A Constant Love: A Pride & Prejudice Continuation

by sturner1805

Summary

For Elizabeth, the joy of her marriage and honeymoon are quickly followed by the demands of becoming Mrs. Darcy, all while helping her shy new younger sister come out into society. Georgiana must deal with more suitors than she expected, when she fears nothing more than once again being persuaded to think she is in love with the wrong man.

Notes

For details on my writing please visit http://sophie-turner-acl.blogspot.com/
A Constant Love

PART ONE

Chapter 1

For two beloved sisters who had both recently become engaged to be married, and were betrothed to men who were already particular friends, it was natural that talk would soon turn to the notion of a double wedding. Neither Jane nor Elizabeth Bennet could remember who first brought the idea about, but both preferred an arrangement that would be easiest on the families involved, and as both were of generous dispositions, there were no selfish feelings in sharing such a special day.

Jane broached the idea to Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth to Mr. Darcy, and all agreed that there was great sense in such a plan. It was introduced to the rest of the Bennet family, and after Mrs. Bennet – who had planned for each of them to have a separate, quite extravagant wedding – was brought around to the idea, the couples fixed upon a date. All agreed that most of the guests would stay at the larger Netherfield estate, where exposure to Mrs. Bennet's continuing high spirits at having two more daughters married would be minimised, and that the wedding breakfast would be held there, in Netherfield's spacious ballroom.

Jane and Elizabeth's aunt and uncle Gardiner were among the few guests to be put up at Longbourn, and they arrived a week before the date with the usual tumble of young children emerging from their carriage, running up to the house and then remembering their manners as they greeted the Bennets. Elizabeth felt a sense of relief upon seeing her aunt; her mother had been suffering from increasing fits of nerves and had finally taken to her room, attended by their aunt Philips, and unable to help with any of the final preparations or provide any advice to her soon-to-be-married daughters. And Mrs. Gardiner, as soon as she had changed from her travelling clothes, asked what she might do to help.

The Netherfield guests began arriving a few days later. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, who brought in their carriage a sulking Caroline Bingley, were first, followed by a train of carriages bearing the Earl of Brandon, Lord Andrew, and his wife Lady Ellen Fitzwilliam; their sons Andrew and Edward; Andrew's wife Alice; Georgiana Darcy; and Miss Darcy's companion, Mrs. Annesley. This accounted for all of the close family of the two grooms, with the exception of some relations of the Bingleys from Scarborough, who could not make the journey, and Lady Catherine de Burgh and her daughter, Anne, who would not be attending. Lady Catherine firmly told her nephew of this in a letter with a great many underlined words, the second such she had sent to Mr. Darcy on the topic of his "unfortunate engagement." He had not seen fit to favour her with a reply.

Of all the guests, Elizabeth was most looking forward to seeing Miss Darcy again. The Hursts and Miss Bingley she had no care for furthering her acquaintance with, but with her sister marrying Charles Bingley (by far the most amiable person in the family), that would not be an option. She was more apprehensive about meeting the Earl of Brandon and his family. His younger son, Colonel Fitzwilliam, she was already acquainted with, and she enjoyed his company very much. However, she was not sure if the rest of the family would be so amiable, and she was not accustomed to addressing an earl. As the carriage brought her, Jane, and Mr. Bennet up to the entrance to Netherfield, she tried not to dwell on how much influence the guests in the house would have over
her future life.

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were waiting to hand the Bennet ladies out of their carriage, and then the group moved through the entrance-hall and into the drawing room that had become so familiar to Elizabeth over the past few months. She need not have worried about the earl and his family. Mr. Darcy made the introduction, and Elizabeth soon found they were all as pleasant to be in company with as Colonel Fitzwilliam, particularly Lady Ellen, who was impeccably dressed and possessed such elegant manners that Elizabeth found herself thinking that here was a woman she could emulate, as the future Mrs. Darcy. Lord Brandon and his elder son were more reserved, but still contributed periodically to the inquiries on the health of her family and the final wedding preparations.

Civil conversation was soon diverted when Caroline Bingley noted how very tired Eliza Bennet looked from all the wedding planning, and offered her services to the Bennet sisters if there was anything she could do to help. Many of those in the drawing room were already used to Miss Bingley's attacks on Elizabeth Bennet; it was no secret that Caroline had wished to marry Mr. Darcy herself, and the event a few days hence would be the end of several years of fruitless pursuit. Lady Ellen, however, gave Caroline a look of strong reprobation and stated that she should never have thought Miss Bennet tired – she looked every bit as handsome and radiant as a soon-to-be bride should.

It was clear during dinner that, while Charles Bingley had his usual cheerful manners, he had planned, or perhaps overplanned, dinner quite mindful that an earl would be in attendance. The richness of the dishes, and the sheer number of them on the table, meant that much of the conversation was centered around the food, and the party spent much of the dinner's duration dutifully applying themselves to try just a trifle of this or that. Elizabeth did not mind, as with Earl Brandon at the table, precedence had been carefully observed, and so she was seated between her father and Mr. Hurst, with Jane across from her. Mr. Hurst applied himself to the food and wine with such dedication that there was not even any aspect of his behaviour that her father could make her laugh at, and she could think of no new topics that the Bennets had not already discussed throughout the course of the day.

When the seemingly interminable dinner finally reached its end, Elizabeth sought out Miss Darcy's company as the ladies retired to the drawing room. Georgiana Darcy had been exceedingly quiet before and during dinner, hardly speaking at all to anyone other than Mrs. Annesley, and Elizabeth wanted to ensure she was not feeling neglected, so when the young lady chose a settee on the very edge of the room, Elizabeth joined her.

"You are very quiet this evening, Miss Darcy. Are you well?"

"Thank you, Miss Bennet. I am well. It's just – I am not used to being in this much company."

"It is rather a lot of people, isn't it?"

Georgiana nodded her agreement.

"Do you spend much time with your aunt and uncle?"

"We visit frequently when all of us are in London. Their estate is about a hundred and twenty miles from Pemberley, so we are only there occasionally."

"That is quite a distance. I do not get to see my aunt and uncle Gardiner nearly so much as I would like, and they are only as far away as London," Elizabeth said. "They arrived at Longbourn three days past, however, so I do at least have their company until the wedding."
"Oh, I remember them – they were so kind and such excellent company. Do you – do you think I might call at Longbourn to see your aunt, and meet the rest of your family?"

"I think that would be lovely. Please do feel welcome at Longbourn at any time, although I must warn you, my mother is not of the sort of constitution to handle wedding preparations well. We may need to spend much of our time out of doors."

Georgiana smiled. "I should like to be introduced to all of your family. After all, in a few days they will be my family as well – Miss Elizabeth, I cannot tell you how happy I am to be gaining a sister."

"I am as well, Miss Darcy."

"But you have four already!" Georgiana exclaimed. "One more must not be of much consequence."

"When she is as lovely and as accomplished as you, I assure you, she is," Elizabeth smiled. "I will allow you, though, that it is not the same for a lady who has always had sisters to gain one, as it is for a lady who has never had a sister."

"That is what I meant – I have always wanted a sister, and now finally I shall have one."

Their conversation was soon interrupted by the entry of the gentleman into the room, and Elizabeth encouraged Georgiana to move with her to chairs closer to the center of the room, and endeavoured throughout the course of the evening to draw her into the conversation whenever possible, asking her opinion on some of the topics under discussion. Elizabeth was pleased to see that although Georgiana seemed uncomfortable at first to be singled out to speak, her confidence seemed to grow slightly by the end of the night, and Elizabeth's attentions also made the rest of the party think more about the presence of a young lady who was of a shy demeanor, and not likely to interject herself into a fast-flowing conversation. Jane and Lady Ellen, in particular, sensed what Elizabeth was at, and made their own efforts to draw Georgiana out.

If there was one complaint Elizabeth had, when Mr. Darcy finally handed her back into the carriage, it was that she had spent very little time with him in the course of the evening. In such a group, private conversation was difficult, and she was required to console herself with the thought that in three days, they would be married, and able to spend as much time alone in each other's company as they chose. Mr. Darcy provided further consolation by arriving on horseback, along with Mr. Bingley, early the next morning; the gentleman were to go for a long ride, but they had ridden out in advance of the party so they might call on Jane and Elizabeth.

They all opted for a short walk, although it was still chilly and the frost crunched under Elizabeth's boots as they made their way across Longbourn's grounds. As per unspoken tradition, the couples soon separated – not enough to be improper, but enough that their conversations could not be overheard.

"I wanted to thank you for your attentions to Georgiana last night," Mr. Darcy said. "She has not often been in so much company, and I find she has not been comfortable speaking in such situations."

"Of course. With such a silent, taciturn brother it is not a shock that she does not often speak in groups," she teased. "Perhaps it is hereditary. But do not worry, I will help her as much as ever I can. As for you, you are a grown man and must fend for yourself."

"You speak in jest, Elizabeth, but you are right. My own avoidance of unfamiliar company has likely harmed Georgiana, who has not had the opportunities to 'practice' her conversation, as you once indicated I should."
"She is not yet eighteen; she still has plenty of time."

"Not for a woman of her station who has no unmarried sisters. There will be whispers in town that something is the matter with her if she is not out in the next season. Some of her peers will be married already by that time," he said. "I worry about Georgiana. Her demeanor is more positive, now – Mrs. Annesley has worked wonders in that regard – but the event with Wickham seems to have permanently shaken her confidence."

It did not help, Elizabeth knew, that her marriage to Darcy would bring Wickham into Georgiana's family. She and Mr. Darcy agreed completely that Wickham would never be welcome at Pemberley or his house in town. Lydia herself might, in time, be invited as guest, but only well after her letters had passed the stage where she went more than a few lines without mentioning "my dear Wickham."

"We will just have to work to rebuild it, then. She is a very accomplished young lady (and I mean that even by your definition, Mr. Darcy) and quite intelligent. She added much to the conversation once she began speaking."

"You are right in that she will need more opportunities to speak up in company. I had thought about perhaps going to London for the little season this fall – it will be less pressure for her with fewer people in town and fewer events," he said. "It would mean delaying our taking up residence at Pemberley until at least Christmas, though."

"I do not mind at all, if it would help Georgiana," Elizabeth said. Truly, even more than not minding the idea, she actually preferred it. Although the idea of being mistress of Pemberley had thrilled her at first, and still did in some ways, she was also apprehensive about taking on such a role. Her mother, the only person she had ever been able to observe at length, was an indifferent household manager, and Longbourn certainly could not compare to Pemberley in the size of its operation. Elizabeth knew she would be expected to handle things with the elegance and gracious manners of someone like Lady Brandon, and was not sure she was yet able to the task.

