



# A Tale of Two Suitors

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**Category:** YA&Teen

**Description:** Two years prior to canon, spending the summer in Ramsgate with the Gardiners, Elizabeth rescues a cat sent to a cruel death by an evil, vengeful man whose identity is unknown.

As much as she searches, Elizabeth cannot find the lawful owner of the cat, so she adopts him and loves him herself. Two years later, an extraordinary succession of coincidences reveals that she and a certain wealthy yet proud and arrogant man who considers her barely tolerable have more in common than she could imagine. Especially a love for cats.

Although she considers herself a good judge of character, when two men compete for her attention, she finds it difficult to decipher their true intentions. While one gentleman appears proud and distant and the other charming and amiable, Elizabeth senses that both have something to hide, though for very different reasons. Since it is impolite for a young lady to ask indiscreet questions, Elizabeth's sharp-eyed tomcat steps in, uncovering more about the true nature of both men.

With low angst, intriguing twists, and lots of romance, this Pride and Prejudice variation explores how even the smallest creature can tip the scales of destiny. Small things can indeed make a big difference and pave the way towards a happily-ever-after.

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## Page 1

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“You have, too many times. Do not misunderstand me — I adore all my children, and I am grateful for your uncle’s efforts in finding us this lovely cottage in which to spend the summer, even if he cannot be with us often.

I know I sound selfish complaining about tiredness when I have several servants to help me. ”

“You might have the servants, but you wish to do everything for the children yourself. It is no wonder you are tired. I am glad that I can at least help to care for them and play with them during the day.”

“It is a significant help, Lizzy. It seems playing out of doors is not only excellent for their health but also exhausts them. When we are in London, they sleep half as well as they do here.”

“I could say the same about myself too,” Elizabeth said laughing.

“This cottage is perfectly situated, with direct access to the beach and the water, on the opposite side of the road from the houses of the very rich, and away from Ramsgate’s hustle and bustle. It has been a peaceful and comfortable stay. Your uncle made an excellent choice.”

“I adore this cottage. I dream that someday I might own or at least rent one of my own, which I doubt will happen. So, when will Uncle come to escort us back to London?”

“In his letter he said it would be next week. If nothing delays him, of course. He

works so hard, but how can I complain since he provides us with everything we need — and much more. He is truly the best husband and father.”

“You and Uncle have always been my example of a happy marriage, Aunt. I hope to find someone like him myself one day. If not, I would rather remain a spinster and take care of your children.”

Mrs Gardiner laughed heartily. “I am sure you will find a good husband very soon, Lizzy. Just do not be too hasty in deciding on your future. You need time, wisdom, and good judgment to make such a lifelong commitment.”

“I have no intention of marrying soon, Aunt. I cannot imagine where I might find a suitor whom I could love, admire and respect. As you well know, we are rather poor, and a good dowry is an essential inducement for most men.”

“For most, but not all of them. Perhaps you will find the right gentleman when we finally take you on that long-promised journey to the Lakes. However, considering your uncle’s business affairs, it might be years before it happens.”

“In truth, I am far more eager for that journey than for marriage. After all, what are men to rocks and mountains?”

The two of them shared more laughter and continued to speak until they noticed a horse and rider moving along the shore. He could not see them through the trees that bordered their garden, but they could make out his form, even though his features remained obscured.

The rider intrigued Elizabeth as there were rarely any visitors at that hour on that part of the beach. She glanced at her aunt, who returned an equally puzzled look. Then the rider leant forwards in the saddle and threw something — seemingly a package — far into the sea, then departed at a gallop.

“That was strange,” Elizabeth said. “And quite rude. Why would you throw something into the water just in front of the houses? It is very poor manners.”

“Very poor manners, indeed, and if there was a little more time, I would have told him as much.”

The peaceful night was suddenly broken by a loud, agonising cry, so tormenting that Elizabeth jumped to her feet.

“What in the Lord’s name...?” Mrs Gardiner cried.

Missing not a single moment, Elizabeth picked up her skirts and ran towards the sound, which resembled a heart-rending scream.

She realised the noise was coming from the water and noticed a writhing dark bundle bobbing on the waves.

With no thought for her own safety and heedless of the protestations of her aunt, she waded into the sea, deeper and deeper until she managed to grab it.

In her arms, the movement of the bundle increased, as well as the wailing.

Pressing the package to her chest while fighting back through the waves in her soaked and heavy gown, Elizabeth realised she was carrying a cat, bound in a thick fabric and evidently thrown to its death.

As she reached the sand, she held it tight, caressing it and speaking gently, but the cat still struggled to escape.

Reaching her relieved aunt, they carefully unwrapped the fabric, holding the cat carefully.

With amazement and anger, Elizabeth watched as a little grey face appeared from inside the fabric, mewling in despair and trying to break free. She held it closely, stroking it while she continued to talk softly.

“Dear Lord, who could do such a thing to such a beautiful creature? Not just turn it out but condemn it to a painful drowning! This is just awful!” Mrs Gardiner exclaimed.

“Who? Someone with no character and no heart!” Elizabeth replied furiously. “If only I had seen his face and was able to recognise him, I would make him pay!”

“What a vicious, cruel act, indeed. Outrageous and frightening!” Mrs Gardiner uttered, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Poor, poor little thing,” Elizabeth continued.

“You are safe now. Come, let us go inside — we both need to dry ourselves and to drink something warm. A little milk, perhaps? You would like some, would you not? Aunt, I hope you do not mind if I keep it. Tomorrow I shall ask the neighbours to see whether perhaps someone recognises it.”

“Of course, my dear. Just be careful to keep your windows and the door closed, so it cannot escape. It must be terrified, the poor thing.”

Mrs Gardiner retired to her room, and Elizabeth took the cat to her chamber and wrapped it in a towel. Then she changed her own clothes and dried her hair before going to the kitchen for some milk.

Sleep evaded Elizabeth for several hours. The cat, with beautiful grey and white fur, was so scared that it remained hidden most of the time. It came out only briefly to lap some milk but stayed away from Elizabeth.

Having owned pets all her life, Elizabeth knew she must not force the cat in any way. She spoke to it from a distance but did not attempt to approach it. The creature certainly needed time to recover after such a shock.

The more she thought of it, the angrier Elizabeth grew. Who would purposely catch and wrap up a cat and throw it to its death? Why would someone do that? What harm could such an innocent soul have done that it was required to pay with its life? What sort of human could be so evil and heartless?

Time passed with many such questions but no answers, and it was late in the night, when she was certain the animal was unharmed, that Elizabeth finally found some rest.

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The following morning proved that the cat was in perfect health, though still frightened. Elizabeth guessed it was around a year old, and Mrs Gardiner assumed it belonged to someone as it was clearly well fed and cared for. The question of who might have sent it to its death became more puzzling.

Over the next few days, Elizabeth asked about the neighbourhood, and Mrs Gardiner sent a servant to enquire farther afield, hoping to find the owner — all to no avail.

The cat, however, became more comfortable and eventually allowed Elizabeth to stroke it and to hold it.

Only then did she notice it was a male, and soon afterwards he proved he was a delightfully mischievous boy who liked to be stroked, to sit on a lap, and to sleep in a bed with his human.

Since nobody claimed him, Elizabeth decided to keep him and named him Mr Ash.

When Mr Gardiner arrived to take the family back to London, he was equally surprised to hear the story of the cat and agreed with his wife that it looked like it probably belonged to someone.

More enquiries were made around Ramsgate, but in the end, Mr Ash travelled back to Longbourn with Elizabeth.

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September 1811

“Put that cat down, Lizzy!” Mrs Bennet demanded. “Your dress will be covered in fur, just when we expect Mr Bingley to call!”

“Yes, Mama. I shall take him to my room so he will be in nobody’s way.”

“You should do that. That cat is so wild that he should not be allowed in the drawing room, especially when we have company!”

“He is not wild at all, Mama. He is the sweetest boy most of the time. He simply has a strong personality, and he dislikes certain people.”

“In fact, he dislikes most people and only likes a few,” Mrs Bennet replied. “Remember when he scratched Sir William?”

“I cannot fault the cat for that,” Mr Bennet interjected. “He was probably weary of Sir William’s endless comments about St James’s. I would have scratched him, too, if I could.”

“Mr Bennet! Do not encourage Lizzy to spoil that cat even more! He is dangerous in company, I tell you!”

Despite her amusement, Elizabeth could not actually argue with her mother. In the two years since she had rescued him, Mr Ash had become exceedingly demanding of her attention and extremely miserly with the attention he gave others.

Apart from Jane and Mary, he did not allow himself to be touched by anyone else.

The Gardiners' children adored him and would have liked to play with him, but their joy seemed overwhelming to Mr Ash, and he kept his distance from them.

The only time he was obedient and calm and would allow other people to touch him was when Elizabeth held him in her arms and stroked him.

That seemed to be his happy and comfortable place.

"Come, Mr Ash, let us go to my room, and you can sleep there," Elizabeth said, picking up the cat. "But I doubt Mr Bingley will care about fur on my dress. His interest certainly lies elsewhere," she said with a smile and a glance at her eldest sister.

"I am sure it does, especially after he danced two sets with Jane at the assembly!" Mrs Bennet replied enthusiastically, while Jane blushed. "What a handsome and amiable young gentleman, and what fine taste he possesses. Unlike his friend, whose name I shall not even mention!"

"You mean Mr Darcy, who refused to dance with Lizzy?" Mr Bennet interjected again, and Elizabeth laughed, slightly uneasy.

She had been annoyed and offended by the strange man who had called her tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him.

Who would make such a rude remark at a party?



Someone proud, arrogant, and uncivil, she was certain.

Three days later, after hearing the story repeated countless times by her mother, her younger sisters, and even Mrs Long and Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth was able to laugh about the incident with her father.

Her mother, however, was not so forgiving.

“You should never dance with him, even if he asks you, Lizzy! He might be tall and handsome and worth ten thousand a year, but he is an unpleasant sort of man and not worth any consideration!”

“Dear Mama, precisely because Mr Darcy is worth ten thousand a year and is such an unpleasant sort of man, I doubt he will ever ask me to dance with him. I shall take Mr Ash away — I believe Mr Bingley’s carriage has arrived.”

Mrs Bennet ran to the window, then exclaimed, “Dear Lord, it seems Mr Darcy has come with Mr Bingley! What on earth is he doing here? Lizzy, you had better leave the cat. With a little bit of luck, he might scratch or bite him, as he deserves!”

As if hearing his name mentioned, the cat struggled in Elizabeth’s arms and jumped to the floor, running towards the door. Elizabeth ran after him, and in the hall, she almost collided with the guests, losing her balance. Mr Darcy grabbed her arm, preventing a most unladylike fall.

“Forgive me. My cat was running away from me,” she mumbled, her cheeks hot with embarrassment.

“Should I try to catch it?” Mr Darcy offered, and Elizabeth stared at him in disbelief.

“No, there is no need. He will take a turn in the garden and return soon. Please come

in, gentlemen,” she said, remembering to be a polite hostess.

In the drawing room, the guests were welcomed enthusiastically, and Mr Darcy was introduced to Mr Bennet.

The conversation began with some difficulty, despite Mr Bingley’s attempts.

As joyful and amicable as he was, the difference between him and his friend was striking.

Mr Darcy was stern and withdrawn, observing them with apparent disdain and hardly saying a word, showing his lack of pleasure in being there.

Elizabeth wondered why he had even come.

Was it just to make them feel uncomfortable?

Yet he had offered to catch the cat for her.

She even regretted refusing the offer; Mr Darcy running about after Mr Ash and likely being scratched would have been a scene to remember.

Mr Bingley suddenly mentioned Mr Darcy’s preference for books and sport, and the subject interested her father, who addressed their guest directly. Shortly afterwards, a separate discussion, in low voices, began between the two, while Mr Bingley continued to talk to the ladies.

Surprisingly, Elizabeth heard her father invite Mr Darcy to the library — an offer that was immediately accepted. Puzzled, she watched the two so different men leave together and close the door behind them.

Half an hour passed, and Mr Bingley seemed to be enjoying himself exceedingly. Refreshments were brought, and out of a mixture of politeness and curiosity, Elizabeth offered to take some to her father and his companion.

