

# Jane Austen and the Archangel

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# DEDICATION

Dedicated to letter carriers everywhere, they move our stories along more than we know.

# Chapter One

*May 1813*

*Chawton Cottage, Hampshire England*

*A letter carrier*, Michael mused as he dodged the thorns of a rosebush and headed down the path to the cottage. Perhaps he was lucky—his situation could've been dreadful. Instead of cooling his heels in a sleepy English village, he could've been sent to purgatory or ... well, he didn't want to imagine anything harsher than that. Besides, who was he to question the Almighty?

Searching through the leather pouch he'd slung over one shoulder, he felt a warm-hearted camaraderie with letter carriers—they bore messages that affected destinies. He knew plenty about *that*.

Still, the assignment would've been less provoking if he didn't know the contents of all the letters he delivered.

Or didn't care.

But he was an angel, after all. Caring came with the position. And extra responsibilities came with the rank. *Archangel*. Heavenly messenger. Master commander and all that.

Still, it irked him that he'd had no word. He burned to get on with the English War Office mission he'd been sent to command, chafed for some action. Boredom was wearing him down, and wasting precious time delivering letters made no sense. Two months had passed since the last dispatch, and this was the third village he'd been hanging about.

With an exasperated huff, he kicked an errant stone off the pathway. Making him wait was likely a further punishment. But penitence was not his strong suit, never had been. And it had been such a *minor* angelic indiscretion—just a brief, unauthorized visit to the future to set things right. Certainly not worth such a fuss.

But he'd been caught.

Hadn't his sometime friend, Gabriel, always said that the main thing was not to get caught? But well-intentioned exceptions to protocol weren't covered in angelic rulebooks.

His order for the mission would likely come unannounced, just as it had last time. He shook his head, wishing he could just as easily shake off that memory. He didn't want to think about last time. The venture had gotten out of hand, hadn't gone as planned. It still astonished him that people could be such fools. But so could angels, for that matter.

He'd just have to deal.

With a determined flick of his hand, he straightened his cap and walked up the weathered stone path. He liked this cottage. More than that, he liked Jane, the woman who lived there. But she wasn't happy. In the past few days he'd seen the lines of worry etching deeper into her face.

He caught a glimpse of her through the window, sealing yet another letter to her distraught friend, Lady Serena. Jane was always putting herself out to help her friends. But right now, *she* was the one who needed help.

It should have been a year for celebration—her books had

been published and had sold to widespread acclaim.

But Jane didn't celebrate.

Though the books had met with success, her funds were still stretched thin. She supported her mother and sister, with little help from her brothers. Those worries he understood. But Chawton Cottage was a peaceful home, suitable for the pursuit of the perfect story. Yet she wasn't writing, at least not more than letters. She hadn't written a worthwhile paragraph in months.

All this he knew because of her letters. In fact, he could know the content of every word written in the human realm if he chose to look. That ability was one of his gifts. And sometimes one of his curses.

But no matter how her troubles piled up, Jane wouldn't ask for help.

*Why was it that people never learned to ask? Didn't they know that spiritual etiquette simply required a request? But they never asked. At least the ones who most needed heavenly assistance didn't.*

He smiled to himself. He could teach Jane how to ask—surely that was allowed.

He mulled over what her letters had revealed. Not only was she worrying over her finances and not writing, her dearest friend, Lady Serena, was in love with a man who hadn't come back from the war. So many hadn't. After two years, everyone had given up hope—everyone except Serena. And Jane was Serena's only ally in resisting her ambitious family's pressure for her to marry well and move on.

A bit of masterful angel sleuthing had revealed that Lady Serena's beloved, Lord Darcy Hathloss, had been injured in the Battle of Salamanca. His head injury had resulted in total amnesia and he was marooned in Spain—in Alba de Tormes, to be precise. Though the young man's father had traveled to Salamanca and scoured the villages near the battle site, the last known location for his son, he couldn't have known that a farmer and his wife had found Hathloss wandering and delirious. They'd taken him to their home in a nearby village, out of range of the search. Since Hathloss's head injury had

erased all memory of his former life and all command of language, the rescuing family had no way to know he was an English soldier and no way to discover where he lived. It was a miracle he'd survived at all.

