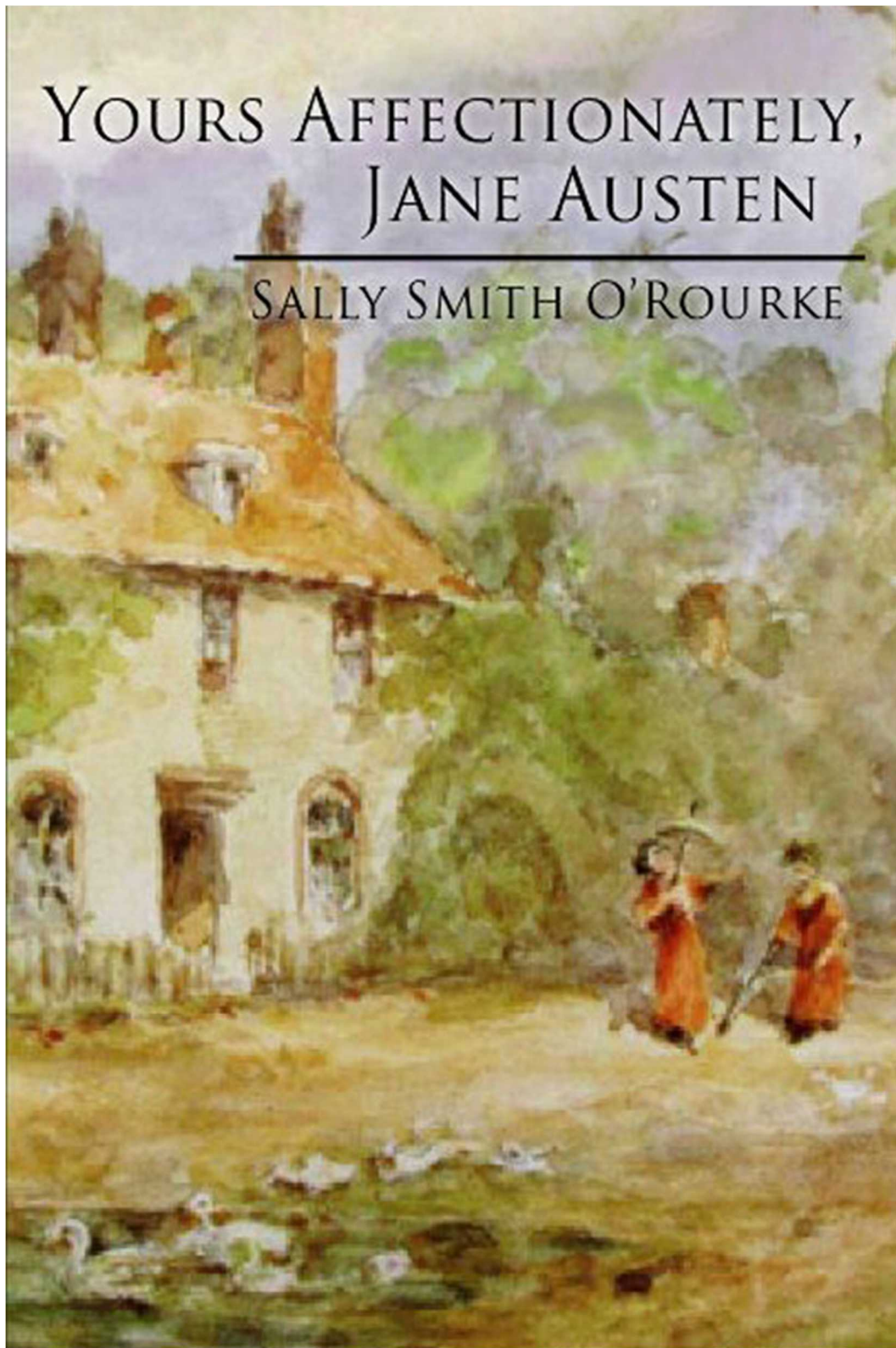


YOURS AFFECTIONATELY,
JANE AUSTEN

SALLY SMITH O'ROURKE



Yours Affectionately, Jane Austen

Sally Smith O'Rourke

PROLOGUE

*Pemberley Farms - Virginia, USA
Summer, Now*

TORCH flames danced in the still summer night as liveried footmen ran ahead to light the way for the beautifully restored horse-drawn carriages. Gravel crunched under the wheels as the remaining guests of this year's Rose Ball made their way to the gates of Pemberley Farms. It was meant to look like a scene from the past, and Eliza Knight had no doubt that it did. In fact, she was sure this was how it looked and sounded in 1795 when the first Rose Ball was held.

The story behind the Rose Ball was very romantic. Fitz Darcy's ancestor had established this amazing estate in the lush Shenandoah Valley of Virginia well over two hundred years ago. To win the hand of a Baltimore debutante, he built this magnificent house and invited the cream of American society to a fancy dress ball. According to the story, it worked; Rose Elliot became the bride of the first Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley Farms. To honor her and the history of the family, the Rose Ball has been held every year since, just as it was being held tonight.

Eliza pushed herself away from the railing on the balcony of her bedroom in Pemberley House as the grandfather clock on the second floor landing struck the half hour. Darkness fell over the estate as the young men doused their torches, leaving only moonlight. The footfalls of the remaining servants faded into the distance and all was quiet. The mournful cry of a hoot owl signaled the close of the amazing fairytale evening.

The ornate and slightly cloying Rose bedroom had been so named, she'd been told, because every available surface was covered in either floral botanicals or rose coloured fabric and paint. Eliza was pretty sure it was actually named for the woman in the portrait on the wall opposite the French doors of the balcony: Rose Elliot Darcy, the Baltimore debutante wooed and won by Fitz' great, great plus grandfather and namesake. Family legend held that when Rose saw Willie—that's what Rose called her Fitzwilliam—riding up to the house on horseback she would slip into a bathtub. There she would wait for Mr. Darcy to join her in the rose-scented water. Eliza smiled. It was a fun story.

The New York artist kicked off her shoes and sat down, falling back onto the fainting couch—not a chaise lounge, mind you, but a fainting couch and glanced back at the painting.

“Well, Rose, did you marry him because he built this house for you, or were you comfortable when you were together?”

She leaned her head back, admiring the hand-carved ceiling panels. *Comfortable*. Eliza didn't know if that's how Rose felt about Willie Darcy, but for some strange and inexplicable reason it

was how she felt when she was with Fitz Darcy, the current master of Pemberley Farms.

