

Elizabeth Ann WEST



a Mr. Darcy & Elizabeth Bennet story

THE WHISKY *Wedding*



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Volume One

CHAPTER ONE

ELIZABETH BENNET'S LEFT nostril twitched in a perturbed fashion. Without opening her eyes, she dreamily attempted to scratch the offending body part with her right hand. But her right hand, attached to her right arm, felt an enormous weight that would not signify in her half-asleep mind. Therefore, the consequence of an itchy nose demanded at least one eyelid to lazily lift and give a blurred glance at her invalid arm.

Intelligence gathered by one eye quickly required the confirmation of a second eye, followed by a squawk of surprise as her entire body pushed and shoved a retreat from the other body inhabiting the bed with her! Groping at the thin sheet to cover her naked form, Elizabeth clamped her mouth shut lest she wake the burly, somewhat hairy, man who had slumbered easily nestled next to her. His back facing her side of the bed, the broad muscular structure of his shoulders and bare back declared her bedmate definitively male. Though not unpleasing to view, she could not allow herself such idiotic indulgences.

Her sleep-sandy eyes blinked furiously; she urgently wished to push the last remaining befuddlement of this disastrous awakening out of her mind so that she might think of a plan. Panic rose with the bile threatening to overcome her senses as Elizabeth tried to think about her needs. Clothing first, most certainly, and then an escape.

Hands shaking, she covered her face to focus as she sat up in the bed and tucked her knees to her chest. A bit of cool, smooth metal brushed against her cheek. Elizabeth removed that palm to hold it out for closer inspection.

"Oh no, no it cannot be," she whispered.

An emerald stone and gold band she had never seen before silently glimmered as a testament to what her gut already feared. Between the token on her hand, her state of undress, and her proximity to a male of the species, Elizabeth Bennet began to believe she was Elizabeth Bennet no more.

But who was the man she had lost her heart to in Scotland? What tricks and deception had he wrought that she remembered very little aside from coming to the border to search for her sister Lydia...

CHAPTER TWO

ELIZABETH BENNET PEEKED through the curtains of her father's study. When the lane outside remained empty, the second eldest daughter of Longbourn sighed and allowed the curtain to fall back closed.

"A watched lane never boils, Lizzie" Mr. Bennet continued to play solitaire. The activity required a solo-effort as his favorite daughter refused to play gin while waiting for her aunt and uncle to arrive for their summer journey to the Peak District.

"A watched pot never boils, you're mixing your idioms, Papa." Lizzie took a brief stroll about the room, which amounted to little more than a half circle around her father's desk and then back again to the window. This time when she tucked back the curtain there was a visitor coming down the lane on horseback. Lizzie scrunched up her nose.

"See, a watched lane does produce a visitor. It looks like a soldier on a horse..." Elizabeth's voice trailed off as she looked frantically at her father. Her youngest sister, Lydia, had gone to Brighton as the particular guest of Colonel Forster and his wife for the militia's summer encampment.

"Go and fetch your mother." Mr. Bennet shuffled the cards to re-stack the deck and tucked it into his desk drawer. The housekeeper, Hill, announced the arrival of Colonel Forster and showed him into the master's study.

By the time Elizabeth arrived with her mother, Mrs. Bennet neared sounding hysterical with worry over her poor Lydia.

"Oh Colonel, how good of you to come. How is our daughter?" Mrs. Bennet fluttered a handkerchief as she refused to enter more than two steps into her husband's study. The colonel turned and offered the mother of his houseguest a grim expression.

"As I have just told your husband, Mrs. Bennet, it is very grave indeed. A lieutenant in my unit, Mr. Wickham, has deserted with your daughter and they intend to marry over the border. I have given your husband here a letter that Miss Lydia left for my wife."

"Oh heavens!" Mrs. Bennet clutched her chest and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Elizabeth and the colonel scrambled forward to catch a fainting Mrs. Bennet before she hit the floor.

"Papa?" Elizabeth exclaimed as her father stood like a statue behind his desk, his wife crumpled to the floor.

Hearing his daughter's voice startled Mr. Bennet into action. He and a footman carried Mrs. Bennet up the stairs to her bedroom as Hill announced the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner.

"Lizzie, can you and Jane help your mother? I shall go tell your aunt and uncle that your trip must be canceled." Mr. Bennet placed a kiss on his wife's forehead as Mrs. Bennet began to stir from the application of her smelling salts. Elizabeth nodded. Her father left the room and Jane entered it to join Lizzie at their mother's side. The other two Bennet sisters were luckily away visiting the Lucases and therefore spared the dreadful news of Lydia's flight.

"Oh, you girls are ruined, all ruined. And you, poor Jane, so beautiful. All wasted now!" Mrs. Bennet lamented.

"Do not say such things, Mama. Father and Uncle will find Lydia and make them marry," Elizabeth said.

"Your father and Mr. Wickham shall have to duel. Your father will be killed! And we shall be thrown out!" Mrs. Bennet turned and slanted her eyes at her second eldest daughter. "Oh why Lizzie, why did you not marry Mr. Collins?"

Mrs. Bennet began to berate Elizabeth over rejecting the cousin who was to inherit Longbourn from an entail on the property. Accepting her mother's vitriol over the rejected proposal last autumn, Lizzie looked to her sister for help. She received a sympathetic look from Jane before her sister distracted their mother. Elizabeth retreated from the bed and stood by the door so that she could hear the voices below stairs.

"But must we leave so soon? I am tired, Edward, and the children need a rest," Mrs. Gardiner said.

"You and the children could stay here, bring the Bennet carriage to London in a few days' time," her husband reasoned.

As Elizabeth eavesdropped on the discussion between her father, uncle, and aunt in the entryway, she began to think of an idea. Elizabeth walked over to the bed where her mother lay in another fit of hysterics.

"I shall simply die if I lose my daughter! I will die I tell you! My nerves cannot, they cannot—" Mrs. Bennet's next statement gargled somewhere into her throat as she pretended to choke on the very sentiment of losing Lydia.

As much as she disappointed her mother on a daily basis, Elizabeth's heart seized in that moment to see the woman who gave her life in such distress. There had to be more that could be done to find Lydia and she looked at Jane, tilting her head gently so that Jane joined her by the door. Elizabeth opened the

door a little wider so that more of what was being said below could be heard above.

"All reports indicate that Mr. Wickham and Miss Lydia headed to London first. I do not mean to besmirch your daughter, sir, but I don't believe the character of my soldier to be steadfast. I fear he will abandon her favors just as soon as they reach town." Colonel Forster explained how another lieutenant, Mr. Denny, testified to him Wickham held no long-term designs on the hand of Miss Lydia Bennet.

"If we change my team of horses with yours, Brother, we can leave within the hour back to London," Mr. Gardiner said.

Elizabeth observed her older sister's eyes widen with fear. "They are only going to look in London," she whispered. "That is a mistake. What if they never go to London at all and head straight for the border from Brighton?" Elizabeth wrung her hands as more plans were being made below.

"Papa and Uncle know what's best. They will find Lydia," Jane said.

"And if they do not? It is our reputations that are ruined. We shall never have another offer from a respectable man again."

Elizabeth bit her lower lip and thought bitterly of Mr. Darcy, the tall man from Derbyshire who she had rejected out of hand over grave misunderstandings. Her trip with her aunt and uncle was to ride through the hamlet of Lambton and Elizabeth hoped to stop at Pemberley with the intention of renewing the acquaintance. More importantly, she wished fervently to apologize to Mr. Darcy for her utter stupidity in believing the woes and tales of Mr. Wickham. It was true that Mr. Darcy had slighted her first, but Elizabeth had allowed the illogical story of a jilted man to cloud her judgment further.

"What are you thinking, Lizzie?" Jane asked, having her own regrets with Mr. Darcy's friend, Mr. Bingley. Mr. Bingley had visited the previous autumn and while for a time it appeared he might offer for Jane, the entire party left for London in December with not another word.

Elizabeth shrugged and then stood taller as she realized how they might search in two directions at once. "Come with me below stairs and just follow my lead. You go to London with Papa and Uncle, and I will go with Aunt toward Scotland in hopes of heading them off if they go there."

"But the expense?" Jane asked. Elizabeth furiously shook her head.

"There should be very little additional expense, our aunt and uncle already paid for us to travel as far as the Peak District. Gretna Green is just another fifty miles." Elizabeth ticked off the distance with her fingers as she knew Jane had not studied geography as well as she had. Remnants of a conversation with Mr. Darcy about the trifling matter of traversing fifty miles of good road echoed from some distant part of her mind.

Jane looked furtively back at her mother's bed as the woman continued to whimper and cry. "Let us go speak to Papa and see if we can offer our aid. But I should stay here with Mama."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Nay, if Papa and Uncle Edward find Lydia in London, they are going to need you because our aunt will be with me. You and I both know Lydia will be in a state. I don't think either man will be equipped to handle her tantrums."

Elizabeth felt a little guilty to criticize her youngest sister in such a manner, but what she spoke of was true. If Lydia did not get her way, as the youngest of five daughters, she resorted to cries and fits until she found relief. And as she ran away with a man neither betrothed to her nor related by family, Elizabeth reasoned her sister deserved no respect in the present time.

Jane agreed, reluctantly, and the two sisters took the stairs to share their thoughts with the older adults.

CHAPTER THREE

TO ELIZABETH'S SURPRISE, it did not take a great deal of convincing from her or Jane for the family to agree to search in two directions. In fact, Elizabeth's aunt had congratulated her niece on thinking of such an elegant solution, though the tone Mrs. Gardiner used made Elizabeth a bit suspicious that perhaps her aunt was not so happy to have her trip back on, with a more frantic pace and without her husband.

As Jane went upstairs to direct their shared maid, Betsy, to begin their packing, Elizabeth was called into her father's study for a private interview.

"What is this really about, Lizzie? I appreciate your eagerness to recover your sister, but is there any other reason you wish to travel?"

"If you are accusing me of a selfish motive, Papa, I have none. I do not intend to go sightseeing with Aunt in between the inn stops. It just seems to me that if there is a search party going to London, there ought to be one heading to the border. What if Colonel Forster is wrong?" The good colonel had already left as he needed to return to London and begin the search for his deserter.

