

The Man Who Loved Jane Austen

Prologue:

Chawton, Hampshire
May 12, 1810

The slender young woman hurrying along a lonely woodland path beyond the village of Chawton this night seemed heedless of the falling moisture that sprinkled her hair and dampened the shoulders of her light cloak.

It had rained in the afternoon, a hard spring shower that had passed over the wood in no more than ten minutes. And though the downpour hadn't lasted long enough to muddy the path that Jane now followed, the leaves of the overhanging trees were still shedding droplets that glittered like jewels in the cold moonlight.

As she moved through the silent wood Jane imagined the scandal that would erupt should a neighbor happen upon her in this lonely place. For she was a respectable young woman by any standard, the unmarried daughter of a clergyman with aristocratic family connections, and youngest sister to the owner of the great country house on which the village depended. Which circumstance rendered her midnight foray all the stranger. For Jane had never before dared or even considered an adventure such as the one on which she was now embarked.

Yet here she was, gliding wraithlike through the dark forest, en route to a clandestine meeting with a man -- a mysterious and possibly dangerous man -- whom she had known for scarcely five days. She prayed that he would be at the appointed spot, as he had promised. And she felt her heart thundering in her breast at the mere thought of what she had committed to share with him this night. She who had long since abandoned all hope of ever finding love.

She was 34 years old -- an unremarkable spinster who lived an unremarkable life in a house provided by her devoted brother and shared with an elder sister and their aged mother. And, until fewer than 24 hours ago, she had never known a lover's caress.

But last night that had changed. Now Jane wanted nothing more than to be again with the man. For he had reawakened her girlhood dreams of love and romance, all the lovely dreams she had so carefully preserved on countless sheets of neatly inscribed vellum that she kept hidden away in the deepest recesses of her closet.

Of course, she fully realized, going to meet him like this was madness. But then, she reminded herself, madness had been the hallmark of their brief but intense relationship, a relationship that had been doomed from the start. For she could not go with him and he could not stay.

And if they were found out, she knew to a certainty, scandal and disgrace would be her only reward.

But love knows not reason. And Jane did not care what consequences might ensue. For, in her mind, the risks she was taking to meet with her new found lover tonight were as nothing compared to the dread she felt, of slipping into her old age without ever having tasted love.

After a few more minutes she came to the edge of the wood which bounded a broad meadow. Covered now in swirls of mist frosted by the light of a near full moon, the grassy field had taken on an otherworldly look, like one of the fairy tale landscapes she was forever imagining in her dreams. At the end of the path she hovered like a frightened deer, huddling in a pool of darkness beneath the dripping trees, until he should appear.

Presently, she heard the drumming of muffled hoof beats from the far side of the meadow. Willing her joyously thudding heart to be still, Jane boldly detached herself from the sheltering shadows and advanced into the open, anxious not to waste a precious moment of the brief time they would have together.

Slowly a horseman emerged from the mist. Spying her moving through the grass, he altered the course of his great black steed to intercept her. Within seconds he reined to a halt beside her. His face was obscured beneath the brim of the tall hat he wore, and she ran forward to meet him as he dismounted. "I prayed you would come," she laughed, prepared to throw herself into his arms.

But instead of the joyous response she was anticipating, the rider nervously swept the tall hat from his head. The moonlight struck his plain, sun-reddened features and she saw to her mortification that he was not the one for whom she had so anxiously waited, but an awkward young servant named Simmons.

"Sorry, miss," the nervous messenger stammered, "the gentleman went away in a great hurry after the troops came. He had asked me to come and tell you if he could not get here himself tonight."

Jane felt herself flushing beneath the servant's questioning gaze. Her bitter disappointment at the broken rendezvous was overlaid by a sudden pang of fear. For young Simmons was a groom from her brother's stables, and she wondered how much he knew...or would tell.

"Oh... I see," she said, forcing her voice to remain calm, and wondering what motive the servant must be imagining had brought her to the lonely meadow at this ungodly hour. "Thank you, Simmons."

His unlined, honest features betraying no hint that he thought the situation odd or particularly scandalous, Simmons fumbled in the pocket of his greatcoat and produced a folded letter sealed with wax. "This is for you, miss," he stammered, bowing slightly and extending the letter to her.

