

An Appalachian *Pride and Prejudice* Retelling



the heart of
**BENNET
HOLLOW**



JOANNE BISCHOF DEWITT

Award-winning author of *The Lady and the Lionheart*

Praise for *The Heart of Bennet Hollow*

Joanne Bischof DeWitt's reimagining of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a clever blending of familiar story elements with a refreshing take on situations and settings peopled with characters who readily capture sympathy and interest. With plenty of nods to Austen's classic, this tenderhearted journey through the flaws of human frailty toward the grace of second chances is sure to please.

LORI BENTON, Christy Award-winning author of the Kindred series

Joanne Bischof DeWitt pens a sweet tale inspired by an enduring classic but adds her own lyrical prose to create an eloquent story of culture clashes, simple loves, and finding where one's heart belongs. In *The Heart of Bennet Hollow*, DeWitt beautifully recreates Austen's familiar and beloved characters.

PEPPER BASHAM, author of *Hope Like Wildflowers* and *Sense and Suitability*

Welcome to the world of Bennet Hollow where a memorable cast of characters opens the door to a turn-of-the-century *Pride and Prejudice* retelling in 1904 Virginia. Witty and pretty, *The Heart of Bennet Hollow* overflows with Appalachian heart in Joanne Bischof DeWitt's wholesome signature style.

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award-winning author of *The Indigo Heiress*

Set in beautiful Appalachia, Joanne Bischof DeWitt delivers another heartwarming tale with a classic twist! *The Heart of Bennet Hollow* is sure to delight readers of historical romance, especially fans of *Pride and Prejudice*, who will see some fun reflections in this new story.

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *A Token of Love* and *The Legacy of Longdale Manor*

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The Heart of Bennet Hollow

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To my husband, Bryan

“If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.”

— JANE AUSTEN

A grayscale photograph of a misty forest. The trees are thin and their leaves are sparse, creating a soft, ethereal atmosphere. A white decorative frame with ornate corners and a central circular element is overlaid on the image. Inside the frame, the word "autumn" is written in a cursive font.

autumn

October 1904

Lizabeth Bennet clutched the handle of the wicker basket with hope. The same hope with which she'd gathered each and every wildflower within. Slipping inside the farmhouse, she traded the brightness of day for the dim light of Ma's kitchen—the very heart-beat of Bennet Hollow.

“Did you spot the new train car, by chance?” Jayne asked from the table, her voice as soft and mountain grown as a wild birch grove. “They say it's called the Pemberley.”

Lizabeth lowered the basket to the table and handed a sprig of lacy white yarrow to her older sister. “I didn't wander far enough. Have you seen it yourself? This Pemberley?” Having just come in from the sunny garden, she brushed her hands clean and sat. “Clearly I've missed the gossip.”

“I saw it when I walked into town this mornin'.” Jayne examined the contents of the basket. Her golden hair was bound up in rag curlers, and a single band of gray twine wrapped her pale wrist, holding a tiny nugget of violet amethyst that Pa, a geologist, had

unearthed in a mine. “It’s the prettiest sight, Lizzy. Brighter than a new penny perched there right on the track.”

Lizabeth rolled back the sleeves of her striped work dress and tried to imagine such a view. A breeze blew cool against her bare neck from the open window, causing her homespun collar to flutter. Her sisters had been on the lookout ever since some weeks back, when the owner of the New River Coal Company had announced his coming guests—a slew of coal barons and investors, all eager to bid on the property that was now for sale.

And the best part of all among the Bennet sisters . . . the dance that would mark their arrivals.

“Do you know his name?” Lizabeth asked. “The man who owns this train car?”

“I can’t recall. But . . .” Jayne’s voice dropped to a whisper. “I hear he’s the wealthiest of the investors. Maybe even more than all of them put together.”

“There’s no way folks could know that.”

“Well, the rest of the investors arrived *on* the train. This other man owns a whole piece of it.” Jayne’s pretty eyebrows lifted.

From where she stood at the stove, Ma chimed in. “And I’m sure one of these fellas’ll want to buy the coal company with Mr. Jorgensen so bent on retirement.” She shook her head slowly as though unable to decide if that were a good or bad omen. “Change is comin’ to New River and it’s gonna affect more than just the coal mine. Mark my words, girls.”

A slow shiver crept up Lizabeth’s spine. No wonder murmurings were spreading from one end of town to the next.

How could only a few men spark such attention?

