

**Yours Affectionately,
Jane Austen**

FIRST CHAPTER

Pemberley Farms ~ Virginia, USA Summer, Now

From the balcony of her bedroom in Pemberley House, nestled in the lush Shenandoah Valley, Eliza Knight watched the torch flames dance in the still, summer night. The clock on the second floor landing struck the half hour. She closed her eyes and listened to the horses' hooves crunching the gravel on the drive and wondered if this is what it had looked and sounded like in 1795 when the first Rose Ball was held. She opened her eyes and watched liveried footmen carrying torches, running ahead to light the way for the beautifully restored carriages taking the last of this year's Rose Ball guests to the gates of Pemberley Farms.

The story of the Rose Ball was very romantic. The man who established this amazing estate in the wilds of the Virginia countryside well over two hundred years ago had built this house and then invited the cream of American society to a fancy dress ball, all to win the hand of a Baltimore debutante. According to the story they told at the ball tonight, it worked; Rose Elliot became the bride of the first Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley Farms. So to honor her and the history of the family, the Rose Ball has been held every year since, just as it was the first time and just as it was tonight.

She pushed herself away from the balcony railing. Darkness fell over the estate as the young men doused their torches, leaving only moonlight. She listened as 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 this amazing fairytale evening.

She returned to the ornate and slightly cloying Rose bedroom; so named, she'd been told, because every available surface was covered in either floral botanicals or rose coloured fabric

and paint. Eliza flipped the light switch next to the small alcove opposite the French doors where specially designed lighting illuminated a portrait that hung over a naturally patinated copper bathtub. The portrait she suspected was the real reason for the room's name. Rose Elliot Darcy, the Baltimore debutante wooed and won by Fitz's great, great plus grandfather and namesake, looked down at her. Family legend held that when Rose saw her Mr. Darcy riding (on horseback) up to the house she would slip into the tub filled with rose scented water and wait for him. Eliza smiled thinking she wouldn't mind waiting in a bath of warm water for Fitz. She chuckled to herself; she'd probably have to wait 'til hell froze over.

Turning away from the alcove the silk of her gown brushed against her and she glanced back at the portrait. This was the gown Rose wore in the painting and to the first Rose Ball; a gown Fitz had generously allowed Eliza to wear (well, actually had insisted she wear) to his Rose Ball simply because she said she liked it. She tilted her head looking at the picture then at the dress she wore. It was just as exquisitely beautiful now as it had been then, even the rose buds embroidered all over the fabric were just as lively. Eliza laughed out loud, lively was a Jane Austen kind of word not an Eliza Knight kind of word; on the other hand this had definitely been a Jane Austen kind of night.

The Darcy Matriarch's eyes followed the New Yorker as she kicked off her shoes and sat down, falling back on to the fainting couch, not a chaise lounge mind you but a fainting couch.

"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 and stared at the ceiling. Comfortable. Eliza didn't know if that's how Rose felt about Willie Darcy (that's what Rose called her Fitzwilliam) 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 had been more at ease with him than she ever had with anyone else. Was it possible it was only two days? She glanced at the clock on the bedside table, three in the morning; that made it about forty-two hours, 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 finished telling 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.

In her mind's eye, Eliza could see Fitz astride Lord Nelson (his, then, newly purchased million dollar horse) galloping through a foggy English morning, sailing gracefully over a low stone wall then just as ungracefully stumbling on the other side throwing his rider to the ground, rendering the American unconscious as his head met a partially buried rock.

She had been sure he was crazy when he started telling her his absurd story of time travel but something in his telling stopped her from just leaving and going home. She would never know if 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 that this uber wealthy Virginia horseman had been the model for Austen's Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*; arguably the most romantic figure in English literature.

Eliza yawned; she hadn't gotten much sleep the last few days and had been running mostly on nervous energy. Carefully she removed Rose Darcy's two hundred year old gown and laid it out on the fainting couch, afraid hanging it up might damage it somehow. Sure that the gossamer fabric couldn't have been any prettier when it was new than it was tonight, Eliza slipped on her favorite extra-large tee-shirt and sat down on the small upholstered stool at the 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. Her eyes were drawn to the frame of the mirror, following the circumference with her eyes, admiring what she supposed were hand carved roses. Her eyes stopped at the right hand edge of the mirror and a small smile curved her full lips; she reached behind the mirror, nothing. She laughed out loud at herself. Finding two hundred year old letters behind an old mirror happened 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, purchased at a dusty antique shop against the advice of Jerry, her financial advisor and part-time boyfriend.

