Superman

by iluvdanimal

Summary

This is a tale of missing undershirts and a missing child, and the quest for a tolerable cup of coffee.

Notes

Hi there! If this looks familiar it's because it's also published over at fanfiction.net (I'm JacquiT over there) - I'm trying to consolidate all of my work into one spot and figured this would be the place to do it. So, if you've read it already, thanks! And if not, please enjoy!
“This is what I get for letting a girl pack my bags,” mumbled William Darcy as he surveyed the selection of clothing which the aforementioned girl, Darcy’s younger sister Georgiana, had packed for him.

She had been meticulous in her selection of certain items. There were notes indicating which slacks he was to wear with which dress shirts, and which ties. Darcy was fully capable of dressing himself creditably, but he still thought her care was admirable. The problem was that she’d paid little attention to certain other items, chief among them being undershirts. Also, as he’d discovered upon his arrival at the hotel the previous evening, his toothbrush.

How she’d convinced him to leave the house entirely, he still wasn’t quite sure. In all honesty he was just grateful that she was smiling again, excited for the house remodeling project to get underway. He honestly could not care less about what color the walls and carpet were, but she did, and if something made his sister happy, it made Darcy happy, too.

So he made plans for them to stay in a hotel downtown, where he worked and she gave and took music lessons, for the two weeks the plumbers, carpenters, and electricians would be tearing up their house. It was summer, so Georgiana’s ongoing music lessons were her only obligation, which she wouldn’t give up for the world. Even in her darkest moods, she would always play whatever instrument she could get her hands on, her favorite being the antique grand piano which their mother and grandmother had played before her. That item was sitting in a private parlor, close to Georgiana’s own bedroom, but the door had been closed and locked and it had been covered under enough layers to keep it warm and dust-free during a nuclear winter.

Darcy sighed and made a mental note to go back home that evening, once he was finished with work. Georgiana, who he called Ana, Ana Banana, and alternatively AB, had packed some more casual pieces – golf shirts and khaki shorts, and underneath those, he discovered she’d packed some workout clothes. He held up the singular t-shirt. It was the Superman t-shirt she’d given him last Christmas, in all seriousness. He rolled his eyes. It was all he had; William Darcy was a creature of habit. He couldn’t not wear an undershirt.

From the arsenal of dress shirts, he chose the darkest one, and hunted for the accompanying tie and slacks. The items thus gathered, he tidied everything else up, and headed for the shower.

The primary reason for having to leave the house was that the plumbing was in need of upgrade. Darcy realized this each time he made a trip out of town and showered at a hotel or a friend’s house, and he was reminded that he actually enjoyed water pressure. But as soon as he returned to his own house, he was just glad to be home. He liked routine; he liked seeing the same house he grew up in every time he walked through those doors.

He was painfully aware that his memories were selective, not stretching past age six. As Darcy tried to relax under the gloriously high-pressure shower, he mused that Georgiana had no such fond attachment to the house. Darcy knew this was because she hadn’t been born yet, during those precious few years when he had two parents. When Georgiana had come along, his ecstasy at finally having the sibling he’d longed for was curbed significantly by his mother’s passing, and the changes in his father.

Not that George Darcy had ever been congenial. He was stand-offish and did not like children in general, but Darcy being the reserved individual he was – like his mother – really wasn’t like other children, and so he had many happy memories of quiet fishing or chess games with his beloved
father. When little Georgiana came home without her mother, there were no further memories to be made. It wasn’t all at once; he tried – Darcy knew that George had tried to love little Ana – but he just couldn’t look at her. Even at that age, Darcy knew she looked too much like his mother.

George became outwardly angry and had little patience for anyone, especially his children. He passed away when Darcy was twelve years old. No one would tell him what happened.

Recognizing that his present ruminations were not helping achieve the relaxation he was used to getting out of his morning showers, Darcy sighed and shook his head. He lingered in the steam and heat for a moment more, and then turned the water off and stepped out of the shower.

Georgiana had wanted to remodel the house for years, but he’d always put her off. At first he could say that she’d be off to college soon enough and wouldn’t care. When she’d chosen a local college, she’d asked again, but he reasoned she wouldn’t ever be there anyway, which turned out to be untrue. She’d asked again, two Christmases ago - practically begged, he now realized - but he’d said no again. The house had historic value, he said - they should meet with consultants and be cautious. But Darcy didn’t truly realize how important making her own mark on what had once been their parents’ home had been to her, until she almost walked out of his life forever, the previous fall.

It was a boy, of course. Georgiana was a beautiful young woman and the Darcys were an old, wealthy family. Darcy was not unlike his father in that he was suspicious of everyone, and that especially included young men who were interested in his sister. Georgiana knew this, of course, and so she kept her relationship with Denny Carter almost silent.

So Darcy didn’t know that Denny was a piano instructor, who Georgiana found handsome and friendly. Darcy didn’t know that Denny had nearly everyone at the college hanging on his every word. Darcy didn’t know that Denny offered extra lessons to Georgiana, that he brought her coffee, that he met her after her lessons and talked with her. Darcy didn’t know that they were officially dating; didn’t know that his sister was falling in love; didn’t know why she was pulling further and further away from him.

But Georgiana didn’t know that Denny knew what the Darcy family was worth. She didn’t know that although he was a gifted pianist, his teaching credentials were, on the whole, made up. She didn’t know his real name was actually George Wickham, and his pseudonym was stolen from a long-deceased relative in order to keep creditors at bay. She also didn’t know that George Wickham had a family - an incredibly recent ex-wife, and two small children.

In early September Darcy became worried when he hadn’t heard from Georgiana for two days. He hated snooping, but he did it anyway. He looked into her room and found pictures of his sister and a man he didn’t recognize. He looked into her email, Twitter, and Facebook accounts and found messages of increasing intimacy. He looked into her bank account and found that she’d purchased tickets to Las Vegas. Then he purchased one himself.

For Georgiana’s part, the entire ordeal was anticlimactic. She was half elated, half angry as she waited for her wedding to take place. She was only a little surprised to see her brother. He calmly walked into the room and closed the door behind himself. She cried when the first thing he said was, “You look beautiful.”

He was calm, and so was she, as he explained why there would be no wedding. He’d already spoken to the man she thought was Denny Carter, and he was preparing to leave. And then, instead of a wedding and a celebration, there was a long, painful talk.

“I want something that’s just about me,” she said, her mascara running. “Something I built for myself. I thought . . .” But she couldn’t say what she thought.
For the first time in his life, instead of just doing what he thought was best, he asked her, “What do you want me to do?”

