

*A Match of*  
**HER OWN**

A modern adaptation of  
Jane Austen's *Emma*

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*To Michael, Elizabeth, Lily, and Peter. I thank God every day He chose  
me for you.*



# One



Jared Knight couldn't keep his eyes off Victoria walking down the aisle in her pink bridesmaid's dress. Her long blonde hair hung in loose curls, and her cheeks glowed as she smiled at the people she passed on either side. When he finally caught her gaze, her lips twisted into a smirk. She gave him a quick wink, too fast for anyone else to see, and his heart skipped a beat.

*Do I have feelings for Victoria Wood?*

The thought hit him unexpectedly. He mulled over the question as Victoria's sister, Elizabeth, entered through the double doors. The minister carried on with the service, joining Elizabeth and Jared's brother, Mason, in matrimony. Jared made frequent glances at Victoria, attempting to get her attention again, but her gaze remained fixed on the bride and groom.

This was ridiculous. Victoria Wood was practically family now that their siblings were getting married. A younger sister-in-law, or something. He'd never considered how strange it was there was no term for the in-laws of one's siblings. Just trying to work out how they were connected bent his brain in a pretzel. They weren't related—that was the thing. He and Victoria weren't actually family, just friends. Good friends, at that. Over

the course of the courtship and engagement and wedding planning, two years in all, Jared and Victoria had spent a lot of time together.

But maybe he'd been developing feelings for her longer than he'd realized. Hadn't he felt his heart skip a beat when they'd laughed together at the rehearsal dinner? And didn't he feel a sense of ease and happiness with Victoria?

Giving his head a slight shake, Jared attempted to rid his mind of thoughts of Victoria. He was forgetting all the reasons he shouldn't have feelings for her. As much as he liked spending time with her, he'd seen how immature and self-centered she could be. She never meant any harm, but that was just it. She could be thoughtless and rude without even realizing what she was doing. No. He couldn't entertain romantic thoughts of Victoria Wood.

She was moving closer. All this time, he'd been trying to catch her eye, and now she was staring straight at him. He smiled back, but her eyes widened. He was supposed to be doing something. *Oh, right.*

Jared stepped forward and held out his arm for Victoria. Her hand hung in the crook of his elbow, warming his skin through his jacket sleeve. She prodded him gently, and Jared led her back down the aisle.

"You okay?" Victoria spoke through her teeth, somehow keeping a smile frozen on her face while she whispered to him.

"I'm fine." He didn't have her skill for subtlety, turning to face her.

Her head flicked slightly, and Jared remembered to look forward. He smiled just as he spotted a photographer pointing her camera toward them.

When they moved past the crowd, Jared turned to her again. "I think I'm just tired from last night." He'd stayed up late celebrating with his brother's friends the night before. That must be why his head felt light. Surely it had nothing to do with Victoria's closeness or the way her hair smelled like citrus.

"I hope you didn't have *too* much fun." Her brows lifted as she gave him an admonishing look.

Jared laughed. "We did enjoy ourselves, but we mostly stayed up talking." He held up his free hand, defending himself from her piercing stare. "Don't worry, Mason went to sleep at a reasonable hour."

"Good." Victoria nodded her head, then tugged his elbow. "Let's go. We're supposed to take pictures with the rest of the bridal party." They walked into a side room, and she let go of his arm, patting it. "I'm glad you had a nice time last night. Let's just hope you're able to stay awake for the reception."

He laughed at her joke, but she was already gone, talking to one of the other bridesmaids.

Rocking on his feet, Jared scanned the room. One of the groomsmen, Austin, approached him. "How long do you think these pictures will take?"

"No clue." Jared shrugged. He hadn't been informed of all the details of the day. Or, if he had, he didn't remember them.

Once most of the wedding guests had exited the church building, the pictures began, and he discovered the answer to Austin's question. One miserable hour. A whole hour of standing tall beside family members, groomsmen, grandparents, and cousins, in various arrangements. And all with a smile plastered on his face.

"Maybe try not to look like it hurts," Victoria whispered between poses.

