A "What if?" divergence from the Pride and Prejudice canon. What if Darcy had adopted a different set of expectations at the first Assembly, where he is introduced to the ladies of Longbourn? What if he was proud but not aloof, and danced with Jane before Bingley did? Yes, I know, a shocking divergence indeed. It is, after all, a work in progress.
Chapter One: At the Assembly

“Prepare to face the unwashed masses,” Caroline Bingley murmured under her breath as the footman opened the door to the Darcy carriage. She caught Mr. Darcy’s eye and was gratified to see him nod slightly in agreement.

“Surely, they’re not that bad,” Bingley countered, alighting after his sisters had done, his boots squelching a little in the mud.

Fitzwilliam Darcy exited the carriage and settled his hat atop his head before adjusting the cuffs of his dark superfine coat. He had a name to uphold and, his valet had reminded him, so had his manservant. Watkins had been in his service for years and had earned some familiarity with his charge. “Bingley,” Darcy said after a moment, “only look around you. A country assembly is just the place for unwashed masses.” That a driver fell off his perch to the damp ground at just that moment only illustrated his point, Darcy felt.

The ladies in his party – Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst – tittered but covered their amusement with discreet and rehearsed coughs.

Darcy took a deep breath of fresh country air before stepping into the loud crowded atmosphere of the Meryton Assembly. He predicted that they would be accosted straightaway and so they were. An obsequious fellow with a nose the size of Darcy’s favorite stallion’s approached within
moments of their being announced.

“Sir William Lucas,” Bingley reminded Darcy. “He called first upon me and invited us here.”

Darcy bowed his head in acknowledgment of the introduction as Sir William offered a deep obeisance in front of them.

“Welcome, welcome to our Assembly. We are honored in your presence, Mr. Bingley.”

Bingley did the necessary civilities and Darcy let his attention wander. As the Darcy of Pemberley, he knew what was due him and what he owed in every social situation. As a gentleman, there were standards he must meet. One of them was to dance in public, to give an example of the art and to be courteous. The whispers and speculations that arose from his choice in partners was inevitable, but it was to him to squash all presumptions. His rank and station did not require him to be accessible. Merely civil.

Bingley was introduced to Sir William’s eldest daughter, an evident spinster with a plain but intelligent expression. Darcy knew he had to choose for himself. There was only one woman in the room outside of his party that would not be a punishment to stand up with, in his estimation.

“Sir William, would you do me the honor of introducing me to that young lady and her parents?” Of course there would be parents. Word of his estate had already flown about the room in less-than-quiet tones. Darcy hardened his jaw against the gossip that would ensue. A beauty such as he had seen would likely be inured to such. Even if she hadn’t a thought in her head.

“Ah, that is Miss Bennet. Jane Bennet.”

Darcy nodded. The two eldest Bennet girls had a reputation as the local beauties. It suited Darcy’s sense of consequence to dance with either or both of them. Jane was clearly the more attractive of the two and he was willing to partner her.

“Mr. Darcy,” Sir William said, bowing again – the fellow was positively bent over for half the evening – before a matron of middle age and apparently decent taste in evening wear. “May I present Mrs. Bennet of Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley.”

With effusions worthy of royalty, Mrs. Bennet gushed her praise for an estate she had never seen before introducing him to the two daughters at her side. Miss Bennet was wearing a gown of
white muslin, embroidered in a blue that was echoed in her eyes. Her hair was the color of honey and her smile was graciously warm.

“Mr. Darcy.” Her voice was pleasant as well, musical in fact, and Darcy was relieved. Dancing was much more pleasant when one could listen to one’s partner without cringing.

“And this is my second daughter, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Bennet went on.

Darcy spared the younger woman a glance, noting primarily that she was not as fair as her elder sister, as her hair was dark and her skin a clear olive tone. Her figure wasn’t nearly as good, either, though her dark eyes danced expressively as a smile flirted with her lips. “Mr. Darcy,” she said, her voice light and airy.

The musicians cued, playing the measures that announced the next country dance, and there was a sudden movement all about the long room as partners were claimed. “Miss Bennet?” Darcy extended his hand to the honey-haired sister.

She slid her gloved hand smoothly into his fingers and Darcy blinked. Unassuming confidence was communicated in her perfectly acceptable gesture and he was unwillingly impressed. He led her to the dance to stand next to Bingley and Miss Lucas. Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas exchanged smiles and Darcy could see that the two young women were acquainted and possibly good friends. That spoke well for both of them. That the beauty would be on good terms with one beneath her in appearance meant she was likely not vain. And that an intelligent woman would consider the beauty to be an equal – as a quick spurt of conversation indicated – meant that Miss Bennet was likely a well-educated woman.

Darcy was quite pleased as the dance began.

“How are you enjoying Herefordshire?” Miss Bennet asked, accepting his hand and turning as the dance required.

“I enjoy country life,” Darcy returned, turning and waiting for the other couple to execute their maneuvers. “I would prefer to spend much more of my time away from London. Have you been?”

“To London?”
“Yes. Did you have the opportunity to study there?” Many young ladies were taken to London for a month or so to study the masters of the arts. It was an unexceptional question.

Still, Miss Bennet blushed and glanced away and Darcy instantly regretted asking. “No, sir. I have not had that opportunity.”

A gentleman sought the comfort of his dance partner, so he moved smoothly to another topic. “Well, in the country, one can learn a great deal. Do you enjoy reading?”

Her clear eyes rested again on his face as they stepped closer in the pattern of the dance. “Indeed. I was just reading Shakespeare’s sonnets this morning.”

“A lady of taste and refinement,” Darcy said with a smile.

Her answering blush carried none of the embarrassment of her earlier fluctuation of color, so he felt he had chosen his compliment well. Indeed, their conversation regarding books and their divergent tastes was managed despite the noise of the uncouth locals. Miss Bennet stood out like a lily in a field of wildflowers. She had grace, poise and dignity, as well as a sense of humor. Able to converse eloquently, with humor, she either did not hear the not-too-quiet speculations that rambled in between their first and second dances in the set, or she ignored them.

After their second dance, Darcy bowed and escorted her back to her mother. Miss Bennet’s hand on his arm was light and without presumption, but she was willing to look him in the eye when she spoke.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I enjoyed our dances.”

“As did I,” he assured her. “Might I secure you for the two after this?”

She pinked up prettily and thanked him, curtsying lightly. With a short bow to the about-to-effuse Mrs. Bennet, Darcy made his escape from that corner. Surprise was moving about in his breast. Surprise that he had found, here in the supposedly unwashed masses, a woman who excited his admiration. Careful not to stare at her, he managed to acquire a glass of sadly watered wine before encountering Bingley in between sets.

“You shall have to introduce me to your partner,” his friend said, his tone sprightly. “Miss Lucas holds her in high esteem, though her particular friend is Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”
“I would be happy to make the introductions to Miss Elizabeth.” Darcy caught the laughter in Bingley’s eye. “What?”

“To Miss Elizabeth but not to Miss Jane Bennet? My good fellow, I cannot believe it. Here in Herefordshire?”

Darcy grimaced. “Not you, too. I’ll not have it.”

“But Darcy, you’ve never shown such an inclination before,” Bingley murmured as they reached the Bennet family.

“Enough!”

Bingley was still laughing to himself as he made his bows. “Miss Bennet,” he said, purposefully addressing himself to the eldest Miss Bennet to tease his friend, “it was a pleasure to see you dance, earlier. You are quite accomplished.”

“I thank you, Mr. Bingley. May I present my family?” Miss Bennet said with all due propriety. Darcy was highly gratified when she offered a smile to him that was warmer than that she had shown Bingley.

After the introductions were made, Bingley asked for the honor of Miss Bennet’s hand in the next set, which was the one prior to the one Darcy had himself requested. To ask for a woman’s hand in two consecutive dance sets was far too particular and was indeed only unexceptional for a betrothed couple. It was a sign of strong interest for a man to secure two such sets one after another and Darcy was not willing to have either himself or Miss Bennet gossiped about any more than was happening already.

So he applied to the next daughter. “Miss Elizabeth? May I have the honor?”

Her smile was almost impudent as she accepted. “Of course, Mr. Darcy. I wouldn’t dare refuse. My sister might never forgive me!”

The answer was unexpected. “Oh? Why might that be?” Entirely unconventional conversation, but Darcy had his attention divided between Miss Elizabeth and Bingley and Miss Bennet.
“She would deem it in very bad form to refuse to dance with a man she had previously stood up with, you see,” Miss Elizabeth explained.

“Ah. Does this situation arise often?” Darcy wondered. The music was a more stately tune and he saw that Bingley and Miss Bennet were now separated by the forms. In contrast, he and Miss Elizabeth were in the pattern of steps where more conversation was possible. “That you and your sister dance in sequence?”

Miss Elizabeth had a ready laugh. “Oh, frequently. She is about five times prettier than anyone else in the room, as I daresay you’ve noticed.” Darcy felt his color rise in chagrin, for a gentleman never made his dance partner feel less than significant during the course of their dance.

With a conscious effort, he shifted his focus more fully to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. “I beg your pardon.”

“Just do me a favor, if you would, Mr. Darcy,” she said, humor lilting along her voice just before they were to part to the more distant outer edge of the dance pattern.

He met her dark eyes. “Of course.”

“You might suggest – No, never mind.” A wash of color under her clear skin told Darcy that she had rethought her query.

Being a gentleman, he did not inquire as to what made her blush. It would be unseemly.

Their dance was enjoyable and Miss Elizabeth Bennet was a fine dancer and conversationalist. Darcy began to think that here, in Herefordshire, he had found a family he might never have found in a London drawing room. Indeed, Bingley seemed to believe so as well, for he and Miss Elizabeth enjoyed a positively boisterous reel in the next dance set, which he and Miss Bennet danced as well. The effort brought a glow to Miss Bennet’s complexion, further brightening her eyes and delighting Darcy out of all reason.

In his diary later, he reflected that if the Assembly had closed after that reel, he might have been in some danger. Alas, it did not.
Chapter Two, Aftermath

"No, Charles. I cannot fathom being associated with the rest of that family. Not even in the country," Caroline opined from the piano forte. She had just finished playing a quiet air to, she said, soothe her ears from the off-pitch screeching of the middle Bennet daughter.

Darcy crossed his legs and saw the lovely eyes and warm smile of Miss Bennet in his imagination. Her behavior and conversation were decorous and intelligent both. Her next younger sister had been – well, if not as decorous, then equally as intelligent as well as spirited and pleasantly pert. For the country. "Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were suitable, surely," he retorted from his chair.

Bingley flashed him a laughing-eyed smile but Caroline actually snorted. Delicately, but that was indeed what she did. "Do not ask me to visit the younger sisters," she said flatly.

"I shan't," Darcy agreed immediately.

"Did you hear the musical one?" Mrs. Hurst burst out in an excess of emotion, Darcy felt. "Such a display. And her dancing!" she continued with a look of startled sympathy to both Mr. Darcy and her brother.

