

# Portrait of a Summer

## ~Part One~

*I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks. ~Harper Lee*

William Darcy was in a bad mood. He was in a town filled with people he didn't understand, he was dealing with unusually humid air, and he had gotten lost three times already on the way to work. It made no sense to him how every damn street in Atlanta had to be named Peachtree Street. He had complained on the phone to his sister the night before that perhaps the people down there really were as ignorant as everyone sniggered about. After all, who the hell agrees to have a governor named Sonny Perdue? When someone had told him, he'd thought they had been joking.

The worst part of the whole miserable endeavor was the fact that he was stuck in the city all summer and for three whole months he was expected to drive in the hellish traffic, deal with the overly friendly civilians, and walk through sheets of humidity as the sun blazed down on him in his dark business suits. He was, to put it gently, seriously displeased.

He stopped that Monday morning at the first coffee shop he saw to regroup with a much deserved container of caffeine. Settling himself at a small table, he thankfully sipped the warm coffee he held in his hands. It did wonders for his mood and in a moment he was able to raise his head and survey his surroundings without the urge to tear off someone's head.

The coffee shop was small and neat. It was obvious that the place was individually owned but was miraculously still thriving in spite of the crazed chaining of Starbucks every five feet. Inside it contained a few over-stuffed couches, and outside was a nice canopied patio with small tables. One of which he had chosen as his own that morning. Leaning back in his chair, he quickly surveyed the other lounging customers. Grunge teens, token man with a laptop, a line of frenzied to-go orders, and a young woman sitting alone at a table beside the road. Immediately, his attention was drawn to her. She was dressed comfortably in a light colored blouse and jeans punctuated with flip-flops. She seemed to be simply looking on as the world hurried by, anxious to begin the day. This woman, Darcy noted, did not seem quite as anxious. She looked perfectly at ease.

Shrugging his shoulders, Darcy focused his attention on the newspaper he'd just purchased. With a furrowed brow, he studied the business section, criticizing and scoffing whenever it felt necessary.

Soon, however, without any voluntary prompting from himself, his eyes drifted back over to the woman as she sat drinking her coffee and watching the day. To his mortification, she turned her head and caught him sitting there, blatantly staring at her. Eyes locked with hers, he half expected her to say something. Instead, she simply dipped her chin and granted him with a closed-lipped smile of acknowledgement before turning her eyes back

to the street. Supposing she had chosen this method to say, *I know you are looking at me, please stop*, Darcy thought he'd better be on his way. As he walked out the door, however, he took one last glimpse of her over his shoulder before he left to begin his day.

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The next few days were not enjoyable for Darcy in the slightest. Work was busy, the traffic was terrible, the natives were still over friendly, and the weather was consistently hot and miserable.

He didn't have time to call his sister to complain, or even stop for coffee. The most meaningful acquaintance he had made was with the man who delivered his daily order of Chinese food.

On Friday morning, Darcy decided to treat himself with a stop for coffee. After such a week, he reasoned that he deserved it. He ordered, grabbed a newspaper, paid, and settled himself at a table with his container of coffee. To some, it might have been redundant to end a week exactly how he had begun it, but Darcy thought some familiarity was nice, especially in a town full of strangers.

Sipping his coffee, he took a quick survey of the patio. Grunge teens (check), token man with laptop (check), frenzied line of to-go orders (check), lady without a care (check). Satisfied with his surroundings, he relaxed and opened his paper.

After only a few minutes, however, he found himself unable to concentrate. Pulling down the newspaper, he looked over at the woman seated at her table beside the street. She had the same wistful, carefree expression as she'd had on Monday. Darcy couldn't help but muse that her life must have been much more enjoyable than his own. He hadn't been that relaxed in...well, *ever*. Taking her lead, Darcy made a mental note to try to relax more. Lazily he wondered if this was where she came every morning. Deciding it was best that she not catch him staring again, Darcy stood, folded his paper, and left with his coffee in hand. As he walked away he wondered if she would be there tomorrow.

On Saturday, Darcy was disappointed not to find the woman seated at her usual table. Buying a paper and some coffee anyway, he sat down and decided to wait. Saturday, he reasoned, was more of a brunch day anyway. A triumph to his hopes, a half-hour later, the young woman arrived and after ordering, sat at her table. With her was a pretty blonde who laughed and called her, 'Lizzy.'

*Lizzy*, he thought. Yes, she looked like a Lizzy.

As was his habit, he paused from his reading to study her. She was wearing a creamy peach sundress that fit loosely and complimented her wavy chestnut hair. In his opinion, she was gently beautiful; nothing severe at all about her features. She was all softness and smiles, the expressiveness of her appearance all in her sparkling dark eyes. He liked watching her smile at the blonde, who, from what he could tell, was obviously close with

her and extremely pregnant. Dragging his eyes away before she could catch his gaze, Darcy brought his attention back to his paper.

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“Okay,” Lizzy said as soon as the man looked back down. “It’s safe to look, but be quick about it.”

Following her sister’s instructions, Jane quickly glanced over her shoulder, getting a brief glimpse of the man Lizzy had told her about.

“He’s so handsome, Lizzy,” Jane said softly, turning back around.

“I honestly didn’t expect him to be here today,” Lizzy admitted, sipping her coffee. “I’ve only seen him here twice, but he looks at me as intently as he reads his paper.”

“But you don’t feel uncomfortable, like he’s a creep or anything?” Jane asked, leaning over the table to whisper.

“No, not at all,” Lizzy replied honestly, shaking her head. “He seems harmless.”

Jane smiled sweetly, “He thinks you’re pretty.”

“Maybe,” Lizzy smiled. Slowly, she let her eyes creep up to look over at the man. He was still concentrating on his paper. It was the first time she had seen him dressed casually and she paused, taking in his appearance. Instead of his heavy business suit he wore a pair of khaki shorts and a cream colored button up shirt. Lizzy was pleased to find the ensemble was punctuated with brown leather sandals.

“He looks good, Lizzy, why don’t you talk to him? He doesn’t wear a wedding ring does he?” Jane asked quietly.

“No. I can’t quite explain it but, I like this,” Lizzy replied quietly with a smile. “I like the uncertainty of it, knowing that anything might happen.”

“It is kind of sweet,” Jane agreed, looking out at the street and rubbing her swollen belly. “Charlie would laugh at us, you know.”

“Mmm, yes, he would,” Lizzy agreed with a laugh. “What did he say about me dragging you into such romantic sappiness?”

Jane smiled gently. “He said it would make him look remiss in his duties as a husband. That he would come home to find I had run off with someone who will bring me roses every evening.”

“Such a sweet man as you have, Jane, I don’t think you or he has anything to worry

about,” Lizzy replied. “I don’t think you’ll be doing much running in your condition.”

“No,” Jane said, smiling happily and ignoring her sister’s tease. “I couldn’t imagine finding someone who is better for me than Charlie.”

A wave of melancholy hitting, Lizzy sighed and looked down at her cup. “Cherish each moment, Jane, if I’ve learned anything, it’s that it all can be taken away at any minute,” she said, looking out at the street.

“Oh Lizzy,” Jane said, reaching over for her sister’s hand. “I know you miss Scott, but it’s been three years, honey.”

“I’ll always miss Scott, Jane. But what concerns me is that I think that might have been *it*—my one great love. I’ve been thinking a lot about it lately and what if there’s not another chance?”

“But Lizzy, what if there is?” Jane said squeezing, her sister’s hand. “What about your man over there, could he not be the next?”

Lizzy smiled and playfully swatted her sister’s hand away. Instinctively, she glanced over at the man and caught his eye. As if mirroring her reaction on Monday, he dipped his chin and smiled. *Dimples*, she noted.

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All day, Darcy struggled to keep his thoughts off of Lizzy—as he now knew her name to be. He’d seen a new emotion from her today: sadness, and its momentary appearance on her delicate features had caught him by surprise. When her laughter had returned he found himself letting out a breath of relief. Then, if only for a second, she had looked at him and they had shared a smile that had left him feeling warm all afternoon.

For the next four days, Darcy found himself showing up at the coffee shop every day. He was astonished with himself at how intrigued he was by her. He gauged his happiness on whether he could catch her eye and felt a disappointment when he did not. It was unlike him, he knew, to be so affected by a stranger. Yet, for some reason this woman had excited his interest and he simply could not tear himself away from the uncertainty of it all.

By Wednesday, Lizzy had seen enough of the man to feel confident about trying something. After speaking briefly with the barista, she paid her and sat down at her usual table. Within the next half-hour, the object of her interest arrived and walked up to the counter to order. Tentatively, the woman behind the counter made eye contact with Lizzy, as if asking a question. Lizzy winked at the woman in confirmation and turned her gaze back to the street.

Darcy eyed the barista curiously as she handed him a newspaper and his coffee insisting that the charge had already been taken care of. Bewildered, Darcy accepted his gift and

seated himself at his usual table. Glancing to see if Lizzy was present, what should have been obvious finally dawned on him:

It had been her.

*Well, who else could it have been?* he argued with his better judgment. He looked over again at Lizzy and was able to catch her eye. ‘Thank you,’ he mouthed, holding up the container. Lizzy merely smiled and nodded once.

In the moments following his thanking her, Lizzy realized that she had not thought this deed through any farther than his receiving it and thanking her. Biting her lip, she turned back to look at the street. Maybe the staring was all there was to know about this man. She felt a little twinge of disappointment at the thought, but it was immediately scolded by her more practical side. *Why did you think that there would be more to it than a simple emission of gratitude? You obviously were flattering yourself,* she thought harshly. Lizzy was just resolving to ignore the coffee shop man forever when the clearing of someone’s throat caught her attention. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she turned and found him standing right beside her.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked, indicating to the table’s empty chair.

“Not at all,” Lizzy said more calmly than she felt. Taking a deep breath, she willed herself to relax.

Once seated, Darcy spoke. “I thought I might come over and thank you properly.”

Lizzy smiled. “It was nothing. I supposed that if I was going to be sharing my morning spot with you, I had ought to give you a suitable welcome.”

“Well, I appreciate it,” Darcy replied, a bit unsure of what to say next. “You are here every morning then?”

“I am,” Lizzy responded. “This is the first thing I do every day.”

“And what is it that you do after that?” he asked, sipping his coffee.

“Hmm, just whatever it is that I have to do that day,” Lizzy replied evasively. “I’m Lizzy,” she said, changing the subject and offering her hand.

“William,” Darcy responded, accepting her proffered hand and shaking it.

“My great-grandfather’s name was William,” Lizzy said thoughtfully. “I never knew him, but everyone says he was a good and honest man. Are you a good man, William?”

“I try to be,” Darcy answered honestly, smiling at her unusual way of making conversation.

“Good,” Lizzy replied decisively, teasing him. “Then I won’t have to think of something else to call you.” At his curious expression she explained, “I wouldn’t have you dishonoring my great-grandfather’s name.”

“Of course not,” Darcy chuckled, looking into her sparkling eyes. They were even more captivating when she spoke to him.

“You’re not from here, William,” Lizzy said matter-of-factly.

“And how did you know it?” Darcy responded with a half-smile.

“Well, despite the fact that you enunciate,” Lizzy said turning her head to look at him pointedly. “Your behavior on Monday gave it away completely.”

“I could have just been having a bad day, you know,” Darcy remarked archly.

“Yes, but despite even that, I can’t believe anybody who knows better would be dressed head to toe in black in all this heat and humidity. They’d have known it would be miserable by 9:30 in the morning.”

“Business trip,” Darcy said, a smile admitting his defeat.

“A rather long one,” Lizzy commented, looking out at the street.

“I’ll be here for three months, ‘in all this heat and humidity,’ as you put it,” Darcy replied.

“So this coffee shop sharing thing is only temporary,” Lizzy said, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Yes, I believe that by the end of the summer, it should be all yours again,” Darcy answered her.

“Shame,” Lizzy replied mischievously. “You were just getting the hang of your attire.”

“Yes, well, I have a bit longer to perfect the art,” Darcy said, responding to her tease.

“What do you do, William, that keeps you here all summer?” Lizzy asked, not really thinking.

“Mmm,” Darcy laughed. “Just, you know...whatever it is I have to do each day.”

“Touché,” Lizzy said with a small laugh. She admired anyone who could beat her at her own game.

“I’d best be going,” Darcy said, looking at his watch. “I trust I will find you here tomorrow?”

“Bright and early,” Lizzy smiled, and wishing him goodbye, she watched as he walked away.

*William*, she thought. Yes, William suited him nicely. Taking her coffee, Lizzy rose to leave also. Truth be told, these days, she never stayed long after he had gone in the morning. She would simply drive back home and find something or other that needed to get done. Something that would pass the time. This morning, though, she drove straight to her sister Jane’s, knowing that Charlie would have left for work by now.

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“Thought you might like some company this morning,” Lizzy said, walking in the door. “I know you hate lying around all by yourself all day.”

Jane smiled. Yes, maternity leave had not been something she had wanted to do so soon, but the stress of carrying twins was already taking its toll when Charlie had finally put his foot down. Lizzy, honestly, was relieved that he had. It had been a necessity, yet, necessity or no, Jane was struggling to keep her person and mind occupied at home everyday.

“I don’t know how you just stay at home like this all the time, Lizzy,” Jane admitted miserably. “It wears me out, this doing nothing.”

“I will kindly remind you that I do not just ‘lie around and do nothing,’” Lizzy said good-naturedly. “I have learned to concentrate more on passing the time more remarkably. Hence, you know, like finding a hobby, which is what you ought to do. Didn’t Aunt Maggie teach you how to crochet once?”

“Oh hell, I don’t want to crochet, Elizabeth Bennet,” Jane said rolling her eyes. “I have a damn Ph.D. in Psychology and you want me to be satisfied crocheting scarves and little ugly sweaters?”

Lizzy bit her lips in amusement. It was unusual for Jane to get snippy, but the pregnancy had been making her a bit cranky and Lizzy was loving every minute of it. Feistiness was such a little known side of Jane, but she could certainly get fired up about her Ph.D. Which, Lizzy thought, was only suitable considering how hard she had worked for it.

“Forgive me ‘Dr. Jane,’” Lizzy said with a smile. “I meant no offense; I’m here to cheer you up. Look what I’ve got,” Lizzy said reaching into her bag and handing a package to Jane; the yummy scent was enough to give away its contents.

“Banana-nut muffins!” Jane said, delighted. “Oh, and they’re warm, too! Oh Lizzy, I yelled at you when you had brought me muffins! What kind of terrible sister am I?”

“A very pregnant one,” Lizzy replied, accepting Jane’s apology hug. “Maybe you can get it all out of your system before Charlie gets home, I’m sure he could use a break.”

“Yes,” Jane said sadly. “I think I hurt his feelings just about everyday. I don’t know why he even bothers coming around me, the state I’m in.”

“Oh Jane, you’re by no means intolerable,” Lizzy reassured her.

“Well anyway, how is coffee shop man?” Jane said changing the subject as she sat down at the kitchen table to eat one of the muffins.

“I spoke to him today, Jane,” Lizzy replied, sitting down beside her sister at the table.

“And?” Jane asked excitedly, abandoning the muffin on a napkin.

“And his name is William,” Lizzy began. She then quickly filled Jane in with all the particulars of their conversation.

“It was very clever of you to think of buying him coffee,” Jane said thoughtfully, watching her sister walk over to the counter and open the cupboard.

“It just came to me,” Lizzy explained as she got out a container to stow away the extra muffins.

“Well, I’m certain now that he likes you,” Jane commented. “He could have just thanked you and went on.”

“True,” Lizzy said, sitting back down to enjoy her own muffin. After she had taken a bite and swallowed, she added, “But I guess we’ll just have to see.”

“Yes, well I want you to keep me informed of all the particulars so that I may live vicariously through you while I am trapped in the house, alone, and enormous,” Jane said with a pout, and Lizzy rubbed her back.

“Relaxing should not be as bad as all this,” Lizzy tried to say compassionately.

“No, relaxing was two weeks ago, Elizabeth,” Jane said pointedly. “This sitting in the house alone thing is what I refer to as *Domestic Hell!*”

“Oh Jane!” Lizzy laughed, wrapping her sister in a hug. “What are we going to do with you?”

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Darcy had left the coffee shop that day in a decidedly better mood than he had seen in several weeks. The air did not seem as hot, the traffic was not as unbearable, and he even

smiled at the woman who said, 'Hi,' to him as they passed one another entering his building.

The mystery that was Lizzy only increased his interest now that he had been given a chance to speak with her. He spent the rest of his day thinking of her sparkling eyes flashing at him in a challenging tease. Darcy felt safe in asserting that he had never met another person like her...she was truly unique and he believed the loveliness of her features to be superior to any woman he had ever known. Being of a reserved nature, Darcy's personality saw to it that he did not get caught up often. To have had no choice with this woman, for it to have happened without any effort on the lady's part did her credit. In the surprise of his attraction, he had forgotten to be cautious. He was in trouble and he knew it, but that didn't stop him from looking forward to their next meeting just the same.

When his sister, Georgiana, called to check in that night, she was surprised to hear some cheer in his voice.

"You're certainly in a good mood this evening," she remarked after a moment.

"I am aren't I?" Darcy replied, smiling.

"It's not so bad down there after all?" she asked, hoping this was the case.

"No, definitely not as bad as I was saying the other night," Darcy replied thoughtfully. He considered telling his sister all that had gone on to allow her some share in his excitement, but after a second thought, he realized that she would be more disappointed than he would like if nothing were to come of all this.