As well, going to London in the little season would allow her as well as Georgiana some time to acclimate to the company Mr. Darcy kept. She would be expected to move in different circles, now, to develop influence and ensure that Georgiana had every possible opportunity for superior company. Superior, marriageable company, if she must come out. Elizabeth understood Darcy's concern fully now – Georgiana was a sweet, shy girl, nowhere near ready to fend off suitors she did not prefer.

"You would be amenable to transferring to London after Weymouth, then?"

"Yes, of course."

Weymouth had been their plan for a honeymoon for some months. Brighton was far more fashionable, but held such negative associations for Elizabeth that she was not yet ready for a visit there. Although Lydia's flight with Wickham and eventual marriage had perhaps been the event that reinforced Mr. Darcy's continued regard for her, and therefore should be seen as having some positive aspects, to Elizabeth, Brighton was still a place where a young girl could run wild and be compromised. They had settled on Weymouth as a suitable alternative, because although Elizabeth had no wish to go to Brighton, she did have a great desire to visit the seaside.

"Thank you, dear Elizabeth. You know how important Georgiana is to me, and to know that you share such concern for her welfare – it means a great deal to me."

She patted his arm as they made their turn back toward the house. "No one who knows Georgiana could not be concerned for her welfare. And do not worry, with practice, as you say, she will
"become more comfortable with what is required of her in being out in society."

"I suppose it may help that she gains a slightly impertinent sister."

"Why Mr. Darcy, I do believe you are teasing me," she said. "You see, if I can teach you to tease, helping Georgiana speak up in company will be nothing."

Georgiana herself came to call, along with Lady Ellen and Mrs. Annesley, about an hour after the gentlemen had ridden off. Elizabeth was impressed by the condescension Lady Ellen showed, in requesting to be introduced to the rest of her family. Although her mother's nerves had shown rapid improvement upon her hearing a noblewoman was calling, to the point where Mrs. Bennet had dressed and joined them in the drawing room, Elizabeth found her mother rendered so quiet by Lady Ellen's superior manners and appearance that she did little more than curtsy and say she was pleased to make her Ladyship's acquaintance. Mary and Catherine, as well, were quiet, answering politely and carefully whenever Lady Ellen asked them a question. Georgiana even ventured a question of her own, Elizabeth noted with satisfaction.

With Elizabeth, Jane, and Mrs. Gardiner helping the conversation along, a half-hour passed quickly, and Lady Ellen rose to take her leave, telling them she was very pleased to make the acquaintance and hoped she might see them again before the wedding. Georgiana rose to follow her, but she looked reluctant to leave, and Elizabeth was reluctant to see her go. She suggested that perhaps her soon-to-be sister might stay to dinner and help them with final preparations. Georgiana said she should like that very much, Lady Ellen offered to inform the Netherfield guests of her plans, and Mrs. Annesley said she would stay as well, so that she and Georgiana could return together.

Mrs. Bennet retired to her room, to rest, and Mrs. Gardiner was left to explain to Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley that they were finishing the items for the Miss Bennets's trousseaux. The wedding dresses were all complete, but there were still a number of other dresses and items to be finished and trimmed. Georgiana picked up a bonnet from the table and said she should like to try trimming it, while Mrs. Annesley applied herself diligently to embroidering handkerchiefs.

Some time passed in silence, all of the ladies working. Elizabeth looked up periodically to see that Georgiana still had sewed nothing on the bonnet itself, although she seemed to be working carefully on some pieces of fabric. Mrs. Annesley, meanwhile, worked with delicate little stitches. Then Elizabeth found herself concentrating on her own work, embroidering the hem of one of Jane's dresses, and it was only Catherine's exclamation that made her look back up:

"Why, that is the most elegant bonnet I have ever seen! You must teach me how to make the little roses, Miss Darcy, you must."

Georgiana blushed, and Elizabeth could see that her sister's praise was not overdone. The fabric Georgiana had been working on had been turned into tiny little pink roses, arranged artfully around the brim of the bonnet, with a pale green ribbon intertwined around them. Catherine moved to sit beside Georgiana, and Georgiana obliged her with a lesson in gathering and sewing the fabric to look as though it was a rose.

Thus began a somewhat unlikely friendship between Georgiana Darcy and Catherine Bennet. Georgiana had long been lacking in company her own age, and while she would be gaining Elizabeth as a sister, a married sister was not the same as an unattached friend of similar age, however different their expectations might have been. Elizabeth worried about the connection, at first – Kitty had, for several years, been nearly as silly as Lydia. But Kitty received her own private letters from Lydia, and she knew that married life with a man of insufficient income was not nearly the same as what her elder sisters were about to achieve. She had come to understand that a good marriage would be necessary for her future happiness and independence, although she still harbored
hope that it might somehow be with someone in an army uniform. She came to realise that she could no longer be amused by chasing after officers, and a friendship with a well-bred, accomplished young lady was far more desirable to her than it would have been before.

Georgiana, meanwhile, benefited from Catherine's friendly, open manners, and as she visited them in final days before the wedding, Elizabeth was happy to see that Georgiana had found another person she could speak to so comfortably. Mary, initially aloof, was pulled into their confidences when Georgiana heard that she was accomplished at the pianoforte and asked to hear her play. As it had been a very long time since someone had actually asked to hear Mary play, this endeared Georgiana greatly to Mary, and Georgiana seemed none the worse for listening to Mary speak, sometimes at length, in her pedantic way.

Chapter End Notes

I have tried to stick to the canon established in Pride and Prejudice, with the exception of some of the events listed in the final chapter (namely, Georgiana and Kitty's fates), and of placing the events of this story a year after they should have occurred based on what is commonly thought to have been the timing of P&P.

All of the noble titles used within this story were either extinct during the Regency, or are entirely made up, and any resemblance of any of the names within to actual people is entirely coincidental, with the exception of brief, wholly fictitious encounters with members of the royal family.
Chapter 2

The wedding was generally deemed a success among their acquaintance. Those who were inclined to be happy for the couples thought Jane and Elizabeth looked quite elegant, Mrs. Bennet's histrionics were kept to a minimum, and the rector spoke well. Those few who were not inclined to be happy for the couples found little audience for their criticisms, and were as such forced into silence.

For Elizabeth, the calm scene within the church belied the hectic early morning preparations at Loungbourn, where the cacophony of her mother and younger sisters as they finished packing Jane and Elizabeth's trunks and helped them dress had done away with any sentiment Elizabeth might have had in leaving her childhood home. The only time she had come near tears was when her father had called her into his library the evening before and said: "Well, now, Lizzy, tomorrow you will be Mrs. Darcy. I shall miss you greatly." She had expected him to finish his statement with some witticism about how there would be no sense in the house now, but he could not; there were tears in his own eyes.

The ceremony itself had held a surreal quality for her; it seemed unimaginable that all of those people were there, family and friends, that the events so long hoped and waited for were finally happening. Elizabeth had smiled a small, private smile as she reached the altar on her father's arm, that here he was, handing her away to the man she'd once said was the last man in the world she would marry. Her thoughts were much occupied by the events that had led her and Darcy here, and she only half attended the rector as he spoke, but managed her lines creditably. She had felt a thrill of anticipation when it came time for the gentlemen to kiss their new wives, but was disappointed when Mr. Darcy placed only a proper little chaste kiss on her lips. With so much anticipation she had looked forward to her first kiss, and it had not been so special as she had always imagined it would be.

But Elizabeth was not inclined to dwell on relatively small disappointments on such a day, and she had nearly forgotten it by the time the couples made a slow procession past their well-wishers, to the waiting carriages. Mr. Darcy handed her in and then sat down beside her, and Elizabeth felt the change in her status keenly, now – to be allowed to be alone with him, nay, to have it be every right to be alone with him – gave her quite a rush of delight.

"I do apologise, Mrs. Darcy," he said, as the carriage pulled out to follow the now-Bingleys. "You know I must be most careful of observing decorum in front of such an audience, when what I truly wanted to do was this – "

He leaned over and cupped her chin and kissed her deeply, and at that moment everything became perfect. She was thrilled by the sensation; she felt she understood him even better, now, that there would be a public Mr. Darcy, and a private Mr. Darcy, and as much as she had finally come to understand the former, the latter she would now discover.

"Did I truly look that disappointed?" she asked, when she had regained her breath.

"I believe it was more a case of felt, rather than looked."
"Darcy – "

"Are you to call me Darcy, too!" he cried. "Can no one in my family use my Christian name, not even my own wife?"

Elizabeth had spent much time meditating on what she would call him, when they were finally married, and "Fitzwilliam" had seemed too much, but she was surprised by the vehemence of his reaction.

"Darcy, you must own that 'Fitzwilliam' has far too many syllables for everyday use. What did your parents call you?"

"Son," he admitted, which filled her with mirth.

"Well, Darcy, what I was going to say was that I find I rather like kissing, and I would have no complaints if – "

He cut her off with another kiss before she could complete her statement, and the couple were still embracing when the carriage pulled up to Netherfield. Elizabeth consoled herself with the thought that they would be alone following the wedding breakfast for an entire month – Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley would return to London at first, to give the newlyweds some time alone, and then join them in Weymouth at the end of April.

Charles Bingley was always a generous host, Elizabeth reflected, as they entered Netherfield's ballroom, but he had outdone himself this time. The ballroom had been filled with long tables – some of them built out of rough wood only a week ago, but tightly covered with tablecloth so that anyone who did not know would never guess at it. Nearly every chair in Netherfield had been pressed into service, and arranged around the tables. Lacking fresh flowers this early in the season, bunches of dried lavender had been tied up in ribbons and placed about the room, so that the scent wafted about the guests as they took their places. These and so many other details had been attended, and Elizabeth assumed that her sister had been behind many of them, for Caroline Bingley seemed unlikely to be enthusiastic about preparations for such an event, as she was about to be supplanted as mistress of the house by Jane.

The Bingleys, Darcys, and Bennets took up the long table at the end of the room, and from her seat there, Elizabeth gazed with great felicity out over the family and friends taking their seats at the tables, as footmen with the first remove were already beginning to gather at their stations around the edges of the ballroom. For the first time, she felt a hint of sadness in knowing that she would see many of the people in this room but rarely in the future. She caught Charlotte Collins' eye across the room and smiled at her friend; Charlotte had ignored her husband's entreaties to avoid further angering Lady Catherine with her attendance, and come with the Lucases. Even seeing Charlotte again was in question; as long as Darcy refused any further communication with "that woman," they would certainly never visit Rosings, and Elizabeth doubted Mr. Collins would allow her as a guest in his own house, when her presence there would be so objectionable to Lady Catherine.

The meal wound on in a leisurely fashion; the Bingleys were to stay a few days to see all of their guests off, before setting out for Cheltenham to take the waters, and the Darcys would stay the night in London, and from there make their way to Weymouth. When many of the guests had left, and only closer relations remained, Darcy called for their carriage, and Elizabeth was forced to listen to her mother's final cries of regret about losing the daughter she had never favoured, and had, up until now, made it her life's purpose to marry off. Elizabeth waved goodbye out of the carriage window until they were well up the lane, and then settled into the seat beside her husband.