They discussed what was best to be done with George Wickham, and Darcy agreed to bring the false credentials of his would-be brother-in-law to the attention of school administration. Georgiana would never see him again. Once they returned home she had almost lived in her music room, but every piece of music she’d ever received from Wickham was burned in anger.

And then, on Christmas morning, he and Georgiana were sitting on the floor by the Christmas tree. For the first time, he was less apprehensive about the holiday in general - he went out shopping with her, and hadn’t gotten dressed that morning, and actually told her what he wanted for Christmas, so she wouldn’t have to guess. After they’d opened gifts - the Superman t-shirt among them - and exchanged hugs, he made her coffee. As they leaned against one another, he was feeling grateful that she was there. And like thunder it occurred to him that the house meant nothing, as long as he had her - she was what had made it what it was since their mother’s death and their father’s depression. A tear rolled down his cheek. How had he not realized that?

“Georgiana,” he finally said, “do you still want to remodel the house?” She almost dropped her cup.

Now it was July, and he was wearing a too-thick Superman t-shirt under his long-sleeved dress shirt. He prayed he wouldn’t sweat through it on the walk from the hotel to the office building where he ran the company that his father had.

Georgiana called him as he walked through the hotel lobby, briefcase in hand. He paused to answer.

“You forgot my undershirts and my toothbrush.”

“Shoulda packed yourself,” she retorted. “Good morning.”

He smirked. “Morning, Ana Banana.”

“Hey, I just wanted to let you know, I have classes all day, and then I’m going out with some girlfriends, so I won’t be able to meet you for dinner.”

“Okay. Do you know what time you’ll be back?”

“Uh . . . later? I don’t know. That’s kind of what happens when you go out - you should try it sometime.”

He smirked. “Very funny, AB. Hey - do you know where I can get some coffee around here? The stuff in the room was sub-par.”

“You work two blocks away. Do you seriously not know?”

“I tend not to venture outside of my office, honestly.”

Georgiana sighed loudly. “Again with the going out. Anyway - there is an excellent independent coffee house on the corner. My favorite barista is Lydia - she’s got gorgeous tattoos on both arms. We’re a lot alike.”

“Any gorgeous tattoos on your arms have quite escaped my notice, I’m afraid,” said Darcy.

“No, you dork - our stories,” she clarified. “Anyway, yes - go there, it’s Longbourn Coffee House. I’ve got to go; I’ll talk to you later, okay?”
“Okay - have a good day, AB. Love you.”

“You too!”

The coffee house was relatively busy, when he walked inside. It was just past 8:00; there wasn’t much of a line. He took a moment to look around - the furnishings and decor weren’t the height of fashion, exactly, but everything was orderly and obviously well cared for. He glanced up at the menu, which was neatly hand-written in chalk.

“Can I get something started for you?”

Standing at the counter with a smile on her face was a young woman with long chestnut hair and big brown eyes. His eyes went to her forearms, which were disappointingly skin-colored. His brow furrowed.

“You’re not Lydia,” he said before he realized the words were forming on his lips. He cringed inwardly.

Georgiana had often told him he was incredibly dorkish in social situations, and he never knew this to be truer than at that moment. However, the woman smiled wider.

“Correct,” she said. “Was it the lack of tattoos, or the name tag that gave me away?”

Darcy approached the counter. “I’d just like a coffee. I’m assuming you have a tolerable enough dark roast.”

The woman - Lizzy, he learned from her name tag - perked her left eyebrow and laughed at him. “Oh, yes - it’s tolerable for sure,” she replied. “In fact, I’ll pour you my most tolerable. Would you like a tolerable amount of room for cream?”

He paused to look her over. She certainly wasn’t shy, which made him a little more nervous than usual. He didn’t necessarily like that his eyes were lingering on her lifted left eyebrow, or her glossed lips, still forming an impetuous and entirely genuine smile.

“Yes,” he said, and then realized he was scowling.

She rang it up. “Anything from the bakery? We carry a tolerable assortment of baked goods tolerably fresh from a tolerable local independent bakery.” Now bright pink, Darcy shook his head and wished she’d just take his money. “And will you be enjoying your tolerable dark roast here, or on your way to work?”

He paused and met her eyes. It was a mistake - they were sparkling, teasing. He liked them, which was a problem. Whenever he was attracted to anyone, even a little, he invariably said insensitive and vaguely stupid things like, “Why does that matter?”

The eyebrow arched further, and a little of the sparkle fizzled out. “Well, as congenial as you are, sir, I’d prefer it if you didn’t take my mugs out of the store.”

“I’ll be walking.” He fished his wallet out of his pocket and extracted a five dollar bill. “Where is Lydia?”

The smile melted from Lizzy’s face, and while he knew he hadn’t been entirely polite, he wasn’t sure why that question would elicit such a response. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in here before. Are you a friend of hers?”
The venom that crept into her voice gave Darcy pause. He didn’t know what to do, except surrender. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Lizzy lifted her chin and handed Darcy his change. “Lydia is my sister; she’s not in this morning.”

She turned to pour his coffee, and Darcy knew he’d been too blunt. *This is why I don’t go out, AB,* he thought. When Lizzy handed him the cup, she pointed out the counter where he could find cream and sugar, and then replaced her smile as she offered to help the person behind him.

Sighing, he moved toward the counter with his briefcase and coffee cup. He poured in the desired amount of cream and stirred, and when he took his first taste he had to admit that Georgiana had impeccable taste in coffee. He secured the lid and picked up his briefcase, and as he turned to exit the store, something caught his eye.

He’d never been drawn to children, not in the remotest way. But there was a little boy, no more than five, standing by the door. He had no shoes on, obviously didn’t know where he was, and there was a terrified expression on his face. Darcy looked around; no one in the store appeared to be this child’s parent.

Lizzy was steaming milk when he approached the bar again. “Excuse me.”

She lifted her eyebrow and chin, and darted her eyes away from her task long enough to communicate that she was listening.

“There’s a little boy by the door – do you know him?”

Her brow rumpled, and she moved the milk away from the steam. “A little boy?”

She was meeting his eyes again, and he had to look away for a moment. “I think he might be lost.”

Lizzy followed his gaze to the door, where there was, indeed, a little boy in a pair of shorts and an Iron Man t-shirt. “He’s got no shoes,” she said. She looked back at Darcy, and now her eyes were round with concern. He immediately looked back at the boy, while Lizzy handed her work off to one of the cashiers and came around the bar.