"From him?" Abandoning all pretense of calm, Jane eagerly accepted the envelope and attempted to read the address in the dim light.

"No, miss. It's the letter you sent to him," Simmons replied. And in his voice Jane heard something that sounded like sympathy as he hurried to explain. "The gentleman had already gone before it could be gotten to him."

Simmons paused then, as if considering his next words carefully. "There was such a row up at the manor house," he finally continued. "Well, I thought you'd want to have your letter back..."

Jane tucked the letter into the folds of her cloak and looked up at him, realizing that in the groom she had found an ally who would not betray her indiscretion. "Thank you Simmons," she said again. "That was very thoughtful of you."

She hesitated awkwardly, aware that such loyalty should be rewarded. "I am afraid I have no money with me at the moment..." she began. But before she could suggest that she would have something for him on the morrow Simmons cut her off with a wave of one big work-hardened hand.

"Don't you worry, miss," the young groom assured her with dignity, "I didn't come here for money. The gentleman was very good to me while he was here." Then his broad features creased in a smile and in a gentler tone he asked, "Shall I see you home now, miss?"

"Thank you, no," Jane replied, the little catch in her voice promising that tears would very soon follow. "It's only a short walk. You have been very good."

Simmons bowed again, then, taking a step backward he put his tall hat on and climbed back onto the black horse. Once mounted he looked back down at Jane and leaned closer so she could hear. "I never met no one like him," he said softly. "He's the best gentleman I ever knew."

Jane nodded in silent agreement, feeling the hot tears welling up in her eyes and wondering what magic her mysterious lover had wrought to engender such regard on the part of this simple country lad. For it had suddenly occurred to her that Simmons was also at risk, both for having slipped away from her brother's manor at this late hour, as well as for having allowed himself to become an instrument in her conspiracy.

She had no time for further reflection, for the black horse was stamping its hooves, impatient now to be back in its warm stable. "Do you think the gentleman will ever come back again, miss?" Simmons's voice was a barely audible whisper above the snorting of the animal.

Jane slowly shook her head. "I fear he may not be able, Simmons," she replied. "You had better go now, before you are missed."

The servant straightened, touched the brim of his hat, then wheeled the horse around and rode away across the meadow. Jane watched him until he was once more swallowed up in the mist.

A bright tear ran down her cheek as she looked up at the lowering moon. "So this is how it is to end?" she asked the cloud streaked sky.

Turning to the wood, she ran into the trees and back along the moonlit path the way she had come. Soon the dark outlines of a large stone house appeared through the trees. Warm light

was shining from an upper window, and Jane knew that Cassandra had awakened and discovered her gone.

Making her way across the broad lawn at the rear of the house, Jane quietly let herself in through a low wooden door. Inside the kitchen the glow of embers in the fireplace provided the only light. Moving as quietly as possible across the flagged stone floor, Jane removed her cloak and hung it near the fireplace to dry. She took a candle in a copper holder from the mantle and lit it with a broom straw. Then, pausing just long enough to brush her tears away, she left the kitchen and walked through a dark hallway to the center of the house.

She had just reached the foot of the wide central staircase when she heard a footstep and saw the glimmering of another candle on the landing above.

"Jane, is that you?" Cassandra, her heavy plaits of golden hair falling about the shoulders of her nightgown, stood peering down into the dark stairwell, her soft features filled with concern.

"Yes, Cass, I am just coming up." Fixing a cheerful smile on her lips, Jane hurried upstairs. She reached the upper landing to find her older sister regarding her with frank amazement.

"Surely you have not been out again at this hour," Cassandra breathed. "It is well past midnight."

"I felt like walking in the moonlight," Jane replied, brushing past the astonished Cass and making quickly for the door to her room.

"The moonlight?" Cassandra, who could always tell when she was lying, moved to block her way, forcing Jane to look directly into her steady gray eyes. "Jane, what have you been up to?"

Jane shrugged, attempting to inject a carefree note into her voice. "I have heard it said that Lord Byron highly commends the moonlight, when he is courting the muse," she replied brightly.

