

# The Rules of Falling for You



Mollie Rushmeyer

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For my girls, Rya and Nova,  
who “put up with” my Jane Austen obsession  
but love to brainstorm stories with me.  
You fill my life and heart with immeasurable joy.  
I love you both so much.  
Remember, no dream is ever too big for God. ~Mark 11:23

# 1



## Zoe

I refuse to have a *Pride and Prejudice* pity party . . . again. The 1995 BBC version, of course. The only correct version, in my opinion.

Okay, maybe that's exactly what I need right now.

Goodness knows I'd much rather be on my couch in my favorite "I love Darcy" pajamas, eating my own recipe of banana/chocolate no-added-sugar ice cream, than here in this trendy downtown Minneapolis restaurant, scanning the exits for my date, who excused himself to the restroom fifteen minutes ago.

Another dine-and-dasher? Seriously?

Despite all of this, I'm still here, trying to give the guy the benefit of the doubt, even if he did live stream ordering a platter for us of the one food on the planet I loathe—salapao. It is a first date after all. He couldn't possibly have known I can no longer stomach the little pork-filled steamed buns, or

that my mouth waters upon sight or savory scent, but in the I'm-about-to-dash-to-the-bathroom kind of way.

While I wait to see if my date shows his face again, I fish my phone from my reticule-inspired purse. At this point, either this Thai food is exacting swift revenge on my behalf if he's a would-be ghoster or he's jumped out of the nearest window and made a run for it.

Either way, it's not the first time.

Opening my phone, I check my blood glucose levels on the app synced to my continuous glucose monitor attached to the back of my upper arm. Normal range. Perfect, because I accidentally left my extra insulin in the car inside my insulated travel case to keep it cool.

Then I hit "new note" in my notes app under the folder labeled: "Dear Modern Lord Pembroke," the dashing hero from my favorite Regency-era novel by A. Nathaniel Gladwin. I can hear Lord Pembroke now in his baritone British accent: "Miss Zoe Dufour, would you do me the honor of permitting me to call on you? I can no longer remain silent about my deep affection for you."

Sigh.

*My dearest M. L. P.* I type the words into the app. Later, I'll write this out by hand in a letter, my preferred method of communication, and add it to my collection of letters I'll give to my future husband. No one writes letters anymore, and it's a shame. Handwriting expresses so much about the human soul. Not to mention the bravery it takes to turn thoughts into ink, staining the pages for generations to come. I like to imagine that my husband will enjoy reading through these letters someday, and maybe my future children will, too.

*Where are you? I've poured my heart out to you for years.  
Saved these words to share them with you when I finally find  
you. I don't think this bathroom sabbatical guy is you, by*

*the way. As a reminder, my thirtieth birthday is soon. So if you could hurry up, I'd appreciate it.*

I swirl the remnants of my khao soi—sweet and spicy Thai coconut curry noodle soup—with a broad, shallow-basin spoon. The ceramic makes an obnoxious screech against the bowl and earns me a glare from the couple at the next table. *Sorry.* My mouth forms the silent apology. They look happy. What's their secret?

Grateful for the din of surrounding conversations and clatter of dishes, I groan to myself. I'm practically an old maid by Regency standards. Even by modern measures, I'm only a handful of years and a few felines away from becoming a lonely old cat lady.

I guess I'm already a plant mom, with more plants in my house than people in my cell phone contacts. Maybe that's the next phase in my transformation into forever spinster. While everyone else pulls out their phones to show pictures of their families, I'll be there sporting my "It's Not Hoarding If It's Plants" T-shirt while sharing glamor shots of my fur babies and memes of Mr. Collins.

The phone vibrates in my hand.

My thumb slides over the phone screen to answer. "Hey, Eden."

"Hey, yourself."

My tense shoulder muscles relax at the sound of Eden Lundquist's voice—my best friend since grade school, talented broadcast technician, and sometimes co-host on my trending Regency-themed advice column podcast, *Love According to Miss Gladwin*.

"You still on that date downtown? The new Thai place? Cough if you need a rescue from a snooze-inducing troll. Give me a birdcall if he seems like a sociopath who'll follow you home. Blink twice if—wait, no."