She'd only known him for forty-eight hours and the entire time had been a whirlwind of activity and a roller coaster of emotions; still she was more at ease with him than with anyone else. Was it possible it had been only two days? She glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Three in the morning; that made it about forty-two hours, so not even two days. She looked up at the portrait again. Yes, it *was* just last night, under the watchful eyes of his ancestor, that Fitz had told her his tale of leaping through a portal that took him from twenty-first-century Hampshire, England to nineteenth-century Chawton and Jane Austen's bed.

Certain he was crazy when he started telling her his absurd story of time travel, she considered leaving and going home. But there was genuineness in all he said and an openness she could not ignore. She would never know whether it was the champagne and the ambiance of the centuries-old southern estate or Fitz himself, but by the time he finished his epic tale, she truly believed that he had fallen through a rip in the fabric of time. Despite her inbred New York cynicism, she was convinced this uber-wealthy Virginia horseman had been the model for Austen's Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mr. Darcy was arguably the most romantic figure in English literature.

Wearing her favorite extra-large tee-shirt Eliza sat down on the small upholstered stool at Rose Darcy's dressing table. Releasing her hair from its up-do, she shook it loose and ran her fingers through it. In the mirror she turned her head to the left and right, then rested her chin on her hand. She wasn't a classic beauty, but her dark hair and eyes did make her look a bit exotic. Two vines of hand-carved roses twined around the oval frame of the mirror, joined at the lower right edge by a bow. A small smile curved her full lips as she reached behind the silvered glass. *Nothing*. She laughed out loud at herself. Finding two hundred-year-old letters behind an old mirror happened only once in a lifetime. She shrugged, but it had happened—to her, and only two weeks ago.

Alone in her New York City apartment overlooking the East River, Eliza sat crossed-legged on the floor examining her newly acquired treasure, a late-eighteenth-century vanity table. She'd purchased it at a dusty antique shop against the advice of her financial advisor and part-time boyfriend Jerry.

The back of the mirror appeared to be slightly warped, however, further examination showed that it was not warped at all but separated from the frame by two letters. The silk of the green ribbon slipped through her fingers as she untied the delicate bow, releasing the two small documents. Were they love letters?

Intrigued, she read aloud, "Miss Jane Austen, Chawton Cottage." She paused. "That can't be right."

She picked up the other letter. "Jane Austen again... to... Fitzwilliam Darcy?" She turned it over; the seal was still intact. "She didn't mail it, Wickham. Maybe it's a Dear John letter and she changed her mind... but then why keep it?" She looked over at her big, gray tabby cat, who was totally uninterested. "Or maybe it's a mushy love letter. Well, let's look at the other one; maybe it will tell us. It's already open and it was obviously written by a man."

She read aloud. "May 12th, 1810." "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."

It certainly wasn't a love letter. Who was the captain and what did Jane want to know? Was it really possible that Jane Austen was corresponding with a fictional character she'd created?

The simple, obvious but completely outrageous answer was that he wasn't fictional at all.

The beautiful penmanship on the sealed letter was enticing, but the thought of opening it was fleeting. If the years of watching *Antiques Roadshow* had taught her anything it was that things were far more valuable monetarily as well as historically if left as original as possible. Reluctantly she re-bundled the letters.

The golden glow from a street light outside her window was the only illumination in Eliza's living room until she turned on her computer. Determined to discover an explanation for the existence of the letters, she sat at her desk and signed on to the Internet. The first thing she found was the New York City Public Library website advertising a current exhibit: *The World of Jane Austen – A Woman of Two Centuries*. She definitely would go there tomorrow and find out what the world of Jane Austen was like. But she probably wouldn't find an answer to the question she most wanted answered, so she continued to scroll through what turned out to be thousands of websites all claiming to have some association with the novelist.

One seemed a bit more promising than most:

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.

She examined several topics on the message boards, finally selecting "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, she sent the message.

"There!" she told Wickham. "With any luck we'll get to the bottom of this and find out the truth."

The truth was that the Fitzwilliam Darcy of the letters was a twenty-first-century time traveler and not Jane Austen's nineteenth-century lover; at least he claimed not to be her lover. Lover or not, Eliza was sure that the unopened letter from Jane Austen to Fitzwilliam Darcy really had been meant for Fitz and not written to his ancestor as she initially had assumed. Because of that certainty the decision to give him the letter had been easy. Austen had written to him, so the letter was his.

The reflection of a single candle flame from the bedside table flickered in the soft summer breeze, one candle. The ballroom of Pemberley House had been ablaze with hundreds of candles tonight and with costumed guests whirling around them, Fitz had held Eliza in his arms as he waltzed her around the dance floor. She was almost sorry she'd told him that she'd made a decision about the letter at that moment because he'd stopped dancing. He'd whisked her out of the ball room and to the front porch.

Commandeering an open coach, the Virginia horseman took her for a short moonlit ride down to the lake. In the silver glow of the moon she pressed the unopened letter into his hand.

He had read the short missive aloud, and it had ended with Jane's wish and admonition for him: "Somewhere in that faraway world of yours, I know, there awaits your one true love. Find her, dearest! Find her whatever else you may do, and when you find her, you must tell her she is your dearest and loveliest desire. Be happy, my love. Jane."

Staring at the ground Fitz had refolded the letter and slipped it into the pocket of his hunter green frock coat, and then took the step that separated them. With grateful tears glistening in his eyes, he cupped her face in his hands and whispered, "Dearest, loveliest Eliza." Then he kissed her—a long, passionate but gentle kiss that had made her knees weak. Even now her heart beat hard in her chest and she had to take a deep breath to calm it.

She had wanted him to kiss her again, but at the bedroom door he had bowed gallantly and kissed her hand.

She didn't know what to say. "Thank you... it's been... amazing."

He smiled. "Yes." Then, with a feather-soft touch he traced the contour of her jaw and gently lifted her chin, brushing her lips with a kiss. "I'll see you in the morning."

She hadn't been kidding when she'd told him it had all been amazing, but she was still having trouble processing it. Hopefully sleep would make everything much clearer. Not bothering to remove her make-up or brush her teeth, she climbed into bed and fell asleep imagining she was in his embrace.

CHAPTER 1

*Chawton, England
Summer, 1813*

THE slender, dark-haired woman walked alone on the same woodland path they had once walked together. Was it really three years ago? Then the slightly warm spring weather had brought forth the first blooming of the wildflowers. Today her muslin dress clung to her body in the moist summer air and flowers no longer coloured the meadow.