"I think immersing myself, rather than resisting the culture, was a wise choice," Darcy speculated. "As long as I was fighting it I was miserable. Letting well enough alone and being a good sport about it all, I'm feeling a little better. Perhaps I am finally learning a lesson on being more laid back like you have been hounding me to do."

"If getting away from here was what you needed to relax, Will, then I don't wish you home just yet, even if I miss you terribly," Georgiana said nicely.

Darcy could hear the grin in her voice and he smiled imagining the dimples they shared dotting her pretty face. "You know I'm sure that husband of yours wouldn't mind you worrying a little less about me and a little more about him," Darcy said in what Georgiana called his 'practical voice.'

"No, Jamie worries about you too, Will," Georgiana insisted. "You work too hard and you're always in a foul mood—"

"Today excepted," Darcy interjected.

“Today excepted,” Georgiana conceded before carrying on. “And there’s no wonder why we both worry about you! You don’t have anyone to look after you and make sure you are eating properly...”

“Georgiana,” Darcy interrupted again. “I think you have forgotten that I am the elder brother.”

“Oh, Will,” Georgiana argued. “Like those people in rest homes only have people older than them to take care of them.”

“Rest homes!” Darcy exclaimed, horrified. “You’re not signing me up just yet are you?”

Georgiana laughed at his over-exaggeration. “No, Will, I was making a point about age not having anything to do with what I am talking about.”

“Yes, well,” Darcy said more calmly. “I think it is time for me to go to bed and for you to go and worry about your husband, leaving your poor brother in peace.”

“I *am* going,” Georgiana said with an exasperated sigh. “But I want you to know that I am thinking of you, telepathically shaming you into getting more sleep and eating something other than that greasy Chinese you always order.”

Darcy looked at the carton of leftover Chinese food he had just picked up off the counter to heat up and quickly put it down as if she would see him with it.

“I’m making a sandwich and going to bed,” Darcy said defensively, as he removed the sandwich meat from the refrigerator.

“Make sure you wait long enough for it to digest before you lay down or you will have a horrible—”

Darcy groaned, rolling his eyes as he turned off the phone.

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The following morning, Darcy purchased his coffee and immediately walked over to Lizzy’s table.

“It would not be presumptuous of me to join you here again?” he asked tentatively.

“Of course not,” Lizzy said, indicating to the empty seat in front of her. “You’re good company.”

“Thank you,” he said, seating himself and looking over at her. Her appearance was comfortable as usual. Nothing was ever busy about her clothing. She wore her hair pulled back, a few tendrils of her curls breaking free around her face. Looking at her pale-

yellow peasant blouse and jeans, Darcy decided he liked pale-yellow on her best of all.

“William, are you thinking of something when you look at people? No, don’t be embarrassed,” she hurried to explain when he reacted to her question. “Because I really want to know what is going through your mind when you stare so intensely. It makes me want to believe that there is a whole lot more to you than what meets the eye.”

“I believe you might be disappointed,” Darcy replied, reeling from what he believed must have been a compliment.

“I don’t think so, William,” Lizzy said seriously. “Everything about you says thoughtful. I refuse to believe that your expression is all there is to it.”

“I consider myself to be one of those people who think too much. My mind’s too active for its own good. Staring, unfortunately, has become a terrible habit as a side effect,” Darcy replied, surprised by how easily he opened up to her. *And why not?* Darcy asked himself. If she truly wanted to know him, he would not stand in her way.

“If I asked you to do something unusual, would you jump up and run?” Lizzy asked ambiguously.

“Define unusual,” Darcy replied cautiously.

“Let me to draw your portrait. I want to see if I can capture you, if it’s even possible,” Lizzy said thoughtfully as she studied his features.

“I don’t know, I’m not going to end up in an art gallery or something am I?” Darcy asked, not exactly comfortable with the idea of being ‘captured.’

“No, no. Nothing like that,” Lizzy replied immediately. “It’s just a hobby of mine, something I do for myself. You would be my first non-relative to sit for me if you agree.”

“And what do I get out of this arrangement if I agree?”

“Besides the rewarding experience of being captured by an artist?” Lizzy teased, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, besides that,” Darcy said archly.

“I don’t know, what do you want?” Lizzy asked, a bit uncertain of what he might ask.

Leaning over the table and giving her a rakish grin he said, “I want you to do something for me.”

“What?” Lizzy said curiously, leaning back a little.

“I want you to go out to dinner with me,” Darcy said, sitting back with a mischievous smile. “What did you think I was going to ask?”

Lizzy closed her eyes and laughed ruefully, shaking her head.

“Ok, you have yourself a deal. You let me draw your portrait and I will have dinner with you.”

“Tomorrow?”

“*Tomorrow?*” Lizzy asked, incredulous. *My, he is feeling brave this morning!* Lizzy thought to herself.

“Busy?”

“I’m never busy, it’s not my style,” Lizzy said, smiling at him smugly.

“Of course not,” Darcy said, smiling at her. *No, I didn’t think it would be,* he thought. “So tomorrow then, you will let me take you out?”

“Yes, I think tomorrow will do just fine,” Lizzy said thoughtfully. “You want to meet me here at seven and go from there?”

“Sounds perfect,” Darcy said, getting up to leave.

“I will see you here for coffee in the morning, William,” Lizzy pointed out before he could walk away. “Be thinking of some times that you will be available to sit for me.”

“I’ll be here,” Darcy said to her as he left the table and walked out of the coffee shop. As he went on about his day, Darcy had a bit of a lighter step, feeling, perhaps for the first time, rather comfortable just being William Darcy.

~Part Two~

*Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.  
~Oscar Wilde*

Darcy was at the coffee shop that evening to pick up Lizzy at seven o'clock on the dot. As usual, Lizzy had already beaten him there. The moment he laid eyes on her it was as if all of the air had been pushed out of his lungs. She wore a sleeveless cerulean blue drape-neck dress, her long hair cascading in gentle waves down her back. A simple heart shaped necklace rested at the base of her neck. Unconsciously, Darcy licked his lips.

"I knew somehow that you wouldn't be late," Lizzy said when he approached her. "You seem like the kind of man who arrives at just the right time."

"And you? You were early," he said, stating the obvious.

"I'm always early it seems," she replied, standing up so they could leave. "It is of my own doing, but as a consequence I find myself always waiting."

"That just leaves you one step ahead of the rest of us," Darcy said, following her out to the parking lot. "You look very nice tonight."

"Thank you," she said when he opened the car door for her. When he had walked around and climbed in she added, "You realize that this will be the first time we're together outside the confines of the coffee shop."

"Yes," Darcy replied, starting up the car and pulling out of the parking lot. "Do you think something might change? Will I suddenly not be as interesting?"

"No, I'm just speculating," Lizzy said, staring out the window. Honestly, she had no idea why he intrigued her so. She wasn't the slightest bit concerned that her interest would fade once she knew him better. Becoming more acquainted with him had done nothing but feed her interest. When he had asked her out she'd been more excited than she had let on and had spent a large chunk of her time that day preparing to go out with him. Although arriving early was something that she did all the time, Lizzy felt that tonight she would have been early regardless.

When Darcy had arrived, Lizzy had been struck by how charming he looked. Gone again was the starched tie and suit coat, tonight he wore a pair of stone colored linen chinos with a pale yellow button-up shirt, the long sleeves rolled neatly up to his elbows. She glanced at his feet, noting the brown leather sandals were back. He was devastatingly handsome, and Lizzy could not help but feel a little elated that he was with her.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Darcy handed the car over to valet parking. Once inside, Lizzy was captivated by the atmosphere. The whole place seemed to have been designed with an Indian theme to it. The walls were painted a rich, warm red with yards of sheer fabric floating from the ceiling. Sitar music played softly in the background.

Once they were seated, Lizzy looked over to Darcy. “William, this place is fantastic.”

“It was recommended to me by a friend at work. I’m pleased to see he has good taste,” Darcy said in agreement.

After they had ordered, conversation came easily. They talked about their sisters and brothers-in law, learned they shared an appreciation for classical music, and Darcy confessed his struggle to balance a personal life with work. Eventually the conversation turned to Lizzy’s drawing.

“I wasn’t joking when I said that it’s just a hobby,” she explained. “I draw because I enjoy it, not because I think I can get something materialistic out of it. I’m not really what you would think of as an artist.”

“Do you only do portraits or are there other things you like to draw?” Darcy asked.

“Portraits,” Lizzy replied. “And flowers. I seem to have an enthusiasm for flowers that I cannot put my finger on.”

“Any flower, or just certain kinds?”

“Well, I know they’re right when I see them,” she said, weighing her words carefully. “I don’t know anything about plant names or horticulture because I frankly don’t care about any of that. My enthusiasm lies in how I feel when I look at them, not what they’re called or when they bloom. It’s kind of the same with people...I decided I wanted to try to capture you not only because of your expression, but because of how I feel when you are looking at me. I want to take down the whole experience because I think your presence is truly unique and powerful.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said uselessly, not really knowing how to respond to such a compliment. “But how can you capture a feeling? I cannot imagine that it would come easily.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Lizzy agreed. “But if I can just get it right, if I can make it pop, I can capture someone in an instant. When it happens, it’s so... I can take it out and look back at any moment to see that person alive and there for me.”

“An immortality of sorts,” Darcy mused.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. “That way they never really have to go.”

“You don’t seem to like change much,” Darcy commented. “A creature of habit?”

“Very much so, I’m afraid,” Lizzy said earnestly. “I think it will take some time for my sister to recover from the shock of my agreeing to go out tonight.”

“You should be more considerate of your poor sister’s feelings in view of her delicate condition,” Darcy teased her.

Lizzy laughed. She was enjoying herself very much this evening. It had been so long since there had been someone she could really talk to, someone who really listened to what she was saying. His comments made her feel like he understood. Perhaps that was why she was so drawn to him—she had somehow known that he would be able to truly *get* her.

When dinner was over, Darcy took her back to the coffee shop to get her car. As he drove, he could feel an increasing swell of apprehension in his chest. He had been pleasantly surprised to hear her explain what it was that inspired her. Darcy liked that she was honest, passionate, and simultaneously complex. She was just as he had suspected she would be. As he watched the road, Darcy decided that she would be extremely easy to fall in love with. The more time he spent in her company only strengthened his resolve to win her. He knew that if it was done correctly, the reward would be incomparable.

As Darcy pulled into the parking lot and stopped the car, Lizzy could feel her heart pounding in her ears. She knew that it was possible that he would kiss her goodnight, what surprised her was just how badly that she wanted it.

“I’ll come around and get the door for you,” he said after turning off the ignition.

Alone in the car as he walked over, Lizzy took a deep cleansing breath in an effort to calm the nervous anxiety that was coiling so tightly against her lungs. By the time he had opened the door, she realized that she felt no better.

She flashed him a smile as she stepped out of the vehicle. “Thank you for taking me out this evening. I’ve had a lovely time.”

“It was my pleasure,” Darcy replied honestly. “I truly enjoy your company, Lizzy.”

“And I enjoy yours, William,” she answered just as seriously. “Are you still planning to follow me home from here in the morning?”

“I have arranged to be at your service all day tomorrow and Sunday,” he said, stepping closer as she leaned against her car.

“I’d better get going then,” Lizzy said, though she was making no effort to leave.

Unable to resist any longer, Darcy stepped forward and gently brushed his lips against hers. Her response was to part her lips, emitting a soft sigh as his mouth lingered against hers. He reached up to push a stray wisp of hair away from her face, pulling back slightly to look deeply into her eyes. When she could take no more teasing, Lizzy wrapped her hand behind his head, her lips capturing his, tugging at them to kiss her more

passionately. Having absolutely no objection to this, Darcy placed his hands on each side of her neck, steadying her as his tongue slipped into her mouth, tasting her and caressing her tongue as she eagerly reciprocated. For what seemed to last forever, they clutched at one another fiercely, seeking a release from the tension that had been steadily building between them during the last two weeks. When they at last pulled away, there was a moment before either could speak, each gasping for oxygen to fill their lungs.

“Goodnight, Lizzy,” Darcy said finally, stepping away from her and opening her car door. After he had climbed in his own car and seen her drive away safely, he rested his head on the steering wheel, stunned by the effect her kiss had on him. When he eventually felt capable of driving, Darcy started the ignition and pulled out of the lot to head home. Deep down he’d known that it would be like that. He was well aware of the effect she had on him. Her response had been delicious, more fierce than he had expected. Whatever this was, he was now certain that she felt it too. Once he reached his apartment, he tossed his keys on the end table and slumped on the couch, knowing that there would be no sleeping anytime soon. He was too wired, too emotionally charged to rest himself. All he could think about was her words, her eyes, her lips. Of all the things he had learned about her tonight, it was her scent that had caught him. It was a warm vanilla scent that was sweet and gentle—not strong at all, but at the same time powerful enough to intoxicate his senses, encasing him in her presence as she kissed him. Darcy leaned his head back against the couch, closing his eyes in an attempt to come back down.

Lizzy had driven home in a state of shock. The kiss had left her legs feeling like jelly and her heart pounding against her chest. She had never been attracted to anyone like this before; not ever. Just as she had insisted, there was indeed a passion behind his eyes; an intensity that had left her speechless. Darcy had helped her into her car and seen her out of the parking lot before she had even begun to form rational thoughts again. Looking back, she would admit that she had no idea how she had managed to make it home that night. As soon as she was inside and had closed the front door behind her, Lizzy leaned against it and slid down to the floor in a befuddled heap. *How easy it would be to fall in love with you, William*, she mused.

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The next morning, Darcy followed Lizzy home from the coffee shop with a big silly grin on his face. They had already spent the morning talking and teasing with Lizzy’s fingers laced through his. When they had finally left the shop, she had allowed a quick kiss, nothing so passionate as the night before, but enough to leave him feeling pretty giddy as he drove behind her to her house. This had happened so quickly, they had connected so easily that it would not have surprised him if he were accused of infatuation—but after a late night of soul-searching he was certain now that it wasn’t. How could it be when he wanted to know everything about her, watch her go through her day, see her in every aspect of her life? Darcy had decided the night before that if given enough time, she could come to mean everything to him—if she would only agree to let him try.

He followed her car down a long wooded driveway that eventually led up to her house.

Large Dogwood trees shaded the pathway to her door and two full bloomed blue hydrangea bushes sat on each side of the steps that led up to her wrap around porch. The house itself was red brick with white shutters accentuating the windows. Lizzy climbed out of her car and announced,

“Well, this is it, William.”

“You’re all alone out here,” he commented, looking around him. “No neighbors to bug you or anything.”

“Yes, it’s very peaceful here,” Lizzy admitted. “It does get a little quiet for me sometimes, but for the most part I like it here.”

“I can imagine it would be nice,” Darcy replied as he followed her inside.

“Would you like a tour?” she asked, setting down her purse and keys. “Or are you anxious to get this over with?”

“Yeah, show me around,” Darcy answered. He was by no means anxious to get anything over with. She took his hand and he followed her as she led him through the house. On the right was the living room, a large rock fireplace took over the back wall. On the wooden mantle rested various photo’s of family and friends, a burgundy overstuffed couch and chair was framed around an entertainment center with little mementos inside the glass on each side of the television. To the left was an open doorway to the kitchen, up the stairs she showed him her bedroom, office, and how the entire house could be seen from the railing in the hall. After she had finished showing him around, Lizzy brought them into the kitchen to have some lemonade.

“So that’s it. Any questions?” she asked teasingly.

“Just one observation,” Darcy said, seating himself at the kitchen table. “You’ve shown me all over this house and I have yet to see a proper place for you to sketch.”

“Ah, yes,” Lizzy said, sitting down at the table with two glasses of lemonade. “The basement is through the door behind you. I keep a corner down there for my masterpieces.”

“That makes sense,” Darcy thought out loud. “A small getaway of sorts.”

“I call it my mouse-hole,” Lizzy replied. “But I ought to warn you that it gets kind of warm down there with the afternoon and evening sun because it’s not air conditioned. So if at any point you get too warm, tell me and we will come back up here for awhile.”

Darcy nodded. “Well, I have today and tomorrow so take all the time you need.”

“Thank you for obliging me with this genuinely odd request, William. I know it’s not

something people are usually comfortable with.”

“Not at all,” Darcy said dismissively. “I’ve never been drawn before and you’ve succeeded in piquing my interest.”

“I really hope I can portray you properly,” Lizzy said seriously. “I’m worried that it’s not possible, but you have such a remarkable presence that I think it’s worth a try.”

“Do I have to sit for hours perfectly still and silent?”

Lizzy laughed. “No, no. You can move, talk, read, whatever. When I focus on your eyes I will need you to look at me, and probably be silent as I draw your mouth. Other than that, I just need you to sit in front of me.”

“Well it sounds easy enough,” Darcy replied. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

Lizzy refilled their glasses and they walked down the basement stairs. Darcy was immediately struck by how different the atmosphere was from the house above. The basement was dark and had a musky smell of dust and thick air. Lizzy pulled a string to turn on some light and he followed her to a back corner where she switched on another lamp. Darcy stood back and watched as she brought her little space to life, pulling curtains open at the windows, letting sun leak in and reveal a small work table that was pushed against the wall and covered with her materials. She pulled a student’s desk from underneath the table and a large rocking chair from the corner that she spent some time positioning to her satisfaction.

“This is yours, William,” she said, indicating to the rocking chair. “Don’t get too carried away with the rocking though.”

Darcy smiled as he seated himself gingerly in the chair. He was surprised when Lizzy drug her desk to sit directly in front of him. “If I had known we were going to be in such close proximity I would have brought some gum,” he teased her.

“For me or for you?” Lizzy inquired, turning to raise an eyebrow at him as she gathered up and situated her drawing materials.