"So you do not think Colonel Forster is a man to know his own business?" Mr. Bennet took his seat as his daughter still stood before his desk. But Elizabeth shook her head.

"The fact remains that a girl just sixteen years of age managed to slip his notice and ran away from his home. He might have interviewed Mr. Wickham's comrades, but Lydia is also very smart. If she has her hooks in Mr. Wickham, I do not suspect that he is going to shake her very easily."

Mr. Bennet laughed in spite of himself at Elizabeth's frank description of his youngest daughter. The stress of the situation weighed heavily upon both of them and the daughter that performed most like a son might in a family dynamic realized she held her father's support. He merely checked her logic.

"And what of Jane? I know you convinced her to join in this mess. She should remain here and see to your mother." Mr. Bennet opened his drawer and pulled out parchment and a five pound note.

Elizabeth's eyes widened as her father scribbled a few lines and signed his name then folded the letter around the note and handed it to his daughter.

"Papa?"

"That is a line of credit, Lizzie. I do not like the idea of sending you so far away and had planned to give you such before your trip with your aunt and uncle, regardless. But if you find yourself in any kind of trouble, no daughter of mine will be without the means of getting herself out of it."

"But Papa, it is too much."

"Take it, and tell Jane when you go above stairs to stop her packing, she will remain here."

Elizabeth clutched the letter in her hands that showed her father held so much trust in her. She raised her face to his and jutted out her chin.

"Jane must go with you. I know you and Uncle Edward will search high and low for Lydia. But there are some places you may wish to search that a lady can gain entry without raising suspicion, such as the dressmaker or a ribbon shop. If Lydia is indeed in London, it will not take very long before she finds her way to old habits. She would think that they stopped there to buy wedding clothes before heading to Scotland."

Mr. Bennet furrowed his brows and listened intently to what Elizabeth said. "How have you thought so much about this? Did Lydia speak to you before she went to Brighton? You did warn me not to let her go."

Elizabeth's stomach clenched at the accusation. "I did warn you not to let her go but Lydia never said anything to me about planning to elope with Mr. Wickham. She did not hide the fact she was going to Brighton to find a husband. I'm afraid Mama did little to persuade her otherwise."

Elizabeth did not add she knew of another young lady Mr. Wickham had once tried to run off with, Mr. Darcy's youngest sister, Georgiana. Elizabeth had thought a great deal about what might befall Lydia on the trip to Brighton thanks to the letter from Mr. Darcy after she rejected his proposal in Kent.

"Oh very well, help Jane pack and finish your own. I know your aunt is eager to get to the first inn before evening. You will be taking Peter, your uncle's manservant, instead of one of our own." Mr. Bennet folded his hands underneath his chin as Elizabeth skipped around his desk and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Don't worry, father. We will find her. One way or another," Elizabeth said as her father shook his head.

"I'm afraid, my dear, you do not appreciate we are searching for a speck in a haystack."

Elizabeth shrugged and left her father to see about her own packing. She did not scold him for again mixing up his idioms as this time she believed he meant what he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN LONDON, AFTER nearly a week of searching for Lydia Bennet there was no trace. In fact, it had been Edward Gardiner who had gone out the last two days, as long as he could reasonably stay away from his business. Thomas Bennet, on the other hand, had helped himself to a book and brandy, sparring intermittently with his host about more or less waiting for Lydia to find herself.

"What if she has turned to the streets?" Edward began a fresh assault on his sister's husband for some decency regarding his youngest child.

"The foolish girl turned away from her family the moment she boarded the carriage with that man. I came to London to satisfy Fanny, but even I know when there is nothing to be done."

"But Elizabeth and my wife are searching the road from here to Scotland! The least we could do is search town."

Thomas sipped his drink and considered the frustrated and reddish complexioned man chastising him for inaction. He had already declared his favorite daughter's flight to Scotland with a chaperone a fool's errand, but Mr. Bennet did not wish to insult Gardiner's wife. So he began his own line of questioning.

"You think I should search for my daughter?"

"Yes!" Edward Gardiner bent at his knees in exasperation and looked to the heavens for a divine dose of patience with the impertinent man.

"And you suspect she has been sold, or cast off, and now warms the bed of men who pay the penny?"

Gardiner nodded, feeling relieved that his line of thought finally matched Bennet's slower uptake.

"And you are prepared to run all over London, visiting the houses of ill repute with your wife on holiday, even on this street as it's more likely what that lowlife could afford had they picked lodgings first?"

Mr. Gardiner's mouth opened and closed in a poor imitation of a fish gulping for water to pass through its gills. "I—that is—I had not thought about how it would appear . . ."

"I see." Thomas Bennet returned back to his book. Appearing to be at a stalemate, he licked his thumb and forefinger to turn the page. "My daughter has sullied her name and ruined her family. Do not drag yours down into the muck with mine. Tend your business."

Feeling broken, Mr. Gardiner poured himself a drink and without his favorite chair available due to Bennet's claim, he settled upon the bench running along his bookshelf. He had devoured a good half of the glass before he wondered if his brother Bennet knew even more he was not sharing.

"And what explanation do you plan to give Fanny?" Edward's older sister was prone to high theatrics and taking to her bed at the slightest provocation. He worried what might happen when the truth of her favorite daughter being lost to the capriciousness of the London streets finally made its way to her heart.

Bennet sighed. "Jane and I shall remain here until Elizabeth returns and then say our farewells. You will not be able to send for her or Jane for some time, if ever again."

"And Lydia?"

"A year of quiet living in the country with no mention of her will go a long way to vindicate my family. Perhaps in time, we shall see a way back to the good graces of our friends. If not, then I hold little hope for my remaining daughters and may live to see them regret me forever as their father."

"You mean we cannot shield . . ." Edward gulped more drink as Thomas Bennet shook his head.

"I would not ask you and Madeline to take such a burden. You have your own children to worry about. And worry about them you should, I am learning too late for my own sake."

The pungent scent of regret and helplessness permeated the office as the two men came to an understanding. They would wait for the ladies to return from Scotland, and then endure the aftermath of Lydia's fall in their own ways.

Outside the study, silent tears fell down Jane Bennet's face as she heard the men inside speak so crassly about her sister, her reputation and her future. When it appeared that nothing more would be said, Jane wiped her tears and went above stairs to fetch the maid, Sarah. Her father had said it was likely Lydia and Wickham took lodgings somewhere affordable, and so she would renew the search by asking every inn and boarding house she could find. For good measure, she enlisted the aid of the footman Nat, who was tall and burly, who had enjoyed hearing Miss Bennet's stories when he was but a lad and serving the family.

When Jane knocked on the door of her uncle's study and announced she would be taking a walk in the park for fresh air, her father asked perfunctorily if she was taking a chaperone.

"Yes Father, a maid and a footman, if you do not mind, Uncle?"

Edward Gardiner shook his head and looked at his niece with great pity.

“Enjoy the city as much as you can, child. We will see you at supper.”

Jane did not lie, she did begin her search for Lydia with a walk in the nearest park. Then she, Sarah, and Nat began the walk down the lane and started stopping at any place with a sign for lodgings. Jane told herself she would have to come up with better ideas for excursions so she could borrow the carriage, she would not be able to search very far on foot. But it was a start.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ENTIRE TRIP to Scotland Elizabeth fretted and worried over the pace of the Gardiner carriage heading to the border. She logically understood the horses and children, and even her aunt and herself, needed rest. Yet this understanding did not keep the edge from her voice every moment she barked at her aunt or cousins when she felt them tarrying too long at a stop. That her uncle had the resources to change their team at nearly every other stop satisfied her little. They were moving much too slowly to reach Lydia before she married Mr. Wickham, though by now, there was little to be done but make them marry if they should find them less so.

At last they reached the Three Hammers, an appropriately named place for the blacksmiths that performed many of the ceremonies. As the Gardiner carriage rolled to a stop, Madeline Gardiner gently put a hand on Elizabeth's arm before she might alight from the equipage.

"Remember, we must be discreet. There is little to be gained if anyone knows we are searching for a Lydia Bennet."

"Descriptions only, to be sure, much like the last score of stops." Elizabeth bit her lip and tried not to feel despair. At both of the last two inns, there had been no recollection of a man in uniform and young, lively brunette traveling together. There was a passing resemblance between Elizabeth and Lydia, but none of the innkeepers or stable hands thought of another lady of a similar coloring and look. As loud as Lydia liked to be, it was too much of a long shot to hope her sister had merely remained quiet and demure if the couple had stopped. Truth be told, it was seeming less and less likely Mr. Wickham and Lydia ever left London at all, but Elizabeth refused to admit it.

The common rooms of the Three Hammers belied the unifying purpose of the weary travelers. More than a half dozen young couples filled their bellies and drank their ale, some in clear celebration of their fait accompli, a few looking a touch nervous as the sun began to set. Perhaps they had yet to hear the anvil's clang, pronouncing them man and wife. As Elizabeth approached a

table with her aunt's permission, and young Peter not far behind her, she overheard the most distressing situation for a young couple in Gretna Green.

"Tis not my fault the Smith's boy be out on errand! I paid him his gold and tomorrow we shall wed," a young man scolded his female companion who sniffled as she cast her gaze down to her pewter plate of stew.

"Pardon me, have either of you met a soldier and a young woman, looking perhaps similar to me, on your way here?" Elizabeth drew in a deep breath as this interview would be the same as the others.

"We lives here, we do." The indignant young man challenged Elizabeth's assumption that the young couple was anything but proper.

"Please, I am not meaning to offend. My sister Ly-- is lost and I am desperate to know if she and her beau have made it safely to Gretna Green." Elizabeth caught herself before saying a name and hastily sought sympathy by confessing her loss. Unfortunately, the young woman who was companion to the lad burst into tears.

"My pa! My brother!" The young woman wailed, but turned to her companion for comfort.

"Best be off with ye, ain't seen no soldiers." The man spat on the floor, dangerously close to Elizabeth's feet. This made Peter step forward closer to his master's niece, but Elizabeth held up a hand. She nodded and continued on, interviewing as many in the inn as she could. But table after table, there was little to learn and time did not live on her side.

Exhausted by her efforts, Elizabeth could not find her stomach in the suite of rooms once she joined her aunt and cousins above stairs for the evening.

