

Excerpt from “In Want of a Wife”

Chapter One

“Open your eyes, Elizabeth,” a voice near her ear demanded, but she could not seem to find the strength to lift her lids. A pain so intense that the idea of her willingly encountering it caused her to grimace.

“Come, love,” the same voice insisted. It was a very nice voice. Smooth baritone. Cultured. A slight accent buried within the words.

Even so, a hint of fear skittered up her spine. She attempted to shake off the idea, but pain—immediate and excruciating—had her squeezing her eyes even tighter. Instinctively, she reached for her head, but he stopped her, catching her hand in his, bringing it to his lips. The warmth of his breath across her knuckles was comforting in an odd sort of manner; yet, she knew she should not be permitting him to continue to caress her fingers. She gave a little tug, but he enclosed her hand in his two.

“Easy,” he cautioned. “You have injured your head. My personal physician has treated the laceration and applied a bandage. Just know, you are safe now. I will protect you. Nothing and no one will harm you again.”

Despite his assurances, she did not feel safe. Instead, foreboding crept into her chest, constricting her breathing. She attempted to remember what had happened to her, but she could recall nothing of the details. Questions. What felt to be hundreds of them scampered through her mind, but none she could name, except one. She cracked one eyelid open and then the second, attempting to focus upon his features. Forcing moisture to her lips, she rasped, “Who are you?”

The effort exhausted her, and her eyes drifted closed again.

“Surely you know me,” he protested. His words sounded as if he held his emotions tightly in check. “I am William. Your husband.”

She thought to protest, but the darkness had caught her other hand and was leading her away from him. With one final attempt to correct his declaration, her mind formed the words, but her lips would not cooperate. Her dissent died before she could tell him: *I do not have a husband!*

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The next time she woke, she was alone in what appeared to be a finely furnished room. Even without turning her head, she could view the yellow and green flounce on the bed drape and the bright sunlight shining through the window. Tentatively, her hand reached for what felt to be a bandage wrapped about her forehead. As the man had told her previously, she had been injured. But how? When? Why? Another shooting pain crossed behind her eyes, and she winced, squeezing her eyes shut.

Seeking a calming breath, she attempted to remember how she had come to this place. Slowly, she lowered her hand and opened her eyes. A memory flitted closer: A voice called to her in urgency. *Elizabeth! Lizzy!* And the same voice saying: *I am William. Your husband.*

The idea frightened her, for she knew, without a doubt, she could have no husband. Her father would never. . . . Her father? *Who was her father?* She glanced to her hand where a very prominent emerald ring rested on her finger. “That is not right,” she whispered in labored syllables. Yet, as her lips formed the words, another memory—this one of fire rising up and consuming everything, and then of the sun, so sharp it stung her eyes—raced across her mind. A strong hand held hers. A man’s hand. A gold band bearing a signet upon his finger. His hand soothing hers and his voice—the same voice as the stranger—pleading with her to stay with him.

She knew instantly she did not belong to him. It was important for her to escape from wherever she was now. She had to leave before...before what? Try as she might, the memory remained out of reach; yet, without conscious thought, she knew whatever it was that she attempted to recall, it would change her life forever and, likely, not for the better. And not simply her life, but all those she loved.

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It was several more days before she could open her eyes without experiencing the continued pain in her head and the feeling of despair plaguing her thoughts. Fortunately, today the harsh white pain had lessened substantially, and her vision had cleared. With care, she turned her head to the side to examine the room further. A variety of fragrances emanated from a large vase of flowers, which filled the gentle breeze from the open window with the scent of a spring day. She could see more than two dozen yellow roses mixed with bits of greenery. She wondered what flower was her favorite.

Turning her head to the opposite side of the room, she realized she was not alone. The same man she recalled from her first awakening sat in a nearby chair, one leg crossed over the other, a book upon his lap. His strong profile stole her breath away. Like it or not, he disturbed her. Although she had yet to view him standing, she could tell from his perfect posture, he was quite tall. His jacket, a dusty black, nearly gray, spread across his wide shoulders as if it would never tolerate a wrinkle in *ne plus ultra*. She studied his averted profile and realized he was classically handsome: His hair was the darkest of browns, but with hints of red, his brows the same rich shade of russet. His features square and angular. A strong, straight nose.

Despite the distance between them, she sensed his power—his complete control of his world. He raised his head. Their eyes met and held. Strangely enough, she could not look away. His gaze threatened to steal her breath away. His eyes were a pale silver and unsettling in a manner that had her wondering if he had judged her and found her wanting.

She knew she frowned, but she could not prevent her reaction. He had told her his name, but she could not recall it. His was not a face easily forgotten, and she was certain she did not know him. Even so, as there was no one else about, she cleared her throat to say, “Could you assist me?”