“Based upon need, I imagine,” Darcy explained himself, carefully.

When Lizzy was at last satisfied with her surroundings, she sat down at her desk and studied Darcy’s features. She began by lightly outlining his eyes to establish a focal point, once she had sketched them in gentle lines, she immediately abandoned them to be filled in later knowing that they would be the most difficult part of his expression to depict. Darcy watched her face as she drew, brow furrowed in concentration. From time to time she would pause her pencil strokes to stare at him before looking away as she bit her lip in contemplation. Slowly, she managed to finish the linework and added some textured detail to his shirt collar and unruly locks of hair. Having made a sizeable dent

and noting that her poor subject was visibly sweating without the benefit of air conditioning, Lizzy decided it was time to take a break for lunch.

“You know I said you are allowed to talk,” she pointed out as they climbed the basement stairs.

“Yes, you did, but I was watching you work and didn’t want to risk interrupting your concentration,” Darcy explained.

“I may be flattering myself, but I think I am capable of talking and sketching at the same time,” Lizzy replied in mock indignation.

“Lizzy, I believe that by now you have picked up on my ability to entertain myself with simply studying you,” he answered seriously.

“Yes, I have,” Lizzy agreed. “Why don’t you go enjoy my air conditioning while I make us some sandwiches?”

Following her direction, Darcy wandered through the kitchen’s doorway and into the living room. Interested in seeing what she might have on display, he ambled over to the glass cases of her entertainment center. On one of the shelves sat tiny blown-glass trinkets of flowers, ladybugs, and butterflies. On the other side the trinkets were miscellaneous ones of angels, boats, children, and what appeared to be a cow dressed for gardening. *Presents*, he decided. He then took the opportunity to inspect the framed pictures sat out on the mantle for display. Smiling, he looked at a picture of her with her sister at what was obviously the latter’s graduation, a photo of an older couple that he assumed to be her parents, and various childhood pictures. However, when he reached one particular frame, it stopped him cold—Lizzy wearing a wedding dress, in the arms of a man who was obviously her husband. His stomach gave an involuntary lurch. “No,” he whispered, picking up the frame. Darcy looked back to the kitchen doorway, and then focused again on the photograph; carefully he replaced it on the mantle and walked back into the kitchen. He felt humiliated.

Darcy came to stand beside her at the counter and in a voice as calm as he could muster, he said, “Lizzy, you never mentioned anything about being married.”

She looked at him curiously, wondering where this statement might have come from. Without answering, she carried their sandwich plates to the table and sat down. Only then did she look over again at Darcy. He had not moved from his spot against the counter, and the look in his eyes was one of extreme hurt. Finally, her memory clicked: he must have seen that picture on the mantle.

Sighing deeply, she said gently, “Come sit down, William, because it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“I want to know right now,” he said evenly, becoming more agitated, “Why you never

bothered to mention that you have a *husband*.”

“William, I will tell you, but first, please come sit down,” Lizzy pleaded. “Don’t make me blurt it out.”

Despite what she was saying, Darcy found his patience at an end. “Tell me!” he demanded harshly.

Lizzy closed her eyes and rested her forehead in her hands. “He’s dead, William,” she said quickly. “He’s been gone for a long time and had you been calmer you would have realized that there’s obviously not anyone else who lives here.”

Darcy put his hand to his mouth and closed his eyes. *Of course*, he realized belatedly. She had just shown him through the entire house, and it had been obvious that she was quite alone here. “Lizzy, I’m so sorry,” he said quietly. “I should not have raised my voice; I jumped to conclusions and over-reacted.”

When Lizzy lifted her head back up, Darcy was relieved to see that she had not been crying. “It’s alright,” she said, indicating again for him to come to the table. “I had forgotten about that picture being in there.”

“How long?” Darcy asked, sitting down beside her.

“Three years this past December,” she replied, glancing away. “Look, don’t worry about how you reacted. I would not have been happy or rational either if you had miraculously sprouted a wife.”

Darcy reached over and grasped her hand, pulling her fingers to his lips. “I am sorry,” he insisted.

“I would have told you eventually,” she explained. “Call me old fashioned, but I thought it was a bit early to bring up dead husbands.”

He smiled sadly. “Well it’s not exactly the best opening line for a new conversation,” he agreed.

“Now,” Lizzy said, tapping a finger on the edge of his plate. “I have made you this delicious sandwich and I intend to see you eat it.”

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That night, Darcy returned to his apartment feeling heavy-hearted. Living up to the memory of a lost husband was a big deal. He thought back over the day and realized she was warming to him, loosening up in his presence. Gone was her mysterious façade and he felt that he was beginning to know the person within.

In the moment he had seen that portrait, the immediate conclusion that she was lost to

him had been shattering. Though he'd felt like a jerk when she explained, the relief he had felt at her admission was palpable. The knowledge that it all had not just crashed around his ears, that she was not that terrible person, had lightened a terrible load.

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After Darcy had left that evening, Lizzy took the photograph off the mantle and sat down on the couch, holding it in her hands. Scott had already been gone longer than they'd been married. It had been two years since she had given away his clothes, gone through his things and given what she hadn't kept to his family. The only things remaining were inside a box up in the attic. It was where she had stored their rings, marriage license, photos, and any memories she hadn't been able to part with.

One night, determined to let go, she had purged the house of any clue that was left of him. In the end, only the framed picture of them on the mantle had remained untouched. Lizzy shook her head. One trace of Scott left in the house and Darcy had walked right into it. She fingered the ridged texture of the frame—Darcy had brought her the closest she had come to stepping back into the world as a single woman. Over time she had grown weary of being known as 'Scott's poor wife,' a widow—someone too fragile to handle the demands the world was making on her. When she had confessed her misfortune to Darcy that afternoon, she'd hid her face not because of what she said, but from his expression. She already knew what his expression would look like; it was one she had come to loathe and never want to see again:

Pity.

Especially not from him. Lizzy realized that suddenly, with Darcy in her house and in her life, it seemed like subterfuge to have on display a photograph of a marriage that no longer existed, haunting her house. She had loved Scott, she had grieved him, and now, despite all the tears, the hurt and loneliness she had suffered, he was still gone. Scott wasn't coming back, she had accepted that. Scott had gone on without her and Lizzy knew that it was time for her to move on too—it was time to let go of this last piece of their life together. Gently, she kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the frame's glass. When she was certain she was ready, she rose from the couch and climbed the stairs. In the hallway she pulled the attic string and tucking the frame under her arm, she unfolded and climbed the ladder. She turned on the light bulb in the attic to look around and eventually located the box she had come for. Pulling open the cardboard lid, she laid the frame neatly inside with the rest. When she was finished, Lizzy climbed back down the ladder and folded it up. As the door snapped shut, Lizzy felt the last twinge of the guilt she had felt for moving on die away. "It's done," she said out loud and walked down the hall to her bedroom. And it was finally over.

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Sunday morning began much like the day before. Darcy met Lizzy for coffee, they chatted, and he followed her home. Today, however, they opted to go on to the basement and work before the afternoon sun heated up her workspace.

As he sat comfortably in the rocking chair, Lizzy struggled with her drawing. Darcy looked on as she sighed, erased and tried again. Just as she'd expected, Lizzy was having trouble conveying the expression of his eyes. Not only tired of the silence, but also hoping that it would help, she asked,

“Will you tell me what you're thinking of when you look at me?”

“What I'm thinking of?” he repeated, frowning his brow.

“Yes,” she replied, chewing her lip. “I need all the help I can get... *and* I would really like to know.”

Darcy pursed his lips, weighing his words carefully before he spoke. “I suppose that when I am looking at someone, I am trying to see who they are and if I can identify what they are feeling. I'm searching to find the soul within. When I look at you, specifically, it's because, well...I think I want your heart.”

Surprised, Lizzy raised her head to fully look at him. The intensity she saw in his eyes was mixed with uncertainty of how she might react to his blunt admission. Without saying a word, she stood and walked over to him. She kneeled, resting her hands on his knees.

“I thought that last bit was obvious,” he said when she still did not speak. Finally, she raised herself up and slid her fingers through his hair, kissing him tenderly. Relieved that she was obviously not adverse to the idea, Darcy pulled her into his lap, deepening the kiss as their tongues dueled for dominance. He ran his fingers down her neck, her hands still grasping his hair. He gradually felt her relinquish her quest for control as she relaxed in his arms. Lizzy whimpered at the loss when his mouth abandoned hers to trail kisses along her jaw and down to the base of her neck. His hands roamed over her waist and back as he painstakingly acquainted himself with her form. Swallowing hard, Lizzy closed her eyes and dropped her arms to her sides. She sighed sweetly as she allowed him to touch her.

Lizzy had acquiesced to his touch so quickly that Darcy became concerned that she might not understand, though it seemed impossible that she would not. With reluctance, Darcy pulled back to look in her eyes. He had learned by now that they betrayed every emotion she was feeling. Darcy stroked her cheek, surprised by the passion he saw written on her beautiful face.

Desperate for him to touch her again, Lizzy leaned in and captured his mouth, taking over, as her hands held his head firmly in place. Without ceremony, Darcy leaned forward and pushed them both out of the chair and onto the floor. It occurred to him that the honorable thing to do would be to advise her of his intentions, but seeing as she was unbuttoning his shirt simultaneously with this thought, he decided to assume she found the prospect to her liking. When she had succeeded in relieving him of his shirt, he pushed hers up her stomach and bent to kiss the skin from her belly button to her neck as

he revealed it.

Her blouse discarded, Lizzy tried not to think about how long it had been since she had done this with someone or worry that he would notice. It didn't occur to her to contemplate how she could be so thoroughly aroused and at the same time feel clumsy and ridiculous. However, the feeling of his warm mouth against her breast through the fabric of her bra sent her worries and any other coherent thought out of her mind.

Lizzy needn't have worried that Darcy would notice that she was out of practice. He was much too caught up in the heady sensation of smelling, touching, and tasting her creamy skin. Removing her bra, he trailed kisses down her breastbone, pausing to run his tongue across her nipple. When she felt the rasp of his tongue against the sensitive tip of her breast, Lizzy's breath caught in her lungs. Frantically, she reached down to unbutton and remove his pants in an effort to speed up his achingly slow progress. Darcy took advantage of the fact that she was wearing sweat pants and pulled them along with her underwear off in one sweep. Both naked, Darcy guided her backward to lie upon their discarded clothing. As he hovered over her, he slid his hand between her legs and ran his fingers against her soft folds, touching the place that was aching for him. Lizzy moaned and spread her legs in a shameless invitation.

Darcy positioned himself accordingly and pushed into her, withdrew and buried himself again, reveling in the feeling of her soft body as she surrounded him. Lizzy whispered his name in appreciation and wrapped her legs around his waist. She rocked with him as he made love to her. Eventually, the flush creeping up her neck and her quickened breathing signaled that she was nearing the peak of her pleasure. Within seconds, she gasped and whimpered as her body shuddered underneath him. When he was certain she was satisfied, he allowed himself to come as he moaned her name and slumped into her arms. When he had caught his breath, he became mindful of his weight on her and rolled them over so her head was resting on his chest.

"That was..." she began, still reeling over the intense passion that seemed to consume her anytime she was in his presence.

"Yes," he agreed, stroking her hair. They stayed there for the rest of the morning talking, kissing, and making love, neither of them really caring that they were lying on the basement floor, as they were both simply content to be together.

~Part Three~

*Love is not a product of reasonings and statistics. It just comes—none knows whence—and cannot explain itself. ~Mark Twain*

As Lizzy rested in Darcy's arms on the basement floor, she realized how long it had been since she had felt this safe or content. Until now, life had been simply going through the motions—getting up in the morning and keeping busy enough for another day to go by. When she had met him it seemed as though something very big had shifted. Instead of maintaining the mundane quietness that was her life, she actually had things to look forward to and she had found a person who didn't classify her as a victim. Darcy had somehow managed to free the woman she had always known herself to be, the person that had been suppressed in the aftermath of her loss. He had succeeded in drawing out Elizabeth Bennet.

"I can't remember the last time I have been this happy," Darcy mused as if he had just read her thoughts.

"Neither can I," she said snuggling in his arms. "Thank you."

"I meant what I said before," he began, tightening his arms around her. "I have been struggling with discontentment for years. You, on the other hand, are so alive. Now that I've met you, Lizzy, I feel like this is what I have been missing...I want to be with you."

"Where do you live, William?" she asked gently.

"New York," he admitted.

Lizzy buried her face in his neck and laughed ruefully. "What's your last name, William?"

"Darcy," he replied. "I cannot believe we have never had this conversation."

Lizzy rolled her eyes. "I think we were both a bit too preoccupied to be concerned with names and locations."

"I assume *Lizzy* is short for Elizabeth?"

"Elizabeth Bennet," she answered affirmatively.

"Elizabeth Bennet, you don't thank everyone who allows you to draw them this way do you?" Darcy teased.

Lizzy snorted. "Considering that I mentioned already that up until now I have drawn family members exclusively, I'd like you to assume that the answer to your question is an

emphatic no.”

When he was finished sniggering, he asked a more serious question, “How did you get into drawing people?”

“If only there was a simple answer to such a simple question,” Lizzy replied thoughtfully. “Sure you want to know?”

“I lend you my ears,” Darcy replied seriously.

“Well, honestly, it happened for several reasons,” she explained. “The first being because of losing Scott. You see, one day he was here with me and then the next he was gone. I was totally unprepared—it never occurred to me that I would lose him.”

Darcy felt her clutch on him tighten and he kissed her hair supportively.

“I was trying so hard to cope and not fall apart. I eventually got it into my head that all I needed was one picture of him. I could keep it with me always and he would be there with me,” she said carefully. “But as I went through them all, none of them were right...they were all so bland with cheesy smiles and hammy poses. None of them captured who Scott was or showed off why everyone loved him. Then, the second reason stemmed from what he had done for me. His family and I found that he had made certain that I would be adequately taken care of—he had seen to it that I would never want for anything. Armed with this knowledge, my own family encouraged me to take advantage of it. Jane and my parents sat me down and begged me to stop and actually deal with this rather than covering it up with over-complicating my life like I would have been more inclined to do. Eventually I gave in to their requests and left my job, and set myself to recover properly. Almost immediately though, I started to wallow and Jane had to stage another intervention.”

Lizzy paused, hoping that Darcy wasn't regretting that he had asked. This conversation had the unlucky potential of becoming too melancholy, but with that said, she also wanted him to know.

“What happened then?” Darcy asked, encouraging her to continue.

“Well, to make a long story short, at Jane's request, I started seeing a therapist and she suggested that I would feel better if I had a way to keep my hands busy. If I had something that was strictly mine and that I could have a passion for I wouldn't be spending so much time wallowing in negativity and gloom. After several rather unsuccessful attempts at various activities, I signed up for some drawing classes at the arts center. It started as something to occupy my time, but I really got into it and soon I was spending an ungodly amount of time with it,” Lizzy chuckled. “I realized that I could draw the things and people that I love and sort of recreate or convey their presence and capture their aura in a way that I had lost with Scott.”

“I would like to see some of the things you have drawn,” Darcy ventured.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Lizzy replied nervously. “I’ve never really shown them to anyone.”

“But they must be very good,” Darcy said seriously. “You cannot be passionate about something you don’t believe in. You don’t have to show me, but I think that you must be very good at what you do.”

“I’ve always drawn to please myself,” Lizzy explained. “I have no concept of what would be pleasing for someone else.”

“What does your sister think?” Darcy asked. “I’m sure you’ve shown her.”

“Oh,” Lizzy laughed. “Jane thinks everything I do is amazing. She thinks my drawings are exceptional because I have done them, not because I have any real talent.”

“Did it ever occur to you that she might think they’re fantastic because they are?” Darcy reasoned.

“I’m a little afraid, I suppose,” Lizzy admitted. “I mean what if someone tells me that they are trash?”

“You’re afraid of losing your enthusiasm,” Darcy said, translating her response.

“Yes,” Lizzy said, exhaling loudly. “It’s just; I’ve never had anything so completely personal before. I’m worried that someone will have the power to convince me that they’re not good enough and then it will be over.”

“You don’t seem to be *that* impressionable, Lizzy,” Darcy commented. “I don’t know if I believe it would be that easy to knock you down.”

“Well, you’re right about how it would be with most things,” Lizzy agreed. “But this is very different.”

Reluctantly, Darcy decided to back off of the topic. This obviously was not something he could reason away in one conversation. Art was personal, and it sounded like her drawing was all she had that was just for herself. Although he really wanted to press her further, he knew it would not be wise to do so all at once. Instead he asked, “Am I at least allowed to see my own portrait?”

The question gave Lizzy pause. Of course he was entitled to see his own likeness, but she was suddenly worried that he would see it and be disappointed. Especially since he seemed to have such faith that she was amazingly talented. While she contemplated, Lizzy pressed her nose against his neck. He smelled amazing—spicy, like cinnamon and black pepper she decided. She liked that he could tell that she was thinking and was willing to give her a moment to do so without assuming she wasn’t planning on

answering him. This was one of the things, she noted, that Darcy had caught onto almost instantly and Scott had never managed to understand.

“Yes, of course you may see your portrait,” she answered at last. “Do me a favor though?”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t tell me it’s amazing if it’s not,” she said seriously. “Everyone has treated me like a china doll after what happened with Scott. I’m not going to break into pieces and I would like to hear your honest opinion.”

“What about spoiling your enthusiasm?” Darcy said, raising his brow.