On entering the library, she was bewildered to see her father talking animatedly and in a friendly manner with the arrogant Mr Darcy, both holding glasses of brandy.

But the greatest surprise came moments later, when she noticed none other than Mr Ash purring and rubbing his head against Mr Darcy's legs.

"Come in, Lizzy," Mr Bennet requested. "We are having an interesting debate here, and your cat seems to approve of it. He entered through the window and did not run away when he saw us. Nor has he scratched either of us yet. Of course, there is still plenty of time."

Elizabeth was too shocked to even notice the joke, even less to smile at it.

In the room sat three males, none of them known to be friendly towards strangers, who were all barely acquainted with each other, yet they seemed to be bearing each other's company and even unexpectedly enjoying themselves.

## Page 2

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Elizabeth placed the tray of refreshments on her father's desk and was about to leave when their guest addressed her, increasing her amazement.

"Miss Bennet, please allow me to tell you how deeply sorry I am for my improper behaviour on the night of the assembly."

"Oh...there is no need, sir..."

"Such ungentlemanly behaviour requires an apology. For a while, I have not been in the right disposition for entertainment, and I should not have attended at all, but Bingley insisted on being there. He also insisted I should dance, which made me withdraw even more. I am not fond of dancing even when I am in my highest spirits, let alone then."

Elizabeth was so surprised by his words that she delayed her answer.

It was a gesture of courtesy that she had not expected from such a proud man; of course, she could enquire why he had needed to call her tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him and to state that she had been slighted by other men, instead of a simple and polite refusal to his friend.

But it mattered little, coming from a man who was obviously accustomed to giving offence with little consideration for the feelings of others. He had apologised, and it was enough.

"I appreciate your explanation, Mr Darcy," she replied. "After all, nobody can force someone to dance, even at an assembly when men are scarce," she concluded with a

meaningful smile that implied more than her words.

“You have my sympathy, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet said.

“There are few things I loathe more than being dragged to parties and forced to dance because etiquette requires it. Of course, that happened when I was younger. Nobody has insisted on my dancing in many years, not even my wife. A benefit of getting older is that you have the liberty to attend gatherings and drink in peace.”

“I understand you perfectly well, sir,” Mr Darcy responded.

“Of course, I was never particularly handsome or wealthy, so people showed little interest in me in any case. You, sir, must carry a heavier burden,” Mr Bennet uttered in the mocking tone Elizabeth knew too well. Mr Darcy, however, frowned and nodded while gulping from his glass.

“I shall not bother you any longer,” Elizabeth said. “And I shall take the cat with me. He can be a real annoyance around strangers.”

“It is a beautiful cat,” Mr Darcy offered. He leant down to stroke him, but Mr Ash immediately ran away.

“He is, but not friendly with people he does not know. I am surprised that he even entered the library with you here, Mr Darcy.”

“And he rubbed against Mr Darcy’s ankles a few times, which I have rarely seen,” Mr Bennet added.

“He must know I am fond of animals,” Mr Darcy declared, finally smiling. “Especially cats, dogs, and horses.”

“He must do. Now please excuse me. I shall leave you two gentlemen to continue your conversation,” Elizabeth said, grabbing the cat.

She took Mr Ash to her chamber, wondering about Mr Darcy’s change of manners. Apparently, her father and her cat were the gentleman’s preferred company in Hertfordshire.

Once Mr Ash was secured in her room, Elizabeth joined her mother and sisters, who were all still engaged in conversation with Mr Bingley.

The gentlemen’s visit lasted another hour, much to Jane and Mrs Bennet’s delight, and at the end, both expressed their desire to call again in a few days, much to Elizabeth’s amazement.

“Dear Jane, I can safely declare that Mr Bingley’s admiration has lasted beyond those two sets,” Mrs Bennet said after the guests had gone.

“Mama, let us not assume more than there is,” Jane answered, blushing. “Mr Bingley is the most amiable gentleman of my acquaintance and the most pleasant companion.”

“In case anyone cares, I also enjoyed spending time with Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet interjected.

“He might not smile as much as his friend, nor does he possess the same amiable manners, but the man has a great knowledge of books. He promised to lend me two volumes published only last week. How kind is that?”

“Dear Papa, do not set your hopes too high,” Elizabeth replied. “These rich people can be rather inconstant with their favours, and he might change his mind by tomorrow.”

“I wonder when you became so proficient at judging rich people, Lizzy, since you hardly know any,” her father mocked her. “As for Mr Darcy, he seemed a gentleman whose word can be trusted. You should have more faith in one of the very few people whom your cat seems not to despise.”

“We certainly do not care much,” Mrs Bennet interjected.

“I am content for you to keep him busy while Mr Bingley calls on Jane. I welcome you enjoying Mr Darcy’s company so much since Mr Bingley seems to value his opinion highly.

He even said he decided to rent Netherfield at Mr Darcy’s suggestion.

For that, I can forgive him for calling Lizzy tolerable! ”

“We should forgive Mr Darcy for that indiscretion in any case, since he apologised to me,” Elizabeth answered. “Papa was a reliable witness.”

“Did he? How kind of him! I am sure Mr Bingley demanded he apologise as you are Jane’s sister. I am sure all was done for Jane,” Mrs Bennet concluded.

“Mama, please do not say that,” Jane murmured, though her eyes shone with joy.

“Oh, hush, girl. You do not know better than your mother! He even mentioned he would host a ball at Netherfield once he is completely settled. Why would he do that, if not to dance with you again?”

“Oh, I long for another ball!” Lydia exclaimed. “Aunt Phillips said a militia regiment is expected to arrive in Meryton next week. Can you imagine a ball with all the officers?”

“A ballroom full of officers would be the most wonderful thing,” Kitty approved, while Mr Bennet rolled his eyes.

“Oh, I always admired men in uniform in my youth,” Mrs Bennet admitted. “Hill, bring me my smelling salts — I might need them.”

The argument over Mr Bingley’s intentions continued till dinner time, and nobody could dampen Mrs Bennet’s dreams of happiness related to that gentleman.

Later on, Jane confessed to Elizabeth that her own hopes were no different, but she was attempting to keep them under good regulation in order to avoid disappointment.

“He is so amicable, so friendly, and has a lovely smile,” Jane said.

“I feel such a strange warmth when he talks to me. Am I silly? Please do not laugh at me, Lizzy. To you, I can confess such a thing, but you must keep the secret. I do not wish Mr Bingley to become distressed by our expectations when he may want nothing more than a friendship.”

“You are not silly, Jane. I like Mr Bingley too. He is also very handsome, so I allow you to like him as much as you want.”

“Did Mr Darcy truly apologise to you?”

“He did — out of nowhere. I was quite shocked. He explained to me he had been in a poor disposition, but Mr Bingley had insisted on him attending the ball and dancing against his will. Apparently, Papa understood him all too well.”

“Mr Darcy must be a good man since Mr Bingley admires and trusts him so much. I cannot approve of him offending you, but perhaps he was truly feeling unwell. If it was in his character to be unkind and uncivil, he would not have taken the trouble to



apologise, would he?"

"I agree, Jane. Oh, and another extraordinary thing, Mr Ash seemed to approve of Mr Darcy too. He entered the library through the window, and he actually rubbed himself against Mr Darcy's legs a few times."

"Did he? How very strange!"

"Indeed. Mr Ash tolerates Papa and sleeps in the library occasionally, but no other men have been to his liking. Seemingly, he found Mr Darcy tolerable enough to tempt him. Who would have imagined that Papa and Mr Ash would see Mr Darcy differently from how we see him? Either we or they must be utterly wrong."

"Dear Lizzy, you are as good as Papa at making sport of people, which frightens me at times," Jane declared, laughing. On the other side of the bed, Ash miaowed once, then returned to his peaceful sleep.

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"Mama, you will not believe what news we have!" Lydia cried as she returned from Meryton with Kitty.

"I have news too, if anyone is interested," Mr Bennet interjected.

"What news, my dear?" Mrs Bennet addressed her daughter.

"The regiment will arrive tomorrow! Colonel Forster is already settled, and his wife Harriet is so lovely and pretty! We happened upon them in Mr Green's shop.

She is a little bit older than me. How fortunate for her to marry a colonel.

I am sure we shall be good friends. Oh, I am greatly anticipating seeing all the officers tomorrow!

We shall go to Meryton and wait for them! ”

“We certainly shall! Mr Bennet, you must give us the carriage,” Mrs Bennet uttered.

“You may have the carriage if you wish, madam,” Mr Bennet responded.

“Just keep in mind we need a good dinner for the day after tomorrow since I am expecting a visit from my cousin. Yes, the one who will inherit Longbourn and may throw you out of the house when I am dead. A tasty dinner is the least we can do to prevent that,” he concluded, evidently amused by the shocked expressions of his wife and daughters.

“Why is that horrible man coming here, Mr Bennet?”

“To visit me, of course, Mrs Bennet. May I ask why you believe he must be horrible just because Longbourn is entailed on him by law?”

“I, for one, would never accept something that is not rightfully mine,” Mrs Bennet said.

“I agree, but nevertheless, Longbourn will be legally his when I die. So your aim should be to keep me healthy for many more years and to win Mr Collins’s friendship. He said he wishes to offer an olive branch, so you should at least ask Hill to cook him a good dinner.”

While Mr Bennet was clearly amusing himself, Mrs Bennet’s frustration visibly increased. The contradiction between the two was so striking that Elizabeth could not help smiling. Lydia and Kitty continued to talk about the regiment and the officers,

but Mrs Bennet's interest was engaged elsewhere.

"Papa, if Mr Darcy loans you those two books, do you think he might allow me to read them too?" Mary asked.

"I am not sure he will truly lend them to me in the end, my child. Let us discuss it further when and if it happens. But I am exceedingly pleased that you are showing more interest in books than in the officers. Quite a pleasant change from your younger sisters. Now, I must leave you. I shall be in my library, reading the books I already own."

Mr Bennet retired, and Elizabeth, tired of hearing about the militia, wished for some exercise.

After walking for some time, she returned to Longbourn but was not quite ready to enter the house.

Instead, she rested in a secluded spot, just beyond the bounds of the gardens, admiring the beauty around her, coloured in shades of red and brown.

A soft breeze touched her face, and it recalled to her the summer, especially the sea, which she had dearly missed these last two years.

Mrs Gardiner had renewed the invitation for her to join them on the long-awaited journey to the Lakes the following summer.

But, as much as she loved and appreciated her uncle, Elizabeth tempered her expectations in regard to his ability to leave his business; next summer was too far away to allow herself to believe the plan might become reality.

## Page 3

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Her solitary reverie was interrupted by a miaow, and Mr Ash appeared, jumping into her lap. Elizabeth stroked him, and after turning round and round for a while, he found a comfortable position and began to purr.

“Who let you out, you disobedient boy? How did you know I was here? Silly me, of course you knew. You are so sweet and beautiful! Do not listen to anyone who says you are wild and evil. If you despise some people, I am sure you have good reason. Do not worry, I shall always take your side, even when you puzzle me. As happened yesterday with Mr Darcy. How could you like him when he barely speaks two words together? Or maybe he was more vocal with you and Papa than he is with the rest of the world.”

“Miss Bennet?” a voice called, startling her so much that she jumped to her feet, and Mr Ash leapt to the ground.

“Mr Darcy!”

“I am sorry to interrupt your privacy,” he said, dismounting. “I just came to bring Mr Bennet the two books I promised. Bingley and I are having dinner with Colonel Forster.”

Mr Ash had been startled too and had run away, but he was now sitting a few yards from where they stood, watching them attentively.

“Oh...the books...how very kind of you. Papa will be delighted.”

“Are you returning home?” he enquired, and she hesitated a moment, but in the end

she could not refuse to accompany him.

“Yes,” she said, and they walked together.

“I assume those newly published volumes are quite expensive,” Elizabeth said, attempting to begin a conversation.

“When it comes to books, their value is not measured in money.”

“A book’s value is not measured in money, and yet one needs good money to be able to purchase one,” Elizabeth replied. “Unless one who cannot afford to buy them is fortunate enough to borrow them.”

Mr Darcy showed a hint of a smile.

