

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white dress with a dark sash and a dark shawl, stands on a stone staircase covered in snow. The scene is decorated with candy canes, holly leaves, and red bows. The background shows snow-covered trees and a bright light source creating a lens flare.

LAURA  
BRIGGS

CHRISTMAS  
WITH  
MISS  
AUSTEN

Christmas with  
Miss Austen

Laura Briggs

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## **Christmas with Miss Austen**

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## Dedication

To Jane and Jane, both of whom made this possible  
over one hundred years apart.

The real Jane Austen never would have made this mistake.

This was Julia Allen's first thought as she opened her eyes to darkness, the only light the faint embers dying in the hearth. Sitting up, her book tumbled from her lap, landing on the threadbare antique carpet beneath her feet. A first edition of *Northanger Abbey*.

It was not 1818, however, but the twenty-first century. And Julia Allen was not a Regency women's author, but a volunteer at the historic Steventon House, property of the city of Delaford, Massachusetts.

She must have fallen asleep waiting for the last few Sunday evening visitors to straggle out. The fellow volunteer who walked this floor before they turned out the lights missed her somehow. Which meant the building was now a series of dark, cold hallways ending with a locked door.

A wave of panic rose in her throat. *Calm down, Julia*. She glanced at the faint streetlight pouring through an opening in the heavy window drapes. Only a few hours before, she had been strolling about the room, reading aloud to entertain the ever-changing parade of tourists pressed against the velvet ropes.

Obviously, it took more than matching initials and a Regency costume to grant a twenty-something-year-old artist the common sense of one of history's wittiest women. A thought which gave Julia little comfort as she gathered her skirts, shivering against the cool atmosphere. That slight sense of panic returned as she felt her way through the darkness, hastily turning the

knob that led from the Steventon House drawing room to the main hallway.

Locked inside a dark and creaky nineteenth-century home. Now, that was an adventure to inspire a future painting series, perhaps. Or inspire a prayer breathed under her breath for heavenly protection.

Her costume for the community re-enactment thankfully included a velvet bonnet and a heavy winter cloak for covering her empire-waist gown. She pulled the cloak more closely around herself in the gloomy hall. A faint chiming sounded as the old grandfather clock in the main corridor marked one a.m., way past Delaford's business hours and Julia's own self-imposed bedtime for rising at seven-thirty in order to be her at "real" job at the Starry Night Bistro.

She drew back the bolt on the main door and turned the lock on the knob below, shoving the door open to let in the cold night outside. She tucked the copy of *Northanger Abbey* beneath the cloak to protect it from the damp atmosphere.

On loan from one of her local artist friends, the rare first edition lent an authentic touch to her literary persona. Even though this particular novel was published at least a year after the real Austen's death, making it unlikely she ever perused a copy in her own sitting room.

The cool wind ruffled Julia's curled hair beneath her bonnet, as she pulled the door shut firmly, listening to make sure the newly-turned lock caught. She crossed her fingers that it would be safe enough until tomorrow's volunteers arrived. She gathered her skirts, hurried down the steps, and towards home.

The other downtown buildings and shops were illuminated by old-fashioned street lamps, the posts

already festooned in holly boughs and red ribbons for the Christmas season. Paper snowflakes and stars dangled from business awnings, while an impressive, hand-carved wooden nativity served as the town square's centerpiece.

Her rented house was only five minutes away, but she would reach it faster if she cut across Delaford Park. Wrapping her costume closely around her, she stepped over the low fence line and waded through the thin layer of snow towards the main path. The city park seemed a little less welcoming in the after-dark hours. *Dear Lord, please don't let any muggers be lying in wait*, she prayed, her pulse quickening with the pace of the winter breeze.

Slipping beneath the sprawling branches of an old sycamore, Julia hopped over the snowdrift onto the main path. She gasped as a tall, masculine figure appeared head-on in the gloom, his features obscured by the shadows as his body collided with hers.

"Excuse me." An apologetic male voice said as a hand reached out to steady her. But she was already past him, casting a fleeting glance over her shoulder as she hurried along.

Her heart slammed against her chest as she breathed. *Just keep walking*. Her ears caught the sound of his voice again, but the words were lost on the wind. Should she have stopped? Going on was rude, perhaps, but her nerves shrank from facing a stranger in such a lonely spot. Not to mention explaining why she was roaming the streets of twenty-first century Delaford dressed like a character from *Pride and Prejudice*.

She crossed the avenue to the residential section. No footsteps echoed behind her, just the crunch of frost

beneath her shoes. She slowed her brisk pace only when she turned in the gate for the sage green house with bay windows and peeling paint.

