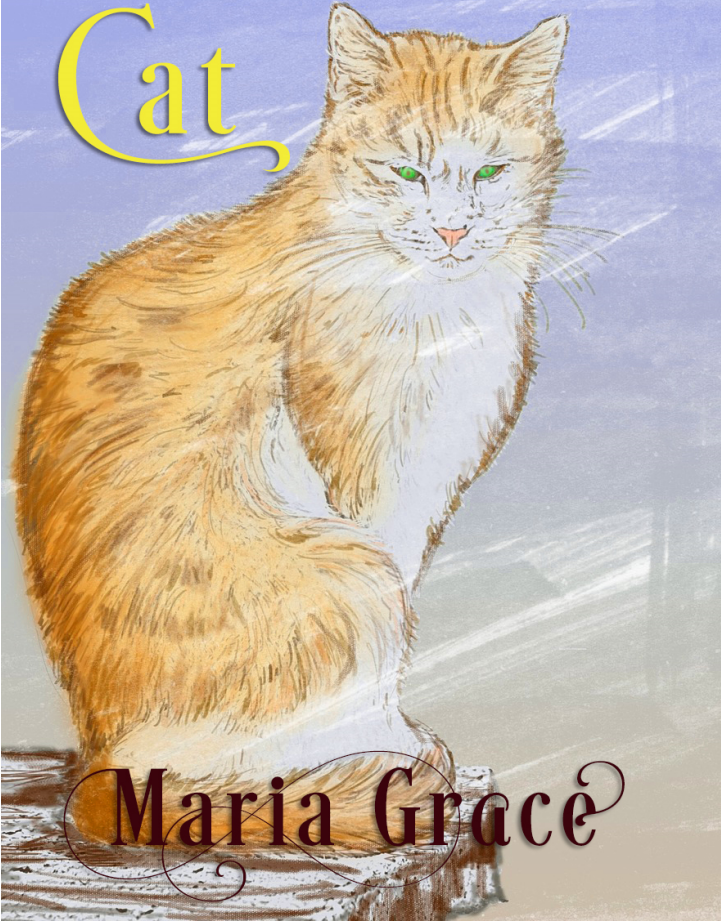


Lady Catherine's  
Cat



Maria Grace

*Lady Catherine's  
Cat*

by

*Maria Grace*

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“Grace has quickly become one of my favorite authors of Austen-inspired fiction. Her love of Austen’s characters and the Regency era shine through in all of her novels.” ***Diary of an Eccentric***

### ***Lady Catherine’s Cat***

Lady Catherine has a cat—a very special cat who has the run of Rosings—and of her. When Colonel Fitzwilliam reveals Darcy’s hand in separating Jane and Bingley, will the meddling feline make things better or worse for Darcy in his quest to win Elizabeth?

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***DEDICATION***

For my husband and sons.  
You have always believed in me.

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## Chapter 1

Elizabeth staggered from the book room, cradling a stack of books in her arms. Two steps into the cramped, dimly lit hallway, she opened the uppermost volume just to demonstrate that she was indeed utilizing the resource to seek answer.

She had asked a simple question of Mr. Collins—why could he not have simply answered? Instead he piled six separate volumes on the art of flower gardens plus two additional ones on the cultivation of roses in her arms, assuring her they would surely answer all her questions most effectively. There was only one conclusion to be drawn from such a response. He had absolutely no idea which variety of roses produced the most fragrant rosewater.

And now she hardly cared. Not that it had ever really been that important. It was really more about having a bit of polite conversation than seeking the information. Nothing more. But now—

“Oof!” She stumbled and dropped several books. Hopefully Mr. Collins had not seen that or he would lecture her fiercely for abusing Lady Catherine’s property for he considered everything in the parsonage that he and Charlotte had not brought themselves as property of his patroness.

“Mrow.” A large ginger cat with huge green eyes blinked up at her with a look of recrimination.

“Gracious, Ginger! You should know better than to be so underfoot!” She set the books carefully on the nearest hall table—which really did not fit properly into the space, but since Lady Catherine had declared its placement, they dare not move it—and scooped up the cat. “You darling creature, you have just spared me an afternoon trapped studying what I have very little interest in.” She whispered into the cat’s ear.