A chuckle bubbles up at her quick jumble of words. She's what I would call a fast talker. "That took a dark turn. Relax, I'm fine. I'm just feeling a little nauseous with this half-eaten platter of salapao staring me down."

There's a sharp intake of breath like air sucked between teeth on the other end. "Sawyer's favorite food? Yikes. Even I don't like the sight of those things since . . ." I can almost see the wince on Eden's face as she trails off.

"I threw my own engagement party before I was actually engaged and was left with a ring in my hand, not on my finger? Not to mention a freezer full of steamed pork buns?" With a shrug, I sigh. "It's okay. You can say it."

But the heat of humiliation prickles up my neck for the millionth time.

"I'm sorry for the ex vibes, Zoe."

I blow a long, cleansing breath before answering, "It's all right. This guy isn't Sawyer. Not sure he'll end up as more than another dead-end date. But, hey, barring the salapao, I had a great meal—man, I've missed Thai food—and he seems harmless enough."

"Way to look at the bright side, my friend." Eden's tone is warm, light. "Something's up though, right? Who has a dinner date at 4:30 in the afternoon? Is he an octogenarian?" She loses the rabbit trail and meanders, "Not that there's anything *wrong* with being elderly, of course."

"Right. And, no, he's not my grandpa's peer." I rub my chin. "I don't know. He insisted we come here at this time. A two-for-one special."

"Romantic." Her tone is dry.

"I know. I'm not sure why I'm still here. I guess I was hoping for a frog prince situation. That maybe there was some other level to him I haven't seen yet. Thankfully, he hasn't jabbered on about his mom." *And at least I have no close, personal witnesses to another potential romantic catastrophe this time*, I silently add.

“Not that there’s anything *wrong* with loving your mom,” she says, drawing out the words.

“Of course. But there’s a fine line between sweet and—”

“Creepy.” She finishes my thought. As usual.

I squeeze my linen napkin into a ball. “But he went to the restroom fifteen minutes ago and hasn’t come back yet.”

She huffs in my ear. “Nobody skips out on the check and a perfectly lovely time with my friend.”

I throw a hand up, knocking water out of my glass with the gesture, and sop it up with my napkin. “I have to hold out hope for my perfect match, Eden. He’s out there. I have to believe my happily-ever-after wasn’t ruined before it ever began with the engagement that never was. And honestly, if I have to go out with every ninety-year-old catfish—”

Eden sucks in a sharp breath like mentioning that particular real-life disaster in my dating history pains her.

“—and unemployed basement dweller with an unhealthy attachment to his mom in the Twin Cities, nay, all of Minnesota, then so be it.” I slap my hand onto the table, winning me more stares.

“Hear, hear.”

There’s applause through the phone. I must be on speaker while she concocts her usual afternoon green smoothie. “But beware, all you ungentlemanly rogues,” Eden declares. “In the words of Gandalf, ‘You shall not pass!’” There’s a *thwack* like a spatula slamming the counter.

How someone could allege she’s an equal fan of Regency stories and J. R. R. Tolkien as Eden claims, I have no idea. Different universes. But then, Eden herself is a walking juxtaposition. Spunky, but kind and caring. Dressed in flowy feminine skirts and dresses—probably channeling her inner Tolkien elf—offset by her nose ring and lavender hair.

“Thank you, by the way, for enduring all manner of terrible

dates so the rest of us don't have to. Your quest for love is like skimming the dating pool for all of us."

My head bows in acknowledgment as though she can see me.

But she's not done. "And you know nobody's out there skimming the pool finding something good. No, you see somebody take out that long-handled net, you know what's floating—"

"Okay!" I say brightly, hoping to force this conversation elsewhere. "Yes, you know me. I'm like that person royalty used to have. The one who tried all of their food and drinks, checking for poison—"

"Cupbearer!" she supplies.

"Yup, that's me. The dating cupbearer. I do it for the good of humanity, myself, and our dear podcast listeners."

She gasps. "Oh! I almost forgot, speaking of the podcast, I found us a new audiovisual engineer and show producer."