+++
So late was their departure from Netherfield that it was already dark by the time the carriage rolled into Mayfair and stopped in front of a large, handsome town house on Curzon Street. By the time Darcy had handed her out of the carriage, an impeccably dressed man and woman were standing on either side of the door, awaiting them.

Darcy introduced them as the housekeeper, Mrs. Wright, and butler, Mr. Miller, and explained that his steward, Mr. Richardson, was at Pemberley and spent most of his time there, managing the estate while Darcy was away. Each greeted her properly, and Mr. Miller held the door as Elizabeth stepped into a grand entrance-hall, sided by much of the rest of the staff. Each was introduced to her, such a flood of names that Elizabeth knew she would not remember half of them the next day. She would have to learn them all, but perhaps she would be allowed some lenience until she returned from Weymouth and was in daily contact with all of them.

Mrs. Wright informed them that dinner had been prepared in advance, as their time of arrival was uncertain, but that the stove had been kept hot so the food could be heated in as little as a quarter-hour.

"Very well," Darcy nodded. "I will show Mrs. Darcy to her bedchamber so she may freshen up."

He offered her his arm and they ascended the staircase to the second floor, then into a bedchamber that was finely furnished, although notably out of date. Elizabeth suspected that much, if not all, of the furnishings had been here when the previous Mrs. Darcy lived in the house.

"I had considered having it redecorated before the wedding," Darcy said. "But then I thought you might prefer to oversee the decoration itself."

"Thank you," Elizabeth smiled. "It is quite nice as it is, but I should like that, eventually." She liked the notion of being able to furnish a room entirely to her own taste, although it might be difficult to bring herself to get rid of the current furniture, all of which was much finer than any piece at Longbourn, even if it was no longer in fashion.

He led her through the room, into her dressing room, showed her the door that adjoined to his own dressing room, and from there into his own room, decidedly more modern, decorated with the same understated quality as she had seen in the rooms at Pemberley. She expressed her admiration of the style, and shared a lingering kiss with him before making her way back into her own dressing room.

Elizabeth could not yet change out of her travelling dress – her trunk had been placed in the room, but no maid had yet appeared to assist her – but she did wash her face and check her hair. With these things complete, she set about exploring her apartment; sitting on the chaise, the bed, opening the drawers of the desk. It was far larger than her room at Longbourn, and it was strange to realise she should have all of this space to herself, and in a town house no less. She was startled by a knock on the door, and Mrs. Wright entered with a deep curtsy.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," she said. "I wanted to speak to you about your lady's maid."

"Yes, of course," Elizabeth nodded.

"I have a young maid, Miss Sarah Kelly, who has been most conscientious since she's been in our employ here," Mrs. Wright said. "She has occasionally served as a lady's maid for guests in the house, and I have been of a mind to promote her – Mr. Darcy likes to promote from within the household, when people are deserving. I wanted to check with you, however; if you would prefer someone with more experience, I will put an advertisement in the papers immediately."

Elizabeth felt all the delicacy of this situation: Mrs. Wright was likely used to making these sorts of
decisions on her own, and to overrule her might create an immediate rift with someone whose cooperation would be critical for her to be successful as mistress of the house. Yet to comply might tell Mrs. Wright that the new Mrs. Darcy could be maneuvered into decisions, and would not stand up for what she wished to be done. It could not be a coincidence that Mrs. Wright had noted how Darcy liked to promote from within the house. Beyond these considerations, her lady's maid would be the woman who dressed and attended her every day; a poor choice for someone in this role must necessarily affect her happiness until a replacement could be found.

"Even if you advertise for a lady's maid, someone will have to attend me before the position is hired," Elizabeth said. "Let us have Miss Kelly do so for now – you said she has served in the role for guests before. She may come with us to Weymouth and I shall see if I like her, and if so, she can be promoted on her return."

"Very well, Mrs. Darcy."

Mrs. Wright looked pleased as she curtsied again and left the room, but Elizabeth also felt pleased with the conversation. She had committed to nothing, but she had also shown herself to be open to considering Mrs. Wright's choice. She left her bedchamber and descended the stairs, realizing she did not know where the dining room was as she did so, but Darcy was waiting there in the hall to show her into a room so large it could easily seat twenty.

They sat at the far end of the table, and the empty expanse of table made Elizabeth slightly uncomfortable. She knew Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley spent much of their time living here, and she wondered if they also dined alone in the empty space, or if there were a more comfortable option elsewhere. Two footmen began serving the first remove – simple food that could be prepared earlier and then heated up, but still quite delicious, particularly as Elizabeth found herself hungry after the travel.

"You are quiet, Elizabeth," Darcy said. "Are you tired?"

"No, I am merely afraid to speak," she said. "I fear my voice will echo. Are Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley forced to dine by themselves in such a great cavern of a room?"

He laughed. "Yes, this room is wasted far more often than it should be. Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley often dine in the garden when the weather is nice, unless the earl's family or Lady Catherine are in town and come to dinner. At Pemberley, at least, we have the option of using the small dining room."

"And what is the relative difference between the small dining room and the large dining room?"

"The small room seats ten comfortably; the large upwards of two and forty. It has been some time since we have used it."

"Well, never worry, soon enough Kitty will force us to have a ball there."

"Once Georgiana is out in society, we will have to hold our share of balls, although most of them would be here."

"Poor Darcy, you will be miserable, standing in the corner and glowering at all of Georgiana's suitors."

"I might take pleasure in dancing with my wife. That would be quite agreeable to me."

He gave her such a look then as made her stomach churn with a combination of nervousness and excitement, and reminded her that tonight would be her first night in the marriage bed. This was not a
new topic in her mind; she had been thinking of it periodically throughout the day, and especially when they kissed. Now, however, the event was only a few hours away.

Elizabeth suspected she was as well-prepared as any other young lady for what was to take place. Her mother had shrilled nonsense at her and Jane and rather frightened them, the morning before the wedding. But Mrs. Gardiner had later asked them if they would like to walk in the garden with her, and presented a vague, but more balanced notion of what was to happen. It would hurt, the first time, but then after that it could actually be quite pleasurable, she'd said, blushing for the first time Elizabeth had ever known her to do so. Still, Elizabeth found herself drinking more wine than was usual for her in the course of the dinner; it did not help that the wine was a delightful claret that spoke to the quality of the house's wine cellar.

It was late enough by the time they finished dinner that Elizabeth suggested they retire directly to bed, rather than the drawing room, and they ascended the stairs together before going to their separate chambers. Miss Kelly knocked promptly on Elizabeth's door, entered, and curtsied deeply. She was a thin wisp of a girl, clearly of Irish descent, and even more nervous than Elizabeth.

"Sarah Kelly, if you please, Mrs. Darcy."

"I'm very pleased to meet you," Elizabeth said. "Has Mrs. Wright informed you that you will be traveling with us to Weymouth?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am looking forward to it very much."

As Sarah helped her undress, Elizabeth reflected that perhaps having a very nervous girl tend to a nervous woman not much her senior in years might not have been the best idea on this night. Yet at the same time, she found herself distracted by trying to make Sarah feel more comfortable; she could see that Mrs. Wright had been most correct in describing the girl as conscientious, and that Sarah wanted very badly to do well. She was, in fact, doing quite well, aside from a very evident trembling of her hands, and dropping one of Elizabeth's hairpins on the floor.

Soon enough, Elizabeth was dressed in her nightgown, her hair loosely braided, dismissing Sarah and thanking her for her assistance. She walked over to the door to Darcy's dressing room and put her hand on the knob, her heart beating wildly.
Chapter 3

The carriage jarred under Elizabeth and she roused, discovering she had been asleep on Darcy's shoulder, but that he had no reason for complaint, as he was asleep himself still. She sat up and stretched, peering out the window. All was unfamiliar to her here, and she had no notion of where they were. They were moving through fields turning green with the first touch of spring, here and there a patch of yellow wildflowers, a flock of grazing sheep or cattle. They were to overnight in Southampton, and a quick check of the time told her they were probably at least fifty miles away from that city.

Elizabeth looked over at Darcy and smiled as she thought about how unfounded her nerves had been. He had been every bit as much the gentleman in the bedchamber as he was elsewhere, offering her another glass of wine when she entered the room, asking if there was anything else he could do to see to her comfort. Then, when she had finished the wine, kissing her until she had forgotten nervousness entirely.

And yet there again was her new private Mr. Darcy, because while her aunt had been accurate as to the pain, there were things he had done before that moment which still made her flush to think about them. Pleasurable indeed, she thought, her face growing hot so that she wished she had thought to put a fan in her reticule instead of packing them all away in her trunks, following them in another, more utilitarian coach than the one she and Darcy rode in, along with Sarah and Darcy's valet, Mr. Mason.

The carriage rolled on along the turnpike road, through the Hampshire fields, and Darcy slept through a change of horses before finally waking.

"Hello, husband," she smiled.

"Hello, wife." He reached over and took her hand and clasped it in his, and Elizabeth found she would not have minded if they had five hundred miles to go instead.

+++  

Their arrival into Weymouth showed the town to be everything Elizabeth had hoped for. She had been to the seaside only once before, also to Southampton, when she and Jane had accompanied the Gardiners on a trip Mr. Gardiner found necessary to make for business. That city's meagre beach on the Solent was nothing compared to the vast expanse of waves on the Channel, sparkling in the sunlight, and the beauty of Chesil Beach, stretching out as far as she could see. She had come expecting to be charmed by the place, and charmed she was.

They had daylight enough upon their arrival to the town that they could take a brief stroll along the esplanade before returning to the hotel, where Darcy had reserved a spacious apartment that would have ample room for Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley, when they arrived. For now, it felt overly large to Elizabeth, particularly as the servants and their trunks had not yet arrived, and so there was little to fill it. Still, she was pleased with the quality of the rooms, and with the fine view of the sea from the sitting room. She was standing at the window, holding the curtain aside and watching the last streaks of twilight disappear over the Channel, when Darcy asked:

"Is everything to your liking, Elizabeth?"
"To my liking? It is perfect. It is all perfect," she said, with a sly smile. "You have raised my expectations so high now you will have to labour greatly to always meet them."

"It is a labour I shall have to bear, then," he said, walking over to the window to join her. "I find I do not mind it much, endeavouring to make you happy."

They watched the waves come in under the moonlight for a long while, his arms wrapped comfortably around her, until at last they were forced to step away for dinner.

