

The Road to Understanding

Chapter One

1787 – on the Great Valley Road crossing from Roanoke, Virginia, to western Tennessee

“There it is,” he murmured under his breath. “My future.”

Darius Fitzwilliam crossed the wooden walkway to make his way along the path leading to the large whitewashed house near the Congregational church. Darius couldn't recall the last time he'd attended a religious service within an actual church structure. It was difficult to discover a proper minister on the western side of the mountain range separating North Carolina from the newly formed state of Franklin.

“On my side of the mountain, generally speakin', people either spend time in reading their Bibles alone or with a few close neighbors, although 'close neighbors' also be hard to come by where I called 'home.'”

He, his father, his sister Grace, and his best friend, Charles Bradford, studied God's words together, but it'd be wondrous to have a spiritual leader to take on the role of adviser to those within the community his father had founded over mountain. One of the things Darius hoped to accomplish with this return to civilization was to employ a ministerial candidate to accompany him west.

He paused as the house came into sight. “More than two years since I called upon my betrothed,” he murmured.

Needless to say, he'd written to Caroline as often as his duties to his father's land permitted. He'd like to say he took great pleasure in sharing his dreams for a future with Charlie's younger sister, but in truth, it felt a bit of another obligation. The idea worried him more than Darius would admit to anyone. He wondered how much Caroline Bradford had changed with their separation.

He couldn't say he held Caroline in deep affection, but Darius knew the woman to be a fine lady, and it was time for him to claim a bride and set up his family homestead. Moreover, he'd always assumed affection would come with marriage.

Darius studied the well-groomed lawn with a large oak shading the house's entrance. A rope swing hung from one of the limbs, and he easily recalled how he and Charlie taunted Caroline and her elder sister, Louisa, upon a summer's night.

“Before Charlie lost his hand in the war against the British,” he spoke softly as he sucked in a steadying breath. Charlie and Darius had followed Washington through more years than either of them cared to mention. Darius's eyes scanned the pristine lawn again before he set his steps. “Nothin' like the rollin' hills and endless forests of my father's land,” Darius murmured. “My land too.”

He'd already cleared several acres and had begun a proper house for his bride, a house with two bedrooms and a suitable parlor for entertaining guests. Darius had even spoken to a man

about extra horses and a small wagon, more for Charlie's use than his. It wasn't as if Caroline and he could share a wagon with her brother on their return to Darius's land.

With a sigh of resignation, he climbed the three steps leading to the main door of Wade Heywood's home to release the knocker. Caroline resided with her older sister. At one time Caroline thought to keep house for her brother, Charles, but after Charlie's injury, Darius's friend no longer held a desire to settle down among the civilized sort. Darius suspected Charlie thought himself less of a man and couldn't bear the possibility of censure.

"Yes, Sir?"

Darius cleared his throat. "Mr. Fitzwilliam for Miss Bradford."

The maid, who responded to his summons, appeared confused. "Miss Bradford be not within, Sir."

It was Darius's turn to know bewilderment. During the winter months, he'd sent Caroline a letter, which chronicled his travel itinerary, telling her that he'd arrive the first week of August for their nuptials. Although he didn't expect her to sit at home and wait for his appearance, Darius knew disappointment at her absence from the house.

"May I speak to either Mr. or Mrs. Heywood?"

The girl glanced over her shoulder to the interior rooms. "You'd best come in, Sir. I'll sees who might be to speakin' to yeh."

Not even accepting his hat, she left him biding his time in the open hall. Darius felt conspicuous in his "Sunday best." In Franklin, he wore buckskin and heavy work clothes, but he thought his appearance before his betrothed required more formal attire.

"Mr. Fitzwilliam?"

Darius looked up to note Heywood's descent from the storey above.

"What brings you to Fincastle?"

The man paused on the stairs to await Darius's response.

"I wrote Miss Bradford of my arrival. Did Caroline not share our plans with her family?"

"What plans would those be?" Heywood asked with a frown of disapproval.

"I came to Virginia to claim my bride," Darius said in what rang of the trepidation now claiming his heart.

A look of disbelief crossed Heywood's features. "I suspect there's some sort of misunderstanding. You should follow me, and we'll address your questions to Mrs. Heywood. She holds a better idea of Caroline's whims than do I."

Darius didn't like the sound of Heywood's assertions, nor of the word "whims," but he followed the man, nonetheless.

Locating his wife in a small sitting room, Heywood hustled Darius to a seat before explaining the situation to Mrs. Heywood.