“Well, I think it will serve me right for not having enough confidence in my own capabilities,” Lizzy answered earnestly. “I don’t do this because I want people to think my work is fabulous, therefore, I should not be too afraid of someone’s opinion to share.”

“You want a test?” Darcy asked her.

“Something like that,” Lizzy laughed, then decided it was time to change the subject. “Tell me about you, William. I’ve said enough about *me*, and I don’t know anything about you.”

“Well there’s not very much to know,” Darcy said thoughtfully. He had been enjoying her sharing with him, but ironically felt uncomfortable when the topic turned to himself. Lizzy was courageous and passionate. *He* was simply a workaholic businessman from New York who, thanks to her influence, recently regained the passion for living that he had lost much too long ago. “Well, as you know, I have a younger sister who is happily married to a man I could not approve of more. She and I are luckily very close because neither of our parents are still living. Our father died about a year ago and I have been doing precisely what your family convinced you not to do, which is throwing myself into work and refusing to face reality head on.”

As Darcy finished his sentence, Lizzy realized that this was an opportunity to comfort someone else for a change and rubbed his chest soothingly.

“My sister will certainly agree with me when I tell you I work too much and am absolutely no fun to be around. To be completely honest, until these past couple of weeks, I have been in a perpetually terrible mood. I am probably so close with my sister because she is the only person who can tolerate me.”

Lizzy giggled, “You can’t be *that* bad, I have seen no evidence of it.”

“Yes, that’s because you have somehow managed to give me a respite from my own ill humor,” Darcy laughed. “I am sure if you had seen me these past months you would have

had nothing to do with me and you certainly would have had *no* interest in drawing my picture.”

“Well, William, I am honored to be the person to cheer you up,” Lizzy smiled. “I think we might have both been in desperate need of meeting one another.”

After spending the morning talking, Lizzy and Darcy grudgingly left the basement only when their stomachs chimed in to add more misery to the raging inferno the afternoon sun had created. When Lizzy declined his offer to help her with lunch, Darcy again wandered back into the living room. Hands in his pockets, he strode over to the mantle. Darcy immediately noticed that the wedding picture was missing and wondered what it meant.

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At Lizzy’s request, Darcy agreed to stay with her that evening. However, because he had to go to work the next day, she rode with him back to his apartment to pick up a few things. His apartment, of course, was small, but efficient for a person who only intended to stay there for a few months. The front door let into a small kitchen that was open to the living area. Around the corner was his bedroom and she followed him there. Understandably, there was nothing personal about his place, the furnishings had come included and Lizzy felt at little sad at the thought of him staying there—a place about as cozy as a doctor’s office.

She sat crossed-legged on his bed while he got together some things to take with him. Seeing this empty and impersonal space only served to remind her that none of this was permanent and that in a couple of months he would be leaving. The impact of the realization was sickening and she endeavored to get her mind on another topic by initiating conversation.

“You must get lonely here,” she said, watching him neatly pack his bag.

“Well, it’s definitely not what I would call home,” Darcy admitted. “But it’s not unbearable because I’m rarely here other than to sleep.”

“Sterile walls depress me,” Lizzy explained. “What does your real house look like?”

“It’s an apartment too,” he began. “But thanks to my sister, it’s much more cozy than this one.”

Lizzy smiled. “You speak so highly of your sister that I cannot help but think that she must be a beautiful person.”

“She is,” Darcy agreed. “Ana deserves all the happiness in the world...and yet she spends her time worrying about me.”

“Looks like you’d straighten up and stop giving her such a hard time,” Lizzy teased.

Darcy raised his head and gave her a toothy grin.

“Jane’s pregnancy has given me a bit of relief from her worrying over me,” Lizzy commented. “I think it comes naturally for siblings to worry about one another. I was the same way before she got out of school and married Charlie. I complained that she never took well enough care of herself and all of that, then these past few years she has turned it around to worrying about me. I’m sure that your sister will back down when you find someone. She just wants to see you’re taken care of until you do.”

“She has a much too kind heart when it comes to me, I’m afraid,” Darcy replied. “I know it cannot be fun to have a grouch for an older brother.”

When Darcy was finished packing, he came and sat down next to her on the bed. “You know, if you really felt sorry for me about staying here, you would let me make love to you on this bed. Then the next time I have to sleep without you, your scent will be here on my covers.”

“Who said I wouldn’t let you?” Lizzy replied, raising an eyebrow.

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Lizzy saw to it that Darcy rarely spent anytime sleeping without her in the weeks that followed. Creatures of habit prefer little variance, and once Lizzy had him there with her; she was not at all interested in having him go home. Darcy teased her that if they had known about this arrangement prior to his trip, the company could have saved themselves some money on his apartment. Especially since everything had eventually migrated to Lizzy’s and he had lost any reason to go to that apartment at all. Soon, they lapsed into a comfortable routine and spent most of their free time together. They still had coffee together every morning, took turns making dinner, and Lizzy had given up the laundry task to him altogether after discovering his ridiculous obsession with color coding and neatly folded underwear. Overall, Lizzy had been pleased with his desire and ability to make himself right at home with her. As for Darcy, he could not have been more pleased with the arrangement as he had found that he simply wanted to be with her all the time. The fact that she welcomed it only reinforced his decision.

Around mid-June, Lizzy put the final touches on Darcy’s portrait. Although its completion had been neglected for a couple of weeks, she was finally satisfied enough to add it to her album. She presented it to him one evening after he had gotten in from work.

He was sitting on the couch, channel surfing when she’d finally gotten up the nerve. Clutching the notebook to her chest, she sat down in the chair opposite to him on the couch. Darcy sensed from her behavior that she was wanting his attention and so he turned off the television.

“What have you got there?” Darcy asked, indicating to the book she was holding.

“My portraits,” she answered carefully. “I’ve added yours on the last page. Would you like to see them?”

“Please,” Darcy said honestly.

Lizzy handed him the notebook and abruptly disappeared upstairs while he looked. Although she had decided to share with him, there was absolutely no way she could sit there and watch him look at them. If it happened to be that she wasn’t very good after all, she by no means wanted to see the surprised disappointment written into his features.

Once she had gone, Darcy sat the book on the coffee table and pulled back the cover. The first picture was of Jane. He sighed in appreciation. She was good, *really* good. Darcy turned each page, carefully taking in every one of her drawings. He saw her mother, father, aunts and uncles, cousins—all the people he knew she loved, heard her talk about and had seen on the mantle. He was surprised to see that even in his enthusiasm he had underestimated her. He had never dreamed that she was *this* talented, that her skill was something innate.

At last, he reached the portrait of himself. Darcy’s breath caught as he admired her work. She had somehow accomplished what she had sought; she had drawn her emotions into his likeness. There on the page, he saw himself through her eyes—handsome and good. She had drawn a strength that he would not have attributed to himself...and there was something else, he could somehow see that she loved him, she had drawn it right there on the page. Floored by his new understanding and realization of her talent, he stood to locate her.

He found her sitting upstairs in the office, talking on the phone to her sister. As soon as she saw him and the expression in his eyes, she hurried to hang up. Eyes wide in anxious anticipation, she looked at Darcy as he sat the book on the desk and knelt in front of her.

“Lizzy,” he began, taking hold of her fingers. “You asked me to be completely honest and I promised to do so.”

She nodded.

“I honestly believe that I have never seen as much passion as you have drawn into these portraits. You’re not just good, Lizzy, you are exceptionally talented,” he continued fervently. “You take these portraits and bring them to life. Somehow, you even made *me* look handsome!”

“You *are* handsome,” she chuckled, a bit dizzy from the strength of his praise.

“Lizzy, I think that if you ever choose to go back to work that you need to be using this

talent—”

“William,” she said, trying to soften his intensity. “Be realistic, this is just something I have been doing for myself. This is not something to get so worked up over.”

“It is, Elizabeth Bennet, because this is a gift here,” he insisted, patting the book. “This isn’t the normal doodling that any person can conjure up.”

Lizzy bit her lip to retain a smile that threatened to break out on her face. Unsure as she was about what he was suggesting, it did feel amazing to have him reacting so strongly to her drawing. She looked down to see his fingers entwined with hers—she hadn’t even noticed when he had done it earlier. *Sweet*, she thought, leaning down to kiss his forehead. *He is so very sweet.*

“So have I acquired my very first official fan?” she asked.

“Yes, you have, Lizzy,” he said, catching her in a proper kiss. “Thank you so much for sharing this with me... there’s something that I need you to know.”

“What?”

“I love you.”

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By the time the fourth of July rolled around, the heat had intensified as well as Jane’s doctor’s insistence that she avoid the sun as much as possible. After hearing about the doctor’s warning, Lizzy immediately began working out how to celebrate without having Jane in the sun all day long. It was Darcy who eventually suggested that she have her sister and brother-in-law over to her house instead having it at Charlie’s as they did traditionally. This concept made perfect sense as Lizzy’s house had a fully shaded wrap around porch where Jane could sit outside and enjoy the day without disobeying her doctor. Lizzy couldn’t have agreed more, but was slightly apprehensive as this would be the first time she had celebrated anything at her house in three years. After voicing her concerns to Darcy, he had agreed to do anything he could to help her create an enjoyable evening. Lizzy had soon categorized this as another positive change he had brought into her life—bringing happiness back into her home.

Keeping his promise, when the day had come, Darcy had made certain that they had everything they needed. Hot dogs, hamburgers, and bar-b-que chicken roasted on the grill as Charlie tried to get acquainted with the man that had succeeded in making Lizzy so happy.

“William!” Charlie began, shaking Darcy’s hand. “It’s good to finally meet you in person. I believe I owe you some gratitude for helping Lizzy organize this Fourth of July celebration in a pregnancy-friendly environment.”

“Oh, it was nothing at all,” Darcy explained. “Lizzy did most of the work; I mostly got in her way.”

“Lizzy is really something isn’t she?” Charlie commented mildly.

“She’s an incredible woman,” Darcy agreed.

“Elizabeth has been through a lot though,” Charlie continued, walking closer to Darcy. “She means the world to me, and is essential to the happiness of my wife.”

Darcy stopped what he was doing and focused on what Charlie was saying. “Charlie, I assure you that my intentions with Lizzy are of the most honorable kind.”

“But from what I hear,” Charlie persisted. “It’s not as easy as all that, is it? You’re not from here, Will.”

“You’re right,” Darcy said, bringing himself up to his full height. “But that doesn’t change how I feel about Lizzy or a future with her.”

“I’m not challenging you, Will,” Charlie finished. “You have succeeded in bringing back the happiness that Lizzy was once known for. I am only asking you to tread carefully with her—your leaving is not going to be easy on her and I think you ought to be prepared for that.”

Darcy nodded in response as Charlie immediately changed the conversation to the more light-hearted subject of living with his very pregnant wife.

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“Charlie said he is going to check your man out today,” Jane said sleepily. She was lounging comfortably in one of Lizzy’s porch rocking chairs, feet propped up on an ice cooler.

“Oh really,” Lizzy replied from the chair beside her. “And if he doesn’t approve?”

“Oh, be sure that he will run him off for you,” Jane said with a laugh. “I can’t believe you’ve made us wait so long to meet him.”

“I hope you will eventually forgive me for wanting to get to know him well enough myself before the two of you swoop in to pick apart his character,” Lizzy replied sarcastically, flashing her sister a smile.

“Charlie has decided that it is his personal responsibility to check Will out for you, lest you be so taken by his charm that you have not recognized the danger.”

“Well, just so you know, I reserve the right to veto any conclusions either of you draw up about William. He is more than suitable, Jane, and has done nothing but bring good into my life,” Lizzy said seriously.

“Yes, I think you happened to mention some of the good things he has been doing for you,” Jane said with a raised brow, closing her eyes lazily against Lizzy’s feigned expression of injury.

When the grilling was complete, they all had dinner while they watched the fireworks going off in the neighborhood around them. All day, Darcy’s connection and ability to interact with Lizzy was received with both surprise and approval by her sister and brother-in-law. At the end of the evening, neither Jane nor Charlie had anything negative to say about Darcy.

“Charlie doesn’t pussyfoot around,” Darcy commented after they had cleaned up and gone upstairs for the evening.

“Jane warned me that he might say something to you,” Lizzy said, sitting up in the bed to look at him. “I hope he didn’t go too far, he thinks he is helping.”

“He *did* raise some important questions,” Darcy replied thoughtfully as he pulled Lizzy to lie back down. “He’s rightly concerned with my leaving in a few weeks.”

Lizzy didn’t respond. This wasn’t something she liked to think or talk about. Yes, she realized that Darcy *would be* leaving, but she hadn’t really accepted it as a reality. Her response was only to snuggle closer to him.

“Charlie makes a good point, Lizzy,” Darcy insisted once he was certain she had no intention of replying. “It’s something we need to talk about.”

“Well, what is there to talk about really, William?” she responded with a bitterness that surprised them both. “How we’re never going to see one another again and how sad we’ll both be?”

“Lizzy—”

“Or maybe we could dwell on how you’re going to go and I’ll be right back where I started?”

“Elizabeth enough,” Darcy said gently, but with a sternness that informed her that he was not going to have any part of a petty argument. “Is that what you want? Because that’s exactly what will happen if we don’t talk about this.”

It was a few moments before either of them ventured to say anything else.

“What *is* going to happen to us, William?” Lizzy finally asked more rationally.

“I don’t want to lose you, Lizzy,” Darcy replied honestly. “I know it’s going to be hard, but I can’t lose you.”

“Sorry I lost my temper,” Lizzy said uncomfortably. “It’s just; I don’t see how this can all work out.”

“Of course it’s not going to be easy,” Darcy agreed. “But I think we have a strong enough relationship that it *can* work if we both want it badly enough.”

Lizzy buried her face in his shoulder. This spot on him had become her comfort zone; something about the action always made him instinctively tighten his arms around her and no matter what, she would feel safe. Anything could happen and she knew that he would be there for her.

“You know, you could always come with me...” Darcy speculated. “Just for a little while, until we find some sort of answer.”

Lizzy lifted her head and for an instant her face lit up, but fell again just as quickly.

“I can’t...*Jane*,” she said. Jane would be entering her last months of pregnancy and there would be no way that Lizzy could justify not being there for her.

Darcy sighed, he had forgotten about Jane. Of course, she would have to stay here with her. “We will figure something out, Lizzy, I promise,” he said, kissing her forehead.

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The remaining three weeks passed much too quickly for Darcy and Lizzy. As his last day approached, Lizzy vacillated between working to keep her mind occupied and spending every last moment she had with him. As for Darcy, he knew it was ridiculous to have no desire to return home and to the life he had led until this summer, but he could not help himself—he did not want to go. This house with Lizzy had become his home. The only thing waiting for him back in New York was an empty apartment with an empty life. There was no happiness for him there. It was true that he had missed his sister, but her influence had never been enough to fill the void of being alone day after day...night after night. He had promised Lizzy that they would find a way to stay together because he knew that they simply had no other choice. Too much good had happened those past three months and he knew he would die if he had to go back to living without her.

After his last week at work, Darcy arranged to fly home on Sunday and spend all day Saturday saying goodbye with Lizzy. Not surprisingly, Saturday began in silent denial. They went for brunch at the coffee shop, and then stopped by in the evening to go for a walk in the park near Lizzy’s house. The park was a beautiful area with large oak trees shading a walking path that circled a clear fish pond. In a little while, Lizzy spread out a blanket in the grass and they had a small picnic in the shade. Once they were finished

eating, Darcy stretched out to relax, resting his head in Lizzy's lap.

Absently, Lizzy's fingers played in his curly hair. "I don't know what I am going to do without you," she said softly, breaking their silence over his leaving. "I've gotten so used to having you here with me."

Darcy's eyes opened to look into hers as she spoke.

"I love you so much," she continued, trying not to cry. "You've given my life purpose again."

"Lizzy you've become my life, and that's not going to change with my leaving," Darcy replied, reaching up to wipe away the single tear that had escaped despite her efforts to hold on to her composure.

"I just don't want you to go," she said simply, her face crumpling.

Sitting up, Darcy pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried against his chest. Without regard to the promise he had made to himself that he would stay strong for her, his own tears slid down his face, landing in her hair as his chin rested on her head.

"You have come to mean everything to me, Lizzy," he said, clearing his throat. "I'm not going to let you go, not ever."

The drive back home was silent with Darcy clutching Lizzy's hand and her head resting on his shoulder. As soon as they were inside the house, they purposely walked upstairs. Clothing was pulled away and both fought with lips, hands, and tongues to show the other how precious they were, how much they needed them. Lizzy eventually took control, rocking against him, taking him entirely as her own. He was hers, and she wanted to sear her mark on him, make sure that no one would ever have the courage to take him away from her. When she came, the climax was bittersweet, the shudders opening a well of emotions and she collapsed sobbing with her body still pressed against his, her face buried in his neck.

Neither slept that night. As they clung to one another, there was a mutual understanding that each moment that passed brought them closer to an inevitable goodbye. One minute before the alarm was set to ring, Lizzy reached over to switch it off.

Mechanically, they both dressed and Lizzy helped him carry his bags downstairs. Earlier in the week they had decided that with his rental car returned, it would be best for him to take a taxi to the airport—both aware that Lizzy would be in no shape to drive herself home afterward.

This morning, there was no time to drive to the coffee shop and so they drank their coffee in silence at the kitchen table. They walked outside to sit on the porch, knowing that there was only so much time left before the taxi would come and take him away. As they sat

there, Lizzy rested her head on his shoulder, pressing herself as close to his side as possible.