She approached slowly, he noticed, with a warm smile on her face. “Hello,” she said. The little boy’s eyes filled with tears immediately, and he stepped back. “Are you looking for your mom?”

The little boy said nothing, and was frozen; Darcy knew he was terrified. He could see tears forming in the boy’s eyes. Darcy knew the look well. When he was getting used to his father’s bouts of anger, he was sure he looked just the same himself. He worried that he was in trouble, worried that whatever had upset his father was his fault, and worried over how long it would be until he stopped.

He approached Lizzy slowly, as she asked follow up questions and got nothing but a teary-eyed stare in return. He set his cup and brief case down, and touched the barista’s arm gently. “Do you mind if I try?”

She was so astonished to find him still standing there, she shook her head. “No – no, go ahead.”

Darcy kept a respectable distance from the little boy. He bent down on his haunches and asked, “Can I show you something?” The boy hesitated, but nodded. Darcy kept eye contact with him as he moved his tie aside, and then unbuttoned the three buttons of his black dress shirt that covered his chest. Slowly, he parted the material, just enough that the boy could see the Superman logo.

The boy’s eyes went wide, and his mouth hung open a little.
Silently, Darcy put a finger to his lips. The boy mimicked him, and Darcy buttoned up his shirt. He motioned to the table where he’d put down his coffee cup, and the boy climbed up into a chair. Darcy sat across from him.

“What’s your name?”

“Carter.”

“Are you all right, Carter? Are you scared of something?” Carter paused a moment before he nodded. “What are you afraid of?” asked Darcy.

“I know I’m in trouble,” he said. “I left because I couldn’t find my dad, and then I got lost.”

Darcy smiled at him. “You’re not in trouble, Carter. I promise.”

“I thought there would be a policeman in here,” he whispered.

“Officer Lucas comes in all the time,” said Lizzy. “I think maybe we should call her. Is that okay?”

Carter’s eyes went even wider, and the tears spilled over. He sobbed, and then said, “Okay.”

Darcy leaned over the table. “Please don’t be afraid, Carter. I promise you, you’re not in trouble.”

Carter sobbed a few times. “Are you sure?”

“You’re not in trouble at all,” said Lizzy. “I’ll go call Officer Lucas. Are you hungry?” Carter nodded again, and Lizzy patted his back before she went behind the bar for the phone.

In the meantime, Carter hadn’t stopped staring wide-eyed at Darcy. “Can you really fly?” asked Carter.

“I fly all the time.” It wasn’t untrue, although he was certain Carter was not thinking of jumbo jets.

Darcy offered Carter his hand, and the little boy laid his grubby palm in Darcy’s. Darcy smiled, and explained that he had to call his friend Lois. Carter held his hand throughout the phone call, staring all the while. It made Darcy a little uncomfortable, but he held fast both to the boy’s grip and to his gaze.

“Okay,” announced Lizzy a few moments later as she walked up to their table, “I just got off the phone with Officer Lucas; she’ll be here as soon as she can. In the meantime, I brought you the most tolerable thing I could find for breakfast.” She set a warm chocolate chip muffin down in front of Carter, and placed a cold glass of chocolate milk next to it.

Without letting go of Darcy’s hand, Carter started on the muffin immediately.

“He does not wanna let go, does he?” asked Lizzy thoughtfully. Darcy looked up at her, but she only had eyes for the lost, and apparently very hungry, little boy.

“It would seem not, no.”

“Well, I’m glad you were able to get him to talk. I don’t have much of a magic touch when it comes to kids. My sisters do – especially Lydia; if she were here she’d have him eating out of her hand.”

“Maybe it’s not such a bad thing that she didn’t show up today.”

“She didn’t just not show up,” protested Lizzy, stepping away from the table. “She’s at the
convention center, running our booth. She’s not irresponsible just because she doesn’t wear a suit to work every day.”

Her eyes had him again, but not with a twinkle or concern. It was more like fire; it made his cheeks hot. He floundered a moment before he began, “I didn’t mean-”

“Lizzy!”

Then her eyes were lost, as they snapped over to the bar, where the cashier was calling her name. The line was forming again, and they needed her help. Without another word, she moved to operate the espresso machines.


“It’s so good,” he said, and then let out a long, satisfied, “Ahhhh!”

It was almost ten o’clock when Officer Lucas walked into the coffee house. Carter had not let go of Darcy’s hand, and the two of them now played checkers companionably on the table top.

Lizzy spotted her almost immediately; Charlotte Lucas was tall and she was also quite loud. She’d been a regular almost as soon as Lizzy had opened the doors of Longbourn Coffee House, some three years prior.

“Hey, Char!” she called, and then waved her over to the bar. “Busy morning, I take it.”

“Correct,” said Officer Lucas. “The convention center is packed, and there’s a protest at the courthouse. I’ve had crazies and drunks and self-important entitled businesspeople all morning.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Lizzy as she handed Officer Lucas her usual, which was nothing more elaborate than a cup of light roast with warm milk. “Your quarry is at that table.”

The officer followed Lizzy’s gaze. “Oh - is that his dad?”

“Nope. Honestly, I don’t know who that guy is. He came in this morning and was just kind of rude and awkward, so I’m surprised he’s still sitting there.”

“Interesting,” said Officer Lucas. “Well, I’m going to take his statement, and we’ll see if we can get some information out of him. Then we’ll have to wait for a child protection officer to come pick him up. I’m assuming it’s OK to wait here?”

“Absolutely,” said Lizzy.

“Okay. Why don’t you introduce me; I don’t want to scare him.”

Lizzy nodded and led Officer Lucas over to the table where Carter sat with the man who had his rapt attention. “Hi there,” she said. “This is Officer Lucas; she’s going to help you find your folks.”

Lizzy and Officer Lucas both noticed that Carter’s little hand squeezed his friend’s tighter. Officer
Lucas immediately pulled out a chair from another table and sat, so that the boy wouldn’t have to look so far up at her.

She introduced herself as Charlotte, and started asking questions about Carter’s parents. But waiting for the child protection officer quickly became unnecessary, as a rather unkempt gentleman walked through the door.

“Carter!” he barked.

Officer Lucas stood between the boy and the man who was apparently Carter's father. Carter all but leapt across the table into Darcy’s arms, and Darcy held him close. He held him even tighter when he recognized the man.

“Is that your father?” Darcy asked.

“Yes but I don't want to go with him,” sobbed Carter into Darcy's chest.