As if released from a cold winter, he rose quickly, permitting the book to drop to the floor. He immediately moved to the bed to sit upon the edge and capture her hand again. He caressed the back of it, silently studying her with close scrutiny.

“Elizabeth, my love,” he said in tones speaking of relief. “Thank our dearest Lord. How do you feel?”

She swallowed hard against the panic filling her chest. He called her *Elizabeth*. Was that truly her name? Surely he would not call her such if it was not her name, but she did not feel as if the name fit her. *Elizabeth* was a most proper name. Lying in a bed while a strange man held her hand certainly did not feel proper. Could he have confused her with another? Yet, if *Elizabeth* was not her name, what was it?

“Elizabeth?” Concern marked his tone. “Tell me what ails you. Do you still have a headache? Doctor Nott promised the pain would decrease when the swelling abated.”

“I do feel stronger,” she assured him, although the words provided her nothing of calm. A thousand questions rushed to her lips, but she could not speak any of them aloud, for she was not certain she wished to know the answer.

“You are so pale.” He caressed her cheek, and it was all she could do not to close her eyes and sigh. His touch held great tenderness.

“Where am I?” she asked, attempting to right her memory.

“In our home in London. In Mayfair. You are in the mistress’s quarters.”

“What happened to cause my injuries?”

She watched as indecision briefly flickered across his features before he reined in his emotions. “A carriage accident.”

She attempted to keep her expression as blank as was his. “When?”

“Nearly a week prior. Your head struck a paver stone, and you were kicked in the leg by a donkey pulling a cart. Fortunately, you incurred only a large bruise from the stubborn animal. My sister and your maid have taken turns throughout the day, massaging your legs and arms to be certain the blood does not pool because of inaction. The fact you are considered a great walker proved advantageous in this matter. We could have lost you. Everyone was so frightened.”

“Including you?”

“Most assuredly. You must know—”

“But I do not,” she insisted.

A muscle jerked in his jaw, and a frown creased his forehead. “I do not understand,” he said after a long pause.

She stilled under his piercing gaze. “I remember nothing of this room. Of my name. Of—”

“Of me?” he demanded.

She sighed deeply, before squeezing her eyes shut for a brief moment. At length, she said, “Nothing of you either.”

He quickly released her hand and stood to pace the open area. She watched as he ran his hand through his hair in what appeared to be frustration. When, at last, he turned to her, his face was in shadow. When he spoke, he enunciated each syllable carefully, as if willing her to remember. “I am your husband. William. Fitzwilliam Darcy. And you are my wife, Elizabeth Darcy.”

“It cannot be—” she began, but the scowl claiming his features silenced her protest.

“This is unacceptable. I realize I was never your first choice as a husband, but it is too late to change your mind. The vows have been spoken. The registry signed. You cannot deny your pledge with this ploy. I will not have it. No matter how often you call out George Wickham’s name, he will never be your husband. I will never release you.”

She closed her eyes, battling the despondency pouring through her. “I know nothing of a marriage to you or a desire to marry anyone named ‘George Wickham.’”

“You have called out for him twice,” he stubbornly charged.

“He means nothing to me,” she insisted. She struggled to conceal how much his accusation bothered her.

“But neither do I.” The bitterness in his tone stabbed her conscience. “I would never have thought you capable of deception. Flippancy and pride and even prejudice, but never spitefulness.”

“Please.” She squeezed her eyes closed to block out his hurt expression. “I never set out to betray you.” She looked upon him again, willing him to believe her. “I do not know the answers to your questions. I cannot provide you the assurances you seek.”

He studied her for an elongated moment before returning to the bed and reclaiming her hand. “We will discover a means from this madness. What is it you require of me? Speak your wishes, and if it is within my power, I will grant it.”

She desperately wished she could give him what he sought, but she truly had no idea how to resolve their dilemma. “I speak the truth. I wish you believed me.” She turned her head so she no longer had to look upon the desolation marking his features. Thankfully, before their conversation could continue, a maid showed a kind-looking elderly gentleman into the room.

“I see our patient is awake,” he said. “I am Doctor Nott, Mrs. Darcy.”

Her supposed husband explained, “Mrs. Darcy appears to have lost her memory, Nott. I would have you consult with others who know more of the field of such injuries regarding her care. I wish only the best for my wife.”

“I understand your concern, Mr. Darcy,” the physician said with practiced patience, “but what you describe of Mrs. Darcy’s condition is to be expected after such trauma. The swelling—”

“I insist,” her husband said in stubborn tones.

“As you wish, sir,” Nott declared. “Might I examine her first?”

“Certainly.” To her, Mr. Darcy said, “I will return when Nott is finished.”

“It is not necessary,” she suggested, but the look of disapproval crossing his features cut short her protest.