When the taxi came and they had loaded his bags, Lizzy clutched his shirt, burying her tears in the fabric. Darcy was certain that his heart would burst with sadness as she held on to him helplessly. He was honestly afraid of what would happen to them once he got into the car and he knew that she was also. He pulled her back and kissed her possessively, tasting every inch of her mouth, the salt of her tears, and drinking in one last assurance of her love. Unable to take much more, he whispered, “I love you, Lizzy,” into her ear, and the next moment, he had climbed in the cab and was gone.

Lizzy spent the rest of the day wrapped in the blanket from her bed—surrounding herself with his scent as she sat in a rocking chair out on her porch musing that there had never been a summer day that the sun could shine and nothing at all seemed warm.

#### ~Part Four~

*You cannot find peace by avoiding life. ~Virginia Woolf*

When he was certain that the cab was no longer in view of the house, Darcy allowed his own emotions to seep out from his over-composed façade. As a few tears trailed down his cheeks, he dropped his head into his hands and tried to remind himself again that this was only temporary. Having a breakdown in front of a cab driver was not something he would have ever usually allowed. However, at that moment, nothing seemed to matter but the reality that he was losing Lizzy, and that every mile driven took him farther away from her. The fact that he had no idea when he would even see her again weighed heavy on his emotions and he slammed the heel of his palm against the car door in frustration.

Darcy spent the rest of the afternoon in a zombie-like calm. He somehow made it back to New York without so much as even concentrating how he got on the plane or what happened once he got there. He was still resting in the kind of morose denial that only allowed his despondency to simmer when he was greeted by Georgiana and Jamie who had both come to take him home as soon as he got off the plane. The only thing he would recall later about the drive home was how sickeningly familiar everything around him was. It was all dull colors and redundancy—nothing like the bright colors he associated with Lizzy. She seemed to bring such a sunnier hue to his world that being home without her was like stepping back into grayness after enjoying the rich shades of life that he had found by her side. Without her, it all seemed insignificant and bland—things that had been acceptable until he had found something better. It was often said that a person doesn't know what they have until they lose it, but in his case it was that he didn't know what was missing until he gained it. The reality of his situation hit hard, and there was nothing that he could do to remedy it...the realization only served to make him angry.

He did feel terrible that while his sister and brother-in-law were so happy to see him, he couldn't have been more unhappy to be there. Although they spoke to him throughout the ride home, he scarcely had any idea what was being said or bothered to contribute to the conversation. Any form of including himself felt like acceptance of what was happening and he wasn't quite ready to jump back in. He petulantly resolved to resist for as long as possible. Instead, he tortured himself by imagining what he had been doing with Lizzy last Sunday. Sunday's were his day to cook. The thought of her having dinner all alone rekindled his frustration and again he slammed the heel of his palm against the car door.

“William!” Georgiana shouted for the third time, knocking him out of his tumultuous reverie.

Darcy immediately stopped and looked at his sister as if he had forgotten that she was even with him in the car.

“What's the matter with you?” she asked, peeking around the back of the passenger's seat at him.

“Long day,” he said evasively, looking back out the window.

“Well, if you’re going to be surly and refuse to tell me why you are attacking our car, I will thank you not to do so,” Georgiana replied incredulously before turning back around.

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“Are you going to tell me why you aren’t thrilled to see your little sister again?” Georgiana asked, perching herself on the edge of his bed. They had arrived a few minutes before, Georgiana asking Jamie to wait in the car while she helped her brother carry in his things and interrogated him.

Darcy’s only response was to turn around and gift her with a severe scowl. This kind of behavior, unfortunately, had no effect on his sister who had known him much too long to be intimidated by his facial expressions. Georgiana pressed her lips together and tried another approach.

“I haven’t talked to you much since you left, did something happen down there?”

“Ana please,” Darcy pleaded, sitting down in a chair and dropping his head into his hands. “Yes, something happened, no, I don’t particularly want to talk about it tonight...I just got home.”

“Alright,” Georgiana sighed, standing up to leave. “I’m going to let it go for now, but I’m calling you tomorrow evening. You have until then to pout, mope, and glower ambiguously.”

Taking a deep breath, Darcy walked his sister calmly to the door. As soon as the door was firmly closed behind her, he headed directly to the phone. He had promised to call Lizzy as soon as he had gotten home.

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Lizzy finally went inside the house when the bugs started to bite and her stomach began to growl. She didn’t want to do anything today. She wanted to pout and cry and she didn’t care what anyone might think of her for behaving so childishly. Darcy was gone and all at once everything was uncomfortable. She didn’t want to leave the house and she didn’t want to be at home. There were things she could have done, but she had no desire to do them. She was hungry but she didn’t feel like eating. Darcy was not there and she felt terrible. The worst part was that she had no idea when she would be able to see him again. There were no days to count off on the calendar, nothing at all to look forward to but his phone call...whenever it came. Lizzy was aware how hard all of this was on Darcy and she vowed that she would not cry when he called. He had already dealt with enough of her emotions and she was well enough in tune with *his* emotions to know that having to leave her behind had been tearing him up inside. She did have the tiny comfort that this was as hard for him as it was for her, that he loved her just as much as she did him. When he called, she would be cheerful and force herself to concentrate on how

happy she would be to hear his voice and talk to him. It was all they had now and she refused to ruin it with tears that could only make them more miserable...not tonight.

Mid-day, Jane called to check on Lizzy. She knew that today was the big day and had resolved to wait out the storm that would undoubtedly plague her sister once he had gone. She decided that she would test the waters around two in the afternoon.

“Hi Jane,” Lizzy answered on the third ring.

“Hey *pumpkin*,” Jane said feelingly. “How did it go?”

“Oh, it was horrible, just as I knew it would be,” Lizzy replied quickly. “He said he would call me tonight though.”

“Are you hanging in there alright?” Jane asked, treading lightly.

“Yes, I mean, I’m miserable, but I’m not despairing,” Lizzy answered in her most positive tone. “William loves me and this is only a temporary situation.”

“Do you want to come over and have dinner with us tonight?” Jane offered. “Charlie’s making meatloaf...”

“No. Thank you, though,” Lizzy said chewing her lip. “I think I will just find something here and wait for William to call.”

Jane hung up the phone with her sister not entirely convinced that everything was alright. She decided to focus, for now, on the fact that Lizzy was trying to remain positive...even if it was just to put on a happy face. It definitely helped her to say positive things whether they were what she felt or not. Honestly, Jane had half-expected to find Lizzy in a sniffling mess. Finding her composed and looking forward to Darcy’s phone call was admittedly a better situation. She did make a note, though, to watch Lizzy closely in case something was to take a drastic change for the worse.

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Over the next week, Lizzy resolved that the best way to cope with the loss of Darcy was to resume her routine prior to meeting him. She woke up in the morning, and did whatever she could to make the hours pass before he would call her at night. She could no longer bring herself to visit the coffee shop alone—it had become *their* place, and going there only reminded her that Darcy was missing. The fresh loss, ironically, did not remind her of the past. If anything, it pushed those memories farther away from her. She began to draw relentlessly. The desire to express herself was so driving that she began to lose hours of sleep and peace of mind until the picture was perfect. Her style eventually evolved, and she felt compelled to take down any image she could wrap her mind around. In the evenings, Darcy would call and they would talk for hours. Lizzy had no explanation for her behavior, but since his absence, she had never been so charged and

inspired to take pencil to paper. In all honesty, Lizzy missed Darcy cruelly and she counted the hours each day until they could speak again. However, the more keenly she felt his loss, the more determined she became with her drawing and did anything she could to release the mixed emotions she was feeling.

Jane was uncertain how to take such a focused stance from Lizzy and although she was concerned, she held her tongue. Lizzy had thrown herself into her drawing with a vengeance that none of them had ever witnessed. Although she never said as much, Jane worried that her sister was on the verge of a spectacular crash.

But she wasn't.

What had actually happened was that Lizzy had given over control to her muse and it was urging her on in her quest for the release of her frustrations. Instead of wallowing in how terribly she was missing Darcy, she was learning to express those feelings on the page, be it a bowl of fruit or her porch side hydrangeas. In addition, pages and pages were covered with Darcy's face as she drew him constantly and anything that reminded her of him was taken down immediately. It was something very healthy that was happening to her. If Lizzy had not been keeping her fingers busy, she would have otherwise drowned in her feelings. The high point of each day was still Darcy's phone call. The reassurance of his loving and missing her was the necessary encouragement she needed to keep working rather than dwelling on what was missing—and a strengthening of her talent came out of the experience.

Similarly, Darcy had thrown himself into work. How he managed to concentrate when he could only think of Lizzy was something that could not be explained. Yet, it was happening and the harder he worked and the more he focused, the faster the hours passed until he could talk to her again. Everything he accomplished each day was working toward the singular goal of making it to the point when he could again speak with Lizzy. For him it became the culminating point of each day, to hear her voice until they both agreed to go to sleep each night.

Two weeks into the separation, however, their enthusiasm for distraction was beginning to wear thin. Lizzy's fingers were tired of penciling and shading, and Darcy's focus on graphs and figures was hastily burning out. As the days began to pass more slowly, Lizzy was convinced that her house was steadily growing larger and more hollow. Darcy scrounged for any way, reason, or excuse for him to go back to Georgia, but there was none, and he rapidly ran out of options. He tried to convince Lizzy to come see him, but she was torn between not leaving Jane and wanting to put an end to being apart. Frustrated as they were with the situation, the one thing that never waned was their enthusiasm for one another and their desire to be together again.

As if she were trying to justify her adamant stance that Jane needed her, Lizzy came by her sister's house with breakfast on the third week. She found her sister sitting on the couch wearing sweats and *watching* a pregnancy work-out video.

“I’m convinced that these women aren’t really pregnant,” Jane said, indicating to the television with her remote control as Lizzy walked in. “First off, who feels secure enough in late pregnancy to want to appear in a work-out video?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Lizzy replied, seating herself on the couch beside her sister.

“Well, obviously *I’m* no expert on pregnancy fitness, but I think some of these moves are unrealistic. *Look!* If I crouched down like that, Charlie would have to call the fire department to get me back up again, and *she’s* going to do it eight times and ‘walk it out!’”

Lizzy sniggered. “If I had known you were exercising, I would have brought along a more nutritious breakfast,” she said, waving a bag of bagels.

“Yes, well,” Jane said musingly. “I think there is something to be said about the effort that is made to keep fit whether you actually make it to the exercise part or not. I mean, look at me; here I am all dressed out with the video popped in. I even did the breathing exercises in the beginning. It gives me hope that I was at least motivated enough to go through the motions, even if I didn’t actually make it to doing the monkey thrusts.”

“*Monkey thrusts?*” Lizzy replied in horror.

“Oh, I don’t know what they’re actually called, Elizabeth. I made that one up...I think,” Jane explained dismissively. “The point is that I am now allowed to enjoy your gift of breakfast even though all I did was squash myself into some spandex and turn on the VCR.”

“Well, if you did the breathing warm-up, I would say that you have practically been exercising all morning,” Lizzy reasoned archly.

“Precisely,” Jane replied, snatching the bagel bag. “Now, tell me why you are here with breakfast, Lizzy.”

“I just thought you might like some company...”

“Mmm, sesame and cream cheese,” Jane interrupted. “Are you trying to butter me up?”

“No...”

“Did Charlie send you?” Jane questioned, pointing an accusing finger at her sister. “Because if you are here to nag, I banished my husband off to work for that not forty-five minutes ago.”

“No, no. I haven’t even spoken to Charlie, I just know you need some company,” Lizzy said uncomfortably.

“Need company, Lizzy? I swear you’re both driving me nuts,” Jane replied. “I’m fine, *bored*, but fine.”

“Jane, I—”

“How is Will?” Jane interrupted.

“He’s alright,” Lizzy said, picking at some fuzz on the couch cushion. “I don’t think he will be able to come back down here to see me any time soon though.”

“Why doesn’t he just ask you to go see *him*?” Jane asked. “That’s much more practical anyway.”

“Well, he has, Jane, but I can’t just up and leave when you are like this,” Lizzy replied, gesturing to Jane’s stomach.

“Lizzy please,” Jane said impatiently. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m not due until September.”

“I know. But—”

“Why on earth are you not taking advantage of this chance to see Will? He’s not going to wait around forever you know,” Jane said pointedly.

“What do you mean by that?” Lizzy cried.

“I mean, that he’s not going to be satisfied for long with a telephone girlfriend who always has an excuse not to see him,” Jane replied harshly.

“I was *trying* to be a good sister,” she replied unhappily.

“No, you’re only making this harder than it has to be. Go see him, Lizzy, I’ll be fine,” Jane said more gently. “Besides, I have Charlie and our mother to look after me and unlimited access to telephones I can call you with if I need you.”

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It was nearly four weeks after Darcy’s departure that they were finally able to arrange for Lizzy to come and see him. After adamant assurances from Jane’s doctor that she was completely safe from delivering in the next week, Lizzy made plans to go stay with Darcy. Finally, the two had something more to look forward to than phone calls. Neither could remember the last time that they had been so excited with anticipation.

Darcy was there waiting for Lizzy as she got off the plane on Sunday. As soon as she saw him, she dropped her things on the ground and reached for him as he wrapped her in his arms. Darcy clutched her to him and buried his nose in her hair, murmuring, “Lizzy,

Lizzy,” as he lifted her up and rocked back and forth. Lizzy said nothing as she clung to him happily, feeling the comfort of his arms and his warm breath against her hair. When they both had relaxed their hold on one another, Darcy put her down and held her back to look at her. She was wearing a long turquoise and flower patterned ruffle-hem skirt with a matching solid turquoise top. Her long hair fell in silky chestnut waves over her shoulders. He marveled over how effortlessly beautiful she was—her features were always soft, nothing was ever busy about her appearance. He leaned down and gave her a long, warm kiss. He had missed her so much.

“Well, I suppose I’ve made it,” Lizzy teased when he had pulled away from her again. She smiled as she took in the intensity of Darcy’s gaze. Even though she had taken it down in her drawing and attempted to duplicate his features over the past few weeks, none of them could compare with his actual expression. Her stomach gave a little flutter under his scrutiny and she was rewarded with a small amount of emotional relief when he finally tore his eyes away to help take her bags. As he gathered the bags, Lizzy noted his appearance. He was wearing dark blue denim jeans and a slate blue button up shirt that he had left untucked. She couldn’t help but note how handsome he was as she allowed him to lead the way out to the car.

“So what do you think of New York so far?” he asked her during the car-ride home.

“I’m just happy to be here with you,” she said, taking his hand and resting it in her lap. “I haven’t really thought of anything past that point.”

“Well, here we are,” Darcy said after a few more minutes when they had stopped in front of his building. Lizzy looked out of the car window and could not help but think that it blended in with every tall building she had seen in the city on the way there. She got out of the car and followed Darcy up the stairs with her bags. By the time they made it inside, Lizzy was feeling tired and was thankful that his building had an elevator. She was even more thankful when she saw that Darcy had pressed the button for the fifth floor.

When she stepped into Darcy’s apartment, Lizzy could not help but take in the surroundings. Everything about his apartment seemed so intensely *him*. The walls were all dressed in a dark blue that seemed cool and warm simultaneously. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Darcy set out to show Lizzy around his apartment. The front door let into the living room and she followed Darcy as he pointed out every thing’s location. The entire place was covered with hardwood flooring and cream colored furniture. His couches were a soft suede and their light color countered the dark walls very nicely. She peeked quickly into his kitchen before hurrying to follow him down the hallway to the bedroom which proved to be decorated in a mirror contrast to the living room with light cream-colored walls and dark blue bedding.

Gingerly, Lizzy seated herself on the edge of the bed and smiled up at Darcy who had shoved his hands in his pockets.

“It’s not quite as large as your house, but it’s efficient, I suppose,” he explained

needlessly.

“I think it’s very nice,” Lizzy replied. “And on top of everything else, it feels and smells like you, so I am content.”

Slowly, Darcy seated himself beside her and slid his fingers through her hair as he pulled her closer for a kiss. When Lizzy parted her lips to emit a sigh, Darcy took advantage of the opportunity to deepen their kiss.

“If you missed me half as much as I missed you, all my suffering is justified,” he whispered against her lips.

“You could not possibly have missed me more,” she said, running her fingertips down his cheek.

Darcy reached up and caught her hand, drawing it to his lips to kiss each fingertip. “I had gotten so accustomed to having you with me every day.”

“I wasn’t happy being all alone in that house again,” Lizzy admitted, freeing her hand and running it through his hair, pushing his unruly curls away from his forehead.

“I’m in love with you,” he said pulling her to rest against his chest.

“And I love you so much,” she replied, pressing her lips against his throat.

“This is what I have missed the most,” he told her, running his fingers down her back. “Having you so close to me. I’ve been miserable trying to sleep without you.”

“I know,” Lizzy said, relaxing herself and sinking completely into his arms. “I put all sorts of pillows on your side of the bed, but nothing compares to having you there with me.”

“No,” he agreed, and when she tilted her head up to gaze at him, he kissed her again. He felt her warm fingers slide underneath his shirt and the palms of her hands run across his chest. He responded when she pressed against him by leaning back, pulling her with him, her lips never leaving his.

Lizzy slowly unbuttoned his shirt, kissing the warm skin of his chest as she exposed it. She had been so bereaved of his touch over the last month and now that she was together with him again, she wanted to lose herself in his arms. Resting her weight on her elbows, she gently flicked her tongue over his nipple and was rewarded with a groan from Darcy as he tangled his fingers in her hair.