"And I have heard that the wicked young lord goes abroad at night only to court ladies of dubious reputation," Cassandra retorted. "What have you been doing, sister?"

Once again Jane felt her tears threatening to burst forth. She shook her head stubbornly. "I have done nothing either very dubious or very wicked," she replied. And in her mind's eye she glimpsed the handsome features of the man she had gone to meet. "I was not given an opportunity," she murmured with regret.

Cassandra's mouth fell open. But before she could find adequate words to express her shock, Jane kissed her on the cheek and pushed past her. "Goodnight, Cass," she whispered as she reached the door to her room.

Cassandra's lined features softened and she regarded her younger sister with concern. "Dearest Jane, you know you can confide in me," she said softly. "Won't you tell me what has happened?"

"Oh Cass, I am not yet certain," Jane replied, feeling the salty wetness beginning to sting her cheeks. "Perhaps my foolish heart has been broken at last." She sniffled and managed a little smile. "I shall have to reflect on it and let you know in the morning."

Then without another word she entered her bedroom and firmly shut the door behind her, leaving Cassandra alone in the hallway to wonder.

Lit only by her single candle, the large cheerful room that Jane loved so well by day was now a warren of leaping shadows. They danced impishly across the flowered wallpaper and pooled deep in the corners behind the bed as she walked to her mirrored vanity by the fireplace. Placing the candle on the table, Jane sat at the table and began slowly taking down her elaborately curled hair, allowing the shining dark tresses to fall loose.

When she was done, she regarded her dim reflection in the mirror, deliberately raising one pale hand to touch the silvery looking glass with her fingertips. "Only one of us is real," she said quietly to that other Jane who sat gazing at her from the glass, "the other is but an illusion. The question is, which am I?"

Removing the undelivered letter from her gown, she placed it on the dressing table before her and stared down at the address she had so neatly written there a lifetime ago. She was startled from her reverie by an insistent knocking at the door.

"Jane, please do let me in," Cassandra entreated. "I will not sleep a wink until you have told me what has happened."

"What has happened?" Jane repeated in a voice so soft that only she could hear. "That, dear sister, is one thing that I will never tell you."

She scooped up the letter as Cassandra knocked again. "Jane!" she called, demanding now to be let in.

"Just a moment, Cass." With a heavy sigh Jane pushed back from the vanity, bowing to the inevitability of admitting her sister. Since they were both small children Cass had always been the one who had soothed her hurts and given her the courage to go on. That would never change, certainly not now that he was gone.

Picking up the letter, she looked quickly around the dimly lit room. "And what am I to do with this?" she wondered aloud. For she could not reveal its contents, even to Cass, nor did she dare destroy it because of the secret it contained.

Jane caught her own worried reflection looking back at her from the shimmering depths of the mirror as Cass's knocking grew louder.

Chapter One

New York City

Present Day

"Oh, now I do like this!" Eliza Knight exclaimed, though there was no one within earshot.

She brushed a thick layer of dust from the mirror of the scarred little vanity table and peered into the silvery glass. The sudden appearance of her own reflection startled her and she paused for a moment to regard the hazed image. The familiar face looking back at her was, she thought, if not exactly beautiful, then slightly exotic, with its high cheekbones, straight if somewhat narrow nose and full lips. Her dark eyes were, she confirmed, still her best feature, though she also liked her glossy black hair, despite the longish flyaway cut she'd let her hairdresser talk her into a couple of weeks before.

Grimacing at the hair, Eliza stepped back to take a better look at the old-fashioned rosewood dressing table. In the hour or so that she had been poking through the clutter of the shabby Westside antiques warehouse that was allegedly open only to "the Trade," the vanity was the only thing that had caught her eye. She had spied it just moments earlier, crammed between an art deco floor lamp and a Jetson's pink 1950's Formica coffee table, and had immediately felt herself drawn to it.

Taking her eyes from the damaged mirror, Eliza scanned the rows of dusty merchandise stretching off in every direction like a bad cubist painting. She finally spotted Jerry Shelburn three aisles away. He appeared to be taking stock of an ancient gasoline pump with a cracked glass top.

"Jerry," she called excitedly, "I want your opinion. Come over here and take a look at this!"