“It is necessary,” came his dry retort.

She presented him a quick nod of acceptance, but the movement caused her to blanch white from the sharp pain claiming the front part of her head.

“Careful,” Nott cautioned her. “Go, Darcy. Permit me time to examine your wife thoroughly. We will speak later.”

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“Mr. Darcy?” His butler, Mr. Thacker, waited politely by the door.

“Yes, Thacker.” He attempted to concentrate on his business affairs, but all he could think on was what had occurred with Elizabeth.

“Mr. Cowan to see you, sir.”

“Show him up, Thacker.”

In less than a minute, the Bow Street Runner entered Darcy’s study. Darcy stood to greet the man. “Cowan. Might I offer you a drink?”

“No thank you, sir. I fear I have but a few minutes to spare. I wished to bring you the most current information on Mr. Wickham.”

Darcy sat heavily. “Tell me.” His heart raced in anticipation. He did not think he could bear losing Elizabeth to any man, but especially not to his former friend, George Wickham. “What have you discovered?”

Cowan removed a small journal from an inside pocket and opened it to read. “So far, I have found no reliable witnesses who can corroborate your sighting of Mr. Wickham in London on the day of Mrs. Darcy’s accident.”

“But Mrs. Darcy distinctly called Mr. Wickham’s name before she bolted away from my carriage,” Darcy argued. “And I swear I saw him walking away from the area when I looked up at the crowd gathered about Elizabeth’s unconscious state.” He would never tell anyone of his wife’s murmurings since her accident.

Cowan consulted his notes. “I did not say Mr. Wickham held no presence in London. Several of the man’s fellow militia mates were in the City, including Captain Denney, as well as the woman Mrs. Younge. I have men watching each.”

“Have there been any sightings of Wickham?” Darcy asked.

“None we can substantiate, but if Mr. Wickham is in London, I will find him.”

Darcy sighed heavily. He wanted this business with Wickham and Elizabeth to end. He suspected if his old school chum had made promises to Elizabeth, another hefty donation to Wickham’s purse would convince the man to leave Elizabeth to him. Darcy was not certain he could continue to adore Elizabeth as he did now, but he knew for certain he could not live one extra day if she chose to leave him. “Thank you for your diligence. Please know it is my intention to remove Mrs. Darcy to Pemberley as soon as she is well enough to travel.”

“When do you anticipate that might be?” Cowan asked as he returned his journal to its proper place inside his jacket.

“Doctor Nott believes Mrs. Darcy will be fit for travel some time in the next week. Perhaps a fortnight. She must not over exhaust herself. Therefore, I have ordered the new yacht to Dover. We will travel north by sea and then across land to Pemberley.”

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It was two more days before she ventured from her bed. With the assistance of her maid—a woman who claimed her name was Hannah and she had been serving her

for several weeks—as well as Mr. Darcy’s housekeeper, Mrs. Romberg, Elizabeth was able to have a bath and a proper toilette. She was surprised when Hannah chose a gown and robe she could not imagine she would have owned, for it was satin and lace, and although she knew nothing of her past, she thought herself more likely to choose a more sensible gown.

“A gift from Mr. Darcy,” Hannah explained when Elizabeth’s eyebrow rose in question.

She was settled upon the bench and Hannah was brushing her hair when a soft knock at the door announced her “husband’s” presence. Despite her best efforts, her breath caught in her throat. The sheer power of his demeanor was almost too much to bear. “I am glad to see you from your bed.” He approached slowly, and Elizabeth swallowed hard against the panic rising in her chest. “Might I?” He gestured to the brush Hannah held. The maid quickly handed it over. “Why do you not fetch Mrs. Darcy a shawl? I thought my wife might enjoy a bit of fresh air.”

“That would be lovely,” Elizabeth said softly.

Hannah curtsied and then disappeared into the bowels of the house. He motioned for Elizabeth to turn around, but she waved off the idea. “I would prefer to remain as I am.”

His frown spoke his concern. “Are you still so dizzy?” He crossed behind her and applied the brush to her still damp hair.

“I am not yet steady on my feet, but that is not the reason I do not wish to turn upon the bench.”

His efforts slowed. “Might you trust me enough to explain?” She could hear the caution in his tones. Since the first day when they had argued over her loss of memory, they had avoided the subject, instead spending time as do long-time friends, playing cards and his reading to her.

A sad smile claimed her lips. “I cannot bear the looking glass. It is a stranger I see staring back at me.”

He came around to kneel before her, catching her hand in his. “You do not recognize yourself in the glass? Is that what you mean?”

She turned her head to glance into the mirror. “I know nothing of the woman I view before me.”

He caressed her cheek. “I know the woman within and without.” He brushed his lips across hers. “Permit me to chronicle the splendor of the woman I married.”