Shoving the key into the lock, Julia glanced at the street behind. No figure loomed in the shadows. *Silly—letting your imagination run away with you.* Almost as bad as Austen's naïve little Catherine Morland. Catherine was the impressionable young heroine in the book Julia had been reading all afternoon, and no doubt the cause of her overreaction to the night's adventure.

As she slumped against the door, she almost giggled at the nature of her predicament. A woman traipsing through a park in a floor-length frock at one in the morning. Probably the stranger she encountered was far more startled by the experience than she had been. With an amused smile tugging her lips, Julia unfastened the ribbons below her chin and tossed the bonnet onto her sofa.

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Did he imagine it?

Eliot Weston peered into the sea of blackness, where the strange young woman vanished moments before. Pale white light from the nearest street light had allowed a glimpse of dark curls, full lashes, and rich hazel eyes. And something else rather unexpected—a long, sweeping Regency style gown and cloak straight from the pages of classic English literature.

"You need to get some sleep," he murmured, as he searched the darkened landscape for signs of the mystery girl, who seemed to have vanished in the

gloom. Not even a flutter of yellow skirts or bonnet ribbons in the fog.

Maybe putting in late nights as the book historian at Delaford University was taking its toll at last. His 'little sis' Isabella liked to tease he would end up becoming as musty and forgotten as the books he kept piled inside his office. But he couldn't help that inspiration struck at odd hours, keeping him at work long past the other faculty members, his fingers flying across the computer keyboard, formulating notes for his upcoming lecture on feminine roles in Gothic literature.

He claimed it was only by God's protection that he hadn't wandered into an accident on one of his late-night walks. But until now, God had never let him encounter anything so interesting as the striking vision of the lady on this path.

Maybe tonight's experience proved a point about his poor sleep habits. Because there was no way he really saw a woman dressed like Jane Austen strolling through the grounds of Delaford Park. Right?

With one final glance, he turned back in the direction of his original destination: the parking lot near the Starry Night Bistro, where his car still sat parked from dinnertime. Eliot preferred walking to driving, since the exercise helped trigger the creative processes. The downside being he often forgot just where he left his car, resulting in more than his fair share of towing fees.

*Smack!* His foot kicked something hard and flat as he passed beneath the old sycamore tree whose shadow had obscured the woman's shape in the dark. Reaching down, he grasped a small, leather object. Definitely a book, from the shape and feel of it.

Carrying it to the nearest lamp post, he turned it over to examine an elaborate binding in the faint glow. Crushed morocco, gilt edging, and a floral centerpiece combined to create a stunning effect. Without looking at the publication date, he guessed it to be antiquated, possibly from the 1800's. But he didn't expect the information he found on the title page.

*Northanger Abbey*. Jane Austen's first full-length novel, published posthumously.

"This is crazy." Eliot stared at the Austen title, dazed by the coincidence. Barring time travel—or a runaway imagination—no other explanations leaped readily to his sleepy brain for the presence of the antique volume in the snowy park.

Tucking the book beneath his arm, he glanced around the empty town square, wishing in vain that the beautiful heroine would return and claim her property.

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"Oh, *no*." Usually, Julia's first words in the morning were mumbled to herself as she searched for a cereal box in the cabinets, but not this morning. Her current search was for something far more important than cornflakes for breakfast.

She groaned as she shook out the dark blue Regency cloak for the tenth time. A tissue and lip gloss bounced from hidden pockets onto her bare foot, partly concealed by baggy pajama pants.

But no hidden book tumbled from its folds to relieve her anxiety attack. Meaning she'd lost a rare and probably very expensive first edition volume. And after promising she would all but guard it with her life,

too.

*What'll I do, Lord? I have to find it. Help me remember, show me where to look.*

She raked fingers through her now strawberry tinted hair—the color she preferred it to be whenever she wasn't moonlighting as famous nineteenth century figures. Tattered jeans and sneakers, graphic t-shirts, and neon skirts also helped complete the transformation from 1800's author to modern artist.

It was a strange alteration, punk suburbia vanishing in a swath of delicate muslin and scoop bonnets on the weekends, a contrast her family and friends found irreconcilable despite all her defensive explanations.

"How can you dress up like that *Pride and Prejudice* girl and then paint some freaky, avant-garde thing? Doesn't that feel weird—I mean, pretending to be stuffy when everyone knows you really love spray-painted sneakers?" her brother Steve would ask.

"Being Jane is just different," she answered. "It's not stuffy, it's..." she trailed off, frustrated that she couldn't find the words to describe it.