As she stood atop a wooden stile, a small smile curved her bow-like mouth as Jane imagined him reaching for her, his hands strong at her waist. Her eyes closed, she jumped down from the weathered step, pretending that he had set her down gently next to him. Her heart beat rapidly and she breathed deeply to calm it.

She had landed in a small mud puddle, and the hem of her gown was now quite dirty. Her sister, Cassandra, and her mother would strongly disapprove of such carelessness, but the thought of their disappointment was lost in the memory of that long-ago afternoon.

Jane reveled in the reminiscence. The walk was one she had made many times since he'd left. Her hand went to her bare throat where he had fastened the gold chain his late-mother had given him in his youth. She tried to imagine him as a boy but was unable to drive the image of the man from her mind: tall, lean and tanned as he lay in her bed recovering from his injuries—injuries that were not nearly as bad as he had led them all to believe. She smiled at the memory of his deception.

The trees hanging over the low-lying wall were nominally larger than they had been when she was here with him. They had sat together on the wall, holding hands and kissing in the sunshine, the breeze stirring the leaves overhead. He had held her in his arms; she had wanted to stay there forever and he had said he never wanted to let her go. But the world had intruded and he was gone.

It was the strength of that memory, his arms around her, his breath on her neck, the beating of his heart against her that caused sensations of joy and sadness. His disposition and temper were nearly opposite her own, but the loving tenderness and gentle passion underlying everything he did still made her feel the excitement she had experienced when he touched her. She relished every moment of the time they'd had together and would not trade it for anything.

A warm breeze rustled the leaves of the two trees that created the arch through which Mr. Darcy had come and, she assumed, gone. The hope that someday he might return—

The thought and her heart stopped as a horse and rider came over the wall through the space between the two trees. In her hurry to retreat Jane tripped over a partially buried rock and fell to the ground.

Reining the black horse to a stop, the young man jumped down and was almost instantly at her side. "I'm sorry, Miss. Are you okay?"

Okay. That was a word she had only ever heard *him* use. She turned her head and their eyes met. Her brother's stableman turned his eyes away in deference to their different stations.

"When did you last see him, Simmons?" Her heart beat faster with a surge of irrational hope that the groom had seen him recently.

“Who, Miss?” He reached to assist her to her feet.

“Why, Mr. Darcy,” she said, accepting his outstretched hand and rising.

Escorting her to the stone wall he said, “Not since the Captain come after him, Miss Jane. Why Miss?”

“I have never heard anyone else use ‘okay’.”

“It is a good word, I think.”

“Indeed.”

Simmons looked around. “Will he ever come back, Miss?”

“Mr. Darcy?”

Her brother’s servant nodded.

“I fear it may not be in his power to return.”

“If that is true then I wish I’d went with him.” He stood next to the horse, rubbing the animal’s neck.

“You wish you’d gone with him?”

“When he prepared to leave I asked to go with him to take care of Lord Nelson. But he said it would be too dangerous for me to go.”

“It most likely was too dangerous.”

A glimmer of realization flashed across his face. “He’s not really a spy, Miss.”

Surprised at the statement, she asked, “How do you know?”

“He gived me his word that he was no spy.” He shifted his gaze to the ground and almost whispered, “He’s a true gentleman, Miss, and I believe him.”

“So do I, Simmons... so do I.” She paused. “You would have gone with him to America?”

“Oh, yes, Miss”

Jane was astonished at the admission. Simmons held a position of some importance in her brother’s stable, caring for his favorite horses, teaching the younger children to ride and hunt and having the special privilege of driving her mother, her sister and herself on local travels. It was a great honor in a household of so many servants to have the responsibility of caring for those most dear to his master’s heart. But despite the fact that he was a young man of no education or particular background and no connections to speak of, Simmons had been willing to leave it all to follow a man he had known only a few days. She was unable to hide the shock. “Why would you have done such a thing?”

The young man straightened himself. “He treated me like he was no better than me, and he shook my hand, Miss, as if we was the same.”

Jane smiled at him. Mr. Darcy had made quite an impression on her brother’s groom. It reminded her of the American’s declaration and his treatment of her as an equal as well. “I believe he considered you his equal, Simmons.”

The young man’s face beamed with the compliment. “I have often thought of going to Portsmouth and hiring onto a ship to go to America.”

“Even after all this time?”

Simmons said quietly, “Sometimes it don’t seem like such a long time.”

Jane nodded.

“I want to be a horse doctor, Miss Jane, and I think Mr. Darcy might help me get the learning I need to do it.”

“Since Britain is at war with America, I fear going there now could pose a great danger to you.”

“You think because I am English Mr. Darcy wouldn’t help me?”

“I have no doubt he would help you in any way he could were you to reach him, but if you went there now it might be seen as an act of treason, or you would simply be pressed into the service of the Prince Regent.”

“I was afraid you meant he would turn me out. If the Prince is all I have to fear then someday I will take my chances.”

Failing to dissuade him with logic or fear, Jane tried cryptic truth. “I am afraid, Simmons, that a ship out of Portsmouth would not lead you to Mr. Darcy’s America.”

“I do not understand, Miss. There is only one America, is there not? And he lives there, doesn’t he?”

She had never considered telling anyone Darcy’s story, but it was Edward’s stableman who had found Darcy a hiding place so that her naval captain brother had been unable to capture him. Simmons had also gotten the American paper and ink so he could write her about his departure. A surge of emotion and fear for Simmons caused a tightness in her chest. He had also become a party to the deception she and Darcy had perpetrated so that they could have one last meeting. The young man’s guileless face made it clear that he could be trusted. Had he not kept their secret all these years? In fact he had risked his life for Darcy and her, so perhaps she did owe her young champion the truth.

“Miss?”

She was aroused from the self-discussion by the sound of Simmons’ voice. She looked up at him.

“Why do you say I couldn’t get to America from Portsmouth?”

She smiled. “You could get to America on a ship from Portsmouth, but you would not find Mr. Darcy there... at least not our Mr. Darcy.”

“But you said he was in America.”

“And so he is. However, it is not the America of today.”

The fear that he might be insulting Master Edward’s sister made Simmons pause but didn’t stop him from saying, “You confuse me, Miss Jane.”