She pulled out one of the drawers and turned it over to look more closely at the dove-tailed corners and the bottom (historically the bottom should be a different wood), the action attracting the attention of her fat, grey tabby cat who grabbed the paper that fell out of the drawer.

“What have you got there, Wickham?” She took the paper and pushed him away. “Whoa! Jeez, Wickham, look at this; it's a newspaper from eighteen ten, The Hampshire Chronicle. An old English newspaper. Pretty cool, huh? A pretty good indication that it really is an English antique.” Whispering conspiratorially to the cat, “it means Jerry was probably wrong, it isn't a fake.”

Continuing to peruse the yellowing scrap of newsprint, she giggled, “What do you imagine Gerlick's Female Potion is, Wickham? Probably a patent medicine that was mostly

alcohol.” She looked up at the cat who had positioned himself on the top of her wicker clothes hamper licking his paw. “Not interested any more, huh, fat stuff?”

She scratched the cat’s head as she passed him to put the newspaper on top of the vanity and then picked up the mirror, sitting once again on the floor to more closely examine it.

“Huh-oh, backing looks kind of warped. Oh, please, I don’t want Jerry to have been right about this.”

However, further examination showed that the backing was not warped but separated from the silvered glass by two letters. Intrigued by the possibility of old love letters, she untied the green ribbon that bound them and read the address on the top one.

“Miss Jane Austen, Chawton Cottage,” she paused, “that can’t be right.”

She picked up the other letter, “Jane Austen again...to...Fitzwilliam Darcy!?” It was a stunned question and statement. She turned it over, the seal was still intact. “I guess she didn’t send it, Wickham.” She looked at the other letter; it was open and obviously written by a man.

"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."

Who was the captain and what did Jane want to know? Eliza examined the letters more carefully. It wasn’t really possible for Jane Austen to have been corresponding with a fictional character that she created, was it? The simple, obvious but completely outrageous answer was that he wasn’t fictional at all.

She looked more closely at the still sealed letter and considered opening it just so she could find out what Jane wrote to her Mr. Darcy, but 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 and tied the ribbon around them again.

“Maybe it’s some kind of joke, Wickham. Not a very funny one.” She looked over at the cat, “I’d say Jerry did this but he doesn’t have enough romance in his soul to even think of such a thing. I’m not even sure he knows who Austen is and I’d bet money he hasn’t read *Pride and Prejudice*.” Putting the letters with the newspaper she picked up the cat. “What should I do, Wickham?” He meowed loudly and squirmed out of her arms. “You’re absolutely right; I need to do some research. If Darcy was real someone must know about it.”

As night settled over the city, the golden glow from a street light outside her window was the only illumination in Eliza’s living room/studio 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.

"Austen experts! That’s what we need," Eliza said, reading the message. She examined the several topics on the message boards, 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 to herself, 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 now 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 had assumed. Because of that certainty the decision to give him the letter had been easy, as far as she was concerned Austen had written to him, so the letter was his.

The reflection of the 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 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 stopped dancing and released her, whisking her out of the ball room and out to the front porch.

He commandeered an open coach and 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 read it to her, the missive ending 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 she is found, you must tell her she is your dearest and loveliest desire. Be happy, my love. Jane."

Staring at the ground Fitz refolded the letter and slipped it into the pocket of his hunter green frock coat, then he took the step that separated them and cupped her face in his hands. She could see grateful tears glistening in his eyes when he whispered, "Dearest, loveliest Eliza."

Then he'd 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 wanted him to kiss her again but at the bedroom door he made a gallant bow and kissed her hand.

She didn't know what to say and all that came out was, "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 told him it had all been amazing, but her mind was still having trouble processing it. Hopefully sleep would make everything much clearer, so not bothering to remove her make-up or brush her teeth she climbed into bed and fell asleep imagining she was in his embrace.

SECOND CHAPTER

The sun was just cresting the Blue Ridge Mountains and it was already warm; a portent of the hot day ahead. Fitz Darcy, his arms crossed, leaned against one of the Doric columns on the porch of Pemberley House and watched Harv Harrington, his boyhood friend, slam shut the boot of his classic Jaguar. Faith, Harv's sister, stood by the passenger door of the car looking at Fitz who refused to meet her gaze.