"But isn't it a little too different for you?" asked Steve. "I just don't think people would find you convincing if they knew the truth. I mean, the spiky-haired Barbies covered in marker colors, the dress made out of flattened aluminum cans you wore to the prom..."

"I get it," she snapped. "Old romance literature and graffiti don't mix. But I'm not making fun of Jane Austen, whatever you say."

"Right." He laughed. "Like you actually believe in that kind of stuff." He ignored her protests as he tapped her Andy Warhol notebook, as if it were proof

he was right.

Steve wasn't alone in his opinion about modern art and classic literature mixing. She saw the way her mother wrinkled her nose as she studied her latest Regency-inspired surreal canvas. Picasso's style mixed with *Sense and Sensibility* received a lot of raised eyebrows.

"I think Jane Austen's books are silly, but do you have to mock them like this?" her mother asked.

A bitter accusation, considering her work was currently worth less on the market than a new hardcover copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Groaning, Julia lifted the cloak and draped it over a nearby chair, careful to avoid contact with the miscellaneous paint pots and water colors. Shrugging on a sweater and paint-splattered leggings, she grabbed her purse and set off for the cafe.

She had fifteen minutes before her eight hour shift at the Starry Night Bistro began—maybe she could retrace her steps and find that book. Although it could have fallen anywhere between the Steventon House and her front door, a random route that would probably be impossible to trace after five hours of sleep.

Cutting through the park, she found piles of slush and bare ground visible in places with damp leaves and muddy footprints. But not even the usual odd scrap of litter dotted the pathways, much less an antique book. Heart sinking, she pushed through the bistro's back entrance and punched her timecard.

"Good weekend?" Her freckle-faced co-worker, Harriet, joined her at the counter with a chipper smile and a tray of pastries for the display counter, doughnuts garnished with festive red and green

sprinkles for the holiday season. “You had a reenactment thing, right?” This was said with a knowing look, like the wink of a fellow conspirator. Harriet had once told her that she fell asleep on the second page of *Emma*.

“It could’ve been better,” Julia answered, pulling an apron with a moon and star motif over her head. How much better she didn’t say, as she slid open the glass doors to the display counter.

“What happened? Couldn’t think of a way to get Lizzie and Mr. Darcy together?” Harriet joked, giving her elbow a playful shove.

Julia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Not exactly a character-based problem. It was just a little mishap with a book I borrowed.”

The first round of customers trickled inside for doughnuts and mocha lattes, preventing a more detailed explanation. She didn’t mind, since most of her co-workers were mystified as to why an avant-garde artist would volunteer at a creepy old house with a crew of elderly docents and soccer moms. Her peers at the coffee shop spent their weekends trolling the mall, or taking in movies at the local theater.

When her lunch break came, Julia raced across the town square to the Steventon House, her backpack flapping against her side in a frenzied manner.

“Hey, Julia, aren’t you early?” Mrs. Stanley, a volunteer desk clerk, gave her a puzzled smile as she glanced up from the ticket reel.

Julia didn’t pause, hurrying towards the stairs to the upper floors.

She scoured the foyer, staircase, and the drawing room for any sign of the lost book. She checked the coat closet where volunteers stowed their private

possessions, even the restroom. But the only books she found were the rows of dusty leather-bound volumes that lined the Steventon's parlor shelves.

*I'll have to replace it.* For no small fee, she knew. The friend she borrowed it from had stressed its pristine condition as part of an original four volume set that also included Austen's final novel, *Persuasion*. Anne Norris was one of the few people who understood how an urban artist could be inspired by Austen's literature.

"It took me years to find them all," said Anne, placing the copy carefully in Julia's hand. "I found the first one at a junk shop in England. A virtual steal of a bargain, it was. No doubt buried in a pile of books from an old library someone donated to a rummage sale."

"I'll be careful with it, I promise," said Julia, pressing the volume against her. "I just want Jane to be real to them, you know? Like they've stepped back in time to meet her or something."

Anne laughed. "I understand. When I think of all the people in the past worth meeting, Jane would be near the top of my list, for her sense of humor, if nothing else." Her fingers lovingly traced the row of semi-shabby antique volumes, the rare editions of Austen's works.

Like Julia, Anne was an artist, although more heavily inspired by the Impressionists than the post-modern period. Sometimes Julia detected a trace of Jane in the colorful oil canvases inspired by Monet and Van Gogh. But maybe that was just because of the session in which she sat for Anne, a solemn figure in a Regency gown and bonnet, only a hint of a smile on her face as it appeared on the more experienced artist's

canvas. Just as Anne had wanted it.

Maybe she could get a replacement copy of this one particular volume from an online dealer. It would certainly be easier than scouring used book shops all over Delaford and its surrounding communities.