He pushed his head under her hand and purred. For a creature belonging to Lady Catherine, he was remarkably personable and content, in addition to being very large and handsome which one might assume was why she approved of him.

“Charlotte!” Elizabeth called, hurrying toward Charlotte’s parlor at the opposite side of the house. “Where is the basket? I have found Lady Catherine’s cat.”

Mr. Collins trundled up behind her. “Her ladyship’s cat? He must be returned immediately! She has been beside herself with worry!” He reached for the cat.

Ginger pressed back into Elizabeth’s chest, hissing and swiping at Mr. Collins. She turned so the cat could not see him. Ginger settled in her arms, merely growling in Mr. Collins’ direction.

Mr. Collins slipped back two steps. “Spiteful creature. Does he not desire to be returned? He lives in luxury many



people cannot fathom.” His upper lip curled back. Everyone, including the cat, knew he had little fondness for felines.

“I am sure he does, but perhaps not by you. Pardon me for suggesting this, but it does not seem as though he has a very great preference for you.” She scratched under Ginger’s chin and he stopped growling.

Mr. Collins muttered something very sour indeed.

Charlotte hurried up, a large basket lined with an old blanket in her arms. “Here, you can use this to carry him back to Rosings. He seemed to like this basket very well the last time.”

Just to prove her correct, Ginger leapt from Elizabeth’s arms into Charlotte’s basket, nearly causing Charlotte to drop it.

Elizabeth helped her catch it before it fell, and then took the burden from her. “I will take him directly to Rosings lest her Ladyship suffer another moment’s anxiety for his welfare.”

Soon the sunshine warmed both her face and the basket she carried as she strode across Rosings’ ample green lawns. Within, Ginger purred deep contentment as though there could be no finer thing in life than to be a cat in a basket in the sun. She might purr too if she had the ability. In truth the errand might not have been nearly so urgent—and pleasant—had a sojourn from Mr. Collins’ company not been so welcome.

Ginger was a very substantial cat though and soon her arms ached. But if she sat to rest, Ginger might well jump out and run off simply because he could. He had a bit of a perverse streak and a great deal of mischief behind those green eyes. Somehow, he always seemed to be planning something. Perhaps that was why Elizabeth liked him so.

She trudged up the steps of Rosings' front door. It would have been far simpler just to take the cat to the kitchen and allow a maid to bring him to Lady Catherine. But that would violate any number of Lady Catherine's rules of propriety. So, she would have to endure an audience with Lady Catherine.

Perhaps it would have been better to remain at the parsonage.

The housekeeper squealed with glee at the sight of Ginger in his basket. She did not even check to see if Lady Catherine was "in" this morning, but ushered Elizabeth directly to the small parlor Lady Catherine favored in the mornings.

The room was light and bright, and might even have been considered happy but for its principle occupant. Sunshine poured through windows that took up the better part of one wall. Elegant modern furniture with dark wood and light upholstery populated the room—several comfortable chairs, a fainting couch and a settee. Vases of white roses stood on each of the three small tables, lending a subtle fragrance to the space. Blue floral paper hanging contrasted

with yellow drapes, resulting in a very sunshiny, garden-feeling sort of room. For all her other eccentricities, Lady Catherine's tastes were difficult to fault.

"Madam, madam! Your Ladyship!" The housekeeper exclaimed, losing all propriety in the excitement of the moment. "Miss Bennet has found him. She has brought him to you!"

"What is this commotion?" Lady Catherine rose from her seat near the center of the room, imposing and stern.

Ginger leapt from the basket to the floor to the arm of Lady Catherine's chair, bumping his head under her elbow. "Mrow?"

Lady Catherine swept the creature into her arms. "You naught, willful creature! How could you sneak out without my approval? How did you come to find him, Miss Bennet?"

Ginger sprang from her arms toward a dark figure in a large wingchair near the window.

"Mr. Darcy?"

"You know my nephew?"

Mr. Darcy stern and somber as ever, rose, scooping the cat up in a well-practiced hold. One could not deny he was a well-looking man, if one could ignore his prideful disposition long enough to notice. Ginger purred loudly. Odd, the cat usually had better taste than that.

"Miss Bennet and I became acquainted in Meryton last winter."

“How interesting.” The way Lady Catherine’s green eyes narrowed suggested she did not quite approve of an unauthorized acquaintance between them. “How did you find my cat?”