"What? Awesome, who is—"

There's movement out of the corner of my eye, someone headed this way. My long-lost date.

"My date's re-emerged from the restroom," I whisper to Eden. "I'd better go. Fill me in later."

"You got it, and you better call me after with the play-by-play. By-ee."

My date, Trevor, slips back into his seat with a clueless smile, as if he hasn't been AWOL for almost twenty minutes now.

I smile back, determined to end the date on a positive note. After all, he hadn't made a run for it. Sadly, that has become a unit of measurement for a date's success these days.

"You all right? You were gone a long time."

His brows furrow for a moment, then shoot up. "The restroom? Yeah, I'll be fine. Thai food does that to me."

I resist the urge to ask why he picked this place, then.

He rubs his stomach. "Wreaks havoc on the ol' system, ya know? My mom—"

Okay, one mention of his mom isn't weird.

“—always says, ‘Don't go to restaurants with spicy food. You know what it does to you.’ But I couldn't pass up the early bird special. Mom always says to look for the best deal. You know what they say about early birds, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” I clamp my mouth because *my* mom always said if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

He proceeds to take another pork bun and indicates the three left on the platter, saying, “Want one? I'll never finish these.” The words are thick around his mouthful.

I exhale instead of repeating my “no, thank you” from earlier. Nor do I warn him he'll likely earn himself another visit to the restroom. I'm not his mom, after all. With a click of my tongue, my shoulders roll back and straighten.

“You know what? Yeah, I will have one.” Silently adding, *This is silly. I'm a big girl, and a year and a half is plenty of time to get over a phobia of my ex's favorite food.*

Despite it being a little cold, the soft, pillowy bun and the slightly sweet and salty filling melt on my tongue.

Trevor's eyes brighten as I take my second bite. “Hey, I brought something to show you.” He retrieves the cross-shoulder bag strapped to the back of his chair and pulls out a thick book.

Scooting closer to my side of the table, he leans in. “Speaking of my mom . . .”

So *many* mentions of his mom now. Help.

“She always says to put your best foot forward. So I made this photo album. It's all about me and the things I've done in my life.”

This is an infinitesimal step down from “I prepared a slide show presentation documenting my birth through present day. Want to see it?” I know my polite smile is sliding into a grimace.

He pats the floral cover of the photo album that, if I had to guess, his mom picked out. “This is me in a nutshell.” Flipping to a page in the front, he points to a picture of him with a woman in large, wire-framed glasses and tall hair. “This is Mom and me in our prize-winning hand-knit Christmas sweaters last year.” He turns the page. “Oh, and here’s one of our most recent trip to North Dakota—”

“No!” I didn’t intend to shout it.

Mr. and Miss Happy Couple are standing to leave and give me one last cocked-brow stare.

“Sorry. I mean, no, I should probably go. I’ll have to get more insulin.” I hold up what’s left of the bun. It’s not a lie. I do need more insulin.

Shoving the rest of the salapao in my mouth to demonstrate, I try to grin, but my cheeks are full like a chipmunk’s prepping for winter. That’s when I feel another set of eyes on me. At the other end of the restaurant, a twinkle dances in the dark blue gaze I’d know anywhere.

Harrison Lundquist. Eden’s brother. He quirks an eyebrow at me, the corner of his mouth tipping to the side.

The one and only witness to my epic rejection a year and a half ago, whom I haven’t seen since that fateful night. And he’s with a gorgeous blond woman. Figures. I can tell she’s tall and slender even though she’s seated.

The food in my mouth seems to congeal. Harrison shoots me a two-fingered salute as I try to swallow. But the bun sticks halfway down my throat, immovable. Clutching my neck, I jump to my feet and wave frantically at Trevor with the other hand. He stands but backs away. Everything is a blur, but there’s a hush as nearby patrons realize what’s happening. The room starts to spin.

A large shadow passes over me. Someone’s strong arms wrap around my middle from behind, under my ribs, and there’s a squeezing sensation. Forceful and sure. The food dislodges

like a shot out of a cannon and flies straight at Trevor and his photo album. It lands with a *splat* on the ugly Christmas sweaters page. I gasp and cough, sweet air filling my lungs again.

