

Chapter 2 ~ Agony and Ecstasy



All that next day after Mr. Bingley's disastrous proposal, Mrs. Bennet lay prostrate upon her sitting room sofa. When she was not complaining of ill usage, she protested bitterly of disobliging daughters. Mrs. Bennet would not be comforted and she made everyone in the household miserable with her unreasonable demands and endless requests for the windows to be thrown open, only to complain of the cold moments later. Nothing anyone could say to her mattered; for Jane to have refused Mr. Bingley seemed unbelievable.

Mary, Kitty, Hill, and the other two maids were chiefly occupied with attending Mrs. Bennet. As for Elizabeth, she was spared that daughterly duty. Mrs. Bennet blamed Elizabeth for everything and would not let her come near her. She was constantly abusing her for, as she put it, "*Putting notions into Jane's head.*"

As for Jane, after she had related a small part of the incident to her awaiting mother, she had not appeared outside of her room and not for lack of Elizabeth's trying. Her door was barred to everyone; only Sarah was allowed admittance and even then, only with cups of weak tea and shallow bowls of gruel.

Henry Bennet chose the refuge of his library; the suffering of his wife, daughters and servants were of little concern. Only he could find humour in the entire spectacle. In an idle moment whether drinking his tea or when reading the newspaper, he was known to suddenly burst out laughing, mocking Mr. Bingley for his foolishness and folly.

"Did not I say, Lizzy," said Mr. Bennet when they all had been sitting in the drawing room the next morning, "That it was all nonsense. I cannot believe I went out on purpose to make Mr. Bingley's acquaintance? Mrs. Bennet promised me that he would marry one of my daughters and it has all come to nothing and I will not be sent out on a fool's errand again."

"Yes, Father," said Elizabeth, blandly, not finding any humour in any of the situation. She worried greatly for her sister and to own the truth, she worried even more for Mr. Bingley for there was something in his look that she did not like when he went away. If only she knew what to do; calling on or writing to Mr. Bingley was certainly out of the question.

She rubbed her temples; a dull ache, which had taken up residence the night before, throbbed with a vengeance. She was at a loss as to how to proceed in any of this. She knew that Jane blamed her in part for her troubles and she wished with all of her heart that she had not chosen to conceal the fact of her meeting Mr. Bingley in Derbyshire. Now, after careful reflection, that information seemed trivial at best.

Also plaguing her mind was the sad situation concerning her sister Lydia. Yes, happily for the reputation of the entire Bennet family, Lydia was now married and gone. But having so recently come upon the astonishing information that Mr. Darcy had took it upon himself to rescue her family from certain disgrace pressed on her daily. He had made the match, paid Wickham's debts, and bought her new

brother a commission with the regulars in the north. She would have found the entire situation incredible had it not been for the confirmation of Mr. Darcy's actions from her aunt a few weeks ago. She owed the gentleman so much, but lamented that now with Mr. Bingley firmly out of the picture; she knew she would never see Mr. Darcy again.

She was suddenly seized with an impulsive thought. "Miss Darcy!" she exclaimed, "Oh why did I not think of it before? I must write to Miss Darcy."

"Hmm?" was her father's not so curious reply as he sipped his tea.

"Nothing, Papa; I only just recalled that I must write a letter to Miss Darcy."

"Miss Darcy? Could she possibly be any relation to that odious Mr. Darcy who was once here in the company of the ridiculous Mr. Bingley?" Then recalling something hysterical, he threw back his head and laughed heartily at Mr. Bingley's expense.

Elizabeth could not take it any longer and excused herself, drawing the curious stares of her two younger sisters who had never before seen their sister refuse to take part in any joke of their fathers. Mr. Bennet merely turned over his newspaper and hardly noticed Elizabeth's departure.



Alone in her room and sitting at her writing desk, Elizabeth drew out several sheets of paper. She hardly knew how to begin or what she would say. She barely knew Miss Darcy and had left Derbyshire so abruptly upon Lydia's disgrace that she did not know if the young lady would even welcome a letter from her. Then there was the matter as to where to write. She then suddenly recalled that her brother had mentioned just the other week that his sister would stay on at Pemberley through Christmas.