“He wandered into the parsonage, your Ladyship, through an open window I expect, and all but asked me to take him back to Rosings.”

Mr. Darcy smirked.

Smirked? Was that possible for a man who never seemed to even smile?

“Well, he is a very sensible creature.” Lady Catherine glared just a bit as Mr. Darcy scratched under his chin and Ginger rumbled even more loudly.

“I supposed you will stay a few moments to rest yourself before your return.” It hardly sounded like an invitation.

“Charlotte is awaiting my return, so I should not delay, your Ladyship.” She curtsied and hurried out. Mr. Collins would be ever so put out to know she had refused an invitation to spend a few more moments in the presence of the great lady. But hopefully he would not find out.

What was Mr. Darcy doing here? Of all people, why him? And why ever did Ginger seem so fond of him, it had seemed the cat possessed better judgement than that.

## Chapter 2

Darcy paced across his spacious chamber once again. The room accommodated not only a large four poster bed and chest of drawers, but a writing desk, a table sufficient to seat three, and an imposing wing chair by the fire. The attached dressing room was nearly as large. While graciously appointed with furniture and trappings as fine as he could wish for, there were moments when all the empty space left him remembering the essential loneliness that followed everywhere he went.

While the room was comfortable, it was far too close to Anne's chambers for his liking. It seemed he would coincidentally run into her in the corridor far too often for coincidence to explain. She would leave her rooms just as he was stepping out for his morning walks. She would appear half-way down the hall, waving at him when he made his way down for breakfast. Returning from an afternoon of hunting, she would arrive breathless at the top of the stairs, to inquire after the success of his sport. The only explanation was that she was stalking him as carefully as he and Fitzwilliam did while hunting their prey.

His shoulders twitched and he shuddered. Anne seemed quite comfortable with her mother's assumption that Darcy would marry her. More disturbing still, it appeared she was trying to make some efforts to be pleasing—efforts

that she had never bothered with before. Almost as if she were growing tired of waiting for that happy event to occur. Truly, he needed to address the issue with her soon and make her realize that it was never to be.

It had been all together much easier to ignore the whole issue of Anne until the appearance of Miss Elizabeth Bennet in Aunt Catherine's parlor, face glowing from the exercise, her arms full of Ginger and his basket. What perverse mischance brought her here just the same time he made his yearly visit? Was it possible that she was even more lovely in Kent than in Meryton? Certainly her wit was as sparking and vivacious as ever. How beastly unfair.

More vexing still, Ginger had clearly taken a profound liking to her. Beyond Aunt Catherine, he was very particular who was allowed to handle His Royal Highness. Darcy himself was one of the chosen few. Now she was, too.

The creature had been a fixture at Rosings for several years now. How he had charmed Aunt Catherine was a mystery indeed. She never had much use for cats beyond the ones in the barns before him. But charm her he had. Now it seemed someone was assigned to keeping watch over the cat at all times. She certainly had staff sufficient to the task and how she deployed them was certainly her business. But Darcy drew the line at being expected to chase after the creature himself.

Still, Ginger's odd predilection for Miss Elizabeth had served him well more often than not on this visit. No less

than half a dozen times, the creature had led him on a merry chase that led him straight onto the path Miss Elizabeth had chosen for her morning walk. Darcy knew her preferences by now, but he would never have save Ginger's interference.

Had Miss Elizabeth come to suspect his encountering her on her morning walk had hardly been coincidental? The arch in her fine brows had certainly suggested so. But she was far too much of a lady to ever give voice to those thoughts. But it was entertaining to imagine what she considered might manage to say while remaining in the bounds of propriety.

Was it a blessing or a curse that she should suddenly appear here at Rosings? Certainly those evenings for dinner or at the card table were a curse. How could it be otherwise when he could hardly look at or even speak to her without Aunt Catherine interrupting to redirect his attention to herself or Anne? Torturous. Simply torturous.

Yet the mornings he found her, framed in the lingering rays of sunrise made all that entirely worthwhile. Sometimes they shared a lively debate. Oh, how sharp her wit—and tongue when she had a decided opinion to profess. Even when she did not, how well she would play devil's advocate just for the sake of the conversation. Other times they were able to just enjoy the quiet cool of the morning. Not needing to sully it with words. What finer diversion could there be than that? How soon might he be able to enjoy that again?