“Mr. Jorgensen’s all but flung open the doors to the hoist barn.” Ma stirred the fire with an iron rod. “Wants these investors to see the town at its best.”

“How do you know this, Ma?” Lizbeth asked.

Ma winked. “It’s my job to know these things. I saw his wife and the other ladies wipin’ dust from the windows. Some boys tried to peek inside, but Mrs. Jorgensen shooed ’em off.” The iron poker clattered as she coaxed the flames brighter. Sparks popped and sputtered. “The rest’ll have to remain a mystery ’til tonight.”

With a sigh, Jayne lifted a snip of wild roses from the basket and plucked petals from the stem. A tiny puddle of pink formed on the rough-hewn table.

Lizbeth did the same with a bundle of chamomile. She’d gleaned the green and white buds from the meadow behind the barn where blackbirds lined the fence, squawking for the scraps of table bread she sometimes brought them.

“Now whatever’s this about?” Ma tilted the basket to peer inside.

Lizbeth lifted a scrap of linen from her embroidery stash. “Sachets. Jayne hatched the idea and I searched the farm.” Now they could fashion scented secrets to tuck beneath their bodices for the dance this evening. An event mused to be the finest they had ever attended.

Or might ever hope to attend.

Ma nodded, looking pleased. “It’d do well to marry a few of you girls off sooner rather than later. And to think of such wealthy men here in town. I hope they stay a good long while.”

“Ma!” Lizbeth gasped.

“Well, you two are of age, and your sisters are right behind. It doesn’t seem like anyone ’round these parts has caught your eye. A mother can hope. Least give me that.”

Jayne widened her eyes playfully and chose another flower. “I’ve been told the train car has a parlor *and* a dinin’ room. All dressed up in velvet curtains as deep a blue as the midnight sky.

Just imagine being whisked away into the grand unknown aboard such a dream.”

Lizabeth smiled softly. At twenty, she was two years younger than Jayne. Her other sisters—Maryanne, Kit, and Lacey—stairstepped after her. Though the younger three still walked to school each day, they were just grown enough to attend the coming barn dance. The very girls that bounded down from the second story now, brown braids flying. Like chicks on a stoop, they filled the crooked stairwell in a chorus of sun-faded skirts, mountain drawls, and tattered boots.

“I heard tell the owner’s a sight to see as well!” Sixteen-year-old Lacey winked brazenly and twirled around the post. “A coal baron all the way from Vermont. They say he’s rich enough to own all of New River if he fancies to. Oh, I hope he notices me.” She gasped at the basket of flowers and climbed beneath the banister for a better look. “Whatever’s this for?”

Lizabeth and Jayne exchanged knowing smiles.

“Just a little somethin’ for tonight.” Lizabeth nudged the basket aside.

But Jayne patted the bench beside her. “Have a seat and join us. There’s larkspur and some wilted mint, but I reckon the herbs’ll be the most fragrant.” Squinting, she adjusted one of the rags in her hair, appearing eager that the curls would turn out.

Like two curious colts, Kit and Maryanne edged nearer.

Lizabeth loosened a length of thread from the spool. “Better get a move on and fetch the kettles, girls.” She gauged the light through the window where a late afternoon wagged its finger at them for dawdling. “Time to hurry if each of us are to bathe before the dance.”

“Water’s steamin’.” Ma flapped a rag at the white cloud billowing from the kettle’s spout. “And the iron’s hotter than the July sun. There won’t be a wrinkle among my girls tonight.”

The younger three grabbed kettles and basins, starting for the stairs.

Ma continued. “We may be poorer than the Jorgensens but we can make just as fine an entrance. Even if we *don’t* own a coal mine. And we best find out this new man’s name so your pa can introduce you girls proper tonight. Lizzy, I hope you’ve finished sewing your new blouse.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Eyes down, Lizbeth tried to focus on her task as she unraveled the same spool of thread. Her other sisters were more patient with the details, and her newest blouse had a flaw or two that she hoped would go unnoticed. She was better at embroidery than more practical sewing. The very reason Ma had her refocus on stitching up a sampler this year. One that was only partially finished.

With a two-story farmhouse, a well-tilled garden, and two loyal mules, Lizbeth knew her family was better off than the mining families on the other side of the river, but not by much. Now, just past sixty, Pa ran their home from the modest savings he’d tucked away before he slowed down his work as a geologist for several mining companies. Such circumstances had all of them considering who might marry first . . . and when.