*Miss Georgiana Darcy
Pemberley House, Near Lambton
Derbyshire
My dear Miss Darcy,*

Here she paused to gather her thoughts. It shamed her to have to ask for Mr. Darcy's help especially so soon after his intervention with Lydia and Wickham, but she satisfied herself by knowing that she was doing this for the good of his friend. Dipping her pen once again into the ink, she set out to write a letter of full entreaty; she would deal with her mortification another time.

Forgive me for taking such a liberty since I hardly know you, but I am at my wits end, have not a moment to lose, and no one to turn to with my sad tale.

You may recall that I am somewhat acquainted with your brother's good friend, Mr. Bingley. It has come to my attention that Mr. Bingley may be in great need of your brother's friendship at the moment. I hesitate to write to your brother directly of such a

thing knowing that it is not entirely proper, so Miss Darcy, I am putting my complete trust in your kindness.

It is in the utmost urgency that he returns into Hertfordshire at once. I am certain that Mr. Bingley suffers most cruelly. I know that I can depend upon your secrecy when I tell you that it involves my elder sister, Jane, in some way. I imagine you can guess that it is a matter of the heart that afflicts Mr. Bingley, for my sister has seen fit to refuse his offer of marriage.

Please, please, please, I beg of you, do not judge my sweet Jane; a circumstance beyond her control and Mr. Bingley's conspired to separate them when they ought to have been together. Your kind brother knows more specifically of that of which I speak and I entreat you most earnestly to pass this information on to him for I know he will most certainly know how to act.

I feel dreadful for asking so much from you. Yet, knowing your brother as I do and his genuine interest for all his friends, I knew that he would wish to be informed. I hardly need add, for you have said it so yourself, but truly, your brother is the kindest and best of men.

*I will be forever in your debt,
Your humble servant,
Elizabeth Bennet*



He was in the middle of the same dream that haunted him all these last months. Perhaps he should begin to call it what it really was: a nightmare. There was Elizabeth as always, dancing across from him. As the music progressed he knew he must soon reach across to take her hand at the next turn, however, when the figure spun round it was always another woman, sometimes Anne de Bourgh, most times Caroline Bingley. Yet when the figure danced a pattern around him it was always Elizabeth, smiling, laughing, teasing, taunting, but never close enough to touch.

Before he could progress further along in his dream, his manservant chose that particular moment to wake him from a dead sleep. "Sir, sir," said the man, holding his candle high. "Please, sir, I am very sorry to wake you but you have just received this express not a moment ago." He held out the letter.

Darcy rubbed his hands across his moist face to revive himself. He knew that his trusted servant would not awaken him unless it was important. He took the letter in his own hands but his eyesight for the present was still too unclear to properly read the direction.

"Thank you, Mattingly," said Darcy sitting up on the edge of the bed. "Light the other candles, please, and then off to bed with you."

"Yes, Mr. Darcy."

Mattingly did as he was bid as his master drew on his dressing gown himself. Darcy walked over to a table and chair by the fire and pulled one of the candles closer. He was instantly alarmed, for upon closer inspection he discovered that it was a letter written in his own sister's hand coming directly from Pemberley. His heart was in his throat as wild thoughts took possession of his mind. He began ripping the letter open only to discover another letter folded inside which fell to the floor. He attended to his sister's missive first.

Dear Fitzwilliam,

Be not alarmed. I am well. I AM WELL! We are all well and things at home are just as they should be. Now that I have assured you that there is no alarm on my account, forgive me if I get straight to the point.

Yesterday, an express arrived and I am sure you will never guess who it was from: Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

I have tried again and again to express her thoughts in a letter composed in my own words but found my words wanting. Therefore, I have enclosed her letter to me to expedite the matter. Her words will explain them much better than I can ever hope to communicate.

*Your loving sister,
Georgiana*

Elizabeth's letter was picked up from the floor, unfolded in an instant, read through three times, and within a few short hours, Fitzwilliam Darcy's carriage, after one quick stop along the way, was on the road to Hertfordshire.



Most of the Bennet family had gathered in the drawing room. On the other hand, Mrs. Bennet and Jane were the only two who chose to keep to their own chambers. Mr. Bennet read his newspaper, Mary practiced at the pianoforte, and Kitty sat in the window seat amusing herself by trimming a new bonnet.