“Yes.” She realized why Darcy had found it so difficult to explain the circumstances of his arrival to her. She had been incensed at his reticence, but now she understood. How could she explain to this young man, a boy really who had never even been to London, that Mr. Darcy had traveled from a time two hundred years in the future? She began an explanation she hoped would end his dreams of finding the tall Virginian. “After Mr. Darcy dined at my brother’s house he requested a meeting with me.” She smiled remembering the circumstances of the request, a hastily written note folded tightly and slipped into her hand under the pretense of finding her gloves, which Darcy himself had taken. Jane caught the hint of a smile on Simmons’ face but he said nothing. “You knew?”

Simmons nodded. “I saw him give you the note, Miss.” He looked at the horse. “That was why I had Lord Nelson ready for him when he came to the stables that night.”

Startled by the admission, she said, “You were so sure I would meet with him?”

Stridently, he said, “Oh, no, Miss! But I was certain he would go... in hopes that you would.”

Jane nodded, continuing to be surprised by the young man’s insight.

“I told him that he needed to be careful of the Captain for he was a far different man than Master Edward and would not take kindly to someone playing loose with his sister.” He blushed slightly. “Sorry, Miss.”

Smiling to ease the groom’s embarrassment, she said, “You were right; Francis is very protective of us and definitely did not like Mr. Darcy, so it was a good warning.” After a short

pause she added, "I am afraid my brother was not alone in his dislike of Mr. Darcy." Remembering that night....

The knocking started softly enough but with Jane's refusal to answer, Cassandra finally struck the door quite hard. "Jane, talk to me." She made no response. Plaintively her sister pleaded, "Jane, please. I am sorry if I injured your sensibilities. I only wanted to remind you—"

"That I am a middle-aged spinster with no right to—Oh, go to bed, Cass!"

"I will not be able to sleep if you are angry with me."

Grudgingly Jane opened the door but pointedly did not invite her sister into the room. Instead she kissed Cassandra's cheek. "I am not angry. Go to bed." Without waiting for a response Jane closed the door again. Leaning against it she waited until she heard her sister's reluctant footsteps as she walked down the hall to her own room.

Cassandra was only trying to protect her, but still it hurt. Cass had accused her of stupidity, declaring that Jane had long since passed the age for such childish romanticism if she truly intended to meet with Darcy. Jane could not deny that she had had thoughts of romance; however, she also knew that Darcy simply wanted the location of his fall. He had made it very clear that he wanted nothing more than to be out of the country at the earliest possible moment. Romance was certainly of no interest to him. She did concede that the late hour and woodland location was a bit suspicious and highly inappropriate, but still it never occurred to her not to go.

As midnight approached, Jane stepped out into the hall, taking note that no light shone from under Cassandra's bedroom door. She felt secure that as she left the house under cover of darkness her sister would be none the wiser. Glancing up the stairs one last time to be sure Cass was not following her, Jane threw her blue gauze cloak around her shoulders and pulled the hood up to protect her head from the light mist that had started to fall just as they'd arrived home from her brother Edward's dinner party.

CHAPTER 2

IN the deep shadows at the edge of the wood, Jane waited as the moon started its descent, casting an iridescent glow on the meadow. The tall American steered his great horse off the road and into the soft grass. He rode straight and tall as though he'd been born astride the animal. He was looking around, obviously in search of her but also making sure he had not been followed. When he was within a few feet she stepped into the moonlight.

He dismounted and cautiously walked toward her. "I was afraid you wouldn't come." He stopped no more than two feet away from her, still holding Lord Nelson's reins. He looked handsome and vital even in Edward's ill-fitting suit. She pushed aside the thought and the romantic notions she'd been entertaining since receiving his note and questioned his choice of time and place.

He apologized and added, "I believe dawn, the sunrise, is the crucial time for me to go back."

"Go back? Where?"

Darcy hesitated, unsure how much he should reveal about his situation.

Taking his pause as evidence that what would follow would be a carefully crafted story—a lie—Jane was surprised when he said, "Back to... back to the place where I fell."

She was irritated by his evasion and certain that he knew precisely what she wanted to know. "It is close. I will gladly show you exactly where it is... *after* you tell me where you came from, why you are here and why you're behaving so oddly."

"Miss Austen, I really can't explain. You wouldn't understand." He paused briefly. "I'm not at all sure I do."

Ignoring his apologetic admission, Jane spat, "What? Because I am a woman you think me too stupid to understand?" She turned and walked away. "Feel free to stumble around in the dark and find the place yourself!"

Almost panicked, he dropped Nelson's reins and went after her. "Miss Austen... Jane, please wait."

Expecting yet another insult but ready with a few of her own, she stopped and turned toward him. But he hurled no aspersion.

"Miss Austen, I believe you are one of the most intelligent women—in fact, one of the most intelligent *people* I've ever met."

Cautiously she returned and stood toe to toe, looking up at him. Her eyes glistened in the moonlight with a combination of suspicion and curiosity, and before she could say anything he began to tell her about her books.

"I know that *Sense and Sensibility* will be published early next year and it will do very well."

Suspiciously she asked, "Why would my brother tell you that?"

"He didn't, nor did he tell me about the one you're working on now, *First Impressions*, the story of five sisters hoping to marry well. It will be published in three years, after you re-title it."

His knowledge of *First Impressions*, on which she was still working, caused her curiosity to flare into anger at the reasonable assumption that he had rifled through her personal papers when he was alone in her room feigning his head injury.

Before she had the chance to throw any well-deserved invectives at him he told her about another book. "*Mansfield Park*. It will be considered your masterpiece by many people although,

Pri—” He cleared his throat. “*First Impressions* will be the most popular, then and now.”

Mansfield Park was but an idea in her head, she had not yet put pen to paper. How did he know? Jane accused him of madness as she took a few steps backward away from him.

Afraid she might bolt before he got the information he needed, he grabbed her arm. She tried to pull away but he held firm, “Jane, please...”

What had she been thinking meeting this mercurial and possibly dangerous man in the middle of the night?

Overwhelmed with guilt at having caused the fear he saw on her face, Darcy released her. “I’m sorry.”

Suppressing the fear she said, “I have no idea how you know so much of my past but you cannot know what my future holds. No one can tell the future!”

Quietly, he said, “Yes... and that is my secret... it’s all in the past for me.” Sadly he looked away, then directly into her eyes. She saw the truth reflected there as he said, “*This is* the past for me. I came from the future.”

Literally scratching his head, the dumbfounded Simmons asked, “The future, Miss Jane?”

She nodded. “Two centuries into the future.”

“How is that possible, Miss?”