A door shut in the corridor and soft women's voices agreed that they would take a ride in the phaeton this morning. They trailed off in the direction of the stairs. Could it be—Anne and Mrs. Jenkinson were away for the morning?

Escape at Last!

A quarter of an hour later, he stepped from his room and down the grand stairs. A brisk morning was just what he needed—and he knew just the path to take.

“Darcy! Darcy! Where are you skulking off to? Come attend me. I require your presence.”

The hair on the back of his neck rose and his shoulders prickled. Her voice grated like fingernails on slate. Had anyone else had the audacity to shout across the house in such a fashion, Aunt Catherine would have declared them entirely rude. How had she even known he was approaching?

Darcy dragged himself to the parlor. Ginger met him at the door, purring and winding himself around Darcy's ankles. Traitorous beast must have given him away. Darcy picked up the cat who rested his paws on Darcy's shoulder.

“Good morning, Cousin.” Anne, in a new walking ensemble rose from her chair near her mother and slowly approached. “It seems as though I have hardly seen you at all. One might think she was being avoided.” She batted her eyes.

It was not an attractive expression. Darcy sniffed.



“Do not take that attitude with me. You have hardly shown proper attention to Anne since you have been here.” Aunt Catherine rapped her knuckles on the table beside her.

“How can you possibly suggest such a thing? What dinner had I missed when have I failed to attend you in the drawing room afterwards or refused to play cards?” Not that he had not often wished for exactly that.

“That is hardly to your credit, nephew. You would do no less at any house party—”

“Mrow!” Ginger leapt over Darcy’s shoulder and out the open window.

Glorious creature! “Never fear, Aunt, I shall return him to you!” He trotted toward the door.

“I am not finished with you!” Aunt Catherine rose, trying to look threatening. The effect was more comical than intimidating.

“But the cat will not wait!” Darcy crossed the threshold into the corridor and broke into a run for the front door and away from the house.

A ginger flash caught his eye, heading toward a wooded path. Miss Elizabeth occasionally walked there, though it was not the one he had planned to take this morning. He paused and turned toward his favorite trail. Guilt—probably overzealous—seized him. He had told Aunt Catherine he was chasing after the cat and he really should do what he had said he would do.

But the other path was far more inviting ...

Oh, botheration!

He turned and trotted after the stubborn creature.

### Chapter 3

The woods in this part of Rosings were too thick for the early morning sun to penetrate deeply. Cool and dewy, they smelt of green and loam, and freedom, peaceful enough to make one forget all she might count among her troubles.

Elizabeth came to a fork in the wooded path. Both options were pleasant, but this morning she craved a bit of quiet and solitude. She had a letter from Jane and nothing sounded as appealing as a bit of privacy in which to read it. Mr. Darcy had frequently run into her when she had taken the right hand path, so she chose the left.

What a puzzle he was. He had been behaving so strangely since he arrived. How many times had he and Colonel Fitzwilliam called upon the parsonage? Not quite daily, but very nearly. While he could hardly be called a sparkling conversationalist, Mr. Darcy was far more apt to engage when the topics were substantive which, thanks to his cousin, were far more common than was typical for a morning social call.

Odder still were the number of times they encountered one another, here in these woods and instead of greeting her and being about his business, he insisted on accompanying her. She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought. To prevent it ever happening again, she took care to inform him

at first that it was a favorite haunt of hers. How it could occur a second time, therefore, was very odd! Yet it did, and even a third.

He never said a great deal, but it struck her in the course of their third encounter that he was asking some odd unconnected questions: about her pleasure in being at Hunsford, her love of solitary walks, and her opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Collins' happiness; and that in speaking of Rosings, and her not perfectly understanding the house, he seemed to expect that whenever she came into Kent again she would be staying *there* too. His words seemed to imply it. What could he mean by such a thing?

Could he have Colonel Fitzwilliam in his thoughts? Surely not, he would not be the type apt to match making. But what else could he be thinking? It distressed her a little, and she was quite glad to find herself at the gate in the fields opposite the Parsonage.

She leaned against the gate and opened her letter. Although it was Jane's handwriting, there was little of Jane's spirit there. Even the very characters she wrote appeared despondent. Though she did not say it, the reason was clear: Mr. Bingley.