Sighing, Faith got into the car. Fitz had been civil enough during the final preparations and the ball itself but before they had retired after the festivities their host had stopped the sister and brother as they headed up the stairs to bed. There at the foot of the elaborately carved staircase Fitz spoke to them.

"I think it best that the two of you leave first thing tomorrow morning." Then he had simply turned and walked away.

His voice held a quiet anger Faith had never heard before and even Harv, who would normally have shot back with some sharp retort or sarcastic quip remained silent, accepting what felt like a reprimand, a strange feeling from a contemporary they had known all of their lives. And now at dawn they were leaving Pemberley Farms and it felt, to Faith, like it might be for the last time.

She watched as Harv and Fitz shook hands then embraced. As her brother climbed into the small sports car Faith said, "He wouldn't even look at me."

"Yeah, and he wasn't exactly his warm, charming self to me either. I guess I can thank you for *that*, too."

"God, was it really that bad?"

"Well, dear sister, I believe you may very well have found the limit to his graciousness. You blew it big time."

"It was just a couple of glasses."

Harv looked at his sister in amazement, “You’re not that stupid, Faith.”

Feigning innocence, “What do you mean?”

“The punch cups have been in his family for over two hundred years, they weren’t random glasses you smashed on the ballroom floor, but it wasn’t the glassware and you know it. It was your attitude and actions toward Eliza; the crystal was just the final straw.”

Faith pouted silently. Harv glanced over at her.

“Your complete lack of remorse for having upset everything and then trying to make a joke out of it probably wasn’t the smartest thing you’ve ever done.”

Faith hung her head. “Do you think he’ll ever talk to me again?”

Her younger brother reached over and patted her knee. “Sure, you know that Fitz doesn’t hold grudges. But you better get used to the fact that he seems to have found someone who matters more to him than his horses. Besides, Eliza is pretty cool. You should give her a chance.”

“A chance to what, have what I want?”

“Boy, you don’t get it do you? You’ve never been more than a friend to him and if you don’t find a way to get along with Eliza you won’t even be that.”

“Do you really think it’s that serious?”

Harv glanced side-ways at his sister, “Yes and you do, too or you wouldn’t have made such a fool of yourself.”

Their mother and Mrs. Darcy had told her all the while she was growing up that she was meant to be Fitz’ bride and she had always assumed that eventually she would be. Even as they grew to adulthood and he made it clear that he had no intention of ever marrying her, she was sure she could change his mind and win him. No other girl had ever gotten in the way of that before Eliza. As Pemberley Farms faded in the distance Faith supposed Harv was right but she wasn’t at all sure it would ever be possible for her to be friends with the New York artist.

The first thing Eliza did when she got up was brush her teeth. She had no idea how she'd managed to rationalize to herself not brushing them before she went to bed. Her mouth was all fuzzy and tasted as yucky as it felt. 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.

Now she rinsed the shampoo out of her hair then stood in the shower tiled with hand painted roses (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 bottles of liquid soap, lotion and body spray; all lavender fragranced. She was surprised but rather glad that it wasn't rose. She used the body spray all over and even in her hair. She dried her hair and slipped on the jeans she'd worn yesterday 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, then set the etched glass bottle down on the weathered marble counter.

Coming back into the bedroom Eliza looked at the portrait of the Darcy Grand Dame hanging over the copper bathtub and smiled. 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 she have to wait for hell to freeze over or would he join her? In the bright light of morning it suddenly became a real question not just a fantasy. What *was* their relationship?

She had kissed him once, albeit in anger and he had kissed her once but aside from the quick kiss when he said goodnight, that was all there was to the relationship; physically anyway. 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 being nice because she

gave him the letter? The kiss by the lake last night wasn't one of simple appreciation but was it any more than a kiss?

Suddenly the thought of meeting him this morning went from excitement to trepidation. She couldn't possibly be in love with him or he with her after only three days...two, actually. Besides he was in love with Jane Austen, it was the reason he wanted the letter; to see how she felt about him. He'd gotten his answer and it was apparent to Eliza that Jane's love for him was instrumental in her suggestion that he find someone in his own world to love; his dearest and loveliest. Jane wanted him to be happy.

So was this the beginning of something beautiful for Eliza and Fitz or had it simply been a weekend dalliance? Of course there hadn't been much dallying, none actually and he didn't really seem the dallying type but she could assume nothing.