"I am truly sorry we did not find her, Lizzie. But perhaps it's not all for naught. Your uncle and father might be enjoying a dinner with your sister and her new husband as we speak."

Elizabeth poked the blobs of gray in the gravy on her plate and rubbed her neck with left hand. She dropped her fork with a clatter.

"I did manage some news. It appears the blacksmiths here charge a small fortune of the desperate couples. Many travel further to Coldstream and Lamberton . . ." Elizabeth's last bit of hope spilled out with the last resort she held to find Lydia.

Madeline Gardiner looked at her children, weary and fussy from such a breakneck pace of travel. "That's another eighty miles!" She shook her head as she mentally calculated the distance.

For her part, Elizabeth wistfully remembered a conversation she once had about fifty miles of good road with Mr. Darcy but did not think her aunt would find such a reference at all helpful. In fact, thinking about Mr. Darcy of Derbyshire felt like a bad omen as Elizabeth began to accept the social pariahs she and her sisters would soon become. If only she had known how incorrectly she had judged that shy man, a man as reticent as her sister Jane! Perhaps she

and Mr. Darcy might have married and forced Lydia to remain home for the summer and she would not be so far from home and worn ragged by a fruitless aim.

“I am sorry, my dear, but we will remain here a few days to rest and then return home. If we travel more slowly to the south, perhaps we might enjoy a few sights and hills before we face whatever outcome we must in London.” Madeline Gardiner offered Elizabeth a half-smile, and her niece scowled.

As Elizabeth nodded to her aunt, a new plan niggled in the back of her mind. She had some money of her own and perhaps it was the memory of Mr. Darcy or the horrors to come, but she simply could not give up! Just a little further, perhaps to Coldstream and back, and Elizabeth would rejoin her aunt. After all, her father had sent her to London on the post chaise many a time with her sister. Come first light, she would hop the carriage heading further northeast and feel satisfied she had done all that she might to save her family name.

That night, as Elizabeth wrote a note to her aunt with her plan while everyone else slept, the ghost-like memory of her mother’s face plagued her thoughts. Each excuse Elizabeth wrote sounded less convincing than the last, but her promise to her mother that she would find Lydia spurred her to push the doubts and fears aside. When at last she was finished, Elizabeth placed the folded note so her aunt would see it come morning, and she tiptoed out of the room to go find Peter in the stables.

CHAPTER SIX

TWO MILES FROM Canonbie, Elizabeth Bennet's foolish plan to search alone came to an abrupt end. The axle on the mail post carriage cracked with an enormous boom! The vehicle toppled over, casting those in the less-expensive seats outside into the muds of summer. Inside, passengers violently tossed to one side of the cabin, resulting in a tangled mess of bodies. Elizabeth cried out as she received a sharp elbow to her ribs and a kick to her stomach but being on the far side of the carriage before it toppled, she thought herself the least injured.

From the screams outside, her heart raced and she used all of her might, and the hand of a strapping Scotsman outside, to climb through the door above her. One by one, those who had ridden in the carriage climbed out to survey the damage.

"My boy! My boy!" An older woman who had traveled upon the same bench as Lizzie hobbled past her to the edge of the road lining the forest. She fell to her knees and cried in agony next to a body laid out upon the grass. The boy of about eleven lay peaceful, as if he were merely sleeping, and not as one of those unlucky enough to have been crushed beneath the equipage. Sorrow filled Elizabeth's breast as she felt the mother's pain, her feet rooted to the ground as more shouts of men and others swirled around her.

A shot rang out causing the assembled group of travelers in various states of injury to leap at the crack. The driver tucked the pistol back into his belt and one of the horses lay still upon the road.

"Poor beast broke a leg," he explained, coming to the group gathered around the young lad. "Shame the rut got him, too."

"You were traveling much too fast!" one man shouted, his one arm hanging limply at his side.

"Yes, yes, much too fast!" The crowd began to turn on the driver as they came out of their shock from the accident. The driver began backing away, fumbling to reload his pistol.

"Now, listen, listen, I went same as I always do. Go look, the road was half washed away. Wasn't anything I could do!"

Elizabeth's head began to ache as she took in her surroundings. Trunks and luggage lay strewn across the ground with two parcels split open, but neither were hers. She twirled around pressing her palms to her temples in search of Peter, suddenly panicked at the thought of the young man lying grievously injured, or worse, as he was not standing near her.

"Peter! Peter?" she called, walking away from the angry mob still fussing at the driver, though the man was joined by reinforcements. A postillon and another traveler were defending the driver and it appeared frustrations merely needed a vent before cooler heads might prevail. Elizabeth walked quickly to the other side of the carriage, seeing for herself the exposed underside completely cracked in two. Down in the field, a stir attracted her attention and Elizabeth stumbled down the embankment.

"Peter? Is that you? Are you hurt?"

"I am uninjured," the voice of her aunt's servant put a glimmer of hope into Elizabeth's heart.

"I am coming to help you!" But by the time Elizabeth reached him, the thickset young man had righted himself and stood in a crop of wheat up to his knees.

"However did you get all the way down here?"

Peter allowed the niece of his master to offer him a hand back up to the road where the passengers who were not mourning in wails, nor wailing in pain, had begun the process of continuing their journey. A small procession walked on carrying their belongings down the road.

"When the carriage took the turn and hit the rut, I heard the crack and leapt off." Peter limped and winced in pain as he had injured his ankle with his fall.

"Well, blessings be that you are only minorly injured." Elizabeth found her trunk and squinted her eyes down the road to the people already on their way. Turning back to Peter, she lowered her voice. "The boy atop did not survive."

Peter looked down at the road in shame, but hoisted Elizabeth's trunk onto his shoulder. They made a dozen steps before he put it down, clearly in too much pain to make much progress with the trunk.

"Wait here." Elizabeth marched over to the driver and tried to negotiate for one of the horses, but her plea fell on deaf ears. The driver held no interest in handing over one of his horses to a woman traveling without a companion, and gave a clear indication he suspected Elizabeth would steal the horse rather than ride it to the inn. Angry, Elizabeth picked up an end of her trunk and began to drag it, cursing the pompous driver with each step.

"Miss Bennet, you must not. I shall carry the trunk." Peter remained faithful to his job, knowing her uncle would not be happy to hear that Peter made his niece carry her own trunk after a carriage accident.

"You . . . can . . . scarcely . . . walk." Elizabeth grunted, seeing the people ahead of them becoming smaller and smaller as the road sloped upward towards a hill and a few disappeared over the crest.

"But I—"

Elizabeth paused and looked behind her, as with his injury, Peter walked slower than she did even while dragging the trunk.

"The inn is two miles that way. I shall manage my trunk if you manage your feet. If you cannot make it, I do not believe I can even drag you to safety, so step lightly and mind the ruts." Elizabeth Bennet gritted her teeth and dug back into her task. Two miles of good road never much worried her, but in a strange land with a lame servant, she suddenly felt very exposed. The sun had not yet reached its zenith, so even with her burdens they should reach the inn before dark. But only if young Peter had suffered a sprain, and not a break.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ELIZABETH AND THE injured servant made limited progress towards the village of Canonbie, but after roughly one mile of their strained procession, they came to a small bridge over a stream.

"Let us rest here a moment." Elizabeth huffed and released her trunk, gaining her breath before stepping upon the luggage. Now standing a head taller than Peter, she scanned the horizon before them; her eyes shaded by her palm and a keen squint. The road curved steeply downhill, a welcome terrain for her aching arms, and in the valley below them the rooftops of the village lay nestled just out of reach.

"Thank you, Miss." Peter hobbled over to the water's edge and greedily cupped his hands to bring the refreshment to his mouth. Elizabeth clucked in sympathy at the poor young servant, estimating him to be in a great deal of pain, yet not the complainer. As gracefully as she might without assistance, Elizabeth lowered herself and caught the edges of her trunk as a great spell of dizziness threatened her balance. Blinking her eyes, and taking a few deep breaths, she felt steady once more and cautiously stepped off the trunk.

After fussing with the lock, Elizabeth opened her trunk and rummaged around for an older shift. Her cheeks burned red at the embarrassment of opening her clothing trunk on the side of the road, but Elizabeth reminded herself this was indeed an emergency, though mostly one of her own making. She reasoned there was nothing wrong with trying to restore one's appearance before rejoining civilization. Peter suffered many nicks and scratches from his neck up to his cheeks and Elizabeth grumbled as she ripped off two healthy swatches of fabric from the bottom hem. She feared looking into the water's reflection to spy the damage to her skin from the accident.

Elizabeth offered a strip of cloth to Peter and pointed at his face and neck to indicate he wash off the dust of the road from his cuts and scrapes. Feeling guilty, Elizabeth apologized.

"This is all my fault. I am so sorry my stubbornness has led us to this precarious situation."

The cool water of the babbling brook offered much relief to the injured servant. Peter looked up at Miss Elizabeth with a toothy grin. "A bit of trouble keeps us on our toes is what my Pa would say. We'll make it to the village and find a way back to Gretna Green. There's been no lasting harm, so I'm sure my mistress will forgive us."

Witnessing the cool cloth improve Peter's spirits inspired Elizabeth to do the same. She thanked Providence no visual mark existed from their ordeal. She sighed as the coolness rubbed along the back of her hairline provided immense relief and she held the compress there for a moment before pulling it away to submerge it once more. However, the pristine white was darkened by a tinge of red. Her hand began to shake and she turned it over to see an even larger amount of blood across the back of her hand.

"Peter?" her voice cracked as she called his name. The young servant scrambled in an ungainly crawl to see what Miss Elizabeth needed. "Look!" Elizabeth held up the bloodied cloth with her eyes as large as saucers.

Gently, Peter turned Elizabeth's head to the side and inspected the area she indicated with her hand. Just along her hairline, behind her left ear, was a nasty gash and accompanying bump. But the blood had clotted into a hard crust.

"You have a right nasty gash, Miss. But it be healed up. The water just now cleaned away some dried bits but to my eye there be no fresh blood." Peter stood up and offered his hand to help her up.

"Thank you." Elizabeth accepted his help and took a deep breath to stymie her rising panic. "I believe we should reach the inn soon if you're still up to walking? I know your ankle must hurt—" Elizabeth paused when Peter shook his head but she frowned at his response. "You have winced and limped, you cannot fool me." Peter shrugged his shoulders.