“When was the last time you heard from Caroline?” Mrs. Heywood asked in a nervous manner.

“Some ten months,” Darius admitted, “but that be not unusual. Someone must make the trek to Greeneville to claim mail.”

“I see,” the woman said tentatively. “I suppose there’s no other means but to reach the point, Mr. Fitzwilliam. Our Caroline married Colonel Fidera some seven months back. My sister and the colonel have a house in Richmond.”

The woman’s news made no sense. Certainly, Darius would accept Miss Bradford’s change of heart, but didn’t he deserve an explanation from the lady’s lips? A farewell?

“Charlie knows nothing of Miss Bradford’s decision,” Darius stated lamely.

He’d left Bradford waiting for him and Caroline to return to Wythe Court House. Surely Charlie wouldn’t permit Darius to act the role of fool.

“You know something of Caroline’s nature,” Heywood countered. “When our sister met Fidera, she set her sights upon the colonel. If she didn’t reside under the same roof as us, I doubt we’d hold knowledge of their courtship before the marriage vows were spoken.”

Mrs. Heywood added, “It was a speedy affair...barely a month of courtship.”

Darius rose awkwardly to his feet. “I must be going,” he said in poor excuse. “Charlie awaits my return near Wythe Court House. It’ll be a surprise for your brother to learn of his youngest sister’s marriage to another. I image he’ll think it quite the thing.”

Darius reached for his hat. “When you next write to Mrs. Fidera, please send my warmest regards.”

Mrs. Heywood rose quickly. “Won’t you stay for supper, Mr. Fitzwilliam? There’s no need for you to rush away. We’d enjoy hearing more of our brother.”

Darius wished to be long away from this unexpected conversation. Without consideration, he reached into his pocket to withdraw a letter. “Charlie dictated what he wished you to know of his life on the western front to my sister Grace. I’m certain you’ll find it informative.”

With a clearing of his throat, Darius spoke his farewells, and before Heywood could respond, Darius made his departure. Once again outside, he turned his steps toward the outskirts of town rather than the direction of the room he’d let for the night.

Darius wasn’t certain how he felt about what just occurred. Last evening as he fell asleep under the stars, he thought long and hard upon the fact his days as a free man were numbered. He’d admit that he wasn’t best pleased with the idea of holding himself accountable to anyone but his revered father; yet, he understood God’s commandment to populate the earth meant that men and women must join. Darius was well aware that America’s hope of becoming a great country rested with men like him, those willing to work for prosperity and to set up a family.

Nonetheless, his pride grimaced with the thought of the folly of appearing upon Caroline's threshold only to be sent packing by his so-called betrothed's relations.

"Should I be incensed?" Darius asked as he paused to lean against a large oak. "Odd, but I'm not." He gave a slow shake of his head. "Did I tarry too long? Certainly, I might've returned last summer, but I wished to have the beginnings of a house built before claiming a bride." Darius lifted his shoulders in a shrug of resignation. "I suppose Caroline became weary of waitin' for my return. Or, mayhap, she'd grown too soft to face frontier life and didn't have the nerve to speak her qualms."

Scrubbing his dry hands across his cheeks, Darius attempted to bring forth an image of Caroline, but he no longer could recall the bits of Miss Bradford's countenance that initially drew his attention to the woman.

"What is the shape of her lips or the true color of her eyes?" he wondered aloud. Darius smiled with hard determination. "How can I blame Miss Bradford for her desertion when neither my body nor my heart wished the connection? I acted from duty to my family name. I just wish Caroline was honest enough to admit the life I chose wasn't to her liking."

Darius lifted his eyes to the Heavens. "All right, God, what now? I realize I came to this day with a less than charitable heart, but if this isn't the path you've chosen for me, then what is?" He sighed heavily. "I know I must wait for your answer, but if you'd prevent this situation from becoming a wedge between me and Charlie, I'd be forever grateful. And even though it isn't a great fault, please remember that I'm not a patient man."

He glanced toward the town's outline.

"I shan't be stayin' more than another day. No sense in keepin' Charlie waiting. Won't he be surprised with my early return and his sister's absence? I can hear him now, offerin' apologies and excuses.

"Nothin' to be said on the matter. I'm free to seek companionship elsewhere, not that there are many women from which to choose in the wilderness, but if I come across one that suits my fancy, I'm no longer obliged to another."

* * *

Eliza Harris held her father's arm tightly.

"Pardon me, Sir," Mr. Harris said as they approached a tow-headed man whose hair displayed the signs of long hours in the sun. "I'm seekin' the acquaintance of two gentlemen from the western counties."