Darcy pulled her back up so that he could again kiss her lips. He was thoroughly intoxicated by the warmth of her scent and the feeling of her lying over him. He had not felt this alive since before he had been forced to leave her and the only coherent thought

he had as he tugged her top away from her body was that if he had to die tomorrow, he couldn't think of a better way to spend the rest of his life than being right there with Lizzy. Of course, he was very much alive and the feeling of her bare skin pressing against his brought back that realization as her lips sought a response from his. In a daze, he rolled her underneath him and looked into her eyes. His gaze deepened as he saw her dark eyes search his for meaning.

There was something about the way he looked at her that never failed to spark a reaction in Lizzy. When he looked at her, it was as if he was searching for the most carefully guarded vulnerability that lived in her spirit. His ability to locate and draw out such a delicate part of her was what incited her response to him and she needed him to touch her, reassure her that this part of her heart was safe with him.

When she reached for him, Darcy responded by pulling away the rest of their clothing and pressing his lips to her stomach. Lizzy never could seem to account for how easily she trusted him. From the first time to this point, she was able give herself over to him completely and know that he would never hurt her. Sighing happily, she opened herself up to him and focused on the warm satisfaction she felt as his hands and lips touched every part of her. When he finally parted her legs and pushed inside of her, Lizzy thankfully wrapped her limbs around him, wanting to be as close to him as possible. She wanted to dissolve into his arms and meld herself to him irrevocably. She found herself wishing to be swallowed up by the pleasure she felt with him so that they could never be taken from one another again.

As his body rocked within and against hers, Darcy allowed his weight to press against her, pushing them as close together as possible. He ran his lips across her breasts, her shoulders, and her neck, waiting for her to gasp for him. He had always loved watching her receive her pleasure as much as his own. When she tensed and dug her fingernails into his back, he watched her face, finding his own release as he felt hers shatter through her body. He eventually relaxed himself, rolling them over and allowing Lizzy to snuggle herself under the covers and in his arms.

If Darcy had planned anything for them that first evening, he never mentioned it and Lizzy never asked. Instead, they dozed contentedly in Darcy's bed until they were both hungry and made dinner together before settling in to watch a movie before it was time for bed.

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The first few days together were amazing, each slipping back into their comfortable routine of being together. Only now it was more meaningful and precious, they appreciated their time together for what it was. The understanding that Lizzy would have to leave on Saturday weighed heavily on both of their minds. On Wednesday, they took a ferry out to Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty because Lizzy had never been. When they arrived on Liberty Island, Lizzy knew she probably seemed silly to him, but something about standing there beneath a national monument that she had only heard of

and seen in pictures left her awestruck.

“Thank you for bringing me here, William,” Lizzy said resting back against him as he leaned against the railing that circled the tiny island. “I’ll remember this always.”

Darcy closed his eyes and reveled in the contentment he felt there with her at that moment and knew that she wouldn’t be the only person to treasure this memory. Yet he felt the growing pain of restlessness well up inside of him as it had every day since Lizzy had arrived. Every bit of enjoyment they shared seemed to be tainted with the understanding that this was only a temporary fix to their misery at being separated. It was frustrating and it put a damper on every sweet moment they had together. He knew that Lizzy felt the same stirrings of anxiety that were niggling at his heartstrings. Never, in the time they spent together over the summer, had he felt the level of hesitancy she was displaying. She had never tried to push him away and it certainly wasn’t her intent now, but he could sense her reluctant and reserved emotions restraining her happiness. It was an elephant in the room, an inevitability that was not to be spoken of, and yet neither could completely forget that every passing moment brought them closer to having to part again.

Feeling a sudden urge to be possessive, Darcy tightened his hold around Lizzy’s waist, and she dropped her head back to rest on his shoulder, her deliberate movement wafting the vanilla scent of her hair, sending the warm and comforting scent that was Lizzy to invade his senses. It wasn’t right, he decided then, that they should be separated, that he could love someone this much and not have her as his own indefinitely. Something that felt so much like home should not be temporary. The solution popped into his head, and his breath hitched—he knew exactly what he needed to do. He dropped his chin to press a kiss against her temple, when she sighed appreciatively, Darcy’s resolve was set.

“Marry me,” he said, breaking their companionable silence. Lizzy’s eyes immediately shot open and she lifted her head to meet his gaze.

“What?” she asked astonished.

Darcy led her over to a bench and sat down beside her. “Please Lizzy, marry me? I know this seems sudden, but I’m perfectly serious. You know that I love you and we will be able to make a new start together, here in New York. I know this would require you to make some serious changes, but I really believe that we can make each other happy forever—please say you’ll be my wife.”

Her emotions in turmoil, and due to the question and how unexpectedly it had come, Lizzy’s eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, William!” she replied, tears sliding down her cheeks, it was a few minutes before she could say anything else. “You want me to come *here*, to live with you?”

“Yes,” Darcy said gently, brushing away the curls that the wind had blown over her eyes.

“I want you to come here with me, to stay.”

Lizzy looked down at her hands, her fingers nervously knotting the hem of her blouse. Of course she wanted to marry him, he had come to mean everything to her over the summer, and she had been miserable without him. But could she live without her sister—the person who had always been her best friend and her strength through every hardship? Could she move away from her family and everything she knew? Would she be able to leave the house that she and Scott had worked so hard to make a home? It felt like a betrayal to what they had if she was willing to give all that up so easily. She knew it wasn't right to deny herself a happier future with Darcy, but she was scared and his proposal seemed so impulsive that it wasn't a decision she wanted to make without first thinking it through.

“Yes, I want to marry you, William,” she said after a moment. “But, I'm not sure if I can leave my sister...” She finished her sentence by pulling herself closer to him and wrapping herself up in his arms for support. “There's no other way is there?”

“No,” Darcy replied gently. “Not without me finding another job and starting completely over.”

Lizzy swallowed hard, she had already known the answer to her question and she wasn't willing to let him do that. Darcy loved what he did, there was no other way he would have been able to throw himself into his work so passionately. It just wasn't practical for her to ask him to drop all of that for her when she had nothing like that keeping her in Georgia. She would not allow him to do that.

“I would go with you to see your sister as often as you want,” he included, holding her to him. He had expected her reaction to be tearful. This was why he had been so nervous, he knew this would be a tough decision for her and truth be told, he hadn't been entirely certain that she wouldn't refuse him outright.

Lizzy nodded against his shoulder and sniffled. She pulled back a little bit to look at Darcy. “William, I *do* want to marry you, I do. But I don't even know *how* to live without having my family close by. Will you be angry if I ask to think about it—just for this week while I'm here with you? If you will just give me some time to think about this, I promise to give you an answer before I leave.”

Darcy didn't hesitate for a moment in agreeing with her plea. If she needed time, she would have it. He could only hope that his patience would be rewarded with her giving him a positive answer. The waiting would be miserable, but he knew that it could mean the difference between yes and no...and so he agreed to wait.

~Part Five~

*We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be. ~Jane Austen*

Darcy rushed home the following evening, as they were due to have dinner with his sister in less than an hour. Knowing that Lizzy would be there waiting for him still sent a little frisson of excitement through his stomach when he thought about it. At some point, Lizzy had become essential to him, like breathing, and her absence in his life had been excruciatingly difficult. Now that she was finally there with him, time could not go by fast enough until he could get back to her.

He called her name as soon as he walked in the door, but to his surprise, he received no answer. Quickly, he set down his things and walked down the hall to look for her.

What he found was the sweetest most precious sight that he could have imagined: Lizzy, curled up and sleeping on his bed. For a moment he paused, folding his arms and leaning against the doorframe, he watched her there. It was as if she somehow belonged there, wrapped up in his blanket. A thought occurred to him and he slipped out of the room and into the office to grab his camera. One of the things he had regretted about the summer was that he'd never taken his own pictures. Yes, Lizzy had taken plenty, but at the end of the summer he had come back home with nothing but his memory to recall her beautiful features. Carefully, he took a quick picture of her there, and looked back on the digital screen to see if it had turned out. He smiled in satisfaction. Perfect.

As soon as he was finished, he turned off the camera and rested it on the nightstand. Gently, so as not to disturb her prematurely, he crawled into bed beside her. He leaned over and kissed her eyelids, nose, cheeks and eventually her lips. Lizzy took a deep intake of breath, waking up as his kisses showered down her face and neck.

“Mmm, William,” she said opening her eyes and stretching out like a spoiled kitten.

“We have to go, or we’ll be late getting to Ana’s,” Darcy replied apologetically. “Are you ready?”

“Almost,” Lizzy replied, pulling herself up and off the bed. “Give me just a second.”

Darcy sat on the bed and watched her as she fluffed the sleep out of her appearance. It seemed fitting for him to be there watching as she put in her earrings and tamed the waves in her hair. Lizzy was everything he wanted in a person and nothing more mattered than the fact that she was simply where he belonged. Whatever she chose, he knew then that he would have to follow her there. Living without her was no longer an option.

“I’m ready,” Lizzy announced, slipping on her shoes. “Sorry I fell asleep, I was trying to be ready by the time you got home.”

“It’s fine,” he replied. “I spoke to Ana before I left and she said that she was only just

finishing up. We should be right on time.”

Darcy couldn't wait to introduce Lizzy to his baby sister. It had seemed so off-kilter to have her so together and comfortable while he remained the lonely bachelor. It had been years since he had seen someone fit to introduce to her—as one does not introduce their baby sisters to women of questionable repute that he had simply been ‘sleeping with.’ Lizzy was certainly in a different league than those women—*she is in a league of her own*, he mused, then laughed at his own cliché thoughts.

“I'm a little nervous,” Lizzy admitted as they climbed the stairs in Georgiana's apartment building. Despite her sudden unease, Lizzy had never been the type to struggle with strangers. She had always been able to win people over with her good humor, yet this seemed entirely different. This was a person that *mattered* to Darcy and therefore someone that would matter to her if she wanted any type of future with him. “I want her to like me,” she explained softly.

“She will *love* you,” Darcy insisted, placing a comforting hand on the small of her back. “You will be surprised at how easy it is to be around Ana and Jamie.”

As soon as the door opened and Georgiana appeared, Lizzy's fears were put to rest. Georgiana was a tall and slender woman with warm blue eyes that gave off the same comforting expression as her brother's. She was wearing a light pink sweater with her blonde hair done up loosely at the nape of her neck. There was nothing imposing about her as Lizzy had feared. Instead, Lizzy would agree that everything about this woman was welcoming and warm. Lizzy noted the dimples in Georgiana's cheeks that she shared with her brother as she smiled and waved them in—she found the trait somehow reassuring.

Dinner was a comfortable affair with a light Italian salad followed by a rich lasagna (Georgiana had gotten wind that it was Lizzy's favorite). As Darcy had predicted, Lizzy warmed quickly to Georgiana and her husband Jamie. The two soon reminded her of a quieter version of Jane and Charlie. Although they lacked the high energy of her sister and brother-in-law, they made up for it with twice as much ease and friendliness. Darcy was delighted to see his love and his sister so taken in with one another and after dinner, when they all sat down in the living room, Darcy found himself having to strike up a separate conversation with Jamie as Lizzy and Georgiana were speaking excitedly about her sister's having twins.

“Lizzy seems like a wonderful woman, Will,” Jamie mentioned after Georgiana had taken Lizzy off to her show her some photo albums. “Ana and I were just recalling before you arrived that this is the first woman you've brought around for us to meet since before we were married. Ana said she certainly must be special if you're willing to let us meet her.”

“She *is* special,” Darcy agreed, sipping his wine. “She was anxious to make a good impression on you both, but as you can see, it's not difficult for her to draw a person in.”

“And what about you, Will? Has she drawn you in?” Jamie smiled. “Will she be the one?”

“I hope so,” Darcy replied honestly. “I think you can obviously detect that she isn’t the type of woman you let get away without a fight.”

“I’m happy to hear it,” Jamie replied, patting Darcy on the back. “You know how much your sister worries for you being alone.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of it,” Darcy laughed ruefully. “She gives me an earful of grief every time there’s an opportunity. She is amazing though—I’m proud that my sister has grown up to be a woman worth admiring.”

“She’s wonderful,” Jamie agreed, then continued archly, “I recommend finding someone like her to keep around.”

“I’m working on it,” Darcy promised, lifting his glass. “Believe me.”

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Lizzy’s lips parted in happiness as she flipped the sleeved pages of the Darcy’s old photo albums. Each page was filled with pictures of Darcy growing up, and receiving this degree and that award. It was amazing to watch the pages reveal Darcy’s evolution to becoming the man she now loved.

“My mother was hopelessly sentimental,” Georgiana explained as Lizzy looked. “She made us both an album of our own that captured all of our important moments over the years. She said she wanted them to be finished with our wedding days—so as you would suspect, his still has an empty last page where mine is finished. She was always filling albums with pictures. She would take them with her and fill these up in the car while dad drove us wherever we were going on vacation. We all teased her about it, but I wouldn’t trade them for anything now. You can’t beat having organized memories at your fingertips. Will and I know exactly where everything—like our high school diplomas and basketball certificates—are.”

“You’re right,” Lizzy acknowledged, still looking at the pictures. “My things are so disorganized and I can only guess which box in the attic has my diplomas and things.” At that point, Lizzy stopped to linger on the last page of the album that, as Georgiana had warned, held no pictures. In gold scrap-booking letters, someone—she supposed it must have been Mrs. Darcy—had placed the words, *Wedding Day*. Georgiana watched as Lizzy ran her fingers across the lettering.

“You know, you’re the very first woman that Will has ever brought around for us to meet in, well,” she paused to think as she finally breeched the subject. “...possibly ever. Jamie and I agreed that you must certainly mean a lot to him for Will to even let us meet you.”

“Mmm,” Lizzy replied with a smile as she closed the book, somewhat discomfited. “Thank you. That means a lot. I believe that William mentioned he wasn’t much of a serial dater in the past.”

“If he was, he certainly never shared it with us. If he hadn’t already confessed to me though, it would have been obvious that he loves you from the way that he has looked at you all night,” Georgiana said seriously. “He’s been terribly mopey since he came back from the summer. He must have been missing you.” She finished her sentence with a smile.

“I can assure you that it was a mopey-ness that was absolutely mutual. I’m lucky my sister is still willing to speak to me after dealing with my moods after he left,” Lizzy tried to say cheerfully as she fingered the edges of the photo album. She could sense where this was leading and it was making her increasingly uneasy.

“Lizzy, I hope you won’t take this the wrong way because I would rather do anything than hurt your feelings, but I think you know that my brother means a lot to me,” Georgiana began carefully. “Last year, he just sort of shut off after our father died and I can’t even begin to elaborate on how worried I’ve been for him. When we lost daddy I leaned so much on Jamie and it frightened me to think of Will having no one to talk to, holding all of that sadness in—which I know he ultimately did. But when he met you this summer, it has seemed like a light has come on again in him. You don’t seem like the type of woman to toy with another person’s feelings, so I just wanted to take a moment to ask you, coming from one sister to another, to be gentle with him—no matter what happens.”

For a few minutes, Lizzy remained silent. She was touched by his sister’s speech and she wanted to respond in the right way—only she didn’t know what to say. Before long though, Georgiana reached over and placed a small hand atop her own.

“Lizzy? Please don’t be offended, that truly isn’t what I wanted just now. Perhaps I forgot to mention that I would be more than pleased to call you my sister, if that is the road you and my brother choose to take...in fact, I truly hope that *is* what happens,” Georgiana finished honestly.

“Thank you for thinking well enough of me to consider me worthy of your brother. You don’t know how much that means,” Lizzy began, weighing each word gingerly. “I want you to know that I am not a stranger to loss and I am well aware of how hard it can be to move forward. I can only promise that I will do whatever I can to be careful with your brother’s heart. I love him very much and he has come to mean more to me than I thought was possible at this point in my life.”

“That is all I ask,” Georgiana said genuinely, and the women hugged, sealing their newfound understanding of each other.

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“I loved your sister and her husband,” Lizzy announced as they returned back to Darcy’s apartment.

“I knew you would,” Darcy replied, pulling her into a warm hug. “I was so happy to have them finally meet you—they both thought you were fantastic—as I knew they would.”

“Your sister showed me your photo albums. I wish my mother would have thought to do something like that for Jane and me.”

“Ana takes that from her too, the whole nurturing and family thing. As you saw she had the camera out all evening. Ana keeps all the photographs and everything from that time until now. When mom was gone she stepped right in, making sure that pictures were still taken—it was nice to have some semblance of normalcy. When we were dividing up their things after dad went, it only seemed right that she should have all our pictures and that sort of thing. She and I have always been so close that I didn’t mind letting her keep mine too. She is much better at taking care of them than I could ever hope to be.”

“Yes, there wasn’t a speck of dust,” Lizzy commented as they moved to lounge on the couch. “Things like that you would expect to be covered.”

“Huh, yes well as I seem to accumulate more than is the average amount of dust for one person—you see the pictures are in a much better place,” Darcy grumbled teasingly.

Lizzy laughed at him as she opened her purse and turned her phone back on. She had kept it off that evening for the purpose of not being rude in front of his sister, as Jane tended to call for the silliest reasons these days—like for her to settle a spat between herself and Charlie over what color the babies’ room had been painted, a pale yellow or lemon. However, she was surprised by the volume of missed calls and messages as it wasn’t her sister’s style to continue on calling several times unless it was an emergency. Instinctively, her brow furrowed with worry.

“A lot of missed calls from Jane,” she explained when Darcy noticed her concerned expression. As she listened to her messages, her features contorted from worry to alarm as she jumped up from the couch. “I have to go!” she announced hurriedly.

“What’s happened?” Darcy replied, standing more slowly and cupping her elbow with his hand to maintain her attention.