A pack of horses passed them ridden by the driver and postillon. Their passing renewed Elizabeth's anger at the caddish behavior of the driver to deny her and her servant a horse.

Picking up the handle of her trunk once more, Elizabeth initiated their trek down towards the village below. The sun had crossed the mid-point in the sky and Elizabeth's stomach rumbled in complaint of how long it had been since last she ate. Hunger pangs appeared to affect Peter as well for despite their injuries, the two wayward travelers quickened their pace. Within the hour, they arrived at the Grey Sheep inn much worse for the wear, but faster than they had taken the first mile from the accident.

CHAPTER EIGHT

INSIDE THE CANONBIE inn, the air choked with the smells of too many bodies and insufficient room for all. Elizabeth's ears rang from the cacophony of children's cries, the higher pitched voices of many ladies in distress, and the low baritones of men yelling. Most of the carriage accident victims had already reached the Grey Sheep by the time Elizabeth and Peter arrived, still, Elizabeth had to elbow her way to the front counter to speak to the innkeeper.

"I should like to rent a room, please."

"Look around you, lass, I don't be having any rooms left." The great red-bearded innkeeper patted his protruding belly as he laughed at Elizabeth's naïveté.

"Sir, please. I have been injured, as well as my servant, when the mail carriage crashed and we are in most desperate need of a place to rest."

The innkeeper cast a wary eye to young Peter with the trunk, and then to the young woman before him. He frowned. Plenty of their sort came through to take care of their business and then hurry home to their mothers and fathers for undeserved reward. "It's like I said, there are many others who were just as injured or worse. They arrived here first. I do not have any rooms left." The innkeeper crossed his arms over his massive chest.

Elizabeth was about to argue further and ask if the innkeeper had another solution available when she was abruptly brushed aside by a tall gentleman in a blue overcoat.

"I require my change of horses."

The voice Elizabeth heard sent shivers down her spine. "Mr. Darcy?" she said quietly and looked up at the man to her left.

Upon hearing his name, Fitzwilliam Darcy of Derbyshire turned halfway around and looked down. His face paled as if he had seen a ghost.

Elizabeth furrowed her brows noticing how gaunt his cheeks had become and his handsome brown eyes nothing more than bloodshot orbs skittering around for more information.

"It cannot be." Darcy blinked and wiped his eyes. "How would you – this is?" Fitzwilliam turned around to take stock of the very crowded inn looking for anyone he recognized that might be traveling with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Spying none, he reacted to her small tug on the sleeve of his coat for his attentions.

"I am traveling alone, sir, with my uncle's servant here." Elizabeth pointed at Peter who nodded to signal he was the man she referred to in her speech.

Darcy spotted a trickle of dried blood as Elizabeth turned her head away in shame, distracting him from asking a more rational question as to why Elizabeth traveled in Scotland with her uncle's servant. Though, to even hear the question in his head, too large a portion of Fitzwilliam Darcy's heart dreaded the answer.

"You are hurt. Come," Darcy began to escort Elizabeth to a small empty table in the far corner. "MacFigan! A word!" Darcy bellowed as the crowd seemed to part like the Red Sea before him. No sooner had they taken a seat than the innkeeper hustled over to the table, offering Mr. Darcy great deference.

"There appears, that is, there was a misunderstanding in the stables, sir. The team of horses reserved for your use was mistakenly let out to another traveler after the accident."

"Then I suggest you find another team of horses for my purposes. Feed and wet down the team I came with and if you fail, then I shall use them for the last fifteen miles to Broadmeadow." Ordinarily, Darcy would brook no failure of this sort from an inn he owned, but the delay afforded him time with Miss Elizabeth, and for that he privately became thankful for the mistake.

"Yes, sir, I shall see them well taken care of." The innkeeper began to shuffle away when Darcy motioned for him again.

"And bring us two bottles of wine." Darcy looked at Elizabeth as the woman flushed before him. "And two plates of stew with a trench."

The innkeeper hesitated again, grimacing. "Afraid we're out of wine, you see, much like the rooms. But Nann made a second kettle of stew and I can bring you whisky."

Darcy nodded and the innkeeper left to see to the swift execution of the many instructions given to him by his employer.

"I appreciate your assistance, Mr. Darcy. But I would have been able to order for myself, you see. Peter needs to eat as well." Elizabeth gestured towards the servant now sitting on her trunk and guarding it most carefully.

Darcy's lips twisted in annoyance. "Yes, Peter. When MacFigan returns I'll tell him to throw some scraps at the boy."

Elizabeth pursed her lips at the tone of voice Mr. Darcy used. She remembered the gallant gentleman that she had horrifically misjudged, and regretted the day she spurned his proposal at his aunt's estate in the springtime. In fact, it was those memories of Mr. Darcy, coupled with Elizabeth's hopes for her sister Jane, that had convinced her that finding Lydia was the key to

everyone's happiness. But as she sat on the hard wooden bench in a foreign county with the same proud, and rude Mr. Darcy she experienced first in Hertfordshire, Elizabeth suddenly felt the full weight of her foolishness. She scowled as she began to cry.

"What? You should like that I invite him to sit and dine at our table?" Mr. Darcy understood the boy to be special to Elizabeth, but he could not bring himself to break bread with a servant in public.

"No, of course not! He may eat in the kitchens or stable, but he must eat as well. I am afraid this is all my fault. . ."

Elizabeth was about to explain when an argument near them spilled into a crash upon their table. Without a moment's hesitation, Darcy sprung into action, grasping the tussling men by the shoulders and heaving them in the opposite direction. He flanked Elizabeth and began yelling, which caused the two men fighting to cease almost immediately.

Elizabeth shook with fright as her mind refused to process any further information regarding the day. There had simply been too much. Before she could use her coat sleeve to wipe the embarrassing display her crying produced, a calmer Mr. Darcy handed her a handkerchief. She accepted it without a word as he took his seat once more.

"Your father does not approve of this?" Mr. Darcy asked as casually as he could muster while looking from Elizabeth to Peter.

"My father? He is probably not yet aware. I left my aunt with a note this morning and convinced Peter to go with me as far as Coldstream."

"Coldstream? But that is at least a two day journey from . . . where were you coming from again?" Darcy knew Elizabeth Bennet to be an intelligent woman. If she was running away to marry a servant, a situation his rational mind found highly unlikely but his jealous heart suspected nonetheless, they need not travel any further.

"Gretna Green." Elizabeth winced as she suddenly realized how it must look to everyone around for her to travel alone with a servant near to her age. Why, she had not only made a dangerous decision, but made herself an utter laughingstock!

MacFigan arrived with the repast and apologized again to Mr. Darcy that he did not have a spare room. Darcy inquired about the innkeeper's quarters and the man explained another family had already paid for the privilege of the room and that he and his wife were going to sleep in the loft for the extra coinage. Ever a shrewd businessman, Mr. Darcy understood the tough position of his manager. It was only that very morning that a rider was sent ahead to arrange his personal horse train.

"Peace, I am sure this will do quite nicely and in an hour or two, my horses will be well enough for the last leg of our journey." The innkeeper raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he glared at the woman who sat with his

employer. Her dress and situation offered little to recommend her, but Seamus MacFigan knew when to keep his gob shut.

Elizabeth cast her eyes down to her stew and waited for the innkeeper to leave.

"You and Peter were in that carriage I saw toppled a few miles out of town? How badly are you hurt? My estate is another fifteen miles away, but the doctor here is a good man. I am sure I could take you to his home—"

"Thank you again, but no." Elizabeth's stomach protested as the smell of the venison and root vegetables reached her nose and her mouth watered. "I really should take the next carriage heading back to Gretna Green."

"The mail post? There is not another until morning. The heavy winds and rain felled two trees to the north and this carriage you were in was to do a loop in Langholm until the morrow."

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "You possess a great deal of intelligence about this place and many appear to know you well. How do you know about the trees and the post?"

Darcy laughed and dug into his stew, urging Elizabeth to do the same by nudging her spoon towards her. "My grandmother's surname was Elliot before it was Darcy. Her brother's family died, sadly, in a fire, and the estate passed to my father since he was the only living male relative." Darcy waited for Elizabeth to actually take a bite of her stew. While waiting, he poured a glass of whisky for each of them.

The bowl of stew steamed piping hot and Elizabeth nearly dribbled her bite before managing to save herself further embarrassment. She thought she spotted a twinkle in Mr. Darcy's eye at her near flub, but she could not be certain. "I am familiar with distant cousins inheriting."

"Yes, well, thankfully my father and I spent many a summer here to win over the local townsfolk despite being Elliots by a maternal line. Blood is blood though . . ." Darcy trailed off as his eyes flickered to Elizabeth's left ear. He remembered now seeing signs of her injury and wished to ask more.

Anticipating the next line of questioning, Elizabeth attempted to stymie any inquiry by taking a deep gulp of the whisky.

"No, you mustn't!" Darcy tried to say, but it was too late.

The amber liquid burned her throat and produced a nauseating smoky flavor to fill her mouth. She sputtered and coughed and winced, wondering why on earth anyone would drink such a vile spirit!

"I should have asked for tea. I am so used to traveling with Richard I did not think—"

"I take the title of scatterbrained for the day, I believe." Elizabeth whispered, not quite finding her voice after nearly choking on her drink. A warmth began to spread through her chest as the whisky found its way to her core and the drink's odd calming power initiated its effects.

“Yes, you did not fully explain to me why you were even traveling. If your aim is not to . . . that is, what brought you to Scotland, Miss Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth braved another taste of whisky, finding the effects of the drink worth the initial burn, but only a sip this time. She licked her lips and considered Fitzwilliam Darcy in the crowded, rough roadside inn and wondered if she would ever enjoy his company again once she confessed all? Still, despite hoping he might provide her aid, she would not lie to him knowing her options for safety were limited if he abandoned her at this moment.

“Prepare yourself for something very dreadful, I’m afraid.”

Darcy put down his spoon and cradled his chin upon his interlaced fingers, daring Miss Elizabeth to give her worst, much as he had in Kent. The man actually smiled a half-smile, and this time Elizabeth was certain she saw the twinkle in his eye.