Jerry had gotten them admitted to the wholesaler's warehouse through one of his clients who ran a small freight forwarding business. Now he smiled good naturedly and waved back. He carefully replaced the brass nozzle on the gas pump before starting toward her, the round lenses of his wire framed glasses glittering like little moons beneath the cold fluorescents of the overhead fixtures.

Eliza sighed inwardly as she watched him picking his way through the maze of old furniture, noting the extraordinary care he took not to soil his Old Navy khakis and spotless cotton pullover. They had met two years earlier, through an artist friend of hers, when Eliza had been looking for someone to manage the small investment portfolio her father had left her. Jerry had turned out to be an excellent manager, increasing the value of her stocks by nearly 30% in the first year and then shrewdly using the capital to secure the down payment on the condo that also served as her studio, thus eliminating more than half the taxes she'd been paying as a renter.

Somehow while all of that was going on they had started dating and then, occasionally, sleeping together. So, Eliza supposed, technically anyway, they were a couple, though the relationship was definitely low maintenance on both sides. There had been a few times in recent months when she had felt that she and Jerry might progress to something more than weekly movies and shopping expeditions, but so far it hadn't happened.

Smiling inwardly, she consoled herself with the thought that at least he was a nice dependable friend, and that her net worth had never been higher.

Turning her attention back to the vanity table, Eliza dragged it out into the aisle and slowly ran her strong artist's hands over the marred top surface. Despite its numerous scratches,

the old wood felt comfortably warm to her touch. The slightly formal squared-off design vaguely reminded her of a Georgian piece she'd seen in one of her antique guidebooks, and she wondered how old it really was.

"So, what rare treasure have you uncovered?"

Eliza raised her eyes to the mirror and saw Jerry adjusting his glasses to peer over her shoulder.

"Look," she said, stepping away to afford him a clear view of the vanity, "isn't it adorable?"

"I thought you were looking for a floor lamp," he said, barely glancing at the table.

"I was," Eliza replied peevishly, "but I really like this. It's kind of charming, don't you think?"

"Hmm..." Frowning as if he'd just been served a piece of tainted fish, Jerry leaned over and examined a tiny pink sticker that Eliza hadn't noticed adhering to the side of the vanity. "At \$600 it's not that charming," he sniffed. "Besides, the mirror's a mess." Jerry straightened and gave her a patronizing wink. "As your investment counselor, I heartily recommend going with a lamp."

Chapter Two

Fresh from a scalding shower, swaddled in her threadbare old terry robe and with her hair wrapped in a towel, Eliza stepped barefoot into her bedroom and regarded the prized vanity, which looked right at home among the mismatched collection of antique furniture filling the room.

"I really want your honest opinion now," she said, turning to look at the figure sprawled carelessly across the colorful patchwork quilt covering her Victorian era four-poster bed. "Do you think I made an awful mistake?"

Wickham, an overweight gray tabby with a severe personality disorder, spread his considerable jaws wide and yawned to demonstrate his complete indifference to her question.

Not to be so easily deterred, Eliza scooped the cat up in her arms and crossed to the corner by the window, where Jerry had somewhat sullenly deposited the antique dressing table two hours earlier. The hazed rectangular mirror stood on the floor beside the table, leaning against the wall. After admiring the newly acquired pieces for a moment Eliza sank cross-legged onto the carpet before them, cradling the squirming cat in her lap.

"I think the whole problem with Jerry and our relationship," she explained to Wickham, "can be summed up in this table. Because when I look at it I see something warm and beautiful. But all Jerry sees is a piece of old furniture.

"You're a creature of discerning taste. What do you see, Wickham?"

Eliza smiled and scratched the special spot between Wickham's ears. The cat's yellow eyes rolled back in his head and he stiffened and moaned in ecstasy.

"My point exactly!" Eliza gloated. "Because, unlike you and me, Jerry has no soul, just a bottom line." She released her grip on Wickham, who leaped out of her lap and settled himself comfortably on the carpet.

"It is a lovely thing, though, isn't it, Wickham?" she asked, reaching to stroke the satiny finish of an unscarred table leg. "Of course," she added, "it's going to take a lot of cleaning up to make it presentable. But I'm sure it actually is very old."