“Miss Bennet! Pray excuse me.”

What was Colonel Fitzwilliam doing here?

She put the letter away and forced a smile, she said, “I did not know before that you ever walked this way.”

He smiled broadly and bowed. How unlike his cousin he was. "I have been making the tour of the Park as I generally do every year, and intend to close it with a call at the Parsonage. Are you going much farther?"

"No, I should have turned in a moment." It was a lie, but what else could she possibly say? They walked towards the Parsonage together. "Do you certainly leave Kent on Saturday?"

"Yes—if Darcy does not put it off again. But I am at his disposal. He arranges the business just as he pleases." He winked as though it troubled him very little indeed.

"And if he is not able to please himself in the arrangement, he has at least great pleasure in the power of choice. I do not know anybody who seems more to enjoy the power of doing what he likes than Mr. Darcy."

"He likes to have his own way very well." Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled, deeply from his belly, a fond, friendly sort of sound. "But so we all do. It is only that he has better means of having it than many others, because he is rich. A younger son as I am, you know, must be inured to self-denial and dependence." He pressed a hand to his chest, affecting woe quite unconvincingly.

"In my opinion, the younger son of an Earl can know very little of either. Now, seriously, what have you ever known of self-denial and dependence? When have you been prevented by want of money from going wherever you chose, or procuring anything you had a fancy for?"

“Perhaps I cannot say that I have experienced many hardships of that nature. But in matters of greater weight, I may suffer from the want of money. Younger sons cannot marry where they like.”

“Unless where they like women of fortune, which I think they very often do.”

“Our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money.”

She colored. Surely he did not think her in need of discouragement toward himself. Or did he? “And pray, what is the usual price of an Earl's younger son? Unless the elder brother is very sickly, I suppose you would not ask above fifty thousand pounds.” There, hopefully that should set him quite on the straight and narrow.

He flashed his brows and quirked a funny smile at her. Perhaps her point was taken.

“I imagine Mr. Darcy brought you down with him chiefly for the sake of having somebody at his disposal. I wonder he does not marry, to secure a lasting convenience of that kind. It seemed, for an instant or two he might have that in mind when he visited Meryton in the company of Mr. Bingley and his sisters. I think I have heard you say that you know them.”

“I know them a little. He is a pleasant gentleman-like man—he is a great friend of Darcy's.”

“Mr. Darcy is uncommonly kind to Mr. Bingley, and takes a prodigious deal of care of him.” She tried not to roll her eyes.

“I really believe Darcy *does* take care of him in those points where he most wants care.” He turned toward her and caught her gaze, as though trying to convince her of something very important. “From something that he told me in our journey hither, I have reason to think Bingley very much indebted to him. But I ought to beg his pardon, for I have no right to suppose that Bingley was the person meant. It was all conjecture. It is a circumstance which Darcy, of course, would not wish to be generally known, because if it were to get round to the lady's family, it would be an unpleasant thing.”

Her stomach knotted and cold spread through her chest. “What is it you mean? You may depend upon my not mentioning it.”

“Remember, I have not much reason for supposing it to be Bingley. What Darcy told me was merely this; that he congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage, but without mentioning names or any other particulars. I only suspected it to be Bingley from believing him the kind of young man to get into a scrape of that sort.”

She drew a deep breath to steady her voice. “Did Mr. Darcy give you his reasons for this interference?”

“There were some very strong objections against the lady.”

Against Jane? He had objections toward Jane? How could he, how could anyone?

A flash of movement caught her eye as an orange streak raced across the path and leapt at her. She barely caught Ginger without being scratched. “What are you doing here?”



## Chapter 4

Ginger raced ahead of Darcy, breaking through a narrow opening in the hedgerow. Darcy started to follow, but paused at the sound of voices.

“Your cousin's conduct does not suit my feelings. Why was he to be the judge?” Was that Miss Elizabeth?

“You are rather disposed to call his interference officious?” Fitzwilliam? What had Fitzwilliam told her?

“I do not see what right Mr. Darcy had to decide on the propriety of his friend's inclination, or why, upon his own judgment alone, he was to determine and direct in what manner that friend was to be happy. But, as we know none of the particulars, it is not fair to condemn him. It is not to be supposed that there was much affection in the case.” She sounded so much like her mother just now—that could not be a good thing.