“It is my pleasure to share books with those who appreciate them.”

“How generous of you. I might be so bold as to abuse your kindness and ask you to allow me and my sister Mary to read them too. But that would be too much of an imposition, I am sure.”

“Not at all. Since I have already read them, I am in no hurry for them to be returned.”

Elizabeth could not conceal her surprise.

“Truly? I was mostly teasing you. My sister Mary asked Papa to request such a favour from you, but Papa was rightfully reluctant to do so.”

“I am glad you asked, and I am pleased to agree. Your father mentioned to me that you and Miss Mary enjoy reading. I have always admired young women who wish to improve their minds through extensive reading.”

Elizabeth's amazement increased; based on his words alone, Mr Darcy's statement had sounded like a compliment. However, his distant tone and his stern countenance revealed that he was simply stating a fact, unconnected to her or Mary.

"That is very kind of you, Mr Darcy. Mary will be most pleased, and so am I."

"It is the least I can do after offending you at the assembly. I really cannot understand what possessed me to act in such a manner. I have a sister, and I am not in the habit of offending women, regardless of the circumstances. I should have found a more gentlemanly way of dismissing Bingley's insistence that I dance. "

"Yes, you should have," she responded, amused by his awkwardness. "But as I said, your attempt to apologise was much appreciated, and I suggest we do not mention the incident again."

"That is very kind of you, Miss Bennet."

Suddenly, Elizabeth lost her balance as Mr Ash rubbed against her ankles. She swayed, struggling to steady herself, when Mr Darcy's hand grabbed her arm. Ash miaowed and moved a few steps away but remained in their proximity.

"I cannot understand this cat," she said, trying to conceal her embarrassment. "He usually hides from strangers, especially men, but now he is under our feet."

"One can hardly understand cats," he said, smiling.

"My family has owned many cats, dogs, and horses. I can safely say that the cats run the household, including claiming dominion over humans and dogs. Cats have secret reasons to like or dislike someone, and you cannot force them to change their opinion. You may feed them and nurture them, and they will still dislike you if they want. A dog learns obedience and loyalty. A cat can hardly accept being forced to act

against its wishes.”

Elizabeth laughed heartily. “You sound like a real expert, Mr Darcy, and although my experience with cats and dogs is not as extensive as yours, I agree with you. In fact you just voiced my own thoughts about cats liking or disliking people without apparent reason.”

“I would not call myself an expert, but all my family loved pets. My grandfather used to say that kindness to animals is just as noble as kindness to people in need.”

“How thoughtful!”

“Indeed. My father and I were raised in the same spirit, and so was Georgiana. She has ridden horses as well as played with dogs and cats since she learnt to walk.”

“She must have learnt from her brother. I assume your mother loved animals too?”

“She did,” he responded after a brief hesitation. “But her health was fragile for as long as I can remember, so she spent more time resting than outside the house. She had a white cat who kept her company till she died.”

“Oh...I am very sorry...I did not mean to impose...”

The conversation had taken a most unexpected turn, and Mr Darcy’s willingness to discuss such private things with her became disconcerting. They walked at a very slow pace, taking a circuitous route towards the front of the house.

“It is I who should apology for burdening you with my sad stories, Miss Bennet.”

“In truth, I thank you for confiding in me, Mr Darcy.”

“Once again, I wonder what possessed me to do so,” he said, revealing a little smile twisted by sadness. “I rarely share my thoughts with anyone, including my relatives.”

“More rarely than you share your books,” she replied, and his smile brightened a little.

“Much more rarely,” he admitted.

“Then I feel privileged to be one of the very few. It is more important that you trust me than that you found me only tolerable.”

His face coloured, then turned pale, and Elizabeth gently touched his arm.

“I was only teasing you, Mr Darcy.”

“Oh...I am as ill qualified at teasing as I am at enjoying parties.”

“As long as you love animals and books, I find fewer and fewer faults in your manners.”

“Are you teasing me again, Miss Bennet?”

“Not entirely, Mr Darcy. May I ask what happened to the loyal white cat?”

“Oh...Molly... She was seven years old when my mother died — the same age as my sister. They had lived together all their lives, and Georgiana loved her deeply. Both of them missed my mother exceedingly and grieved for a long time. For many weeks, both Georgiana and Molly stayed in my mother’s empty room.

Georgiana used to play the pianoforte there. Molly just lay on the bed.”



“I am so sorry,” Elizabeth whispered, suddenly feeling the burden of his sadness.

“Molly died almost three years after my mother. A few months after that, my father died too.”

“Children and pets grieve so deeply for their loved ones. Miss Darcy must have suffered so much, losing both her parents at such a tender age...”

“She did. It was a long while before she recovered reasonably well, although everyone in our family showered her with affection and tenderness.”

“Poor dear girl,” Elizabeth said in a low voice, feeling tears well in her eyes.

“My sister is the kindest, sweetest soul, and therefore, she is more prone to being hurt. I wish I could protect her more.”

“From the way you speak about her, even though we are barely acquainted, I am certain you are an excellent brother.”

“I try but often fail, and Georgiana gets hurt again. For instance...”

He paused as if trying to regain some composure.

“A few months after my father died, I purchased a kitten for my sister. An acquaintance’s cat had a litter, and Georgiana immediately fell in love with one of the boys.

She called him Milo, and they became immediate friends.

He slept only with her. He was as affectionate as he was protective of her. ”

“I am sure Milo brings her comfort and peace.”

“He did. Sadly, her comfort only lasted a year or so. One day, someone in the house must not have been attentive enough, and Milo simply disappeared, probably jumping out of a window and running away. Georgiana was out with my aunt Lady Matlock. When she returned, you can imagine she was distraught. Her companion, Mrs Younge, and the entire household searched for Milo for many days, but he was never found.”

“Oh dear Lord! What she must have suffered...”

“She grieved for many months, and I suspect she still suffers. After a while, she refused to even talk about him, but since that day, she has refused to have another pet, except for those who already live at Pemberley.”

“I am so very sorry,” Elizabeth whispered one more time, a lump in her throat. “What could have happened to him?”

“I failed to find out, despite all my efforts. I joined in the search. For weeks I startled every time I saw a white and grey cat, anywhere I went. I still do. I confess I felt a tightness in my chest when I first saw Mr Ash yesterday.”

“Truly? Are they alike? What a strange coincidence!”

“Not entirely. There are many similar cats in England. But it must be my obsessed mind, as the more I look at Mr Ash, the more resemblance to Milo I see. Excuse me, I know I sound like a lunatic.”

“Not at all, Mr Darcy! In fact...”

“Mr Darcy? What a wonderful surprise, sir!” came Mr Bennet’s voice as the

gentleman approached them. Only then did they realise they were standing in front of Longbourn, and several curious eyes were watching them through the windows.

“Mr Bennet, good day, sir. I can only stay for a moment as I am expected elsewhere. I came to bring you these books, as promised.”

He then bowed to Elizabeth, saying, “Miss Bennet, thank you for keeping me company. It was an unexpected pleasure that I hope to repeat soon.”

“Likewise, Mr Darcy,” she managed to respond, while her father escorted his guest to the library.

Mr Darcy left a few minutes later, but their conversation affected Elizabeth deeply, and she still wondered what had prompted him to make such an intimate confession.

Never would she have imagined that the proud, arrogant man, whose repulsive manners were universally criticised in Meryton and who had offended her directly with such insolence, could possess an affectionate heart and had been forced to struggle with such deep and overwhelming sorrow.

And poor Miss Darcy troubled Elizabeth exceedingly, even though she had known nothing about her until that day.

A young girl with a sweet character, having to suffer so many losses at such a young age, would not easily find her place in the world, nor any peace or tranquillity, despite her fortune and connections.

And the fact that she had lost a cat resembling Mr Ash was astonishing; even though, as Mr Darcy had said, there were many similar cats in England.

And certainly, Miss Darcy’s cat that had jumped out of a window in London could

not be the same animal as poor Mr Ash, who had been tied up and thrown into the sea to drown many miles away in Ramsgate.

But still, the coincidence was astonishing and disturbing at the same time.

Her mother and sisters enquired about her meeting with Mr Darcy, curious to know where Mr Bingley was. The revelation that the two gentlemen were having dinner with Colonel Forster became a subject of debate between Lydia, Kitty, and their mother, with gentle assistance from Jane.

Elizabeth whispered to Mary that Mr Darcy had agreed to allow them to read the books too, then she retired to her room to reflect on everything she had unexpectedly discovered as the recipient of Mr Darcy's confession.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

Elizabeth felt caught up in Mr Darcy's story and could not escape the distress associated with it.

She was equally preoccupied by trying to understand how it could have happened that Mr Darcy had come to visit them with Mr Bingley, then by himself, befriended her father, and opened his heart to her all in a couple of days; he had barely spoken to anyone in her family or in the entirety of Meryton for an entire week, so what could have caused this complete change?

She felt as intrigued by him as she had been appalled several days before; he was certainly not an easy man to know and to be around. There was such a complete contrast between him and Mr Bingley that it was a mystery how the two men had become friends.

With so many questions that demanded answers, Elizabeth was determined to speak more with Mr Darcy the next time she saw him. Of course, she could not ask any direct questions, except perhaps about Milo, the lost cat. And perhaps from there, she would find out more about the gentleman.

But why did she truly care? After all, Mr Darcy had indicated he would only remain in Hertfordshire for a few more weeks, and afterwards their paths would probably never cross again. Except if a certain event that Jane was already dreaming of became reality.

The day passed in similar reflections, with Mr Ash often seeking her attention.

Before dinner, a note arrived from Miss Bingley inviting Jane and Elizabeth to have

tea with her and her sister the next day.

Mrs Bennet's joy matched Jane's silent but obviously pleasure; Elizabeth's feelings were a combination of anticipation and anxiety, which she found to be irritating and unreasonable.

For Jane, the invitation was meaningful, as Mr Bingley must have had an influence on his sister's decision.

But to her, it meant little; she had clearly been invited only as Jane's companion, nothing more.

"Papa, can we take the carriage?" Jane asked.

"Perhaps you would be better to ride," Mrs Bennet suggested. "I might need the carriage to go into Meryton."

"I could, but what about Lizzy?" Jane enquired.

"It is about time Lizzy rode again. She was once rather proficient. For someone who proclaims she loves animals, being afraid of horses after only one fall is ridiculous," their father declared. "Or else she could walk," he added.

Elizabeth was more amused than hurt by her father's mockery.

"Well, Papa, for someone who proclaims he is an educated man, it is a little bit ridiculous to refuse to go out in society and attend parties. And yet, we respect your choice."

"That was a harsh retaliation, Lizzy," Mr Bennet responded with a glare. "Harsh but just. I shall tell John you need the carriage tomorrow."

“Or Jane could go alone,” Mrs Bennet suggested. “I am sure Mr Bingley and his sisters wish to see her and would do well enough without Lizzy.”

“I am not going without Lizzy, Mama!” Jane stated.

“We have already decided you will have the carriage, so let us close the subject,” Mr Bennet requested.

Dinner was being served when a servant entered with another note from Mr Bingley.

Mr Bennet,

I shall be in Meryton tomorrow, and I request permission to accompany Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth to Netherfield in my carriage. Afterwards, my carriage will convey them home again if this is acceptable to you.

C. Bingley

“Well, well, what a thoughtful young man he is,” Mr Bennet said, seeming only half serious. “Let me write back immediately and accept. Your mother may have the carriage tomorrow after all.”

“How thoughtful and considerate of him!” Mrs Bennet repeated. “He would do anything to please Jane. Anyone could see that. What a lovely thing! Oh, I greatly anticipate hearing about the visit, Jane. Mr Bingley will certainly be home — how wonderful!”

Jane said nothing, only blushed. As had rarely happened before, this time Elizabeth agreed with her mother: Mr Bingley’s attention went beyond a gentleman’s friendly behaviour.

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The next day, around noon, Elizabeth and Jane were ready for their visit and equally eager.

The difference was that the reason for Jane's anticipation was publicly acknowledged, while Elizabeth was mostly overlooked by the family.

She was going simply as Jane's chaperon, and everybody assumed she had no reason to be nervous.