The man looked up and grinned widely. Eliza thought his the most congenial smile she'd ever encountered.

"I suppose that be me, but I don't count myself a gentleman, not in the strictest sense of the word. I be a frontiersman who knows his Bible teachings. My name's Charles Bradford. How may I be of assistance, Sir?"

Her father stretched out his hand in greeting. It was only then that Eliza noticed the man's missing hand.

Mr. Bradford shrugged in embarrassment. "A gift from good King George," he said in explanation. "I beg your pardon."

Mr. Harris shook off Bradford's apology. "No need, Son. I'm proud to claim the acquaintance of those who served our fledgling country."

A flush of color claimed Bradford's cheeks, but Eliza noted how the man stood straighter. "I've learnt to do many things with the left one. Now, what business do you claim, Sir?"

Her father cleared his throat before confessing their purpose. "My name is Robert Harris, and this be my daughter Eliza. We heard two men from the western counties meant to set out soon for Jonesborough. We hoped to join them as far as the Cumberland Gap. Perhaps we can find another group of settlers to continue the journey from there."

Bradford nodded his greeting to Eliza while her father made his explanation.

"Where ye from, Harris?" the man asked.

"Up near the Maryland–Virginia border. My family and I mean to claim land in the valleys in Kentucky County. I hear land be available for less than a dollar an acre."

"Hears the same," Bradford assured. "Do you also have sons?"

Her father patted the back of Eliza's hand. "My only boy be but eight, but have no fear, Sir, my three girls be strong enough to survive the trek if that be yer concern, Mr. Bradford."

"I'm just askin' what I know my partner Mr. Fitzwilliam will ask. The journey be difficult even for sturdy men."

Eliza straightened her spine to appear taller than she was. "My sisters Jonquil and Margaret and I can handle a team of oxen as well as any man, and none of us are afeard of a long walk." Bradford smiled kindly upon her. "I've no doubt, Miss. As for me, yer welcome to join up with us. Fitz means to see several settlers to the mountain territory, but I'm certain he'll not object to add a few more to our party."

"Where's Mr. Fitzwilliam?" Eliza inquired.

"To the east in Fincastle," Bradford said with a smile of amusement. "Plans to get himself hitched to my youngest sister."

"And you won't attend the wedding?" Eliza asked. It appeared odd to her that both men wouldn't retrieve the lady.

"Nah," Bradford said with a shrug. "I left home at eighteen to join General Washington. My pa's house no longer exists. Only been home once since leaving to fight. Wade Heywood bought the land when my pa passed, and he married my eldest sister, Louisa. There's nothing for me there. My sister's neighbors recall a whole man and look upon me as if I'm a derelict. I prefer the

wilderness where a man be judged for what he accomplishes, not for his failures. My pa left me a small legacy, and I mean to earn my fortune upon the frontier.

“As to the wedding, Fitz will escort several families west to join up with us. He and Caroline will share a small wagon until we meet up again, and then I’ll claim the smaller one and permit Fitz the larger. There’s no need for a man without a wife to hold back those who do. Moreover, I consider myself fortunate to claim Fitz to friend. Most wouldn’t consider my needs in such a matter. Even takin’ a small wagon, it’ll be good to have Caroline close. Of late, I find I’m missin’ much of my New York and Virginia roots. The winter in the mountains reminds me of home.”

“It sounds as if you’ve found yourself a friend with principles,” her father observed.

“He’s a Christian man and the best,” Bradford declared. “If not for Fitz, I’d be dead in some unmarked cornfield posing as a battleground.” The man’s words sent a shiver of dread down Eliza’s spine. She’d never been so close to those who’d fought in the war of revolution.

“When do you expect to depart?” her father asked.

“Three to four days. A week at most if’n we get rain. Can you be prepared by then?”

“Absolutely,” her father declared. “Provides us time to restock some of our supplies. We’ll be prepared to leave when you and Mr. Fitzwilliam make the call.”

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Watching the McClendons cuddle together upon the wagon seat did little to ease Darius’s bruised pride. The couple had professed sorrow at not taking Caroline’s acquaintance, for before he’d ridden to Fincastle, Darius had spoken of his betrothed to the pair. From his own observation, he didn’t think the McClendons would even know of Caroline’s absence if he’d not informed them of it. Married only a few months, they were rarely seen not holding hands. In truth, the scene fueled Darius’s anger. He couldn’t say he would be so openly affectionate with Caroline as were Andrew and Marti McClendon, but he’d convinced himself he and Miss Bradford would know contentment.