Eliza went to the blanket chest at the foot of the four-poster bed and picked up her portfolio. Tucked behind the sketches she'd done of Pemberley Farms and the one of Fitz on Lord Nelson was a small watercolor portrait she'd done of the man she'd met at the New York Public Library's Jane Austen exhibit. Even though she seldom drew people she had been compelled to paint him and it had taken only a couple of hours, as if her hand had a mind of its own. She'd never met a man who appreciated Austen and the romance of her era and more than once wished that she'd gotten his name and number. Running her finger over the drawing she realized that there definitely had been an emotional connection with the man from the very beginning, at least on her part.

Three days ago (two weeks after the library), fate stepped in and she met the man in her little portrait; Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley Farms, Virginia. This was the man who, in spite of his arrogant façade, was generous, kind and passionate; a man who definitely had her in emotional turmoil.

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 gates. Fitz turned away and poured himself a cup of coffee at the table Mrs. Temple had set up on the veranda for his remaining guests.

Alone in the early morning he took his coffee and walked down toward the barns. He'd had a good night 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 but was the most comfortable one he had, not forgetting a pad, bridle and a small apple.

At the stallion's stall Fitz opened the door and set his tack just inside, he released the top of the Dutch door and pushed it open all the way and secured the bottom half, setting his coffee cup on the ledge. The horse stood in the corner and turned to him as the latch caught on the door.

“Good morning, boy. How are you today?”

Lord Nelson nuzzled Fitz's shoulder as if in answer to the question. With his hand open he offered Nelson the apple he'd procured. While the horse greedily munched his treat Fitz gently put the saddle pad and saddle on Lord Nelson's back, slowly 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 and together the duo walked out of the barn into the early morning sun.

Using agility not common in a large man Fitz swung into the saddle, then horse and rider walked past the paddocks and out into the open fields. Spurring the great horse on they galloped across the fields, 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 did love being out at dawn with his horses. It allowed him to shake off the muzziness of sleep and think more clearly and he had a lot to think about this morning.

THIRD CHAPTER

Chawton, England

Summer, 1813

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

Atop a wooden stile she imagined him holding his arms out to her, his hands strong at her waist as he lifted her gently off her feet and set her on the ground next to him. Her heart beat rapidly; she breathed deeply to calm it.

Jane jumped down from the weathered step, soiling the hem of her gown as she landed in a small puddle. 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 as she continued her casual walk toward the low stone wall on the opposite end of the meadow. It was a walk she had made many times since he left. Her hand went to her bare throat where he had put the gold chain his late-mother had given him in his youth. She often tried to imagine him as a boy but was never able to drive the image of the man from her mind, his body tall, lean and tanned as he lay in her bed recovering from his injuries; injuries that were not nearly as bad as he had lead 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 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 wanted to stay there forever and he 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 all that he did allowed her, even now, to feel the excitement she had experienced when he touched her. She relished every moment of the time they 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...

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 instantly at her side.

"I'm sorry, Miss. Are you okay?"

Okay. That was a word she had only ever heard *him* use. Her head suddenly swiveled, their eyes meeting. 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 it had been recently.

"Who, Miss?" He reached out 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." He asked, "Why Miss?"

"I have never heard anyone else use 'okay'."

"It is a good word, I think."

"Indeed," Jane agreed.

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 had gone with him." He stood next to the horse, rubbing the animal's neck.

Jane queried, "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."

She saw a glimmer of realization flash across his face. "He's not really a spy, Miss."

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

"He give me his word that he was no spy." He dropped his eyes 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 was willing to leave it all to follow a man he had known only a few days.

Unable to hide the shock, she asked, "Why would you have done such a thing?"

The young man stood up tall, "He made me feel 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 treatment of her as an equal as well.

She said, "I believe he considered you his equal, Simmons." The young man's face beamed with the compliment.

"Where do you think Mr. Darcy is, Miss Jane?"

"Very likely he is in the state of Virginia in America, the United States."

"I have often thought of going to Portsmouth and hiring on to a ship to go to America."

"Even after all this time?"

"I want to be a horse doctor 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 could be a great danger to you."

"You think because I am English Mr. Darcy would not 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 impressed into the service of the Prince Regent."

"I was afraid you meant he would turn me out so 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. 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 Francis, her naval captain brother had been unable to capture him and Simmons had 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 remembering

that he had become a party to the deception she and Darcy had perpetrated so that they could have one last meeting. A slight sadness colored the memory, it was a meeting that was not to be and she suspected was never meant to be. Looking into the young man's guileless face it was clear that Simmons could be trusted for had he not kept their secret all these years? In fact he had risked his life for Darcy and herself so perhaps she did owe her young champion the truth.