“My sister Lydia has run off with Mr. Wickham.”

CHAPTER NINE

THE DIN OF the common room of the Grey Sheep continued unabated despite Elizabeth Bennet's explosive confession. Anger. Disgust. Surprise? All were emotions Elizabeth hoped to see cross Fitzwilliam's face, but the man remained stoic and hard as cut marble. Feeling ashamed, Elizabeth continued to sip her whisky and alternated bitefuls of the chunky venison stew with as much grace as she could muster.

Over time, the silence between them grew to be too much of a discomfort for Elizabeth and she elected to change the subject entirely.

"I am most appreciative of your care, Mr. Darcy, but after this meal I believe I shall ask one of the families if they might allow me to sleep on the floor of their room for the night." The utter defeat of the situation cast Elizabeth's mood into despair. But she could not think of another solution. To beg Mr. Darcy for further assistance mortified her beyond reason, and she looked around for a family with a number of young children as a suitable candidate.

Her announcement snapped Fitzwilliam out of his contemplation and the man refocused his eyes upon her.

"You would sleep with strangers rather than return to my estate? I can assure your perfect safety in my care if that is what you fear."

"Fear you? Never, sir, but I could not ask you to take on such a burden when so much has passed between us. . . and besides . . . you have not formally offered." Elizabeth blew out a breath as her cheeks suddenly felt too warm. She lifted the backs of her hands to cool her skin but even her hands, which were normally chilled without gloves, refused to perform as they ordinarily would. Her efforts only placed warm skin against uncomfortably warmer skin, a failure her mind struggled to reconcile without a giggle.

Darcy raised his eyebrow. "I believe that is enough whisky for you, madam." He reached to take the glass away from her, but Elizabeth's hands moved from her face to stymie his effort. Her hand collided with his and the glass slid away, precariously close to the edge of the table, but did not fall. If Elizabeth's hands

had been warm earlier, touching Mr. Darcy's lit them positively on fire and without knowing what she was about, she smiled at the man.

"You have been so kind. So very kind, always. And I am forever ruining it." She locked eyes with him, feeling as if she had finally seen the man for the first time. He was sensitive, just as Jane had warned. Gently, she removed her hand, wishing she might allow it to linger longer but it was too painful to do so knowing there could never be more between them. Not with Lydia gone and the identity of the man she ran away with already revealed.

Darcy cleared his throat, bringing the glass closer to Elizabeth and pouring them both a touch more liquid courage.

"I should like to offer the shelter of my home to you and your uncle's servant. If our past dealings bring hesitation, please know I would offer my lodgings to any lady of my acquaintance in such duress." He took a sip and waited for Elizabeth to join him. He rather enjoyed the unreserved Miss Elizabeth Bennet in his presence. "I understand you take the blame for leaving your relations in Gretna Green, but your intentions must be taken into account. If you shall allow, I can promise a night of peaceful rest at Broadmeadow and in the morning, escort you and young Peter to your aunt."

Elizabeth's heart fluttered more than it ought at the simple, friendly invitation. As grateful as she was for the man's hospitality, she still worried about the subject matter that she knew he could never forgive.

"But my sister. I should not blame you for cutting all ties with me and my family. Especially after . . ." a lump formed in Elizabeth's throat and she reached for her glass. This time she did not take a sip, but a gulp, and the burning sensation hardly registered.

"Yes, it is an unfortunate business . . ." Darcy shifted his weight in his seat across from Elizabeth. "If it is not too taxing for you to endure my presence—"

Elizabeth snorted and began to laugh.

"Pardon me, madam. I did not know I had made a jest."

"Mr. Darcy, you are too generous to trifle with me. My behavior in April abused you so abominably . . . abominably . . ." Elizabeth crossed her eyes at her mouth's inability to properly pronounce a word she had said many times. Realizing it was a lost cause, she changed tacks. "After reading your letter, I realized how very wrong I was about our previous interactions . . ."

Darcy stifled a laugh as he finished his own glass of whisky, relaxing the tension in his shoulders. He had not had so much to drink outside of his normal limits as to affect his behavior, and the effects on Elizabeth were highly amusing to say the least. He was about to speak, when she continued her rant.

"Why did you call me ugly, sir?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"You know of what I speak. Not handsome enough, I heard it plainly the first night you ever met me. And now, I must look an absolute fright," she glanced

down at her dirty frock, with rips and tears, that she had not considered before entering the inn and finding an acquaintance. "And you gaze at me like I am . . . like I am . . ." Elizabeth trailed off, her head tilting to one side. Her tongue darted out to moisten her parched lips and Darcy held his breath.

Blinking profusely, Darcy spun his torso a quarter turn on his bench to raise a hand to MacFigan. *Surely the horses had to be ready by now*, he thought.

As Elizabeth fumbled for the bottle of whisky to pour herself more, Darcy swiftly pulled it out of her reach.

"Truly, that is enough whisky for you and I shall not be moved otherwise." Darcy shook his head in disbelief as the woman pouted before trying to remember her manners, though she was much too drunk to behave properly.

"But I am thirsty."

"I shall order you some tea."

"And when we reach your estate I can rest?" Yawning, Elizabeth leaned her head against the wall and slumped forward slightly, giving Darcy a clearer view of her injury. Spying the horrific bulge blows to the head were known to create, he clenched his fists under the table. As Elizabeth's eyes fluttered closed, he allowed her the brief rest until an hour later, his team of horses were ready for another leg of the journey. He would not drive them hard, and it would take longer to reach Broadmeadow than usual, but he would at least get Elizabeth to safety before nightfall.

And though he did not comfortably speak in a crowded inn, Darcy resolved himself to speak to her in the morning to disabuse her of the notion of guilt. Only one person stood responsible for the mess, the same person it always was since he was a mere lad. George Richard Wickham.

CHAPTER TEN

MR. DARCY STOICALLY stood at the window in his study. Staring out at the full moon above illuminating the lands of Broadmeadow, a tightness in his chest gave the great man pause. He disliked awaiting word from his trusted staff as to Miss Elizabeth's condition.

The few hours' drive from the Grey Sheep inn to his estate were uneventful. So much so, both he and Peter could never fully rouse Elizabeth as they helped her into the carriage nor during the ride. A click of the door behind him sent tension to his shoulders, but Darcy did not turn around. Instead his eyes flicked to the reflection of his housekeeper, Mrs. Aldridge, allowing herself entrance into his study.

"This be a very different kettle of fish, sir. She is resting, but for the life of me, I cannot be sure what you were thinking in bringing her here without proper escort." Mrs. Aldridge remained respectful in her tone, but the content of her words nipped at Darcy's soul.

"This was not my best-laid plan. I could not leave her behind at the inn and there was no room." Darcy turned around as Mrs. Aldridge raised an eyebrow. "With the poor weather we've been having, the state of the roads is an utter disaster." Needing employment, he walked to his sideboard. "More than just the post carriage has been stranded from the poor road conditions." Darcy's hand shook as he reached to pour himself a drink, making him think better of the idea.

"Let me have a maid bring you a tea tray, sir. You must have much to do this evening with your plans not going as you expected." At nearly threescore in age, Miriam Aldridge remembered Broadmeadow as a child being under the care of the Elliots. Housekeeper under Mr. Darcy's father, she had watched the current master grow from a young lad into the great man he was today.

But she had never seen the master so rattled. Her correspondence from Mrs. Martin in London had prepared her for his poor condition since his annual spring visit to Rosings. The staff of the Darcy family was above reproach where it came to gossip, but the three housekeepers maintained regular

correspondence so as to best serve the family. And with no parents to guide either Mr. Darcy or the young Miss Darcy, the three elderly women in Mr. Darcy's employ justified their informative missives as a means to spare their young master and mistress from further suffering.

"Thank you, a tray would be most appreciated." Darcy ruffled his hands through his hair and stalked to his desk, circling the imposing piece of furniture as if it was a beast of some sort. Resigning himself to the unwelcome task of letter writing, he first decided to pen a letter to his solicitor. With Miss Elizabeth above stairs residing in his home, there were certain matters that needed attention though Darcy almost dared not to hope. He had never intended to win Miss Elizabeth's hand through compromise, but the particulars of their situation dictated he at least be prepared for all outcomes, even if Miss Elizabeth was reluctant to do so.

Next, Darcy hesitated to begin his second letter. He vacillated between giving into his anger and writing Richard about searching for Wickham in London or writing a rather uncomfortable letter to Elizabeth's father, Mr. Bennet. During Elizabeth's slumber, Darcy had managed to interview the young servant, Peter, who he asked to ride inside the carriage as a poor substitute for chaperone. At first, Peter had served his master well and refused to give any information. But as Darcy pointed out the grave condition of Miss Elizabeth, eventually the young footman spilled as much as he knew, which was not very much at all, but more than enough for Mr. Darcy's purposes.

Realizing he had not a single clear idea on what to write Mr. Bennet, he scowled and wrote instead to his cousin Richard Fitzwilliam, a colonel in His Majesty's Army. It was unfortunate to place such a burden on Richard's shoulders when he had just taken a period of leave for their trip to Kent. But Darcy could not avoid it. At the very least, it would be a number of days before he could reach London with Miss Elizabeth, but a rider might reach there within half that time.

Darcy outlined a description of Lydia Bennet from his best recollection and recommended that Richard check with the former companion they had appointed to his sister, Georgiana, for her Ramsgate trip. Mrs. Younge was unlikely to welcome a visit by either Richard or Darcy, as she had aided Wickham in nearly absconding with Darcy's sister just last summer. But he suspected a few coins might loosen her tongue. For good measure, Darcy included a letter of drafting privileges on his personal account with the bank for Richard's use.

The study door opened once more and Mrs. Aldridge carried in his tray. Darcy moved a number of letters and correspondence from the corner of his desk so that the older servant need not walk very far to unload her burden.

"The Cook added a basket of your favorite shortbread, sir." Mrs. Aldridge lifted a pot of jam as well without mentioning it as it was one of the few

peculiarities of Fitzwilliam Darcy. Since he was a boy he had always enjoyed a touch of strawberry jam on his shortbread, but it was not a treat he would allow himself in civilized company.