Only Elizabeth sat in discomfiture and disquiet. It had been three days since her desperate letter to Miss Darcy at Pemberley and her impatience to hear anything as to the current situation was great indeed.

However, what distressed her even more was the current gossip circulating all of Meryton and unfortunately it involved Mr. Bingley. Apparently, he was thought to have been seen once in a state of inebriation about the town.

The only redeeming feature of this entire situation was the fact that he had only been seen by persons who had been known to be in states of inebriation themselves and therefore was not to be believed. And since it was her Aunt Philips who had brought the news to them, the entire story was considered utterly ridiculous by her father and not to be spoken of again.

Yet, deep in her heart, Elizabeth knew that there must be some credence to the story. She had seen Mr. Bingley's state with her own eyes on the day that he left them, and she would not put it past him to drown his sorrows in drink and dissipation.

However, it was an even greater mystery as to why Mr. Bingley remained at Netherfield. Every day Elizabeth was certain that she would receive some intelligence through the regular channels of neighbourhood gossip as to Mr. Bingley's departure. Yet, here he remained and apparently getting himself into all sorts of trouble.

It was Kitty's pronouncement from her seat by the window that threw Elizabeth into a further state of agitation. "Papa, the most enormous carriage is just coming up the lane."

"Who is it Kitty, for if it is Lady Lucas or even Mrs. Long, give me a moment to make my way to my library. Your mother wishes no company and I am not at home."

"No indeed, Father, this carriage can not belong to either Mrs. Long or Lady Lucas for I believe this is one of the finest carriages to ever be seen in Hertfordshire; too fine for one of them and besides the crest has the letter "D" upon the door."

Elizabeth, for the briefest of moments, thought it could possibly be Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but she instantly dismissed that idea as preposterous. Lady Catherine could have no reason whatsoever to come to Longbourn.

Kitty's statement was enough to now draw Henry Bennet's attention and he got up from his seat to have a look for himself. Unfortunately, the carriage had just gone round the corner to the front of the house and within moments the sound of commotion was heard in the hall. Mrs. Hill soon after opened the drawing room door.

"Mr. Darcy for you, sir."

Elizabeth's cheeks flamed.

"Mr. Darcy, for me?" asked Mr. Bennet in great confusion. "Surely, there is some mistake, Hill. You must mean Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy for Mrs. Bennet and my daughters."

"No, indeed, sir," said Hill curtsying nervously, "For he asked for you most specifically on a matter of private business and I have shown him into your library at his insistence."

"Well, well, this is a day of mysteries is it not, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth could hardly answer. Her confusion was great. Why had he come to see her father?

Mr. Bennet chose to see only humour of the situation. "First, the idiots of the town brand Mr. Bingley a common drunkard and now his friend, who by all accounts is very superior, condescends to call upon me. How much will you lay down, Lizzy, that he brings more news of Mr. Bingley's transgressions, eh?"

Here he laughed heartily but Elizabeth refused to join him in the joke. Since her father could see that Elizabeth was in no mood for his teasing; he left his daughters for his tête-à-tête with the odious Mr. Darcy.



The Darcy carriage had pulled away over an hour ago and Elizabeth's impatience to hear what had brought Mr. Darcy into their midst was great. Her letter had entreated him to be of use to his friend; it was a great mystery as to why he would choose to make a visit to her father at Longbourn.

Not being able to stand not knowing another second, Elizabeth threw down her work and ran to her father's library only to find it deserted. Seeking out Hill in the kitchen, she soon learned that her father had gone for a walk. This seemed strange to Elizabeth, her father being a great rider was not the walking type. With her curiosity being high, she fetched her pelisse and bonnet and set out to find him herself.

Her walk did not last long for she spotted her father almost immediately upon exiting the door. She saw him pacing under the large chestnut tree at the other end of the garden. This did not bode well, for the last time she's seen him thusly was when he had to impart the disagreeable news concerning her sister, Lydia.

She ran over, eager to know it all and not showing an ounce of patience burst out, "What news does Mr. Darcy bring, Father; good or bad?"

Mr. Henry Bennet turned to look at his daughter in disbelief. There was a few things that his Lizzy had been keeping from him and he was not going to let it past without quizzing her mercilessly.

"News? What makes you think that Mr. Darcy brings any news?"

"Forgive me father, but my curiosity is acute. I can not imagine what brings him here unless he has news of Mr. Bingley."