Ignoring for now the indignant noises from Trevor as he sputters, “M-my photo album. You’ve ruined it!” I tip my head back to find Harrison’s upside-down face peering at me. Incredulity and concern are etched in tandem on his angled, lightly bearded face.

“Harrison? What are you doing here?” I croak, my throat raw.

“Same as you, having an early dinner.” Harrison’s thumb indicates the woman at his table, and I crane my neck to see she’s now staring wide-eyed in our direction.

He turns me around so we’re facing each other.

“No, I meant here in Minnesota. Are you visiting?” *Please be visiting.* I’ve managed to avoid him for almost a year and a half, why now?

The entire restaurant has gone silent, nary a knife or fork stirring, as he grins and says, “Nope. I’m moving back to Minnesota, and not a moment too soon, it seems.”

His hands gently grip my shoulders as his eyes scan me. “Are you all right?”

Like a bobblehead doll, Trevor glances between us with his mouth agape.

Harrison takes the liberty of reaching over for Trevor’s hand, giving it a shake. “Hey, I’m Harrison.”

“My best friend’s brother,” I supply. Gesturing across the table, I add, “This is Trevor.”

But Trevor’s not paying attention, fussing over his photo album and scrubbing at the page with a napkin.

There’s a flash of something in Harrison’s deep indigo eyes in the awkward silence that follows, but it’s gone just as quick, and he quirks a grin down at me. “Ouch. Save your life and all I get is ‘best friend’s brother?’”

I shuffle from foot to foot, cheeks burning. “You hardly—I was working it out—”

“You were turning purple.” His arms cross over his plaid-covered chest. He never was one to dress up, even in a nice restaurant. But then, no one has ever worn plaid as well as Harrison does. “I’ll take that as a thank-you, so you’re welcome.”

He winks, and my glucose monitor emits a series of earsplitting beeps—as if people don’t have enough reason to gawk—and my mortification is signed, sealed, and delivered.

## 2



## Zoe

**S**tanding at my open car door, body bent inside over the front passenger seat after giving myself an injection of insulin, I spend an extra few seconds sending a furious text to Eden:

Thanks a lot! Didn't know your brother was back in town. Why is it that every time he's around, I'm in the middle of making the biggest fool of myself?

I add the face-palm emoji, growl as I hit send—not worrying the text will make no sense to her right now—and throw my phone back into my purse.

Harrison leans his tall body against my short-by-comparison MINI Cooper. “Well, you sure know how to show a guy an exciting time.”

When I squint up at him, he jabs a thumb in the direction

of the restaurant across the street from the parking garage. “Trevor. That’s a date he’ll never forget.”

“Me either.” Slapping a hand to my forehead, I roll my eyes. “Nor his mother. I’m sure she’ll be getting an earful about the evil girl who ruined their photo album. I said I was sorry—”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone run so fast out of a nonburning building.”

His lips twitch, and he scrubs at his chin as though to steady it, but a low chuckle escapes anyway, the sound warm and familiar. For a moment, it’s as if the last year and a half melts away. And I have my surrogate big brother back.

I swat his arm. “Stop. It was a horrific date, don’t make it worse.”

The golden rays of the fall afternoon sun mix with his sandy blond hair, setting it aglow. “Thank you, by the way.” Heat fills my cheeks despite the crisp for the first week of September breeze ruffling my long, wavy hair around my face.

He shrugs off my thanks as he shoves his hands into his jeans pockets.

And . . . it’s uncomfortable again. What came after my failed proposal, what Harrison said, how he looked at me, the suffocating tension that followed rushes back.

A pang slices through my chest. Things used to be so easy between us. The boy I grew up with, like family to me. He and Eden both.

My fingers cover my mouth with another realization. “I’m so sorry you had to leave your date, and you did *not* have to pay for mine. I’m paying you back.”

After Trevor fled, Harrison insisted on paying for our check. I only let him because I didn’t want to cause more of a scene than I already had. Plus, I needed my insulin.

