

Chapter 1



Mr. Darcy's plane landed forty-five minutes late. Vanessa, with coffee in hand and an earbud in one ear, steered her aunt in the airport wheelchair toward the throng of people gathered at the international arrivals area of Chicago's O'Hare.

She leaned over her aunt's shoulder. "How are we doing, Dowager Countess of the local Jane Austen Society?"

Aunt Ella turned and smiled. She eagerly awaited Mr. Darcy, a.k.a. Julian Chancellor, from England. He was her honored guest and a keynote speaker for the Jane Austen Society of North America's annual conference.

He'd written a book called *My Year as Mr. Darcy*, with a quill pen no less, detailing how he'd spent a year living as if he were a Regency gentleman, and accepted the invitation to speak and promote his book at the conference. He and her aunt had been corresponding via handwritten letters for months now and had become such good

friends that she'd invited him to stay, as academics often do, in her condo.

But even a week with a Mr. Darcy clone couldn't change her aunt's status to healthy. Even he couldn't delete a dementia diagnosis.

Still, from the perspective of Aunt Ella's red-framed reading glasses, Julian's arrival couldn't be topped even if it were a visit from a royal. She'd had his September arrival date circled on her Austen calendar for months.

Vanessa's aunt, who had done so much for her and now faced dementia, considered this conference her final legacy to the literary society she had founded with a few other women and a teapot full of Earl Grey back in the 1970s. Now more than six hundred professors, scholars, and young, Web-savvy Austen enthusiasts the world over were coming to the conference—the last one to be held in Chicago for at least fifteen years.

Vanessa wanted this whole thing to be white-tablecloth perfect and as festive as the Queen's Jubilee. She needed all the *i*'s dotted and not a single *tea* crossed. That wasn't too much to ask, was it?

A magazine slid from Aunt Ella's houndstooth-skirted lap and Vanessa stopped to pick it up. The cover story title read: "Pottery Shards Prove Jane Austen Never Lived the Upper-Crust Life." A photo of blue and white china plates, broken apart, with pieces missing, topped the page. She could almost hear the clatter of the china as she handed the magazine back to her aunt, and the sharp, jagged edges of the shards gave her a chill. They reminded her of fragile hearts and fragmented . . . minds.

"Excuse me," she said with a wiggly smile, while people darted all around, and sometimes into, the two women. Her seventy-nine-year-old aunt didn't need the wheelchair, but it did make it easier for them both, if only people could successfully text while walking!

#Grrr, she thought, but didn't post. Posting would only bother her aunt.

When the Austen Society board had asked Vanessa to take on the public relations work for Julian, she'd said yes as a favor to her aunt and declined pay in order to help the cause. Since she ran her own boutique PR agency, she figured this would be a straightforward pro bono job. She'd already laid the groundwork—in fact, she'd planted an entire English garden—to ensure his success.

She'd treated him as one of her top-tier clients and plugged everything into her online calendars, complete with alerts and reminders. She'd established his online presence, since he had surprisingly little of that; generated thousands of followers across all the social networks for him; and lined up newspaper and radio interviews, book signings, and even another major appearance. Now all she had to do was escort him around Chicago, drive him to Kentucky for the Jane Austen Festival, do the real-time social networking, grab photos of him to post, film his events for uploading to various websites, hope something would go viral, and boom. He'd be back in England reaping the book sales benefits and Aunt Ella would be pleased with her niece's crowning achievements.

She nudged the wheelchair to the front of the cordoned-off crowd, right behind the rope, and pulled out the sign she'd printed. It did double duty as a PR stunt while letting Julian know where they were in the crowd, since he wasn't the texting type. The sign read:

LOOKING FOR OUR . . .

MR. DARCY

A young woman standing next to her read the sign. "Are you two—waiting for Mr. Darcy? *The Mr. Darcy?*"

Vanessa knew better than to wait for Mr. Darcy . . . or any man.

After her latest relationship *#fail* she had determined she wouldn't meet her next boyfriend in a bar or in a train car or in a house or with a mouse. She'd signed up for eBelieve, an online matchmaking service. Now she had many potentially perfect men's messages filling up her in-box, all of them sharing her interests and goals, all in her

age range, and each geographically desirable—but she had yet to find the time to reply to any of them.

Statistically, one in five relationships began online. What better way, really, to get matched with someone these days? It made complete sense to her, especially after surviving this past summer, also known as yet-another-wedding-season, when, if she hadn't been invited in person, she'd endured the wedding photos and videos splashed all over her formerly single friends' social media. How many wedding gowns, bouquets, and kissing-at-the-altar images could a single girl take? And if they weren't wedding pix, they were baby photos.

Online. That was how it would happen for her.

Oh, she eBelieved.