Jane told him what Darcy had told her. “He jumped the wall with Lord Nelson, and both were blinded by the rising sun. The great stallion stumbled, throwing Darcy to the ground where he hit his head on a rock. When he awoke he was here.”

Simmons just stared at her, waiting for more.

“The day after that midnight meeting we came here and he attempted to enter the portal, but it was not open. That made him even more sure that the sunrise was instrumental in the opening of the gateway through which he and Lord Nelson had come.” She paused. “Although it appears now, the sunset was just as effective.” Her voice grew quiet. “At least I hope it was.”

Simmons stepped to the wall and looked through the arch of hanging branches, “But I just come through here Miss and it was only Master Edward’s fields.”

“As I said, he was sure the sunrise or possibly the sunset was responsible for the opening of the portal.”

The young horseman looked behind him. “It’s almost sunset now, Miss Jane.”

Jane nodded. “So it is.”

She took three steps and stood next to him, after a few moments a fine mist started to rise from the grass on the other side of the wall. The mist turned to a thick fog, and as the fog cleared slightly Jane and Simmons peered through an opening. A large green machine was moving across the far meadow. There were no horses or oxen driving it and it made a grinding noise as black smoke billowed out of it. They looked at each other in awe and amazement. When they looked again, a smaller wheeled vehicle with no horses was kicking up dust on a dirt road next to the field. They remained where they were, transfixed until the image started to fade as a blaze of sunlight filled the space. The brilliance seemed to reflect as if off a mirror, and when they regained their vision Edward’s field was just as it had been before.

Almost in a whisper Simmons asked, “Was that the portal, Miss?”

Sitting once again on the warm rock wall, Jane said, “I suppose so. I believe those things were some of the machines Mr. Darcy told me of... machines that replace horses.”

“Replace horses, Miss?”

“Yes. Mr. Darcy told me about all manner of machines in his time. Automobiles are carriages

without horses.” She glanced over her shoulder at the meadow. “The big green one must have been a plough of some kind.”

“But Mr. Darcy breeds horses.”

“Indeed, but for sport and recreation.”

Still standing at the wall looking through the arch of tree branches, Simmons said, “So the opening is still there.”

“It appears so, Simmons... it appears so.”

“Why do you think he hasn’t come back, Miss?”

“There are many possibilities. It would still be dangerous for him. Perhaps he does not know he can. It is possible he does not want to revisit this time. Even worse, it’s possible that he did not return to his own time safely.”

After several minutes of quiet thought, Simmons ventured, “What do you think would happen, Miss, if I went through it?”

Jane looked over her shoulder at the meadow beyond. It was still and quiet. There was no sign of a rip in the fabric of time. It looked like the Hampshire countryside of Regency England. She turned to Simmons.

“Mr. Darcy said that his coming here was accidental. He had no idea how it happened or why. If the portal was open when my brother was chasing him and he went through it, we have no way of knowing whether he returned to his own time or some other time. And we cannot know what might happen to you. He told me there is no way to control it, at least as far as he knew.” She paused a moment. “If you were to go through, what would you do if you could not return?”

“If I found Mr. Darcy I would not want to come back.”

“And if you did not find Mr. Darcy?”

“I would secure work in a stable somewhere.”

With the sun down, evening began to fall on the English countryside. Simmons took a deep breath. “I must be getting back.”

“And I must return to the cottage before dark.”

“Shall I see you home, Miss?”

“No, thank you, it is not necessary.”

Simmons tipped his hat and swung up into the saddle, guiding the horse away from the wall. Suddenly he wheeled around and spurred the animal to a full gallop, charged the wall and sailed over it with ease.

Jane smiled at the image. Memories of that night with Mr. Darcy flooded her mind. Memories that she had not included in her telling to Simmons. After she had finally accepted his explanation for his sudden appearance in Chawton, he told her of the many changes that were to come. The ones that fascinated her most were societal, particularly the relationships between men and women. Alone in the early evening dusk, Jane’s memory returned to that night three years ago.

As the moon started its descent he told her that he must return to the Great House before he was missed and then offered to see her home.

She declined, then coyly asked him to kiss her good night.

Hesitantly he gave her a light kiss on the lips.

“Is that how you would kiss a woman in your time?”

He smiled. “Maybe after a first date.”

“And after a second or third date?”

He gathered her to him and kissed her more thoroughly.

Jane heaved a deep sigh. It had been the first kiss but she was ever grateful that it was not the last. The growing dusk reminded her that it was getting late and she started home.

The cushioning of the summer pasture again brought back memories of the afternoon she was here with Darcy. She'd run off, as a sort of test to determine whether he really preferred women who were spirited and independent as he had declared. He'd caught up with her, picked her up and whirled her around, then fell with her in his arms, tumbling onto the soft grass. Although she was fully aware that anyone seeing them this way would be outraged, she did not care; lying there with him was intoxicating. When he kissed her, her heart fluttered, then beat so hard she was breathless. She closed her eyes and sighed at the memory of his gentle passion. It was a good thing he was a true gentleman, as Simmons said, for at that moment, in the soft spring grass, she had not felt very ladylike. However, gentleman that he was, he did not take advantage; instead he stood and offered her his hand to help her to her feet.

The reluctance she felt as she stood up with his help caused a tightening in her chest, and as the years passed she often wondered what it would have been like if he had made love to her that afternoon. She chuckled. Somehow the idea that it would have happened in her brother's field made it all the more exciting.

She walked home in her own world thinking about what might have been.

CHAPTER 3

*Pemberley Farms ~ Virginia, USA
Summer, Now*

ELIZA didn't know who painted the portrait of Fitz's ancestor, Rose Darcy, but it was an exquisite example of Federalist era portraiture. She glanced at the dress hanging on the door of the armoire, another exquisite example of the era. She had worn it to the ball last night. It was the same gown Rose was wearing in the portrait. The tiny embroidered rose buds all over the delicate pink silk were just as lively today as they had been then. She laughed out loud. "*Lively*" was a Jane Austen kind of word, she thought. But then the whole weekend had been like falling into a Jane Austen novel. It's the kind of story you tell your grandchildren, and she would... if she ever had any.

The painted gaze of the Darcy matriarch followed her as she crossed the rose bedroom to the bathroom. She had no idea how she'd managed to rationalize to herself not brushing her teeth before she went to bed, but she did and her mouth was all fuzzy and tasted as yucky as it felt. Using more toothpaste than necessary, she scrubbed her mouth with vigor. That done, she slathered on cleansing cream (because her grandmother told her never to use soap on her face) to remove the sticky, crusted on make-up she'd also managed to rationalize away last night.