Bingley shrugged. "One cannot expect lightness of foot in every partner, Louisa." He rose to his feet and crossed to the hearth. "Miss Elizabeth, though, was charming. As was Miss Bennet. Fine dancers, the pair of them. Energetic and possessed of great conversation, wouldn't you say, Darcy?"

Darcy opened his mouth to speak but Caroline shut the piano forte with no little irritation. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet has a satirical eye," she pronounced. "She would not do in London at all, Charles. You just remember that."

Hiding a smile with a tilt of his head, Darcy deemed it fit to change the subject. Having danced with all the Bennet sisters – a damning himself for a status-bound fool for so doing, as the younger two were simpering chits, the middle girl awkward and unaware – he did not wish to dwell upon their imperfections. His admiration for the eldest Miss Bennet he kept to himself as much as he could.

However, over the next fortnight, he could not ignore the subtle excitement that moved under his skin when in company with her.

The first time, he noted in his diary, was at a small dinner party Bingley hosted. He was having different families over to dine as they invited him to do likewise. Darcy, as a guest in the house, was not in general inclined to dine out with the locals too often, but Bingley had nudged him to do so with a gleam in his eye.
"Come, Darcy. You must. Miss Bennet will certainly be in attendance."

After the second such mention over the billiard table one afternoon, Darcy angled a brow at him. "Do not pretend, Bingley, that you are not looking forward to the company of Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

He grinned. "She is delightful company, is she not? But in truth, I am having rather too much fun watching you to properly appreciate Miss Elizabeth." At Darcy’s disbelieving expression, Bingley elaborated with slightly more sobriety. "Darcy. You have done your duty as long as I’ve known you. Perhaps the smiles on Miss Bennet's lovely face are your reward, eh?"

Disgruntled and irritated, Darcy rolled the cue on the green baize cloth of the table. "No. I cannot and should not. Her family are inferior."

"Careful, Darcy. You are beginning to sound like Lady Catherine, your aunt."

Darcy had no wished to be classed with his aunt, Lady Catherine, so he said no more of the inferiority of the Bennet connections. Though Mr. Bennet was a gentleman of no mean understanding, he was not a man of fashion or fortune. Mrs. Bennet was a foolish woman who spoke with too much volume and too little wisdom. He inwardly cringed every time that woman opened her mouth.

Thankfully, she was rather in awe of him. He did nothing to put her at her ease; it was not his duty to do so and he preferred that she keep her distance.

"Oh, Mr. Darcy. Good of you to come," Colonel Foster said in greeting at a dinner with the regiment. The conversation carried on about them in a mild way, scarlet coats weaving through pastel gowns as if there were dancing. "Wasn’t sure you would."

A bit abashed, Darcy nodded. "I enjoy an evening spent among sensible men, Colonel. Thank you for including me in the invitation."

After a brief bow, Darcy made his way past the milling people to the wall. And then, he heard, "Oh, la, Colonel Foster. You must know that your invitations are always welcome."

Damnation, was Darcy's initial thought. Mrs. Bennet's annoying voice followed him everywhere. But soon, he spied the honey-hued locks of Miss Jane Bennet and his ill humor passed from him like water through a sieve. Her movements as she dipped in polite curtsies and shook hands were set to music. Her smile was grace. And when she caught his eye from across the filling room, she grinned more broadly, dimples denting creamy skin in such a way as made him wish to taste them.

He was in serious danger. He went to meet her anyway.

"Miss Bennet," he began. She offered him her gloved hand along with her smile and he took it gently, bending over it to touch her knuckles briefly to his lips.

He heard her quickly indrawn breath and winced internally. It was not a natural skin contact, so was unexceptional, but she had not been to London. Still, he retained her hand in his own for another moment after straightening.

"Mr. Darcy," she murmured, slipping her hand from his. "I did not know you were to be of the party." She apparently recovered herself and offered him another warm smile.

With his own, he answered, "I would hope my presence does not darken the evening for you."
"Not at all."

They talked of books and walked slowly about the room. Occasionally interrupted by an officer or one of Miss Bennet's friends, he still enjoyed this time with her. It was startling, how much he wished to be alone with her. To be able to sit and just relax in her soothing, rich conversation.

Three more times did they dine in company during the first part of a wet and dreary November. Twice that many letters did Darcy send to his young sister, Georgiana, telling her about Netherfield and the local neighborhood.

_Dearest Brother,_

_I do confess to some curiosity about this mysterious "lady" whom you have mentioned in the last few letters you have been so kind as to send me. You are very sly, you know. If it is intrusive, of course I shall not inquire further._

_But I will still wish to be enlightened!_

_On that other matter, I am much recovered, I thank you. My spirits are quite improved. Mrs. Annesley and I are planning on preparing to remove to London by the end of the the month. I hope we will soon see you there._

_Your loving sister,_

_Georgiana_

That _other matter_. Yes. Darcy grimaced, his jaw tight at the memory. That reprehensible, intolerable fellow. George Wickham! He would stay far, far from Derbyshire if he had any native sense whatsoever. Darcy would never forget Georgiana's inward shattering and outward weeping when the length and breadth of Wickham's perfidy had been lain before her.

"London. He cannot go to London, surely," Darcy muttered, unwittingly crumpling his sister's letter in his hand. "He would not show his face. He could not."

Bingley invited the Colonel and some of his officers to Netherfield. Miss Bingley acted as hostess, of course, and she and Mrs. Hurst were not the only women at the table, as it seemed that one of the officers had a new wife with him.

In return, Bingley, Mr. Hurst and Darcy were invited back to the regiment. It was a bit tedious, but the rain prevented any evening ride and indeed delayed their return by an hour.

"Oh, you're home at last? Well, what do you think has happened?" Caroline Bingley inquired, her steps languid as she strode to meet them. "We invited the elder Miss Bennets to dine with us," she went on, taking her brother's arm to stroll back to the evening parlor. "You know, since you were away and we needed some relief from one another." Her smile was careless and shallow and did not reach her eyes. Darcy wondered if that were due to her boredom with her own sister or to a less-than-satisfactory supper with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth.

"Did you have a good evening?" Bingley wondered. His eyes roamed the small room as if seeking his friend, Miss Elizabeth. For that was, Darcy had come to realize, what had happened with the amusing, light-hearted second Bennet sister. She and Bingley had rousing conversations, debates, even. One even before that very fireplace that boasted a comforting, post-outing fire. "Were the Miss Bennets in good health?"

"Oh, lord, Charles," Mrs. Hurst cried, throwing her hands up in the air so that her many bracelets clinked together. Rising in a surfeit of rustling silk – far too much for a small evening dinner for
the ladies only – she crossed the room. "You'll never guess. Well, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth joined us for dinner, as you know."

"Yes," Bingley said, his face set in stern lines as he tried to pry the answer from his dramatically-inclined sister. He made an impatient motion with his hands. "What happened?"

"They came in a small carriage and their horse threw a shoe! And what do you think?"

Darcy's imagination immediately went to the dozen or so dangers that could have befallen the young ladies. "Were they driving themselves or did they have a coachman?"

"In that tiny thing?" Miss Bingley's derision, Darcy let slide past him. "No, but apparently your Miss Elizabeth," she said to her brother, "is an excellent driver."

Bingley relaxed a little and moved to stand by the fire, warming his hands. "Good, then. So what happened?"

"They were both absolutely soaked through when they arrived here, naturally, but they had only had to walk a mile or so, Miss Bennet guessed. So we had our maids take them up and dry them off before dinner."

Something in the way Caroline Bingley held her mouth brought Darcy to speak again. "What happened on the road, Caroline?" He did not normally address her by her first name, but they were friendly acquaintances of long standing so he was not crossing any blatant lines.

"Well, Miss Bennet turned her ankle and it was quite swollen when she emerged from her bath. Miss Elizabeth, however, is apparently made of sterner stuff, Charles. She's hale as one of your horses."

Bingley snorted softly; Darcy believed he was covering a laugh. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a hardy soul, well-formed for country life. I'm glad she is doing well. What has been done for her sister?" he asked, turning with his hands behind him.

Darcy, though wishing to ask and even indeed visit the injured lady, had to remain silent.

"Well, Carter, of course, wrapped it in a cabbage leaf and...whatever it is that she does."

"If it's not much improved by morning, we'll have to send for the apothecary," Bingley instructed.

"Of course, Charles."

The ladies withdrew, Mr. Hurst as well, leaving Darcy and Bingley to enjoy a bit of warmed brandy before the fire. "She'll be fine, Darcy," Bingley murmured to his friend. "Relax. It's only a turned ankle."

Darcy shook himself and shifted his weight to lean against the mantle. "I'm sure. I am just imagining what might have befallen them." He met Bingley's amused gaze with his own more serious one. "Really, their family lacks a great many things, you know, in terms of basic propriety." That their father only appeared with them once in public was a situation that spoke of a desultory parent at best. "It could cause them trouble, make their circumstances more difficult..."

"Or, perhaps, one of them will – as does happen, you know – marry well and help her sisters."

"Perhaps."

Bingley's chuckle was in no way hidden.
After they had finished, they parted to go to their separate chambers. Darcy’s mind was entirely on the injured Miss Bennet. If he were her host, he would go to her...

But he was only another guest, and could only hope that the morning brought her smile to him.
“No, that one. Thank you,” Darcy told Watkins. The weather was fine for mid-November and Bingley had planned for a brief ride out about the nearest parts of Netherfield this morning.

“Not too far, but I would appreciate your eye on some of the repairs, Darcy. You’ve a vast deal more experience than I in this sort of thing.”

The plan had been much more appealing before Miss Bennet and her sister had been installed as guests here at Netherfield. Darcy pressed his lips together and gave a brief survey over Watkins’ impeccable efforts. “Thank you.”

“Will you be out all morning, sir?” The valet, his bright green eye gleaming in the morning sunlight, adjusted the alignment of the knot in his employer’s neckcloth before slipping a brush from a pocket and paying close attention to the fabric of the riding coat at the shoulders. “Dining in this evening?”

“ Likely and yes, I shall.” Miss Bennet would likely still be abiding here for dinner. Perhaps he would have the opportunity to talk with her then, since Bingley was absconding with him for the first part of the day.

Watkins nodded and Darcy took himself downstairs for breakfast. He could not help the speeding of his heart or the slight, nervous thrumming within his muscles as he approached the breakfast parlor. Would Miss Bennet be breakfasting with the family? He hoped she would.

Breakfast was a much less formal occasion. A gentleman could be a gentleman still while conversing with a lady under far less watchful eyes.

The welcoming aromas of shirred eggs and buttered toast met him as he entered the smallish dining room. Bingley was already there. “Darcy,” he said, spooning jam on his toasted bread. “The housekeeper informed me that the Miss Bennets are doing remarkably well this morning. Miss Bennet was not yet ready to join us for breakfast, but will be brought down to the drawing room later this morning.” He winked slyly. “I guess you’ll have to be patient a little longer.”