Or telling Anne that she lost one of her most precious possessions in all the world.

*Help me solve this problem, Lord. It's my fault, my stupid fault that I didn't keep my promise to her,* Julia prayed as she paused in the doorway to the break room. Inside, Harriet was sipping a cappuccino and checking her emails on the computer.

Opening her eyes, Julia offered her coworker a smile. "Hey, mind if I use the Internet for a second?"

"Sure. I was pretty much done, anyway." Harriet vacated the seat, pausing to toss a sticky napkin in the trash can.

*Here we go.* Biting her lip, Julia typed in the search terms. *Northanger Abbey*, first edition, buy. She scrolled through the results, clicking on the first reputable-looking book dealer's name she saw. A picture of the exact 1818 book set popped up on the screen.

With a price of ten thousand dollars.

She searched page after page for an affordable copy that would still fit Anne's collection. But the individual volumes weren't available, not even on the numerous online auction sites. The cost of the set was a fortune—the only solo first edition of *Northanger Abbey* she could find was damaged beyond value but still priced beyond her wallet.

Either she'd have to purchase a complete set with borrowed funds or pray that somewhere she could find a single copy for a few thousand. As it was, she could kiss the last of her meager savings goodbye.

With a groan, she buried her head. If she sold a hundred paintings, it would never come close to the necessary amount for either purchase.

The problem haunted her as she wiped down tables and took orders for club sandwiches and exotic coffee flavors. Collecting the bits of trash from one booth, she paused over a discarded copy of *The Daily Delaford*.

Maybe she should place a Lost and Found ad. Or maybe there were some local book shops or dealers with information in the classifieds section.

"Please, please let there be something," she murmured, as she thumbed through the pages, skimming the columns for anything remotely book related, and pausing as she spotted a notice in the local events section:

Hampshire Hall proudly presents a lecture on the *Feminine Mystique in Regency-Era Gothic Literature* by Dr. Eliot Weston, resident book historian and literary professor at Delaford University.

A book historian—that sounded promising, like an answer to her prayer. Maybe he could give her some names and numbers of sellers and collectors. Or maybe, just maybe, he owned a copy himself. One he would be willing to part with for a reasonable price.

"Julia! Grab some more creamer packets from the back room." Her manager, Doug's, voice pulled her back to the reality of the bustling dining area.

"I'm on it," she said, tearing the ad from the paper and tucking it in her pocket with a mental note to find this Dr. Eliot Weston as soon as she got a chance.

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The bell above the door at J. S. Pratt's Antiquarian Shop jangled, as Eliot made his way inside. Sunlight filtered through the oversized windows, revealing row after row of wooden shelves, packed to the brim with books of all shapes and sizes. Faded hardbacks, peeling leather, and crumbling paperbacks peeked from every possible space, including the window sills and rolling ladders.

"Be with you in a minute," a man's voice called from somewhere among the stacks.

"No problem." Eliot placed his shoulder bag on a counter that displayed antique maps and inkwell sets beneath the glass. Pulling the Austen book from the bag, he studied its impressive binding once more. Missing his lunch hour would be worth it to get a fair estimate and a little of the history behind the carefully preserved first edition.

Then maybe he could find a way to restore it to the rightful owner—if only to prove to himself she actually existed.

"Dr. Weston, isn't it?" said the white-haired book dealer as he emerged from the maze of shelves, wiping his hands on a dust rag. "I've seen you lecture at Delaford University. Nice presentation on Greek Mythology in Fiction."

"I didn't think anyone stayed awake for those." Eliot flashed a lopsided grin and slid the book across the counter. "Think you could take a look at this? I've tried the Internet but price estimates are all over the place."

"Well, let's see." Mr. Pratt drew a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket and peered through the lenses at the book's cover. An approving smile curved his lips, as he fingered the bands of gilt. "Ah,

yes, Riviere & Son. Some of the finest binding in the history of the business."

"I've seen a few of their editions before," Eliot said, leaning against the display case. "One particular John Keats volume from 1818 caught my eye at a book fair in Boston. I can't remember the name, something like—"

"*Endymion*," the dealer supplied with an approving smile. "A very beautiful poetry collection I've seen only once in my thirty-year career. Fetched eighteen thousand dollars at auction, it seems."

Eliot let out a soft whistle. "Guess I'll have to take it off my Christmas list then, along with that second home in Bermuda."

The dealer chuckled, turning his attention to the copy of *Northanger Abbey*. "Well, this appears to be in excellent shape." He turned it over, inspecting the spine, and then flipped open the cover. "Hardly any fading on the leather, no loose pages. It's part of a set, as I'm sure you must have noted."