When Mr Bingley's carriage arrived and the gentleman stepped down, Elizabeth held her breath. Behind him, she noticed Mr Darcy, who chose to remain inside while his friend handed the ladies in.

"Mr Bingley, thank you for offering your carriage," Jane said.

"You are most welcome. In fact, it was Darcy's idea. He said Mr Bennet may need his horses. Of course, I am delighted to escort you, but I have to admit that Darcy is more considerate than I in all these little things."

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy and caught his eye briefly. So, it was his idea, after all.

"It is not a lack of consideration, Bingley. You are simply not accustomed to running an estate and the sort of necessary tasks that go with it. That comes from experience."

"I accept that, but I also admit you are always more attentive to details than I. That is why I always trust your opinion. You are hardly ever wrong."

"I do not deserve such praise, Bingley. I am simply older."



Elizabeth said nothing; the relationship between the two friends, so different in nature, age, and even social situation, was a puzzle.

She could easily understand Mr Bingley's appreciation for Mr Darcy — who was superior to him in every way, except perhaps in manners.

But why Mr Darcy would wish to be friends with someone outside his circle was less clear.

The carriage arrived at Netherfield in a short time, and Mr Bingley invited them in. He offered Jane his arm, while Elizabeth followed them and Mr Darcy brought up the rear.

Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst greeted them enthusiastically and even embraced Jane.

Their manners seemed entirely polite and friendly, yet Elizabeth sensed dishonesty and forced smiles.

Her sensation increased once the tea was served, when the two sisters asked a lot of questions, which Jane answered with her usual sincerity.

Elizabeth, however, assumed they were mostly meant to reveal the Bennet family's flaws to their brother.

Mr Darcy chose to keep his distance, watching them from a chair, holding a glass of brandy.

“Miss Eliza, is there fur on your skirt?” Miss Bingley abruptly asked.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, attempting to laugh yet slightly uncomfortable. “My cat, Mr Ash, rubbed himself on me to say goodbye.”

“I love dogs and cats as much as any other person, but only out of doors,” Miss Bingley said. “I would die to find hair on my gown. I spend too much money on them to ruin them so easily.”

“My gowns are not so expensive, and the fur can be easily removed. To me, it is worth the effort,” Elizabeth concluded.

“My mother loved cats too. She even used to sleep with her favourite one,” Mr Darcy interjected, a little smile on his lips.

“I love cats too,” Miss Bingley immediately repeated. “Except that I would rather not keep them in the house. I think that is best for them too — to live a life of freedom. I think it is to their benefit.”

“The truth is that we have never been particularly fond of pets,” Mr Bingley admitted. “Perhaps because we lived in a townhouse and never owned a property in the country. Once I purchase one, I shall begin by buying a dog. Do you like dogs or cats, Miss Bennet?”

Jane blushed and needed a moment to reply.

“Both, I think. I have no firm preference.”

“So, Miss Bennet, your uncle lives in London? He is in trade, you said? Where exactly does he live?” Mrs Hurst asked.

“In Gracechurch Street. Yes, he is in trade and quite successful.”

“I am not sure in what part of London Gracechurch Street is. I doubt I have ever been to that area,” Miss Bingley said.

“It is quite a lovely neighbourhood,” Jane continued. “We visit them often as they are kind enough to invite Lizzy and me.”

“From that part of town, I imagine you are very far from any places of entertainment, such as the opera or theatre,” Mrs Hurst continued.

“Not too far,” Elizabeth interjected. “My uncle may not live in the fashionable part of town, but he has a lovely house and a wonderful family. He is an admirable man, highly educated, and very successful in his business. We all enjoy the theatre and opera, and we attend often when we stay with them. Distance matters little when one owns a good carriage.”

As she spoke, she heard the harshness in her voice, but she did not regret it. The women’s insolence, barely concealed behind polite smiles and careful words, caused her ire to rise.

“Mr Gardiner sounds very much like your excellent father, Bingley,” Mr Darcy interjected, bringing a smile to Elizabeth’s face; the gentleman seemed to disapprove of the two supercilious women as much as she did.

The Bingley sisters turned pale, while their brother answered, “Indeed! And I am sure Louisa and Caroline remember we also lived quite far from Mayfair until ten years ago, when my father managed to purchase a house in Grosvenor Street. He wished to buy an estate too, but in the end he left that responsibility to me. I hope Darcy will help me to fulfil it.”

“It means less where a man lives and more how he manages to turn it into a loving home for his family. And often being a gentleman or a lady means more than owning an estate,” Mr Darcy declared.

“I agree,” Elizabeth said. “And I have always found it amusing when people become

conceited and self-important because they inherited a fortune and a social position, without doing much to earn it.” The last statement was rude, but she had said it, and it could not be taken back.

Again, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst looked offended and angry, but surprisingly Mr Darcy smiled.

“I agree, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. “It is one thing to take pride in your family history and your ancestors and another thing to be proud and arrogant just because you inherited some privileges.”

“But surely one’s name and situation in life make a great difference,” Mrs Hurst declared.

“A gentleman like Mr Hurst, or like Mr Darcy, deserves more consideration than someone with no connections in society, and I shall not even mention their fortunes. That is why a woman with a good education and a large dowry has more chance of a happy marriage than one who sadly lacks such advantages.”

“You cannot compare my situation to Darcy’s,” Mr Hurst unexpectedly said, sipping from his brandy. “He is superior in every way.”

“As for women with large dowries,” Mr Bingley said, “I believe they are more likely to have more suitors and receive more marriage proposals, but not necessarily for the right reasons. And that will surely not secure them a happy marriage.”

“Bingley, you just expressed my thoughts exactly,” Mr Darcy declared. “I would certainly wish my sister to be pursued for her excellent qualities, out of affection and admiration, than for her dowry and situation in life.”

“But you would certainly not want your sister to marry someone beneath her —

someone with an inferior fortune and fewer connections,” Mrs Hurst insisted.

“I would certainly not want my sister to marry someone below her in character and education. A learned man, who strives to improve himself, who loves, admires, and respects a woman, is worth much more than one who is privileged but lacks the strength or the character to grow.”

“That all sounds lovely, Mr Darcy, but we all know you are fastidious and selective regarding the people around you,” Miss Bingley said.

“You hardly ever dance, you hardly ever speak to anyone, you often criticise a woman’s appearance and manners.

Let us be honest — we all know what you said about Miss Eliza and how you refused to dance with her. ”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks and neck burning, Jane appeared to be holding her breath, and Mr Bingley’s eyes widened in shock; Mr Darcy looked disconcerted too, but he replied in a strangely composed tone.

“I have already apologised to Miss Elizabeth for my rude statement. It was thoughtless — and completely untrue, for that matter. I remember calling her tolerable without even looking at her. Since I have had the pleasure of coming to know her better, I have found her to be one of the most handsome young ladies of my acquaintance and certainly one with whom I have many things in common. One being that I am a gentleman and she is a gentleman’s daughter.

The second that we both love to read, and the third that we both like cats.

And I hope she will agree to dance with me when the next opportunity arises. ”

Such a statement seemed to amaze the Bingley sisters as much as Elizabeth.

Mr Darcy was still smiling, and nervous thrills made her quiver.

Did he just declare his admiration for her?

And his intention to dance? What could it possibly mean?

It must have been only an attempt to argue with Miss Bingley, which Elizabeth found almost as offensive as his remark that she was tolerable.

Pretending a positive opinion and admiration that you did not really feel, simply to win a debate, was as appalling as giving offence without any sound reason.

“You may have the opportunity to dance soon, Darcy, as I plan to host a ball in about a fortnight,” Mr Bingley said. “I already know Caroline and Louisa disapprove, but I am determined to do it.”

“Do not worry, Mr Darcy, I shall not take your word in earnest,” Elizabeth uttered with a large smile. “I certainly do not expect you to dance with me.”

“I hope you will, Miss Elizabeth, as I have every intention of asking you. Unless you would find it too unpleasant to accept, that is. Fortunately, you have a little more time to decide,” he concluded, while Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst gazed at them, their mouths hanging open in a most unladylike manner.

The visit lasted another half an hour, then Elizabeth and Jane returned to Longbourn. Mr Bingley offered to accompany them; Mr Darcy only said goodbye. Elizabeth felt more bewildered and unsettled by Mr Darcy than any other man she had ever known; he was a riddle she could not hope to solve.

When they arrived at Longbourn, Mr Bingley only helped them out but did not enter the house. Inside, Lydia and Kitty were telling their mother about the regiment that had recently arrived in Meryton, while Mr Bennet expected to receive his cousin, Mr Collins.

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

The latter clearly had several aims and was determined to pursue them.

The first was to draw attention to his accomplishments and his situation in life as a clergyman in a good parish in Kent.

The second was to praise his noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

And the third was to find a wife, as Lady Catherine had demanded.

This purpose was revealed to only Mr and Mrs Bennet, but the former passed it on to Elizabeth at the first opportunity.

Mr Bennet was highly amused by the news; Elizabeth not so much.

Mr Collins initially suggested he was tempted to pursue the eldest Miss Bennet, but Mrs Bennet explained her daughter was likely to be engaged soon, so he turned his attention to Elizabeth, following her everywhere in and around the house, addressing her all the time, and allowing her not a moment to breathe.

Mr Collins was well read but not educated. He possessed knowledge but not understanding. He quoted sermons and Lady Catherine de Bourgh's wisdom and gave both equal merit. He spoke much and listened little, with obstinate ignorance of everything that was to his advantage .

Mr Ash disregarded him completely. However, on several occasions when Mr Collins imposed himself too close to Elizabeth, the cat somehow found himself around the clergyman's feet, causing him to stumble.



“Elizabeth, take that cat out of here,” Mrs Bennet demanded.

“Indeed, my dear cousin Elizabeth, even Lady Catherine says that pets and children must neither be seen nor heard in adult company. She strongly opposes any animal in the house because of Miss Anne de Bourgh’s fragile health.”

“Lady Catherine seems a very wise woman,” Mrs Bennet agreed.

“Wise cannot describe half of her ladyship’s discernment and concern for the wellbeing of others. I have been exceedingly fortunate to gain her trust and benevolence.”

“From what you tell me, Lady Catherine would disapprove of most of my behaviour,” Elizabeth declared, causing Mrs Bennet to choke.

“You should not listen to Lizzy, Mr Collins! She likes to joke, just like her father! Her behaviour is impeccable, I assure you.”

“But, my dear Mrs Bennet, this tendency to speak in jest might also displease Lady Catherine.”

“I assure you, Lizzy will correct her manners once she is married,” the lady said with an angry glare at her daughter, at which Mr Collins shook his head doubtfully.

Mrs Bennet continued to chasten Elizabeth privately several times that day, and she chose not to reply. Her mother’s expectation that she would ever marry someone like Mr Collins was ridiculous, but there was no need to argue unless an unwanted proposal was made.

The next morning, Lydia suggested walking to Meryton, and Elizabeth hoped for some peace; yet, she had no such luck, as Mr Collins immediately offered to

accompany them.

Throughout the entire mile, Mr Collins chatted about Lady Catherine and Rosings Park, until Lydia and Kitty lost patience and ran ahead.

Arriving in the town, they met several other people, who were introduced to Mr Collins. That captured the clergyman's interest, and he gave Elizabeth a little bit of space.

Charlotte Lucas, with her sister Maria and her father, Sir William, was a pleasant addition, as Mr Collins took the opportunity to express his favourable opinion about Hertfordshire, Longbourn, and Meryton.

The entire group was engaged in conversation in the middle of the street, when suddenly Lydia waved to someone.

"Look, it is Colonel Forster and his wife! And there are two handsome officers with them. Kitty, let us go and greet them."

Elizabeth's call for proper manners was disregarded; Lydia and Kitty had already scampered off. Elizabeth and Jane followed them, as did Mr Collins and the Lucases. As the only one acquainted with everybody, Sir William performed the introductions.

"These are two of my officers, Mr Denny and Mr Wickham. Mr Wickham has just joined our regiment."

"You are most welcome in Meryton, Colonel Forster, Mrs Forster. And your officers too," Elizabeth said. Mr Denny and Mr Wickham both bowed and smiled at her, and Elizabeth mused that she had rarely seen a man with a more charming smile than Mr Wickham.