Clearly something would have to be done if this love story were to have a happy ending. And though it caused him to be the brunt of exaggerated jesting among the angels—jesting done behind his back and never to his face—Michael liked a happy ending.

He considered the plan he'd hatched that morning. There was one annoying hitch—he'd been told not to leave England until his current mission was completed. The order couldn't have been clearer. If his plan to rescue Darcy Hathloss, restore the man's memory and get him back to Hampshire were to succeed, he'd have to get help. And since the rest of his team had managed to finish up their assignments and return to the fold, that left only Gabriel. God only knew where *he* was. Well, God did know, but right now Michael wasn't in good enough favor to ask.

So he'd have to find Gabriel on his own.

For an angel, Gabriel was a bit of an ass. *Arse*, Michael reminded himself. Then he shook his head. He'd have to watch his language—Lack of reverence was another flaw that had landed him in this fix in the first place. He'd just have to swallow his pride, find Gabriel and ask him to help. Gabriel's powers in the earthly realm were more extensive than even Michael's. Gabriel could get the man back to England, and Michael could carry on with his plan.

He whistled as he neared the door of the cottage, a short snatch of a tune he'd heard centuries before, a bit of a love song written by a troubadour. He liked having a project; it cheered him up. And it suited him—keeping busy helped to pass the centuries.

And he liked his plan.

He hadn't worked out all the details—details were pesky irritations. Sure, messing with the man's destiny could cost him a few more years of exile, but what were a few years to an angel? And intervening would be just a *bit* of an angelic

fudge—if it did the trick, what harm could there be? Darcy and Serena would get together and true love would win the day. How could the Almighty be angry about such a blissful outcome?

And then, maybe then, Jane would be happy.

A smile curved across Michael's face as he reached the weather-beaten door. He wanted Jane to be happy, wanted her happiness in a way that he'd seldom desired anything for himself. And—he tried to stop smiling but couldn't—he wanted to be the one to ensure that happiness.

He knocked at the door and heard a quick shuffling of papers followed by the sound of Jane's steps across the floor. The heavy door creaked open. He couldn't help but notice that her cheeks were flushed, her eyes guarded, as if she'd nearly been caught at some naughty game. Little did she know that he was well aware of what she wrote at her desk, of how she covered her work to conceal her activity from servants and visitors. But since her brother Henry had bragged of her accomplishments as an author, Jane's secret was leaking out and secrecy was hardly a behavior she still had to maintain. Yet her modesty was endearing. He liked her better for it.

She looked up at him and he saw more than worry lurking in her eyes. He saw fear. It surprised him, and little did these days. But it wasn't fear of him, though had she known him better, it might have been. No, what he saw was deeper and more haunting. Something primal. Something that gnawed at her soul.

"Letter for you, Miss Austen," he said, trying for a nonchalant tone.

"Thank you," she said as she took the letter. "By the way, where's the letter carrier who delivered here last month?"

Few people noticed those who served them, but Jane noticed everything, except when it came to herself. He smiled. "I'm taking the place of your usual carrier."

She laughed. "There haven't been any *usual* carriers since I've lived here."

That was true—Michael was the third carrier this year. And God knew Damien and Alastair hadn't been hugely adept. But



they'd followed the rules and made their way back to the heavenly realms. It should've been a straightforward assignment for him as well. But as Jane smiled up at him, he had the very uncomfortable feeling—a zinging prickle of warning—that this might not be straightforward after all.

“I'm Michael,” he said, tipping his cap.

Surprise registered in her eyes. “And your surname, sir?”

*Right*, he thought. She didn't know him well enough to be on a first name basis, and even if she did, it wasn't proper to his station. *Egad*, all these English practices and sensibilities. Even more complicated than holy protocols. It was enough to make him yearn for the tumultuous era of the crusades. He'd better come up with a surname. Fast.

“Umm ...” He thought for a moment. “Grace. Michael Grace.” She wouldn't know it didn't truly fit.

“Thank you, Mr. Grace.” She turned the letter in her hand and read Serena's vibrant script that dashed across the front. It wasn't franked.

