

Miss Bingley immediately fixed widened eyes on his face and fluttered her eyelashes.

“Pray, sir! Tell me who had inspired such reflections?”

How would she react to the truth? But if he were to stop her infatuation for him in its tracks, it must be done.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

An invisible hand seemed to push Miss Bingley in her middle and a thin hand came up to her mouth. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet!” She quickly rearranged her shoulders and her face. “I am all astonishment. How long has she been a favorite?” Her eyes glowed green with wickedness. “Pray, when am I to wish you joy?”

Her defense was to mock. So be it.

“That is exactly the question which I expected you to ask.” He directed his eyes to Miss Elizabeth again. “A lady’s imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment. I knew you would be wishing me joy.”

Miss Bingley came to stand beside him, her gloved hands tightly clasped together. “Nay, if you are so serious about it, I shall consider the matter as absolutely settled.”

The clatter of Mrs. Bennet’s laughter pierced the air. “You will have a charming mother-in-law, indeed, and of course she will be always at Pemberley with you.”

He listened to her with a façade of perfect indifference, but she did raise a legitimate problem. The young woman who was beginning to penetrate his heart and mind had vulgar relatives. Ah well, he was not so far gone in his admiration that he could no easily reverse his emotions.

His act of aloofness succeeded so well in persuading Miss Bingley of his indifference that she chose to entertain herself in this jocular manner; and as his continued composure convinced her that all was safe, her wit flowed along as she concocted further stories involving Miss Bennett’s younger sisters.