

Chapter 1



She gave up pink drinks and took up tea long ago. Chloe Parker, even after her divorce, still dreamed of a more romantic era. An age when a lady, in her gown and gloves, would, for sheer amusement, banter with a gentleman in his tight breeches and riding boots, smoldering in a corner of the drawing room.

So now that she stood deep in the English countryside, loaded down with her suitcases, at the registration desk of a Tudor-style inn, she felt as if she'd been drinking something much stronger than tea. Was she woozy from the jet lag of the eight-hour flight from Chicago to London, or enthralled with the antique furniture and aroma of scones?

A young woman in a long blue frock, apron, and ruffled cap approached and curtsied. "I'll be your maidservant during your stay, Miss Parker," she said in a monotone voice with a slight Cockney twang. "My name's Fiona."

Chloe had a maidservant? Who called her, at thirty-nine years old,

a “miss” and curtsied? As Chloe’s eight-year-old daughter, Abigail, would say, “This rocks.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Chloe said instead.

Fiona would be beautiful, were it not for the pierced hole in her pouty lower lip where her lip ring would be.

“Welcome to the set, Miss Parker,” she said without a glimmer of a smile. “To Jane Austen’s England. Or should I say Mr. Darcy’s Derbyshire?”

Chloe would be happy to be welcomed to Mr. Darcy’s pigpen, but that was beside the point.

Fiona looked Chloe over. “It looks as if you’re almost dressed for the part.”

Chloe wore lace-up boots, a long pencil skirt, and a poet blouse. She shopped at vintage and secondhand stores and most people noticed her quirky outfits.

Fiona took a skeleton key from behind the check-in desk. “Are you excited to join in our little charade?”

“This documentary’s a dream come true for me! A chance to live in the year 1812 for three weeks? No computers, just gowns, balls, and tea parties. This is my Vegas, my—Brighton.”

The ice between mistress and maidservant had been broken for a moment, because Fiona managed a half smile.

You wouldn’t have to have read *Pride and Prejudice* like Chloe did at eleven years old to appreciate the magnitude of the moment. Mr. Darcy was her first love, although other Austen heroes soon followed, but Mr. Darcy loomed large in her heart for twenty-eight years—the longest relationship she’d ever had with any man, fictional or real.

She’d also never been abroad, and never to England, even though English blue blood ran thick on her mother’s side and she surrounded herself with all things Austen and all things English, from BBC costume dramas to Cadbury chocolates. She had even named her daugh-

ter Abigail so she could call her “Abby” after the famed English abbeys.

Abigail, though, didn’t like to be called “Abby.” She took hip-hop dance classes, programmed her own apps, shot her own YouTube videos, and even filmed and uploaded Chloe’s audition video for this Regency documentary.

“With all the social networking, Twittering, e-mailing, and texting I’m supposed to be doing, I’m twenty-first-century weary and twenty-first-century challenged,” Chloe told Fiona. “I can’t wait to escape to the 1800s and slow things down for a while.”

“Right.” Fiona held out her waiflike arms toward Chloe’s suitcases. “It’s time to go upstairs and get dressed for your carriage ride to Bridesbridge Place, where you’ll be staying. Might I take your baggage?” Her outstretched arm revealed a Celtic ring tattoo around her wrist.

It occurred to Chloe that Fiona might be a little miffed that she had been cast as a servant forced to wait on the likes of her. “No thanks, I have them.”

“As you wish. Follow me, please.” Fiona spun around and led Chloe to a narrow wooden staircase with steps smoothed from hundreds of years of wear, and Chloe couldn’t help but imagine the people who must’ve walked the same path over time. It was fitting that her journey would start at an inn, as inns were the crossroads of early 1800s society, where rich and poor intermingled, horses were switched out, ladies could lunch in public, and trysts in various rooms changed destinies.

Chloe tried not to bang the plaster walls with her heavy bags.

She had baggage, that was for sure. An ex-husband, a stack of overdue bills, and a house facing foreclosure, all because her antique letterpress business was tanking. Nobody paid for their wedding invitations or anything to be letterpressed and handcrafted on one hundred percent cotton-rag paper anymore.

Letterpress was a dying art, another casualty of the digital age. The bank sent her threatening letters run off on cheap paper and laser-printed in Helvetica, the font she despised the most, because it was sans serif, overused, and, to her, it heralded the reign of the impersonal.

With Chloe's failing business, Abigail's entire world was in jeopardy. That brought Chloe here, first and foremost, to compete in this documentary, to put her knowledge of Austen novels to the test and win the \$100,000 prize. How else could she rally that kind of cash so quickly and generate PR for her business at the same time? Perhaps, though, even more than the cash, the documentary offered her one last chance at—everything.

Fiona looked down on Chloe from the top of the stairs. "How ever did you find out about our film project all the way from America?"

"Oh! The president of the Jane Austen Society of North America sent me the casting-call information. I'm a lifelong member and win so many of the Austen trivia contests, she thought of me right away. Once I won the audition, well, how could a lady refuse?"