I did not enjoy being teased about Miss Bennet. Slicing his old friend a cool glance, Darcy turned to help himself to a plate. “As will you,” he retorted, keeping his voice even. “I daresay Miss Elizabeth shan’t stir without her sister.”

Bingley paused, a thoughtful expression sobering his teasing manner. “You may possibly be lacking in just that insight I normally accredit to you, my friend. I, er, don’t have a tendency in that direction.” Alarm sparked in his eyes. “D’you think I have compromised Miss Elizabeth in that way?”

Darcy could not help but be a bit amused at his friend’s sudden alarm. Still, he didn’t wish for his host to be uncomfortable – a gentleman would not trifle with a friend’s reputation. “No, I don’t believe so.” He set his coffee on the table carefully. “So, nothing leaning that way?”

“No, Darcy. Miss Elizabeth is a delightful young woman. She’s – she reminds me of friends I had at University. Very intelligent and spirited. But I didn’t have any inclination toward any of them, either.”

The laughter surprised Darcy as much as it did Bingley. When it subsided, Darcy had to wipe his
eyes and met Bingley’s over the table and the two of them laughed again, together. The image of Elizabeth Bennet at Oxford wasn’t nearly as funny to the master of Pemberley as was the notion of Bingley’s connection of her with the schoolmates of their not-too-distant past.

As none of the ladies joined them, the men finished their breakfast quickly and were soon off to survey the property.

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Upon returning, hours later, the men were met by Bingley’s butler, Burns. “Sir,” the thin fellow said in his nasal manner, “the Miss Bennets are in the drawing room. William and Frederick carried Miss Bennet down. Miss Bingley sent for the apothecary, but the ladies insisted upon being present at your return.”

“The apothecary?” Darcy handed Burns his riding gloves, which would be overtaken by his valet soon enough, and his hat before moving swiftly past Bingley and his butler to the drawing room. He heard soft voices and the low notes of a soothing piece issuing forth from the pianoforte. Still, Darcy’s mind could not rest until he had seen Miss Bennet.

He stopped just within the room, his boot-toes barely crossing onto the Aubusson rug, when he saw her deeply hued eyes lift to find his. His smile was involuntary, but not broad as he crossed the room to her. No one else captured his notice.

He bowed briefly to her. She was wearing a gown that was, perhaps, too formal for morning wear but he knew she had not expected to stay the night. Perhaps a servant should be sent for a change for her and for her sister. He was a practical fellow with a younger sister, as was Bingley. Really, he should have thought of this.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, realizing he’d been studying her perhaps too long. It seemed she was embarrassed as she was no longer meeting his eyes. “Pardon me. I hope you are improved this afternoon?”

With a soft smile, she looked up. “I am, I thank you. The apothecary has been by, as you might have heard.” With a slight motion of her hand, she asked, “Would you like to sit down? It is a bit awkward staring so far up at you, Mr. Darcy.”

He felt his ears heat with chagrin. “Certainly, Miss Bennet.” As he did a quick survey to see where he might sit that would allow him to continue his conversation with the injured lady, he caught the laughing gaze of her sister. “Miss Elizabeth. Good afternoon. Has your morning been pleasant?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Darcy. Everyone has been so kind,” she returned, her voice containing only the slightest edge. He wondered what had occurred, but did not wish to ask and risk embarrassing anyone.

As he sat down on the small chair nearest Miss Bennet, he noted that her pupils were slightly enlarged, giving him the understanding that whatever medicament the apothecary had offered had probably included opium. “Miss Bennet, I do hope this is not too much for you.”

“Oh no, sir. Not in the slightest,” Miss Bennet replied in her quiet way. “I could only wish for different circumstances under which to spend a day with friends.”

“Indeed,” he said, quite agreeing. He sought for a topic they had not yet touched on and was about to speak when she took the burden briefly from him.

“I understand you were riding this morning, Mr. Darcy. How did you find the country?”
They chatted about the landscape thereabouts and Darcy was pleased to note that she did not gush on about his horsemanship as other young ladies had done, seeking to win his favor by toad-eating. “Do you ride, Miss Bennet?”

Her smile lit her eyes and he felt himself to be nearly enchanted. This was certainly a dangerous place for him to be, but – thought Elizabeth did smile far too slyly in their general direction a time or two – he could not find it within himself to leave Miss Bennet’s side.

Caroline Bingley did intrude, settling herself impudently between Miss Bennet and the comforting warmth of the fire. Darcy felt his hackles rise at her rudeness, but he said nothing. He confined his solicitude to making sure Miss Bennet’s footrest was comfortable and that her shawl looked to be thick enough for the abrupt change of temperature.

“Miss Bennet!” Caroline began. “So pleased the apothecary was able to be so helpful. I daresay you’ll be able to rejoin your family later today.”

Darcy was appalled at the lack of courtesy Miss Bingley displayed to her guest and made sure his expression showed it.

Jane Bennet merely blushed, but she nodded. “Yes, I certainly shall, if our horse is ready to travel.”

“Absolutely not,” Darcy objected, his back stiffening in indignation on her behalf. “Her carriage is quite small and not well sprung.” Wincing inwardly at his lack of tact, he softened his voice and apologized to Miss Bennet. “Pardon me. I only meant that a better-sprung carriage would spare you pain from unnecessary jostling.”

Jane’s color was still high, but she would not meet his eyes and he wanted to kick himself. “I thank you, Mr. Darcy, but I shouldn’t wish to put you out. It is a mere three miles to Longbourn and I could bear the jostling very well, I’m sure.”

His fingers itched to clasp hers. Managing to restrain himself, he merely leaned forward a little. “Not at all. I assure you, it would be a pleasure.” Ah, her eyes lifted again and Darcy felt himself smile slightly. She had such a gentle, unassuming nature, and her accents were all that was ladylike. Indeed, he thought he might be in some danger. But he couldn’t bring himself, just then, to care.

“Hear, hear, what is this talk of departure?” Bingley’s sudden appearance just to Darcy’s right startled him. With a bright grin and a clap on Darcy’s shoulder, Bingley gave Miss Bennet his attention. “I shan’t hear of it. Not this evening, Miss Bennet. You and your sister are our guests. My cook tells me we’re having a ragout, this evening.”

Miss Bennet and her sister exchanged amused glances and Darcy wondered what family secret he was witnessing. Part of him wished to inquire, but he did not.

Instead, he heard Miss Bennet and her sister say all that was proper while Miss Bingley flounced across the drawing room to the pianoforte. Under cover of the music – Caroline Bingley was an accomplished musician – Darcy engaged Miss Bennet in a discussion about her favorite country pursuits. They touched on horseback riding walking, as well as the more sedate domestic pursuits, such as reading and the types of parties that were hosted at Longbourn as well as what he enjoyed at Pemberley.

At length, he saw her eyes sharpen and her voice became more animated. She asked him questions and laughed softly at stories he told her about his boyhood. He felt nigh on giddy with the wish to entice that laugh again.
“I am quite amazed, Miss Bennet, he said as the room began that restless shifting that precluded a change in activity. It was strange, but he hadn’t noticed any other happening during the time he and Miss Bennet – Jane – had been conversing. Now, he saw that the light had moved in the sky and it was time for tea.

“Amazed, Mr. Darcy? How?”

He rose and smiled down into her clear, deep blue eyes. “You’ve told me about everyone you know and I’ve yet to hear you say one unkind thing about anyone.”

“Oh, but they are all such agreeable people,” she assured him, honesty in every lovely line of her face.

“She’s a wonder, is she not, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth quipped, coming to her sister’s side. “A woman of her intelligence, too. That is the wonder of it.” Miss Elizabeth’s affectionate heart was in the forefront, but Darcy sensed she was studying him, too.

Impertinent? Perhaps. But then...

Perhaps he needed to study himself, as well.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I did indeed borrow/paraphrase a bit of dialogue from at least two versions of Pride and Prejudice here. I’m a fan of the movies, too!
Agitated Anticipation

Chapter Notes

A/N: Up 'til now, i was keeping on the Pride and Prejudice timeline... It will now change. Forgive me. Remember, this is a divergence story, NOT P&P. ;-

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Chapter Four: Agitated Anticipation**

*We left Mr. Darcy reflecting on how much Jane Bennet captivated him - even when she was clearly on opium-tinctured medication.*

"Oh, Mr. Darcy, thank you so much for your kindness toward my dear daughters. Jane is such a good girl. She never complains, but I know she suffers so with her injury. Elizabeth is so brave and competent, but I am *sure* she appreciated your assistance in getting home."

When Mrs. Bennet finally had to pause for breath, Darcy was able to respond. "It was my pleasure, Mrs. Bennet." Internally, he was cringing. Jane truly was a lady born out of place – this family did not suit her in the least. How she grew into such a calm, delightfully restful and intelligent woman was a miracle.

He had seated himself across from her in his carriage, so that she could sit with her sister. Jane's ankle and foot had been wrapped in sturdy cloth to keep it as motionless as possible. Her dress had slid just a bit up her leg...

Of course, he did not take advantage of the increased visibility. He was a gentleman.

But he *did* take advantage of Frederick, the second footman, stumbling on the gravel walk in front of Netherfield. When the younger man lost his footing, Darcy was more than happy to whisk Jane into his own arms and deposit her in his carriage. Even now, as Mrs. Bennet railed on and Mr. Bennet adopted a mien of tolerance that Darcy supposed he had cultivated over the past twenty years, Darcy recollected the singular pleasure he had had for just a few, brief moments.

... "Mr. Darcy," his Jane – Miss Bennet – had whispered, her eyes widening, their blue depths tempting him to fall and swim indefinitely. "Sir, really, there is no need."

"There is every need," he insisted softly, memorizing the gentle weight of her in his arms, wishing they were entirely alone. "And more, it is my pleasure. To be of service to you."

Jane had darted a quick glance to her sister, who was suppressing a smile that Darcy knew would be far too knowing, far too broad. "Then I thank you. You're very kind."

Miss Elizabeth climbed into the carriage, handed up likely by a grinning Bingley, and helped to ease her elder sister onto the plush seat. "Here you go, Jane. Look, Mr. Darcy has had a cushion brought in for you."
"Mr. Darcy is all consideration," Jane murmured, eyes lowered as she made herself comfortable.

He felt her weight transfer to the seat and its loss made him lightly melancholy. He searched for words to say at such a parting but found none other than meaningless words of social acceptability. Still, they were what he had. "I am happy to be of any service to you. May I call upon you, to see how you fare?"

"That would be – very kind." Her words, too, were social gloss. But he could see the warmth in her cheeks again and felt it in her gaze. "I would enjoy continuing our conversations."

Preparing himself for a brief farewell, then, he was altogether discomfited when Bingley nudged him forward. "You can't send her off alone there, old fellow."