“That wasn’t a date. For me, I mean.” Palming the back of his head, he shakes it twice. “It was for my new job.”

“So, you’re like *back* back, then? For good?”

“Yup, I’ll be working at a news station. Security.” He lifts a broad shoulder. “But I’m hoping to work my way up to a producing job again at some point.”

I nod. “Good for you. I know Eden will love having you back.” I keep my own mixed feelings to myself.

He studies me for a moment, then adds, “And you’re not paying me back. Besides, I’m about to be ridiculously overpaid for a new side gig.”

There’s that grown-up boyish grin again, though maybe not as open and unguarded as it once had been. I narrow my gaze, but he doesn’t elaborate.

Instead, he says, “I better run. Never know when someone will need a spotter for chewing or a witness to the longest restroom break in dating history.”

“Haha. Very funny.” My hand lands on my hip. “Wait, bathroom break? You saw that and didn’t come over earlier?”

“I was enjoying the view.” His grin widens as he starts backing away.

“There’s something wrong with you. You know that, right?” *Tsking*, I point at him. “You should get that checked out.”

He touches his forehead and gives a little bow as though doffing a cap, then starts toward his big red truck that belongs in a country song. Over his shoulder, he tosses, “See you around.”

Back in my car, heading toward home in the suburb of Shoreview, I reply for myself alone, “But maybe not too soon.”

How often will I run into him, though, even if he *is* living in the Twin Cities again? It’ll be fine.

My heart lightens as I near my little neighborhood-within-a-neighborhood of four townhome complexes. It’s quiet here. Surrounded by old-growth trees, wide sidewalks, and well-kept mid-century homes and yards, this feels like small-town USA rather than a quick jaunt back to the freeway and the hustle and bustle of Minneapolis/St. Paul.

Home. When my podcast numbers climbed higher than I

dreamed they would, and with the income from my part-time work as a host on a faith-based radio station, I could finally afford a real home.

I started the podcast because of a passion for the topic, but I honestly assumed I'd be rambling to myself and Eden. Who knew people would take a shine to a little podcast about finding love in a modern world using wisdom from my favorite Regency authors?

Ironic. The listeners are relying on me for advice and help in their dating lives. But so far I've failed to find a modern-day gentleman of my own.

I cringe, reviewing the Date of Doom this afternoon even before the whole choking incident. Aren't there any true gentlemen left in the world?

My answer comes with a flash of my soft-spoken father and the way he cares for my mom, who has primary progressive multiple sclerosis. My dad is the epitome of a gentleman and has never complained or begrudged his role as husband and caretaker. Their love is like something from my favorite Regency romance stories. Better, actually.

I need to step it up. Not only for me. For my listeners, too. The question is, How?

Eden is dancing in her living room with her dog when I pull into the shared driveway. Through the window of the townhouse across from mine, I can see Eowyn Elizabeth's paws on Eden's chest. Eden always says her golden retriever-mix rescue dog's names represent the best female characters of both worlds.

Inside, something is waiting for me on my kitchen counter. There's a small wrapped package, and next to it is a plate with a single brownie. Eden and I have keys to each other's places, so no doubt this is the famous (to me) low-sugar zucchini brownie she learned to make when type 1 diabetes found me in the sixth grade. Vegetable brownies might sound disgusting

to most, but they're moist and delicious and an easy way to adjust my life to my condition.

My mouth waters at the sight. But there's a note taped to the front of the small rectangular gift.

*Hey, that date sounded rough. Sorry for not telling you about Harrison. I just found out myself. Speaking of which, there's something I need to talk to you about tomorrow morning. But, hey, I'm glad you're okay! Brought you a couple of things to cheer you up.*

A growl rumbles in my still-sore throat. He must've told her about me choking. Heap on the mortification. There's a lot to digest there, but not right now. The whole situation has exhausted me.

I rip off the gift's paper. It's a book. She knows me so well. The worn cloth cover, yellowed pages, and earthy scent tell me it's old. I flip it open. Elegant writing, faded in spots, but clearly a high-quality reproduction of the original handwritten pages. Inside the front cover is printed: *Yours Truly, A Diary by A. Nathaniel Gladwin*. Underneath, it states the volume contains the author's own words.