"And what, may I ask does Mr. Bingley have to do with you?"

"Me? I don't understand you, papa."

"Why did you not tell me that Mr. Darcy is far better acquainted with you then you have led us all to believe?"

"Pardon?"

"Come now, Lizzy, don't pretend to be missish—the young man stood here not an hour ago, asking my permission to call upon you."

Elizabeth's eyes widened at this piece of news. "Call upon me? I don't pretend to know what you mean, sir. I-I had no idea that he—"

“Apparently, from what I have been reading,” and here he produced a letter from his pocket, and waved it in the air, “You were much thrown together in Derbyshire. I am also to understand that he has become an intimate amongst our London relations for he was so kind as to bring me this very letter from your uncle Gardiner. Edward speaks of the young man in such glowing terms that I can scarce believe it. Listen to this:

Mr. Darcy is just such a young man of good sense and common decency, but fears greatly that he may have made the wrong impression on you all during his past visits to Netherfield. I assure you that Maria and I have seen nothing in him but kindness and generosity. He called upon us this morning most handsomely and asked if there was anything that he could convey to Longbourn on my behalf. Having no real information to pass on to you, I seized this opportunity to write to you and tell you he has taken great pains to become acquainted with us.

Moreover, and I don't believe I am telling tales out of school, but I believe he wishes to further the acquaintance between his sister and my niece, Elizabeth. Elizabeth took great delight in meeting the young woman during our visit to Mr. Darcy's home at Pemberley and I believe that she would have greatly enjoyed a continued friendship in that quarter had not we been called home.

“How come you never mentioned any of this Lizzy; we all thought you hated the very sight of him. Now the young man wishes to call on you for the benefit of his sister. I am all astonishment.”

“Papa, believe me, I am astonished as you are. Even though Mr. Darcy has been very kind to me, I had no idea that he wished to—” she stopped to order her thoughts.

“Call upon you,” said, her father, who was carefully watching her changing features.

“I will own that I did think of him at one time in the most dreadful of terms, but since, I have come to see a truly generous young man—so generous, in fact that I can never hope to deserve his good opinion.”

“Generous? How so, Lizzy? You do not mean to tell me that you are beholding to him in some way and he has come to demand your attentions as some sort of repayment! I'll shoot him where he stands!”

“No! No, indeed father; I only mean that he was very kind to me, especially when we visited his home in Derbyshire. He escorted us about his grounds and he showed most particular consideration to the Gardiners', even inviting my uncle to participate in the sport with the other gentlemen visiting his estate. He then introduced us to his sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, a very amiable and agreeable young woman.”

Mr. Bennet looked over his daughter; her manner of speaking of Mr. Darcy was guarded at best. There was certainly much more to this story than what met his eye. Darcy's actions of the morning were perplexing enough, but now with this explanation from his Lizzy about the young man's other attentions of late, he couldn't help but wonder at it. He decided to take a different tack to see how Elizabeth would answer.

“Just say one word, Lizzy, and I will bar the man from this house. You need not trouble yourself with him if it is merely a case of returning his hospitality.”

“No indeed father, for, as you say, M-Mr. Darcy merely wishes to c-call upon me, I see no reason to prevent it. I for one would love—I mean, I would like the opportunity to get to know him—I mean his sister a little better. Perhaps we were all too quick to judge his character last year. I, for one, have seen none of the pride recently, which so marked his personality last year. H-He has proved himself by his actions and generous nature to be the very best of men.”

Elizabeth faltered a bit while making this statement and her cheeks has taken on such a delightful shade of pink; Mr. Bennet had his answer.

“Well, take all the time you need to get to know him---and through him his sister, as you say, for he calls on you tomorrow afternoon.”

Henry Bennet strode off to the house leaving his daughter in a state of absolute bewilderment.



Never in her life had Elizabeth wanted Jane more, but Jane still kept to her rooms, kept her own counsel, and would not talk to anyone in the family. It had been a very trying time for her with Mr. Darcy’s impending arrival; Elizabeth’s only wish was to talk things over with her most beloved sister.

Mrs. Bennet, on learning of her esteemed visitor and of his particular request to call upon her dear Lizzy, and the possibility of what ten thousand a year meant, felt that she could not very well remain in her rooms and made all haste to revive herself. Her *most precious* daughter needed her particular brand of guidance and motherly advice at this delicate and perplexing time.