Rinsing the shampoo out of her hair she stood in the shower tiled with hand painted roses which were obviously not original to the two hundred year old house, and let the pulsating water pound her back and neck. She'd slept well unlike the night before and actually felt rested and relaxed for the first time in weeks.

The counter in the bathroom held several small etched glass bottles of liquid soap, lotion and body spray; all lavender fragranced. She was surprised but rather glad that it wasn't rose and used the body spray all over including her hair. She slipped on the jeans she'd worn the day before along with the only clean shirt she had with her. She ran the brush through her hair and put on just a touch of blush and pink lip gloss. She gave her hair one last spritz of lavender, and then set the bottle down on the weathered marble counter.

In the bedroom she looked at the portrait of the Darcy Grand Dame that hung over a naturally patinated copper bathtub. What she wouldn't give to see the look on Fitz' face to find her in the tub with rose petals floating atop warm water. Would he join her as Willie did Rose? In the bright light of morning it suddenly became a real question not just a fantasy. What *was* their relationship?

They'd held hands, danced and he had kissed her once but that was all there was to the relationship. It had been so long since she'd allowed herself an emotional connection to anyone outside the family that she wasn't at all sure what the signs were. Was she reading him right, did he like her as much as she liked him? Was he simply being a southern gentleman? Or was he just being nice because she gave him the letter? The memory of his kiss last night made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. It definitely wasn't a kiss of simple appreciation; but was it any more than a kiss?

Did his love of Jane Austen override any feelings he might have for her? Did Jane's plea for him to find his true love in his own world mean she didn't love him, or did she simply assume

she would never see him again? Would they have married if he'd stayed in Regency England? Jane never did marry; was it because Fitz was gone and no one else could compare? He had never married either; was it because if he couldn't have Jane he didn't want anyone?

She glanced in the mirror and chuckled. She was doing exactly what her mother said: over thinking things. Still, it was very difficult to believe that the man who loved Jane Austen could or would ever love her.

She hit the open palm of her left hand with her right fist. *Enough! He obviously likes you. Why obsess over unanswerable questions? Take Mom's advice. Let nature take its course and simply move on to the next step, whatever it is.* She sighed. She needed coffee.

Dirt flew up in the wake of the vintage Jag as it sped down the drive and into the ground fog held by the woods near the gate. After the early morning departure of two of his overnight guests, Fitz poured himself a cup of coffee at the table that Mrs. Temple had set up on the veranda for his other guests.

Leaning against one of the Doric columns of the porch he was glad Heritage Week was over. It always took a lot out of him. He smiled at the thought that his mother would have thoroughly enjoyed it all, and he was sorry she never got to see it. His spirits were lifted by the fact that it would be almost a year before he had to deal with it again.

His coffee in hand, Fitz walked to the barns. He'd had a good night's sleep, helped no doubt by the fact that he had gotten virtually no sleep the night before. He was fairly refreshed and looked forward to seeing Lord Nelson. As he passed the tack room he grabbed his favorite saddle, one too worn for anything but exercising. It was the most comfortable one he had. He also grabbed a pad, a bridle and a small apple.

Fitz opened the door of the stallion's stall and set his tack just inside. He released the top of the Dutch door and it swung open on its large brass hinges leaving the bottom half in place. He set his coffee mug on a small shelf inside the stall. The horse remained in the corner but turned to him as the latch caught on the door.

"Good morning, boy. How are you today?"

Lord Nelson nuzzled Fitz' shoulder.

With his hand open Fitz offered Nelson the apple. The horse greedily munched his treat as Fitz gently put the saddle pad and saddle on the horse's back, adjusting the girth so it was secure but not tight. Pulling the bridle over the animal's head and gently slipping the bit into his mouth, Fitz threw the reins over his shoulder. Together the duo walked out of the barn into the early morning sun.

With a fluidity of motion not common in a large man Fitz swung gracefully into the saddle. Then horse and rider walked past the paddocks and out into the open fields. When Fitz spurred the great horse on, they galloped across the summer grass, the strong muscles of Lord Nelson taking them over white rail fences with ease. It was almost as if they were flying, the moist air rushing around him as they went. He loved being out at dawn with his horses. It allowed him to shake off the residual haziness of sleep and think more clearly, and he had a lot to think about this morning.

CHAPTER 4

NO one was in the kitchen, but the coffee was brewed and smelled wonderful. Putting her sketch pad on the island, Eliza took a mug from the cupboard above the coffee pot and poured herself some of the hot, dark liquid.

“Miss Knight?”

Mrs. Temple, Fitz’ housekeeper, looked none too pleased to find someone had invaded her domain.

“I just needed some coffee, Mrs. Temple.”

“There’s coffee, juice and muffins on the veranda.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Next time you want something, ask me and I’ll take care of it.”

Eliza finished getting her coffee ready with milk from the refrigerator and sugar from the bowl on the counter. “Sorry. It never occurred to me to ask for something like coffee. My mother says we come from good peasant stock and shouldn’t expect others to do things for us.”

Mrs. Temple’s look softened. “That’s commendable I suppose, but Mr. Darcy would want me to serve you properly.”

Conspiratorially, Eliza said, “Then let’s not tell him. I feel weird being waited on.” She picked up her pad. “Thank you, Mrs. Temple.”

The woman smiled. “Thank you, Miss Knight.”

“Eliza, please. Miss Knight is so school marmish.”

“Yes, Miss—Eliza.” The two women smiled at each other and Eliza left the kitchen.

The brilliant light of morning made last night and the two days before seem even more dreamlike. A tractor in the far field, a single-engine airplane overhead and the three vehicles, including her little rental car, parked in the circular drive reminded Eliza that the real world didn’t include horse-drawn carriage rides, candlelit rooms and romantic leading men.

Leaning against one of the porch columns she sipped coffee from a heavy crockery mug. The mug wasn’t as pretty as the delicate china cups they’d been using all weekend, but the stoneware vessel felt real in her hands.

She turned at the sound of light footsteps behind her, and her stomach and throat tightened in anticipation. Fitz’ teacher friend, Jenny Brown, came through the door, the picture of southern gentility in a simple yellow sun dress that made her ebony skin glow in the morning sun.

Eliza released the breath she’d been holding. “I was afraid you were Faith.”

Jenny’s dazzling and very friendly smile eased Eliza’s tensions considerably. Walking to the coffee cart, Jenny casually said, “No, Faith and Harv are gone.”

“Where did they go?”

