



Emma, Mr. Knightley and Chili-Slaw Dogs (Jane Austen Takes the South)

By Mary Jane Hathaway



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From the bestselling author of *Pride, Prejudice, and Cheese Grits* comes a new and comical contemporary take on the perennial Jane Austen classic, *Emma*.

Caroline Ashley is a journalist on the rise at *The Washington Post* until the sudden death of her father brings her back to Thorny Hollow to care for her mentally fragile mother and their aging antebellum home. The only respite from the eternal rotation of bridge club meetings and garden parties is her longtime friend, Brooks Elliott. A professor of journalism, Brooks is the voice of sanity and reason in the land of pink lemonade and triple layer coconut cakes. But when she meets a fascinating, charismatic young man on the cusp of a brand new industry, she ignores Brooks's misgivings and throws herself into the project.

Brooks struggles to reconcile his parents' very bitter marriage with his father's devastating grief at the recent loss of his wife. Caroline is the only bright spot in the emotional wreckage of his family life. She's a friend and he's perfectly happy to keep her safely in that category. Marriage isn't for men like Brooks and they both know it... until a handsome newcomer wins her heart. Brooks discovers Caroline is much more than a friend, and always has been, but is it too late to win her back?

Featuring a colorful cast of southern belles, Civil War re-enactors, and good Christian women with spunk to spare, *Emma, Mr. Knightley, and Chili-Slaw Dogs* brings the modern American South to light in a way only a contemporary Jane Austen could have imagined.

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Editorial Review

Review

Jane Austen and Southern romance fans alike will enjoy this sweet echo of the Regency classic. The story is adorably funny in its Shakespearean comedy of errors as Caroline and Brooks continually misunderstand each other and their romantic feelings... Their first kiss is well worth waiting for—for readers as much as the made-for-each-other couple. (*Romantic Times* (four and a half stars))

“I loved watching them slowly fall in love and rarely do I comment on such a thing, but the kiss in this book was awesome. I had to go back and read that thing again.” (*Remain in His Love Review*)

About the Author

Mary Jane Hathaway is the pen name of an award-nominated inspirational fiction writer who spends the majority of her literary energy on subjects un-related to Jane Austen. A homeschooling mother of six young children who rarely wear shoes, she's madly in love with a man who has never read *Pride and Prejudice*. She holds degrees in religious studies and theoretical linguistics, and has a Jane Austen quote on the back of her van. She can be reached on facebook at *Pride, Prejudice and Cheese Grits* or her regular author page of Virginia Carmichael. She was nominated for Best Debut in Series Romance 2012- *Romantic Times Book Reviews*.

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Emma, Mr. Knightley and Chili-Slaw Dogs

Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing; but I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall.

—EMMA



CHAPTER ONE

Utter disaster on a cake platter.

Caroline Ashley stood back and surveyed her creation. The fabulous triple-layer fudge cake with light-as-air espresso-flavored chocolate frosting did not look like the photo in the magazine. It didn't look much like a cake at all. Leaning to the left and shedding gritty brown frosting in ultraslow motion, this cake wasn't quite what her mother had requested for her Wednesday bridge group.

The recipe looked downright simple. Mix together, bake, frost. How hard could it be? Caroline blinked the sweat out of her eyes and stared around the sweltering kitchen, groaning at the sight. Flour, mixing bowls smeared with batter and butter-cube wrappers dotted the workspace. A purist would never have upgraded from the original Civil War-era fixtures, but her mama was not a purist. The long marble counters, custom Mississippi-oak cabinets and a heated flagstone floor were all top-of-the-line. The hammered-copper sink was original, but it was obscured by dirty dishes more often than not.

Their cook, Angie, loved to create her masterpiece desserts in here, although Mama had been giving her more and more time off. All the fancy kitchen equipment was going to waste on Caroline's watch. She was trying, and failing, to be a personal chef. Not that it was a role she'd ever wanted.

Lifting the cake platter, she carried it to the freezer, sliding it in between the bags of sweet peas and a carton of vanilla ice cream. In only an hour the bridge group would show up, and there wasn't time to make another. She could pray the cake would miraculously right itself and set into something more like the picture. Or she could run away from home.