Heat hit his own face. "I thought you –"

Bingley had never shown himself to be quite the mischief-maker as he had since they had met the Bennets. "I'll ride. You go in."

Now, they were distributing the rather irritating weight of Mrs. Bennet's gratitude betwixt them. She caught his gaze, her own carrying a soft, warm, rueful apology. Immediately, he was soothed and smiled a little back at her.

The curve of her lip was ample compensation for listening to her mother. "Truly, Mrs. Bennet, it is my pleasure to be of service to your daughters." He offered her a slight bow and stepped to stand next to the armchair where Jane had been comfortably situated. "I will leave you to the care of your family," he murmured, not without some idea of the humor of the situation.

To his delight, Jane covered her lips with her hand so that he focused on her dancing eyes. "You're too kind," she replied, her voice sounding choked. It had to be on a chuckle – a chuckle she was too gently bred to free from the confines of her mouth.

Oh, that mouth...

He dwelt upon the perfections of Miss Jane Bennet during the carriage ride back to Netherfield. Bingley was riding ahead, no doubt planning some mischief with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. The two of them were like schoolchildren, heads bent toward one another before the mutual leave-taking.

"Oh, Mr. Bingley. Mr. Darcy. Do join us for a family dinner? It is the very least I can do to repay you for your compassion and kindness."

As host, it was Bingley's call whether or not they would attend – not that Darcy had any doubt. "Thank you, Mrs Bennet. We'd be delighted."

"Charming!" the older woman gushed, the laces of her day cap fluttering with her agitated joy. "Is Friday evening free for you?"

"That would be splendid," Bingley said, with a grin at Miss Elizabeth that made Darcy think they had agreed betwixt the two of them that this would be happening. Thick as thieves, really. If not for Bingley's prior assurance that there was no mutual attachment there, Darcy would believe his friend to be in danger.

But no more than Darcy was himself.

Upon reaching Netherfield, Bingley having gone 'round to the stables himself to see to the care of
his horse – of which Darcy wholeheartedly approved, though his own coachmen took care of his with ample skill – Darcy retired to his room to write a letter to Georgiana.

[~]

"Ah, Mr. Darcy. A letter from dear Georgiana," Caroline Bingley said in her languid way.

It was Friday morning and, not having seen Miss Bennet since Wednesday, Darcy found himself in a state of restless anticipation regarding the intimate dinner with the Bennet family. He was considering going over early, to see if Jane wished to take the air in his carriage, with perhaps her maid to accompany them. (Much as he enjoyed Miss Elizabeth's vivacity on occasion, she was rather too sharp-eyed as a chaperon for a gentleman intent upon pursuit.) He shook himself out of his foolish daydreams and regarded the sealed letter in Caroline's fingers.

"Thank you. I shall answer her and be down later. I am going to ride over to Longbourn this afternoon, to see how Miss Bennet has fared."

Caroline lifted one brow slowly into her fashionably pale forehead. "Of course you are." She exchanged a satiric look with Mrs. Hurst before adding, "my brother will bring us at the appointed hour."

He decided not to allow her to tease him further and merely bowed before leaving the drawing room. Once in his chambers, he broke the seal to his sister's epistle and settled himself in a comfortable chair to read.

And promptly gaped at the darkly-written sheet of paper that seemed to shout at him – not at all Georgiana's style.

My Dear Nephew,

"Aunt Catherine," Darcy spat, glaring at the inserted letter that intruded upon what he considered to be tantamount to a private visit with his sister. He flung his aunt's letter aside and tried to calm himself for the letter he had wished to read in the first place.

Dear Brother,

Greetings from London. It is damp and cold, here, but the fires are warm and Mrs. Annesley is very agreeable. I have been studying my painting with the master you selected, Herr Dorner, who is quite gifted with painting light. I have much I can learn from him. And indeed, I think this is a good position for him at present. He has been quite ill. Nothing contagious, Brother. He just seems to lack energy. And you know I am not attempting to be a portraitist, so it is a good learning experience for me and a good employment for him. Mrs. Annesley finds him amusing. Herr Dorner is also helping me with my German.

Thank you for telling me about life in Hertfordshire, my brother. I especially [she added, with several underlinings] have enjoyed what you have told me about Miss Jane Bennet. She sounds like an intelligent, elegant female and – if I may be so bold – would not be adverse to knowing more of her. You may consider it a hint if you wish. I know that you have pressures and duties that I am very thankful I am unburdened with, since I am not the Master of Pemberley. She sounds like she enjoys the country. So do we. Do you think it might be too forward if I suggested – Here, there was a quick change in ink texture, as well as writing style. It was clear to Darcy that his sister was writing without her usual care. Even though it was a day later and miles distant, his hackles rose.
My aunt, Lady Catherine, has just arrived, Fitzwilliam. Claiming to have the right to know my nearest concerns, she read the letter I was writing. I am sorry I didn't hide it sooner! Forgive me. Hope to see you soon in London.

Your fond sister,

Georgiana

"She did what?" Darcy sprang to his feet, Georgiana's letter crumpling between his tense, angry fingers. Spying Lady Catherine's unasked-for note, he bent to where he had tossed it and snatched it up.

My Dear Nephew,

Your cousin Anne and I have been traveling and were hoping to meet you in London. It would suit me if you came immediately. You clearly are ready to fulfill the promise your dear mother and I had dreamt of a long time ago.

I believe you should hire a music master for Georgiana. She needs to practice more, and with someone other than her companion. Her art master is not at all good Ton. Why did you not hire an English landscape artist? Germans are too mathematical. And why did you not seek my help in finding your sister a new companion. Mrs. Annesley is a genteel sort, but not at all what I would have hoped for. Just say the word and I shall see to it directly.

We can discuss these matters when you visit.

Your Affectionate Aunt,

Lady Catherine de Bourgh

Darcy had been raised to be a gentleman. He had lived all of his twenty-seven years as such and had every intention of keeping true to the values his father instilled in him as a youth. But the words that tumbled from his lips at this juncture were those he heard in the stables, before the grooms noticed him.

"No. I am not going to marry my cousin Anne. And how dare she read Georgiana's letter? How dare she?"

He paced his suite of rooms for quite some time, regaining control over himself and deciding, with a degree of defiance he had not known he possessed, exactly what he wanted.

And whom.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In the note at the top of chapter one of this little story, I mentioned that I would update when the "fit was upon me." That remains true. I have not and will not abandon Darcy and Jane (or anyone else!) and have plans for our other favorites... Really!

Thanks for reading! I hope to see you soon.
~LJ
Chapter Five: Question and Answer

After sending a reply to Georgiana, but ignoring Lady Catherine's unwelcome missive until he was more a master of himself and what he wished to say to her, Darcy had Watkins present him with the chosen ensemble for the evening at Longbourn.

"Sir, may I recommend the Mathematical for this evening? Or perhaps," Watkins continued with the most subtle of sly looks, "The Trone d'Amour?"

Narrowing his gaze, Darcy ignored the presumption. "The Mathematical, Watkins, will do admirably."

Mildly chastened for even suggesting the Throne of Love for his master, Watkins nodded and complied, knotting Mr. Darcy's neckcloth before brushing his dark gray evening coat and breeches. He then finger-combed Mr. Darcy's rather unruly hair before pronouncing him presentable. "I understand Mr. Bingley and his family will be following later, sir?"

"Yes."

"Would you like me to send along a fresh coat for the evening?"

Darcy smiled crookedly at his valet. "That shan't be necessary Watkins. This is a family dinner in the country. I am sure your efforts will be superior to the circumstances."

Watkins bowed, not quite hiding the smug tilt to his lips. "Very good, sir.

Bingley was at his door when Watkins retired to his own quarters. "Darcy. Have you a moment?"

His host and friend eyed him swiftly and was not at all abashed about breaking into a broad grin. "You're in a bad way, my friend."

Unwilling and unable to deny it, Darcy shrugged. "But is she? That's the sticking point."

"Shall I ask my friend Elizabeth for deeper intelligence?"

Darcy blinked, honestly surprised and a bit distracted. "Bingley? Such good friends already as to use Christian names?" The pair of them had been friends for years and rarely did so.

The younger man shrugged, his face tinting with a blush. "Well, Darcy, I can hardly call her 'Bennet,' can I? I slipped once, you know, and did so." Darcy laughed, surprised, and Bingley continued. "We daren't use those names in front of her family."

"Well, no. Her mother would be buying wedding clothes within an hour."

Again, Bingley looked so alarmed that Darcy was concerned for him. "You're sure I haven't compromised her?"

"You have maligned my powers of observation once regarding her already, Bingley," Darcy said with a small smile, "so I have taken care to be more aware. No. As you say, you are friends; unlikely as that might be for either of you. Her affections are not engaged and she has no
expectations." Miss Elizabeth Bennet truly treated Charles Bingley as a schoolfellow, as Bingley had said. "I cannot speak for her mother," he went on as Bingley snorted in suppressed humor, "but I do not see anyone requiring Miss Elizabeth to, ah, become involved where she doesn't wish it."

"And Miss Bennet?" Bingley said, redirecting the conversation with the skill of a barrister.

For once, remembering the recent self-revelations prompted by Lady Catherine's intrusive, presumptuous letter, Darcy allowed himself to smile in a slightly love-sick manner. "I hope to take her out for a drive shortly, before dinner, to better ascertain her feelings."

"Oh, ho! As serious as all that, my friend?"

"Indeed."

Bingley's clap on the back was all the encouragement Darcy required. He knew his own heart, knew his own mind, but he would not be so dull as to mistake his wishes for the wishes of another.

[~]

"'It is the essence of human things that the same objects which are highly useful in their season, measure, and degree, became mischievous in their excess, at other periods, and under other circumstances.' That was on page forty-three, Mr. Darcy."

Jane's sigh was almost silent as they drove slowly along a rutted country cowpath in Bingley's open chaise. It would seat four, but presently seated three: Darcy himself, Jane and – playing the part of chaperon with unknowing perfection – Miss Mary Bennet.

"Thank you, Mary," Jane said in her patient way, but still sounding like the eldest sister of a family. Her quiet authority, gently asserted, brought only a smile to Miss Mary's face.

Darcy felt it behooved him to support his lady. "Wise words indeed, Miss Mary. Whose are they?"

The middle Bennet sister's brows rose behind her round spectacles. "Why, this is Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education, by Hannah More." She closed the small volume, with a finger between the pages to mark the place. "She has a great many practical ideas, Mr. Darcy. I think they should be applied more widely."

Darcy nodded slowly, thinking of Georgiana and her artistic pursuits. He couldn't agree with Hannah More, but he did see how some of the words that Miss Mary had been sharing might be applicable for some of the lower classes. He cast about quickly for something agreeable to say – Miss Mary was Jane's sister, and he wished for her to be at her ease, no matter how little he appreciated having her with them – but was rescued, thankfully, by his Jane.

His Jane... If only he could be certain of her.

. . .