So, it was almost an identical replaying of the events of the week before, only this time it was Elizabeth’s turn to be poked and prodded and pushed into her gown while her mother prattled away throughout the entire ordeal.

“And you know, Lizzy, if Mr. Darcy approves of furthering a friendship between you and Miss Darcy there is no telling where all of this could lead. Just think, my dearest girl, ten thousand a year, a house in the country and in town, and what jewels. How fine you shall be.”

“Mother! He calls as an acquaintance only. I don’t know why you persist in seeing something in this situation when there clearly is not.”

“Don’t speak to me in such away, Miss Lizzy. Your sister has already frightened off Mr. Bingley for the second time in as many years and I will not have the world say that the Bennet girls have no ideas of their duty. I have grown fatigued of Lady Lucas forever parading Charlotte’s happy situation in front of me. If Mr. Darcy should ask you to marry him, you will say yes and have done with it!”

At one o'clock the Bennet family, using their best manners and wearing their finest clothes, gathered in the drawing room to welcome their esteemed guest.

Elizabeth could not breathe when Mr. Darcy entered the room. He looked at her and bowed in the most stoic and formal fashion that, for a moment, Elizabeth was almost certain that there was some mistake. During the first few minutes of his visit, he hardly said a word to her apart from his greeting when he entered the room.

Mary and Kitty, who were not a little afraid of him, were at a total loss for words and said nothing. Even Mrs. Bennet who had always boasted of his rude manner and her own superior understanding, suddenly felt ill at ease. It was one thing to abuse him amongst her friends and family when he had been badly-mannered to her, however on closer consideration and now fully comprehending his wealth and status in the world, and with him sitting in her drawing room without the amiable Mr. Bingley as a buffer between them, she found herself in awe of him, and could only manage, now and then, a few polite observations about the weather and the state of the roads.

"Yes, the weather is very fine," said Mr. Bennet, having heard enough and having no real patience for idle small talk, "Perhaps my daughters would be kind enough to show you the grounds." He pointedly looked at his wife when he said the words "daughters" and Mrs. Bennet immediately knew his meaning; she was a little miffed not to be able to follow along to advise her daughter, but did not protest.

"Yes, I would be delighted to see your gardens, Mr. Bennet; if your daughters are inclined to show them to me."

Mary and Kitty looking for any means of escape, nodded, and immediately went out of the room to fetch their bonnets and coats as Elizabeth followed behind. Mrs. Bennet went to help her daughters as Mr. Bennet walked Darcy to the front door.

"I noticed a very fine collection of game on your grounds as I entered, Mr. Bennet. Longbourn must be a bountiful estate which I am sure brings you a great deal of satisfaction."

"It is nothing to Pemberley, I am sure, but it suits us," said Mr. Bennet, puzzled and at the same times gratified in Darcy's praise. "My daughters know nothing of sport but they do draw a great deal of pleasure from our gardens here."

"My own sister, Georgiana, enjoys Pemberley's gardens very much and has great pleasure in showing them to our guests."

"Oh, so it was your sister who showed my Elizabeth your grounds when she had the honour of visiting your estate," said Mr. Bennet, almost certain that it wasn't.

"No, for I reserved that pleasure for myself." On Mr. Bennet raising an eyebrow, Darcy amended his declaration to say, "Along with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, naturally."

"Naturally."

Fearing to appear too forward, Darcy steered the conversation back onto general topics.

“I have heard that you are the best shot in the area, sir; I have come across many in the area who have spoken of your skill with the gun in only the highest of terms. I will admit that at times I am a bit too quick with my aim, perhaps sometime, when you have the time, we could discuss the subject.”

Mr. Bennet brightened. Perhaps Edward Gardiner was correct in this lad’s praise. Mr. Darcy didn’t plague him with insincere compliments or ridiculous conversation, yet this man and his real reasons for coming here (his sister, HA!) would require further inspection.

“I look forward to that, sir.”

The ladies arrived dressed and ready to take their leave. Mrs. Bennet stood by, smiling politely with an unnerving and, to her husband, a greedy gleam in her eye.