This is a rare find. Gladwin's personal writings are the reason historians determined Gladwin was female, but they've never uncovered her true identity. Her published journals have been out of print for years. I clutch the little book to my chest. This one is now mine.

Eden's parents are rich, with all of the connections to go with it, including in the art and literature world. They attend a ton of charity auctions. Eden knows I've always wanted something like this.

A page toward the back has been bookmarked. Along the top is scrawled in Gladwin's own hand, "Thirty Ways to Meet and Secure a Suitor." A grin pulls at my lips. After tonight, I'm

game for anything. *Is this what'll finally help me fulfill my dream of finding my person, of starting a family before it's too late, God?*

But I don't wait for an answer. I don't have that kind of time. None of us knows what tomorrow holds, and I need to stick to my plan if anything is going to get done and get done right.

Look out, hunky but humble lords and esteemed gentlemen. Here I come.



“Isn't it supposed to be ‘Thirty, Flirty, and Thriving?’” Eden eyes me over her open laptop at my kitchen table as she preps for our podcast recording this morning.

“Yes, and it is. But I'd rather be flirting with my husband, and first, I have to find him.” That inner clock starts to tick and with it, prickles of sweat form on the back of my neck.

I cast her a cheerful grin as I shuffle through my notes for the podcast episode at my kitchen counter. “That's why I'm going to use Miss Gladwin's list, ‘Thirty Ways to Meet and Secure a Suitor,’ from the diary you gave me. My own ideas have failed, *obviously*, so maybe this will be the key to finally finding my modern-day gentleman.”

“But, Zoe, why thirty, why—”

“Did you know in 1805 Jane Austen basically lost everything? Her father died, and she, her mother, and her sister were left poor and dependent on her brothers for support.”

Eden's lavender brows scrunch together. “And?”

“She was thirty.” I tug my bottom lip between my teeth. “And then there's Miss Gladwin. We don't know who she was, but in her journal”—I hold up the book Eden gifted me for emphasis—“she wrote about how approaching her thirtieth birthday, she was considered an old maid. Unmarried. A social pariah after a broken almost-engagement with a prominent bachelor, kind of like me.”

“I still don’t understand. I only gave you the diary reproduction because I thought you’d enjoy it.” A crease forms on her otherwise smooth forehead.

Gritting my teeth, I square my shoulders and reply instead, “And did you know when my mom was thirty, in one fell swoop she found out she could never have another child and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? Her entire life changed in an instant. When she was this age, *my* age.”

Eden’s mouth drops open. She stands and moves toward me until she can wrap an arm around my shoulders. “Just because that’s your mom’s story doesn’t mean it’s yours. You can’t live in fear of what could be.”

Squeezing her back once, I step out of her embrace and give her a small smile and raise my chin. “I’m not. But that’s the point. I can’t take a day for granted. I want a family. I want to have a partner in life. What’s so wrong with wanting to move along the process?”

I lift a hand. “And what could it hurt, using Gladwin’s suggestions? We know she did eventually find her very own real-life Lord Pembroke, who she based her character on. She must’ve known what she was talking about.”

Eden is quiet, studying me for a moment, but then a slow grin spreads, her eyes rounding. But as she starts to respond, “You know what? That’s actually a brilliant idea,” my BBC *Pride and Prejudice* theme music doorbell plays.

Eden’s gaze darts toward the stairs. “Oh, I meant to tell you—”

“Just a sec.” I hold up a finger as I dash to the front door.

Yanking it open, I gasp at the sight of Harrison standing on my front step. His tall, broad frame fills the doorway.

“Harrison, what are you doing here?” I don’t mean to sound so accusatory.

“Hello to you, too.” His sandy brows shoot up. “This is the second time in twenty-four hours I seem to have shocked

you with my presence. No unchewed food in your mouth this time, I hope?”

I huff and roll my eyes.

Eden appears at my side. “Harrison! Come on in.”

I find myself backing up to let him by but aim an incredulous look at Eden.