*He had asked her father – whom he vastly preferred to converse with when possible – if he could take Miss Bennet and her maid out for a drive, as the day was fine.*

*Mr. Bennet's lips had twitched against a smile. "Indeed, Mr. Darcy. I am sure she will be happy to go with you. But my daughters, you see, share but one maid between them." Instead of sounding abashed, Mr. Bennet seemed to find this indication of either penury or ease amusing.*
"And I'm afraid that the girl is engaged in nursing Mrs. Bennet, who is suffering from a nervous complaint this afternoon."

"I do hope she'll be well for dinner," Darcy had murmured, though to be perfectly frank, he felt nothing of the sort. Still, a man had to say something.

Mr. Bennet laughed lightly. "I'm sure she shall. But that leaves Jane without a maid, does it not?" The look Jane's father gave him was shrewd, but not displeased. "I propose you take one of her sisters with you, Mr. Darcy."

. . .

Jane spoke to Mary, that afternoon in the chaise. "I thank you for sharing your reading with us, Mary. I was wondering, might you like to walk for a bit? Sitting so long is so confining, you know, and a bit of exercise is also healthy for young women. I would walk myself, if my ankle did not prevent me." She smiled serenely at Darcy, who watched her in something like awe. "Does not your sister, Miss Darcy, engage in exercise from time to time, sir?"

Oh, he loved her. He knew it, but it was clearly manifest that she would suit not only himself, but his home and his family as well. Emotion thickened his throat, so he kept silent until he was again master of himself. A nod was apparently enough of a response.

Miss Mary Bennet took Jane's advice and departed the chaise, book in hand, to walk and read simultaneously. Bingley's driver slowed the horses down to the barest of walks to accommodate and Darcy could only bless his good fortune.

Somewhat daring, he took Jane's hand in his own. Neither wore gloves for this rather casual outing, so the sensation of her bare skin in his palm was new and welcome. "You demonstrate a great understanding of your sisters, Miss Bennet," he said after a moment. "I can only admire such wisdom in one so young."

Jane blushed, her eyes lowered as she thanked him. "Truly, Mr. Darcy, it is nothing of merit. It is my role, yes? You are the eldest in your family, are you not?"

"I am." He kept her hand in his, thankful that she didn't pull it away. He was a gentleman and would not wish to do anything untoward. "It is a role that not many undertake to do well; I – I could wish that my sister would have had an elder sister like your sisters have. She might feel more at ease with herself if she had."

Dark blue eyes met his, wonder widening them and – he hoped – emotion warming their lake-deep hue. "Mr. Darcy..."

He leaned closer to her, knowing exactly what he wanted. "Miss Bennet – Jane, if I may – I had never expected to meet someone of your beauty, grace and kindness. Not anywhere." Her lips parted; his eyes dropped to them and temptation flamed under his skin. Still, he refrained, reminding himself that the lady was not his. Not yet.

"I never expected," she whispered, her usual gentle notes lost somewhere between her tongue and his ear, "never expected to meet a gentleman of your caliber either, Mr. Darcy... I, I am honored you think so highly of me." She seemed to recover herself somewhat. Lifting her chin, she offered him a small smile, tentative, hopeful. His heart swelled within his chest as she continued. "You have used my Christian name, but I do not know yours."

Had she not inquired? Most young women he had met had done so instantly – hopeful of having
that type of intimate knowledge – shortly after an introduction. His Jane though...she was not like other women. "Fitzwilliam, madam."

"Jane," she reminded him, her eyes twinkling with what he hoped was joy.

He bent toward her, momentarily forgetting he had not yet actually secured her consent. "Jane..."

"Yes?" She moved her head back a trifle, enough to recollect him to the circumstances: the driver, Miss Mary walking alongside the chaise, and the fact that he had not asked for an answer.

He stiffened his spine, steeling himself to be able to say it with all due gravity, to choose his words carefully, for this was the most important question he had ever asked anyone. "Jane. You must know how ardently I admire and love you. In the short time we have known each other, I have come to feel for you a most passionate regard, and can only pray that you feel the same. I offer my hand, my name and all that I am. May I hope that you will do me the honor of accepting me as your husband? Of becoming my wife?"

His hope grew with his confidence in her answer with every sentence, as his Jane gripped his hands in both of her own, their strength reassuring. The color in her face fluctuated, tears stood in her eyes, but she never looked down or away. Modest she was, gentle and kind she would always be, but Jane Bennet was a brave woman and he loved her with his entire heart.

She moistened her lips and he manfully resisted temptation yet again. "Oh Mr. Darcy. Fitzwilliam. Yes, yes, I will."

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_A/N: And yes, I am so leaving it there for the present...! Be not alarmed, gentle readers – this is nowhere near the end of this story..._

_Until next time...be well!_

---

Chapter End Notes

And yes, I am so leaving it there for the present...! Be not alarmed, gentle readers – this is nowhere near the end of this story...

Until next time...be well!
We left Jane accepting Darcy's proposal.

Chapter Six: Acceptance and Appellations

"Jane? Mr. Darcy?"

To say that Darcy was shocked to have forgotten himself so far as to embrace Jane Bennet whilst in the presence of her sister would have been to lie by sheer understatement. To say his face flamed at Miss Mary Bennet's curious call would have been an accurate assessment indeed.

Gasping, his lips still warm from where they'd been caressing Jane's, Darcy controlled his breathing and compelled himself to answer Miss Mary. He was a gentleman. There was nothing terribly unseemly about kissing one's betrothed, but it was not in the best of form to do so in front of her maiden sister. "I beg your pardon, Miss Mary," he managed, though his voice was far from firm. "Your sister has done me the very great honor of consenting to be my wife."

Jane's smile was joyful, her eyes rich and cheeks flushed. "Indeed, Mary," she murmured as Darcy rapped lightly on the frame of the chaise so that the driver halted the walking horses. "I do ask that you keep this in confidence until –" She stopped, her eyes widening as they met Darcy's again. "That is –"

Darcy hastened to assure her. "Until I can obtain your father's consent, of course." Not that he truly had any worries on that score. He did not presume to know Mr. Bennet's mind, but he wanted to believe that the desultory fellow would be vastly relieved to have a daughter of his well-settled. Darcy knew himself to be highly eligible.

He alighted from the chaise to hand Miss Mary up into it. The bespectacled young woman had actually closed her book without marking the page upon seating herself next to her sister. Darcy had to smile; it was likely unintentional, but Miss Mary had effectually put distance between her sister and her sister's betrothed. The way Miss Mary was talking, the happenstance was entirely without a plan.

He indulged himself in listening to his Jane answer what questions she would. "Yes, he is going to ask Papa. Yes, I'm sure there is a library at Pemberley."

"Is there?" Miss Mary demanded, leaning toward Darcy. "Do you have a library in Derbyshire?"

"I do indeed," Darcy replied. He would do all in his power to allow her liberty of that room as long as she remained far distant from the piano forte. "It is the work of many generations and I am sure you will find," he added with a nod at Miss Mary Bennet's forgotten book on female educational practices, "improving literature among the volumes."

He had never seen that young lady smile before, he realized. When she did so, she was not nearly as plain as heretofore.

Unsurprisingly, Miss Elizabeth Bennet was only nominally employed when Darcy returned with
Jane and Miss Mary. The second-eldest Bennet sister sprang to her feet with a great deal of enthusiasm, catching Jane's eye as Miss Mary – mouth primly pursed not to smile – handed off her bonnet to the servant and sat down with her book once more, elbows on the small table in the out-of-date parlor.

"Did you have a nice ride about the countryside, Mr. Darcy?" Miss Elizabeth inquired, her smile much too fulsome for her mild query. "My sister looks as if she had a most delightful time. Let me thank you for entertaining her so well."

The young lady really was quite lively. An idea formed in Darcy's head and he had to bite back a laugh to keep his composure – but he would have a letter to write, soon.

"Yes indeed, Miss Elizabeth. It was a pleasant drive. Your sister Miss Mary shared a great many ideas about the education of females with me."

"Mr. Darcy," Jane whispered, her cheeks pink.

He helped to get his lady situated comfortably while Miss Elizabeth arranged a footstool to prop up Jane's injured ankle. Meeting Jane's eyes, he could see the silent question in them, the wish to share her news with her sister. He held her gaze with his own and took her hand to his lips to gently caress her fingers. "I will be back shortly," he informed her with a smile.

Jane's color rose at Miss Elizabeth's gasp of understanding. Bowing, he quickly left the room.

"Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet said after ushering him into the older man's apparent sanctuary. "Welcome." Thin lips twitched a bit and blue eyes twinkled behind spectacles as Mr. Bennet urged Darcy to settle himself in a chair. "Looking for something to read, are you, sir?"

Composing himself from his eyebrows to his restless feet, Darcy leaned forward slightly in the upholstered chair, studying Mr. Bennet as that gentleman took a quiet moment to wipe a pair of gilt-edged volumes. "No, sir. I am here for an entirely more weighty matter."

"I imagine you are, at that, Mr. Darcy." He leaned back, smiling a little, and Darcy wished he had rehearsed in his mind what he would say. How had he not thought of this?

"Yes. Well. Sir." Clearing his throat, Darcy had to rise to his feet. This was not the sort of thing he felt able to sit through. Inhaling deeply through his nose, he compelled himself once more to stillness. "I would like to marry your eldest daughter, Mr. Bennet. I have offered her my hand in marriage and she has accepted."

Mr. Bennet displayed no signs of nervousness or discomfiture at all, allowing Darcy to relax and flex his hands at his sides. Jane's father nodded after a moment. "She has, has she? Well, she's always been a good girl, Mr. Darcy. If I may say so, I believe you've chosen well." Rising to his feet, Mr. Bennet held out his hand.

Darcy took it. "Thank you, sir. I assure you, she will be well cared for. A large settlement has long been set aside for my eventual bride and I –" It was on the tip of his tongue, in his happiness, to promise settlements upon all of Mr. Bennet's daughters, but that might be seen as a slight on the man's pride. He would discuss it with his fiancée.

His fiancée. A smile tugged at his lips and he let it spread, imagining for a brief moment his Jane in a white gown, walking up the aisle of a resplendent edifice...

"Mr. Darcy?"

"Yes, sir?" Abashed, Darcy felt his cheeks heat before he was more in command of himself.
"Sit down, sir. Sit down. I am curious, and I would beg your indulgence." Laughter filled the white-browed eyes across the way.

Darcy had no idea what Mr. Bennet would want to know – was there a question about the Darcy family or estate? Did Mr. Bennet already think to avail himself of the fishing, perhaps? Though Jane might have been unworlly enough not to seek out information regarding Pemberley, Darcy had no doubt in his mind that Mr. Bennet had done so. "How might I satisfy your curiosity?" he wondered, trying to put himself at ease, leaning back in the chair.