What else may be said about their first month in Weymouth that has not been said about so many of the newly wed, on their first trip together, with more than ample wealth to make all things easy? They had no close acquaintances in Weymouth, and so they passed their mornings early in the trip with walks along the beach, returning to the hotel for refreshments and correspondence. Elizabeth found that Darcy was most diligent in any matter of business sent to him, and no less so with his family. She, for her part, wrote Jane and the rest of her sisters – including Georgiana – regularly, and was surprised to find Catherine a much more dutiful correspondent than she would have expected.

Evenings they spent walking the esplanade, and eating lavish dinners for two, until Elizabeth finally grew desirous of some other society, as well as some dancing, and required him to take her to a ball at the town's assembly rooms. They made many acquaintances there, some of which were actually worth preserving, and this provided them with occasional morning callers, as well as people to greet in their walks along the esplanade.

There were no morning callers, however, on the day Elizabeth received a letter from Georgiana that made her begin to suspect why Catherine had been writing her regular letters filled with apparent rational thought.

"Georgiana writes to ask may we invite Kitty to come to Weymouth as well," she told Darcy. "Kitty has apparently written telling her how wild she is with envy over Georgiana's trip to the seaside."

"I see nothing wrong with the scheme," Darcy said. He had been too long in the care of only one person – Georgiana – to automatically give consideration to Elizabeth's sisters-by-blood, but he had seen that Catherine and Georgiana got on well, and that being around a lady of her age but of a more lively temperament might be beneficial for Georgiana. "We have ample space. Please do write to invite her, and Mary as well, if you so choose. I should have thought of them previously."

"Mary will say she has no interest in such frivolous pursuits as are to be found at the seaside," Elizabeth said. "I will write to Kitty, however. She has been saying these six months that she will never get to go to the seaside because papa will not allow it, and Lydia has ruined everything for her. She will be ecstatic, and I am sure my father will have no objection to her coming with us, so long as we promise not to allow her to elope."

Catherine was indeed ecstatic, bounding out of the carriage and embracing Elizabeth before gazing back at the sea and sighing with happiness. She had gone to London and stayed with the Gardiners for a few days so that she might travel with Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley. Those two ladies were helped out of the carriage by Darcy, and looked far more weary from the travel. Any suspicions Elizabeth had that Catherine had worn them out with a constant stream of chatter, however, were gone when they all dined together; it was clear she and Georgiana had shared many confidences and become better friends in the course of their correspondence and carriage ride to Weymouth. Kitty was more energetic than her companions simply because she had so long wished to travel to such a place, and now she was here, and determined to enjoy her time.

The growing friendship between the two young ladies meant that Elizabeth was not able to bond with her new sister perhaps as much as she would have liked, although she found herself knowing
Georgiana better simply for spending more time together as a family. When Georgiana was engaged in conversation with Catherine, Elizabeth attempted to learn more about Mrs. Annesley, whom she knew from Darcy only as a gentlewoman by birth who had suffered a loss of fortune at some point earlier, and who had made great strides with Georgiana since being enlisted as her companion.

The ladies were out walking one morning – Darcy had more business to attend to than usual, and had bade them to go without him – and Georgiana and Catherine were walking on ahead, laughing about some thing or another. Elizabeth, following them with Mrs. Annesley, took the opportunity to ask whether Mrs. Annesley had been much to the seaside before.

"Yes, many times before," Mrs. Annesley said. "Usually to the north, however, particularly to Scarborough. We went there many times when I was a child."

"Were your family from the north?"

"Yes, we had an estate in Yorkshire."

"I have never been Yorkshire – what is it like?"

"Beautiful, Mrs. Darcy. I suppose everyone says that about the land where they were raised, but I never knew anyone to visit who didn't comment on how lovely the country was."

"Perhaps someday I shall be able to visit there." Elizabeth felt it, hanging in the air between them, that she had been elevated in fortune and rank, to the ability to travel wherever and whenever she wished, while Mrs. Annesley had suffered a loss in status. She wondered what had caused it, but knew it would be impertinent to ask, and so they walked on silently for awhile.

"I suppose you have a curiosity as to how I came to be here," Mrs. Annesley said.

"No, I would never – "

"It is no worry, Mrs. Darcy. I can understand such a curiosity, as I am a companion to your new sister. You would have a right to ask, although I appreciate that you did not. It is not the happiest of tales, but I do not mind telling it."

They walked down, closer to the water, the stones rolling under Elizabeth's half boots, and Mrs. Annesley began:

"I was born on a small estate, Werchfield Manor, in Yorkshire, as I said. I was an only child, and my father set aside a respectable portion for me, so that I was able to marry well, or so I thought. My husband was a kindly man, but I also learned he was a foolish man, and any means that he could use to part himself from his fortune, he used to their fullest extent. Speculation did the most damage, and he died of typhus in a debtor's prison."

Elizabeth made such expressions of sympathy as she could, and could not but help thinking of her sister Lydia, and wondering if her sister would suffer the grief of seeing Wickham eventually meet a similar end.

"It was less than a year after my husband died that my father also died," Mrs. Annesley continued. "The estate had been doing poorly, more poorly than my mother or I realised, and although I inherited it on his death, by the time I had sold the estate and paid the debts of my father and husband, there was barely enough of a portion to keep my mother in a small cottage. So I chose to make my own way in the world; I was fortunate that a friend of our family was in need of a companion for his daughter. I do not possess all of the skills of a governess – I was never musically inclined."
"You may not have those skills," Elizabeth said. "But I know Mr. Darcy has been exceedingly happy with the progress you have made with Georgiana."

"Ah, yes, well, manners, deportment, helping a girl gain confidence, these are all things I at least feel I may attempt. If Georgiana asks for help with a piano concerto, however, I am at a loss."

Elizabeth laughed, and considered Mrs. Annesley, who she estimated to be at least five and thirty years of age. "How many girls have you been companion to, if you do not mind my asking?"

"I do not mind at all. I was companion to three young ladies before Georgiana. They are all of them married now, and I expect we'll see Georgiana do the same before long. I understand from Mr. Darcy that she is to come out in the fall."

"Yes, we are for London for the little season," Elizabeth said. "We thought it would be better to ease her into society."

"Certainly. It should not take long for a girl like her to make a good match. She has all the accomplishments that could ever be asked of a young lady, and fortune. There should be nothing to hold her back."

"She is so shy, though."

"Give her time in society, and that will go away soon enough."

"You do not think the – setback – she had when she was fifteen will affect her?"

"If anything, perhaps it will make her cautious and prudent, which I believe to be a good thing. I see a great many girls during the season fall in love with the first handsome man they dance with."
Part 1 - Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4

Before Georgiana could dance with any men in London, handsome or otherwise, she had to be presented at court. A date for her presentation was applied for while they were still in Weymouth, and granted, so that when they returned to the house on Curzon Street, they had a fortnight to prepare.

At this point, Catherine should have returned to Longbourn, but her presence had become so much a part of their family unit in Weymouth that Elizabeth had dispatched a letter to Longbourn before they left the seaside, requesting that she be allowed to stay in London with them, and she received a response back from her father that he could perhaps attempt a few more months without the level of silliness he had grown used to over the years at Longbourn, which elicited a smile and a few tender moments of homesickness from Elizabeth. She wrote back to invite Mary, as well, wanting to be fair to her other unwed sister, and it was fixed that Mary should join them after Georgiana's presentation at court.

When Elizabeth had been presented at court, it had been a production involving much shrilling from her mother, who, not a gentlewoman herself, had never been through such a process, and the calmer presence of her aunt Gardiner. Elizabeth remembered little of the actual event itself, and more the ridiculous dress she had been required to wear, full hoop skirt and all, which she suspected to have been handed down from Jane and reworked as much as possible, and knew to have later been handed down to Mary and Katherine, while Lydia had not even been presented at all before being allowed to come out. Their family had not the fortune to have a gown custom-made for each girl for less than a minute of time in front of royalty.

Georgiana, however, had no such blood sisters to provide handed-down gowns, and every expectation that a fortune of thirty thousand pounds could give her. They went, therefore, to a modiste that specialised in court dress, and Elizabeth and Georgiana would have been lost without the presence of Mrs. Annesley, who had been through this three times before, and knew precisely what was required. She requested the gown, made of a rich silk, be produced in a way that it might later be reworked as a ballgown in more of the modern fashion, and ensured that no detail was left undone. Although of less importance, a new gown was also ordered for Elizabeth, who would accompany Georgiana during her presentation.

At this point, the greatest influence Elizabeth could exert over the preparations was to encourage Darcy to re-engage relations with his aunt Catherine. Personally, she would not have minded doing without Lady Catherine's society for the rest of her days, but she knew that Lady Catherine's connexions would be very helpful for Georgiana as she made her debut, and she continually exerted pressure on Darcy as such, until he finally sent a brief letter of contrition to Rosings. He received a prompt response that said nothing at all of his wife but assumed a certain level of Lady Catherine's involvement in Georgiana's coming out. She would not be able to make it to her presentation at court, but would be in town soon enough to make introductions and ease Georgiana's entrance into society.

Elizabeth was fortunate that while Lady Catherine could not attend Georgiana's presentation at court, Lady Ellen had been a part of the plans from the very beginning. She had no blood daughters herself, but had always looked very kindly upon Georgiana, and looked forward with the utmost felicity to
seeing her young niece introduced to the world. She called at Curzon Street the day before Georgiana's presentation, noted her gown as being most appropriate, and provided a calming influence over the whole party.

The Lady Ellen of a casual morning call, however, was very different from Lady Ellen attending court. She arrived at Curzon Street in the earl's grandest carriage to attend them to St. James's, and it was not until they all alighted the carriage, with much awkwardness from the hoop skirts of each of their dresses, that her dress was fully visible to Elizabeth. She took it in immediately as the dress of a woman who attended court frequently enough to have no need for such rework as Elizabeth and Georgiana had planned for their gowns. As they approached the palace, she placed a hand each on Elizabeth and Georgiana's arms and said:

"Do remember to never turn your back on the royal presence. You must curtsey once upon entering the room, once as you approach their highnesses, and then once as you exit. Your presentation will likely be brief; do not be insulted by this."

Elizabeth realised that although Lady Ellen's instructions were ostensibly for Georgiana, they were also meant to benefit her. It had been so long since her presentation at court and she had never expected to return here as a woman presenting a young lady such as Georgiana. As they entered the palace, Lady Ellen stepped ahead of her and she found herself clutching Georgiana's hand, hoping she herself communicated just a little less terror than she could feel from her sister.

They approached the drawing room and were announced. Elizabeth released Georgiana's hand reluctantly, and they followed after Lady Ellen, who discreetly maneuvered Georgiana in front of her at the last possible moment.

Lady Ellen had been expecting both of their royal highnesses, but only Queen Charlotte was there to receive them, looking regal, but as tired as a woman in her situation should be expected to look. She examined them all for a moment before stating:

"Lady Brandon, you have somehow been hiding not one, but two elegant young ladies from us. Pray tell, who are they?"