"What are you talking about? This is my smile." He demonstrated, and she grimaced. He'd never been great at posing for pictures.

Two more shots and the photographer allowed them to step off the stage. "We're finished, right?" His stomach growled, emphasizing his desperation.

"We are, but Elizabeth and Mason have to stay for more portraits." Victoria picked up the fluffy layers of her dress and started out the back doors.

“Should we stick around? Give them some company?”

Victoria raised a single, perfect eyebrow. “What for?” She tossed her curls over her shoulder. “Come on, let’s get some shrimp before it’s all gone.”

“Need a ride?” Jared reached for the key fob in his pocket.

“Sure.” Victoria turned to the other bridesmaids. “Who needs a ride?”

Though his heart sank at the missed opportunity to spend some time alone with Victoria, Jared put on a smile and led the way to the car.

With every member of the bridal party in the car or accounted for, they pulled out of the church parking lot and drove the ten miles to the reception.

“Mason and Elizabeth sure went all out.” One of the bridesmaids said from the back. They’d just pulled up to the venue, a newly renovated building in downtown Fort Worth. Jared said a silent prayer of thanks that parking was free and readily available in a nearby structure.

“Well, they’ve both been saving for a long time, I’m sure. Elizabeth wanted her wedding to be perfect.” Victoria’s voice held an edge of defensiveness. “And why shouldn’t she?”

Once his mom’s SUV was parked, he held the door open for a gaggle of women in fluffy pink dresses to unload. His usual hybrid sedan wouldn’t have fit nearly as many bridesmaids, but it currently was with his parents and an elderly aunt. The logistics of a wedding could be maddening.

Whether she meant it or not, Victoria remained just out of reach the rest of the night. They spoke between rounds of appetizers, but he never got more than a few minutes alone with her. And the first dance—something he’d hoped to share with Victoria—was stolen from him. Austin snagged her before Jared could make his way over, and he ended up with someone he’d never met before.

“Hi, I’m Jared.” He held out his hand. “Sorry, I know I’m not the man you walked down the aisle with.”



She gave a small smile. “Miranda.” Tentatively, she took his hand, and they shared an awkwardly quiet and blessedly brief dance.

“It was nice to meet you, Miranda.” He ducked his head and made his way back to the table.

Before he’d eaten more than two bites of food, the wedding coordinator handed him a microphone. Time for his toast. Jared stood, his chair squeaking and drawing the attention of everyone around him.

“Hello—” his voice broke. Clearing his throat, he stole a quick glance at the bridal table. His brother grinned up at him, bolstering Jared’s confidence. He’d practiced his speech in front of the mirror a dozen times. But that wasn’t the same as standing in front of hundreds of people, mostly strangers.

“Thank you all for coming today to celebrate Elizabeth and Mason. I’m Jared, the brother of the groom.” As he turned to gesture behind him, he caught Victoria’s eye. She gave him a quick wink, jolting him back to attention. *You got this.*

“Mason and I had to share a room growing up, so I’d like to offer my sympathies to Elizabeth for what she’s about to get into. Of course, he’d probably tell you I’m the messy one.” The audience laughed just like he’d hoped they would.

“In fact, we once had such a big dustup over our shared space, Mason decided to move out. I’d been playing with his baseball cards or Batman action figure, or something.” He waved his hands in the air. “But Mason’d had enough and decided to permanently relocate ... to a fort he built out in the backyard. And it might’ve worked, too, if Mom hadn’t discovered her missing tablecloths hanging on some tree branches.”

There were many stories—all much funnier and much more embarrassing—that he’d considered telling. But this one was most appropriate.

Then he shared about the first time he met Elizabeth and how well the couple suited each other. “I knew from the first

time she beat Mason in a game of Spades—with me as her partner, by the way—that she was a keeper.”

At the end he said, “Unlike that fort—borne out of animosity and brotherly strife ...” He paused to allow for a chuckle. “I know the home you build together will be one made from love and trust. May God bless you with a strong home and a lifetime of joy.”