Mr. Bennet took his spectacles off and cleaned them – a different bit of cloth than he had used earlier on the books – and cleared his throat. "I do not doubt that my Jane will make any man a fine wife, but are you certain that her happiness will be assured at the mistress of Pemberley?"

Taken aback, Darcy nodded slowly to collect his thoughts. "Mr. Bennet," he began, remembering to keep his tone respectful and even to demonstrate his confidence in his choice. "Mr. Bennet, the mistress of Pemberley will have quite a responsibility, I know. I am aware that Miss Bennet does not at this time have quite the same responsibilities, but I am convinced – through observation and conversation – that she will make an admirable Mrs. Darcy. She will not be running the estate on her own, of course. I have a full staff who will be at her disposal and I know that Jane will make sound judgments and do all things that will be to the betterment of my home." He leaned forward again, feeling the smile on his own face as it mirrored Mr. Bennet's. "I love your daughter. She is a woman with a peaceful spirit and a kind heart. She wields authority mildly but with confidence. She is used to being heeded and that goes a long way when managing a household, I know." Mr. Bennet's brows rose in surprise and Darcy allowed himself a short laugh. "Did you think I chose her merely for her beauty? I find her charming in all ways, sir, but more than that, I feel that she will be my partner."

"Well, well... Well, well." Darcy tried not to stir as Mr. Bennet studied him once again as if he were judging him as a stallion put to stud. "Welcome to the family, Mr. Darcy."

[~]

Thankfully, Mrs. Bennet followed her husband's good example, refraining from making a garish display after the news was formally announced that evening. Bingley and Miss Elizabeth laughed at them and when Darcy observed Mrs. Bennet looking far too fondly upon Bingley, he just averted his eyes.

After dinner, Miss Kitty sang a light air to Miss Elizabeth's accompaniment. Though the performance was sadly lacking, Darcy clapped politely. His heart heard music enough in Jane's voice and soft laughter.

"May I get you some coffee, Jane?" he asked quietly, exulting in the opportunity to use her Christian name openly. She was his Jane and they all knew this and he had every right to address her as such in a family party. Just because his chest felt full to bursting with pride and joy, there was no shame in it.

She shook her head, her eyes liquid as they met his. "Not just now, Mr. Darcy."

He smiled teasingly at her. "Who?"

Her blush suffused her skin, delighting him. "Fitzwilliam. It just... I'm not used to it," she confessed. "I shan't call you that in public, if that's all right? I feel that it – it's a private name."

That his body tightened in response to her lowered tone he could not help, but he did his best to
calm himself. "As you wish. I wish only to make you happy, Miss Bennet."

She laughed again, more loudly, at his use of her surname. "I wish the same, Mr. Darcy," she assured him.

Upon taking their leave, he offered Jane his arm on a slow walk to the door. "May I call upon you tomorrow?"

"Of course. I daresay there are things we have to speak of, are there not?"

"Foremost in my mind," he murmured, "is when we can change your name and leave the Miss Bennet to your sister Elizabeth." And when he could take his Jane home to Pemberley, ensconce her in her own suite of rooms, visiting her there...

"She will rather enjoy that, I imagine."

Bingley and his family made their farewells, a private ball was mentioned, and in the excitement generated by the youngest Bennet girls, Darcy pulled Jane out the front door. Lifting their joined hands to his jaw, there to caress them skin on skin, he inhaled the soft, gentle fragrance of her. "Until tomorrow." His lips lingered on her hand.

"I look forward to it."

But the next day introduced a new member to the family party at Longbourn, and Darcy felt his gut clench in negation of his presence. The new face belonged to a heavy, self-important yet obsequious fellow named William Collins.

Lady Catherine's new vicar.

Damnation. His aunt was spying on him.
A/N: Greetings! I have not forgotten this story, on my honor. Since last I posted, I have relocated to a new climate, settled two children into two schools, and have spent a great deal of time writing many things. Many, I know, do not read things from other fandoms. I have written something over 115,000 words since I last posted a chapter of *Unexpected Perfection*. Pray pardon my easily diverted imagination.

**Summation to date:** There are rules for the behavior of a proper gentleman in the early 19th Century, and Fitzwilliam Darcy follows them to the letter. In so doing, he dances with and learns to admire the most lovely woman in Hertfordshire: Miss Jane Bennet. His pursuit of her is earnest, rapid and successful. Their engagement is announced to her family and everyone is quite pleased. Darcy's only manner of discontent is that he is not yet married to his chosen lady. All is well – until Mr. Collins, his Aunt Catherine's new vicar, arrives at Longbourn. Darcy is sure that his aunt is spying on him.

And so we continue.

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**Chapter 7: Agitation**

The vicar was a tall, heavily-set fellow, with an air that puzzled Darcy exceedingly. He seemed to be self-effacing, yet every word that poured forth from him referenced his own peculiar awareness of his good fortune.

"Mr. Darcy. My esteemed patroness – your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh – told me I might encounter your illustrious personage while visiting my dear cousins. I assure you your aunt was in excellent health when last I saw her, so you may be at ease on that score."

Darcy clenched his jaw against bitter words that he had for his aunt; their personal issues did not belong in open discussion. "Thank you." He sought out his Jane, first, and saw that she was uncomfortable so he crossed the room to her side immediately. "What is it?" he murmured, sitting on the sofa next to her. Her foot was no longer elevated, but he knew that it could not yet be fully healed. "Can I get you something for your relief?"

She blushed, her eyes dropping momentarily to the needlework in her hands. He wondered, briefly, if her white work was in preparation for their wedding and the idea made him feel warm and rich, within. "Just being here is more than enough for my relief, Mr. Darcy," she told him in her gentle way. Still, there was tension in her voice and he followed the direction of her gaze at it flitted first to her sister Elizabeth and then, to Vicar Collins.

*That* gentleman was fawning over Mrs. Bennet like a beagel trying to get treats from his mistress. A thought – a vastly unwelcome thought – struck Darcy with the force of a tree limb. He swallowed over a lump in his throat, one of both worry and relief, and, leaning in slightly toward his betrothed, asked, "What brings the vicar to visit?"

"He is our cousin," Jane replied silently, her eyes widening at Darcy's near proximity. He smiled a little to see her so affected but did not move away when he asked her to elucidate. "I overheard him speaking with Mama. He is to inherit the estate, due to an entail." He nodded – this was information he had discovered upon arranging a settlement with his man of business immediately upon securing Jane's hand. "He thought to make things easier for us by marrying one of us, you see, and thereby giving all of us a home, should my father be taken before we have homes of our own."
She was stating all of this clearly, coolly, but Darcy could imagine the tension that had to be under the smooth surface she presented. His Jane was a careful woman – a quality he loved about her, along with her good nature. "I see. So he thinks Longbourn is Tattersalls, perhaps?" When Jane looked at him blankly, Darcy winced a little. "Sorry. It is a horse-traders in Town."

"Ah." She blushed and looked away.

Regretting the comparison, Darcy took her hand and waited for her eyes to meet his again. "I am sorry, dearest Jane," he whispered, so as not to embarrass her with his endearment. "I meant no disrespect. I am thankful indeed that you are not in a position to have any concern on this score." Her cheeks pinked up deliciously and he smiled. Then, still holding her hand in his, he asked, "Might I dare to presume that he is at least trying to be subtle?"

"I am afraid not. Please," she said, half-turning in her seat so that they were all but brushing noses. Not wanting to raise eyebrows, Darcy leaned back a bit while Jane continued. "Please speak to Mr. Bingley and please ask him not to be offended or, or, concerned if my sister acts a bit more playfully than is her wont." Deep blue eyes spoke for his beloved, using words she dared not utter out loud, but that her emphasis hinted at very well. "Elizabeth would not wish to make him uncomfortable, of course."

"Of course," he murmured, wishing he could kiss her. Because he wanted to, in loving appreciation for all that she was. "I am sure he will have no objection. They appear to be on excellent terms."

"Indeed."

His semi-private tête-a-tête was interrupted. "Mr. Darcy," the vicar blustered, intruding into the small bit of space he and Jane had managed for themselves in the small parlor. "I have been remiss in not offering you and my cousin my congratulations." Bowing, the fellow continued, apparently not noticing the cool stare with which Darcy fixed him, nor the uncomfortable, wrinkled brow of Miss Bennet. "I look forward to sharing this delightful news with my esteemed patroness." He paused.

Darcy ignored the implied invitation to thank the vicar, but Jane evidently felt obliged to say, "You are too kind." Worry flickered in her eyes as they met Darcy's. "I confess to being a bit intimidated. Mr. Collins has had so much good to say of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Darcy. I was unaware that she was a relation of yours."

Turning from Vicar Collins, Darcy pressed her hand in both of his. "I will be writing to all my family of our upcoming wedding, as soon as we are assured of a date." He smiled when she blushed. "I know my younger sister looks forward to meeting you."

"Jane, dear. How is your ankle?" Mrs. Bennet called from across the crowded drawing room later that afternoon. "It's a cool day, but I thought you and Mr. Darcy might enjoy some fresh air. I'm sure your sister Elizabeth and Mr. Bingley would not be averse to accompanying you, if you chose to take the air."

"Mama!" Jane whispered, clearly embarrassed. Mrs. Bennet's machinations were all too clear, and Darcy winced in sympathy for his beloved's discomfiture. "I'm fine, thank you, but–"

Miss Elizabeth spoke up and Darcy blessed her for it. "It's a fine brisk day for some air, Mama. I am sure Mr. Bingley would appreciate the opportunity." Darcy held in a chuckle at the widening of the vicar's round eyes. "For fresh air." Even Bingley seemed to acquire a bit of color at Miss Bennet's teasing.
Mrs. Bennet appeared to nearly come out of her skin in anticipation. Darcy considered that it might behoove him, as a gentleman, to give a hint to his betrothed as to a possibly compromising situation that might arise if her younger sister were not more careful.

It turned out that he didn't need to say anything. He and Bingley were treated to a very quiet conversation held just within earshot.

Jane, still favoring her ankle, had her arm twined through her sister's as the carriage was brought 'round. "Lizzie. You'll have our mother shopping for wedding clothes for you before the week is out. Is that what you wish?"

With a quick glance past Jane, Miss Elizabeth colored underneath her olive complexion. "No, of course not. He understands me, though, Jane, You needn't –"

Jane sighed and patted her sister's arm. "If you're sure. I daresay getting out of the house is not a bad thing this afternoon."

"No, indeed!"

Darcy and Bingley exchanged a look before helping the sisters into the Bennet's small carriage. It was a bit crowded, but as it turned out, the seating worked best if he sat on Jane's left and Miss Elizabeth sat across from her sister, holding the still-wrapped ankle in her lap.

Darcy could not complain at all about the close confines of the carriage. It suited him far too well.

"So, you're abandoning us again, are you?" Bingley inquired with a far-too-knowing grin. "I had hoped to go shooting with you." Bingley's eyes perused Darcy's frock coat and breeches. "You are clearly not hoping for the same thing."