"Your Majesty, they are my nieces, Georgiana and Elizabeth Darcy. Miss Georgiana Darcy is making her introduction to court, and her sister is lately Mrs. Darcy. I understand she was presented a few years previously as Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

Queen Charlotte examined Elizabeth closely for a moment before saying, "Ah, yes, Darcy. Quite an excellent family; I wonder we have not managed to give them some sort of title by now. But then, that is reserved for war heroes, these days. Miss Darcy, did any of your family serve in the war?"

"My cousin – Colonel Fitzwilliam – your Majesty," Georgiana said, her voice quavering.

"Lady Brandon's son, I believe." She looked to Lady Ellen to affirm her statement, and Lady Ellen did so with a decided nod.

"We thank your family for his service," Queen Charlotte said. "We should not have defeated Bonaparte without the contributions of men such as your son."

"I thank you, ma'am," Lady Ellen said.

"Well, Miss Darcy, I look forward to seeing you out in society, as well as your new sister." Her gaze fell on Elizabeth only momentarily this time, but Elizabeth caught in full the question there: Who was she, and how had she managed to marry Mr. Darcy so quietly?
"We thank you, ma'am," Lady Ellen said, taking just the slightest step backward. Elizabeth and Georgiana caught what she as at and stepped backward themselves, until Lady Ellen paused near the doorway and they saw that it was time to curtsy for the last time, Elizabeth dropping down so deeply that the hoop in her skirt thumped against the ground, while the silly ostrich feathers in her hair bobbed back and forth, so that she felt both ridiculous, and relieved.

When they had exited the drawing room, they had only to make their way out of the waiting room and back out of the palace, to the safety of the waiting carriage. As they left the waiting room, Elizabeth heard something she had no reason to believe her companions overheard, and still it gave her great unease.

"Who are they?" asked an unidentified female voice. "They look quite elegant."

"Oh them," answered another female voice. "One is Miss Georgiana Darcy, who has thirty thousand pounds. The other is the nobody who married Mr. Darcy. I do wonder if she will have an impact on her new sister's prospects."

The carriage returned to the Fitzwilliams's house on Half Moon Street; Lady Ellen had long ago arranged that they should all have dinner there to celebrate Georgiana's presentation, and so Darcy and Catherine were to meet them there. For young Georgiana, there was only relief that the event was over, and that she had made no mistakes or said nothing that should hamper her entrance into society. For Elizabeth, however, there was a more subtle worry that she must at all times endeavour to be equal to her company; she must prove those who would expect nothing of her wrong.

These things were soon forgotten, though, in the comfort of the Fitzwilliams's home. It was exceedingly well-appointed, to be sure, but even in such noble spaces, to be around family who wished her and Georgiana well was a relief to Elizabeth. Although Colonel Fitzwilliam was still on the continent, helping to complete the final arrangements of Napoleon Bonaparte's abdication and the ensuing peace, Lord Brandon, Lord Andrew, and Lady Alice proved to be excellent company. It was clear to Elizabeth that Lord Andrew had from an early age been groomed to inherit the earldom, and he displayed a thorough knowledge of current affairs and how they might impact the family estate. If he was not quite as light-hearted or as easy in conversation as his younger brother, she could not find it in herself to hold it against him.

Lady Ellen, as usual, was everything polite, and Lady Alice followed her lead. She encouraged both Georgiana and Catherine to join in the conversation, as did Elizabeth, and by the end of the evening Elizabeth felt more assured in having such connexions and allies. She was especially proud of both sisters for making confident and well-informed contributions to the conversation. If anyone had any regrets on the evening, it was simply that Elizabeth and Georgiana had to remain in far more restrictive corsets, combined with the awkward hoop skirts, than they were used to. And yet Elizabeth could not help but feel a swell of happiness for her new sister as Darcy handed her into the carriage to go home – Georgiana had survived perhaps the most difficult part of coming out into society, and now she would have access to all the more enjoyable aspects.

By the time they returned home to Curzon Street, Elizabeth was exhausted, and barely aware of Sarah's motions to remove the great expanse of dress from her. She felt the increase in air, though, when Sarah removed the corset. Sarah had proved so far to be a most careful and dedicated lady's maid, and Elizabeth resolved she must speak to Mrs. Wright about her promotion soon; she did not know how she could possibly do without Sarah's kind company and gentle Irish accent every day, and she was most diligent in all of her duties.

Although she was terribly sleepy, she still passed into Darcy's chamber – he had made it clear to her early on that he enjoyed her presence even if either of them was too tired for marital relations, and so
she was no longer comfortable sleeping without her husband at her side. He pulled her close and kissed her hair as she entered the bed beside him, and she found all the discomforts of the day melting away; she had a husband who loved her, a sister newly out in society; another sister newly reasonable in company; and a well-placed relative who had been nothing but kindness to her so far. She felt the benefit of all of these things, but most of all, of a husband who every day provided her with new caresses, new nuances, of his very private self.

+++ 

Elizabeth woke late in the morning, to find Darcy already absent from his bedchamber. She made her way back into her own rooms, rang the bell for Sarah, and found her lady's maid as always prompt in entering the room.

"Let us go with something very simple and plain, for my day dress," Elizabeth said to her.

"Yes ma'am," Sarah smiled. "That was rather a lot of dress for you to wear all day yesterday."

Elizabeth laughed softly as she thought back to the two of them, trying to manage the unfamiliar corset and determine how the complex dress was to go on, as Sarah had dressed Elizabeth the previous day.

"Certainly it was – I must say I am glad I should never have to wear such a thing again."

When Sarah had finished dressing Elizabeth in a blue day dress that was very plain indeed, Elizabeth requested that she send Mrs. Wright in if the housekeeper was available. Sarah flushed, and said she certainly would, and Elizabeth realised too late that the young maid might have thought Elizabeth wished to censure her work. Sarah had grown more comfortable in Elizabeth's presence, and more willing to converse, which was partly why Elizabeth enjoyed her company in the morning. Sarah was always very careful to stay within the bounds of propriety, never departing from innocent and appropriate topics, and so she should have had nothing to fear. Elizabeth consoled herself that soon enough Sarah would know of her promotion and no longer be worried.

Mrs. Wright bustled in a few minutes later and asked what she could do for Mrs. Darcy.

"I wanted to speak to you about Sarah," Elizabeth said. "She has done excellent work as my lady's maid thus far, and if you are still amenable to her promotion, I see no reason to delay it any longer."

"Very well, ma'am," Mrs. Wright said, looking very pleased. "I will let her know."

"Please do inform her as soon as possible," Elizabeth said. "And I thank you for recommending her."

"You are most welcome, ma'am."

"We will soon need to begin preparing for Georgiana's coming-out ball," Elizabeth said. "I would appreciate your assistance in the planning, and I thought perhaps we might also include Mrs. Annesley, as she has helped several other young ladies come out before Georgiana."

"Of course, ma'am."

Elizabeth waited a few moments after Mrs. Wright had left her rooms to go down the stairs to breakfast. She felt satisfied by the interaction, which indicated a growing trust between Mrs. Wright and herself. They had certainly agreed on Sarah's qualifications and skills.

Darcy had already breakfasted and was attending to correspondence, but he sat with Elizabeth, Georgiana and Catherine as they ate; Mrs. Annesley, knowing Georgiana to have no fixed
engagements for the day, had requested permission to visit a friend of hers, and Darcy had sent her off in the carriage. The group went to the drawing room after breakfast, and Elizabeth was delighted when Mr. Miller came in to hand her a letter that had just been delivered.

"A letter from Jane!" she exclaimed, and eagerly opened it. The two sisters continued to correspond frequently, and Elizabeth found that although she very much enjoyed the company of Georgiana and Catherine, she still missed the companionship of her elder sister. They had been together for most of their youth, and although Elizabeth knew that their own sisterly bond and their husbands's friendship would still have them together frequently, it was not quite the same.

"She writes they are to come to London, and will be staying with the Hursts." Elizabeth felt a twinge of disappointment that they would not stay at her home, but with Catherine and now Mary coming to visit, she could hardly begrudge that the guests would be balanced between the two houses. If anything, the greater disappointment was that she would have to spend more time in the company of the Hursts and Caroline Bingley.

Elizabeth did not share the more private parts of the letter, which indicated that the cause for their departure to London was that Mrs. Bennet had finally worn down even the heroic patience possessed by Charles and Jane Bingley, and they desired a break from her daily calls to Netherfield, and frequent requests that they all dine together at Netherfield or Longbourn.

"I cannot criticise my mother too much," Jane wrote. "She has grown used to a house full of daughters and now finds herself lonely. But her constant company has become difficult to bear."

Jane wrote on to say that she missed Elizabeth greatly, and would have the added advantage of being able to convey Mary with them in the carriage, as they were to remove from Netherfield quite quickly. Elizabeth hurried to get her writing things and pen a response to Jane, telling her of Georgiana's presentation at court, and how equally delighted she was to soon be able to see Jane and Mary.

The family passed the day in this quiet way until Darcy suggested they all take a stroll in Hyde Park. They agreed to this scheme readily; Elizabeth was desirous of fresh air and the opportunity to stretch her legs, and she also knew it to be one of the things done by the circles she would now be moving in during the season. A fine day was not complete without a stroll or a ride through Hyde Park, for those who most mattered in town.

Everyone went upstairs to change into suitable attire for a promenade, and Elizabeth found Sarah seemed even more nervous upon entering her dressing room, curtsying deeply and approaching Elizabeth with shaking hands. Had Mrs. Wright not yet informed her of her promotion?

"Ma'am," Sarah said. "I hope I do not speak out of turn, but I wished to convey my deepest gratitude on my promotion. I cannot thank you enough."

"You need not thank me, Sarah, you have earned it yourself. You have done very well in your work and I am very glad to have you. Although I find I have addressed you incorrectly; now that you are a lady's maid, you are Miss Kelly. Please accept my apology."

"Oh, but ma'am, I feel so odd not being called Sarah. I would prefer it if we continued on as before, at least in private."

"Very well, but then you must also call me Elizabeth, in private."

"It might take me some time to adjust to that, ma'am," Sarah said, in a tone that indicated she might never adjust to it. Still, she seemed to relax, and helped Elizabeth change with even more than her
usual cheer.

The house on Curzon Street had the advantage of being very close to the park, and once parasols had been found and spencers donned, the group made the short walk there. Elizabeth had spent much of the past week inside, preparing for Georgiana's presentation and learning the ways of the household, and the vast expanse of the park made her realise how much she had missed being out of doors. It was the fashionable hour, and the park was filled with walkers, but it did not feel at all crowded.

They had been walking for awhile when Georgiana recognised an acquaintance, Miss Harriett Grantley, and introduced her and her companion to the group. Miss Grantley was a delicate young girl, nearly the same age as Georgiana, but about to enter her second season. Elizabeth could not recall Georgiana mentioning Miss Grantley before, and realised even before they had said their goodbyes and walked on that Georgiana must not have favoured the young lady's company.