The cat meowed and rubbed his head against her, hoping for another scratch, or perhaps hinting that he wouldn't mind a second helping of the tuna she'd dished out when she came home.

But Eliza was already busy removing the single drawer from the table. Setting it on the floor before her, she noticed that it was lined with faded pink wallpaper that still retained a faint floral pattern. Ignoring the liner, she turned the drawer around and examined the outside corners, which had been fitted together without nails.

"Look here, Wickham," she said, pointing excitedly to the wedged construction. "See these nice, slightly irregular dovetails holding the sides of the drawer together. That means they were all cut by hand. When I saw this in the warehouse, I knew the table must be old!"

Having thus spoken Eliza smiled ruefully, for though she was entirely correct about the dovetails, she had also exhausted virtually the entire store of knowledge she remembered from the NYU evening extension class she'd taken two years earlier on appraising antique furniture.

Nevertheless, she turned the drawer over to inspect the bottom, vaguely recalling something about being sure the wood colors matched or didn't match or something. The pink liner fluttered to the floor, coming to rest upside down on the carpet.

Interested at last, Wickham swatted at the crumbling paper. Eliza shooed him away and then stared in surprise at the liner. For adhering to its underside was another strip of yellowing paper densely covered in cramped black type.

"Look, Wickham, it's a piece of...old newspaper!" she exclaimed, squinting to read the oddly shaped and embellished letters. "Listen to this," she breathed, tracing with her index finger a heavier line of print bannered across the top of the sheet. "The Hampshire Chronicle, April 7th, 1810... My God, that was almost 200 years ago!"

Her attention now riveted by the partial sheet of ancient newsprint, Eliza carefully lifted it onto the top of the vanity and spent the next few minutes curiously poring over several densely packed columns of ads for gentlemen's best quality silk cravats, beneficial beef extracts, drayage and forwarding, whatever they might be, and a host of mysterious products with names like Gerlich's Female Potion, calibrated boiling thermometers and India rubber goods.

When finally her eyes tired of squinting at the strange old-fashioned print she gave the sturdy little table another cursory inspection. Then she knelt beside the mirror and stood it upright, noticing with some dismay that the silvered surface was, as Jerry had pointed out in the warehouse, badly hazed.

Cheerfully dismissing the hazing as enhancing the overall charm of the piece, she experimentally tilted the mirror toward her and was distressed to see that the wood backing on one side was pulling away from the frame. "Oh great! The backing seems to be warped," she murmured to the cat. "Now give me some support here, Wickham, I'd hate to have to admit that Jerry might have been right after all.

Wickham stretched and meowed.

"Thanks," Eliza grinned. "I needed that."

She pulled the mirror to her and turned it around, in order to get a better look at the damaged backing. To her relief, though, the visible gap appeared to be no more than six inches long. "Well, it's not as bad as I thought," she said. "I think it only needs to be re-glued." With her fingernail she experimentally lifted the edge of the backing from the mirror frame in an attempt to determine how far the separation extended. As she did so, something fell out of the mirror and landed on the carpet with a soft plop.

Attracted by the sudden motion, Wickham leaped onto the fallen object and hissed menacingly. Eliza shooed him away and stared at the thing in surprise. She slowly leaned the mirror back against the wall, then reached down and lifted the fallen object into the light.

She remained frozen on her knees for several seconds, gazing at her hand while she tried to reconstruct what had just happened. For she was holding a slim packet of thick sepia toned paper tied together like a Christmas package with a criss-cross of bright green ribbon.

"Good Lord," she whispered, letting her eyes dart back to the mirror and glimpsing her own puzzled expression.

Something swatted against her hand and she looked down to see Wickham resolutely batting at the end of the bright ribbon. Snatching her hand away from him, she got to her feet and examined the packet more closely. Held together by the broad ribbon, she saw, were two rectangles of folded paper. The one on top was smaller than the other and had been written across in reddish brown ink, the words obscured by the ribbon covering them.

"Letters!" she exclaimed.

Rising slowly to her feet, Eliza turned the packet over and saw that the larger of the two letters had been sealed with a blob of shiny red material that she guessed must be sealing wax, though it looked like no other wax she had ever seen, having more the consistency of brittle

plastic. Intrigued, she carefully untied the ribbon securing the packet, so that she could read the address on the top envelope.