Lizbeth knew some fine colliers, but something in her heart longed for more than sweeping the porch steps on one of the row houses where miners and their families dwelled in the shadow of the coal company. A place where grime and dust tried to coat anything in its sight.

Was that the life she was meant for? Who was she to think that there might ever be more?

Ma had fussed that she was *headstrong*. Pa dubbed her *noble*. And all the girls knew her as *well-read*. Those weren’t particularly good qualifications for a bride. No. Men around here needed women who could diaper a baby and store coins beneath the

mattress. Stretching provisions remained the order of the day, not reading books or caring for her mules or hoping she could have a purpose that she'd been uniquely made for.

Tilting the basket, Lizbeth searched for more chamomile, unable to believe that a man might love her *and* her purpose. That he could *need* her for such. Especially since she didn't yet know what that purpose might be. Best she remain alone and live out a quiet life right here, surrounded by her sisters and her beloved mules. Perhaps that was her calling all along. Otherwise, she'd need to nail her dreams to the floor and go the way that all young women in New River went. To be a miner's wife, owing every cent her husband made to the company store just for flour and salt.

Upstairs, the younger girls chattered over which reels and waltzes they thought the band might play and which men they hoped would ask them. By the sound of it, Lacey had her eyes on the lead spragger while Kit fancied a jig with his younger brother. As for Maryanne, the girl was as sensible as a mile marker, so she hushed their squeals, hoping this might be a night for conversation instead.

Threading a needle, Lizbeth reached for a scrap of linen. Should any fellow notice the earthy scent of chamomile, he would find Lizbeth in his arms. But should a man favor the fragrance of rose, he'd be charmed by a turn around the floor with Jayne tonight.

If Jayne made a promising match, the dear girl could fly from these crowded walls and narrow beds. Perhaps one of these fine men who'd come to town could be right for Jayne. Maybe it could even be the owner of the Pemberley. A man who could give Jayne a life as grand as she deserved. Not only was she the prettiest sight to behold, and more ready for marriage, she was worthy. A good heart and a sweet countenance. An ideal wife for any bachelor, especially one who could give her a safe and secure life. Had the opportunity just ridden in on the rails?

“Did you see him while you were in town?” Lizbeth asked. “The one with the train car?”

A twinkle lit Jayne’s blue eyes. “No. But I overheard him speakin’ to Pa about the mine and he sounded pleasant—”

Ma gasped. “Your pa didn’t tell me he spoke to him! Mr. Bennet! Best get yourself in here.” She tapped her spoon on the edge of a pot. “What does a wife have to do to get a man to talk about these things?”

Pa entered with his newspaper. “Just a hot cup of tea should do me.” He winked as he settled into his armchair near the window, worn smooth from use. Just beyond, mature poplars blocked the Virginia sky, sending glittering shadows across the room.

“Tell us more, Pa,” Jayne said. “About the newcomers.”

“Five of ’em to be exact.” His voice was as deep and aged as the hickory chair he sat in. “A handful of coal barons. All owners of other mines across the east.”

“And the one that all the fuss is about?”

“He’s a younger fella. Younger than all the others. Arrived here with his business associate. Fine-lookin’ boys with steady manners.”

Ma cracked open the oven door to a loaf of fragrant pumpkin bread. “I’ve never seen such a commotion as I saw at the company store this week. I watched two bolts of calico sell in less than ten minutes. And today, I saw a whole mess of hair ribbons fly out the door just as quick. You mark my words. Our girls won’t be the only ones in New River dressed up in their finest tonight. To think of Mr. Jorgensen hosting such a fuss.”

“Well, this is just the first step in convincin’ folks ’round here that change doesn’t always have to be bad,” Pa mused.

“Does that mean one of these men would own the town of New River?” one of Lizbeth’s sisters called from upstairs.

The others giggled.

“Not quite,” Pa answered back. “But it does seem that way.”

“I hear they’ve cleared the company’s barn from stem to stern.” Lizbeth snipped the end of her thread. “It sounds ever so pretty.”

“I’ve been told there’ll be over two dozen pies and punch sweetened with sugar.” Jayne added another stitch to her fragrant sachet then moved Lizbeth’s embroidery hoop aside lest it get buried in stray petals. Lizbeth had gotten so far as embroidering *The night is* on a square piece of linen. A sacred sentiment that lingered far from finished. Both on the cloth and in her understanding.

Ma wagged her head. “This’ll be somethin’ to remember!”