Once they were far enough away, Georgiana confessed to Catherine and Elizabeth that Miss Grantley was fiercely competitive, always wanting to be the most accomplished lady in the room, and Georgiana did not care much for her company. Georgiana had once looked upon Miss Grantley as a potential friend, but had realised her overtures of friendship were only to find someone to compare herself against, and so now they were only polite acquaintances.

Catherine felt a certain, but healthy, amount of pride in hearing this; she had sought Georgiana's friendship because she liked the lady, she had no desire to be competitive for accomplishments, although she realised that it would be better for her to be more accomplished. It might help her find the sort of husband she wished to find. For the time it was but a momentary thought, gone soon enough, and she took up her friend's arm and patted it in sympathy, as the two young ladies walked on ahead of Elizabeth and Darcy.

Chapter End Notes

I did some reading into the whole Earl of Matlock thing as I was writing this, and it seems that it's just one of those things that's been used in a lot of fics, but isn't actually canon – the only time "Matlock" appears in P&P is in reference to Elizabeth and the Gardiners's travel in Derbyshire. At least for the purposes of this story, I thought it likely that the previous Mrs. Darcy and Lady Catherine met their husbands during the London season, making it less likely that they would live near their brother, the earl, so I went with Brandon. There's a lot of interesting speculation out there about whether Jane Austen was trying to refer to a specific earl, although she doesn't name the earldom.
Chapter 5

The first few days leading up to the Bingleys's arrival with Mary passed with nothing more eventful than a few morning calls between the Darcys, Fitzwilliams, and Gardiners. As Lady Catherine was to arrive at nearly the same time as Elizabeth's more-preferred family, Elizabeth had suggested to Darcy that perhaps they should have them all over to dine; he agreed, and so with equal parts anticipation and trepidation, Elizabeth went calling to deliver the invitations. She had taken on the planning of the family dinners with little difficulty and helpful assistance from Mrs. Wright, but had never planned a meal on such a large scale. Still, she looked forward to the idea of hosting so many people whose company she enjoyed, and had been most pleased when Darcy suggested she include the Gardiners in the invitation before she could even ask about them herself.

To one household, however, Elizabeth went with only trepidation, and a great deal of reluctance. Lady Catherine received her with apparent disgust, and proceeded to ignore her and Mrs. Annesley, whom she had brought along with Georgiana. That young lady was the entire focus of her conversation for the whole course of their visit; what balls she must attend, who she must be introduced to. Lady Catherine seemed to already have an entire string of young gentlemen for Georgiana to meet, and Elizabeth watched her sister's discomfort grow increasingly throughout the course of the visit. Elizabeth and Mrs. Annesley both attempted to deflect some of the conversation from Georgiana, but Lady Catherine would not have it.

Elizabeth did feel the slightest twinge of sympathy for Lady Catherine; it was clear her daughter Anne, who had stayed behind at Rosings due to her ill health, would never come out into society, and so Lady Catherine could only help a niece through this process, instead of a daughter. She would be in a position to do so frequently, as well; Rosings Park was an easy distance to London, and so she might come and go throughout the entire little season and full season whenever she felt herself needed.

When they returned to Curzon Street, Darcy informed Elizabeth that he had learned another friend of his family, the Dowager Viscountess Tonbridge, was in town, and asked Elizabeth if she might like to include the viscountess in the invite. He described her as a woman of great sense, powerful enough to keep very liberal company, and someone who could be a very helpful acquaintance for her and Georgiana. With such a recommendation from a man who generally did not favor company, Elizabeth readily agreed to going with him for a morning call. Viscountess Tonbridge was a broad woman with a happy countenance and yet very good manners, readily welcoming to Elizabeth and desirous of being introduced to those acquaintances she had not already met. She had no children of her own and enjoyed the company of young people, and as she had no engagements for the evening of the dinner party, would be delighted to attend.

Elizabeth came away from the introduction pleased that she now knew another person with a noble title who had readily welcomed her into an acquaintance. She might still be a nobody, and certainly everyone would not receive her so well, but she was not without friends.

The next day brought the Bingleys's carriage to the front door shortly after the noon hour, and with great joy Elizabeth welcomed her sisters into the house. Jane and Charles agreed to stay for some refreshment before heading on to the Hursts's house, and soon enough Elizabeth and Jane had sequestered themselves in a private corner of the drawing room so that Jane could tell her of news from home, and they could exchange their impressions of married life. Jane was clearly every bit as happy as Elizabeth, and the two sisters's felicity increased even more as each heard how content the
They were interrupted by the sound of the pianoforte. Mary and Georgiana had been corresponding occasionally, and upon learning that Mary was to join them in London, Georgiana had written to suggest they play duets together. They had landed upon a few selections that pleased them both, and had been practicing their parts independently. Now, they were eager to play together, and they did so with much delight. It was clear to Elizabeth that Georgiana was the superior player, but she was such a modest girl that she continually complimented Mary on her playing, and only occasionally suggested an easier way to do the fingering on difficult passages. They had mastered one piece by the time Jane and Charles rose to take their leave, and sounded quite well. The wooden, technical sound of Mary's playing was quite softened by playing with a friend, and Georgiana's skill was, as always, delightful.

Elizabeth, Catherine, Mrs. Annesley, and Darcy continued to listen to them after the Bingleys had left. Later as they went upstairs to dress for dinner, Darcy pulled Elizabeth aside.

"Mary and Georgiana play quite well together," Darcy observed. "Perhaps we could ask Mr. Palmer to fit Mary into his schedule either before or after Georgiana, when he comes for her lessons."

"I do not think there is anything Mary would like quite so much as that," Elizabeth said. Her sister had always laboured away at the pianoforte, with no instruction aside from what little help Elizabeth could give her.

"Catherine does not play, is that correct?"

"No, she does not. She has never had an interest."

"Do you think she would like to learn now?"

"I can ask her," Elizabeth said. Perhaps Catherine, with her recent increase in sense and manners, and removed from Lydia's influence towards more frivolous pursuits, would like to reconsider the pianoforte as well. Indeed, Elizabeth had thought she detected a hint of jealousy on Catherine's face in watching Mary and Georgiana take so much enjoyment in their playing earlier.

When she applied to Catherine with the opportunity, though, Catherine felt she was too far behind the other ladies, and still did not have much interest in learning the pianoforte; she was not musically inclined, although she did take a greater enjoyment from hearing others play now. She hesitantly offered that instead she should like to try her hand at drawing and painting.

Elizabeth relayed this to Darcy, and he promised to see if one of Georgiana's former masters in this area would be available to provide her with instruction. Elizabeth did not know which to be more pleased about – that her formerly silly sisters were now growing more fit for company, or that Darcy had made such an effort to treat them as his own sisters.

The morning of the dinner found Elizabeth far more nervous than was usually her nature. She flitted around the house, occasionally calling to Mrs. Wright to ensure some detail or other had been attended to. It was only Mrs. Wright's continuing affirmations that all was set, and the realization that she was, perhaps, acting a bit like her mother that forced Elizabeth to go to the drawing room and attempt some embroidery while Georgiana and Mary continued practicing their duets.

Elizabeth had been very pleased with how all of the dresses in her wedding trousseau had turned out, but among them she had a few favorites, and she was pleased to see when she went upstairs to
change that Sarah had set one of them out. It was a lovely pale blue silk that flattered her complexion, and Jane – whose patience made her easily the best embroiderer of all the Bennet ladies – had done the trim. Sarah could not have known this, but Elizabeth was pleased her sister would be able to see the results of her handiwork.

There came a knock at the door adjoining Darcy's dressing room just as Sarah was finishing up Elizabeth's hair, which Elizabeth knew to be her husband, for no one else was to use that door while the family was in residence.

"Do come in," she said, and Darcy entered.

He was holding a jeweler's box, and Elizabeth did not look forward to seeing its contents quite as much as she should have. The last time he had given her some of the Darcy family jewels had been the morning of Georgiana's presentation at court, and he had given over the box with almost a sheepish expression on his face. She had seen why as soon as she opened it. The necklace and earrings had been terribly overset and completely ostentatious – a good choice, perhaps, to suit her court dress, but she knew she would never wear them for any other occasion. It had been a surprise to her, and a source of puzzlement, for her wedding ring, which had belonged to Darcy's grandmother, was a beautiful little delicate piece that she loved very much.

Sarah rushed to finish the last of Elizabeth's curls, curtsied and made her exit, and only then did Darcy approach with the box, although his expression was very different from last time – he seemed to have even the slightest hint of a smile.

"I am glad you are wearing that dress," he said, handing her the box. "I believe these will complete it."

Elizabeth prepared herself to make a positive response, regardless of what was in the box, and then opened it.

"Oh!" she gasped, for inside was a most exquisite little sapphire necklace and earrings, with a matching pair of hair combs. "Darcy, they're all so beautiful!"

"Not quite so beautiful as the woman who will wear them, but I am glad you like them," he said, all smiles at her reception of the gift. "I was afraid they would not be done in time, but my jeweler sent them over this morning. You see, Elizabeth, my mother had a bit of a penchant for – what shall I say, substantial – jewelry. What you hold there was only a necklace and earrings, and I do not think the old setting would have suited you."

"This suits me very much – I love them," she said, putting in the earrings, as he picked up the necklace and clasped it behind her neck.

"I am very glad. I fear though that it may be some time before we can have all of the pieces re-set," he said. "Hadley's can only take on so much, and I do not like the idea of entrusting the work to someone new."

"It is no worry – I rather like the idea of periodically having jewelry bestowed on me," she said, looking back at him with an arch smile.

"Then you may count on me for periodic bestowal of jewelry. I shall leave you now," he said, tilting her chin up so that he could lean around and kiss her. "I know you will do brilliantly tonight."

The Bingleys were the first to arrive, and Elizabeth found Jane's calm presence a balm to her nerves. The Gardiners came in shortly after them, giving Elizabeth the added benefit of her aunt's being there
as well. The drawing room soon filled with their guests, and Elizabeth circulated among them, ensuring they were all comfortable, and it seemed a little silly to her, but she did feel more confident in her new jewels and dress, as though she was properly armored for the evening.

As she did meandered about the room, Elizabeth observed something that piqued her interest. She had occasionally wondered if Lady Ellen actually approved of her, or whether the lady's manners were simply so impeccable she would never deign to behave improperly to anyone. However, as she watched Lady Ellen's chilly reception of Lady Catherine, she understood that while Lady Ellen would never allow her manners to be anything less than excellent, she would allow just the slightest bit of distaste to show, when she so felt it.