“Tough act to follow.” Victoria whispered in his ear as he handed off the microphone.

Her breath sent shivers down his spine, but he kept his smile steady. “You’ll be great.”

Victoria’s speech got more laughs, for sure. At one point, he caught some people wiping tears from their eyes. But he also saw Elizabeth’s cheeks turn bright pink as Victoria relayed the story of Elizabeth’s first date as a teenager. Jared’s own face burned in sympathy. Then she moved on to the story of meeting Mason.

“We were all thankful your first date with Mason went so well. I’m so glad I talked you into giving him a shot.” She turned to face the audience. “And wasn’t I right? He made the perfect boyfriend and is now the perfect husband. Congratulations, you two!”

Jared groaned inwardly. Victoria basically took credit for setting up the couple. Not at all how he remembered their courtship. It wouldn’t be appropriate for Elizabeth or Mason to correct her publicly now, and maybe they didn’t care, but he’d be upset if he were them.

That was the problem with Victoria. Tonight wasn’t an isolated incident—she pulled stunts like this all the time. Sure, she was charming, funny, and gorgeous. But she could also be selfish. He couldn’t date someone like her. Maybe someday, when she gained a little maturity, but not today. They were in completely different life stages—completely different worlds.



Victoria sipped the sparkling cider in her glass and surveyed the scene around her. Per her sister's wishes, the ballroom had been transformed into a winter wonderland, fitting for a December wedding. White spindly trees lined the walls. Silver snowflakes hung from the ceiling and twinkle lights glowed everywhere. There were even tiny lights inside glass jars on the tables. It looked like the Sugar Plum Fairy had worked her magic on the entire place, but Victoria knew the decor was all thanks to a team of professionals.

Victoria swiped at a tear. She couldn't afford to ruin her makeup, not even on the day of her sister's wedding. Not even when her mentor and guide and role-model was getting married and leaving her. Grabbing a tissue from her clutch, Victoria dabbed the corners of her eyes and focused on the scene around her.

Several couples twirled and swayed on the floor under glowing orbs. Victoria had taken her turn dancing, but none of the young men there interested her. She much preferred pulling the strings behind any romantic entanglements.

It really was lovely seeing a couple come together like Elizabeth and Mason. Despite her sadness over losing her sister, she was truly happy for them. She hadn't realized it at the time, but she'd been an instrumental part of their early relationship.

*I wonder if I could repeat my success.*

Come to think of it, she'd set up another couple at school recently. *Didn't I introduce Rob and Amanda?* And now they were spending Christmas break together. A smug smile formed on her lips as she pushed her shoulders back.

"Enjoying yourself?"

Victoria turned to see Jared standing beside her. "I am." At least, she was pretty sure she was. She took another sip of her drink, then gestured to the dance floor with her glass. "Why aren't you out there?"

"Actually—" Jared's expression brightened, but Victoria never

got to hear what he had to say because Elizabeth had joined them with her best friend, Miranda Smith.

“Hello, beautiful.” Victoria kissed her sister on the cheek, careful not to smudge her makeup. “Great party. Everything looks so magical.”

“Thanks.” Elizabeth beamed. Victoria had never seen her sister so peaceful. It was quite a contrast from her usual self—organized and uptight to the extreme. Elizabeth’s joy eased Victoria’s sadness a little. Although she hated to have her only sister leave, she was happy Elizabeth was in good hands with Mason. “I just wish Mom could be here to see it.”

“Me too.” Victoria didn’t have any recollection of her mother beyond a few fuzzy happy memories. But she knew it hurt Elizabeth to not have her here today. “She would be so proud of you.”

Her sister gave her another hug and sighed. Her face glowed with contentment. Victoria felt her happiness and sadness mixing together. The day was bittersweet for everyone, a joyful occasion full of endings and beginnings.

“Where’s your husband?”

“My ... oh, right.” Was that a blush on her sister’s cheeks? “Mason is mingling somewhere. I’ll go find him.”

“See you later.”