“I don't blame you.”

It was, without a doubt, George Wickham. Darcy’s nostrils flared, and Lizzy noticed. She also noticed Officer Lucas' hand hovering around her billy club, and the distinct sway in the man's posture.

“That's my son, you let him go,” slurred Wickham.

“He doesn't want to go with you,” said Darcy. “I can't imagine why.”

Wickham turned his head sideways. “Don't I know you?”

“Yes, you do,” snapped Darcy. “More particularly, you know my sister.”

Wickham's face paled a little, but he was undeterred, and evidently unimpressed with the presence of a law officer. “Doesn't matter. So you stopped me from marrying your stupid bitch of a sister, so what? You're not better than me.”

Darcy wanted to beg to differ, but not with Carter paying such close attention. “You really shouldn't swear in front of kids,” he said.

“Sir,” said Officer Lucas, “I need you to have a seat, please. We'll get this figured out.”

“All I did was leave the apartment for five minutes. I had to borrow a . . . something. From the neighbors. He's my kid, you have to give him to me.”

“Sir,” repeated the officer, “if you'll just sit down, please? We have some conflicting stories here, but I'm sure it won't take long to get this figured out. All right?”

“I'm not sitting down, I just want my kid!” he barked.

Officer Lucas paused to allow the stench of alcohol clear her general vicinity before she drew breath and spoke again. “The problem is, sir, that you appear to be a little intoxicated. I can't let Carter go with you like this.”

Wickham swayed. “I'm not drunk,” he mumbled.

“Mmm-hmm.” Officer Lucas positioned a chair behind him and tugged on his shoulder, and he collapsed almost immediately. “Now, sir – why don't you tell me what Carter's mom's name is?”
“I don't have to tell you anything!”

“Fine. What's your name?”

Wickham was silent, so Darcy supplied the information. “It's George Wickham. Unless you're going by Denny Carter again?”

Wickham pointed at Darcy, who still held his son. “You shut up!”

Officer Lucas' interest was piqued, however, and she addressed the drunk man. “You have public intoxication and endangering a minor already. Do I get to add identity theft, too?” Wickham glared silently at Darcy. “How 'bout you just tell me where I can find Carter's mom?”

“Her name's Mary King,” mumbled Wickham. While the officer extracted the remaining information out of the drunk man, Lizzy turned to Darcy with no little amount of astonishment.

“You're Ana's brother.”

He looked up at her, still holding Carter close. “Yes.” He swallowed, not wanting to let either Lizzy or Carter hear the anger he felt in his voice. “Ana said Lydia was her favorite barista. She said they were a lot alike. I was hoping to meet Lydia and thank her for her kindness toward Ana.”

Lizzy nodded. “Your sister is fantastic,” she said. “It’s not just Lydia that likes her around here, it’s the whole staff.”

“She’s all I have,” said Darcy. He didn’t know why; maybe it was the remnants of the fear he’d felt on the plane to Las Vegas all those months ago, or lingering doubt that he’d been able to change and give her the space she’d needed so much. Maybe it was because Lizzy’s eyes were too open, too genuine to close himself off. “I don’t know what Lydia’s story is, but I almost lost Ana. I can easily understand why you’d be so protective of Lydia.”

“She’ll be at the convention center all week,” said Lizzy. “She’ll be back on Friday afternoon, if you want to come by. She’s a talker though, so - you know. Prepare.”

Darcy smiled at her, and hugged Carter, who’d calmed down. “You okay, buddy?” asked Lizzy. Carter nodded. They watched together as Officer Lucas’ backup arrived, and took Wickham outside for a field sobriety test, which, by the looks of it, he’d fail spectacularly.

Officer Lucas spent a few moments talking into her radio, and then approached Carter. “Hey bud,” she said, “sounds like your mom’s on her way. You’re going to go home with her, okay?”

“Ohay,” said Carter. “Is she mad?”

“Not at you. But let’s talk about what to do if this ever happens again, okay? You could’ve gotten hurt or really, really lost.”

Carter nodded and listened while Officer Lucas gave him safety tips, and Lizzy felt compelled to help out behind the counter again. About fifteen minutes later, a blonde woman in scrubs came rushing in carrying a pair of children’s shoes, and Carter sprang from Darcy’s lap into her arms. She sobbed and vacillated between telling Carter not to ever walk away from the apartment again and telling him how sorry she was. Officer Lucas let her know that someone from child protection would be contacting her, and while Darcy took Carter over to the bakery case to pick out a treat, Officer Lucas filled Mary King in on Carter’s reaction to his father, and coached her on a handful of other things, including obtaining a restraining order, if it became necessary.
Tearfully, Mary thanked Darcy and Lizzy for comforting her son. Officer Lucas, with Wickham tucked safely in the back of her cruiser, waved good-bye to Lizzy and headed out. Then Carter gave Darcy one more hug.

Before he left, with one hand around his juice box and the other around his mother’s hand, Carter looked up at Darcy conspiratorially. “Show her,” he whispered, flicking his eyes toward Lizzy.

Darcy knelt down, confused. “Show her what?”

Carter smiled. “This!” he said, poking a finger into Darcy’s chest.

Darcy blushed a little, having honestly forgotten that he was supposed to be Superman. “Oh – I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“You hafta show her,” insisted Carter.

“Say goodbye, Carter,” instructed Mary.

“Bye, Clark!” Carter waved, and they walked out of the store together, smiling.

Darcy stood, waving until Carter could no longer see him.

“So, it’s Clark, then?”

Darcy was startled by Lizzy’s sudden presence next to him. “What? No . . . no. That’s not my name.”

She waited for him to offer up his name, but he didn’t. She lifted the cup in her hand. “Peace offering?” she said. “It’s tolerably fresh.”

“Thank you,” he said with a smile, and accepted the cup. He turned around to use the creamer on the counter just behind him, and enjoyed a few long sips before replacing the lid. “It’s more than tolerable,” he told her as he turned to face her again. “It’s actually quite exceptional.”

Lizzy blushed. “Thank you,” she replied. She observed him a moment, and then began, “Um . . . listen . . . you and I got off on the wrong foot. I tend to get defensive about certain things – my coffee and my sister among them. Can we start over?”

His eyes softened. “I would really love that.”

She held out her hand. “Lizzy Bennet.”

He took her hand and noted with no small degree of pleasure that it was soft and warm, and that she shook firmly. “William Darcy.”

“It’s nice to meet you, William.”