Lady Ellen took her dislike of Lady Catherine to such an extreme that, upon seeing Lady Catherine snub the Gardiners when they were introduced, Lady Ellen encouraged the earl to go over with her and converse with them right up until Elizabeth called them all to dinner. Elizabeth felt a surge of regard that she could call such people family, and noted that the Fitzwilliams and the Gardiners seemed to get on well, which was not such a surprise – despite the difference in their ranks, both couples were intelligent, well-mannered, fashionable people.

The earl offered Elizabeth his arm, noting she was still a new enough bride that she must go in first, with Jane immediately following, a notion that was seconded by both Lady Ellen and Lady Tonbridge. When they all were seated, the dining room was much closer to properly full, and as she had anticipated, Elizabeth felt a great satisfaction in seeing so many friends and family gathered there. The footmen came in with the first remove, and Elizabeth noted happily that everyone seemed to be enjoying the food. She had generally taken Mrs. Wright's recommendations as to which dishes Cook was best at making, and ventured only a few suggestions of her own. All went over well, and it was on the subject of the food that the viscountess first spoke to Elizabeth.

"You, my dear, are not helping my gout with such an excellent array of dishes," she said.

"I do apologise, Lady Tonbridge, would you like me to have something else prepared for you?" Elizabeth responded.

"Oh, no, do nothing of the sort. It is my own fault for refusing to give up good food," the viscountess said. "You have done quite well for yourself here. I would have thought you to be mistress of this house for many years, and yet you are only newly married. When were you wed?"

"I thank you for the compliment, Lady Tonbridge," Elizabeth said. "Mr. Darcy and I were married in March."

"Ah, the flush of young love," the viscountess said. "And I understand there may be more young love in your household soon. Mr. Darcy told me Miss Darcy has recently come out into society."

"Yes, we presented her at court less than a fortnight ago."

"I will be certain to include your family in my invitations, then. I usually host a few balls over the course of the season. I have half a mind to try to fit one in before Christmas, as well."

"Thank you very much, ma'am. I'm sure Miss Darcy will be appreciative."

"You will let me know if there is anything I can do to help her," the viscountess said. "And your other sisters, as well. I understand they are also out in society?"

"Yes, Miss Bennet and Miss Catherine Bennet are both out."

"Excellent. I shall have to ensure I drum up plenty of suitable male partners with so many ladies to
Elizabeth glanced over at Darcy, caught his eye, and smiled. She understood fully why he had introduced her to the viscountess – the woman must have had the excellent connexions of her rank, but she showed no hauteur at all, only a great friendliness and desire for enjoyment in life.

The dinner continued on through the second remove, and when that was nearly finished, the earl stood with his glass in the air.

"I believe we are still within a reasonable range of time to again toast the Darcys and the Bingleys on their marriages, and especially Mrs. Darcy for hosting such a fine dinner."

The toast was gladly picked up by most of the rest of the table, Lady Catherine excepted, and Elizabeth blushed as his praise was echoed.

"And I would be remiss if I did not also toast Miss Darcy, on her recent presentation at court," the earl continued.

This toast was seconded by all, and Georgiana blushed even more deeply than Elizabeth, looking somewhat mortified to be singled out. She had the good fortune, however, of sitting near Catherine and Mary, and following the comforting glances her friends provided, she was able to gently nod her thanks to her uncle.

The ladies retired to the drawing room soon after, where Mrs. Gardiner chose a safe topic in asking for a description of Georgiana's presentation at court. This was readily provided by Lady Ellen and Elizabeth, both of them periodically applying to Georgiana for her impressions of the event. The time passed quite enjoyably, aside from the occasional interjection from Lady Catherine about how she might have done things differently, had she been in town for Georgiana's presentation, to Lady Ellen's increasing irritation.

"I must hear Georgiana play the pianoforte," Lady Catherine said, not long after the gentleman had rejoined them. "As many of you know, I have an unsurpassed love of music, and I simply must hear how Georgiana gets on."

Georgiana looked to Elizabeth and Mrs. Annesley with terror; she had never performed in front of half this many people before.

"Miss Darcy and Miss Bennet, perhaps you might play us one of your duets," Elizabeth suggested.

Mary, as always, was eager to perform, and all but dragged the more reluctant Georgiana over to the pianoforte. Elizabeth's suggestion had been effective; Georgiana took comfort in sitting down on the bench with a friend. They played delightfully together, and were roundly applauded by all in the room. Mary all but glowed – never before had her playing been met with such reception. Georgiana seemed more relieved than anything else, but Elizabeth hoped this would be the first step in her taking more comfort in playing for an audience. Her musical accomplishments would not be nearly so useful if she was not able to exhibit.

After a second duet, Georgiana was compelled by Mary to play a piece on her own, which she did, a bit shakily at the beginning but beautifully by the end, when she had managed to forget her audience. She then encouraged Mary to play a few pieces, which Mary readily agreed to.

Lady Catherine was in raptures when Mary had finished; she continued to share her love of music with all in the room, and her delight in seeing two young ladies who applied themselves so diligently in practice. Mary sat down next to her and basked in her praise, discussing the frequency of her
practices and all the things she did to try to improve herself, and generally deflecting Lady Catherine's attention from everyone else in the room, which all seemed grateful for.

It was only after Lady Catherine's carriage departed Curzon Street that Viscountess Tonbridge approached Elizabeth and Georgiana, and beckoned Mary to come over and join them as well.

"I too had a great enjoyment of your music tonight, Miss Darcy and Miss Bennet, although perhaps not so effusive as others," the viscountess said. "My gout has settled in my hands and I can no longer play, so I miss it greatly. I have formed a musical club so that I might have music in my house with some frequency, and I should like it greatly if the two of you would join us. We meet for tea and music, every Monday evening."

"That sounds delightful," Georgiana said. "I thank you for thinking to include us."

Mary looked as though she was about to faint; to have such enjoyment of her playing in the course of the evening, and then to be asked by a viscountess to join a musical club was nearly more than her spirits could bear.

"I should like that as well," Mary managed, finally. "It is so wonderful to be met with such appreciation of music as I have seen thus far in town."

"Ah yes, Miss Bennet, there is much to feed the soul of a lover of music here. I shall have to have you all to the opera in my box."

The viscountess's carriage was called then, and she took her leave, as did much of the rest of the party. The Bingleys, first to arrive, were also last to leave, but no one had any complaints about this. Charles and Darcy retired to Darcy's study for a final glass of brandy, and Jane sat down with her sisters.

"Lizzy, you've done so wonderfully! To host such a large dinner, and with such nobility, too, in your first attempt."

"It is nothing compared to hosting a wedding breakfast for near on eighty people," Elizabeth teased her sister.

"That is different; all Charles and I had to do was ensure we had enough seating and food."

"Nonsense, Jane, it was quite an event. Since you are too modest to admit that yours was a larger feat, I must put forth that we were both successful. There, now, you cannot argue with that."

"No, I cannot." Jane smiled at her sister before they both dissolved into a fit of giggles not very befitting of two elegant married ladies. At the moment, neither of them cared.
Chapter 6

If the Darcys had known what a disturbance Viscountess Tonbridge's invitation to join the musical club would have on their household, they might have discouraged Georgiana and Mary's participation. Beginning the morning following the dinner, they both began practicing so fervently that Darcy was forced to have the ballroom opened so that one or the other could use the pianoforte in there when they were not playing duets, and the house resounded with music every day until they all left to take the promenade in Hyde Park.

Mr. Palmer came for his lesson with Georgiana, and was compelled to add Mary as an additional client. Mary, wild with enthusiasm before her first lesson, was reduced to tears following it; Mr. Palmer had criticised her technique, and her pride, and said they must break everything down before they should build it back up again. After a few hours of quiet reflection, however, she came to see that he was correct, applied herself to his recommendations, and saw enough early improvement to encourage her to keep practicing with what he said in mind. He had also, upon hearing her sing, told her she had not the voice for it, and should stick strictly to playing; this was much more difficult for her to accept.

Catherine entered into her first drawing lesson with no such expectations of her own talent. She had tried sketching things on her own from time to time, so it was not the first time she had held a pencil, but she was completely open to all of Mr. Shaw's guidance. With Georgiana and Mary focused so entirely on the piano, she had ample time for practice, and she worked carefully on the exercises Mr. Shaw gave her, only wishing from time to time that they might go shopping, or do something else a bit more lighthearted.

Monday came, and with it the first musical evening at Viscountess Tonbridge's that Georgiana and Mary were to attend. Mrs. Annesley conveyed them there, and Catherine retired to the conservatory to practice drawing the plants, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone in the drawing room after dinner. He sat down beside her and leaned back against the sofa.

"Peace at last," he said. "Do you think perhaps we could start sending them over to Lady Catherine's house to practice? After all, she does have a true love of music."

"I think this amount of practice might test even Lady Catherine's love," Elizabeth laughed. "I only hope their level of talent is equal to the rest of the club, or we will have no peace until it is."

"It does at least give me an opportunity to have an evening alone with my wife," he said.

Elizabeth reflected that for all her teasing, these last few weeks must have been hard on him. To have so many visitors in the house, and to know that their time in company was only to increase as Georgiana's engagements began in earnest, could not be easy for someone who was not by nature fond of society. She resolved to watch him closely and suggest they retire to Pemberley for a few weeks if his discomfort was too great; she expected shy Georgiana would not mind a break from company, either.

"Yes, it has been quite a long time since has been just the two of us," she said. "What do you say I entertain us on the pianoforte?"

Many of the servants heard the laughter this question prompted, and all that did, smiled. They had always felt grateful to be working for a kind and fair master, and that he had brought to the house an
equally kind and fair wife, one who was so clearly a love match, pleased them all very much.

+++ 

Breakfast in the morning brought a full recounting of all that had occurred at the musical club. The ladies described Sir Robert Morris, who played a surprisingly delicate flute, and Lady Louise Barton, who was quite skilled on the harp, as well as several other young ladies, accomplished on the pianoforte, and a few other gentlemen who played the trumpet, violin, and other instruments that Elizabeth soon lost count of in Mary's excited description.

Georgiana and Mary had been compelled to play a duet and a solo piece each, and on the whole they had found the group to be passionately devoted to music, and very forgiving of mistakes, especially when they were made by a player attempting to stretch his or her capabilities.

Mary conveyed their reception with the utmost enthusiasm, but Elizabeth noticed that Georgiana seemed a little subdued, and wondered if she had been uncomfortable performing in front of such an audience. She intended to apply to Mrs. Annesley at some point during the day to find out how the evening had gone from a more impartial perspective, but found that Mary provided her with all the intelligence she needed in an aside as the ladies were moving to the drawing room.

"Mr. Davis, on the trumpet, paid quite a lot of attention to Georgiana," she said. "He could hardly be persuaded to leave her side the whole evening, and he said she had thirty thousand pounds. Is that true? Could she truly have such a dowry?"