“Just a moment.” She turned to open a small wooden box on a shelf and took two coins from it.

Before he could move, she reached to place the coins in his hand and her fingers passed right through his hand. The coins clattered to the floor.

Maybe she hadn't noticed. He hoped she hadn't noticed. He'd forgotten to put his gloves on. With an inward groan, he reached into his pocket for his gloves, donned them and bent down to retrieve the dropped coins. She hadn't moved.

“It's a lovely day,” he said, dissembling, hoping to distract her. But as he knew, little escaped her keen notice.

And apparently little to do with her escaped *his* awareness.

Just that brief swoosh of her essence through his had made his heart pound, had shocked feelings through him he'd never felt before. Not good.

But the sensations that rippled through him felt good. Too good. And *that* was not good.

Without making eye contact, he turned and walked to the street, not looking back.

\* \* \*

Jane stood at the doorway, staring after the letter carrier. Wasn't it enough that she couldn't write three meaningful words in succession, couldn't develop a personality for the heroine or a plot for her story. Now her mind had to play tricks on her as well. She could've sworn that her fingers passed right through Mr. Grace's palm. And, even stranger, the most blissful feeling she'd ever experienced had washed through her at precisely the same moment, feeling like a blessing, sounding like a song. Surely she'd only imagined the soul-sweet singing, the power and splendor of a heavenly chorus. But more astonishing than the music and unearthly voices was the thrumming of her heart.

Pressing her hand against her chest she watched the man stride to the street. His dull uniform did nothing to hide the muscled grace of his movements. *Grace*. A fitting name for a man who moved as he did. Was she simply adding to the flight of fancy when she remembered the smoldering amber glow shimmering from his eyes?

*I need to keep those sorts of dramas on the page.* But that's what was wrong, wasn't it? Too much drama all around her and too little on the page. *None* on the page, she reminded herself, not a word. That wasn't like her.

She stared out at the empty street. Sometimes Chawton had moments like this when the clatter of carriages stopped and a peaceful quiet settled in. She'd come to love these moments. She shuddered as she remembered the last time she hadn't been able to write, the miserable years she'd spent with her parents in Bath. To Jane's dismay, her parents had decided to retire there. They'd uprooted her and her sister, Cassandra, and moved them into the varieties of tedium one finds in places where the idle wealthy gather to pursue their pleasures. She'd endured years of endless chatter and useless socializing, years when her heart and her pen wouldn't be coaxed. She hadn't been at home there, hadn't written a word.

After her father's passing, they'd resettled in Chawton. Finally situated in a snug home that suited her, she'd made

good progress, finished two books. But now, what was wrong with her now? She had no excuse.

Except, perhaps, her worry for Serena. Serena's plight touched something deep within her, something raw and untended. And then there was her concern over finances and her distress at not being able to do anything useful for her brother Harry. She feared he might do something desperate; he'd walked with one eye on the grave since his wife died.

But it wasn't just those worries; something deeper haunted her. If she listened to the messages of her heart, she'd have to admit that she'd been feeling at odds with herself, unmoored and strangely distanced from her inner world, the world that had always buoyed and entranced her, the world that she trusted. The *only* world she trusted.

But still, she ought to be able to write. She *had* to.

She closed the door and held her hands against it, leaning into its sturdy, well-worn wood. Looking down, she noticed a slash of white on the floor near the door. She crouched for a closer look and discovered an exquisite white feather. It would make a lovely bookmark. She closed her fingers around it and a whisper of warmth washed through her. She held motionless for a moment, savoring the heat, then stood and uncurled her fingers. The feather was gone. She looked around the foyer. It had simply disappeared.

Mystified, she walked to her writing desk and opened Serena's letter. She didn't need to read the words to know the troubles facing her friend. But as she read, she found that the situation was graver than she'd imagined. Serena's father was insisting that Serena marry a man he deemed suitable. Immediately. He'd had enough of her faithful waiting for Darcy, enough of what he saw as fanciful pining for a man who would never appear. Two years was long enough, he'd decreed, and it was time for Serena to turn her back on foolish dreams.