Darcy leaned back in his chair and cracked the bones down his spine with a wince. Looking at the pages of parchment in front of him scribbled most thoroughly with his own words, he had not realized how much work he had done in the half hour it had taken for his tea to arrive. "I wonder if I might trouble you, Mrs. Aldridge, for a very difficult letter I must write." Darcy helped himself to some tea and a smear of jam on a shortbread biscuit.

Mrs. Aldridge wrung her hands on her apron and responded that she would help her master any way that he needed.

"How would you address a letter to a man to explain you have not kidnapped his daughter, but hold her in your house, and that you plan to marry her, if she would be so willing as to accept your addresses?" Darcy laughed, in spite of himself, to enumerate the ridiculousness of his situation with Miss Elizabeth.

Mrs. Aldridge's eyes widened in a perfect impersonation of an owl. "The miss? You mean to say, you are to be married?" Mrs. Aldridge clapped her hands and cheered at the master's good fortune. But Darcy held up one hand to temper her glee.

"Do not become too hasty, you should know there is a history between Miss Bennet and I. I asked for her hand in marriage when I visited my aunt in Kent and to my greatest chagrin, the woman refused me. She held good reason—"

"I cannot rightly believe that, sir." Mrs. Aldridge bristled at the idea of a young lady having cause to reject her master, not even realizing she had interrupted him.

"Indeed, I can assure you she did. But I have made great pains to change in the few short weeks since our interview but I'm afraid now actions beyond either of our control have likely pushed Miss Elizabeth into the unwelcome eventuality of becoming my bride." A sour taste of bile burned the back of Darcy's throat as he considered a future of wedding Miss Elizabeth, a woman he loved and admired above all others, yet she would never return his affections in kind.

Mrs. Aldridge frowned and opened her mouth a number of times before she finally spoke. "I cannot pretend to understand the whims of the lady who might turn down a perfectly good proposal, but I can say there is one thing all lasses share."

"And what is this commonality?"

Mrs. Aldridge offered Mr. Darcy a toothy grin. "Never be a bonny Lass that don't enjoy a Lad's proper attentions and compliments. If the lady has refused you, for cause as you have said, then there can be no obstacle if you have changed. You shall just have to show her."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A MONSTROUS HEADACHE greeted Elizabeth Bennet as she opened her eyes and silently cursed the pain ripping through her head. Blinking, she began to panic as she did not recognize any of the furnishings around her, nor could she recollect even what day had dawned. She flung the covers off of her body and swung her legs over the side to escape the bed, but her wobbly knees betrayed her. Losing her balance, Elizabeth found herself on all fours to break her fall and a strange voice calling to her through her mental fog.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Bennet! Oh please tell me you have not injured yourself." Elizabeth looked up into the worried face of an unfamiliar maid.

"Where am I?" Elizabeth asked hoarsely, scarcely above a whisper.

"You are at Broadmeadow, ma'am. Just south of Langholm."

"Broadmeadow?" Elizabeth rocked herself back to kneeling and grabbed the bottom rail of the bed to steady herself as merely sitting upright invoked too much dizziness for her tastes. "I am not familiar with a Broadmeadow. Where is Broadmeadow?"

"In Scotland, ma'am. The master, he brought you and your servant last night but we could not rouse you. We were instructed to allow you to rest." The maid offered her hands to help Elizabeth up and back into the bed, but Elizabeth was not compliant. She accepted the maid's assistance to stand, then willed her legs to move forward to take in the grand room that comprised her accommodations. Elizabeth's heart rate continued to climb as she wracked her brain for some memory of how she came to be at this foreign estate and could find none.

"What is the name of the servant who came with me?" Elizabeth hoped her question did not appear too silly, but she could not bring herself to outright ask who owned Broadmeadow estate. Perhaps if she had some small piece of information, her memory would oblige her with an indication of what had happened.

"Why, Peter, Miss. He rode with you and Mr. Darcy in the carriage from the tavern in Canonbie." If the maid began to find her charge's behavior quite odd,

she did not say so. Still, the young woman jittered and held her hands out as Elizabeth began to trust her own strength to move about.

"Mr. Darcy! Of course, of course, how could I have lost my bearings?" Elizabeth laughed hollowly as inwardly she felt enormous dread over the identity of who had saved her from whatever calamity robbed her of her memories.

Gingerly, Elizabeth walked without assistance to the chair by the fire. She wrapped her robe around her, thankful that the cloth was at least one source of familiarity as she continued to will herself to remember more about her current situation. Finding herself beyond distraction, as the name Peter only reminded her of a servant in her aunt and uncle's household, Elizabeth tried to remember as far back as she could and suddenly the journey to Gretna Green with her Aunt Gardiner flooded her mind. She recalled searching inn after inn for signs of her sister Lydia, to no avail, but the leap to being a guest in Mr. Darcy's Scottish estate proved elusive. Meanwhile, the cheery maid chattered on and on about Mr. Darcy this and Mr. Darcy that and Elizabeth began to at least hear the details of how she came to arrive at Broadmeadow, even though she could not retrieve the information as to why.

"Forgive me, I was very tired last evening from my travels, but what was your name again?"

"My name is Fiona, Fiona Grace, if it pleases you, ma'am" The maid dipped into a perfunctory curtsy.

"Fiona. I believe I like that very much." Elizabeth offered the maid a genuine smile as she represented her only ally in the mess of confusion. Shouts from outside her window attracted Elizabeth's notice and she rose from her chair to walk over to gaze out the pane of glass. Gently, she tucked the curtain aside so as to remove obstruction from her view and became rewarded with the most intriguing sight.

Down below, a group of men in laborers' clothing, chopped wood with great expediency. But one man caught her eye. He dressed not in the plain cotton threads of his fellows, but in a lawn shirt and breeches. Wearing no cravat or top hat or any other gentlemen's trappings, Fitzwilliam Darcy laughed and cajoled with the groundsmen as he lifted his own axe and swung it down to split a stump most decidedly in half. Elizabeth gasped to spy the ever proper Mr. Darcy not only in a casual setting and attire, but found herself mesmerized by the alluring display of manhood so deliciously staged just below her rooms.

The maid Fiona came over to her lady's side and looked over Elizabeth's shoulder at the vista below.

"Does Mr. Darcy so very often chop his own wood?" Elizabeth tried to ask the question without conveying any censure of the gentleman's behavior. She truly felt amused and intrigued by such a different side to the man she had met in Hertfordshire and again in Kent.

"Oh no, Miss. But whenever he comes to Broadmeadow to see to the estate, I hear the lads say he is never averse to rolling up his own sleeves. I believe he chops wood with Young Hamish MacGuffin down there for the enjoyment."

Elizabeth followed the maid's finger as she pointed to the younger servant who cleared the wood from Mr. Darcy's chopped pile and carried it over to the main wagon they were loading. A large bandage could be seen just below the groundsman's hairline and Elizabeth gasped.

"But he is injured!" she exclaimed as Fiona chuckled.

"Aye, an injury he deserves, too, if you don't mind me saying, Miss." Fiona backed away from the window and though reluctant, Elizabeth did the same. But not before spying a footman deliver a note on a silver tray to Mr. Darcy, thus delaying any further displays of masculine strength for the moment.

"However did he hurt himself?" Elizabeth wondered aloud as Fiona poured fresh water into the basin so that Elizabeth might clean her face and hands before dressing.

"He and young Robin nicked a bushel of apples to aggravate the Cook. But Mrs. Nolan would have none of it and her broom caught his legs as he turned around and fell backwards. The stone steps broke his fall, but he won't be playing any pranks on Mrs. Nolan for a good spell, I reckon."

Elizabeth laughed at the very idea of two young woodcutters trying to steal a bunch of apples from the kitchens and getting caught.

"Will he face punishment for his behavior?"

"Not likely, as even the Cook had a good laugh and felt the boy had punishment enough with the knock to the head."

Fiona's words reminded Elizabeth of another piece of information from the last few days and tentatively her hands lifted to just behind her left ear where she could feel the bump and abrasion. She suddenly remembered now that she had hurt her own head but still, she could not recall how. Thankfully, Fiona watched her miss and clucked her tongue in sympathy.

"Carriage accidents be a nasty business, ma'am. But don't worry, I shall do your hair in such a way to loop some curls and hide the mark."

Elizabeth mumbled her thanks as Fiona left to pull a gown for her lady.

Elizabeth wanted to return to the window and watch Mr. Darcy some more, but she dared not. She had been in a carriage accident and Mr. Darcy had rescued her. She would have to forgive the man any of his other trespasses. Especially now that Lydia was lost to the dastardly Wickham.

Feeling so utterly overwhelmed by the enormity of her ordeal, Elizabeth's spirits could not even rise when Fiona managed to select her favorite gown from her trunk. Dutifully, Elizabeth donned the red spotted frock and allowed the maid to do her hair so that she might go below stairs and address her many shortcomings directly with the gentleman woodcutter himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE GRAND DINING hall at Broadmeadow existed primarily to accommodate an enormous hunting party in days past. The walls boasted intricate wood carvings of forest animals and nymphs. A pleasing pale green ceiling arched overhead with a dozen chandeliers hanging from heavy chains. Large windows along the far wall allowed a surfeit of sunlight to pour into the room. As Mr. Darcy rarely entertained the local gentry in sport, the expansive room offered a loud echo and still carried a much more masculine decor than the dining rooms Elizabeth had enjoyed in London and Hertfordshire. A luncheon of mince pies and various breads baked on-site had made Elizabeth's mouth drool as her mind could not easily recall her last few meals but her body certainly felt the lack thereof.

"I apologize, Miss Elizabeth, for not calling Dr. Rowley. I believe your condition far worse than perhaps you understood." Mr. Darcy apologized to Elizabeth with his normal splash of unintentional offense. "But I shall send for him now if you'd like?"

"I feel very well indeed, sir. I believe I just needed to rest." Elizabeth's cheeks tinged pink at the embarrassment of discussing the particulars of her health, but she tried to smile at the man nonetheless.

Darcy dropped his fork and considered the woman next to him intently. "How can you state you only needed rest? Your uncle's servant and I were both gravely concerned you did not awaken fully after falling asleep at the inn. Please say you will inform me if your condition worsens so that I might send for care?"