She was aroused from the self-discussion by Simmons question, "Miss?" Jane 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 him pause but didn't stop him from saying, "You confuse me, Miss Jane."

Smiling, "Yes." Realizing, now, 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 was she to tell 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 he requested a meeting with me." She stopped talking and thought about the circumstances of the request; a hastily written note folded tightly and slipped into her hand under the pretense of finding her gloves that Darcy himself had taken.

Jane caught the hint of a smile on Simmons' face but he said nothing.

"You knew?" She queried.

"I saw him give you the note, Miss." He dropped his eyes to the ground. "That was why I had Lord Nelson ready for him when he come to the stables that night."

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

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

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

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

Smiling to try and ease the groom’s embarrassment, she agreed, “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.”

The knocking started softly enough but with Jane’s refusal to answer, Cassandra finally struck the door quite hard.

“Jane, talk to me.” Still she got no response. Plaintively her sister pleaded, “Jane, please. I am sorry if I injured your sensibilities, I only wanted to remind you...” before she could finish the sentence Jane answered without opening the door.

“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 went to the door and opened it but pointedly did not invite her sister in to the room. 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.

She knew Cassandra was just trying to protect her, but from what? Mr. Darcy had made it abundantly clear to her that he wanted nothing more than to be out of the country as soon as possible. It was the reason he wanted to see her and with, her brother, Frank’s suspicious and rude behavior toward him this evening she could hardly blame him. Besides what harm could

come from a single meeting? She conceded that the late hour and woodland location was a bit suspicious and highly inappropriate, still it never occurred to her not to go.

As midnight approached, Jane stepped out into the hall, taking note that no light shown 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. At the bottom of the stairs she 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 arrived home from her brother Edward's dinner party.

FOURTH CHAPTER

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

He dismounted and cautiously walked toward her saying, "I was afraid you wouldn't come," he stopped no more than two feet away from her, holding Lord Nelson's reins in his hand. 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 that will allow me to go back."

"Go back, where?" She questioned.

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

Taking his pause as evidence that what would follow would be a concocted story...a lie, Jane was surprised when all he said was to go back to the place he had fallen.

Irritated by his evasion, as she had no doubt he knew precisely what she wanted to know, she snippily said that it was close and she would gladly show him exactly where it was after he told her where he came from, why he was there and why his behavior was so odd.

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

Ignoring his apologetic admission Jane angrily spat, "Because I am a woman you think me too stupid to understand!?" It was part statement, part question and with the last word she

turned and walked away telling him as she went that he was free to stumble around in the dark and find the place himself.

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 instead claiming that he believed her to be one of the most intelligent women, nay, people of his acquaintance.

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, "My brother told you, did he not?"

"No and he didn't tell me about the one you're working on now, 'First Impressions', about five sisters hoping to marry well. It will be published in three years, after you re-title it."

His knowledge of First Impression, which was not yet finished 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. But before she had the chance to throw well deserved invectives at him he told her about another book.

"*Mansfield Park*. It will be considered your masterpiece by many people although, Pr..." He stopped himself before saying it and 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? And what did then and now mean? Her confusion turned to anger and she accused him of

madness saying that she did not have any idea how he knew so much of her past but he could not possibly know what her future held for no one could tell the future.

Quietly he agreed and said that was his secret, it was all the past for him. It was the past because he came from the future.

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

She nodded, “Two centuries into the future.”

Completely amazed, “How is that possible, Miss?”

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

When Simmons said nothing else in his amazement she added, “The day after that midnight meeting we came here and he attempted to enter the portal but it was not open. It 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,” adding quietly, “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 is almost sunset, Miss Jane.”

Looking out at the western horizon, Jane agreed, “So it is.”

She took three steps and stood next to him, after a few moments a fine mist started to rise from the moist grass on the other side of the wall. The mist turned to a thick fog and as the fog

cleared slightly Jane and Simmons saw a large green machine move across the far meadow. There were no horses or oxen driving it and it made a grinding noise as black smoke billowed out the back of it. They looked at each other in awe and amazement and then back where they saw a smaller wheeled vehicle with no horses kicking up dust on a dirt road next to the field. They remained where they were, transfixed until the image started to fade; a blaze of sunlight filled the space with a brilliance that seemed to bounce back at them as if off of a mirror and when they regained their vision all they saw was Edward's field 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 or worse that he did not return to his own time in safety."