"Miss Jane Austen, Chawton Cottage... Jane Austen!"

Stunned by the name of the famous 19th century author, Eliza paused and took a deep breath before she could read the remainder of the address on the letter. "Jane Austen" Again she had to pause as her eyes raced ahead of her trembling lips. "Jane Austen ~ Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Chawton Great House..." she squeaked.

Eliza stood there on her bedroom carpet for several more seconds, silently reading and re-reading the words inscribed neatly across the front of the smaller envelope.

Then she began to laugh. "Jane Austen and Mr. Darcy!" she said, shaking her head in disbelief. "You have got to be kidding me!"

The thoughts racing through Eliza's head at that moment are somewhat difficult to define. For although she would not have classified herself as a voracious reader, she was well enough read, her tastes running largely to popular fiction with a smattering of respectable old favorites, ranging from the works of Agatha Christie and Damon Runyon to a few major poets and several classic novels.

And, like many women, one of Eliza's very favorite novels, numbered among half a dozen well worn books occupying the small shelf beneath her bedside table, was Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen's timeless story of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's uncompromising quest for a perfect love.

Which is only to say that Eliza Knight knew precisely who Jane Austen was, and she certainly knew who Fitzwilliam Darcy, the purported recipient of the letter she now held in her hand, was, or at least who he was supposed to be.

And, as wildly romantic as the idea that immediately seized her imagination and threatened to sweep her away might have been, Eliza did not believe it for a minute. Because the relationship suggested by the enigmatic address on the letter was flatly impossible!

Chapter Three

In sharp contrast to Eliza's bedroom, which, with its eclectic collection of old wooden furniture, framed prints and warm fabric accents, could only be described as cozy, the living room of her small condo -- actually the work room and studio where she created her art and operated her internet gallery -- was all 21st century business.

Before the large window that allowed her to look directly into the wheelhouses of passing freighters on the East River were arrayed her white IKEA computer desk and drawing board, and beside them the wide steel filing cabinets, airbrush, paints and other equipment necessary to her work.

Hanging on the otherwise bare walls were several meticulous illustrations of the idyllic flower-filled country landscapes and other natural and whimsical subjects in which she specialized.

With the envelopes in her hand and her bare feet tucked into a pair of warm sheepskin moccasins, Eliza crossed the polished hardwood floor of her studio and seated herself on the tall chrome and leather stool at her drawing board. Taking care first to cover the painting of a woodland cottage to which she'd been adding a mistily airbrushed backdrop of thickly forested mountains, she laid the two envelopes on the board side by side and switched on her halogen work light.

Beneath the flood of pure white illumination she carefully examined the two old letters. Beside the smaller envelope -- the one addressed to Fitzwilliam Darcy in a neat feminine hand -- Eliza now saw to her added consternation that the second letter was addressed to Jane Austen

from Fitzwilliam Darcy. And though the reddish brown ink appeared similar, the pen strokes on the second letter were broader and more scrawled, as might be expected from a man's hand.

And, unlike the smaller letter, which appeared to have retained its original seal intact -- indicating that it had never been opened -- the hard wax seal on this second letter had been broken.

Her well founded skepticism as to the genuineness of the letters notwithstanding, Eliza felt her heart beginning to trip hammer in her chest as she sat regarding them. For she could not help wondering, What if...?

The moment was broken as Wickham returned from some feline errand in the kitchen and boldly leaped into her lap, likely still campaigning for more tuna.

Relaxing slightly, Eliza laughed and reached for the opened letter.

"Well," she said to the annoyed tabby, " I can see the suspense is killing you, so let's see what Mr. Darcy had to say to Jane Austen, shall we?"

Despite her levity, Eliza could not help noticing that her hand was trembling as she opened the larger letter, which had been folded over in thirds and then folded along the sides to form its own envelope.