“And we are happy to finally meet you, Miss Elizabeth. We have heard much about you and your family. I shall send your father an invitation for a drink soon.”

“You have heard about us? I hope not all the information was unfavourable,” Elizabeth said.

“Not at all. We had the pleasure of dining with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley last night, as well as with Sir William and Lady Lucas. Mr Bingley spoke a lot about your family — and only good things.”

“I can confirm that,” Sir William interjected. “There is no young woman prettier than Miss Jane Bennet in the entire neighbourhood, nor a clever or wittier one than Miss Elizabeth.”

“Sir William, you are exceedingly generous with your praise,” Elizabeth replied. “I second your opinion about my sister, but I do not deserve such credit.”

“You do, Miss Eliza. And you are pretty too. I am sorry that some people believed otherwise,” Sir William continued.

Elizabeth was shocked by such a comment; had Sir William lost his sense of decency?

“Papa!” Charlotte cried, but Lydia spoke over her reprimand.

“Oh, you mean that Mr Darcy called Lizzy tolerable? It was very rude of him, but he later came and apologised. He is so proud and unpleasant, but Mama said we must tolerate him because he is a friend of Mr Bingley’s.”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth scolded, grabbing her arm. She felt mortified at being the centre of such a discussion; the two officers watched her curiously, while Mr Wickham’s

countenance changed a few times. He was certainly amused at her expense.

“Mr Darcy?” Mr Collins interjected, his eyes wide. “Did I hear correctly? Could he be the master of Pemberley?”

“He certainly is,” Sir William agreed.

“This is most extraordinary! I must introduce myself to him immediately. He is the nephew of my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. This is the most astonishing coincidence. I would never have expected to meet Mr Darcy here!”

“It is a surprise, indeed,” Mr Wickham mumbled, and Elizabeth gazed at him, curious.

“Are you acquainted with Mr Darcy, Mr Wickham?” Sir William enquired.

“I am, but I am sure neither of us would be pleased to meet again.”

“Well,” Colonel Forster said, “from what I heard, Mr Darcy intends to leave Hertfordshire in a month. I am sure you can bear to meet him once or twice, if such a thing occurs, Wickham.”

“I certainly can, sir. My duty keeps me with the regiment, and that is more important than any unpleasant encounter.”

Mr Wickham’s remarks — as well as his voice and his obviously distracted expression — intrigued Elizabeth.

There had been so many coincidences: the similarity between Miss Darcy’s missing cat and Mr Ash; Mr Collins being Mr Darcy’s aunt’s clergyman; a new officer acquainted with Mr Darcy.

It seemed as if they were all in a play.

Would it turn out to be a comedy or a drama?

Sir William's indiscretion had begun the conversation, proving he was no cleverer than Mr Collins. And the officer who had so easily expressed an opinion about an acquaintance to some strangers was also uncommonly ill-mannered.

The discussion was still taking place in the middle of the road, so Colonel Forster invited everyone inside for some refreshments. Elizabeth and Jane were the only ones reluctant, while everybody else agreed enthusiastically.

Charlotte took Elizabeth and Jane's arms, walking behind the rest of the group.

"Your cousin is an interesting man," Charlotte said. "Papa heard a few things about him from Mr Phillips. He has a pleasant figure."

"He does, but interesting is not a word I would use to describe him," Elizabeth said.

"He seems to be partial to you, Eliza."

"My dear Charlotte, he only met me two days ago. What partiality could he have? The truth is — and I trust you will keep this a secret! — that Lady Catherine has demanded he marry, and he would never disobey her. For two days now, he has been trying to compliment me, and I have been attempting to escape from his attentions — especially since I know they cannot be the result of any true feelings. He cannot like me since he does not even know me."

"People hardly know each other even after they have lived together for twenty years. So you do not intend to marry him?" Charlotte asked, and Elizabeth gazed at her, laughing.

“My dear Charlotte, I cannot believe you are even asking me that.”

“Why not? He seems to possess more qualities than flaws. He is making a good living as a clergyman, and one day — hopefully in many, many years — he will even inherit Longbourn,” Charlotte insisted.

Elizabeth wondered whether her friend was serious or not.

“You are right, of course, but Mr Collins is not the sort of man who could make me happy, and I would certainly not make him so. Besides, I am quite certain Lady Catherine would despise my stubbornness and frankness, and she would disapprove of everything I do or say. Just like Mama does.”

“That, I cannot argue with,” Charlotte replied, laughing too.

They entered the colonel’s house, and refreshments were ordered. Mrs Forster seemed close to Lydia and Kitty in age as well as manners, so the three found a subject of conversation to amuse themselves. The colonel spoke with Sir William and Mr Collins, and at some point, even Charlotte joined them.

Jane was talking to Mary and Maria Lucas on a sofa next to Elizabeth’s.

“Miss Elizabeth, may I sit with you, if I am not imposing?”

She lifted her eyes to see Mr Wickham smiling at her most charmingly.

“Of course, sir!”

“Thank you. It is a real pleasure to meet you and so many other lovely people here in Meryton. I am grateful that I decided to join the regiment, if only for that reason.”

“I hope you will enjoy your career in the militia for many other reasons, Mr Wickham. But we are pleased to have you here too.”

“I hope you will not find me too blunt or impolite, but I noticed your unease when Darcy’s impoliteness to you was mentioned.

I just wanted to assure you that you have nothing to be embarrassed about.

Darcy takes great pleasure in treating others with a lack of civility and consideration.

I know that better than anyone since I have known him my entire life. ”

“Really? That is quite astonishing!”

“I would prefer this not to be widely known, but I grew up at Pemberley. Mr George Darcy was my godfather, and he loved me exceedingly. I was even named after him.”

“Truly?” Elizabeth tried to temper her curiosity with little success. “You may be assured of my secrecy, Mr Wickham. In fact, perhaps it would be better if we did not discuss this subject further, as I assume you and Mr Darcy are not on friendly terms.”

“We are not. Darcy did me a great injustice and refused to give me what my godfather left me in his will. He never liked me and never showed me any friendship, probably because his father loved me so much. Darcy has a jealous and resentful nature.”

Elizabeth took a minute to understand the man’s assertions.

“So, Mr Darcy disregarded his father’s will? How is that possible? I assume inheritance is protected by laws.”

“Yes, but there was such an informality in the terms as to give me no hope from law. My godfather recommended Darcy give me the living of the parish of Kympton as soon as it fell vacant. The recommendation was clear and beyond a doubt, but Darcy chose to dismiss it and give the living to someone else.”

“That is strange, indeed... I know Mr Darcy only a little, but he seems to cherish his family. Disregarding his father’s wish is inconceivable.”

“And yet, that is Darcy — the one who always wishes to have his own way. I shall not trouble you with my problems any longer, Miss Elizabeth. I just wanted you to know that you are not alone in suffering from Darcy’s rudeness.”

“The situations can hardly compare, Mr Wickham. The remark you heard — due to my sister and others’ indiscretion — was said to his friend. After all, he is entitled to like and dislike whomever he wishes, and to refuse to dance at a ball. He later apologised, so I cannot hold a grudge for that.”

“You are more generous than I am, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I doubt it... From what you said, he did you a great injustice and sullied his father’s memory. I would hardly forgive him for something like that. You, Mr Wickham, are calmer than I would be.”

“Time has healed my wounds, Miss Elizabeth. This happened more than three years ago, so I have had time to become accustomed to his actions and my situation.”

“Wickham, what have you been talking about with Miss Eliza for so long?” Mrs Forster called to him. “Come here and hear the news. Lydia said Mr Bingley is hosting a ball, and I shall ask my husband to make him invite all the officers.”

Mr Wickham smiled, then bowed to Elizabeth and walked away, joining the other



group, leaving her thoughtful and perplexed.

Mr Wickham's story confused her even more in regard to Mr Darcy. The officer's accusations were serious. How could a man who had shown so much grief and tenderness for his parents and his sister, and who loved animals, act so dishonourably, even cruelly?

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*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

Another night passed in equal restlessness for Elizabeth, and she only fell asleep an hour before dawn broke, waking again as the first strains of light glowed in the sky.

More than anything, she wondered at herself for caring so deeply about the whole situation surrounding Mr Darcy, a gentleman who had made such a strangely powerful impression on her, both negative and positive.

She had known him for less than a fortnight, yet she thought of him more than any other man of her acquaintance.

Mr Wickham's accusations bothered her more than they should.

What if Mr Darcy truly had treated his father's godson with disregard?

But their dealings were certainly not her business.

Still in a nervous state of mind, Elizabeth dressed herself and left the room.

It was too early even for Mr Ash, who glanced at her, then continued his sleep by the fire, but she needed a walk to calm herself and to gather some patience and composure before she had to face Mr Collins again.

The autumn morning was cold, damp, and foggy, the grass slippery, but Elizabeth was too anxious for caution.

She kept to the woodland behind the house, undecided whether she should go farther or just sit in her favourite wild, secluded place and enjoy the fresh air.

However, she had little choice when she noticed the shape of a man and a horse, waiting.

She startled and covered her mouth with her hand until she heard a voice calling her.

“Miss Bennet?”

“Mr Darcy? What are you doing here, sir? Has something happened?”

“No...I was just taking a ride and thought it would be too early for company...”

“Yes, I believed the same.”

“Am I bothering you?”

“No...I am just surprised. You are rather far from Netherfield,” she said, her voice unsteady.

“I am,” he replied with a smile.

“By accident? Or is it yet another coincidence?”

“Another coincidence?”

“Yes...my cousin Mr Collins arrived two days ago. He happens to be the clergyman for the parish of Hunsford, which is under your aunt’s patronage.”

“Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

“Yes.”

“My aunt wrote to me of a new clergyman she is apparently very pleased with. That he is your cousin is indeed quite a strange coincidence.”

“You should be warned that Mr Collins has discovered your presence here and is overjoyed at the prospect of making your acquaintance. I wonder whether you will be pleased or irritated to meet him.”

“I doubt I shall experience either sentiment at a mere introduction. Why would I?”

“Mr Collins is exceedingly skilful at offering compliments and at worshipping certain people. Your aunt is the main recipient of his adoration, and you might be the second.”

“Oh...now I understand why Lady Catherine speaks so highly of him.” Mr Darcy smiled. “I assume I shall be irritated by the introduction, in that case.”

“You have not answered my question yet, sir.”

“Forgive me, what was the question?”

“Whether you are here at this early hour by accident or due to another coincidence.”

“Neither. I came with the hope of meeting you, either on your walk or perhaps later, when I intend to pay Mr Bennet a visit.”

“Oh...” She was surprised by his straight answer. “Is there anything particular that you wish to speak to me about?”

“Yes, though I am not sure I should take such liberties, considering the newness of friendship. Forgive me — will you allow me to call it that?”

“Of course...” she answered, now utterly dumbfounded. He had come to talk to her? On what possible subject? And he considered them to be friends, after they had only spoken a few times? What could he have to tell her that might be considered taking liberties?

“Mr Darcy, we hardly know each other, but I trust you will not open an improper conversation. So please speak freely since you seem agitated.”

“I am... I was told yesterday you met someone. A certain George Wickham.”

“Oh...” That, she did not expect. “Yes, we were introduced to Colonel Forster and his wife, as well as Mr Denny and Mr Wickham.”

He paced around a little, puzzling Elizabeth even more. “Sir, it is cold, and we shall freeze if we delay this conversation too long. What are your concerns regarding Mr Wickham? You should know he mentioned to me that you have been acquainted for a long time.”

“Ah...he did not lose any time in telling his stories. Usually, it takes him a few days, at least.”

“Usually?”

“Yes. He usually complains about how unfairly I treated him and how I condemned him to poverty, disregarding my father’s wishes. That is the tale he repeats at every opportunity.”

“Oh...I see...” Elizabeth whispered. “He told me something of that sort.”

“Miss Bennet, I shall try not to contradict him, because I am aware you have no reason to trust my word over his. Wickham’s attempts to disparage me have been too

many to hurt me any longer.

I shall only be so bold as to warn you to be prudent in his presence.