“She pleasure is all mine,” he replied. “I’d be happy to pay for Carter’s breakfast, by the way.”

She waved her free hand. “No, no. Company policy – all lost little boys receive one free breakfast.” He laughed a little, and so did she, but it quickly became apparent that he didn’t know what to say next, so she asked, “What are you supposed to show me?”


“Well, now you have to show me!” she declared. “I’m way too curious; you’ll never get out of the
store without showing me.”

Darcy let out a breath and smiled a tiny bit. His cheeks were on fire. Reluctantly, he set his coffee cup down and reached up to unbutton his shirt.

The sparkle came back into Lizzy’s eyes, and she smiled gleefully. “You told him you were Superman?”

“I showed him my shirt. He drew his own conclusions.”

“More like Super Awkward Man,” she laughed. “That is fantastic!”

She was laughing at him, but it was okay. She was directing those intoxicating eyes toward him. He shrugged a little and allowed himself a real smile. “It worked.”

“Yeah, it did.”

Her smile faded a little bit, but not from her eyes. He held them for a long moment, until embarrassment make him look away briefly. “So . . . it’s well-established between you and I that I’m a little awkward,” he said.

“A pinch, yes.”

“That kind of makes me feel slightly more awkward asking you if you would like to have dinner with me tonight.”

Now it was Lizzy’s cheeks that were on fire. “That wasn’t awkward at all,” she replied. “In fact, it was tolerably sweet.”

He relaxed into a full-blown smile and shook his head. “I’m never going to live that down, am I?”

“No,” replied Lizzy. “But I will have dinner with you.”

“You will?”

“Surprised?”

“Kind of,” he admitted. “Um . . . why don’t you just meet me at the steak house across the street – is 8:00 okay? Unless of course you don’t eat meat, in which case I’m sure there’s a vegetarian – or maybe vegan? – restaurant somewhere close by that you could recommend?”

She was laughing again. “I eat anything,” she replied. “Almost literally. Eight is fine, the steakhouse is fine. I’ll see you then.”

“Okay.” Instinctively, he held out his hand. With suppressed laughter, she reached out to shake it. But he was able, just in time, to turn her hand and raise it to his lips to press a soft kiss to her knuckles. Her cheeks flared, and her heart melted a little bit, and they both spent the day wishing 8:00 was just a little closer.
The Date

AB, need your help. Please call.

Upon reflection, Darcy acknowledged that the text to his sister sounded far more urgent than it actually was. He also had to acknowledge that he should have expected the reaction he received; namely, she didn’t believe him. He’d been on a grand total of two dates in the same number of years, both of which had been set up by her.

Of course, he’d left out the part where a drunk George Wickham had stormed into Longbourn Coffee House to demand his son. He’d left Carter out of it entirely, as a matter of fact. All he said was, “I have a date. Which of these ties am I allowed to wear?”

“Depends,” she’d said briskly. “Who’s the date with? Someone important, or is this a bullshit business quote-unquote date with Caroline Bingley who you won’t flat-out tell no because you’re chicken?”

Darcy paused a beat. “I’m not chicken. She knows I’m not interested.”

“No, she doesn’t. Anyway, if it’s Caroline, wear sweats and a stained t-shirt, please.”

“It’s not Caroline. It’s a real, important date.”

“With…?”

“Well, you directed me to that coffee house this morning,” he replied, flipping through the suits hanging in the hotel closet.

“So . . . what? Ooh, did you meet Lydia? Isn’t she great? She’s not really your type though.”

“I didn’t meet Lydia, she wasn’t in,” he said, remembering the color in Lizzy’s cheeks. It made his own blush a little.

“Ah – you must have met Jane, then,” surmised Georgiana. “She’s so dang sweet. And holy cow – probably the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen, and her peanut butter cookies? To die for. She’s not your type either, but she’ll let you down easy.”

“I didn’t realize I had a type,” mused Darcy. “Is any of what you packed suitable for a date?”


“Lizzy,” he replied, as though she ought to have known all along. “So – what? I wore the black shirt with the white tie this morning.”

His sister guffawed. “You do not have a date with Lizzy Bennet.”

“I do,” said Darcy. “I have a very real, very important date with Lizzy Bennet, on which I can not act like a donkey, and I need you to help me dress for it so that I can at least try to disarm her with my looks. And it’s not looking good right now, frankly – I don’t have any undershirts!”
Georgiana was unmoved by his frustration. “I can’t believe it. How did this happen?”

“It’s very simple, AB – I walked into the store, bought some coffee, and asked if she’d like to have dinner tonight. Because you are ditching me for your friends. And you made fun of me for never going out. And none of these shirts are dark enough to cover up this Superman logo.”

“You really, for realsies, have a date with Lizzy Bennet?”

“Yes, for realsies. Why? Is she so untouchable?”

“No, she just doesn’t put up with any bull. You’re kind of alike that way, I guess.” She paused a moment, and then said, “What Superman logo?”

“The Superman logo on the Superman t-shirt you bought me for Christmas, because I am apparently some kind of Superman who cannot dress himself.”

Georgiana laughed in his ear. “Oh, William . . . you are a mess, aren’t you? Why are you so nervous?”

He sighed. He honestly didn’t know. “I don’t want to act any more awkward in front of her than I already have.”

“So, it’s a little bit less simple than walking in and asking for dinner.” He could hear the smile in her voice.

“Yes, a little. Stop laughing at me.”

She didn’t. “I’m coming home – well, to the hotel. I’ll just be a little late meeting my friends. Actually, since you are so particular about the undershirt business, let’s just meet at the department store up the block. You can buy something shiny and new.”

When all was said and done, Georgiana had Darcy outfitted nicely in a white button-down shirt with a deep green tie, light gray vest, and dark blue jeans. His sleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows, and the green complimented his coloring nicely.

“Don’t be nervous,” she said, holding his upper arms. “You look great, and all you have to do is relax and be yourself.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “I’m socially awkward and she already knows it.”

“Don’t make sweeping generalizations about her sister, and you’re cool.” She straightened his tie. “I mean, probably. She does like to tease.”

“That’s comforting,” he replied, taking one more glance in the mirror.

“William.” He turned at the sound of his sister’s voice. There was a look of pleading on her face. “Relax, okay? You have nothing to worry about. Maybe you’ll be a little awkward and Lizzy will tease you a little, but that’s just how she is. You kind of have to accept that if you want to spend time with her.”

He let out a breath. “Why is this personal stuff is so out of my element, Ana?”