Pa examined the newspaper. Though he’d never been a miner by trade, he’d worked for mines in eight counties across the state before finally landing in New River to lead a quieter life when the girls were little. His gnarled hands were stained black at the creases from over forty years of scouring the earth for minerals and uncapping ink pens to create maps and ledgers that documented his findings. A gentle soul who taught Lizbeth how to recognize rocks and features on their walks through the woods.

Pa’s bristly brows lifted to match the amusement in his tone. “We’ll just have to wait and see, then, won’t we?”

“How do you sit there, the picture of mischief?” Ma asked.

Pa finally lowered his paper to his lap. “Do tell a fella what you’d like to hear.”

“For starters, we’re all burstin’ to hear more of this train car. I only saw it from a distance. Does it really have a glass observation dome?”

“I do believe I counted two.”

“Oh, how grand. Imagine seeing the stars at night from inside a train.” Jayne blew on a dandelion weed, scattering its delicate seeds.

Kit returned with empty kettles, her hair glistening and clean. With a sigh, she nestled a sprig of chamomile behind her ear. “Like a mansion. How could one man be so rich?”

Lizbeth tugged the stem loose, replacing it with a dainty rosebud. “You don’t even know what a mansion looks like. And off with you. The others are waiting!”

Kit fetched the kettles for the next bath. “Well, I sure hope it has runnin’ water!”

Pa chuckled.

Lizbeth pondered such luxuries as running water and blue velvet curtains. She knew only the frayed cotton of her apron and the sun-streaked quilt that graced her tiny bed in the second story room she shared with Jayne. A place where the floor was knobby but clean and the washbasin made of rusted tin, not porcelain. She’d hardly know how to peer inside the window of such richness, let alone grace its aisleway.

“Does he own the engine too?” Lizbeth asked.

“Just the car.” Pa tucked his creased paper into the edge of his chair for the next time he re-read it. “Engines are owned by railroads. Wealthy folk pay to have their private cars hauled by an engine that’s either comin’ or goin’. It costs a pretty penny to do as much, mind you. Hundreds of dollars for the fare alone.”

“Incredible,” Jayne breathed.

Ma sighed. “To think of it.”

Pa went on. “The depot has three tracks so there’s plenty of space for it to linger.”

“What a pity that such a shiny new train car’ll soon be covered in coal dust like the rest of the depot,” one of the younger girls called out.

Ma fanned a rag for them to hurry and fill the tub again.

Rising, Lizbeth used the edge of her apron to pull out the loaf of pumpkin bread. She felt the tin’s heat through the cotton fabric as the air warmed with nutmeg and cinnamon.

Ma checked the loaf with a practiced touch. “And to think of

it parked here.” Ma often fussed and fretted that Pa had chosen to settle down in New River where the only thing separating their farm from the clatter of the mine was the glittering river from which the town gleaned its name.

“It’s the blessings of the Lord that maketh a man rich,” Maryanne called down from the stairwell.

Everyone looked up at her at once.

“So the Proverbs say,” she added.

Lizbeth smiled at her sister’s tender reminder. “Hear, hear.” Then for Jayne’s ears alone: “But you still must dance the first reel with the man.”

Jayne blushed. “He’d have to ask me, Lizzy. And there’ll be so many people there tonight. It seems the whole town is coming.”

“Yes . . .” Lizbeth returned to her seat. “But you’ll be the prettiest.”

Jayne shook her head. Needing to wash up next, Lizbeth rose to fetch the kettles from upstairs. Already, she could imagine the duet of a mandolin and fiddle. How welcoming and warm it would sound as couples paired up on this autumn evening. Maybe the fiddler would play a waltz or two.

Ma’s voice broke through the daydream. “I hear the young coal baron owns several mines already and other companies as well. A logging firm out west, and some sort of factory in New York.”

Lizbeth paused at the top of the stairs to listen.

Pa nodded slowly. “That’s what folks are sayin’.”

“Have you found out his name? Does the boy have kin to speak of?”

“That’s two questions at once, my dear. I don’t know about kin—don’t know the man’s story.”

“But we only need his name,” Jayne chimed in. “The owner of the Pemberley.”

Lizabeth seconded that, though she didn't want to admit it.

Pa's laughter danced across the room. The first note of music to be heard this evening, but certainly not the last. "From what I gather, someone as wealthy as that ought to be called by his proper title, which is Mr. Drake. But seein' as you girls must know . . ." He winked. "I believe his name is William."