Elizabeth became lost at the intensely smoldering gaze Mr. Darcy offered her as her body temperature rose in response to the man's attentions. Swallowing the lump in her throat, Elizabeth nodded, not trusting her lips to speak civilly as a flood of regret and shame washed over her nerves in a familiar storm of emotion. When he finally broke his gaze, Elizabeth helped herself to a sip of wine and continued to eat her meal, hoping a display of a healthy appetite would make some inroads at reassuring Mr. Darcy's concern.

"I am not certain you should travel so soon after your injury, but I did promise my carriage's use to return you to your aunt."

Elizabeth nodded and smiled. "Your hospitality has been beyond any kindness I have ever received, sir. I was the fool for ever thinking that traveling beyond Gretna Green on my own stood as a sound plan. Very lucky I did not perish in that carriage accident." As Elizabeth said the words, she began to involuntarily tremble. Flashbacks of the jumbled carriage interior and the image of a dead boy in the grass played in a nonsequential manner in her mind. She became frightened by the incomplete information. Who was the boy?

"Miss Elizabeth!" Darcy's hand reached out gently to touch her elbow as the man struggled with what comfort he might provide a woman clearly in distress in his presence. For her part, a single tear slid down Elizabeth's cheek. As she wiped it away, he released her.

"I am so terribly sorry. When I read your letter . . . the treachery you endured at that man's hands, I could not believe my own vanity had carried me so far." Elizabeth drew a deep breath and released it before drawing another. After three such breaths, she began to feel restored once more and inwardly cursed her female sensibilities that suffered her such a topsy-turvy ride of emotions. "You have been so kind. So very kind, always. And I am forever ruining it."

Darcy stumbled for a moment as his ears heard a similar sentiment from her just the previous afternoon. "I believe your vanity played less of a villain than my proud and selfish behavior. Last night, and again today, you have called me kind. It is a change that I hoped you might notice. But I was not kind in Hertfordshire nor in Kent."

Elizabeth shrugged and wondered what all she had confessed yesterday. Had she called him kind?

"I lived in arrogance that I thought justified by my position and status in life. But you—" Darcy paused and looked up from his plate to treasure the view of Miss Elizabeth Bennet sitting with him alone at a dining room table. He willed the image to burn into his memory as a comfort he might have when he lost her again later that day in Gretna Green. "But you taught me, madam, that arrogance is still arrogance and can never be kind because the chief concern is one's own comfort."

Elizabeth bit her lower lip to try to keep her tears at bay. This man challenged her, cared for her, and would never suffer her a single day of diminished resources. Whatever they might have had was lost months ago when she rejected him and further when Lydia ran off with Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth's mind took a position of Plato in reflecting about the negative ramifications of such regret. Had she accepted Mr. Darcy's offer of marriage she might have dragged him down with her sister's scandal. The small sacrifice she might make today to cut Mr. Darcy out of her life grieved her, but it was the only way she could think to repay the man's generosity and good opinion.

"I do not relish leaving your lovely estate, but I should return to my aunt as soon as we might manage. How soon do you think the carriage might be readied?" Elizabeth could not answer to Mr. Darcy's soliloquy on her good graces, but a change of subject might help them both.

"I anticipated your wishes and the carriage has been readied as we sat here to eat. If you should like to check your trunk before it is loaded—"

"No, that is not necessary. I believe your staff here to be of the highest caliber." Elizabeth broadened her smile as Mr. Darcy's eyes softened at her compliment.

"I'm happy to hear you say so. But yes, as soon as we are finished here, I have arranged for the maid, Fiona, to ride with us to Gretna Green if you have no objections."

"None, and I thank you for preserving my reputation by riding with young Peter to Broadmeadow." Finding her appetite fleeting at the settled plans for leaving Mr. Darcy's company, Elizabeth looked down at her hands in her lap.

"Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth looked up at Mr. Darcy with a paleness that betrayed her conflicting emotions. Darcy struggled with what he wanted to say next, and just as she was about to look away, he found some way to broach the subject that would likely be most uncomfortable for them both. "I just wish to say that even after we restore you to your aunt, you have my regards and blessing. I should very much like to be your friend."

Elizabeth's breath hitched in her throat. She began to hyperventilate that such sentiments could still be there after all that she had done to wrong him and her family's fall. Mr. Darcy, for his part, misinterpreted her body language and began to offer excuses for his perceived blunder.

"Forgive me, madam, I did not mean to distress you further. Please forget my last statement, 'tis a boundary I should not have crossed." Darcy motioned for the servants to clear the dishes and to allow them both to rise from their chairs.

All of the movement confused Elizabeth further as she silently stamped her slipped foot on the cold stone floor, frustrated that in addition to her loss of memory she felt herself unable to think so quickly as she had before. It was not until Mr. Darcy was practically leaving the room that she finally found her voice.

"Mr. Darcy, Mr. Darcy!" Elizabeth also found her feet, but felt most unladylike as a steep dizziness and imbalance to her steps forced her to walk with her hip brushing against the chairs pushed in on the long side of the table. "You misunderstand my silence, sir. There are not many phrases a lady might use without giving herself away, I could never dare to hope for more than an acquaintance with you and your family given the monstrous tumble mine has taken."

Mr. Darcy began to shake his head, but Elizabeth held her hand up so the man allowed her to speak further. "It would grieve me, sir, to take advantage of your gentleman-like behavior knowing that nothing but scorn and scandal face the friends and family of the Bennets. My sister Lydia is lost and there's nothing I might do, or you might do, to change that. So I accept your offer of friendship as the greatest gift that I cannot possess in good conscience." Elizabeth bowed her head and curtsied at the man, hoping he understood she was not trying to spurn his advances, but spare him the disastrous future she knew faced her as soon as she crossed the border once more into their homeland.

"As you wish, madam" Darcy's mask that he wore in many social situations descended and he and Elizabeth exited the dining room to begin their journey to Gretna Green.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ANOTHER DAY OF dry weather made the roads much improved between Langholm and Gretna Green as the Darcy coach spirited away Miss Elizabeth Bennet, her uncle's servant Peter, and Mr. Darcy. The maid in Mr. Darcy's employ, Fiona shared the bench with Miss Bennet while Peter sat next to Mr. Darcy. Darcy had intended for Peter to ride outside of the carriage but Miss Elizabeth had entreated him to show kindness to the boy who had assisted her after the carriage accident. Loathe to admit it, Fitzwilliam would deny Elizabeth nothing in his power to give. He only wished her request would include his presence in her life from this day forward. With such a mixture of company inside of the carriage, conversation remained stilted though Elizabeth found she enjoyed that very much as her head still pained her at intermittent times.

"There be the milepost, shan't be too long now to town." Peter remarked on the familiar milestones he recalled from his journey the morning Miss Elizabeth escaped her aunt's care.

"Miss Elizabeth, have you had the pleasure of reading the Bard's *Twelfth Night* play?" Darcy attempted to begin a conversation on a neutral subject. He hoped Shakespeare might stir Elizabeth's interests as his cravat felt tighter the closer and closer they drew to Gretna Green. Mr. Darcy abjectly dreaded the activity of turning his heart's desire over to her aunt.

"In which language, sir?" Elizabeth arched her eyebrow, an expression that made Mr. Darcy utter a short laugh.

"Indeed, how careless of me not to specify."

"Two summers ago my father and I translated our favorite play of mixups into both Latin and Greek."

Darcy's mouth turned down in both corners, impressed. "You are fluent in Latin and Greek?"

Elizabeth began to feel slightly self-conscious, worrying if she boasted too much. Still, it was not a lie to admit such. She nodded and looked out the window.

"Any other languages you claim?" Mr. Darcy teased.

"French." Elizabeth's mouth opened in surprise as the farms grew much closer as they neared the village. "And a little Italian." Turning the tables, Elizabeth put Mr. Darcy in the tough spot of answering a personal question. "Why *Twelfth Night*? What is it about that play that draws your interest?"

Darcy shrugged and tightened his grip on his walking stick perched vertically between his knees. "My sister, Georgiana, adores the story and I may have been tormented into reciting it with her at Christmastime."

"Tormented? My, my, I must meet this sister of yours who controls you so brutishly!" Elizabeth laughed to show she was not seriously insulting Mr. Darcy's sister who she understood to be significantly junior to him in age.

"And you?"

Elizabeth twisted her mouth into a sly sign of mirth. "I suspected you would ask. It is one of my father's favorites and, I confess, therefore mine. I suppose you might say I find a strength in Viola to not accept her circumstances after her shipwreck and seek her own destiny, even if it is just as a man." Elizabeth groaned inwardly as her confession spoke too much truth of her current situation, and Mr. Darcy cleared his throat.

As the carriage rolled more slowly, their proximity to Gretna Green began to alarm her as well. She could not expect her Aunt Gardiner would be very pleased with her behavior and as she had no success in locating or hearing any intelligence of either Lydia or Mr. Wickham, her flight from the Three Hammers was indeed nothing more than a dangerous folly.

"Yes, but in the end it was her brother who truly saved her was it not? I hardly see how Viola's efforts would serve her well if Sebastian had not joined the fray," Mr. Darcy countered.

"Sebastian arrived to help the mixup, but I am certain eventually Viola's sex would have come out in due course and Orsino would still be in love with her."

The carriage took a nasty jolt and Elizabeth's face paled as white as a specter, making Mr. Darcy quite concerned, but he restrained himself from reaching out to her. Instead, the maid Fiona fussed over Elizabeth raising an eyebrow from Mr. Darcy as to how close the two women had already become in less than a day's time.

"So you believe that two people in love can overcome any obstacle?" Mr. Darcy asked with as much indifference as he could muster.

"And you do not? I believe a great deal of history can be placed at the feet of lovers unwilling to give up. Scandals, affairs, even my current history, it would appear, is a direct consequence of two people in love," Elizabeth said bitterly.

Mr. Darcy had nothing more to say as he felt very confused as to how Bingley and Jane factored into Elizabeth's current predicament. He could hardly credit Elizabeth's intelligence to think that Mr. Wickham truly loved her sister, Lydia. That man was nothing more than an opportunist, and if he was still with Lydia Bennet wherever they might be holed up, it would be nothing short of a

minor miracle. It pained Darcy's heart to think of the poor soul that was the boisterous young Bennet girl. She was brash and perhaps too bold, but no one could say she would deserve the life she would likely face once Wickham abandoned her. Though he had set his cousin on the task of finding them, Darcy did not offer Elizabeth any hope of success in the mission. There was none to offer.