“I don’t know, William. You didn’t have the best examples, maybe. Or maybe you’re just naturally
shy. But honestly . . . you just don’t put yourself out there. You don’t practice.”

“That doesn’t help me now. This isn’t a practice date, it’s a real date with someone I really like.”

Georgiana smiled at him. “Who better to practice with?”

He sighed and nodded, and withdrew his phone from his pocket to check the time. It was a quarter to eight.

“Put that thing on silent,” she reminded him. “No work or other BS tonight, okay? Nothing’s worse.”

He slipped the phone back into his pocket. “I’m not quite that bad,” he said. Then he smiled and kissed her cheek, and with promises of information later on, he left the hotel.

Lizzy was exiting the coffee house as he approached. He saw her step out and turn to lock the door. Then, to his horror, he saw Bill Collins approach. He was, aside from being a blatant ass-kiss, one of the best agents on his staff. Darcy was more than a half a block away and could only hope that Collins would just confirm that the shop was closed, and walk away. In the other direction. Into a black hole, preferably.

Unfortunately, he and Lizzy stood discussing something. Collins appeared to be as simpering as ever, and Lizzy – well, Lizzy wasn’t facing Darcy, so he wasn’t sure. But he liked the back of her bright blue dress.

“I understand it’s very difficult for local independent businesses to compete in such a tight market,” Collins was saying, with a smile. “I can see the stress lines in your face each time we meet.”

Darcy stepped next to Lizzy. He forced himself not to stare, but she looked utterly lovely. Her hair hung loose down her back in big waves, and it was tucked behind her right ear. The bright blue of her sleeveless dress showed off the freckles on her shoulders, and the skirt fell right at her knees. He took a brief look at her bright red polished toes, peeking out of her high heeled shoes, and then swiftly up at his agent. “Bill,” he said by way of greeting.

“Oh – Darcy! Hello!” Collins put his hand on Darcy’s upper arm. “May I present Miss Elizabeth Bennet – we’ve been discussing her building. It is the epitome of prime real estate!”

“Yes, I know Lizzy,” he said evenly. “We met this morning. She makes an excellent cup of coffee.” He looked over at Lizzy’s clearly agitated face. “I didn’t know you were acquainted with any of my staff.”

Lizzy put on her own best fake smile. “Actually, Darcy, Mr. Collins and I are less acquainted and more hunter-and-hunted. He’s tried several times now to get me to put my building on the market, and I’ve told him several times now that I am not interested. I didn’t realize you worked for the same company.”

Darcy could tell that his date was already in jeopardy, and it hadn’t even begun yet. He turned to Collins, who he could speak to without fumbling words. “What’s the interest in this particular
building?”

Collins’ face took on a confused look. “Well, Darcy . . . I mean . . . it’s a downtown building. Why would there not be interest in it?”

“But Miss Bennet has clearly stated she’s not interested in selling.” He turned to Lizzy. “Yes?”

“Yes,” she replied tersely.

He raised his eyebrows at Collins.

“Particularly,” continued Lizzy, “because the world does not need another goddamned Starbucks. And because this is a beautiful old building, even if it doesn’t have any official historic significance. And because people live in it, including me. And because it’s belonged to my family since it was built.”

Darcy could hear the anger in her voice; it was more intense than this morning. He knew Collins wasn’t good at taking no for an answer, and for the most part, that served him – prime real estate was, in fact, their business. But from a personal standpoint, he didn’t want Lizzy angry at him before he’d had a chance to see if she’d like him, and from a business perspective, he couldn’t support harassment. He turned to Lizzy. “Would you give Mr. Collins and me a moment?”

“Sure.” She flicked her eyes aside, wanting him to get on with it.

Darcy led Collins a few steps away. “Bill, you need to let this one go.”

He gaped at Darcy a moment. “Darcy, have you any idea of the potential of this building? I don’t mean the building itself – the space? Knock it down, put a proper restaurant in at street level and build condos! Do you have any idea how much this is worth?”

He leveled a significant stare at Collins. “I know my own business, Mr. Collins.” His voice was dark.

He backed off a little. “Of course you do – of course, Darcy. But honestly, the market is just starting to turn in our favor. We need to take advantage of any opportunity like this one.”

“Bill, it’s not an opportunity if the owner doesn’t want to sell,” he reasoned. “Not to mention the fact that we can’t go on buying up old buildings and putting local shops out of business when we are a local business, and we market ourselves that way.”

Collins sighed. “Darcy, I’ve been working on this for months.”

“I understand. I need you to let this one go, though. She’s not interested, and we don’t need bad press.” Darcy knew Collins wouldn’t fight with him, not much anyway.

Collins let out a long breath, and nodded. “All right.” He looked around at the dwindling traffic a little, and then back at Darcy. “All right. Can I buy you a drink?”

“Sorry, Bill,” he replied, a little nervous. “I have plans this evening. With Lizzy.”

“Oh.” His eyebrows raised, Collins turned toward Lizzy, whose arms were crossed. “Oh,” said Collins. “I see; I am so sorry, I didn’t realize-”
“It’s all right, Bill,” he said, stepping closer to Lizzy again. “I appreciate your work, but it looks like this one’s off limits. Okay?”

“Yes, of course - I apologize, Miss Bennet; it looks like we don’t have a deal after all,” he said. “Of course, I never meant to offend – I’m just very persistent.”

“Of course,” Lizzy deadpanned, still not impressed.

“Enjoy your dinner,” Collins said, and Darcy swore he bowed a little as he said it. “Darcy, I’ll see you at the office tomorrow.”

“Have a good evening,” he replied as Collins walked away.

Darcy watched him go, and then turned toward Lizzy. His eyes were closed, and he let out a long, deep breath. “I am so sorry.” He opened his eyes, only to be met with hers – the beautiful, round eyes he’d found intoxicating that morning were no less so this evening.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“He’s been on my case for months. How can you just make him go away like that?”

“Well . . .” Darcy colored a little, and then reached into his pocket for his wallet and extracted a business card.

H. F. Darcy  
CEO  
Pemberley Enterprises, Inc.

She lifted her eyebrows, and then took the card. “Oh. This is you?”

“Yes,” he replied. “My grandfather started the company when he came back from war without a left hand.”

Lizzy fingered the card curiously, and then looked up at Darcy. “Listen, I’m sure he’s good at his job. I just don’t want to sell. This has always been the Longbourn Building; I’d be heartbroken if it were ever anything else. Or worse - if it were destroyed.” Then she laughed a little, slipping the card into her purse. “Honestly, for making him go away - I could kiss you.”