“Much longer?” Geoffrey Shannon asked as he brought his horse alongside the one Darius rode.

Darius wasn’t much pleased to add Shannon to their party, but he’d possessed no legitimate excuse to deny the man. He’d known Shannon when he was still in England, and it was at Darius’s suggestion that the Shannons sought their fortunes in America, and that brought them to his notice a second time. If Darius had known then what he knew now, he’d have kept his counsel.

“Can’t blame the son for the sins of the father,” he thought when he looked upon the man.

With Shannon on the other side of the line of muskets, they’d been enemies during the war, but Shannon had claimed American roots since then. He’d been in the colonies long enough that the English would no longer consider him an “English” man. Even Shannon’s British accent had softened somewhat, picking up the cadence of those born in America. Darius’s conscience said that many of the founding fathers had come to America for their freedom, and he should provide Shannon his forgiveness for a crime the father committed. God would expect it of him. And so,

against his better judgment, Darius had permitted Shannon to claim a spot among the traveling party.

“Be in Wythe Court House by this time tomorrow. It’ll take at least two days to bring the group together. Hope to set out for Franklin by week’s end. The others might wish to stay for one last Sunday service before leaving the closest thing to civilization this side of the mountains.”

“In that case, I might ride over North Carolina way for a day or two,” Shannon said. “I’ve relations that direction.”

Darius warned, “Can’t wait for your return if the others mean to claim dry weather.”

“No worries,” Shannon said with a grin. “I travel light. If you leave, I’ll follow in a day or two. I’m certain several of those waiting for you are well loaded with supplies. You’ll not make as good a time when you add another half dozen wagons to these three.”

“Will the boy come with us?” Darius glanced back at the small ox cart owned by Shannon. The fellow had won a Negro child, an ox, and a flat wagon in a card game. The boy of no more than ten to twelve years drove the slow moving cart holding Shannon’s few belongings, some supplies, and an impressive chest of which Darius had yet to view the contents.

“Finny will wait with the cart in Wythe Court House. It’ll be my contract with you. Everything I own be on that cart. I shan’t forget to return.”

Although Darius held his doubts regarding Shannon’s character, his Christian faith said he must play the role of Good Samaritan. If the worse came, he could send Shannon out on his own or leave the man at one of the forts.

“Before you set out for greener lands, I must reiterate: I won’t tolerate gaming for more than a few pebbles. The families that travel with me are under my protection. Do I make myself clear?”

“I’d expect nothin’ less, Fitzwilliam,” Shannon declared in what sounded of sincerity, but Darius couldn’t shake the unease he experienced.

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“Fitz!” Charlie called as Darius reigned in his horse before the barn in which he and Charlie claimed a straw bed as cover each night.

“Evening,” Darius said with a grin as he swung his leg over the saddle to dismount. “Everything go well?”

“Absolutely,” Charlie said in distraction as he looked past Darius’s shoulder to the wagons rolling to a stop before the barn. “My sister within one of the wagons?” Charlie squinted into the late day sunshine.

“Afraid not,” Darius said softly. “Miss Bradford chose not to join us.”

Charlie looked upon Darius in obvious confusion. “What mean you by ‘chose not to join us’? It was always the plan for you to marry my sister and for us to take up homesteading together.”

Darius attempted to hide his continued aggravation with the situation. "Plans change: Miss Bradford married another some seven months prior. She's now Colonel Mrs. Fidera and residing in Richmond."

Charlie's expression took on an incensed look. "Without even as so much as a fare-thee-well?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Heywood seemed to think Mrs. Fidera sent me her regrets," Darius explained.

He didn't enjoy the discussion of Miss Bradford's betrayal, for Darius feared it would lodge between him and Charlie. They'd been friends since they were no more than six, and Darius would be sore to lose Charlie's loyalty.

"What's done cannot be undone," he said in sympathy, for Darius recognized the conflicted expression on Charlie's countenance. His friend also held loyalties to his youngest sister. "Miss Bradford chose a life that best fits her needs. I cannot fault Caroline."

"If'n yer certain," Charlie said in a tone that spoke of doubt. "I'd not want Caroline's notions to set our friendship off foot."

Darius slapped Charlie upon the shoulder in camaraderie. "We remain as we've been for some two decades," he assured his friend. "Another woman will eventually claim my attentions. Until then we'll build ourselves a welcoming homestead."