"Something smells good." Caroline whirled at the sound of the voice, even though she knew the speaker before she saw him. Brooks Elliot, her friend since before she'd learned to ride a two-wheeler down the long driveway, had a habit of showing up at all the best—and the worst—times. At his side stood a golden retriever, mouth lolling open, tongue half-out in a big doggy smile. Brooks looked cool, calm and collected in a perfectly tailored deep blue suit. His spotless white shirt and pale blue silk tie completed the picture of effortless style. It was unbelievably irritating.

He cocked his head. "Hiding something?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "Not from you, Professor." She liked to use his title in a chirpy little voice that got on his nerves. Opening the freezer door, they surveyed the cake-that-was-not-a-cake together. "Although I don't trust Absalom within five feet of anything edible." She reached down to scratch behind the dog's ears, loving how the retriever's whole body wagged against her leg.

"Hmmm." Brooks pretended to be choosing his next statement carefully, but as her oldest friend, he knew he never had to watch his words. "Not so sure you need to take precautions."

"Hilarious. You're making fun of my cake, but I saw this dog eat through the leg of your grandpa's best rocker."

"Hey, we don't bring up the past. Right, Ab?" Brooks reached down and ruffled the dog's fur. Those two were thick as thieves. Better not get on the bad side of one, or you'd be on the bad side of the other.

It felt wonderful to stand inches from the frosty freezer. She wanted to crawl inside and never come out. But there was a bridge party to entertain. She closed the door and shrugged. The strands of hair sticking to the back of her neck reminded her she still needed to shower, and the reflection in the stainless steel door didn't argue. Blond hair escaped from her ponytail in several different directions. Her cheeks flushed pink, green-blue eyes just smudges. Behind her was a wavery image as familiar as her own. A head taller than she was, with sandy-blond hair and dark brows, Brooks was the kind of man that made women check his hand for a ring. When they'd first met, she'd been too young to think of him that way and preferred dreaming of boy bands and the quarterback at her high school. But as the years passed, she couldn't help noticing how the rest of the female population reacted to him. Every year it was more and more obvious that he was the catch of the tiny town of Thorny Hollow, and beyond.

She met his gaze in the reflection and grinned when he winked at her. Brooks, the consummate flirt. They were related, sort of, by marriage, and he always occupied that hazy area between cousin and guy friend. Whatever he was, catch or not, he was never less than a perfect gentleman.

"I'm sure it will be just fine after it sets." She spun to face him, tugging on the strings of her red gingham apron, which seemed to have tied themselves into a knot.

Brooks gently turned her around and brushed away her hands, loosening the apron strings. Absalom wedged his furry body between them, his tail thumping against the back of her legs in a steady rhythm of happiness. “How’s the book?” Brooks asked.

Oh, that. “Coming right along.”

“I think you should call it *The Never-Ending Story*.” His expression in the refrigerator-door reflection was completely serious.

“Hardy har har.” It was just a little bit funny, she had to admit. Her idea of the great American novel had morphed into a *Gone with the Wind* remake, which had become a historical saga spanning the Russian Revolution. Why? Because she was bored. It was not a great reason to write a book and it showed. She’d been working on it for two years and it wasn’t even close to being finished.

“You know, just because your mama asks for a chocolate cake doesn’t mean you have to make one.”

She stared up at the high, arched ceiling, biting back words. It was easy for Brooks to give advice on family matters when he lived a happily independent life, or as independent as that of a good Southern son could be. He was still expected to come home for weddings and holidays and weekends regularly. But being a journalism professor at Midlands came with respect, a nice house and a decent distance from his cranky-pants father. No such luck for her.

“Bravard’s Bakery makes a great triple-layer cake. You could have asked me to pick one up on the way through town. You know I’m here almost every weekend. Absalom’s so used to the drive, we’re going to switch places next time. He’ll drive and I’ll stick my head out the window and yell at passing cars.”

She snorted at the image but regretted the ungenerous thoughts of a moment ago. Brooks lived a few hours away in Spartainville, but that didn’t mean he was immune to the call of the needy parent. “Your grandma moved in to keep your father company, but she wants to get out of that old house every now and then, too. Your mom passed away so quickly, I don’t think he had a chance to come to terms with what happened. I think he’s just lonely without her.”