He peeked through the hedges. Her face was the very picture of righteous indignation.

“That is not an unnatural surmise, but it is lessening the honor of my cousin's triumph very sadly.”

Darcy slapped his forehead. No, he could not have—did Fitzwilliam just tell Miss Elizabeth about Bingley? How could he?

Darcy burst through the bushes and into their path. “Miss Elizabeth, Fitzwilliam.” Brushing leaves off his lapel,

he glowered at his cousin who shrank back. "Pray forgive the intrusion. I am on a mission to retrieve Ginger." He reached for the cat.

Ginger flattened his ears and pressed back into Miss Elizabeth's arms, clearly no happier with him than Miss Elizabeth was.

She slid several steps back, maneuvering the cat out of his reach. "He does not seem disposed to your company, sir."

"It seems, perhaps that you are not either. Pray forgive that I overheard a bit of your conversation." He glared again at Fitzwilliam. "Grant me your forbearance and pray allow me to speak for myself in this matter."

Fitzwilliam scooted out of the way and bowed. "That sounds like a most excellent suggestion. Pray excuse me." He scurried away.

At least the army had taught him when retreat was a necessity.

Miss Elizabeth fixed such a look on him! Had her mother or a stern governess taught her that? It was all he could do not to wither in the face of it.

He ran a finger around the inside edge of his cravat. "Err, ah, I believe my cousin shared some matters that I thought were to be held in confidence with you?"

"It seems he has." Icicles dripped from her voice.

"And you do not approve of what you have heard."

"Should I?" Ginger's tail whipped back and forth across her apron and he glared over his shoulder at Darcy.

“By all appearances your pride and caprice have ruined every hope of happiness for the most affectionate, generous heart in the world. No one could say how lasting an evil you might have inflicted. I cannot possibly take that lightly! No motive can excuse the unjust and ungenerous part you acted. You dare not, you cannot deny that you have been the principal, if not the only means of dividing Mr. Bingley and Jane from each other, of exposing one to the censure of the world for caprice and instability, the other to its derision for disappointed hopes, and involving them both in misery of the acutest kind.”

He blinked and edged back. “I have no wish of denying that I did everything in my power to separate my friend from your sister, or that I rejoice in my success.” Or at least he had until just now.

“How could you object to Jane herself? There could be no possibility of objection! All loveliness and goodness as she is! Her understanding is excellent, her mind improved, and her manners captivating.” Color crept up her cheeks.

“I grant that there is truth in what you are saying.”

“How very kind of you.” Did she know her words carried a razor edge?

Probably. He swallowed hard; he had to continue, this might be the only chance he had to explain himself. However poor that explanation might be, he had to try. “I had not been long in Hertfordshire, before I saw that Bingley preferred your eldest sister to any other young woman in

the country. But it was not till the evening of the dance at Netherfield that I had any apprehension of his feeling a serious attachment. I had often seen him in love before.”

Perhaps that was not the right way to have begun an explanation. Her eyes widened, like Ginger’s just before he pounced. “In love? You mean he makes a habit of toying with the affection of ladies?”

“No, he does not toy with them. But he has, more than once fancied that he had feelings for them. At that ball, while I had the honor of dancing with you, I was first made acquainted, by Sir William Lucas's accidental information, that Bingley's attentions to your sister had given rise to a general expectation of their marriage. He spoke of it as a certain event. From that moment I observed my friend's behavior attentively. I could then perceive that his partiality for Miss Bennet was beyond what I had ever witnessed in him.” Beyond what he had witnessed in anyone up until that time. Besotted was the only way to truly describe it. But best not share that.

“So you admit you understood the depth of his affections for her?”

“Your sister I also watched. Her look and manners were open, cheerful, and engaging as ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard. I remained convinced from the evening's scrutiny, that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment.”

Her brows creased and she broke eye contact as though suddenly pondering what he said. That was a good sign. Hopefully.

“If you have not been mistaken here, I must have been in error. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make the latter probable. If it be so, if I have been misled by such error, to inflict pain on her, your resentment is not unreasonable. But I assert that the serenity of your sister's countenance was such that the most acute observer might believe that, however amiable her temper, her heart was not likely to be easily touched. That I was desirous of believing her indifferent is certain, but I will venture to say that my investigations and decisions are not usually influenced by my hopes or fears. I did not believe her to be indifferent because I wished it; I believed it on impartial conviction.”