"May 12th, 1810," she read aloud, "Dearest Jane, the Captain has found me out. I am being forced to go into hiding immediately. But if I am able, I shall still be waiting at the same spot tonight. Then you will know everything you wish to know. F. Darcy"

Eliza paused to consider the meaning of those few sparse sentences. And when she began to read it over again there was a slight quaver in her voice. For this was not at all what she had expected. Though, on momentary reflection, she was not quite sure exactly what she had

expected to find in Darcy's letter, some flowery romantic tribute perhaps, or a poetic declaration of undying love to a lady fair.

After a moment, she shook her head and threw the letter down in frustration. Wickham looked up at her and meowed loudly. "You're absolutely right," she told him. "It's very mysterious, and very romantic. But I think somebody is having a tremendous laugh on us, Wickham."

The cat yawned, anxious now for her to return to the warmth and comfort of the bedroom. But Eliza was in the mood for protracted argument.

"What, you don't get the joke?" she berated him. "You see, Wickham, Darcy is the hero of Jane Austen's greatest romantic novel, Pride and Prejudice. But Darcy is a fictitious character, so he would hardly have been writing to the woman who created him, would he?

"It's too ridiculous to even consider," she added for her own benefit.

Wickham seemed unimpressed.

"Very well," said Eliza picking up the second envelope. I've read enough Gothic Romances to know that the solution to the mystery is obviously contained in the second letter. "We'll just read it and see what Jane said to Darcy."

She held the smaller envelope in her hand, turning it over to examine the unbroken seal and noticing in the same moment the fanciful letter "A" that had been impressed into the wax when it was still molten.

"Of course, there's no date on the outside," she said, wondering exactly how a wax seal was supposed to be broken, "but it's addressed to Darcy, so it must be Jane's supposed reply to his letter."

Wickham meowed impatiently at that.

Still, Eliza delayed opening the letter, tracing the curves of the seal with the tip of her index finger and, curiously, experiencing a tingling sensation that shot like a jolt of electricity through her body.

"Wickham," she said, hesitating, "I just had a terrible thought. What if this letter really is from Jane Austen? Can you imagine what that would mean?"

She looked down at the cat who was unconcernedly applying his long pink tongue to one of his wickedly clawed front paws.

Eliza sighed. "No, of course you can't, you poor thing. You have no forehead." She replaced the sealed letter on the drawing board and gazed thoughtfully at it.

"My heart is racing, Wickham," she confessed after several more moments, "but I don't dare open this letter," she said, thinking aloud. "Because if there's the slightest chance that it really is genuine I'd be damaging it."

Eliza emitted a short bitter laugh as she tried to imagine the consequences of committing such a thoughtless and clumsy blunder. "Then I'd forever be known as that stupid artist who ruined the historic document," she murmured, more to herself than the cat.

"No," she said firmly after another long bout of contemplative silence, "I think I'd better try to find out something more about the fictitious Mr. Darcy before I go burning any bridges.

"After all," she admitted, "as much as I've always loved Jane Austen's writing, I just realized that I know virtually nothing about her life beyond what I've read on the jackets of her books."

Her mind made up, Eliza moved from the high stool at her drawing board to a matching chair before her computer console. Signing onto the internet, she called up a popular search engine and typed in JANE AUSTEN.

The computer whirred softly for several seconds before the screen filled with a message:

SEARCH RESULTS FOR: JANE AUSTEN
ENGLISH AUTHOR JANE AUSTEN, 1775-1817
3742 SITES FOUND

Eliza stared at her monitor in disbelief. Beneath the search result message was arrayed the beginnings of the list of web sites pertaining to the author. Scrolling down through the list, Eliza discovered to her amazement that there were sites devoted to Jane Austen's life, her birthplace, the time that she lived, each of her books and all the movies and television shows that had ever been made from the books. There were even more web sites devoted to the actors in the movies and television shows made from the books...in addition to those, there were hundreds of fan sites, history sites, sites for scholarly discussions of Jane Austen's work, sites devoted to the many sequels to Jane Austen books, written in the style of the author by latter day imitators.

There were Japanese Jane Austen web sites, Australian web sites, Norwegian sites, discussion sites about Jane Austen's letters, her family, her friends...the list went on and on.

Eliza scrolled until her finger ached and her eyes grew bleary, and yet she realized that she hadn't even made a dent in the endless list. "I thought this was going to be easy," she groaned to Wickham.