You and your sisters. George Wickham's charming manners help him to make friends easily, but he should not be trusted. ”

“Mr Darcy, this is quite... I understand there are some unresolved matters between you and Mr Wickham, but I do not feel it is my place to discuss them with either of you. I only hope I am wise enough to show decency and prudence when it comes to any man at the beginning of our acquaintance.”

“I am sure you are, and I trust you will seek proof before believing any accusations made by me, Wickham, or anyone else. I am more concerned about your younger sisters — or any other young woman who might be easily impressed by charming manners.”

Elizabeth stared at him, blinking a few times, then her cheeks heated. Such a conversation between them was certainly not proper.

“Forgive me if I have said more than I should.”

“I admit being surprised. But I thank you for being thoughtful enough to open this uncomfortable conversation. I hope you have sound evidence for such statements.”

“Sadly, I do. I am very closely acquainted with Wickham's dishonourable actions.”

He looked affected by the meaning of his words, and Elizabeth was confused for a few moments, then immediately felt cold shivers up her spine. Could it be? Should she dare to enquire further?

“What I wished to tell you is that I am not certain of Wickham’s true intentions in joining the regiment, so I shall not warn your father or anyone else.

Not yet. I still pray that Wickham will change his habits and find an honourable way of making a living, as my father intended for him.

I hope that perhaps he has joined the militia to improve his life. But I still wished to warn you...”

“Thank you, sir.”

They were silent for a little while, as if pondering whether to continue the conversation or leave — as they should.

“Mr Darcy, since we are talking openly, there is something I have long wished to ask you. I mean, I have wished it for a few days, at least.” She smiled at him.

“Please ask.”

“I am a little bit puzzled. When we first met, regardless of your reasons, you were not impressed by me, nor by my family. I could see your reproachful glances at my mother and my younger sisters at the assembly. Then, a few days later, you called on us, spent time with my father, and you showed me attentions usually appropriate to friends. And that was before we began to speak about our love for animals.”

“I shall answer, of course, but I might upset you even more.”

“I doubt it. I prefer an honest answer to uncertainty.”

“Very well. I shall not deny that at first, I disapproved of some of your mother’s and younger sisters’ behaviour at the assembly. I fear I might resemble my aunt Lady

Catherine in this.”

He paused, and Elizabeth smiled. “Hearing people around me talking about it, I became aware that my rudeness had been publicly heard, and consequently I had exposed you to a most undeserved and unfair offence. And I felt ashamed of myself. The fact I refused to dance with you was not a joke for people to amuse themselves with. So I came to apologise.”

“Oh...as simple as that?”

“Yes...but then I found Mr Bennet’s company exceedingly pleasant. And yours too. And I met Mr Ash, who provided us with a most welcoming subject of conversation. How did I come to talk to you about my private life? I still wonder, but I do not regret it.”

He sounded genuine, his expression was light, and his eyes locked with hers. She quivered and assumed it was too cold for further conversation.

“I believe I should return home,” she said.

“Of course. Bingley intends to call at Longbourn later today. I would like to accompany him.”

“I would like that too,” she said, then immediately added, “My father will be happy to see you.”

She was about to leave when she suddenly turned to him again.

“Mr Darcy, I was thinking about coincidences... Your sister lost her cat and I found mine about two years ago.”



“Really? How interesting. I hope Milo was found by someone who has loved him as much as you love Mr Ash. Did I mention that for a long time I asked about every white and grey cat I happened to see? I always asked about its age, whether it was found or not, and I always looked for the white heart in the middle of his chest and the white spot on the back of his right leg. I would have recognised him anywhere.”

Elizabeth held her breath, and her heart began to race. She stared at him, speechless, although she had so many things to say. Surely such an extraordinary coincidence was not possible; besides, how could the cat have been lost in London then appeared in Ramsgate?

“What troubled me the most was that Milo was accustomed to going out with my sister, even though he did not particularly enjoy the sand and was positively afraid of water. But he would always follow Georgiana at a certain distance, and all the neighbours knew him very well.”

“Sand? Water?” Elizabeth whispered, bewildered, barely hearing her own voice. “Where was Milo lost?”

“In Ramsgate, where my sister used to spend her summers with her companion at that time.”

Without thinking properly about what she was doing, Elizabeth grabbed both of his arms, staring intently into his face. He looked at her, confused.

“Mr Darcy...I think... As incredible as it seems, I believe I have your sister’s cat. I believe Mr Ash is Milo.”

“What? How can that be? But how? When...?”

“I need a moment to compose myself. I admit I am utterly shocked,” she said,

withdrawing her hands, her voice trembling.

He gently put his arm around her in a gesture of friendly support and held her. She did not oppose it, only began to talk.

Slowly, she related to him the circumstances of saving Mr Ash. He listened while a tumult of feelings transfigured his face.

“This is extraordinary,” he finally said. “From your description, your cottage must have been on the opposite side of Ramsgate. There was no chance of us finding him.”

“We made enquiries at every house in the neighbourhood,” Elizabeth said. “We assumed someone might be looking for him and missing him, but we could not find who he belonged to. Then we had no other choice but to return to London, so I took him with me.”

“This is an extraordinary coincidence,” he repeated. “Truly amazing. My sister would call it a miracle.”

“I agree. It is beyond words.”

“But who could it be? Who could have taken Milo away from Georgiana with the intention of killing him? Georgiana was only thirteen years old. Who would hate an innocent child so much as to hurt her so horribly?”

“I thought it was horrifying even then, when I found Mr Ash. Knowing he belonged to a child is just dreadful.”

“It is...” he mumbled, as if suddenly his mind was occupied elsewhere.

“So...what should we do now?” Elizabeth asked.

“Do? I trust you will continue to take good care of Milo as you have all this time. He could not be in better hands. I shall tell Georgiana... She will be so happy and relieved to know he is safe and happy. Truly a miracle, which will hopefully help her recover...”

“Recover? Is Miss Darcy unwell?” Elizabeth enquired.

“Miss Bennet, I am very sorry that I cannot stay longer. I must leave now. There is something of great importance I must take care of. Thank you for telling me...and for saving Milo.”

With that, he mounted in haste and departed at a gallop, while Elizabeth stared after him until he disappeared from sight.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

Elizabeth returned to the house, shivering. She went directly to her room and closed the door, disregarding her mother's repeated calls.

Mr Ash immediately jumped into her lap, and she hugged him tearfully. Such a tight embrace was not exactly to the cat's liking, so he mewed, demanding to be released.

"You sweet boy," she whispered, stroking him.

So the unthinkable had actually happened: Mr Ash had turned out to be Miss Darcy's lost cat — an unthinkable coincidence that might change many lives.

But there was much more drama behind the story that Elizabeth hardly dared to consider.

Mr Darcy's warning about Mr Wickham, his mention that he was closely acquainted with Mr Wickham's dishonourable behaviour, was a hint that the past behind their disagreements was deeper and more tormenting than either of them had revealed so far.

To believe either of them, she would need evidence, as Mr Darcy had implied.

She was determined to request as much from Mr Wickham at the first opportunity.

Of course, he was not obliged to indulge her, but since he had been the one to open the subject with her, he should expect further enquiry.

Besides Mr Ash's story, Elizabeth was troubled by Mr Darcy's confession regarding

herself.

The more she thought about his words, the more they sounded as if he had confessed a sort of admiration for her, which was difficult to believe and even more to understand.

Surely a man like Mr Darcy could not have serious designs on her.

Their situations in life were so utterly different that it made any possible connection — other than a friendship — impossible to conceive.

She finally joined the family for breakfast, her hair still in some disorder and with little appetite.

Mr Collins met her with his large smile, which he probably considered charming, and Elizabeth felt even less inclined to eat.

“Lizzy, where have you been? I have been calling for you!” Mrs Bennet asked.

“I went for a walk, Mama.”

“Who were you talking to, Lizzy?” Lydia asked.

“Talking?” she repeated, sipping her tea.

“Yes, you were talking to a man. Was it Mr Darcy? I believe it was.”

“Mr Darcy?” Mrs Bennet repeated.

“Yes, Mama. Mr Darcy was taking a morning ride, and we happened to meet. He enquired about Papa and about you all, and that was it.”

“How strange that Lizzy met Mr Darcy alone in the woodland,” Lydia said, chuckling. “How funny it would be if Mr Darcy turned out to be Lizzy’s suitor?”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth cried, hot with mortification. “How dare you say that?”

“Why not? What would you say if I sneaked out of the house to meet a man? An officer, maybe? Perhaps even Mr Wickham — there is nobody more handsome than him!” Lydia and Kitty laughed loudly; Mrs Bennet shook her head in a poor attempt at scolding, laughing too.

“Lydia, do not tease your sister,” Mrs Bennet said. “We all know a man like Mr Darcy would never be her suitor. But you must admit it is a little strange that he keeps coming here. If not for Lizzy, he must come either for your father or for the cat — they seem to like each other.”

“Lydia, Mrs Bennet, enough! You should be honoured that a man like Mr Darcy calls on me. He was so generous as to lend me some truly valuable books. He is a man of consequence with whom you should not be trifling. I will not have it!”

Their father’s harsh rebuke silenced the ladies, but Mr Collins continued.

“Indeed, Mr Darcy is not the sort of man to make jokes about,” the clergyman said, frowning as he looked at them all.

“He is one of the most remarkable young men this country has, as Lady Catherine has pointed out many times. He cannot be anyone’s suitor — he is meant to marry someone who is his equal in fortune and connections. ”

Mr Collins paused briefly after this outburst of praise, then continued, “And you, Cousin Elizabeth, should not walk alone or meet any man without a chaperon. It is highly improper for a respectable young woman. Lady Catherine always insists upon

the importance of following the rules of decorum.”

“Mr Collins, I have taken walks about the area, alone, since I was a child. I shall not change my habit because someone entirely unconnected with me disapproves of it. I find nothing improper in enjoying a little exercise,” she replied coldly, causing a change in Mr Collins’s countenance.

“Lizzy! Mind your words,” Mrs Bennet scolded her.

“I am sorry if my telling the truth upsets you, Mama. Please excuse me. I am not feeling well. I hardly slept at all last night, and I have a headache.”

“Lizzy, we are going to Meryton. Are you not coming with us?”

“No, thank you. I hope you have an enjoyable time.”

She hurried to her room and threw herself onto the bed, tormented and with a strange desire to cry. She heard Jane entering, but she pretended she was sleeping. Her attempt to put her thoughts in order failed, and her tumult increased.

The fact that Lydia had made such poor jokes that could have turned into harmful rumours affected her less than the revelation that Mr Collins was right: Mr Darcy was certainly meant to marry someone who was his equal.

Why would she even be troubled about that?

How foolish could she be to even assume anything more?

Lydia had called him her suitor as a joke, and only a simpleton would take such a thing in earnest.

She felt Mr Ash crawl onto the bed and curl up next to her, and she stroked him until he began purring. What would happen to him? Very likely Mr Darcy would ask her to return him to his sister. He had not said as much, but that would be the honourable way to end the story.

A while later, another knock startled her.

“Lizzy, dearest, you fell asleep after all. I hope you feel better.”

“A little bit, yes.”

“Lydia and Kitty went to Meryton. Mr Collins accompanied them.”

“Good.”

“Lizzy, is something wrong, dearest? You have not been yourself lately. Are you ill?”

“No, not at all,” she replied, smiling reassuringly at her worried sister. “I am perfectly well. I just found out something most extraordinary, but please, do not share it with anyone yet. And I mean anyone — not even your Mr Bingley.”

“Lizzy, do not tease me! Tell me what has happened.”

“It turns out that Mr Ash is Miss Darcy’s lost cat, Milo.” The brief statement left Jane confused and speechless, just as Elizabeth had expected. She requested an explanation, and Elizabeth revealed to her sister all the details of the discovery.

“Dear Lizzy, this is an extraordinary coincidence,” Jane stated at the end.

“Those are the exact words that Mr Darcy and I kept using.”



“So what will happen now?”

“I am not certain. He said he trusted I would continue to take good care of Mr Ash. And that he would inform Miss Darcy.”

“Poor Miss Darcy will be so happy with the news! But she might want her cat back.”

“She might. If that is the case, I shall ask to see how Mr Ash reconciles with her. I shall not just give him away, regardless of how tragic his loss was.”