She stomped one step toward him. “And if now I tell you that you were entirely and utterly incorrect in every assumption you made?”

“If I have wounded your sister's feelings, it was unknowingly done; and though the motives which governed me may to you very naturally appear insufficient, I have not yet learnt to condemn them. I still cannot regard looking towards the best interests of my friend as an evil.”

“And it was only your perception of Jane's lack of affection toward Mr. Bingley that made her objectionable.” Her eyes narrowed as she made eye contact once again.

“That was my highest concern, although,” he swallowed hard, “the situation of your mother's family in trade, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly, betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father. Pardon me. It pains me to offend you. But let it give you consolation to consider that for you and your sister to have conducted yourselves so as to avoid any share of the like censure is praise no less generally bestowed on you and your eldest sister, than it is honorable to the sense and disposition of both.”

She colored and turned aside. Ginger looked at him over her shoulder as if to warn him that more needed to be said.

## Chapter 5

Her insides roiled with his revelations. As much as her heart demanded she must, how could she deny his assertions? He declared himself to have been totally unsuspecting of her sister's attachment. Charlotte's opinion had been much the same. Neither could she deny the justice of his description of Jane. He was right that Jane's feelings, though fervent, were little displayed, and that there was a constant complacency in her air and manner not often united with great sensibility.

The justice of his charges against her family struck her too forcibly for denial, and the circumstances to which he particularly alluded to at the Netherfield ball could not have made a stronger impression. She remembered them frighteningly, horridly well. The compliment to herself and her sister was not unfelt. It soothed, but it could not console her and as she considered that Jane's disappointment had in fact been the work of her nearest relations, and reflected how materially that the credit of both of them must be hurt by such impropriety of conduct. Had there ever been a more depressing thought? She would have hidden her face in her hands save Ginger required them both.

Worse still, they were hopeless of remedy. Her father, contented with laughing at them, would never exert himself to restrain the wild giddiness of his youngest

daughters. Her mother, with manners so far from right herself, was entirely insensible of the evil. Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavor to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia; but while they were supported by their mother's indulgence, what chance could there be of improvement? Catherine, weak-spirited, irritable, and completely under Lydia's guidance, had been always affronted by their advice; and Lydia, self-willed and careless, would scarcely give them a hearing. They were ignorant, idle, and vain. While there was an officer in Meryton, they would flirt with him; and while Meryton was within a walk of Longbourn, they would be going there forever. A shiver coursed down her spine. It was exactly as Mr. Darcy suggested.

Ginger pressed the top of his head to her cheek and purred. She scratched under his chin. "I do not like admitting it, but I understand how my family might be a great impediment to a man's admiration toward my sister."

Darcy nodded very slowly. "But it would be nothing if there were true affection on both sides."

"Do you truly believe that, or are you saying that as it is the societally appropriate thing to say?" She chanced a glance at him.

His face screwed up into knots as though trying to work out whether or not she was serious. Had Colonel Fitzwilliam teased him similarly? Given his disposition it was



likely. But it did not seem Mr. Darcy quite knew what to do with it.

“Society is loath to admit it, but with a fortune like Bingleys, and affection in the home as a balm, a very great deal may be overlooked and forgiven.”

He seemed so earnest, even a little timid, so unlike the proud, unfeeling man that he had appeared to be in Meryton. But no, he could not have changed so quickly. She could not allow herself to be distracted by his deep and feeling eyes. The harm enacted towards Jane and Bingley were not the only charges at his feet. She steeled herself and drew a deep breath. “Forgive me if I note that there seems to be an insincerity to your character which I cannot understand. You seem to be willing to acknowledge the hurt you have caused to one friend, while standing fast against another? What kind of friend are you sir?”

“Pray forgive me madam, but I have no idea of what you speak.”

“Your character was unfolded in the recital which I received many months ago from Mr. Wickham. On this subject, what can you have to say? In what imaginary act of friendship can you here defend yourself? Or under what misrepresentation, can you claim now for your imposition upon him?”