She reached into her overstuffed but completely organized bag for a promotional postcard to give the young woman. "His name is Julian Chancellor and he's the author of the book *My Year as Mr. Darcy*. Proceeds from his book will help save his historic family estate from demolition."

It was all very *Downton Abbey* of him—she knew this because she had absorbed some of the BBC miniseries from behind her laptop as her aunt watched on Sunday nights. He wanted to save his family home and had written the book to raise awareness and garner donations to restore the place.

Aunt Ella nodded toward the young woman. "He is very much talked of in England for his foray into the life of a gentleman. His publisher paid for his flight over to the States, and we're all hoping his book is a raging success on this side of the pond. It's for a good cause, you see."

Vanessa handed the woman the postcard. "You can follow him on all the social networking sites. And to help promote his book and generate donations for his estate he'll be doing a show called *Undressing Mr. Darcy*—"

Vanessa now had the attention of several people in the crowd, and the woman's green eyes flickered.

Sex sells, even to smart, liberated women, and Mr. Darcy was the smart girl's pinup boy.

"Undressing?" she asked.

"Yes, he gives a little historical background on his Regency-era clothing as he proceeds to take it off—down to his drawers." Vanessa smiled.

"I'm in," the woman said as she looked at the postcard.

Nobody, it seemed, was above watching Mr. Darcy remove his cravat, breeches, and boots all in the name of history.

A few others in the crowd turned their heads and Vanessa handed them postcards, too. Jane Austen fans, she had learned from her target-market research, were everywhere, including online. They made Austen one of the most popular, if not *the* most popular, dead authors on social media, and they fueled a marketing bonanza for Austen-inspired merchandise. Just searching for "Jane Austen" plus "gifts" on the Internet yielded more than six million hits. These modern Janeites were well educated, often professors and lawyers; they preferred cats over dogs, tea over coffee; they enjoyed opera; and many played the piano.

Her aunt played the piano, too, only now she needed her sheet music.

"Vanessa, you and your electronics! Must you keep that wretched thing in your ear?"

She'd forgotten all about her earbud, and she lifted a hand to take it out, but a text beeped on her phone from a client just as her aunt spoke—

Aunt Ella continued, "Did I tell you I saw your old friend Lexi on the conference attendee list? She's getting her master's in history, specializing in sex during the Regency era."

Vanessa almost dropped her phone, although none of this sur-

prised her. The name dredged up feelings almost as unwelcome as being left for yet another “sleepover” at her aunt’s condo when she was thirteen, her parents separated and her mom heading out on a date. That little girl sported a backpack on her back, clutched her favorite blanket, and stared into Aunt Ella’s glass curio cabinet at antique teacups and a framed silhouette of a woman she came to know as Jane Austen.

Lexi was no more her friend than she was the typical Austen fan.

Vanessa needed to switch up her mindset and turned to her phone, where she tapped on another one of her charity clients’ social media pages: the Cat’s Meow, an urban cat shelter. She flipped through this week’s pictures of cats and kittens. She liked cats and kittens. That much she did have in common with Austen lovers. The cat shelter proved to be her favorite client and they didn’t even pay her.

Still, she couldn’t scratch out the name: Lexi. She turned her attention back to her aunt. But the young woman and Aunt Ella weren’t looking at her. They were beaming at a tall, dangerously good-looking man on the other side of the rope wearing a form-fitting Regency tailcoat, cravat, buff breeches, and black riding boots. He had an antique, leather-bound book tucked under his arm and didn’t carry suitcases but toted old leather trunks—leather trunks on a wheeled cart? A tumble of black hair spilled onto his forehead.

How could he look so much better in person than in his author photo? She made a mental note to update that shot—it would increase their crowds. Pleased with his looks (for marketing purposes, of course), Vanessa cleared her throat, as if to clear her mind.

He wore his Mr. Darcy garb on the plane? Then she found herself trying not to notice the slight tug of his breeches, the snug way they fit him—

Huh? He was a *client*, after all, regardless of whether he was paying her or not.

Even if he had been a prospect, she preferred a man in a well-

tailored Italian suit or blue jeans and a button-down shirt, didn't she? What woman, at thirty-five years old, with a condo, her own business, family ties, and a thing for modern American amenities, would consider a man from another continent—not to mention the nineteenth century? She didn't understand it.

And, let's face it, Mr. Darcy's skill set—chiefly, diving into a pond in his shirtsleeves—would get him nowhere in today's job market.

"Miss Ella Morgan and Miss Vanessa Roberts, I presume?" he asked in a bass-range voice that needed no emoticons to get attention. Then he bowed.

He was none other than a very official-looking Mr. Darcy. On the big-screen TV above him, a bomb exploded on the news, and when Vanessa tucked her long brown hair behind her ear, her earbud popped right out.