"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 and was the Hampshire countryside of Regency England. She turned to Simmons.

“Mr. Darcy said that his coming here had been 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 if he returned to his own time or some other time. And we can not 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 find Mr. Darcy I would not want to come back.”

“And if you do not?”

“I will secure work in a stable somewhere.”

With the sun down, evening began to fall on the open fields. Simmons took a deep breath, “I must get back.”

“And I must return home 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 when suddenly he turned and spurring the animal to a full gallop charged the wall and sailed over it with ease.

Jane smiled at the image and started home. The cushioning of the summer pasture reminded her of the afternoon she was here with Darcy. She'd run off, as a sort of test to determine if he really preferred women who were spirited and independent as he had declared. He caught up with her, picked her up and whirled her around and then fell with her in his arms tumbling onto the soft grass. 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. It was a good thing that Darcy 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 had not taken advantage, instead he stood and offered her his hand to help her to her feet.

Even now the reluctance she had felt as she stood up with his help caused a tightening in her chest and as the years passed she had often wondered what it would have been like to have had him make love to her that afternoon. Jane 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.

FIFTH CHAPTER

Pemberley Farms ~ Virginia, USA

Summer, Now

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 the white rail fences with almost no effort.

Heritage Week was over and now things could get back to normal. He shrugged, whatever normal was and then he realized there was a very good chance that his normal was about to change radically. Eliza's letter or rather the one she found written to him from Jane ended his search for the truth of his Regency encounter. Although Eliza did much more than bring him the letter, she brought excitement back into his life; she made him want to live again. Jane Austen and Eliza Knight, the two women who engaged his thoughts this morning. The slightly tangled web they created in his mind needed a bit of sorting out. 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. How he felt about her was one of the threads of the web that he needed to untangle. Almost as if he'd been transported back to Chawton eighteen ten, the image of Jane's sweet face flooded his mind.

By the light of a single candle Jane checked on her patient and with the combination of his head injury and the laudanum prescribed by Mr. Hudson, Jane's family physician, Darcy slipped in and out of consciousness. At the moment he was groggily aware of her presence and through the veil of his eyelashes he saw in her eyes concern and questions about who he was and where he'd come from. 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 wrote, 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 low tones using a hodgepodge of words that meant nothing to her. He spoke what she could only suppose were the nonsensical ramblings of a sick brain; attributing words like television and jet to his head injury and delirium. She reached out and placed her hand softly on his cheek and was distressed by the heat radiating from him, so pouring water from the pitcher on her night stand into the basin, she dropped a clean linen cloth in to soak up the water. Wringing it out she folded it and 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 the third time she stayed and sat on the edge of the bed so that 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 the hopes that it would, in time, reduce his fever.

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

Quietly she crossed the wooden floor and slipped the 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 once again watched surreptitiously through his lashes. She leaned down and whispered, "Good night, Mr. Darcy," almost brushing his lips with her own and in spite of his continuing laudanum haze, he could see 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 asked, "Please don't leave me."

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

Cognizant of Mr. Hudson's admonition of keeping the injured American calm, she was 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 but he said nothing more only took her hand as she sat down. He did not relinquish it until Jane rose to move to a chair by the side of the bed where she finally slept.

The movement woke him and in the dim pre-dawn hour he scanned the room, there were no electrical outlets or switches, the room held no lamps, television or telephone and the only clock appeared to be pendulum driven. Everyone he'd seen were in costumes similar to the ones people wore during Heritage Week at home. Those things and the treatment he had received up to now 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 the only portrait of her to survive to the twenty-first century depicted. Not the brazen hussy of family legend 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.

Watching her in the dim 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. 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 just assumed that if he had stayed he would have been on the run from all of them. So even if he had remained in the time he probably wouldn't have seen Jane 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 never said it and the letter Eliza found 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 Spring fling across the ages?

He laughed out loud. 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.

It had happened, he now had absolute proof of it but it all happened before he met Eliza, before he knew how right love could feel.

Fitz and 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 had been 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 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 Nelson's back and then swung up behind her. He remembered the ride to the house. She was slightly light headed from the sudden fall, once on the horse she had leaned against his chest and he'd had to control his 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.

He knew how ridiculous that sounded but 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 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 she found 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 they (whoever *they* are) say 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 them over every fence and stream on their way back to the barn.