His cheeks flushed a bright pink and he smiled at her. “I really wouldn’t mind.”

She chuckled. “Let’s save it for later?” He nodded and was sure his cheeks turned even pinker. “You look really nice, by the way. I like that green on you.”

“Oh - thank you,” he said, looking down at himself. He’d forgotten how important it had been not an hour ago to make sure his clothes were just right, and now he realized she probably wouldn’t have minded if he hadn’t changed. “Ana picked it out for me. You, um . . . you look . . .”

She chuckled again when he was lost for words. “Tolerable?”
“Stunning,” he said. He hadn’t meant to; he was trying to come up with something in between ‘nice’ and ‘stunning’. He watched her blush and enjoyed the spectacle.

“Oh. Thanks,” she said, a little uneasy.

He shook his head ruefully, and looked down at his shoes. “Sorry. As you might remember from this morning, I don’t really have a filter. I mean, I just admitted to you that I didn’t dress myself, which was kind of stupid. Ana reminds me of that almost every day. But I really do think you look stunning.”

“Well,” she said, taking pity on him, “I suppose it’s okay as long as it’s genuine,” she said. “Look, um . . . in the interest of full disclosure, your sister came by the shop this afternoon and told me how nervous you are.”

“Oh.” Darcy nodded, and made mental note to throttle his sister later. “Um. That doesn’t make me less nervous.”

“I know,” she replied. “But I thought maybe . . . if we just didn’t pretend we’re not nervous . . . you’d be a little less awkward and I’d be a little less eager to jump in and finish your sentences with sassy words.”

He smiled at her. “Maybe that’ll help. Do you want to go across the street?”

“Yes!” she declared. “I am actually really starving.”

He gestured, and she led the way. The steakhouse was just across the street from Longbourn Coffee House, and down a few doors. He held the door for her and she breezed inside, and he enjoyed the back of her dress again. The hostess seated them almost right away, given that it was a later hour during the week.

“Do you mind if I order the wine?” he asked, and when she shook her head, he turned to the waiter to make his request. Once the waiter had gone, he turned to her and smiled. “It’s one of my favorite bottles - I hope you like it. I’m sorry; I should’ve asked - do you like red wine?”

She laughed a little. “I do - coffee connoisseurs usually enjoy fine wine as well. There are some of the same complexities in good coffee that exist in a good bottle of wine.”

“I’ve often heard that,” said Darcy. “I confess, I know I like a darker roast, but beyond that I’m not very educated on coffee’s nuances.”

“I’d be happy to to teach you,” said Lizzy, the color in her cheeks rising again. “After dinner, we can go back across the street. I don’t honestly know what I have for dessert, but I’m sure there’s something, and I can roast you your own batch of coffee.”

“That sounds fantastic.”

He was content to let her do most of the talking during the appetizer. She talked about the history of the Longbourn Building and about her family - her four sisters and her parents, and her aunt and uncle who managed the residences above the coffee house.

“Did you like having so many sisters?” he asked. “Ana and I just have each other. I can’t imagine what it would have been like with three more siblings in the house.”

She smiled and blushed. “Now? Yes - I like all my sisters. Back when we were kids? Forget it,” she rolled her eyes with a smile. “Too much estrogen, seriously. And we lived upstairs, you know? Not
too much space back then.”

“There’s more now?” he asked.

“My dad and uncle worked on remodeling the interior of the building when Jane went to college,” she said. “By the time Lydia was out of high school all of the apartments were done.”

Their conversation paused naturally then, as their dinners were served to them. Once the waiter was gone, Darcy picked up his fork and turned to her. “Speaking of Lydia,” he said, “what’s her story? Ana seems very fond of her.”

“Well,” said Lizzy, “I mean . . . it’s not really my story to tell. I guess the Cliff’s notes version of it is - she got involved with a man whose intentions he misrepresented and she misinterpreted. There was some . . . unpleasantness with some DEA officers, which led to some legal troubles, which led to Lydia pulling away from us almost entirely. Not a great couple of years.” She looked up at Darcy, whose eyes were just so concerned she had to smile. “I think she and Ana helped each other, honestly. They’d talk for long hours - Ana still comes in when Lydia’s done with her shift.”

“Sounds like they’re good friends,” he said.

“I think so,” she replied, and then looked at his barely-touched plate. “I still can’t believe you ordered the fish in a steak house.”

He blushed. “I actually really like this place,” he said quietly. He considered telling her that he had fond memories of eating lunch there with his father, before his mother had died.

She saved him having to choose a reply by surmising, “I see - can’t have steak all the time. It’s really bad for you.” She took a bite of her dinner then - the filet - and closed her eyes as she chewed. “But this is soo good.”

He smiled, recalling Carter’s similar comment from that morning. “That’s what Carter said this morning,” he said. “He was pretty impressed with your breakfast selection.”

“Can’t ever go wrong with chocolate,” she replied. “That chocolate chip muffin is one of my favorites.”

Darcy smiled at her. Lizzy sipped her wine, resting against the back of the chair with her hand in her lap. “Um . . . Lizzy,” he began, and hoped like hell what he wanted to say would come out right, “if I didn’t say so before, thanks for the chance to start over.”

She smiled and leaned in. “You and I certainly ran the gamut this morning, didn’t we?” she mused as she set her wine down next to her plate. “Kind of makes me wonder if I’m always that way with people.”

Darcy tilted his head a little. “To be fair, we did touch on some very personal things – I don’t think that’s normal for this soon in a relationship.” Immediately realizing that what he’d just said could be taken the wrong way, he stammered, “I mean – you know – in general terms. We just met . . . I didn’t mean that you and I . . . that this implies . . . oh, Christ.” He picked up his wine and took a long sip.

But she just laughed at him. “I know what you meant,” she replied. “Are you always this unsure of yourself?”

“Socially only,” he replied. “I sometimes surprise myself with how utterly cool-headed and confident
I am at work, no matter how difficult the situation is. So that’s a comfort – I won’t be able to build a family, but Pemberley will be an empire by the time I’m fifty.” He took another long drink of his wine again, and then looked over at Lizzy, who looked like she wanted to burst out laughing. “What?”

“That was super-awkward first date commentary and I don’t think you even know it.”

He looked down at his plate uncomfortably and knew his cheeks were on fire again. He heard her let out a breath.

“Look, um . . . William? Darcy? I never even asked you which you prefer . . . just relax, okay? I mean, I’m not really sure what you’re this nervous about.”