“But Lizzy, did Mr Darcy not know who might have done such a horrible thing?”

“He seemed shocked, and then he suddenly left. He said he had urgent business to attend to. I am not certain what he suspects and what will happen.”

“Lizzy, may I ask...did Mr Darcy come specifically to talk to you?”

“Yes,” she admitted after a brief hesitation. “But he is certainly not my suitor. Such an assumption is ridiculous.”

“You should not be upset by Lydia’s jokes, Lizzy.”

“I might not be, but Mr Darcy would certainly not take such mockery as a joke. And Mr Collins was there to hear it — what could be more embarrassing?”

Even Jane’s attempts failed to comfort Elizabeth, but she continued to try until Mary came to inform them that Mr Bingley was in the drawing room and Mrs Bennet had asked for Jane.

The two of them went down together, Elizabeth’s heart racing restlessly, expecting to see Mr Darcy.

But his friend was alone. Greetings were exchanged, and the guest said, “Mr Bennet, Darcy asked me to pass you this note. He had to return to London urgently on some pressing matter. Oh, and Miss Elizabeth, he asked me to tell you to send Mr Ash his regards. I have to say, I never imagined Darcy to be so fond of animals.”

Mr Bennet took the note, while Elizabeth, feeling unsteady on her feet, sat. He had left? But only a few hours ago he had said he would call on them. What urgent matter could have changed his plans so suddenly?

“Mr Darcy’s note said I can keep the books until he returns and that he will bring me some more from his library,” Mr Bennet said with a large, satisfied smile.

Elizabeth was still in a perturbed state of mind, but even so, she understood Mr Darcy had clearly indicated his intention to return.

Whether he had done so for her father’s sake or hers, she did not dare assume.

For the rest of the day, Elizabeth blamed a headache and spent her time in her chamber, thinking about Mr Darcy, failing to draw a clear image of his character or to make sense of his actions.

Over the next few days, Elizabeth and Jane visited their friend Charlotte Lucas on two occasions, and each time Mr Collins accompanied them.

He and Sir William seemed to have become good friends, which gave both Elizabeth and Mr Bennet some well-deserved relief.

On one visit, the officers were also there, and Mr Wickham seemed exceedingly pleased to see Elizabeth.

He asked permission to sit next to her, which she reluctantly agreed to.

After a neutral beginning to the conversation, he said, “I hear Darcy left Hertfordshire unexpectedly. I wonder if my presence pushed him away. Do you happen to know the reason, Miss Bennet?”

“How could I know, sir? Mr Darcy’s affairs are completely unknown to me.”

“Rumours say Mr Bingley is hosting a ball. Perhaps that is why Darcy ran away. He would do anything to avoid dancing,” he attempted to joke, and Elizabeth returned a forced smile.

“Or perhaps he has some business related to his estate or his sister. I hear he is as good a landlord as he is a brother,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes, perhaps...”

“I assume you are acquainted with Miss Darcy?” she enquired.

“Very much so. I have known her since she was born. She was a sweet, lovely child, and she loved me very much. But she grew up to be as proud and arrogant as her brother.”

Elizabeth gazed at him warily. “Did she? But I heard she is about fifteen years old, the same age as my sister Lydia. I wonder how proud and arrogant she could be at that age.”

“Well, she is, especially with those beneath her. Darcy must have taught her well.”

“Have you seen her recently?”

“No...yes, this summer, but only briefly.”

“I see...”

“Speaking about the ball, I hope you will grant me the favour of a set, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Gladly, Mr Wickham.”

He then departed, while Elizabeth experienced another moment of confusion. Mr Wickham’s description of Miss Darcy was completely different from her brother’s; one of the two men was either lying or was a poor judge of character.

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Days passed, and Mr Bennet finished reading Mr Darcy’s books; he loaned them to Elizabeth and Mary, wondering when Mr Darcy would return with more, but there was no news about the gentleman.

From one of their usual visits to Meryton, Lydia and Kitty returned in the company of Mr Denny and Mr Wickham.

At their entrance, Jane was working on her embroidery, while Elizabeth was reading by the window, with Mr Ash sleeping on her lap.

The two officers bowed politely to the ladies, then Mr Ash suddenly jumped to his feet, arched his back, and began to hiss and spit at them.

Before anyone could intervene, Mr Ash jumped towards the two men, but he landed on a chair, then fell to the ground.

“What on earth...?” Mrs Bennet cried. “Lizzy, take that wild cat out! Upon my word, I shall kill him before he kills someone else!”

“I am truly sorry. Something must have scared him for him to respond in such a way,” Elizabeth said, addressing the guests as she struggled to catch the cat.

“I have told you many times that that cat cannot be trusted, Lizzy! What if he scratches our guests? You must not allow him in company again!”

“Yes, Mama,” Elizabeth agreed simply to end the conversation.

Holding the cat in her arms, she took him to her room, but he seemed unable to calm down.

He was clearly agitated, miaowing and spitting as he paced about the room.

She had not seen him in such a state since the night she had saved him from the sea.

She closed the windows carefully, then left the room, allowing him time to calm down.

In the drawing room, an animated conversation was being held, which she tried to join.

The officers’ visit did not last long, and they were invited to call again soon.

When Elizabeth returned to Mr Ash, he was still restless and would only drink a little bit of milk.

It was several more hours before he fell asleep, but during the night his agitation returned.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

Two more days passed before Mr Ash seemed to regain his usual calm.

Mr Bingley kept his word and began the preparations for the ball while calling at Longbourn every other day.

In Meryton, every event was centred around the officers of the regiment.

In her visits to the town, Elizabeth met Mr Wickham again.

He did not resume the conversation about Mr Darcy, but he showed Elizabeth a peculiar partiality, which puzzled her exceedingly.

Although prudent and restrained with him, Elizabeth could not deny that Mr Wickham was the most pleasant gentleman she had met.

His handsome figure matched his easy manners, his smile was charming, and he seemed to know exactly what to say to please.

Everybody in the neighbourhood admired him, and Elizabeth seemed to be the recipient of his attentions.

She was somehow flattered but not impressed.

Mr Darcy's warning kept her alert, but even without it, there was something in Mr Wickham's small gestures that concerned her.

In a certain way, he appeared to be too much.

Just like Mr Collins's tendency to praise Lady Catherine and Rosings Park, Mr Wickham was too pleasant, a notion that Elizabeth could hardly explain even to herself.

His company was delightful, yet she did not enjoy it.

And his constant attention towards her — for which Lydia declared every woman in Meryton was jealous of Elizabeth — soon became tiresome.

She was tempted to keep her distance from him, but curiosity defeated her common sense.

Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy had made some significant accusations towards each other, and she was determined to discover where the truth lay.

She attempted to ask him a few times, but he seemed to deliberately change the subject.

“Lizzy, I hope you will allow us to dance with Mr Wickham at the ball too,” Lydia said one evening when they were gathered in the drawing room before dinner.

“You have taken all his attention. It is not fair! You had Mr Darcy courting you, and now you have Mr Collins and Mr Wickham! How do you have so many suitors all of a sudden?”

As silly as the statement was, Elizabeth would have been amused if she had not spotted Mr Collins staring at them from the doorway, his countenance horrified. Her cheeks heated in mortification.

“I shall have dinner with Sir William at Lucas Lodge tonight,” the clergyman declared, then hurried out before anyone had time to comment.

Mr Wickham and Mr Denny returned at Longbourn for a second visit when Elizabeth, Jane, and Mr Bingley were taking a stroll in the garden.

Elizabeth was trying to allow her sister and her suitor some privacy so was walking some distance behind them, with Mr Ash following her.

She heard Lydia calling, and when she turned, she noticed her younger sisters waving to her, with the two officers at their side.

Mr Ash's mewing startled her; but before she had time to respond, the cat jumped directly onto Mr Wickham's chest, emitting a deep growl.

The officer struggled to free himself from the animal's claws, but finally he managed to grasp him and throw him to the ground, but the scratches remained visible on the officer's handsome face.

"Damn cat!" he mumbled, rubbing his cheek.

"Dear Lord, I am so sorry!" Elizabeth whispered. "Please let me help you!" She took out her handkerchief and gently tried to remove the spots of blood that had appeared.

"It is only a superficial scratch. It will heal quickly. I am so sorry..." Elizabeth mumbled.

Jane and Mr Bingley approached too, while Lydia and Kitty were fawning over their favourite officer.

"Do not worry, Miss Elizabeth. Wickham will not die from a mere scratch," Mr Denny said, laughing. "I am sure he has suffered worse scratches, and not all from cats!"



Mr Wickham smiled too. “Yes, do not worry, Miss Elizabeth. I am not fond of cats, and probably the feeling is mutual. But for this, you owe me a second set at the ball.”

“Gladly,” she answered. “I am truly very sorry. I really cannot understand what happened to him.”

“He is insane — that is what happened to him,” Lydia interjected. “The only man he seems to like is Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth felt disconcerted as she tried to conjure a reply, but Mr Bingley responded first.

“It must be because his sister had a cat just like that. He purchased the animal for her a few years ago. He told me the first day we called at Longbourn that he was surprised by the likeness.”

“That cat was a little bit darker in colour and certainly not so wild,” Mr Wickham responded absently while brushing the fur from his coat.

Elizabeth stood still, gazing at him; he looked up, and a shade of distress passed over his face.

“I know because I saw that cat once...a long time ago. But I do not remember it well.”

They all returned to the house together, but the officers refused to enter; Mr Wickham recalled he had a prior engagement and took a hasty farewell.

A storm of thoughts was spinning in Elizabeth’s head.

She did not even dare to try to connect them, but they seemed to pull together and

solve the puzzle by themselves.

Could it be true? Or was she assuming too much?

After all, Mr Ash had been aggressive in the past, but not in such an extreme manner.

Could he have attacked Mr Wickham on purpose?

Could he have been the man who had hurt him?

Even if he was, could a cat remember his attacker and hold a grudge for so long?  
Surely not.

And Mr Wickham — there was such an appearance of goodness in his face!

Even if he had somehow acted inappropriately in the past, was he capable of harming a girl's beloved pet?

Why would he do such a thing? What could he have against the cat or against Miss Darcy?

Everything seemed an enormous mystery that Elizabeth did not dare to look at too closely.

But if Mr Wickham was truly capable of such a vicious act, he must be a dreadful and dangerous man who should be avoided and even feared.

What was she to do? Could she tell her father about Mr Darcy's warning?

She could not possibly mention her suspicions about the cat to anyone, as even her father would question her sanity.

Perhaps she should ask Mr Bingley to write Mr Darcy a few words from her, something that only he would understand.

If he returned, she could ask for his advice; he would surely know what the best course of action would be.

Back in the house, Lydia related to Mrs Bennet all the details of Mr Ash's attack, setting off a flurry of whining, cries, and curses against the cat.

Then suddenly, Mr Bingley removed himself from their presence and returned a few minutes later with their father.

"My dear," Mr Bennet addressed his wife, who was still grumbling, "in case you have finished mourning Mr Wickham being scratched by a cat, I have a bit of news to share. Mr Bingley just asked for my blessing to marry your daughter Jane. That is all — now you may continue whining." With that, Mr Bennet returned to his library, far from the din of his wife's cries of joy and disbelief.

That evening and the following day, Mrs Bennet cared for nothing else. Having her daughter happily married to such a handsome, amiable man had been her lifelong dream, and it would now finally be fulfilled.

However, when Mrs Phillips called, she brought two pieces of disturbing news.

One was that the whole of Meryton was appalled by Mr Wickham being attacked by Lizzy's cat.

And the second was that Mr Collins had proposed to Charlotte Lucas, and they were to marry in six weeks.

Both reports provided Mrs Bennet with reasons to scold Elizabeth for ruining her

chances of marriage and to remind her once again that she would end up a spinster.

“You had two suitors, and now you have lost both of them. One of them was scared away by your wild cat and the other by your wild temper! Well, missy, you will see when you are old and end up homeless. Then you may spend the rest of your life with just cats!”

There was no use in convincing Mrs Bennet to see reason, so Elizabeth did not even attempt it.