“I’m not sure why. Maybe he misses the constant bickering. You know, I don’t really mind hanging at the old homestead every weekend, but with our grandmother off on another cruise, Manning needs to step up once in a while.”

“They’re still in the honeymoon phase.” Brooks’s brother and her cousin were happily ignoring the entire family now that they had subjected the town to an over-the-top Southern-style wedding. Ten bridesmaids in rainbow-hued gowns, ten groomsmen in matching bow ties, a catered reception featuring every Southern delicacy known to mankind and a live band playing in an old barn for a dance that went on until dawn? It was enough wedding to last Caroline all year. Maybe more. Nobody could get married simply out here. That was just one more reason she’d never dreamed of every girl’s “special day.” Too much fuss, too much money spent on nothing real and everyone else had to play along just to make the bride happy.

Brooks sighed. “It’s been a year. Since you take full credit for getting them together, it’s up to you to tell them it’s time to rejoin the real world. Hard as it is to believe, I do have a life in Spartainville.”

“Did you finally find a girlfriend?” She knew even before she turned around that he would say no. Brooks just wasn’t the type to marry. In fact, he didn’t really date. He’d never said much about it, but she knew his

growing up as a child of an unhappy couple made him less than eager to enter into his own romantic union.

“You’ll be the first to know.” He lifted the apron strap over her head and hung it on the peg near the back door. “Why are you cooking on a hot day like this, anyway?”

“Because my mama asked, and I always feel like I need to prove myself in the kitchen.”

His mouth twitched. “Finley, a brilliant journalist can’t be expected to bake triple-layer cakes. It wouldn’t be fair to the rest of the world if you were that perfect.”

She shot him a look. He would never give up that silly nickname. Caroline Ashley had nothing in common with Finley Peter Dunne, great American political humorist and newspaperman of the turn of the century. But Brooks had called her Finley ever since he saw some little sketch she’d made about their high school principal, and that was that.

Brilliant journalist. He was just being kind, but she smiled as the words reverberated in her head. Coming from Brooks, it meant a lot. Graduating with highest honors and landing the job of a lifetime after her internship at the Washington Post still gave her a glow of pride. It was the best thing she’d ever done.

The smile faded from her lips. It was the only thing, really.

“I’d trade all that supposed brilliance for a decent approximation of that magazine picture,” she said.

“And a chili-slaw dog.”

“You know me so well.” Absalom’s head went up at the mention of a chili-slaw dog. The only other creature who loved them more than Caroline was the golden retriever sniffing around the large kitchen, hoping for edibles dropped by the careless cook.

“When you have a big wedding like Manning and Debbie Mae, you’ll have to have one long table of chili-slaw dogs instead of the cheese straws and hush puppies.”

“I’m not jumping on the marriage train. I feel like Pleasant Crump most days, but finding a husband isn’t the answer.” Crump was famous in these parts for being the last living Confederate soldier until he passed away in the 1950s.

“That’s a bit dramatic.”

“Maybe to you. As a man, you can take all the time you want, but women are groomed for the big white day from the moment the doctor slaps our little bottoms in the delivery room.” She wiped her forehead with a kitchen towel and watched Absalom vacuum up all the cake crumbs from the floor. “And anyway, I’ve seen what happens in a Thorny Hollow wedding, and even if I wanted chili-slaw dogs, I wouldn’t get to have them. The bride never gets her way. It’s all run by the old ladies, every single detail.”

“Probably right.”

“Speaking of old ladies, if I don’t get showered and spiffed up, Mama is going to have a breakdown when the bride group gets a look at me.”

“And I’ve got to get home. Come on, Ab.” Brooks patted his leg and the golden retriever reluctantly withdrew his nose from under the cabinets. The dog looked up at Caroline with hope in his bright black eyes and she shook her head.

“Chocolate isn’t good for dogs, buddy.”

“I don’t think that chocolate is the real gastronomical danger here.” Brooks cut his eyes to the freezer and bolted out the back door, with Absalom hot on his heels. The kitchen towel she tossed at him thumped harmlessly against the leaded, diamond-pattern window of the antique kitchen door as it swung closed.