Darcy smiled, thinking of the pleasure of spending the day with Jane. "I rather doubt we are."

"You are welcome to invite her – and one of her sisters, of course – to spend the day with us. Perhaps Georgiana might be persuaded to journey from London as well?"

Surprised, Darcy put down his toast. "Bingley! Capital idea. I shall write to my sister directly."

Before leaving for Longbourne, Darcy penned a quick invitation to his sister. At the writing desk in his chamber, he saw the much-creased, intrusive letter he had recently received from Lady Catherine, as well. He needed to answer his mother's sister.

"Damn."

After a couple of abandoned starts, Darcy decided to put off answering Lady Catherine and focused instead upon writing to his sister.

My Dear Georgiana,

It is with the certain knowledge of your approbation that I write to inform you of my betrothal to Miss Jane Bennet of Hertfordshire...

Having extended Bingley's invitation to her – though it might not have been entirely perfect form, they were long-standing friends all the way around and much could be overlooked – Darcy readied himself to take his own carriage to Longbourne. It was vastly more comfortable than the Bennets' and would more comfortably accommodate another Bennet sister if necessary.
Upon arriving and leaving his gloves and hat with Hill, the butler, that fellow touched a finger to the side of his broad nose. "Mr. Darcy. I believe the young ladies and Mr. Collins will be –"

"Hill! Has Mr. Darcy arrived?"

Mrs. Bennet's strident call brought a wince to Darcy's countenance, but Hill was clearly accustomed to it. Wordlessly, Darcy requested the return of his possessions and Hill obliged before turning to meet Mrs. Bennet's flustered form at the top of the stairs.

"Hill!"

"Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Darcy has only now just arrived."

That good woman's voice settled itself at least an octave. "Oh, good. Well then, have him settled in with Miss Bennet in the drawing room."

"Very good, ma'am."

"Miss Mary," Vicar Collins was heard to say from the upper floor. "Will you be joining us on our walk to Meryton?"

Hat and gloves still very much in hand, Darcy was more than relieved to leave whatever rudimentary courtship endeavors the vicar engaged in behind him. Perhaps Miss Mary Bennet might distract the portly fellow enough so that reporting to Lady Catherine would be forgotten. One could hope.

Since they were properly betrothed and would be joined by her sisters and cousin eventually, Darcy was able to take his Jane to the small village of Meryton, where they had met, without chaperonage. Darcy relaxed into the upholstered leather seat and faced his lady, who faced forward.

"May I ask when I am to be made a happy man, dear Jane?" he inquired, the question having been burning in his mind for fully two days. The banns had not yet been read, since they hadn't a date set it hadn't been necessary. He was hoping for Christmas, but didn't wish to put any further pressure on Jane; he was well aware of the changes in her life that she had to be contemplating.

Her color rose. "I confess to being a little overwhelmed, Darcy."

"Who?" he teased.

"Fitzwilliam." Her smile was shy but he believed it was loving, too. "I have so much to do..."

Leaning forward, he took one of her hands in both of his. "Jane. I have an idea. My sister has been invited to join us at Netherfield. I propose you and your family spend Christmas with my family at Pemberley." Not that he looked forward to having Mrs. Bennet within hearing distance for a fortnight, but he hoped to persuade Jane to marry from Pemberley and then he wouldn't have to let her leave his side. "You could become accustomed to the house and then, perhaps, we could set an official date."

"Oh! Dar - Fitzwilliam!" Her lips parted and he was hard put not to close the distance between them and kiss her thoroughly. He refrained, and was rather proud of himself for maintaining his gentlemanlike manner. His betrothed pressed her free hand on their clasped ones and smiled so brightly that he thought he could die content, right at that moment. "I will have to ask permission," she said at last, "but I cannot see any real objections. I would be most pleased to join you and your sister at Pemberley."
"And a date?" he prompted.

"We could have the banns read, then, if that suits you?"

"Oh, Jane," he whispered, sliding one of his hands out from hers to cup her cheek. "It suits me well."

Once in Meryton proper, he was pleased to have his coachmen take the carriage off while he slowly escorted Jane to what might be called the shops of the village. Privately, he resolved to see her able to shop in a manner much more appropriate for his fiancée.

"Mr. Darcy, I imagine this cannot be interesting for you," she murmured at the milliner's.

Abashed, Darcy resolved to appear more engaged in the business of choosing a bonnet. "Indeed, learning what pleases you, pleases me," he said. At her questioning look, he felt his lips slant in a smile. "Truly."

Jane smiled self-consciously. "We could perhaps venture to the bookshop, sir. It might be more to your taste?"

He drew her hand through his arm. "You are entirely perfect."

Her soft laughter heartened him considerably.

"Oh, look. There's Lizzy," Jane said as they emerged into the daylight.

Up the street, under a pale autumn sun, Miss Elizabeth was walking alone in front of Miss Mary and Vicar Collins, who were apparently amiably conversing. About the educational practices for females, perhaps. Collins was a pedant of the worst kind, in Darcy's opinion. This opinion had been settled firmly over the course of tea and one family dinner.

It was more than sufficient.

"Shall we," Darcy offered, nodding briefly at Miss Elizabeth.

"Colonel Denny!" shouted one of the ill-bred younger sisters. Inwardly, Darcy winced, but he maintained his decorum for the sake of his blushing bride-to-be. Who was truly pink-cheeked in likely embarrassment, as she would not glance at him as they paced to meet Miss Elizabeth. The two younger girls, even after a hasty set-down from Miss Elizabeth and a quieter urging to better behavior from Jane, continued to beckon to the scarlet coats and shined boots across the road.

"Mr. Darcy," Vicar Collins said, bowing so low that his back was nearly parallel to his shoes, "a pleasure to see you again. I received a letter today from my most esteemed patroness and –"

"Ladies!" interrupted a jovial male voice. "I have someone for you to meet. He will shortly be joining the regiment. I have at last managed to convince him, I believe. Let me introduce you to George Wickham."

Darcy's fist clenched, his jaw tightened against a regrettable wish to dress the son of the prior Pemberley steward down to his very marrow. All the pain that man had been the cause of, only a few months before, and he dared to show his face again?

"Mr. Darcy?" Jane's voice brought him under a more certain command of himself.

He barely nodded at Wickham, who paled noticeably. "Wickham."
"Darcy."

"Miss Bennet," Darcy whispered, half-turning from the new-acquaintance conversations amongst the others. "I believe I would like to return to Netherfield, to make arrangements for the Christmas holidays at Pemberley. Would you care to join me? I will meet the coachmen at the inn, as we had earlier arranged, and can return for you directly." At her slight hesitation and worried glance at her sisters and the officers, Darcy urged her to accept, reminding her of her prior injury. She consented and he only barely managed not to offer Wickham the cut direct as he made his farewells.

Wickham. What was he going to do about the man? He could not be allowed to impose upon the innocents of Meryton.
Especially not any of the young ladies of Longbourn.

I will endeavor not to be so tardy with the next chapter. I do have a plan, honest. :)

Thanks for reading!
As it happened, Darcy was unable to take Jane to Netherfield after the encounter with Wickham in Meryton.

"Mr. Darcy, would you care to join me for an evening's shooting?"

That Mr. Bennet had so invited him drove all other plans out of Darcy's head. "Of course, sir. It would be a pleasure." He offered an apologetic look to Jane. "Perhaps we can work on those arrangements tomorrow?"

She smiled warmly into his eyes as they stood in Mr. Bennet's library, a fire snapping brilliantly away. "It would be my pleasure, Mr. Darcy. I would then have time to alert my family."

"I'll speak to your father this evening." Taking her hands, he pressed a light kiss to her forehead – he felt comfortable with nothing more, with her parents so close. "Mr. Bennet, I'll return for shooting in an hour. I'll return with my own gun."

"As you will, Mr. Darcy." Mr. Bennet smiled benignly and nodded as he left the room, calling, "Jane, you may see him out, if you wish."

"I do not suppose it improper," his so-proper fiancé murmured when they were quite alone. Still, her cheeks flushed and she fluttered a quick glance up at him.

He smiled and drew her hand up to his lips. "Not at all. We are betrothed. I shall return soon."

They walked in peaceful silence through the small foyer, where the butler waited with the barest of smiles on his disciplined countenance. "Mr. Darcy," he said, holding Darcy's greatcoat in his hands.

Hill. The man's name was Hill. Darcy accepted the coat, hat and gloves. "Thank you, Hill. I shall return presently."

Jane continued with him out to his horse, which was saddled and waiting, as Mr. Bennet did employ good servants. "I hope my father's invitation is not an inconvenience, Mr. –"

He pressed her hand lightly where it rested in the crook of his arm. "Who?"

With a soft laugh, she corrected herself. "Fitzwilliam. I do hope it isn't an imposition."

With the warmth of his horse wafting toward him and his beloved, Darcy shook his head. "Not at all. I welcome the opportunity to become better acquainted." He darted a glance toward the house and saw that he and Jane had been left altogether alone. That she had seen the same thing he knew in the slight lift of her brow and the glow in her eyes when they met his. "Jane..." he whispered.

She tilted her chin up just a little, just enough to let him know that they were of like mind. His heart pounded with a little more enthusiasm than was its wont as he cupped her lovely face in his palm and brushed her lips with his own. Sweet and soft, firm but yielding, he lingered on his second kiss, restraining himself to all that was proper before, with a wistful tug at his lips, he parted from her.

Her smile followed him all the way back to Netherfield.
"Mr. Darcy!" Caroline Bingley called languidly, accosting him as he was about ready to climb the stairs to his suite of rooms. "A messenger came for you from London not an hour ago. Your valet took a note and the messenger is still waiting...?" Her voice rose in query, but Darcy’s heart chilled in dread.

"I wasn't expecting anyone, Caroline. Has Bingley returned?"

"No, I thought he was with you."

"I left him in the company of the Bennet sisters in Meryton. If he arrives, please send a servant to inform me."

"Of course."

Taking the steps two at a time, Darcy abandoned propriety and ran to his rooms. To his credit, Watkins was waiting immediately within the chamber. "Mr. Darcy. A messenger arrived from London."

Impatient, worry for his sister churning within, Darcy snapped out one hand. "Yes, yes. Give it to me." The paper was heavy, the handwriting on it spidery and thin, but utterly legible.

**Dear Mr. Darcy,**

*Pray pardon my interrupting your visit with Mr. Bingley, but your sister Georgiana has taken ill. Of course, Staff is utterly capable of handling most things, but her fever has not abated and I wished you to be notified.*

*Please send directions as to your wishes or any physician you feel most comfortable contacting. Miss Darcy suffers so without complaint and I am afraid to have her imposed upon.*

**Your ob’t servant,**

H. Annesley

Almost every thought was driven from Darcy's head. He envisioned his Jane's sweet face, regret briefly twisting his heart, but really there was no help for it; he had to go to his sister in London. "Watkins!" he called, never thinking that his valet would not be within calling distance.