"Mayhap I'll find me a woman before you," Charlie teased.

"That would please me as much as finding someone of my own," Darius declared as he loosened Jinx's bridle. "Any takers for the settlement? We could use some unmarried ladies in the west."

Charlie propped a leg against the side of the barn to oversee Darius's efforts. "One young one came to speak to me three days prior."

Darius looked at his friend in compassionate amusement. "Pretty?" he asked.

Charlie rarely spoke of women. Since his injury, Darius's friend seemed to think women would judge him half a man.

"Fair enough," Charlie taunted. "She and her pa, a Mr. Harris, asked about going with us as far as the turn off for the Cumberland Gap; they be going on into Kentucky County."

"Then ye better work fast," Darius suggested with a broad smile.

"Supposedly there be more than one daughter," Charlie explained. "And the MacCaffey's have two daughters, one of age and one maybe a year removed."

Darius grinned at his friend. "Should I not grieve your sister's loss for a few weeks?"

Charlie shoved off the barn to set his steps in the direction of the two wagons and the cart. Darius had no doubt Charlie would make certain the newcomers were properly settled. "I see no reason to grieve for something you never had. Caroline's bed be made elsewhere. Neither of us has a foot in the grave. We've a lot of livin' to do."

Darius watched his friend greet the McClendons, Mr. and Mrs. Wilkerson, and Finny. There was a quickness to Charlie's step, which Darius thought long missing. He prayed Miss Harris would be kind to his friend. Even if she held no interest in Charlie, Darius hoped the woman wouldn't find Charlie's injury repulsive.

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He wasn't long to wonder on Charlie's improvement. Early the next morning, the Harrises called upon Darius.

"Heard of your return," Harris explained after Charlie made the introductions. "Wanted to make certain you held no objections to my family joining your party."
There was little Darius could say since Charlie had approved of the family joining them.

Moreover, he could tolerate any number of females if it meant Charlie's long-standing doldrums disappeared.

"As long as your womenfolk can keep up with the rigors of the trail," Darius began.

"Why shouldn't we? It's not as if walking long stretches is a man's domain."

Darius eyes finally settled upon the woman, and despite recognizing Charlie's interest in the lady, Darius's body reacted to her appearance: Fine boned, but not fragile of frame. Eyes that changed from green to muddy brown as she spoke with emotion. Skin tanned from the sun. Hair kissed by flakes of fire. Certainly not a woman of which Darius's betrothed would approve as a replacement or as a suitable match for her only brother.

"I meant no offense, Ma'am," he said distractedly.

"Never mind our Eliza," Mrs. Harris placated. "She's never learned her place or how to hold her tongue."

In spite of first impressions, Darius studied the girl as Charlie assumed control of the conversation with her parents. She wasn't the type that would customarily catch his eye, but Darius was hard pressed to conceal his interest. If they were in England, like when he was at Cambridge, he'd address her as 'Miss Eliza,' for he learned she possessed an elder sister. But in America, if they were familiar, she would simply be Eliza. Nonetheless, Darius suspected there was nothing simple about the woman. Somehow, he thought the shortened name without the form of address just didn't suit her. Even with her protests of holding her own on the journey, the woman was as a regal in the tilt of her head as any member of the monarchy.

"Do you ever go by Elizabeth?" he asked in a soft tone. In his opinion, the idea of the "warrior" queen fit the woman who stood before him.

As if she read his mind, she asserted, "I am not named for an English queen." Her nose curled up in distaste.

Darius's lips turned upward. He understood perfectly what attracted Charlie to the woman. Unfortunately, the thought of his friend's attraction for Miss Eliza had Darius bringing his own desire under control.

“You assume I mean you harm, Miss Eliza. As such, perhaps it’s better we keep our connection minimal. It appears I cannot speak kindly without your accusing me of disdain.”

His words evidently shocked her, for Eliza Harris turned several shades of red before huffing her disapproval and following her parents toward the open barn door.

Despite his internal warning not to intrude upon Charlie’s supposed courtship, Darius couldn’t withdraw his eyes from the gentle sway of the lady’s hips as she walked smartly away. He studied how she straightened her shoulders, shoulders that held no sign of the practiced façade of gentility in them. The woman walked as if she owned the barn in which he stood—walked as if she wasn’t afraid of work, a fact that would prove to her benefit upon the wilderness frontier. She was without the false shell often found in society ladies.

Although he set his mind to ignoring her, Darius’s smile widened. Eliza Harris would make the journey over mountain interesting. Of that, he held no doubt.