“It’s Jane, the babies—she’s in labor...and I’m not there. Oh, I just knew this would happen if I came!” Lizzy replied frantically as she looked around, mentally calculating what had to be done.

“You have to go? Tonight?” Darcy asked, already knowing the answer. “What are the

odds of you actually making it there before they're born? Even if you left this second."

"I don't know, but I have to try," Lizzy said, looking at him pleadingly. "I know this is terrible and horrid and neither of us want this to end so suddenly—but you know I have to go to her. Will you please help me, William?"

"Of course," he said softly, drawing her into a quick hug. He wasn't happy, but arguing with her wasn't going to change anything. "I will see if I can find you a ticket while you get your things together."

After kissing him in a quick thanks, Lizzy turned and ran off to pack up everything. Darcy frowned as he watched her run around the apartment scooping up her things. *This wasn't supposed to happen.* He felt a jealous twinge shoot through his stomach as he walked back to his office and sat down at his desk to see if he could find her a ticket. This sort of thing happened all the time, he reasoned. Babies didn't operate on designated schedules. Yet, at the moment, he felt like being childish. It wasn't fair that she had to go now. She had planned to stay here with *him* for the whole week at the very least! Jane didn't *need* her, she had a husband, and Lizzy would be able to hear all about it later. But even as he thought it, he knew that it wasn't possible. Of course Lizzy would want to be with her sister. Nothing would be able to tear him from Georgiana's side if their roles were reversed. Understanding was the only rational choice at this point and being a good boyfriend meant helping her find her way back to Georgia as safely and as quickly as possible—it would not be an easy feat this late in the evening.

Despite the odds, Lizzy was able to find a way back to Georgia that evening and all too soon, she had kissed Darcy goodbye and was gone again in a flutter of bags, tears and agitation. Driving home, Darcy felt empty and lost. It was just all too soon for her to go.

Although she had promised to give him an answer to his proposal before she left the city, her pledge had been forgotten in the elevated moments leading up to their hasty goodbye. Now that she was gone, Darcy was already feeling the effects of her loss. He felt empty and depressed. *It wasn't fair,* a tiny voice of petulance insisted. That night, he climbed into bed wondering how on earth he was going to get to sleep without her there.

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Lizzy was able to arrive at the hospital just minutes before the birth of her new nephews. Considering the attractiveness of their parents, it was not surprising that the two boys, Charles Emmett Jr. and Christopher Ethan, were two of the handsomest infants she had ever seen—which she happily told her sister and brother-in-law repeatedly.

The next few days seemed to flood by in a steady flow of needy babies, doctors, nurses, pictures, parents, distant relatives, and the fuss of bringing home Jane and the boys amongst all the noise and fanfare. Lizzy didn't seem to be able to gain a moment to herself or be able to stop and think through all that was going on around her as there always seemed to be something that needed taken care of. As anticipated, Jane and

Charlie needed her help constantly—even if it meant keeping their mothers and aunts at bay so that the new parents could have a moment's peace with the babies.

However, amidst all the fuss and hurry, more than a week came to pass without Darcy being able to speak to or even get in touch with Lizzy at all. When there was actually a moment for her to rest, Lizzy had found herself nodding off to sleep immediately, not thinking to check her messages or considering that anyone she wasn't seeing daily might have been trying to reach her. It wasn't that she had not thought of Darcy at all during this time, it was more the lack of energy when the time came that she could actually talk to him—it was a poor excuse and she knew it, but in her defense it *did* have the benefit of truth to recommend it.

On the contrary to Lizzy's flurry of activity, it had been a stressful and frustrating week for Darcy. He no longer had any sort of idea how many times he had called her and he had yet to even hear if she had arrived safely from her flight. Frustration had turned to worry and worry had eventually turned into anger as they had never gone this long without speaking to one another. When Lizzy finally took the time to listen to her messages, she was able to hear the evolution of his emotions that went from,

*Lizzy, please call me so that I can know you've made it back safely. I love you.*

to

*I hope something hasn't gone wrong with the delivery, hope everything is ok. I still haven't heard from you...I love you.*

to

*If something has happened, Lizzy, I understand that nothing else would be higher on your priority list, but I need you to call me and let me know what is going on, love you...*

to

*Lizzy? Call me, there's no reason that you should be avoiding me. I just want to know everything has gone well. It's been a while since I have heard from you, it's not like you, Lizzy...I love you.*

to

*What is going on with you, Elizabeth (saying her full name was never a good sign)? This isn't like you, I'm really worried. I've called you I don't know how many times, please give me a call and let me know that everything's alright. (No 'I love you.')*

to finally,

(Very bitterly) *What's the deal, Elizabeth? Ok, I give up. You call me when you can find*

*the time.*

And those were just the high points from the myriad of messages he had left for her.

Lizzy's anxiety level rose with each message. Save the brief amount of time he had believed himself duped over her having a husband, Darcy had never once been angry with her and she wasn't sure how to deal with it now. She knew herself to be in the wrong for not calling him, but it had only been due to her exhaustion, not because she hadn't wanted to speak to him. Yet, that was still no excuse for her to have allowed him to worry excessively and she knew it. Her conscience berated her in the silence as she debated on what to say when she called him back. Listening to a live version of Darcy angry with her made her tummy do flips, and she sighed with worry—the last thing she wanted was for him to be upset with her right now.

*Your fault!* her conscience exclaimed impatiently as she reached for the phone to make a now dreaded call to New York.

Unknown to Lizzy, Darcy was pacing the floor of his apartment with a rancid cocktail of displeasure, confusion, and the remnants of worry he hadn't been able to shake flowing through his system. His temper for the past few days had been toxic to say the least and every day that passed only allowed his abused feelings to stew. At the forefront of his thoughts was the extreme confusion over what was happening. It wasn't like Lizzy to be so inattentive—he had thought that they were closer than that. It was a crushing blow to face the possibility that he might have thought her more in love than what she was in reality. A painful thought with which he could only allow himself to react with anger.

When her call finally came he stared at the caller ID meanly as he briefly considered not answering. Curiosity and the off-chance she might have a reasonable explanation was what convinced him to change his mind.

“Hello?” he answered neutrally.

“Hi,” he heard her voice say sheepishly. His blood boiling, he chose to wait for an explanation before he said anything. “I know you're furious with me...and you have every right to be.” She had realized he was waiting for her to speak. “I have no excuse for myself, it was extremely irresponsible of me—I've just been so caught up with Jane...”

“Are the babies alright?” he asked, his voice even.

“Yes, two boys, both with ten fingers and toes. Healthy,” she admitted.

“I was on the verge of flying down to make sure everything was fine.” The displeasure in his voice made Lizzy's stomach burn with uneasiness.

“I'm so sorry...” she said lamely.

“Do you have any idea how worked up I’ve been, not being able to get in touch with you? I didn’t even know if your flight got in safely, much less if everything was ok with your sister!”

“I know, and—”

“No, I don’t think you *do* know,” Darcy interrupted bitterly. “I wanted to speak to you, just to know that you were back and safe. I wasn’t even given *that*, Elizabeth. Am I so low on your priority list? Not even one phone call for almost two weeks?”

“*No*,” Lizzy responded miserably. She felt like crying, she didn’t know what to say or how she was going to make it better.

“Seriously, Elizabeth,” Darcy insisted. “I need to know if I matter at all to you. When I asked you to marry me, I thought I meant as much to you as you do to me—but now I don’t know what to think. I still don’t have my answer—is that why you haven’t called me back? You didn’t want to tell me that your answer is no?”

“No!” Lizzy cried with a sob in her voice. “That’s not it, I swear that’s not it...” There was pleading in her tone.

“But you still can’t answer me, can you?” he demanded harshly, already knowing that was the case.

“I just don’t know...” Lizzy said softly. He heard her snuffle, but was too angry and hurt himself to give it consequence.

“I’m going to go, Elizabeth. You’re welcome to call me when you do have an answer, but I’m just too angry to talk anymore tonight. I don’t want to say something to you that I don’t mean,” he said quietly. Lizzy sighed, this was it, an ultimatum.

“Ok,” she replied sadly in the receiver and heard him hang up the line. Stunned by his degree of his anger, Lizzy allowed the phone to slip from her fingers and fall into her lap as she cried softly. She felt terrible about her behavior and extremely confused over what to do about the situation she now found herself in. As she reached again for the phone, she glanced at the clock. 10:45 pm. Too late to call Jane. Standing up, she pulled back the covers on her bed and crawled underneath them. There wasn’t much chance that she would get to really rest, but in her emotional state, there wasn’t much more to do that night but hope she could cry herself to sleep.

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Lizzy watched the light effects of dawn breaking through the curtains of her bedroom window. It had been a long night and she was no closer to knowing what she should do about Darcy than she had been in the hours before. She felt emotionally battered and her heightened senses from the lack of sleep left her feeling achy and nauseous. Sighing in

defeat, she sat up in the bed and rubbed her neck. For a moment, she entertained the memory of what it was like waking up to find Darcy lying there next to her, his facial muscles relaxed with sleep, giving him the appearance of youthful innocence. Without seeking permission, a tear slipped down her cheek and she swept it away as she rose to get in the shower. *If he just knew how much I love him...* she thought sadly.

As the morning progressed, so did the growing unease in the pit of Lizzy's stomach. She didn't know what to do, but she was uncertain if it would be right for her to bring this up with Jane right now. This was a time when Jane should be celebrating and Lizzy worried that it would be wrong to burden her with such a heavy topic. After she got out of the shower, Lizzy stepped into her office and sat down at her desk. In the corner of her eye, she spied her album of portraits, and pulling it in front of her, she opened it to the page containing Darcy's likeness. Gently, she reached out and traced the lines and contours of his face as she positioned the page so that the fierceness of his gaze rested on her. To anyone else it would be a simple drawing of Darcy, but to her it was so much more than that—it was a feeling, a portrait of a summer, a summer where she had lived and loved more passionately than she had ever thought possible in the aftermath of her loss. Darcy had reached out and touched a part of her that she had been sure was cut off from the world forever. He had given her that, and she knew then that no matter what she chose, she would be eternally indebted to him.

It was then that she knew that this wasn't a decision she could make without first talking to her sister—the only voice of reason that Lizzy was ever really willing to listen to. It was Jane that kept her thinking levelly while Lizzy was notorious for often making things more difficult than was necessary. When Lizzy appeared on their doorstep, she was surprised to be greeted with a very calm and comfortably dressed Charlie, cradling one of the babies in the crook of his arm. Granted, it was Saturday, but as crazy as things had been during the week with handling babies, messes, family, and an endless tap of well-wishers, Lizzy had half-expected to see rattles and confetti spraying out of the windows.

“Lizzy,” Charlie greeted her with a kiss on her cheek. “Jane will be happy to see you...only you'll find her sneaking a mid-morning nap just now.”

“Oh, I've come at a bad time,” Lizzy replied, immediately backing away to leave. “I can come back by a little later.”

“No, no, that's not what I meant,” he amended, and quickly pulled her in the door. “I actually doubt she will be asleep for much longer. Why don't we have a cup of coffee in the kitchen while we wait for her?”

Lizzy agreed and Charlie handed over the baby to her while he worked with the coffee maker.

“By the way, how was your trip to see Will?” Charlie said over his shoulder. “I don't think you've mentioned it—or perhaps we've all been too selfish and preoccupied with babies to ask.”

“It was good,” Lizzy began. “He took me to see the Statue of Liberty and introduced me to his sister and...everything...”

“Oh yeah?” Charlie replied, encouraging her.

“Yeah...and he...he asked me to marry him,” she finished, finally coming clean.

“Wow,” Charlie said softly. He was admittedly a bit surprised. “What did you say?” The last he asked tentatively.

“I haven’t given him an answer yet...” she replied shamefully. “He’s actually kind of angry with me at the moment and some of the reason has to do with the fact that I still don’t have an answer to that question...”

“Have you told Jane?”

“No, but it’s the major reason I’ve come today,” Lizzy admitted, smiling weakly. “He wants me to come live with him.”

“Ah,” Charlie replied signaling his new understanding of her indecision.

“You’re not seriously considering giving him up?” Jane interrupted from the doorway of the kitchen. Charlie had been quite right about her nap being almost over.

“I don’t know,” Lizzy said pathetically. “I’ve sort of neglected him this week and he’s really upset with me...and he’s waiting for me to do something, to make this decision, but I don’t know what I should do—and I’m confused. I’m sort of stuck in this indecisive relationship limbo where it’s do or do without. What I want is what we had this summer—forever...and I can’t have that. It’s either my life here, without William, or I can have William and leave everything I know. I don’t want to pick.”

“Charlie, can you excuse us for a little bit?” Jane asked as soon as Lizzy was finished. When he had taken the baby and left them alone, Jane sat down at the table, taking Lizzy’s hands in both of hers. “Lizzy, I’m going to be very honest with you just now and I hope that what I’m about to say will help you do the right thing. You know you are the best sister I could ever ask for. I have a beautiful house, healthy parents, and a job that I love. But, I would pick up and leave you all *today* if Charlie asked me to, because I realized somewhere along the line that I could never be happy without him.

“*You* will never be happy if you let William go, Lizzy. Don’t you remember what it was like before he came to you? I will always be right here, everything about this place will always be right where it is—but *you*, you, haven’t been here in a long time. I never thought I could have back the sister I knew, not after what happened with Scott. Something crucial about you disappeared, you became a vague shell of the sister I loved—someone just floating through the motions—nothing about you was solid. But

then he came and he drew you back out from that shield you were hiding behind. He brought you back to us, Lizzy, and I for one am not willing to give you up again—even if that means I have to let you go,” Jane said gently.

Lizzy pulled back her hands and looked down at them as she attempted to process her sister’s words and organize her own. Nodding, she placed a hand on her keys as she rose to go.

“Lizzy?” Jane said cautiously. When her sister met her eye, she said, “This has to be your decision. I can tell you what I think you should do all day long, but in the end you have to own this. This is something you have to do on your own because the truth is, it doesn’t matter what someone else thinks. You will never be happy if you don’t do this for yourself. Own this, Lizzy, and choose what you know is right for *you*.”

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For three hours Lizzy drove her car through the winding Georgia roads she had called home since the day she was born. Nothing could ever replace what she felt as she passed underneath the boughs of big green trees weighed down from the volume of leafy foliage and heavy kudzu that had grown rampant in the summer months. Nothing compared to the sense of belonging that she felt when she was there shaded, as the sun peaked through to light her way. However, the thing she was beginning to realize was reminiscent of something Jane had said to her that morning. It would always be here—and it would be no matter where she went, that it would never change the fact that this was home...that it would forever be hers to come back to, no matter how far, this place would still be hers to love.

Just before heading back to her house, Lizzy stopped at the tiny park where she had picnicked with Darcy on their last day together. She walked a little ways alongside the fishpond before she stopped at the spot where they had sat and finally gave voice to their fears at having to part. Lizzy thought about their final moments together. Darcy had said, *I’m not going to let you go, not ever*. He had been willing to fight for them, why wasn’t she fighting too? Was she afraid of her history repeating itself? She thought then about the man who’s expression had so moved her that she was willing to go out on a limb and ask a complete stranger if she could draw his portrait.

*You don’t find a man who can move your soul to inspiration with the look in his eyes every day.*

And then she thought,

*You don’t find a man worth fighting for every day, either...*

And it was in that moment, she knew what she had to do. With nothing more than her purse and the clothes on her back, Lizzy got back into her car and drove herself to the airport. She boarded the earliest flight New York knowing that if she gave herself an

extra moment to think about what she was doing she might lose her nerve and hang back. Lizzy knew that she had messed up, and there was no way of telling how she would be received by William when she showed up on his doorstep unannounced. But, the fact of the matter was, she had the most important question of her life to answer and that wasn't something she wanted to do over the phone.

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While Lizzy was chewing her fingernails in anticipation of their impromptu meeting, William was spending his Saturday working his sensibilities down to a dull roar at the office. His temper was vile from lack of sleep and spending every free moment he could spare obsessing over work. Anything he could do to avoid dwelling on the situation with Lizzy and the sinking feeling that he was going to lose her—or considering that he perhaps already had. It had now been almost twenty-four hours since he had given her the ultimatum. What had suddenly changed in the dynamics of their relationship he could only guess. He occasionally tortured himself with the implication that perhaps it was his proposal that had torn them apart—that they could have been happy together for quite a bit longer...if only he had not placed so much pressure on her so spontaneously. Now he'd committed the ultimate relationship taboo by insisting she make a choice, *now*, when only couple weeks earlier he had been willing to give her all the time in the world—follow her to the ends of the earth. How shamefully the reality of his breaking point had paled in comparison to his promises. Once she said goodbye, he would have no other option but to go back to the way things were—he figured he was getting a good head start on the inevitable...*back to being over-diligent and unpleasant*.

When it was literally impossible for him to spend another moment on work, Darcy grudgingly left and headed back to his empty apartment—*seriously empty*, he added mentally. He arrived at his building feeling worn, tired, and excessively sorry for himself as he climbed the stairs knowing that she wouldn't have called while he was gone. He was just getting his key out and placing a hope against all odds that she might have called, when he spotted a small figure seated beside his door with her knees drawn up to her chest where she was resting her chin.

Had he believed his eyes when he saw her there, he might have dropped to his knees and drawn her into his arms immediately. As it was, he stood staring at her in shock and speechlessness there in the hall. However, Lizzy caught the faintest scent of cinnamon and black pepper and her head shot up in excitement to see him standing there in front of her.

In an instant, she hopped up and tossed her arms around his neck.