The small door to the dressing room opened. "Mr. Darcy?" Taking in his master's disturbed countenance, Watkins braced himself.

"I must get to London immediately. We must leave."

"We, sir?"

"Yes. For an indefinite stay. The messenger. I must send him back with assurances. I'll draft a note while you prepare us. Have my carriage brought round."

"Of course, sir." Clearly, Mr. Darcy was quite upset, the valet thought, as he felt the need to give these basic directives. "Anything else, sir?"

"I'll need to send a note to Longbourn. Have someone prepared to do so."

"Of course, sir."

Watkins left to see to affairs. Darcy gave him no more thought as he focused on a physician for his
sister as well as what to write to Jane Bennet.

Physican first. Yes. He jotted off a note to Mrs. Annesley, directing her to send for Dr. Fitzsimmons or Dr. Barnaby, giving his sister's companion the directions for both. He instructed Mrs. Annesley to spare no expense – of course – as well as to forward that very note to the housekeeper and butler so they knew that the companion had full authority in this matter until Darcy himself arrived.

"I'll be on my way directly. See to it that my rooms are made ready at my sister's house. I shall, of course, be in residence there until she is out of danger."

He rang for Watkins, who knew just what to do with the message to London and Darcy let his mind be as much as ease as it could be with that out of the way. He was on his way to Georgiana but the messenger would arrive first and things would be set in motion in advance of Darcy's own arrival.

"Jane," he murmured next. This letter was harder.

As they were betrothed, there was nothing inappropriate about writing to her.

My dearest Jane,

Yes, he could say that to his fiancé.

Please forgive me for not bringing you this information myself. My sister, Georgiana, is quite ill in London, as I have just been informed by her companion. I must, of course, go to her immediately and see that all is being done for her. This will, I am afraid, prevent our recent plans from being solidified. Please know that my regrets are sincere and I look forward to welcoming you to Pemberley as soon as may be, since of course all future plans are uncertain at this juncture. I beg that you will extend my apologies to your esteemed father as I will be unable to fulfill our evening's shooting engagement.

May I ask you – if it is not too much – to write by return post to London and let me know how you fare? I would count it a great kindness on your part. I know my sister wishes to get to know you as well, and I am sure that she will be a fine correspondent when she is able to write again.

Please give my regards to your family. God bless you, my love.

Yours ever,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

After giving Jane his direction in London, as well as his sister's, he sealed up the letter and, with another pang of regret, knew he would miss her calm good spirits and peaceful presence as he sought to do his all for Georgiana.

He would have felt more than a pang if he had known how long it would be before he saw her again.

The trip, though hurried, was made largely in the dark, with the carriage lanterns providing more of a notice of their existence than serving any real purpose. One mishap did occur, resulting in a delay as he and Watkins assisted their driver with replacing one of the wheels, which had broken in transit.

"It is well that you had one to spare, Barton," Darcy said on a grunt as he helped to lift the laden
carriage whilst Watkins and Barton slid the new carriage wheel onto the axel.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. There, I think you can set 'er down, now."

With a jolt, Darcy did so, rolling his shoulder to ease the lingering pressure that it had been under. "All right. Are we able to continue this evening?"

Watkins wiped muddy hands on his own breeches and grimaced mightily. In spite of their adverse circumstances, Darcy was hard-pressed not to smile. His valet might never forgive him for putting them into a circumstance requiring such a disaster as muddy breeches. "Mr. Darcy, I daresay that we can." The valet and driver exchanged a look and nod and Darcy inhaled deeply in subdued relief.

They reached town shortly before dawn, due to their evening departure and the delay on the London road. Pulling up in front of his house, Darcy was out of the carriage before it had entirely stopped.

The door was opened immediately by Williams, his sister's butler. "Mr. Darcy," the older, rail-thin man said with soft urgency. "Welcome. We've been expecting you."

Handing the man his unused gloves and mud-damaged hat, Darcy stepped past him. "Mishap on the road. We are well, but late. How is my sister?"

"Both Dr. Fitzsimmons and Dr. Barnaby have been here, sir. Miss Darcy is being tended by Mrs. Annesely."

"I'd like to see her," Darcy insisted. He was reminded of the evening when Jane Bennet was injured and being treated at Netherfield. He had not been allowed to attend her. Tonight, with his sister, he had every right and he would see her.

"This way, sir," Williams said, as if Darcy did not know his own sister's house. Still, he followed. The glow of the butler's single candle was small in the gracious halls of Georgiana's residence, casting shadows on landscaped images captured on canvas, on tasteful works of marble, and the small details in the woodwork. A peaceful place, Georgiana's home, marred only by the over-loud sounds of their footsteps as they went up the stairs.

Williams scratched lightly on the first door on the right and a soft, shuffling sound came from within the room a few moments later. The illumination of another candle joined the butler's as a worn pale face topped by a white lace cap peered through the door. "She's sleeping," admonished the older woman.

"Mrs. Annesley," Darcy began.

Her eyes widened and she bobbed a quick curtsy. "Oh, Mr. Darcy. I beg your pardon. You'll be wanting to see her."

"I do. Williams? Get some rest," he instructed the butler. Meeting the older man's eyes, he added, "And thank you." He would certainly be adding to everyone's Boxing Day gifts in his sister's household this year.

"Very good, Mr. Darcy."

One candle's light bobbed off to the servant's staircase while the other moved out of Darcy's way. "Mr. Darcy, the physicians have both been here and consulted," Mrs. Annesley informed him, seeming to drift over the floor toward the canopied bed where Georgiana lay supine under the bedclothes. "Her fever continues, sir. They bled her, and left me a tonic for when she is more able
to drink."

Georgiana appeared more pale than was her wont, lying there on the pillow. Her hair was spread out and brushed – her companion or lady's maid had been taking good care of her. "Go to your rest, Mrs. Annesley. You have done well. I'll tend to her for a while."

The older woman gasped. "But, sir!"

"She's my sister. I can see to her while you rest for a while." Darcy hadn't done a great deal of sickbed duty for Georgiana, but he was confident that he could provide her with some comfort should she awaken. "Go on. You may return after you've had some rest."

Mrs. Annesley nodded her acquiescence and, after giving him instruction regarding the physician's tonic, left for her own chambers.

Taking off his coat and draping it on an embroidered chair, Darcy pulled up another small chair to Georgiana's bedside. He took her slender hand – a hand capable of coaxing music from a piano forte or executing a landscape on canvas – in his own. She was indeed fevered.

But she awakened. "Mrs. Annesley?" Her voice was dry, sounding cracked and whispery.

Smiling, Darcy pressed her hand lightly. "Georgiana. It's me. I came to visit."

"Fitzwilliam... You're here." Her eyes slivered open, but did not seem focused. Darcy hoped it was merely exhaustion that had her in its grip. "When?"

"Just now, my dear." He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to it. "I have some medicine Mrs. Annesley insists upon your having." He rose and saw to the dispensation of the tonic with the water on the night table. "And then we can talk." His heart ached to see how pale and drawn his sister was, how slight she felt against his arm as he helped her to sit up. "I'll hold the glass."

"I'm not a child, Fitzwilliam," she protested, angling a frown at him.

"No, you're not. Here," he offered, watching to see if she held it steady. It trembled in her hand, though, so he helped her. "We'll both hold it."

"All right."

Once she had taken her medicine and Darcy had helped her get comfortable again, he was quite gratified that she appeared alert enough to converse.

"I must hear of Miss Jane Bennet," she said, her voice stronger and less parched-sounding than it had been. Her forehead crunched in concern. "Oh, my dear brother. I fear you have had to leave your lady on my account."

"She will understand, Georgiana. She is everything that is excellent and praiseworthy. I daresay you will find her to be good company when she comes to visit."

Excitement flared in his sister's dark eyes. Under her curly blond hair, the contrast was striking and Darcy was struck anew by the fact that his little sister was growing into a lovely young lady. "What does she look like? Did you give her a betrothal ring?"

And...yes, Georgiana was only sixteen after all. Subtly reassured in the familiar, Darcy grinned at his sister. "No, no ring yet, but I shall remedy that soon. She is about your height, I would guess, with hair like sunshine in the wheat fields."
"Fitzwilliam!" Dry lips smiled broadly. "You are smitten!"

He confessed this to be so and the two spent the next hour talking, until Georgiana drifted back to sleep and Darcy, exhausted, leaned back in his chair and let his eyes close likewise.

Georgiana seemed to have benefited from the bloodletting and tonics, as well as from conversation and nourishing soups taken in front of the fire in her room. Toward the end of the first day that Darcy was back, he and his sister were conversing when a servant entered with a note on a salver. "Mr. Darcy. A letter."

"Thank you," he said. Noticing the handwriting, he felt warmth bloom in his chest. "It's from Jane," he informed his very-interested sister.

She laced her fingers together as she sat in her bed once more. Her fever had lessened during the day, though it was not gone entirely, and Darcy would not let her exhaust herself. "Well, tell me? Unless," she went on, her eyes twinkling in mischief, "she says aught that I not know?"

Darcy felt his skin flush slightly with his sister's teasing. "Miss Bennet is a lady," was all he could say at first. He remembered the last kisses he shared with her, before he thought to be gone only an hour. How sweet, but how tempting...

_Dear Fitzwilliam,_

_I am so dreadfully sorry that your sister is unwell. I pray that her health is soon restored and that your mind and heart are eased._

_My father, of course, teased about your absence but he is not at all discomposed in truth. And there is nothing to forgive, sir, as you have not offended anyone, anywhere. Indeed, a gentleman such as yourself could give no offense._

_I would be only too happy to correspond with your sister when her health is regained._

_I am faring well. Elizabeth sends her regards. Mr. Bingley might appreciate hearing of Miss Darcy's improved health; he seemed distressed when I shared the reason for your absence last night._

_I must away. We have a visitor in a crested carriage and my mother is all in alt. I daresay it is merely someone whose horse has lost a shoe._

_I find myself at a loss, sir, as to how to close, so I shall return the kindness you showed me._

_Yours ever,_

_Jane Bennet_

Darcy smiled as he shared the greater part of Jane's letter with his sister, but then he noted the odd tilt to the postscript and his gut clenched.

As before when confronted with evidence of his aunt's meddling, Darcy clenched his fists.

"Fitzwilliam! Pray, what has Miss Bennet said to make you so angry!"

Chagrined, furious, but still mindful of his sister's delicate health and the fact that he held Jane's own words in his hands, Darcy endeavored to master himself, smoothing the letter on his thigh before folding it with great care.
P.S. Did you know Lady Catherine de Bourgh was in the area? I shall seal this and send it and then go to meet her. I confess, Mr. Darcy, to be quite nervous to be meeting your family without you by my side. ~jb

A/N: The timeline will go radically divergent from this point on, so bear with me. If I can answer any questions for you, feel free to PM - just make sure you are accessible so I can respond! Thank you! ~ LJ

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