Immediately upon stepping out of doors, Mary and Kitty rapidly struck out ahead, having had a lecture from their mother on keeping their distance from the “couple.” Darcy and Elizabeth followed behind them, with Darcy hastily forming his words in his mind. Elizabeth was no less busy, she had many things to say to Mr. Darcy, and she was impatient to get them out.

Having gained some distance from the house, Elizabeth and Darcy simultaneously turned to each other and burst out with amounted to, “Forgive me, how can I...”

They each coloured, looked away, and were silent.

After walking a few more steps in contemplation, Elizabeth took the initiative and said, “You were saying, Mr. Darcy.”

“I was only going to ask your forgiveness for intruding upon your notice in such a way, Miss Bennet, but please, finish what you were about to say.”

“No, please continue. What I have to say can wait a few moments longer. I can not deny that I am extremely eager to hear what you have to say.”

Darcy looked at her to ascertain her true feelings, and pressed on. “As you wish; I just wanted to say firstly, that if I had not gotten your letter, believe that I would not have called upon you in such a manner. If only there were some other way in which I would be allowed communicate with you in some secrecy on the subject of Mr. Bingley and your sister, I would not have felt the need for such a ruse.”

Elizabeth all at once felt relieved and discouraged. So, it was all subterfuge, a means to communicate only. Secretly, she had hoped that Mr. Darcy would renew his addresses, but it would appear that the subject of their friends must be discussed.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy, I have been greatly concerned; if you could have but seen his face that day then you would understand the reason for my unease. I hope I did the right thing in summoning you to his side. I know your business affairs must keep you very busy.”

“Yes, you did do the right thing,” he replied. “Do not be alarmed for my being away from my dealings in London; I welcome the change.”

“Please tell me, sir, how is Mr. Bingley?”

“He suffers a great deal and I can not help but feel that it is my fault entirely. I am extremely grateful to you for informing me so quickly of your worries. It appears that you were well justified in your concerns. I am endeavouring to be of use to my friend and in the circumstances, it is the least I could do. I will not abandon him in his hour of need.”

“How could this all have happened, I don’t understand. When Mr. Bingley returned into the neighbourhood, Jane’s spirits certainly did increase. She seemed very pleased to see Mr. Bingley once again. What a difference only a few days could make. When he came so early and so eager to please just that morning, we all had such hopes!”

“I am afraid that I must again take the blame. I explained my actions to him in separating him from your sister in full the morning I left Netherfield for London. Naturally, Bingley was very angry with me and he had every right to be. However, with his excellent nature, his anger did not last long. When I left him, he was in such high spirits that I was certain that the next communication I would have from him would be news of an engagement to your sister. It would seem that certain secrets have made their way to the fore. I was very grieved and shocked to hear from you as to the nature of how matters now stand. I know I have no right to ask, but has your sister truly turned against my friend?”

“Mr. Darcy, I wish I could say. Jane has not spoken to anyone of the affair since that dreadful day—not even to me. I have never been so distressed in my life. It is not like Jane to keep her feelings to herself. You will remember my saying that I was privy to all her distress as to Mr. Bingley before. I do not fully understand why she has chosen to shut me out now. If only there was some way in which I could bring about a conclusion to this sad state of affairs, I would.”

“Miss Bennet, do not take too much upon yourself. I am not so blind as to see that the fault lies entirely at my door. If there is any mending to be done in this matter, it is I who will do the mending.”

Here Elizabeth was reminded of all the other things that he had mended and was compelled to speak out and she did, with feeling.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy; truly, you are the one who takes too much upon himself!” she cried. “Forgive me, forgive me, but I am such a very selfish creature. I must speak on a subject that can only be distressing to you, and I am keenly aware that I am satisfying my own anxious feelings when I tell you that I know what you did for my poor sister Lydia—I know; I know it all.”

Darcy stopped walking and coloured. He never intended for Elizabeth or her family to find out his role in bringing about the marriage of her younger sister to Mr. Wickham and it grieved him to the core. He quickly glanced around himself to see where Elizabeth’s younger sisters had gotten themselves to and he was grateful to see them step into a little copse off to one side of the garden. He now moved off in the opposite direction.

Elizabeth stepped over to follow him and resumed her speech, "As soon as I learned of it, I wrote to my aunt for all the details. Please do not blame my aunt for telling me. Carelessly, it was Lydia who betrayed it first, and I could not rest until I knew the particulars. Please, if you will allow me, I would like to express my unwavering gratitude to you on behalf of my entire family, who do not know to whom they are indebted."