The carriage wheels slowed for the third time that afternoon, with the sun hanging low and threatening to touch the horizon, the weary travelers realized just how much time had passed since luncheon at Broadmeadow. Mr. Darcy alighted from the carriage first and offered a hand to help Miss Elizabeth, which she gratefully accepted. He wondered if he had somehow offended Elizabeth with his frank discussion, but he had precious little time to inquire. Elizabeth marched straight on up the path through the door of the Three Hammers, forcing the trio of travelers with her to scramble and catch up.

The inn stood nearly deserted as the post chaises had begun running again. Elizabeth's eyes adjusted from the bright outdoors to the wood paneled interior. She spotted the innkeeper and began to walk towards the man when Mr. Darcy's longer gait overtook her and he addressed the innkeeper first.

"I would inquire about a traveler you have staying at this inn. Mrs. Gardiner, if you please?" Darcy asked with the air of a man who was not accustomed to being either ignored nor disappointed.

The innkeeper turned a wary eye towards Darcy, recognizing the man as a fancy gentleman, but not one of his acquaintance. "We be a respectable installation here, sir. I do not readily give dark strangers who trespass my door the private information of my guests."

"I arrived here just two days ago with my aunt, perhaps you remember me?" Elizabeth offered the short innkeeper a flashy smile, hoping the man might remember her custom.

"Ah, the runaway. Been 'specting you." He reached down below his counter and produced a thick missive. He plopped the folded parchment on the counter with his hand firmly over it. Darcy, recognizing the man's need, flicked him a coin from his purse.

"Thank you, sir." Elizabeth said to Darcy.

Gently, Elizabeth took the letter addressed to her and unfolded the parchment. Mr. Darcy waited stoically next to her as large tears began to fall as Elizabeth read the missive.

As you have left me with nothing more than a mere note, I find an ironic justice in leaving you the same. Imagine my anguish to wake and learn my favorite niece, a young woman trusted to my care, abandoned her family to seek adventure and certain ruin with limited means and a servant? I am appalled

at what madness might have possessed you to continue our search on your own, a search I might add, that is entirely worthless now with your flight!

How would I explain your absence, or even be assured you might return? Was I to mount a search for two Bennet women with my children in tow, putting them at further risk in unfamiliar inns and roads? You left me with no protection, Elizabeth, leaving me without a footman.

I have left what resources I might with the Post Master who will see to it you take the post coach back to London, if it be the Lord's will for you to find this letter safely. You might bring Peter with you, if you can arrange his wages from what manner of funds you hid from me on your person, but do not bother to bring him to our doors. He may consider himself discharged without reference for his role in this mess.

I am deeply ashamed of you, Elizabeth Lucille Bennet. I pray nightly for your return to our family but find little sympathy in my heart for what consequences you might find.

Madeline Gardiner

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"SHE HAS LEFT me," Elizabeth sobbed, thrusting the letter from her aunt down to her side. Every word in her aunt's letter had been true. Elizabeth had made a selfish mistake, risking people she loved best. The only sentiment incorrect was that she had ruined herself worse than she was before with Lydia's flight. Desperation had driven her mad, and she now understood the motivations of many a heroine in a novel.

Mr. Darcy gently reached out for an opportunity to read it and Elizabeth relented. Pressing her fists to her temples, Elizabeth felt too animated to sit still. She frantically paced the small row between tables as Mr. Darcy read the short missive. Finally, she halted in her pacing and took a breath to restore her comportment.

"Forgive my outburst. I shall inquire with the Post Master and return to my family." Elizabeth dipped a small curtsy but did not get more than two steps before Mr. Darcy blocked her path.

"Again, you choose strangers? This news of your aunt's travel plans is . . . distressing." Darcy paused and looked around for any interested in their affairs, but truly, there was none. The one family and two couples in the common room were too concerned with their own troubles to pay him and Elizabeth any mind. "The coach has already left for the day, look, the room is deserted and tomorrow is Sunday. You shall become stranded."

Elizabeth blinked. "Not strangers, per se, that is not my choice, sir. But I have said quite plainly I do not wish to burden you for your kindness."

"And my kindness is my own concern. Come, let us take a table and think clearly." Mr. Darcy gently led Elizabeth to a table and motioned to the innkeeper for his attentions. "A bottle of wine?"

Elizabeth frowned as another memory came to her mind, this felt familiar.

"Whisky?" she asked, captivated by her own fractured memory of a conversation with Mr. Darcy and a foreign taste her mind recalled by that name.

Mr. Darcy took Elizabeth's question to be a request. "Belay the wine, your best Scotch if you do not mind."

The innkeeper left as Elizabeth began to protest about the drink order.

"I am sorry, I spoke out of turn. Wine or tea would have been lovely."

Darcy cocked his head to one side, finding Elizabeth's sudden embarrassment endearing. "No apology necessary for a palate of your caliber. I find you to be the best company yet to enjoy a pour." Darcy's imagination leapt to evenings in each other's company in his study or the library at Pemberley, partaking in a glass of whisky and his wife's company by the fire . . .

"Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy shook his head. "Forgive me, I was not attending."

"I can see." Elizabeth mocked him as the innkeeper had hustled to make his sale. Darcy again placed a coin on the table. She waited as he poured them both a drink.

"Remember, sip. Do not gulp," he teased as he offered her a drink. Elizabeth accepted the glass and then looked to the offending letter lying on the table between them. She sighed.

At Mr. Darcy's demonstration, Elizabeth lifted her glass and the amber liquid stung her lips just before it began to burn her mouth. The potent alcohol tingled on her tongue as she felt compelled to take an additional sip to remove the effects of the first. As long as she continued to replace one mouthful with another, the effect and nostalgia of the drink warmed her to the core.

"Careful! 'Tis better to prolong the completion . . . Er, that is not a drink you finish quickly." Mr. Darcy began to feel exposed as he worried needlessly about his crass language that Elizabeth did not register. Had it been his cousin, the teasing would have been merciless.

"I drank this with you in Canonbie?" Elizabeth began to feel the warmth of the liquid run down her esophagus to her nearly empty belly.

"You do not recall? That is to be expected, I hate to be the one to tell you that the lady doth drink too much." Darcy flashed Elizabeth a rare smile that revealed the man's dimples. Elizabeth looked down at her glass and back up through her eyelashes.

"Perhaps it is the whisky's fault I do not remember much of yesterday afternoon. What a remarkable substance." Elizabeth marveled at the potency of such a liquid, now understanding her father's penchant to begin drinking whisky in the afternoon and not ceasing until after dinner.

Darcy nodded and tapped the letter that still sat as an ominous white flag between them of unpalatable surrender. Elizabeth finished her drink and gestured for more. "I am afraid to say that I reserved only one room this evening, but the moon still be high tonight and we could return to Broadmeadow if it pleases you. Come Monday, the Darcy coach will start the journey to take you to London, as I had planned to leave Scotland then as well."

“So soon? But you just arrived? That is a beastly schedule.” Elizabeth took another sip of her second whisky. She found comfort in the liquid’s abilities to lessen her anger, hurt, and guilt over her aunt’s letter.

Darcy shrugged. “My sister and the Bingleys will be at Pemberley in a few days’ time. It was my aim to see to Broadmeadow’s needs for the coming harvest before entertaining my guests in Derbyshire.”

“Needs like firewood for the coming chill.” Elizabeth offhandedly offered, giggling and drinking again until she reflected on Mr. Darcy’s mention of Derbyshire. If not for Lydia’s debacle, she might have seen the Peak District, and all of its glory, with her aunt and uncle. Perhaps they might have even stopped at Pemberley, it being so close to Lambton, and met Mr. Darcy there.

Mr. Darcy felt confused about the mundane mention of firewood. “Yes, certainly, though my steward and I also reviewed other more critical needs, and made preparations for the spring planting.”

“Mr. Darcy, I hold great admiration for you, sir.” The words tumbled out of Elizabeth’s mouth with such speed, that she hastily took another sip. “What I mean is, I greatly admire your steady and capable management of your estate.” Elizabeth frowned as the tip of her nose began to feel a little numb. “Estates.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I dare not hope at your words, but do you truly admire me?” The doleful chestnut eyes of Fitzwilliam Darcy captivated the attention of Elizabeth Bennet and neither could look away.

“Yes,” she barely managed with a heavy release of breath she had not consciously held. “But it is too late—” she stopped as Mr. Darcy reached into his blue overcoat and produced a closed fist. Extending each long finger in procession, a shiny gold band with a hefty emerald inlaid into the center glistened in the candlelight of their table.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I am embarrassed to offer you another proposal of marriage, but my first was so horrifically done, might we consider it a shadow of another time? I have loved you, madam, since the first night your joy lifted the entire home of Netherfield. I dared not trust my observations the night we met, but watched you most carefully at every chance since then. I would be most honored to have you as my wife. Will you—” he cleared his throat as Elizabeth held her breath, “Will you marry me?”

Elizabeth’s emotions bubbled between utmost elation and dread. “But Mr. Darcy—”

“If your only reservation is your sister’s predicament, know that is no obstacle to me.”

Taking a deep breath and nibbling her bottom lip, Elizabeth nodded.

“Is that a yes? You will marry me?”

“Yes, yes Mr. Darcy, I shall marry you!” Elizabeth shouted, then recalled they were not alone but in a common room of an inn. The Three Hammers in Gretna

Green, no less. Elizabeth followed Mr. Darcy's gaze, after he placed the ring on her finger, to the window.

"If we hurry, the sun has not set." He stood and helped her up from the table.

"Hurry?"

Mr. Darcy leaned down and whispered into her ear. Elizabeth chuckled as she took the man's arm, the man who had indeed come to her rescue more than she ever deserved.

Not a half hour later, Peter and Fiona stood to witness the marriage at the blacksmith's anvil of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet. And despite the failure of finding Miss Elizabeth's aunt, the happy couple had found a way to each other. Having another drink as the carriage was again hitched with horses, they left Gretna Green to return to Broadmeadow. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Darcy wished to pass their first night as husband and wife in a rented room of the Three Hammers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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