Chloe might have been born two centuries too late, and in the wrong country no less, but now that she was in her ancestral England, everything was going to work out.

"Do you think you have what it takes to win the prize money?"

"Absolutely. All things Austen are a passion of mine, and that's why I decided to do this." If there was one thing she knew, it was Austen novels.

"What exactly do you intend to do with the money if you win?"

Chloe stopped on the stairs for a moment. "What do you mean 'if'?"

Fiona tapped her finger on her cheek and smirked.

"I fully intend to give as much of it as I can to charity." There. She made it to the second floor, where several closed wooden doors

radiated from the landing. “But only after I set aside enough money to secure my daughter’s future.”

Fiona stepped back. “Daughter? Are you *married*, Miss Parker?”

“Divorced. Four years ago.”

Fiona raised an eyebrow and made a flourish toward a door that, once unlocked and opened, revealed, in a corner of the room, a white floor-length Regency gown hanging from a large three-paneled mahogany dressing screen. “Your gown.”

“Wow.” Chloe gasped, trying to imagine herself in the straight skirt-ing, the small puff sleeves, and the revealing neckline. She thought they’d put her in something a little more—matronly.

“I didn’t expect you’d have a daughter. How does she feel about her mum being so far off?”

Chloe hadn’t worn such a low neckline in a while. “Um, she actually made her own plea on my audition video, that’s how much she supports my being here.”

They’d had so much fun filming, along with Chloe’s only employee, Emma. They shot Chloe in a hand-sewn Regency gown, sitting in a horse carriage on Michigan Avenue, sipping coffee from a white paper cup and bemoaning the plight of a modern Janeite.

But somehow, Emma’s interview questions led Chloe to a rant about men who text other women while on a date or tweet breakups, who think baseball hats are fashion, and who can give a blow-by-blow account of any sporting event but are incapable of writing a love letter even if their last glimpse of the Super Bowl depended on it.

“I remember Abby said to me, ‘You have to go, Mom. Who else owns a complete collection of the ‘I Heart Mr. Darcy, Mr. Knightly, Mr. Tilney’ blah, blah, blah coffee mugs?’ She’s staying with my parents, and even though they’re on a fixed income, I’m sure they’ll spoil her as best they can.”

Fiona folded her arms. “What really brought you here, Miss Parker?” She blocked the door.

“I’m a huge Jane Austen fan, huge. But I’m here for the prize money, really. And the great PR this will bring my failing business. I’m facing bankruptcy. My ex-husband only contributes minimally, and Abigail’s an advanced student, on the gifted track. I resolved a long time ago to give her the best education I could. You have no idea what it took to get her into her school, and if we have to move—”

Fiona didn’t seem fazed.

“Look, I don’t fit into the modern American world, but Abigail, she has an extremely bright future ahead of her. Sometimes I feel like ‘Ma’ from *Little House on the Prairie* with a daughter like her who’s into all things futuristic and trendy. But I’d do anything for her. Anything.”

“Does she know you’re here just for the money?”

“I’m not here just for the money!”

“Then what else are you here for?”

“To ogle the young men in their buckskin breeches.” Chloe winked.

Fiona smiled again.

“I’m here for the experience, of course! Although Abigail’s under the grand delusion that I’m going to find my own Mr. So-and-So.” Chloe laughed.

Fiona didn’t. “And what do you think?”

The thought had crossed Chloe’s mind, but, in true Regency fashion, she had repressed the idea, even after reading a sample bio they had sent her of a cast member, a certain Mr. Wrightman, a man who seemed great—Oxford-educated, an art, architecture, and travel buff—all interesting, except for that ridiculous stage name.

“You didn’t come here to meet a man?” Fiona asked, confirming the vibe Chloe had picked up on.

“I think that just because a woman travels overseas, people shouldn’t assume she’s looking for romance,” Chloe said. “I came here to dress in gowns for this documentary, to live and breathe the Regency, and use my knowledge of Jane Austen novels to win.”

“Of course.” Fiona turned to lead Chloe into the room.

Chloe had to sign all kinds of agreements and go through a battery of interviews and medical and psychological tests for this documentary and now her own maidservant was probing about a man, too? Why was everything always about men? She was perfectly happy without one.

Chloe stumbled, but caught her fall by grabbing onto the wooden coat tree on her way through the door.

“Mind your step.” Fiona nodded toward the floor and took Chloe’s bags. “Many of these old doorways have wooden thresholds.”

“I never was very good at thresholds—being carried over them or otherwise.”

That made Fiona laugh, and Chloe felt like she was making progress with her melancholy maid and had successfully dodged the man question.

She found herself in a fairy-tale cottage of a room with a canopy bed, a scroll-armed chaise lounge, and a fire dwindling in a fireplace with a wooden-beam mantel. The dressing screen with the white gown hanging from it dominated the room, and Chloe had to wonder: Could a mom like her pull off a gown like that?