After several more minutes of scrolling she sat back, rubbed her eyes and blinked at the screen again. The title and description of one web site in particular suddenly caught her eye.

"Austenticity.com," she read, liking the sound of that, "Everything you ever wanted to know about Jane Austen.

"Now that sounds promising," she told the cat

Wickham rubbed against Eliza's arm as she clicked onto the site. A burst of romantic theme music suddenly poured from the computer's speakers and a title popped up onto the screen.

AUSTENTICITY.COM PRESENTS
Jane Austen's
 PRIDE & PREJUDICE

The title faded away as a scene from the BBC/A&E television mini-series of "Pride and Prejudice" began to play on the computer screen. In the scene, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy are alone in a sitting room.

Eliza found her lips moving in silent accompaniment to the actor playing Darcy as he recited one of her favorite lines from P&P. "You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you..."

Her face reddening, Eliza abruptly broke off the monologue and turned down the sound, smiling at the casual ease with which she had been captivated.

"Darcy, you seductive devil!" She grinned at the now silent actor still mouthing his lines. "I dearly love your first proposal to Elizabeth Bennet," she told him. "But right now I need some hard information about the real you! If there was a real you."

She stopped the film clip by clicking onto the information menu at the top of her computer screen. Another screen immediately popped up, featuring a rather dour portrait of the author herself beneath a new title.

AUSTENTICITY.COM
 THE EVERYTHING AUSTEN SITE

Can't get enough Jane Austen?
 Dying to know what she ate and wore,

what books she read, songs she sang?
 Post your question on our message boards.
 One of our Austen experts is sure to have
 the answer you seek.

"Austen experts! Now that's more like it," Eliza said, reading the message. She examined the several topics on the message boards, selected one titled "Jane's Life & Times" and started to type.

POST MESSAGE:

Was Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* a real person?
 Please reply by e-mail to:
SMARTIST@galleri.com

Smiling to herself, she sent the message.

"There!" she told Wickham. "With any luck, somebody will have the solution to our little mystery right at their fingertips."

The cat rolled his yellow eyes up at her, as if to say don't kid yourself.

Eliza shrugged and closed out the Austenticity web site. "Okay," she grudgingly conceded, peering once more at the daunting list of other internet sites. "I'll look at a few more, but I'm not going to keep doing this all night."

More than an hour later a thoroughly exhausted Eliza sat propped among the pillows piled against the elaborately carved figurals decorating the headboard of her bed.

As she leafed idly through her copy of Pride and Prejudice her imagination was filled with the possibilities presented by the two mysterious letters. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the little vanity table by the window, and she wondered who had placed the letters behind the mirror, and for what possible purpose.

Eliza's further explorations on the internet had provided her with no more clues to the existence of a real life model for the novel's most compelling character, Fitzwilliam Darcy. And, indeed, the scant biographical information on Jane Austen that she had been able to locate seemed to indicate that the writer had never known anyone remotely resembling the wealthy and handsome Darcy, much less carried on a romance with such a person, or with any other man for that matter.

Wickham was comfortably dozing on the pillows beside her as she finally put her book aside and switched off the bedside lamp. Moonlight filled the room, casting soft reflections in the hazed mirror of the vanity table. Eliza gazed sleepily at the golden orb outside her window and snuggled down next to the cat.

"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you..." she murmured dreamily. "Oh God, Wickham, that is so romantic! Could there have been a flesh and blood Darcy who actually spoke those words to Jane Austen before she wrote them?"

Wickham's deep throated purr rumbled up from somewhere inside, indicating that he was already fast asleep.

"And if Darcy was a real person, then who was the Captain he was so worried about? And why was he suspicious of Darcy?" Eliza continued sleepily, entwining her fingers in the warm ruff of fur around Wickham's neck.

She tried to imagine what it would be like to have a passionate lover who ardently admired and loved her. A brief, unsatisfying image of Jerry popped into her mind. He was sitting across from her at a deli restaurant table, eating a naked green salad and reeling off stock quotations between mouthfuls.

After a long while Eliza drifted into an uneasy sleep. But in a small recess of her mind a nagging sense of unease had already begun to whittle away at the neatly constructed set of boundaries that she had so carefully erected around her passions and her life.