In answer, she returns my scowl with a too-bright smile. “So, Zoe, remember how I said I found us a producer and audiovisual engineer replacement?”

We had started our podcast with just the two of us about six months before the proposal-incident-that-shall-not-be-named, but quickly realized we needed help. A coworker from the radio station had filled in here and there, but we were on our own again a couple of weeks ago when he moved.

Harrison, already at the top of the split-level stairs, turns and points to himself. “You’re looking at him.”

I catch up to find him making himself at home in my kitchen like he always used to, like I haven’t just spent the last year and a half avoiding him. Although it wasn’t too hard since Harrison had moved to Cincinnati for a lead-producing job right after the whole thing with Sawyer.

Tipping my head to the side, I cross my arms over my chest. “Lucrative new side gig, huh?”

He shrugs, his eyes full of mischief. “Well, I may have exaggerated that part. Unless you’re looking to give me an immediate raise. In which case, I’ll say that’s completely proactively justified. But otherwise, I will work for coffee, especially if you’re going to insist on the early morning recordings.” He’s already rummaging through my cupboards.

Eden joins us and chimes in, “I convinced Harrison to help us, and he agreed because it’ll be good for his résumé while he’s applying for news-producing positions.”

He places a hand on his chest as if struck there. “I’m offended. What I think you meant to say is that out of the good-

ness of my heart, I'm here to offer my much-needed charm and expertise to this operation."

But with a gesture to me, he adds, "If that's okay with you, too, Zo."

His tone is soft, uncertain, putting away his usual jovial-with-a-hint-of-sarcasm attitude for now. The sweet, vulnerable side he doesn't show everyone. The side that always plucked at something in my chest. And then there's his use of his nickname for me since we were kids. . . .

Finally, I pinch the bridge of my nose even as I feel myself give in. We do need the help, after all. "Fine. But keep your opinions to a minimum."

Before the words even fully leave my mouth, I know that'll never happen. He hadn't been shy about letting us know how ridiculous he found the concept back when we started the podcast.

"You know me. Always on my best behavior." He chuckles as he adds my freshly ground dark roast coffee to the coffee-maker.

After starting a big pot to brew—the curls of steam already filling my kitchen and combined dining room with the rich aroma—he turns and rests his hip against the counter. Retrieving the diary reproduction sprawled on top of my show notebook, he thumbs to the marked page in the back with the thirty tips. The notepaper I've already filled with ideas on how to use the list for the podcast and myself falls free.

"What's this?" One brow slants low while a corner of his lip hitches up as his finger traces the list.

I grab it out of his hands, my shoulders arching back. "It's a list of ways to meet and—"

"Secure a suitor," he finishes. "Yes, I can see that. Don't tell me you're going to try doing these things."

"Yeah, isn't that a great idea, Harrison?" Eden's chipper voice carries from the corner of the kitchen where she's prepping

our coffee mugs. Even without Harrison here, it's always been our number one rule. Coffee first. Podcast second. I bring my notes to the table, and he asks if I still keep our audio equipment in the hall closet. After I nod, he retrieves the mic, cords, and small soundboard.

"It'll be fun," I insist. "Plus, we'll document everything for the podcast. We'll call it, 'Thirty by Thirty: Regency Courting Tips.' Get it? My thirtieth birthday is in November."

I don't add that, though our podcast has an overall positive audience reaction, there has been some kickback in the comment section demanding what I could possibly know about love when I'm not in a relationship. So this list has both a personal and professional objective.

He breezes past me and sets the equipment on the table to sort through and eyes me. "So you're going to blindly follow these old dating suggestions from the 1800s?"

His considerable shadow falls over me and my papers. With his height and wide shoulders, he always made my five-foot-two-inches look diminutive. Not that we ran in the same circles back in school. Our two-year age difference meant something when we were teens. And the fact that he was the popular football star, while Eden and I were the drama club/artsy/start-a-Regency-book-club outcast type.