Jenny turned toward the pretty New Yorker, a mug of coffee in her hand. “Home I suppose. Fitz evicted them, or so Mrs. Temple told me.”

“Evicted them? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know the particulars, but Mrs. Temple said they left at dawn.” She leaned forward and added in a hushed voice, “Apparently Fitz didn’t talk to Faith at all. In fact, as far as Mrs. T could tell he didn’t even look at her.” Jenny grinned. “So relax. I don’t think you have to worry

about Faith for a while... probably a long while.”

“What makes you think he evicted them? Maybe they just needed to be somewhere.”

“Believe me, Honey, Faith would never have left voluntarily. At the very least Fitz asked them to leave or they’d still be here.”

“But why would he ask his best friend to leave?”

“Well, he couldn’t very well get rid of Faith and not get rid of Harv—they came together—as for why he did it; I’m pretty sure he found her threatening to kill you unacceptable.”

Eliza still didn’t understand. “But that happened the night before last, and she *did* apologize to me... sort of.”

Jenny sat in one of the wicker captains’ chairs.

Eliza took a seat in a bentwood rocker.

“For the last seven years, Faith has been instrumental in the plans and arrangements for the Rose Ball.” She paused. “For Heritage Week in general, she’s one of the few people Fitz allowed to give tours of the house, and until last night she’d always been his date for the ball so she’d come to fancy herself his hostess. She always made sure that everything was perfect in the hopes of showing him that she would be the perfect mistress of Pemberley. It never worked, of course, but she kept trying. Because he is the way he is, Fitz allowed her to stay in spite of all her shenanigans on Friday. I’m sure he figured it was only fair since she’d spent so much time and energy organizing everything. But once it was over all bets were off. So she’s gone.”

“Certainly it wasn’t just because of me?”

“I don’t imagine it helped that she destroyed crystal that had been in his family for over two centuries. But you’re the main reason.”

Eliza shook her head.

“You still don’t believe he really likes you, do you?”

“Oh, Jenny, we’ve only known each other three days, two if you don’t count today, how much can he like me?”

Jenny raised an eyebrow. “How much do you like him?”

Eliza blushed.

“That’s what I thought. Time has very little to do with it; three days, three months, three years, it doesn’t matter. Haven’t you ever heard of love at first sight?”

“Yeah,” she said with a chuckle in her voice. “In movies and books, but this is real life.”

“Don’t they say that the best writers write what they know?” Getting herself more coffee, Jenny added, almost under her breath, “and life often imitates art.”

“How long have you known Fitz?” Eliza queried.

“All my life. I don’t remember a time when we weren’t friends. We played together as kids; his father taught me how to ride a bike when he taught Fitz. My father taught Fitz how to fish. He’s one of my favorite people.”

“Is he really as nice as he seems?”

“You think he’s hiding something?”

“Well, sometimes he just seems too good to be true. And you know what they say... if it seems too good to be true it probably is.”

“He’s not perfect if that’s what you mean, but he does have a very strong sense of fairness and justice. In the old days they called it honor. He has a strong sense of honor. His word is his bond. On the other hand once you’ve crossed the line and lost his respect or affection, there’s pretty much no going back.”

“So he’s hard-headed, implacable?”

Jenny shrugged. "When he's pushed too far, yes he is."

"What was he like as a kid?"

"Pretty much the same except he was always happy. Had a ready smile for everyone. She chuckled. "We called him sunshine."

"Really? Until last night I'm not sure I saw him smile. He seemed somber, almost sad."

"Yes and he was. It started when he was in the ninth grade and his grandmother died, the one who did costume restorations. He bounced back from that pretty well even though he was very close to her. But then it all seemed to come apart, and with loss after loss he turned in on himself more and more. He became distant even to those of us who were already close. By the time his mother died he had pretty much stopped smiling altogether and couldn't find the good in any situation or person. His life became his horses and making Pemberley Farms a thriving business. Not much else mattered to him."

"What other losses?"

"He doesn't like to talk about it, so it isn't really my place to get into the details; just know that his life was pretty well devastated and he's basically been alone ever since. And he's alone on purpose; it's safer than risking further loss. You only noticed it last night, but for me, over the course of the last two days he was gradually becoming the kid I grew up with again." Jenny got up and poured a second cup of coffee, then looked at Eliza and smiled. "And I'm pretty sure *you* are the reason." She turned to walk back into the house.

"Where are you going?"

Jenny raised one of the mugs of coffee. "Going to take Artie his morning java. He's something of a bear until he's had his coffee. See you later, Sweetie."

Eliza didn't know whether she was responsible for Fitz Darcy being happy this morning, but he was very definitely the reason she was. Looking out at the expanse of beautifully manicured lawn, she grabbed her sketch pad and skipped down the steps, singing, "Oh, what a beautiful morning..." Suppressing the urge to continue the song, she giggled.

CHAPTER 5

ALTHOUGH the sun was fully up in the Virginia summer sky, it was not yet hot. Fitz found jumping exhilarating; the cool morning air caressing his face, and Lord Nelson, so strong and graceful, took all the jumps with no effort.

Heritage Week was over so things could get back to normal. He shrugged. *Whatever normal is*. He realized there was a very good chance that his normal was about to change radically. Eliza's letter—the one she had found written to him from Jane—had ended his search for the truth of his Regency encounter. But Eliza did much more than give him the letter.

He had been merely surviving, not living, in the years since his mother's death. He'd thrown himself into the business of Pemberley Farms to the exclusion of almost everything else. Eliza's arrival had heralded an acute awareness of that fact. It was as though a light was suddenly shining so he could see the world around him. She made him want to live again. And she had given him the letter... Jane's letter.

Fitz reined Lord Nelson to a walk as they entered the cool shade of the woods on the edge of his property.

Jane. He had spent more than three years seeking proof of his meeting with her and of her feelings for him. Almost as if he'd been transported again back to Chawton in 1810, the image of Jane's sweet face flooded his mind. He thought back to that morning and his inauspicious entrance into Jane Austen's life.

The combination of his head injury and the laudanum prescribed by Mr. Hudson, the Austen family physician, caused Darcy to slip in and out of consciousness. He tried to sit up, the effort making him dizzy.

Jane gently laid a hand on his chest. "Please, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Hudson wants you to remain still."

Through a cotton mouth, his head spinning, Darcy asked, "Mr. Hudson?"