Jane masterfully drew her mother’s attention to other, more pleasant, events, reminding her that Mr Bingley would officially announce the engagement at the ball.

Furthermore, the gentleman had asked Mrs Bennet to come to Netherfield and supervise the preparations, a prospect that flattered and delighted her beyond anything else.

Two days prior to the ball, Mr Darcy returned unexpectedly; he appeared at Longbourn when the family and Mr Bingley were dining together.

Mr Bingley and Mr Bennet immediately invited him to join them, and he sat to Mr Bennet’s right. From there, he threw repeated glances at Elizabeth, who could not remember when she had ever felt so cold and so hot at the same time.

Mr Bingley lost not a moment in informing him about the engagement, and congratulations ran freely during the evening.

Mr Darcy suggested that Mr Bingley procure a common licence, and the thought that her daughter might marry before Charlotte Lucas was like sweet palliation to Mrs Bennet’s distress at not having longer to make the arrangements.

Elizabeth had no time to speak to Mr Darcy privately, but he stole a moment near the end of the evening and asked, “Miss Elizabeth, do you think this cold weather will still deem it appropriate to take a morning ride?”

She felt her fingers and lips trembling as she replied, “Very much so. I still enjoy a morning walk to my favourite piece of woodland whenever I have the opportunity.”

With that, he returned to Mr Bennet and Mr Bingley, while Elizabeth began to count the hours till morning.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 7:15 am*

Dawn had not yet broken when Elizabeth began to dress.

She knew it was too early, but she could not lie in bed any longer.

Mr Ash opened one eye and looked at her but refused to move.

Elizabeth closed the door slowly and stepped carefully down the stairs so as not to wake anyone.

The last thing she wanted was to have to give explanations for her plans.

She left the house in relative darkness; a heavy mist made it hard to see even inches away, but she knew the path even in the dark.

She walked carefully so as not to fall. It would not do to present herself to Mr Darcy covered in dirt.

What could she tell him? What did he want to tell her, since he had been the one to suggest the morning meeting?

She would certainly reveal her suspicions about Mr Wickham; the rest, she had better not presume, nor set any expectations.

With little light yet to guide her way, she let out a fearful cry when she suddenly happened upon the outline of a man, much sooner than she expected.

“Miss Bennet, I am very sorry that I scared you.”

“Mr Darcy! I was going to my usual place. I expected we would meet there.”

“We should have. I left my horse there but moved closer to the house because of this mist. Would you care to take my arm?”

“Yes, thank you,” she answered, relieved that he could not see her hot cheeks. “Mr Darcy, there is an urgent matter we should discuss before going further. I believe...I suspect Mr Wickham was the one who stole Mr Ash...Milo...and tried to drown him.”

“May I ask how you reached such a conclusion?” he answered in a strangely calm voice.

“I spoke to Mr Wickham a few times while you were away. And he visited us twice... Mr Ash attacked him each time. Then Mr Bingley mentioned your sister had a similar cat, and Mr Wickham replied that it was a darker colour and not so wild.”

“Very perceptive of you. You are right, of course.”

“I am right? Are you sure?”

“Yes...I have the confirmation from the person who plotted with him. A Mrs Younge, my sister’s old companion. A woman who proved to me I can be a terrible judge of character.”

“Oh...”

“The discussion with you brought back some details that I had since forgotten. After I left Netherfield, I went directly to search for Mrs Younge. She first denied it, but she had no other choice but to tell me the truth. She was the one who caught Milo and handed him to Wickham.”

“But why? How is that possible? Is the woman out of her mind?”

“For revenge... Not hers, but Wickham’s. She was only a weak tool in his hands.

It was shortly after Wickham came to me demanding I should give him the living, and I refused.

When I give you all the details, I hope you will not accuse me of unfair treatment.

You see, Miss Bennet, George Wickham was the son of a worthy and loyal man who had managed Pemberley successfully and honestly for many years.

My father held him in high esteem and showed his appreciation by taking his son under his wing... ”

Mr Darcy continued to speak in a low voice.

Elizabeth listened with amazement. Mr Wickham’s lack of honour, his deceptive nature, his insolence in demanding money and then returning to demand even more cause her to feel nauseous.

Even with Mr Darcy’s warning, she had never imagined Mr Wickham might possess such a dreadful character, and she realised she might have fallen into his trap of deception too.

“At that time, I had not yet forbidden him from seeing Georgiana, as she grew up with him and considered him a friend. He visited her occasionally. He knew I had purchased Milo for my sister to comfort her after our father’s death.

He knew she loved him dearly. So because I refused his demands, he chose this evil vengeance.



I never suspected it at the time because my dealings with Wickham were in London and Georgiana was at Ramsgate.

I never imagined he might concoct such an evil plan for no other reason than to cause me and my sister more suffering.

His revenge was on me, and he did not care who might be harmed in the process. ”

“I cannot believe it...how can it be...?”

“However, I am afraid the tale grows worse, and I must trust in your complete discretion, Miss Bennet. This past summer, Wickham crossed paths with my sister again, once more in Ramsgate and also with Mrs Younge’s assistance.

He insinuated himself with Georgiana and convinced her to elope with him...

If he had succeeded, his revenge would have been complete indeed.

Fortunately, I arrived just one day prior to the elopement, and she confessed everything to me.

You may imagine that I took every measure to ensure Wickham could never come near my family again.

Now, the only means of revenge at his disposal is to spread falsehoods about me and deceive innocent people for whatever advantage he might gain. ”

They had long reached their destination and were standing, facing each other. In utter astonishment, she struggled to speak, observing his grieved countenance. She slowly reached out her hand and, with a boldness that mortified her, gently stroked his face for an instant.

“I am very sorry,” she whispered. “What will you do now about that horrible man?”

“You remember when I said I still hoped one day Wickham would improve himself? The fact that he stole a cat and cruelly condemned it to death revealed the real danger beneath his vices. He hurt Georgiana once, then he tried to ruin her. He might be capable of worse if the opportunity arises.”

“I agree. So what is to be done?”

“Mrs Younge was set to leave the country when I spoke to her. Wickham will be arrested later today and thrown into debtors’ prison.

Afterwards, he will be expelled from the country too.

I shall not take the risk of allowing him to plot freely against my family.

I should have done this a long time ago. ”

“Perhaps, but your heart was better than his, and your character so noble that you gave him more chances. Now he deserves nothing more.”

“Yes. It will all be over by tomorrow. You should return to Longbourn now, Miss Bennet. It is very cold. I shall call on your father later, with Bingley. This time nothing will interfere, I assure you.”

“I shall look forward to your visit with pleasure, sir. And so will my father.”

“I brought him more books.”

“He will be delighted. Mr Darcy, I forgot to ask, what did Miss Darcy say about Milo?”

“She doubted me...then she cried. Then she laughed. I have not seen her laugh in a very long time.”

Elizabeth smiled, though her eyes were filled with tears.

“My sister will come to Netherfield as soon as Wickham is removed from Meryton. She greatly anticipates meeting you — and seeing Milo, of course.”

“That is wonderful. I am eager to make her acquaintance.”

“Miss Bennet, there is another matter of great importance that I wish to speak to you about. I pray you will forgive me if you find it inappropriate.”

“After everything we have talked about, I wonder what could possibly be inappropriate,” Elizabeth said, laughing through her tears.

“I received a strange letter from my aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Oh?”

“She wrote to express her disapproval about the outrageous report that I was your suitor,” he said, watching her attentively, a mischievous twist to the corner of his lips.

Elizabeth forgot to breathe, and a wave of heat exposed her mortification.

“Mr Darcy, I am so very sorry... Dear Lord, what shame! It must have been my ridiculous cousin Mr Collins. Lydia made a joke about it — a silly, poor joke — and the witless Mr Collins must have passed it on to Lady Catherine. I apologise deeply...”

“There is no need to apologise...quite the opposite,” he said, the smile widening on his face. She felt lost as to his meaning.

“You will have to be clearer, sir, as my mind is not as sharp as I would like it to be.”

“I assumed it had been a mistake — my aunt has a tendency to be wrong more often than she admits. At that time, I was not your suitor, but if you have no objections, I would like to be. Very much so.”

She held her breath, hoping he could not hear her heart hammering. Did he really say that?

“I have no objections, Mr Darcy,” she eventually managed to reply.

“Thank you. Now, as your suitor I must insist you return home immediately. I would not want you to catch a cold. And Miss Bennet?”

“Yes?”

“I hope you will remember to save me a set at the ball.”

“As a suitor, I believe you are entitled to choose which one you prefer, Mr Darcy,” she said with a raise of her brow, her heart now soaring as she returned home. She turned to look back at him a few times, but due to the mist, he quickly disappeared from her sight.

Elizabeth said not a word to her family; what could be said?

And how could she, when not even she could yet believe what had happened.

Mr Darcy wished to court her, which had seemed inconceivable a few weeks ago.

Just as inconceivable as the possibility that the cat she had found was the one Miss Darcy had lost. So many twists of fate that had completely changed her life in such a short while.

Since the gentlemen were expected to call much later in the day, Elizabeth and her sisters went into Meryton to make some small purchases.

An hour later, they were about to return home when they were stopped by Mr Denny and Mr Wickham.

The latter smiled and bowed to her with a familiarity that was not entirely proper.

His face still bore the marks of Mr Ash—Milo's claws, but he was all smiles, so Elizabeth presumed he had not yet heard about Mr Darcy's return.

As much as she tried to control her anger, Elizabeth failed. So she addressed him in a low voice, looking straight into his eyes.

“Mr Wickham, I am glad we met. I wished to inform you that I can no longer honour my promise to dance with you at the ball.”

“Really? May I ask why not, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Because a cat killer belongs in prison, not in a ballroom, and perhaps not even the prison is enough.”

He appeared so shocked that he paled and stepped away, then turned and left without another word. Elizabeth just smiled, watching him depart in haste. It was still too little for what that scoundrel deserved, but the worst was yet to come for him.

That very evening, while dining with Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy, the Bennet family received the astonishing news that Mr Wickham had been removed from the regiment and arrested.

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The arrest of Mr Wickham was one of the most shocking events Meryton had seen in a long time, and later on, the details of his deceptions, debts, and depravations shocked the people who, only a little while ago, had adored him.

However, other more pleasant events engaged people's attention; one of them was Mr Bingley's ball and the official announcement of his engagement, the details of which everybody had discovered a long time ago.

The second was the arrival of Miss Georgiana Darcy with her companion and her cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Not long after, the Gardiners arrived too and were invited to stay at Netherfield in greater comfort.

Soon after, a story began to circulate that Miss Elizabeth's cat was once lost by Miss Darcy — a story that many people doubted.

It was proved true when Miss Darcy was reunited with her beloved pet, and the young lady spent most of her time at Longbourn, with Elizabeth and the adored animal, which nobody accused of being wild any longer.

The cat was presumed to also be the reason why Mr Darcy — who never danced when he could avoid it — danced two sets at the ball with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, whom he had once called merely tolerable.

However, the greatest of all events, which nobody could have imagined or believed two months ago, happened the day after the ball.

The news of it was first heard at Longbourn, where Mrs Bennet truly fainted for the first time in her life, and soon spread around Meryton: Mr Darcy had proposed to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and they were engaged.

That event was debated for many months, long after the happy couple married.

There was no explanation for Mr Darcy's sudden change of heart except for the influence of that cat, who it was said must possess some strange powers.

A cat that had escaped from one lady to be found by another, only to be reunited with its first owner again two years and many miles later.

But the most important character in the story did not care for the rumours in the slightest.

Mr Ash — Milo — travelled from Longbourn to London immediately after the wedding, with Mr and Mrs Darcy as well as Miss Darcy. He finally found rest, peace, and comfort, splitting his time between Georgiana's and Elizabeth's laps.

However, once in London, from the Darcys' wedding night and for many nights following, Milo slept only in Georgiana's room.

During the day, Mr Ash — or Milo, as he was also often called — had the liberty to go anywhere in the house, but at night, the door of Elizabeth's apartment closed to him.

He mewed his opposition at times, but he was generally content to sleep on Georgiana's bed and live in her chamber whenever he wished.

After all, what more could a cat want than two mistresses to love him heartily and dearly and to comply with his every wish?

THE END