Elizabeth waved before heading across the room, leaving Miranda behind. The three of them—Victoria, Jared, and Miranda—stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“Nice to see you again, Miranda.” Jared spoke first, smiling warmly.

She nodded. “You too.”

“Miranda was my dance partner when you abandoned me to dance with Austin.” Jared answered the question forming in Victoria’s mind.

A surge of something unpleasant grew in her belly, but Victoria pushed it down by focusing on their new companion. “Elizabeth

tells me you're studying English." Before this weekend, Victoria hadn't seen Miranda in a couple of years. And they'd been so caught up in the wedding frenzy, there hadn't been much time to chat.

Miranda's eyes lit up behind the large lenses of her glasses. "British Literature. I'm studying female authors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries."

Biting her lip to keep from giggling, Victoria listened as Miranda waxed eloquent about the differences between authors published from 1790 to 1810, and those published from 1811 to 1830. In the nearly seven years she'd known her, she'd never heard so many words come out of that woman's mouth.

"Remind me how you and Elizabeth met?" Jared interjected, much to Victoria's relief. She'd successfully avoided taking any literature courses that required a massive Norton anthology and didn't plan to start now.

"We took a few classes together in undergrad and shared an apartment with some other girls our senior year."

Miranda was underselling her friendship with Elizabeth. They'd been inseparable most of college. Victoria wondered how Miranda felt about her sister's marriage. How would it change their relationship?

"Where do you live now?" Jared asked.

"I'm working toward a PhD in Chicago," she said. "But I grew up in Dallas."

"Oh, are your parents still there?"

Miranda frowned. "Sort of. They're actually overseas right now, visiting my brother's family."

"Will you join them for the holidays?" Victoria couldn't imagine spending Christmas alone. All thoughts of jealousy over Miranda and Jared's shared dance were forgotten now. A seed of an idea was forming.

"I'd planned to fly back to Chicago in the morning, but my flight was canceled." She twisted her lips in a wry smile. "I'm not sure if I have the economy to blame or bad weather."

Jared nodded. "I heard there's a big storm blowing through the north."

How he'd had time to pay attention to the weather when they were neck deep in wedding plans, Victoria couldn't understand. "So where are you spending the night tonight?"

Miranda took a deep breath.

"You can stay at our place! It's just Dad and me knocking around in that old house. Elizabeth is gone, and we have an empty guest suite." Elizabeth would want her to help take care of Miranda. Offering up a place to stay was the least she could do.

"Oh, I couldn't—" Miranda's eyes widened.

"Please. I insist." Victoria grabbed Miranda's hands, giving her sweetest pout. "You shouldn't be alone for Christmas. Please, stay with us."

Miranda's expression softened. "I suppose ... if it isn't too much trouble."

"Not at all." Victoria squeezed Miranda's hands in hers. "We're going to have so much fun."

Brightening, Miranda returned her smile. "Thanks, Victoria." She stood for a moment, smiling alternately at Victoria and Jared. "Well, I'm going to get some cake."

She shifted her feet a bit before taking off toward the refreshments.

"So ..." Jared turned to her, smiling.

Another idea occurred to Victoria. "You know, Miranda seems awfully lonely. She's so quiet and awkward. And I don't ever remember her having a boyfriend." She tapped her finger to her lips. "I wonder ..."

A grin spread across her face. If she could repeat the success she'd had with Elizabeth and Mason—and Amanda and Rob, and countless others she'd probably matched together—maybe she could help Miranda be happier. It would ease both of their troubles over losing Elizabeth.

"I bet I could find a nice guy for Miranda."

“What?” Jared’s brow wrinkled. “She’s only in town for Christmas, right?”

“That just makes the stakes more interesting.”

“What stakes?”

Victoria gripped Jared’s shoulder with her free hand. “I’m going to set Miranda up with someone. She’ll have a boyfriend by Christmas.”

“Wha—?”

“I think matchmaking is so much more fun than actually being in a relationship, don’t you?”

She raised her glass in a toast, but Jared didn’t reciprocate. Victoria sighed at him and sipped anyway. Men could be so clueless.