Elizabeth confirmed delicately that it was true, and began to understand why Georgiana had been so subdued. She wished she had gone with them that evening, or at the very least warned Viscountess Tonbridge that Georgiana was not yet prepared for the fortune hunters that would come her way in society.

Georgiana joined them in the drawing room, but left soon complaining of a headache. Elizabeth followed her to her room, knocking on the door and entering when there was no response.

"Please do tell me to leave if you truly have a headache and do not want the company," Elizabeth said. "But I understand that your headache might go by the name of Mr. Davis."

Georgiana, sitting on the edge of her bed, looked up sharply at Elizabeth. "How did you know?"

"Mary informed me, but please do not blame her. We are both worried about you. Was he at any point inappropriate?"

Georgiana shook her head. "He was indiscreet, but his manners were otherwise unobjectionable. He could talk of nothing else but how great my family were, and how my fortune should be just what he needed to expand his small estate in Wales. He made it sound as though it were certain we would be married and yet I showed him no indication that I favoured his company!"

"Oh, Georgiana," Elizabeth reached out and put her hand over her sister's. "I fear he is not the last man with similar presumptions you will have to face."

"I know," Georgiana sighed. "Mrs. Annesley warned me that I would have many suitors who were only interested in my fortune. It's just – I suppose I did not realise some of them would be such terrible company. I went last night expecting only people who were enthusiasts of music, and I was unprepared. I will not be so in the future."

Elizabeth felt a deep pang of sympathy for her sister. She had grown up facing the challenges that a lack of fortune brought to her potential for marriage, and had only now fully realised that finding a
good partner with such a large fortune as Georgiana's could be equally difficult.

"I'm sure the viscountess would understand if you did not choose to return for future evenings," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, no!" Georgiana cried. "That is to say, I did truly enjoy the music, and everyone else was so kind. I did not think I would be comfortable performing in a room full of strangers, but I was. I had even thought to ask if we could send back to Pemberley for my harp."

"We certainly can. But how shall you deal with Mr. Davis?"

"I will have to be firm, and tell him that I do not prefer his company," Georgiana said, with enough of her brother's resolve that Elizabeth thought she might just be able to do so.

"I will go with you next time, as well as Mrs. Annesley, so you have more family to support you," Elizabeth said, determined that if Georgiana was unable to do so herself, she would tell the man to stop his overtures. "However for now, if you are feeling well enough for it, let us practice."

"Practice? How does one practice such a thing?"

"Oh, Miss Darcy, you are in possession of such a great fortune," Elizabeth said, taking up her arm. "I am sure you will love my paltry little estate in Wales, of all places."

Georgiana giggled at Elizabeth's actions, but finally said: "Sir, I have come for the musical club. I thank you for your interest, but I would ask you to turn your attentions back to the music."

"But Miss Darcy, we are a match made in heaven! Surely our love of music will bring us closer!"

"Mr. Davis, I am sorry, but I must make it clear that I am not interested in your suit."

"There, you did that quite well," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, but I fear it will not be so easy with the real Mr. Davis."

"I think you will manage just fine."

After Elizabeth left the room, Georgiana laid back in the bed, staring at the ceiling. Now that she had feigned a headache, she would have to stay in her room for at least a few hours, and she wished she had thought to ask Elizabeth to bring her a book. She smiled as she thought of her sister; she was feeling much better after her conversation with Elizabeth.

At the very beginning of the evening, she had actually enjoyed Mr. Davis's company. He had sat beside her after she finished her solo piece, and was very complimentary of her playing. But then he had continued to seek her company throughout the rest of the evening, and been increasingly bold about the potential of a connection between the two of them.

The only thing she could take some consolation in was that it had been clear to her he was only interested in her fortune. After her near-elopement with Mr. Wickham – the thought of it even now made her flush with shame – she had realised that he would likely not be the last man to pretend to be in love with her in order to get at her fortune. She had been young, no one had ever paid her such addresses before, and she had thought herself in love so easily. When her brother had first brought up her coming out this year, she had known that he was right, it was time, but she had determined that she must be extremely cautious. She must guard her heart, and she must rule her own feelings so that she would never again allow herself to be persuaded to be in love by such a man.
Georgiana was still in her room when Lady Ellen called on them; expressing concern for her niece and her hopes that she would be recovered a fortnight from Friday. The ladies all expressed their curiosity as to the significance of the date, and Lady Ellen informed them that a particular friend of hers, Lady Ruth Allen, was hosting a ball that evening. Upon hearing that Lady Ellen's nieces were in town, Lady Allen had immediately extended the invitation to include them, and Lady Ellen thought a small, private ball would be a perfect first such outing for Georgiana, whose coming-out ball would not occur until January, when the full season began.

Catherine was disappointed at first, upon hearing this – she had been longing for a ball, and now Elizabeth and Georgiana would get to go to one while she would have to stay home. But soon enough, Lady Ellen's statements indicated that both she and Mary were also included in the invitation. Catherine had always liked Lady Ellen, but this condescension to consider her and Mary as her nieces, and for an invitation to a private town ball, of all things, now made Lady Ellen one of her very favourite people.

Elizabeth, too, noted the condescension with satisfaction, and particularly the way Kitty acknowledged it. There was no wild squealing as might have happened had Lydia been around, and instead, Catherine told Lady Ellen that she would look forward to the event with great anticipation; it had been some time since she had danced. Her enthusiasm was evident, but she controlled it carefully.

There was no such condescension, however, when Lady Catherine arrived, so soon after Lady Ellen had departed that Elizabeth wondered if she had seen the carriage with the Brandon arms on it, and ordered her own carriage to circle the block until Lady Ellen left. Lady Catherine had an invitation to deliver to Darcy, his wife, and Georgiana only, for dinner, only two days before Lady Allen's ball. She did so despite the presence of Mary, Kitty, and Mrs. Annesley in the drawing room, and Elizabeth had half a mind not to accept it, but knew that Lady Catherine must have invited at least one potential suitor for Georgiana, and she would not harm Georgiana's chances to favor her own indignation.

Kitty had no cares about Lady Catherine's dinner party when she would be attending a ball two days later, but Mary took greater insult; she had thought Lady Catherine favoured her, and she went over to the pianoforte and took up her practice in the hopes of reminding the lady of her diligence. Lady Catherine rose to take her leave soon, however, and so Mary was left to look forward only to the next musical evening with the viscountess, which she did, greatly.

They had a family dinner that evening, having invited only the Bingleys to join them. Everyone was much relieved to see Georgiana recovered, and she was filled in on the callers of the day, and the invitations that had been delivered. Georgiana could not garner much excitement at her aunt's dinner invitation – she had no doubt that Lady Catherine had a suitor in mind for her, someone who matched Lady Catherine's expectations of who Georgiana should marry, and that they should be introduced at the dinner. The ball, however, she was quite excited for. She knew her aunt Ellen would not have sought the invitation unless she thought it to be a good event for Georgiana's first ball, and she looked forward to it with every anticipation of finally having an opportunity to dance in company.

The gentlemen were not long with their port after dinner, but rather than taking seats in the drawing room, Darcy requested that Elizabeth and Jane join him and Charles in his study. Elizabeth felt all the strangeness of the request; she sometimes joined Darcy in his study during the day to read a book in the comparative quiet of the room, especially when Mary and Georgiana had been practicing in earnest. But to request her presence there, and with Jane and Charles, was something else entirely,
and she wondered if perhaps he had some bad news to share with them that he wished to keep from the rest of the family at first.

When they were all inside and seated, Darcy seemed at a loss for how to begin whatever it was he was about to broach. Finally, he said:

"Charles and I have made some very fortunate investments in the course of the last year, that brought an exceptional return when the peace was declared. We had been discussing what we might be able to do with the profits, and thought perhaps the best use of the money would be to increase Mary and Catherine's portions."

"Oh my," Elizabeth said, seeing that Jane still looked too shocked to speak. "That is exceedingly considerate of you."

"Nonsense!" Charles said. "They are our sisters now, too."

"But what of Georgiana and Caroline? Surely as your blood sisters you would want to increase their portions."

"Georgiana and Caroline already have more than sufficient dowries," Darcy said. "Georgiana will be pursued by enough fortune hunters with her current dowry, and it is in part for her that I wish to do this. She, Catherine and Mary have struck up quite a friendship, but the discrepancy in their expectations must certainly colour the relationship."

Darcy did not mention another reason for the decision to contribute to Mary and Catherine's portions, but he and Charles had discussed at length what should happen if Mrs. Bennet survived Mr. Bennet. Certainly the woman would need to live with one of her daughters, and if one or the other of her unmarried daughters remained so, a sufficient fortune would allow them to set up house in a reasonably sized cottage. If all of her daughters married – and a larger portion would give Mary and Catherine much improved chances – Mrs. Bennet could be shuffled amongst more households, meaning that Darcy and Charles would suffer her company less frequently. This however, was reasoning he could not offer to Mrs. Bennet's two eldest daughters, so instead he said:

"We had thought to supplement their portions so that each of them should have five thousand pounds. Do you think this would be acceptable to your father?"

In some ways it would be an insult to Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth knew, that what her father had failed to save up over the years could now so easily be provided by his new sons. However, she also knew her father to be selfless enough that he would accept the gift politely. Five thousand pounds, although nowhere near Georgiana's thirty thousand or Miss Bingley's twenty thousand, should be sufficient for them to make a far better match than either of them might have hoped for previously.

"I am certain it would be," Elizabeth said. "I know my entire family will be grateful for the consideration you have given them."

"Oh yes," Jane seconded her. "It is so kind of both of you."

"Good, then we will have the paperwork drawn up, and I will write your father indicating our intentions," Darcy said. "Would you like to call your sisters in so that we may give them the news?"

"I would like for the two of you to give it to them without us," Elizabeth said, looking to Jane for her assent. "They should know that this was your idea, not ours."

"Very well, then. Please do send them in."

Both Mary and Catherine were mildly terrified to be called into such a conference, and especially without their elder sisters. Mr. Darcy had been nothing but kindness to them as guests, and they had always known Charles as an amiable man, but they could think of no reason why they should be called into the male sanctuary on business.

When the reason for their being called in was explained, and they had absorbed the news that they were each to have five thousand pounds, they were as pleased as can be imagined. Mary did not think it likely that she would find a husband in town; she held out hopes that perhaps she might meet with a country clergyman of the highest moral standard someday. While she already knew she was no longer at risk of winding up in the hedgerows, with two sisters so well married, the idea of having some fortune of her own was greatly pleasing, even if she never did marry.

Catherine, meanwhile, was ecstatic. She had come to London hoping to find a husband, and to go about it much better than Lydia had done, and now in addition to the artistic skills she hoped to acquire, she had some fortune to also recommend her. She looked forward to the ball with even more enthusiasm than before, and looked upon her brothers with nearly as much adoration as she had shown Lady Ellen earlier.