Caroline stood for a moment, listening to the two of them cross the old wooden wraparound porch and head for the car. Brooks had been driving back to Thorny Hollow almost every weekend to fix windows or oil squeaky hinges or even weed the flower beds. That a full-time caretaker lived in a carriage house a short distance from the main house didn’t seem to matter at all to Brooks’s father. His marriage had been notoriously acrimonious, but he seemed unmoored without Nancy.

Grabbing a clean towel and trotting upstairs to the bathroom, Caroline sighed. Almost three years ago her daddy had passed away, leaving her mama in absolute shock. Lonely, lost and refusing to leave her room. When Mama asked Caroline to come home, she hadn’t hesitated. She walked away from the job she loved and the years she’d put into her career because that’s just what good daughters did. It killed her to leave it all behind, but she’d done it.

Rejoining the workforce was going to be harder than simply packing a few boxes, if she was honest with herself. She’d been writing freelance articles and doing online news services, but it wasn’t the same as joining the hustle and bustle of a big city and a powerful company. She’d lost her groove, her confidence. She might not be completely happy here, but she knew this town and she knew how to stand around in pearls at a party. Taking care of her mom had turned into taking the easy way out.

The ornately framed bathroom mirror showed a clearer version of the stainless-steel-fridge reflection, but this one mercilessly highlighted her shiny forehead and sweaty hair. Poor Brooks. He didn’t seem to mind the hot mess he’d seen, but a tiny part of her wished he had walked in before the cake, not after. At least she wouldn’t have been drenched in sweat.

She put a hand under the dribbling showerhead and tested the water, knowing it took at least four minutes for the water heater to kick in for this part of the house. Her mother had recently redone her private bath in marble and heated stone tile, junking the claw-foot tub and built-in antique vanities despite Caroline’s protests. But this bathroom still had the original fixtures. Caroline ran a finger along the curved, cool edge of the claw-foot tub before her, smiling at the pink porcelain. She’d hated this tub when she was younger, wishing she had a sparkling-new shower stall and gleaming fixtures like Debbie Mae’s. The eighties had been the age of glass and chrome, of Robert Palmer video vixens with slicked-back hair and bright red lips. It was not the era of pink claw-foot tubs and copper fixtures and itty-bitty pink, octagonal tiles covering one enormous wall.

But her daddy had refused to change a thing about their home, saying it was unnecessary. Just like the tiny gap between her front teeth. He’d said it was the way she’d been made and it was beautiful. The thought of him sent a sharp pain through her. She acknowledged it with a quick prayer of thanksgiving. Gratitude helped the loss, somehow. She was grateful for him, for his quiet humor and stubborn personality. Wishing him here didn’t help one bit, but she still did. Their little family just wasn’t the same without him, especially her mama.

If only her mama hadn't given up everything when she married. If only she had kept her job, maybe working on the side while raising a family. But that wasn't done. Not back then, and not around Thorny Hollow. Now her husband was gone and Mama had no reason even to get out of bed. No matter how much she loved them both, Caroline felt a chill at the thought of marriage. They'd been happy, so happy, but what happens when the person who is your everything dies? What then?

Caroline stuck her hand into the cold spray of water. No, she wasn't ready for any kind of serious commitment. She wanted to have a good job and be professionally fulfilled before she vowed a lifetime of love to another person.

All of this was far away from the pressures of the moment. She hauled in a breath and let it out slowly. It didn't make any sense to worry about how her husband would treat her professional life because she didn't have a single prospect for either at the moment. The tepid water shifted to warm and she shrugged off her clothes. Stepping carefully into the old tub and drawing the curtain closed, she tried not to focus on the problems ahead. Mainly, that her mother was minutes away from welcoming ten of Thorny Hollow's finest bridge players and there was no cake.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Edwards:

Spent a free time and energy to be fun activity to complete! A lot of people spent their sparetime with their family, or their particular friends. Usually they carrying out activity like watching television, planning to beach, or picnic within the park. They actually doing ditto every week. Do you feel it? Would you like to something different to fill your free time/ holiday? Could possibly be reading a book can be option to fill your no cost time/ holiday. The first thing that you'll ask may be what kinds of e-book that you should read. If you want to try look for book, may be the publication untitled Emma, Mr. Knightley and Chili-Slaw Dogs (Jane Austen Takes the South) can be excellent book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

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