The anguish behind her friend's carefully penned words echoed through her. Though Jane might well torture her fictional heroines and make them squirm in the imprudence of their prejudices and follies, the fact was, she couldn't bear to

see Serena suffer.

Laying the letter aside, she stared out the window.

She knew something of the steadfast yearning of the heart, something of the pain that held tight until only a vaporous shadow remained to taunt the yearning spirit with what might have been. She thought of her own youthful self, of those brief days when she'd felt the bloom of love. It had been a long time since she'd allowed herself to think of Tom LeFroy, to remember the pain she'd suffered when he'd abandoned her without a word. As soon as his family had realized the depth of their attachment, they'd decisively separated them because neither had sufficient funds for their joining to be considered a suitable match. They'd whisked him off to Ireland, far away from her. Their cruelty and his abandonment had carved a wound she'd eventually buried deep, hoping to ignore.

*Suitable.* She was beginning to hate the word itself. Had she been wealthy, or had her books already been published to wild success, maybe then they would've had a chance at happiness, maybe then it would've been different. But it hadn't been different. And he'd married an Irish heiress, to the great relief of his family.

Since then, she'd given up seeking love for herself. Since then, she'd kept love strictly on the page; it was far more satisfying there.

Or so she had convinced herself.

But the feelings Mr. Grace had kindled clamored for more than life on a page. They'd slipped in, heedless of her carefully drawn boundaries and had breathed life into a part of her she'd kept safely dormant for so long.

She spent the rest of the day at her writing desk, staring at blank pages. Maybe she didn't have it in her anymore to write about love. Or anything else, for that matter. But writing was the best part of her world. What would she be without it? What if, as it had for so many others, the creative well had run dry?

Frustrated, she abandoned the attempt and went up to bed. In the quiet darkness, her thoughts turned to Serena. Serena was a creature of the heart. For her to be forced to marry without love would spawn life-deadening heartbreak. Jane

wished she could work some feat of magic and miraculously help her friend.

Tugging at the coverlet, she tucked it up under her chin, seeking a bit more warmth against the chill of the night. The song of a nightingale in the nearby hawthorn serenaded her but sleep would not come. Her thoughts circled again and again to the moment in the doorway with Mr. Grace. She could almost remember the blissful song. As the memory sharpened her heart picked up its beat and unfamiliar feelings teased her body. A hunger she'd never imagined, hadn't known existed, spread in and claimed territory if its own. She lay in the dark tossing restlessly and tried to calm her body and quiet her mind. Then a question pierced into her—what had happened to the feather?

She threw back the covers and snatched up her dressing gown, shrugging into it as she descended the stairs. After taking up the candle from the dining table, she lit it and walked into the foyer. As she approached the door, the candlelight cast her shadow along it, to dance there like a creature in a puppet theatre. She knelt and ran her palm along the wooden floor. Pain instantly seared her other hand. Gasping, she pulled it back as more hot wax dripped from the candle onto her fingers and across the floor. She raised her fingers to her lips. Then the absurdity struck her and she laughed. What was she doing pattering around in the dark, in the middle of the night, searching for a feather?

\* \* \*

In the morning, after downing a quick cup of tea and some cold toast, Jane sat at her desk, paper arranged just so. Though she had a vague sense of a story forming in her mind, the words still resisted her. Disturbed, she gave up and began a letter to Serena. Fighting the impulse to tell her about the strange encounter with Mr. Grace, she was considering an alternative when a loud knock resounded at her door. Perhaps the bakery delivery. That would be a pleasant surprise.

“Good day to you, Miss Austen.”

It wasn't the baker.

Mr. Grace beamed at her as if he had no need of sunlight to illuminate his face. He stepped closer. The man obviously had little sense of decorum. But his smile was irresistible.

“And to you, Mr. Grace,” she said, feeling awkward. He acted as though she should be inviting him in, as though she were violating some unknown rule of hospitality in not doing so.

He handed her another letter from Serena.

Lord Baringdon, Serena’s father, had franked it. Jane was relieved—her funds were precious and every penny counted. Being able to economize on postage was a welcome reprieve.