Ginger yowled at the sound of Wickham’s name and leapt from her shoulder into Darcy’s arms, leaving several

claw pricks along her collarbone. She clapped her hand over her wounds. Spiteful creature!

“You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns.” All warmth left his voice.

“Who that knows what his misfortunes have been can help feeling an interest in him?”

“His misfortune! Yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed.” Darcy's upper lip curled back.

“And of your infliction!” She advanced a step toward him. “You have reduced him to his present state of poverty. You have withheld the advantages, which you must know to have been designed for him. You have deprived the best years of his life, of that independence which was his due. You have done all this! Yet you can treat the mention of his misfortunes with contempt and ridicule.”

“So you believe I have, in defiance of honor and humanity, ruined the immediate prosperity, and blasted the prospects of Mr. Wickham; that I have willfully and wantonly thrown off the companion of my youth, the acknowledged favorite of my father, a young man who had scarcely any other dependence than on our patronage, and who had been brought up to expect its exertion.” He ran his hand along Ginger's back as though to calm himself.

How strange. While he seemed angry at the accusation, it was an odd sort of anger, as though he believed himself a victim, not a perpetrator.

“I can only refute it by laying before you the whole of his connection with my family. The truth of what I shall relate, I can summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity, including my cousin Fitzwilliam. I am sure he would not hesitate to offer an explanation very similar to my own if you ask him about my father’s god-son, the gentleman in question.”

God-son? Wickham was old Mr. Darcy’s god-son? Did that not just make Darcy’s crimes against him even worse? She folded her arms across her chest and willed herself to listen to what surely would be an entirely insufficient explanation.

But what he related, if true—and she would apply to Colonel Fitzwilliam for that—were so astonishing, they must overthrow every cherished opinion of Mr. Wickham’s worth.

Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. She wished to discredit it entirely, but Darcy’s account of Wickham’s connection with the Pemberley family was exactly what Wickham had related himself; and the kindness of the late Mr. Darcy, of Wickham’s resigning all pretensions to the living, of his receiving, in lieu, so considerable a sum as three thousand pounds, again was she forced to hesitate. She wrapped her arms tight around her waist.

The extravagance and general profligacy which Darcy scrupled not to lay to Mr. Wickham’s charge exceedingly shocked her. But should it? Of his former way of life, nothing had been known in Hertfordshire but what he told himself.

As to his real character, had information been in her power, she had never felt a wish of enquiring. His countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in the possession of every virtue. Yet, despite her valiant efforts, she could recall no instance of him demonstrating any of those traits she had willingly attributed to him. In fact, so many times, he had acted the very opposite. The conversation she shared with him at the Philips' was so entirely improper. She blushed hot.

Worse still, considering Wickham's attentions to Miss King, Darcy's tale of his sister's dealing with Wickham were entirely, despicably, believable. She pressed her hands to her cheeks. How despicable my thoughts. I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! How humiliating is this discovery! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind.

"Are you well, Miss Bennet?" He peered at her with such concern.

"I fear what you have related to me has come as rather a surprise." That was to put it mildly, very mildly.

"Shall I escort you to the parsonage? Are you in need of a place to rest?"

Heavens, she could not encounter Mr. Collins in such a state as she was in! "Pray no, I prefer to take some air, perhaps continue to walk."

“Then allow me and Ginger to walk with you.” Ginger echoed the sentiment with a loud ‘Mrow.’

“Thank you for the offer, but I am not likely to be of good conversation.”

“I would think that by now you know well enough, that good companionship does not always require liberal conversation.” He gestured toward the path.

Ginger meowed insistently, his shoulder bunching as if to jump. Did he mean to run off so they would have to chase him if she did not agree? Vexing creature probably did.

“Very well, sir, we may walk together this afternoon.”

Something about his smile suggested that she had just offered a gift of great value. What could that mean?

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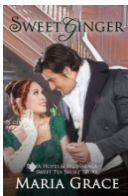


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## *About the Author*

Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again, for which many are grateful. After penning five file-drawer novels in high school, she took a break from writing to pursue college and earn her doctorate in Educational Psychology. After 16 years of university teaching, she returned to her first love, fiction writing.

She has one husband and one grandson, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, is starting her sixth year blogging on Random Bits of Fascination, has built seven websites, attended eight English country dance balls, sewn nine Regency era costumes, and shared her life with ten cats.



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