“I've been calling and calling, but you must have turned your phone off because I couldn't get you,” Lizzy said burying herself in his embrace as he finally returned it. “I was just beginning to wonder what I was going to do if you didn't answer or come home tonight.”

“You’re here,” he said simply, showering her with kisses on any part of her face and neck he could access as he crushed her body to him protectively.

“I came to give you my answer,” she began, pulling her head back so she could look in his eyes, “because I didn’t think it was the type of thing I should be agreeing to over the phone if I could help it.”

She continued on, but because he had caught the answer in her opening, he pulled her back against himself and resumed his onslaught of kisses, the anger he had felt the day before all forgotten as she explained, “I love you, and I am so sorry for how I’ve acted, I think I just panicked, I was so wrong. I have thought of nothing else today but what I should do...and I realized that there is nothing I want more in this world than to be with you. If the offer still stands, that is...”

And then he was kissing her lips, deeply, affectionately, pouring all of his love for her into the passion of his kiss. “You’ve come to stay? You will marry me?” he asked when he had regained enough oxygen after breaking their kiss.

“Yes, William,” she said as he dipped his head to resume his kisses, “I can think of no better ending for us than for me to agree to be your wife.”

“I love you, Lizzy.”

“And I love you,” she said happily as he unlocked his apartment door and pulled her inside. “I’m not going to let you go, I’m going to stay with you forever.”

“And when does forever start?”

“Now.”

~Epilogue~

*What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined... to strengthen each other... to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories.*

~George Eliot

Lizzy nervously pulled at the buttons on her mother's couch pillow. Darcy had come here with her today to ask for her father's permission for them to marry and she was understandably very nervous to have his reaction. She had, of course, told Darcy that asking her father's permission wasn't really necessary—this wasn't the first marriage for her, and hence, her father would not be giving up his maidenly daughter to a questionable suitor. This had been done before, she reasoned, there was no need for him to place himself in an uncomfortable position.

Yet, Darcy had insisted on asking for several reasons. The first was, naturally, that after all she and her family had been through with the loss of her first husband, they deserved to know that Lizzy was in the good hands of a man that respected them enough to seek their approval. The second reason was because this was the first (and only, he was certain) time he would be married, and he wanted everything to be done correctly—including his reception by her family.

Now, as she waited for the verdict, Lizzy fidgeted restlessly there beside her mother.

“Lizzy,” her mother said, laying a quelling palm atop her daughter's hand. “What's the matter with you? I'm staring at the television, but all I can see is your squirming in my peripheral vision.”

“Sorry Mama,” Lizzy sighed, puffing out her cheeks anxiously. “It's just...well, you know why William's asked to speak to Daddy don't you?”

“I have my ideas,” her mother said gently. “But as my younger daughter fails to tell me anything about her life these days, I can only hope I will find out what has been said from your father after-while. If he *is*, in fact, doing what I think he is—especially with you wiggling there like you've gotten in a patch of poison oak—I can only suppose you are nervous because you've come to ask your father and me to accept a man we have never met to be your husband.”

Lizzy swallowed hard and glanced out the window. “I'm sorry I've pulled so far away, Mama. I didn't *mean* to alienate you—honestly. It's just...when I met William, I didn't know if I should tell you because I didn't want y'all to fret about him having to leave at the end of the summer.” She paused for a moment, chewing her lip. “And Daddy's so protective, I was afraid he wouldn't approve of me dating William because he isn't from around here.”

“I suppose it's too late to be worried about those things now, dear Lizzy,” her mother replied. “I'm guessing that since there was no vehement denial to my supposition, that I

was correct in assuming why you're here."

Lizzy caught her mother's eyes and held them. Gingerly, she nodded.

"Well," was all her mother said as she turned her attention to the television. After a moment she finished, "Don't worry, Lizzy. If that boy's worthy of you, your father won't be able to put up much of a fight."

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"Mr. Darcy," Lizzy's father began, seating himself on one of the kitchen bar stools. "I have to say that I certainly had no idea that this is what you were wanting to talk to me about when Lizzy brought you over today."

Darcy exhaled nervously.

"How can I answer you confidently when I've only met you a few minutes ago?" Mr. Bennet continued.

"Sir, I love your daughter, *very* much," Darcy tried, feeling uncomfortable.

"Yes, but you are missing my point. *Elizabeth's* mother and I don't know you from Adam's housecat, and if he sauntered in here, I reckon I ought to give his request the same consideration!"

"Sir, Elizabeth has come to mean everything to me," Darcy explained quietly. "Although she has never introduced me to you, my affection for her has reached the point where I'm certain that I could never live without her."

Mr. Bennet chuckled as he glanced sideways at the younger man standing awkwardly there in the kitchen, his eyes filled with pleading.

"I make no mistake, William, when I say that I am aware that this is simply a gesture performed out of respect. It is also not unreasonable for me to assume that you intend to marry my daughter whether or not I find the idea particularly agreeable. With or without my blessing, I see that you took your place as my son-in-law the moment that my daughter agreed to marry you. This will happen whether I like it or not—I just reserve my right to refer to you as *Adam's housecat* as often as I like," he explained with a good-naturedness that confused his future son-in-law.

"My Lizzy is a bright woman, William, and I know better than to believe that I know more about what will make her happy than she does herself. I'm confident that she would never allow herself to marry a man that was not worthy of her. If Lizzy has agreed to marry you, I cannot but give you both my blessing."

With this, Darcy relaxed visibly. "Thank you, Sir," he said feelingly as the older man

laughed softly and shook his head.

“Let’s go join the ladies again, shall we?” Mr. Bennet said, already walking through the door that led to the living room.

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The next few weeks flew by as Lizzy and Darcy tried to plan the smallest wedding possible in the shortest amount of time. They had decided that with their current living situations, the best idea was to marry quickly and minimize any more miscommunication or time apart. There was a bit of indecision between them about where the wedding should take place. Darcy politely begged that they marry in New York so that he could continue to work while helping Lizzy out with the planning.

Because Lizzy was a relatively reasonable person, she accepted the fact that it *did* seem more logical for them to be closer to where Darcy worked. However, it was not difficult to discern that Lizzy wanted very badly to be married in Georgia. The truth was that she had never actually had a real wedding with Scott. The two had eloped spontaneously while on vacation in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. As romantic and excited as it had seemed at the time to be married in a chapel underneath a billboard directing traffic to Dollywood, Lizzy had always dreamed of having a wedding where her family could be there with her. She was also very aware that although her father loved her deeply, she would never be able to convince him to set foot on a plane. Lizzy could not forget that five years ago, rather than fly, her mother and father had opted to drive all the way to Missouri for his army reunion. But that had been years ago, and like it or not, her parents were getting older. She could not, in good conscience, ask or allow them to drive 20 hours to New York.

“I would just worry for them,” Lizzy had explained when Darcy questioned her. “Neither of them are the best of drivers, and if something happened to them while they were trying to do something nice for me, I would never forgive myself.”

“Fair enough,” Darcy had said. But in reality, they had reached a stalemate. Lizzy was willing to acquiesce to another elopement, but Darcy honestly wanted her to have the proper wedding that she dreamed of. The problem was, of course, who was going to give in. Lizzy was willing, but Darcy was struggling with the idea of getting his way and making her sacrifice—he knew he couldn’t do that with a clear conscience. Fortunately, Darcy had chosen to confide this hitch in their plans to his sister.

“William Darcy,” Georgiana had said with mock patience. “There is no way you can convince me that you don’t have a back up of vacation days at work. You have worked there for *years* and I have never known of you to use them—ever.”

“Yes, Ana, but those are for emergencies,” he explained defensively.

Georgiana sighed dramatically. “Your *wedding* constitutes a worthy cause to use them,

Will. I understand that you are important and great and that sort of thing, but they can certainly spare you long enough for you to marry and have a proper honeymoon,” she reasoned snippily. “Lizzy would do anything for you. Hell, she is moving all the way from Boonfuzzle, Georgia just to be with your sorry, workaholic ass. I think the least you can do is give her a wedding where her mother and father can come. It’s not like either of us have any parents to offer her.”

“You really know how to lay it on sweetly,” Darcy grumbled sarcastically before getting off the phone.

In the end, however, Georgiana’s reasoning had served its purpose and Darcy had cashed in on his collection of vacation days for Lizzy to have the wedding and honeymoon she had always wanted. In retrospect, he had realized that doing this one thing for her—especially since she had agreed to give up everything she knew just to be with him—should not have even been a question.

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Darcy had never seen Lizzy as happy as she was the day that they were married in the beautiful park near her house. This spot in the park had seemed perfect—it was where they had promised never to let one another go, where Lizzy had decided that she had no life without him by her side, and now where her father had officially given her hand to Darcy in matrimony. They were married exactly five months after they had met at the coffee shop down the street.

As they drove away from the reception that afternoon, Lizzy had whispered, “I think we have to be the happiest couple in the world.”

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They barely made it through their hotel door as they clutched at one another—lips crushed against the other’s, both anxious to consummate their newly minted marriage. They had made love hundreds of times before, but they each knew that this time would be more meaningful as their first time as husband and wife. Darcy grumbled impatiently as he worked on unbuttoning the tiny buttons and removing the layers of fabric that composed Lizzy’s wedding attire.

“If this wasn’t your wedding dress, I would be tearing it into pieces,” he said against her ear as he tugged a little impatiently. Lizzy felt a little frisson of anticipation at the prospect.

“Although I doubt I would be very upset at the moment, come tomorrow I would certainly be unhappy to have my wedding gown in pieces.”

“Oh, finally,” Darcy said triumphantly.

“You got it?” she laughed.

“It was touch and go there for a moment, but I think I have it under control now,” he joked, sliding the material off her shoulders. “More?” he whined petulantly when the removal of her dress revealed yet another layer of restricting garments.

“I’ve got this one,” Lizzy said, removing it expertly. Almost naked, she turned to undress him—a much easier task. “As much fun as we’ve had, I’ve been looking forward to this all day,” she admitted. “I just wanted to be alone with my new husband.”

“Mmm,” he agreed pulling her into a deep kiss, his mouth covering hers and his tongue caressing her lips and entering her mouth. Lizzy immediately relaxed in his embrace. The following weeks after her spontaneous return to his arms had taught her just how lucky she had been to have him love her so. She was also thankful for having enough sense to hold on to what she had, no matter how scared she had been to take this route again. Now, as she stood there in the warmth of his embrace, breathless from his kisses, she could not regret a single moment.

Only when the backs of her knees touched the mattress did Lizzy realize that Darcy had been slowly guiding her back to the bed without ever ceasing his assault on her lips. Without a thought, she allowed herself to be pushed backwards; she hadn’t been lying when she had said that she’d been wanting to be alone with him all day.

Darcy kissed his way down her body. Her neck, breasts, belly button, and thighs were all thoroughly kissed before he finally reached his destination. When he at last touched his tongue to the warmth of her sex, he could not help but grin a bit as he felt every muscle in her body tense and heard her lightly whisper his name. He lingered there until she began to shudder and pulled at him until he rose up and was lying over her nose to nose.

“I don’t want it like that,” she explained, trying to catch her breath. “This is *our* wedding night. I want it to be us together.”

It was not a request that he was particularly adverse to, yet he could not resist teasing her with his fingers a bit before acquiescing to her. His effort was rewarded with the arch of her back as she whispered, “Please William.”

Smiling, he grasped her hips and pushed into her. Immediately, he began a slow rhythm, a sweet torture for her, making certain that she could feel each individual stroke.

“I love you, Lizzy,” he said softly against her ear. “And now that you are mine forever, I won’t be letting you go again.”

Lizzy moaned in response as he increased his tempo, murmuring the promises of their future to her. Within another moment, she cried out in an intense release, clinging to him helplessly as he found his own.

“I love you, William,” she said after she had caught her breath enough to speak. “There is nowhere that I would rather be.”

“Good,” he said, wrapping them comfortably in the bedclothes. “Because I haven’t the slightest intention of allowing you to get away.”

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Lizzy lounged comfortably in the car as Darcy drove them home from the airport. Lagging from the flight and from two weeks of honeymooning in Cancun, Lizzy had been partially dozing when she realized that she had no idea where they were.

“Where are we going?” she asked, sitting up in the seat.

“What do you mean? Darcy asked, smiling mischievously.

“I *mean*, you have driven us out of the city. Are we not going home? Aren’t you tired?” she questioned, trying unsuccessfully to keep the petulance out of her tone.

“We are, but I have a surprise for you first. Take a little nap,” he suggested, remaining secretive.

“William,” Lizzy sighed impatiently. “You know I hate surprises.”

“And I hate party poopers,” he said, reaching over to a place where he knew she was particularly ticklish. Lizzy dodged him with some success and sighed dramatically. Darcy had to struggle to keep from laughing. She had no idea how silly she would feel once they arrived home.

Not surprisingly, Lizzy remained awake for the rest of their ride. After several versions of, *Just tell me where we’re going* and *Are we almost there?* were rejected with Darcy’s, *You will see* and *Be patient*, she had crossed her arms and stared blankly out the window. As much as Darcy hated to make her angry, he was willing to make that sacrifice for a just cause—he was sure that the reward would be well worth the trouble. He had planned this long before they were married, and with a little help from Georgiana and Jane, Lizzy’s surprise had been made completely ready for her so that she could see it as soon as they returned that day. Once they finally arrived, Lizzy huffed and looked at Darcy incredulously.

“William,” she said evenly. “Why are we at someone’s house? Who is so important that they *had* to be seen the day we’ve returned from our *honeymoon*?”

“This house,” William said as he pulled to the end of the driveway, “belongs to Mrs. Darcy. It is to be given to her as a wedding present from her husband.” He held up a door key. “Do you think she will like it?”

Lizzy's mouth dropped as she looked from Darcy to the beautiful brick house. With its white porch and beautifully green yard, it looked like something out of a lifestyle magazine. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You mean..." she stuttered. "Ours?"

"Yes," he said, grinning. He placed the key in her hand as she pulled him into a hug.

"Oh William!" she cried, kissing every part of his face she could reach while leaning over the console. Darcy held her close, feeling the happy tears on her cheeks. After a moment, he pulled away and was able to convince her to actually get out of the car and go in.

Holding her hand like an excited child, Darcy led Lizzy through their new house. He explained that he knew how much she loved having a house of her own and that as much as he had liked his apartment, he had decided that living in the city in his old apartment wasn't right for them. He wanted them to start fresh in a home where every memory could be built together.

"There's a big reason that I chose this particular house," Darcy explained, guiding Lizzy to show her a certain room he had picked out just for her. When they reached their destination, Darcy opened the door and stood back as Lizzy took in her second surprise of the day. The room was large with a high ceiling and located at the back of the house. Two of its walls contained floor-to-ceiling windows that revealed a beautiful backyard. In the corner rested her old rocking chair from the basement of her old house. A quick sweep of the room with her eyes found her drawing desk and a brown box with the words, LIZZY'S ART SUPPLIES written in her own hand.

"It's all here!" she laughed, turning to gift him with a huge hug of excitement and gratitude.

"Yes, your sister and I hatched a complex scheme to have it delivered here before I brought you back," Darcy explained, kissing her as she smiled up at him. "I wanted it all here so we could just come right home after our trip. That accomplishment took an immense amount of help from *both* of our sisters."

"We can stay here? *Now*? Tonight?" Lizzy exclaimed, disbelieving.

"Yep," Darcy laughed, pleased she was as excited as he had hoped she would be. "I made her a list and Ana even went to the grocery store for us."

They eventually migrated to the kitchen to see what Georgiana had bought. Darcy immediately got a few things out and started dinner for them while Lizzy explored the cabinets and pantry. Jane had obviously been there as well, Lizzy saw, with everything organized just as she liked it, there could have been no other explanation for it. No one but her sister (and Darcy) knew how she preferred her kitchen to be organized. Despite all of their things being brought to the house for them, Lizzy saw that nothing had been

decorated. The important things had all been unpacked and put away while anything that could be considered decorative was left untouched.

“We can paint the walls any color you like,” Darcy explained. She glanced at him. His back was turned as he stood at the stove.

“You must have been reading my mind,” Lizzy laughed, moving to sit at the kitchen table. “I was just thinking how thoughtful our sisters have been to know—,” she stopped as her eye caught what was lying on the table.

“They did really well,” Darcy agreed, unaware that Lizzy’s attention was caught elsewhere. “We should give them a call after dinner to tell them we’re back and to thank them both for helping us out, don’t you think?”

When she didn’t answer, Darcy turned his head and started at the sight of Lizzy looking at something on the table, a tear sliding down her cheek.

“Lizzy?” he asked, confused.

“Come here, William, it’s done,” Lizzy said raising her head and giving him a watery smile.

Darcy cautiously stepped over to the table to see what Lizzy was looking at. “My photo album,” he whispered, looking down at the book.

“It’s finished,” Lizzy sniffled, fingering the edges where the book had been left open to the last page. On it were several pictures surrounding a larger portrait of them on their wedding day.

“It took much longer than my sister’s,” Darcy laughed. “I can’t believe it is finally done.”

“Just like your mother intended,” Lizzy sighed happily as he grasped each of her hands.

“It seems rather anticlimactic though,” he mused. “There’s so much left for us—this is really only the beginning, yet there’s no room for that in this book.”

“Perhaps we should start a new book,” Lizzy suggested, pulling his arms closer around her.

“The story of us?” Darcy asked, planting a kiss on her forehead as she looked up at him.

“Yes,” Lizzy said, smiling. “What do you think?”

“I can hardly wait to begin,” he said happily, closing the book. “And what better time than the present?”

“I agree,” Lizzy said, standing up and pulling him into a hug.

And so they did.

*~The End~*