Mr. Grace stood in the doorway, waiting for she knew not what. Flustered, she tried to ignore the raw, manly beauty of him. He was an unnerving combination of height and muscles and a pulsing physical presence, yet his face shone with a gentleness that tugged at her. She recalled the feeling she’d had the day before. *Bliss*. There was no other word for the emotion. But the tantalizing hunger lurking beneath it set her on edge. Coming to her senses, she slid the letter into her pocket and began to close the door.

He didn’t move, but she imagined he’d leapt toward her. Or maybe it was her body—not her imagination—that felt the nearness of his. In truth, he simply stood there as a powerful smile curved across his face and lit his eyes.

“Yes, well, thank you, um ... Mr. Grace.” She was stammering!

He stepped back. She smiled—what did it matter that it was a wavering one—and pulled her gaze from his. Inhaling deeply, she pressed the door closed and listened to his receding footsteps as he walked to the lane.

Then she raced to her desk and made frenzied notes, trying to capture his smile, to put words to the sensations that had passed through her, trying to hold the experience long enough to get it on paper. When she’d finished, she read over the sheaf of pages. Though she’d portrayed the actions and the details, she hadn’t rendered the inexplicable and elusive joy that the encounter had sparked. And she hadn’t written about the haunting feeling of having been summoned—but to what, she

didn't know. Her inner universe had been disturbed and something within her, some part of her that she'd long ago shut away, clamored to be heard. That evening when she nestled into her bed, the mystery of it kept her tossing, sleepless, late into the night.

\* \* \*

The next morning Jane dismissed the maid and savored having the cottage to herself. Her mother and Cassandra were visiting her brother, Edward, and she'd have two peaceful, solitary days.

Yet, though she sat diligently at her desk, her characters and story simply teased at the edge of her awareness, and no attempt on her part would call them forth. Reading through the sheaf of pages she'd hastily penned about Mr. Grace confounded her all the more.

Perturbed, she donned her sturdy boots and set out for a walk to the neighboring village. Fresh air would clear her mind; it always did.

After visiting her favorite shops, feeling cheered by their bright displays and quirky shopkeepers, she headed back to Chawton. The storm that had lurked in the distance during the morning was now muting the afternoon's light. The sky darkened rapidly, and she quickened her steps. Large raindrops pelted the road and her skirts were soon lined with mud. An unseasonable chill pervaded the air, making her glad for her sturdy pelisse.

She laughed to herself. A cold soaking was a mighty price to pay for ribbons, but the paper had been a necessity. At least she hoped she'd need it. After Mr. Grace's unsettling visit yesterday, she'd used up most of her supply, even if the pages hadn't been what she'd hoped for. Certainly the words on those pages hadn't led to *any* coherent account.

*Words.* They'd been her life. They could serve and elude, could be wielded to help beings flourish or just as easily cause harm and unhappiness. Words broke hearts, broke rules, soothed and healed. And right now, the inability to wield them

to her liking—no, her inability to wield them at all—was torturing her.

As she hurried along, the song of a thrush trilled in the hedge along the lane. She didn't lift her head to search for the defiant bird that sang despite the rain, but she did smile at his daring. Birds had no need of words. They communicated their timeless messages without fussing over nuances and hidden meanings as men and women did.

She shook out her skirts and dashed into the cottage, closing the door quickly to keep out the now pelting rain.

She hadn't even removed her gloves before she heard the knock behind her. She whirled to face the door. Without looking, she knew Mr. Grace stood on the other side.

By the time she opened the door, he'd already dripped a spreading puddle onto the flagstones. He was soaked through. Wet and smiling, he looked like some lost hero washed ashore on her doorstep.

"Would you care for a cup of tea to warm you?" The words tumbled out before she could stop them. The frisson of embarrassment that rose in her was instantly nipped by his radiant smile.

\* \* \*

"It's certainly the most welcome invitation I've had all day," he said with a grin. "Wouldn't mind, thank you."

*Wouldn't mind?* If it had been in his power to affect her will, he would've conjured an angelic spell and *made* her ask him in. But angels were forbidden to counter human free will. Pleased that she'd invited him in without prompting, he stepped across the threshold.