He stopped walking, looked at the ground, and said in great agitation of spirits, "Your family owe me nothing, Miss Bennet." Then, looking up and turning his gaze upon Elizabeth continued by saying in an earnest manner, "As much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of you."

Elizabeth, at his declaration, had stopped breathing and could hardly meet his eye. Darcy took this opportunity to finish his thought.

"Miss Elizabeth, I know that I can never hope to deserve you and I can only think that in light of Miss Bennet's situation I know full well that you would never again consider me. But if only I could know for certain and hear from your own lips that somewhere in your heart you do not think so ill of me as you have before, I will be well satisfied. With your justified criticisms at Easter, I have endeavoured to turn my character around and address my flaws in the most serious manner, and Miss Elizabeth, even after all that has happened between us I will derive the greatest contentment in the world, if from this day forward I knew that you could somehow look upon me as you would any friend."

"A friend?" said Elizabeth, breathlessly. "Oh, Mr. Darcy, it is true, much has happened. Please believe me when I say that I do not look on you with all my previous dislike. You were kindness itself to me and my family when we visited Pemberley. So much has changed since that day, I hardly know how to answer, so I am sorry, but in light of my present feelings, I do not think I want you as my friend."

At that moment, Fitzwilliam Darcy knew that his life had ended for his heart had stopped. He carefully schooled his features so as not to show his disappointment, but felt it fruitless to struggle and turned away.

"Forgive me, Miss Bennet, I had hoped that after your stay in Lambton we had moved beyond the feelings of the past. I see now that once again I am mistaken. You can rest assured that I will not trouble you any longer on the matter and will remain silent on the subject for the rest of my life. Please extend to your family my warmest regards and know that I will not intrude upon you all again." He turned to walk away, dejected, thinking all the while about taking up a position on the settee beside the miserable and inconsolable Charles Bingley.

Could it be possible, thought Elizabeth? Could he really be as blind as to the change of her heart? His face looked so very unhappy that she could do nothing but laugh at it; she didn't know exactly where it came from, but she felt the need to laugh at him heartily.

"Oh, Mr. Darcy, the look on your face."

This immediately drew Mr. Darcy's ire. How could she, of all people, be so cruel? He turned to her and replied, "Miss Bennet, I do not pretend to be unaccustomed to your penchant for mockery, but I had never expected that you could be so heartless as to find humour at my expense."

Elizabeth immediately stopped laughing but could not help but to smile brightly; her heart was so full. The outside world and all its problems slipped away. At that moment they were the only two people on the face of the earth.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy, are we doomed to forever misunderstand each other?" His look was questioning and confused so Elizabeth went on. "Oh, how I do love you."

Darcy stared, hardly comprehending her words. He turned away to look at the horizon, then turned back and stared at her face. He next looked at his boots, seemingly struggling to understand. "What did you say?"

Elizabeth, seeing his confusion, leaned her head over to one side and responded very slowly and very clearly, "I said that I love you, Mr. Darcy."

He quickly closed his eyes. The ecstasy of the moment was exquisite and he needed to savour it for just a moment. Elizabeth Bennet had said the three words from her own lips that up until that moment he had only ever heard her speak in his dreams. She loved him and he could scarcely believe it would ever be possible to claim that love for his own and he gave himself over to the feeling engulfing him in that instance.

Elizabeth, seeing this, immediately felt the need to tease him before he passed dead away.

"I have been lead to believe, Mr. Darcy, that it is the usual custom in such cases as these to kiss the lady who, it would now seem, has so carelessly given her heart away to the man she loves."

Darcy opened his eyes, wanting to move towards her, yet, his legs were paralysed. He continued to stare in wonder, but somehow managed to reach out to gently stroke Elizabeth's cheek, saying nothing and only looking.

Rolling her eyes cheekily, Elizabeth said smilingly, "Very well then! Since you have nothing to say on the subject, I fear I must believe you indifferent to my feelings. Quite a pity, too, for I had so recently come to believe you only conducted yourself in the utmost gentleman-like manner. Good day to you, sir." And she turned and made her way back to the house trying desperately not to skip for joy.