"The doctor," Jane said. "You must rest now Mr. Darcy." The American looked at her face. Her curiosity was palpable even in his drugged state. Unable to think clearly, never mind responding to questions he wasn't sure he could answer, he closed his eyes completely and turned his head away.

Jane returned to her vanity table where she continued to write; a single candle and the flames in the fireplace her only light. Interrupted in her writing by a low murmur from Darcy, she took the candle and quietly approached the bed. He was tossing back and forth, his face flushed and contorted; he was speaking in quiet tones, a hodgepodge of words that meant nothing to her. He spoke what she could only suppose were the nonsensical ramblings of a sick brain; she attributed words like *television* and *jet* to his head injury and delirium. She placed her hand softly on his cheek and was distressed by the heat radiating from him. Using fresh linen soaked in water from the pitcher on her wash stand, Jane swabbed his face and neck, then laid it across his forehead. It seemed to calm him and she went back to her writing.

Each time he grew restless Jane stopped writing and went to the bed to refresh the linen with cool water. After three episodes in close succession she remained on the edge of the bed so she was at hand, and each time he started to toss and turn she would caress his face and neck with the

cool, damp linen in hopes that it would, in time, reduce his fever.

She stayed there until Darcy's features turned placid and he was breathing more evenly. He finally seemed to be sleeping comfortably. She laid her small, soft hand on his cheek. The fever was broken. She dropped the cloth into the basin. Stiff from sitting in one position for so long without support, she stood up and stretched. She was not particularly tired but needed to get some rest.

Quietly she crossed the wooden floor and slipped the small pages of writing she was working on into the drawer of the vanity, then took a nightgown from the closet next to the fireplace. Glancing back at the bed she stepped behind the screen.

He opened his eyes just enough to see her slender, full-breasted figure silhouetted on the muslin screen, back-lit by the remnants of the fire as the light fabric of her nightgown floated down to envelope her.

Jane stopped at the bed before making her way to Cassandra's room for a few hours of sleep. As she stood over him he watched surreptitiously through the veil of his eyelashes. She leaned down and whispered, "Good night, Mr. Darcy," almost brushing his lips with her own. In spite of his continuing laudanum haze, he could see that her eyes were filled with a tenderness that caused him to grab her hand as she straightened up; he didn't want her to go.

Without opening his eyes or letting go of her hand he said, "Please don't leave me."

Unsure whether this was further evidence of the delirium or whether he was actually requesting her presence, she pulled her hand away. He did not move to take it again but said, "Please, stay."

Cognizant of Mr. Hudson's admonition of keeping the injured American calm and concerned her leaving might agitate him, Jane sat once again on the edge of the bed. Darcy smiled in the flickering flame of the dying fire. He said nothing more but gently took her hand. He did not relinquish it again until she rose to move to a chair by the side of the bed where she finally slept.

The movement woke him. His mind finally clear of drugs, he scanned the room in the dim, pre-dawn light. There were no electrical outlets or switches, no lamps, television or telephone, and the only clock appeared to be pendulum driven. Everything he'd seen wore costumes similar to the ones people wore to the Rose Ball. Those things and the medical treatment he had received led him to the inexplicable conclusion that somehow he'd fallen into another time—a time when Jane Austen was alive.

And there she sat, serene in what had to be an uncomfortable position for sleep; his nurse, his savior and much prettier than she was depicted in the only portrait of her to survive to the twenty-first century. She was not the brazen hussy of Darcy family lore but a sweet and loving woman who took care of him without concern for her own safety or expecting anything in return. His mother would have said she was a true Christian.

As he watched her in the pale light of the dying embers his head started to throb as though a nail was being driven through it. He closed his eyes and blessed sleep overtook him.

Jane was an incredibly strong, intelligent, willful and virtuous woman who followed the propriety of the day... mostly. During the last three years he'd often wondered what might have happened between them if he'd been forced to stay in early nineteenth-century England. Of course with the way her brothers felt about him, he probably wouldn't have seen her again.

If the circumstances had been different would he have married her? He could have been happy with her, he supposed, but over the years he'd come to realize that the love he felt for her was based on who she was, the awe in which he held her, caring for him when she certainly

didn't have to, loving him. Then again, *did* she love him? She had never said it and the letter Eliza had found and given him showed obvious affection but she urged him to find his true love. Apparently she didn't think she was it. Had they ever loved each other or had it just been a fling across the ages?

He laughed. What difference did any of it make? Jane Austen had been dead for almost two hundred years. Still, the undisputed icon of witty English romance had kissed him whether she loved him or not. He still had to pinch himself to believe it had ever happened.

He had no such questions about Eliza. Everything felt right when he was with her. This was no fling. He had no idea where they were headed, but for the first time in years he was looking forward to the rest of his life. As long as Eliza was with him he didn't care where they were headed.

Fitz and Lord Nelson crossed the bridge at a leisurely gait; the ground fog was burning off in the warm morning sun. Had it really been only two days since he and the great stallion were galloping across the bridge before the fog had lifted and run Eliza off the road and into a muddy drainage ditch? He hadn't even realized she was there until it had happened. When he did, he brought Nelson to a stop and, without questioning who she was or why she was walking along a road on his property, he had lifted her onto Lord Nelson's back and then swung up behind her. She was slightly light headed from the sudden fall, and once on the horse she had leaned against his chest and he'd had to control a strong desire to kiss the top of her head. He still didn't understand how a complete stranger could make him feel that way, but he didn't really care. From the first moment, being with her felt right and wonderful and that was all that mattered.

She had touched something in him that no one else ever had, including Jane, even before he knew her. At the Austen exhibit at the New York Public Library he had found himself staring at her. He laughed remembering that he had thought of her as a raven-haired beauty. Then two days ago she had come out of the fog and into his life.

He had told her his story about jumping through a rift in time and meeting Jane Austen. It had been very difficult at first, but once he started it tumbled out and had been a relief that he wasn't carrying it around anymore. It was as though a weight had been lifted and this slight, feisty New Yorker had done the lifting. She had listened to him with an intensity that had made her a part of the story. She had been kind and compassionate—he had seen real grief when she asked him about leaving Jane—and she had given him the letter that answered his questions about whether he'd actually met Jane Austen and how Jane felt about him.

Jane would always hold a special place in his heart, but Eliza held his heart. Maybe it was too early to take it all for love, but it certainly felt the way he'd always thought love is supposed to feel.

Horse and rider stepped out from the cool canopy of the woods and into the warm summer sun. Spurring his favorite horse to a full gallop Fitz guided him over every fence and stream on their way back to the barn.