Then he felt her hand on his – it was soft and gentle, and she was squeezing just a little. He looked down at her hand and had to repress the urge to take it into both of his own and hold it tighter.

But then she removed it, and when his eyes followed to hers he knew she’d misinterpreted his longing look for one of irritation. “This is going to be awkward.”

“What is?”

“I am going to tell you something I need you to not repeat. Ever.”

Lizzy’s eyebrow shot up. “Oh. . . kay.”

Darcy closed his eyes, let out a long breath, and said, “Ana tells me I have resting bitchface and she isn’t wrong.” He could tell, when he opened his eyes, that she wanted to laugh again. He was grateful that she didn’t. “I often have difficulty expressing myself. I didn’t want you to move your hand, I wanted to hold it tighter.”

She colored and slipped her hand back over to rest on top of his.

He held her eyes for a long moment. “William,” he said quietly. “Please, call me William.”

She smiled. “William.” Then her brow crinkled a little and she tilted her head. “Your card doesn’t say William - it says H. F. Darcy. What’s that stand for?”

“It’s Henry Fitzwilliam,” he replied. “Honestly, I’ve always hated it.”

“Well’s that?”

He shrugged. “It’s my dad’s name, and his father’s name, and . . . several additional generations,” he replied. “When I was a child, I wanted to be called Simon.”

She chuckled and squeezed his hand, letting it go so she could take up her fork again. “Why Simon?” she asked.

His hand felt cold; he put it in his lap. “I couldn’t tell you,” he admitted. He contemplated her for a long moment while she stabbed an asparagus spear with her fork and then ate it. “So . . . what’s your story, Lizzy Bennet? Why coffee?”

She blushed. “Life-long obsession,” she confessed, setting down her fork. “My dad, he always started his day with a cup of coffee - all by himself, no one around but him. I always thought it was
about the coffee; I didn’t realize it was about starting your day with a clear head and some solitude.
Anyway, one morning - I think I was about eight - I snuck into the kitchen and he let me take a sip of
his coffee, thinking that I wouldn’t like it, but I did.” She shrugged her shoulders and cut another
slice of steak. “That morning, with my dad, all warm and cozy in the kitchen, actually having a
conversation with him - I felt so grown up. . . . I knew that what I wanted to do for a living was re-
create that feeling for other people.”

Darcy smiled at her. “That’s really inspiring,” he said quietly.

Lizzy laughed. “My dad said it was stupid,” she said. “He fought it tooth and nail for a ridiculously
long time. Said I’d be better off working at Starbucks through college and then managing one of their
stores. But, lucky for me, he taught me to be stubborn.”

“That’s always helpful when you have a goal in mind,” said Darcy, no longer interested in his
dinner.

“I doubted myself many times,” she admitted. “It’s really not an easy market.”

Darcy nodded. “Several years ago there was a lot of pressure from the board of directors to merge
with one of the bigger real estate corporations. I felt about the same way you feel about selling the
Longbourn building.”

She smiled at him and sat back in her seat. “You must be a little stubborn yourself.”

He laughed at that. “Ana could tell you stories.”

Her smiled deepened, and to his delight, the sparkle from this morning had returned. She sighed after
a moment and reached for her wine. “I am so full . . . those potatoes are almost better than my
grandma’s.”

He reached for his own wine and drained the glass, wondering what it was like to have a grandma
who made mashed potatoes. He wanted to ask, but knew it wouldn’t come out quite right. Instead he
leaned in and set his elbows on the table. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. This is one of my favorite places
in the city.”

“Really? Why’s that?” she asked.

He reddened, but for her genuinely interested expression, he was willing to be a little vulnerable.
“Well . . . I used to come here with my dad. I was really kind of little for a place like this, but I was a
quiet kid, so no one minded. He worked a lot, so . . . .” He trailed off and shrugged, looking away
briefly. “Some of my favorite memories of him are here.”

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” she said, and she reached her hand across the table again.

He smiled when their fingers connected. Their eyes locked, and when Darcy could feel his ears
burning he couldn’t help speaking again. “There’s . . . another place in the city I’m very fond of - um
. . . the falls, just south of here. The park is beautiful; it feels like you’re miles away. Maybe this
weekend, I could show you all my favorite places there.”

“That sounds like fun,” she said.

Her response made his heart thump happily in his chest, and a thrill shot through his arm when her
thumb caressed the back of his hand gently. “You promised coffee.”

“I did. Let’s go have some.”
Darcy walked through the door of his hotel room at one thirty in the morning, his lips still tingling with the feeling of having kissed Lizzy; the rest of his body and mind alive with the energy it had given him. He knew he wouldn’t sleep much that night, if at all. The scene kept replaying itself in his head.

It had been, without a doubt, a patented first date kiss. The difference was, for the first time in his life, it wasn’t awkward. She’d taken him to the back of the store, where the roasters were, and explained the process to him. He listened intently, but watched her even more so. Her eyes were so bright, explaining processes that she had begun perfecting in high school in her parents’ kitchen; she was truly passionate about what she did and Darcy knew that whatever happened, he’d always admire Lizzy Bennet.

Then she’d set her smaller roaster to work, roasting him his own personal batch, and while they waited she brewed just enough of her favorite decaf blend for the two of them to enjoy a cup, sitting together in her tiny office.

When the beans were done, were cooled and then ground, she packed them in a bag labeled “Darcy’s Blend.” She made sure he had filters and knew how to brew it just right. And then they were saying goodnight and Darcy could not stop smiling. She teased him; he colored. And then, without thinking, he slid his left hand against her right cheek softly, and laid a gentle kiss on her lips. He hesitated to pull away; she kissed him back.

They settled on Sunday to see the falls. He kissed her hand before he turned to leave, and made sure she’d locked the door securely behind him before he walked the two blocks to the hotel.

Ana had been waiting for him. She’d fallen asleep on the couch. He set his keys and wallet down, and put the coffee next to the maker. Then he sat down next to Ana and shook her gently.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. “You’re back,” she said groggily. “How’d it go?”

Darcy smiled. “I was awkward, she teased me,” he replied. “It was fantastic.”

Ana’s eyes softened and she reached over to hug her brother. “Yay!”

He lingered in the embrace of his sister for a moment, and suddenly remembered the details of what had gone on that morning. He’d need to tell her, but it could wait for tomorrow. For the time being, he was content to send her to bed with the promise of a cup of custom Longbourn coffee in the morning, and all the details of his date with Lizzy Bennet.

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