Jane appeared to be considering his reply as she guided him to the parlor. *Not* the smoothest of replies on his part. He glanced at her desk when she hurried over to cover her papers. He hid his smile and wondered how unsettling she'd find it if she discovered that he knew the content of every page she'd ever written. Sometimes angelic powers actually turned out to be useful, but in this case perhaps it was a blessing that the



rules also required that he keep the knowledge to himself.

“Would you excuse me,” she said as color rose in her cheeks. “I’ve given the maid the day off and, well ... I’ll just be a moment.” She waved her hand toward a small chair. “Please hang your coat near the fire to dry. Never mind the carpet; it’s old.” Her rapid words and erratic movements told Michael she was either uncomfortable or uncertain. And he’d had no intention of making her feel either emotion.

“I could help you,” he offered as he shrugged out of his coat.

“Oh no. Heavens, no. I mean, I *can* make tea, Mr. Grace.” She offered a hesitant smile. “Do sit down, Mr. Grace. I can only imagine how tiring a day like this must be.”

*You have no idea*, he thought as she left the room.

Tiring didn’t begin to cover it. Exhilarating, intriguing, and entrancing, but not tiring.

Michael studied the small parlor. Lit by a large window, it had a homey feel. To take advantage of the sunlight, her small writing desk—topped with a mahogany escritoire and covered with two stacks of those hastily concealed papers—was angled near the window. He knew that one pile held Serena’s letters and Jane’s unfinished reply. There was also the beginning of a letter to her sister, Cassandra, and a near-finished letter to her brother Francis, an admiral in the Royal Navy. The other pile held Jane’s scribbled notes from the previous day.

He considered the contents of that pile. A thrill rushed through him when he understood that he’d made an impression on her. He didn’t know why, but the knowledge made him happy all the same. And he was especially happy that he’d kept to the rules and hadn’t used his powers, not one of them. He hadn’t cast an angelic glamour—*that* was strictly forbidden—and hadn’t conjured any supernatural effort. She’d responded of her own will. But the episode and the feelings it had released in him had surprised him, and very little surprised Michael after all these years.

*Watch out*, a small voice called in warning from some deep recess of his consciousness. But he wasn’t one for heeding warnings. If he had been, he certainly wouldn’t be sitting in

Jane's parlor, enjoying the warmth of the snapping fire and anticipating her return.

The door creaked open. He leapt to his feet to help her maneuver the large tray and settle it on a table near the fire.

"Thank you." She smiled. "It's heavier when it's set for two."

If he hadn't been watching closely, he might not have noticed the slight trembling in her hands as she poured the tea. He wished he could put her at ease, but he was a bit nervous himself. The sensation confounded him. He'd sipped tea with queens, guzzled champagne with dukes and shared warm milk straight from the goat with farmers and their wives—why would having tea in a cottage with Jane make him nervous? He gritted his teeth behind his smile. Gabriel had more than once claimed that Michael's failure to experience human love would some day test him. Michael sure hoped Gabriel was wrong. At least about that. Well, about many issues, actually. But most especially about being tested about love. Michael had seen what love did to men and women; he'd prefer to avoid that kind of trial.

"I'm afraid we have no sugar," Jane said as she lifted a cup and saucer from the tray. "I do hope you don't take sugar."

The silvery light from the window bathed her in a gentle radiance. She had lovely eyes, like a doe's. So wide, so observant. So kind.

"Mr. Grace?" Her voice startled him from his trance. She held the cup out to him.

"Sugar? No, thank you," he said as he took the cup from her hands. "I prefer it purely as you offer it."

He hoped she didn't think it strange that he hadn't removed his gloves. *That* was a mistake he wouldn't repeat. And though his oversight yesterday had been foolish, he wouldn't wish away the results. He had felt her. *Felt* Jane. In a deep, mysterious realm within himself, a realm he hadn't known existed or at least had never acknowledged. Sure, he'd heard the troubadours' songs, knew all the love poems ever written and had observed countless couples in love—had even helped a few—but he'd never, ever been immersed in feeling as he

had been when he'd felt Jane. When he'd touched not her hand, but her essence. When he'd felt the wild ardor of her soul.