Eliot nodded. "An expensive one. Ten to twelve thousand dollars judging from the online auctions."

"The set as a whole is certainly very valuable." Mr. Pratt drummed his fingers against the desk, an inquisitive look on his face. "You only have this one volume, I take it?"

"Correct." He fell silent, praying there wouldn't be any questions about how it came into his possession. Especially since he wasn't a hundred-percent certain what transpired that brief, startling moment in the park.

"Well, of course, not having the rest of the set diminishes the value somewhat." The dealer paused to ruffle the pages, none of which bore any marks or

stains. "Still, given the nearly pristine quality, I would say this copy should easily fetch somewhere between one thousand and fifteen hundred dollars."

Wow. The girl who dropped it must be frantic, if she had an inkling of its worth. His mind traveled back to the striking hazel eyes and brown ringlets of hair; the graceful Empire style gown. An image so vivid, yet so improbable.

Mr. Pratt seemed to interpret his silence as disappointment. "I could make an offer of eleven hundred, if you're interested."

"No, sorry. But thanks for the estimate." He slipped the book back in his pack, making sure it was cushioned by the folders. "But if you ever run across a phenomenal deal on that Keats volume, give me a call."

"Will do." The dealer shook his hand, then turned to greet a new customer.

Before returning to work, Eliot stopped at the local police station, where he turned over the book, as well as an appraisal slip from the antiquarian shop. The best possible way to find the owner, or at least, the only one he could think of at the moment. Holding onto a lost book of this value made him feel strangely guilty.

"I'm sure someone will claim it," he said, feeling a twinge of sadness as it disappeared into the safe. As if it somehow connected him to the mysterious young woman with the warm hazel eyes.

"Well, if they don't, it's yours to claim in thirty days," the officer said, locking the safe.

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"So you're saying you bumped into Jane Austen at

midnight in the city park?"

"Well, not exactly." Eliot squirmed beneath the burst of good-natured laughter his father's question drew. Maybe the weekly Wednesday dinner at his parents' home wasn't the best place to share his late-night 'Austen encounter', as he now thought of it.

At least he had a sympathetic ear in one of the dinner table's occupants. Fourteen-year-old Isabella, or "Bella", the romantic at heart, was already leaning across the table to fire off questions about the fabric of the woman's dress, whether she wore her hair wound up in a chignon, or trailing her shoulders in long, elegant curls.

"Try to remember," she urged. "Did she wear a lace cap or maybe a bandeau? Because that could tell us something about her age, if she were married or single, even—"

"Slow down," Eliot said, coughing on a swallow of water from his glass. "Sorry, Bella, but not being an Austen addict like yourself, I didn't memorize all the technical details. All I know is, a girl in a Regency gown was there on the path."

Bella sighed. "I'm not *that* fanatical, Eliot." A lofty claim, since she owned a closet full of Austen themed T-shirts and kept her bedroom walls and ceiling plastered with posters of the numerous film adaptations. "All I want to know is what she looked like."

"I still say your eyes were playing tricks on you," his mother insisted, collecting the empty dessert plates. A science professor retired from the University of Massachusetts after twenty-four years, Charlotte Weston gravitated to the logical explanation for almost everything, including matters of romantic attraction.

“Poor light distorts our vision and deceives our imaginations,” she added.

“Well, maybe.” He toyed with his fork, not satisfied with the explanation. The book itself still seemed too much of a coincidence, shadows and poor lighting aside.

“Here’s a theory,” his father, Henry, a freelance writer, chimed in, with a humorous gleam in his eye. “Pretty much the only women you spend time with are the long dead, historical types, right? Well, maybe this is a symptom of your obsession. You know—a sort of dream girlfriend.”

Laughter erupted from the two female listeners over this remark.

Eliot’s love life, or rather, nonexistent one, was a subject he tried to avoid at all costs, since his work at the university left scant time for even casual flirtations. At best, he managed a date every two months, usually to something like a movie or the symphony. Or one of his own lectures, where the date spent the evening stifling yawns and checking her wrist watch.

“So our son’s ideal woman is from another century?” An amused smile twitched the corners of his mother’s mouth. “I suppose it could be possible, given the fact his last steady relationship was back in graduate school.”

*If our Heavenly Father created a girl to be your second half, He would have to put her in a book to get your attention.* A direct quote from Eliot’s father in the past, concerning his son’s solitude.

“OK, I get it—you think I’m the real life version of the movie, *Somewhere in Time*.” Eliot crumpled his napkin with a sheepish grin. “Let’s just forget I ever mentioned it and move on to more pressing matters.