"Look at this stuff." He scoffs, pointing. "Attend a ball or assembly,' 'Go for a horseback or carriage ride with your potential suitor,' 'Take a promenade in the park?' 'Enjoy a friendly competitive parlor game such as conundrums or whist?' 'Write and receive letters—'"

"Oh, that's a good one. I wish someone would write me a love letter." I tap my chin and flutter my eyelashes.

Eden snickers. "I can hardly get people to text full sentences. A love letter might be out of the question." She hands us our coffee, made just the way we like it—his black, mine pale beige with unsweetened almond milk and my homemade sugar-free

creamer. A preference that always makes my dad tease, “Want a little coffee with your creamer?”

Eden’s lavender hair is twisted back in a complicated braid today, and her round blue eyes, a shade lighter than her brother’s deep indigo ones, are set off by the long-sleeve boho dress she’s wearing. Her hair used to be the same color as Harrison’s, golden blond with natural caramel undertones. I was always jealous since mine only came in one color—brown. Not something romantic like chestnut or auburn. Just medium brown with eyes to match.

Harrison takes a sip and grimaces, probably from the scalding contents, but he doesn’t make a sound. He’s not big on emoting unless it’s to express his displeasure at the Vikings. Which happens a lot. But when Harrison has something *more* to say, he doesn’t hold back. Whether we like it or not.

Except the night I proposed to Sawyer. The way Harrison looked at me. Unsure, nervous, so very unlike Harrison. Had he held in something more he wanted to say? What he did manage to say still sets off a gnarled jumble of feelings in my chest.

I brush the thoughts away. If there had been anything unspoken, he’d probably been about to say how sorry he felt for me as I made such a fool of myself with Sawyer. I certainly didn’t need his pity or to hear those words out loud. And the thing is, that wasn’t the first time he saw me in such a pathetic situation with my heart broken. Back in high school, he’d witnessed my jock boyfriend humiliate me in front of the whole school—and Harrison had looked at me in much the same way then. Whatever words were behind it, if there were any, are a mystery, and frankly, it’s fine if they stay that way.

“Are you really doing this one?” He bends over my shoulder to tap number four on the list, now open on the table. “Attend chaperoned activities with your potential suitor”? Do you

need a babysitter to tag along on your dates? That's ridiculous. Who's gonna go for that?"

Not that *he* would ever have a problem acquiring a date, chaperoned or otherwise. A certain hammer-wielding superhero comes to mind when I think of Harrison—golden and buff but in plaid flannels—although that's as far as I've ever let the thought go. Okay, *maybe* for a hot minute in junior high I let myself crush on Harrison, but that's it. Otherwise, he's always been the snarky, sports-fanatic older brother of my best friend. A jock, but a nice one. I've had run-ins with the not-so-nice kind. I guess we all have our battle scars.

I prop a hand on my hip. "Yes, I will be doing that one. A chaperone isn't a babysitter. In Regency days, they helped preserve a woman's reputation, confirmed intentions were honorable, and offered advice and support to ensure both were making a good choice. Why wouldn't that be worth a try?"

Eden's head bobs, matter of fact.

Harrison, on the other hand, eyes me again with one eyebrow quirked. Eventually, he shifts gears. "We'd better get ready for the show. I have to be to work in an hour and a half."

With a check to her cell phone, Eden says, "Yup, and I set up a caller question for you." She sits behind her laptop at the kitchen table, where she typically monitors our recording program to ensure it's running smoothly and fine-tunes as we go. "I told her you'd call at 8:30 a.m."

"Right." Fifteen more minutes. I gather my notes while Harrison carries the microphone to the plant-filled four-season sun porch that doubles as my studio and sets it up with my laptop at the desk in the corner. I adjust my ring light and boop the small rounded leaves of my Jade Austen plant. "Looking handsome enough to tempt Darcy, Miss Austen." She's shoulder to shoulder with her proud hero, Darcy the Dracaena, who's doing his best not to be overshadowed by Lord Ficus.

I smile to myself and adjust each one, including my fussy, high-maintenance but beautiful fuchsia moth orchid I've nicknamed Caroline Bingley. "There's sun enough for each of you."

Harrison chuckles at my one-sided plant conversation and grabs the soundboard, which I bought from the radio station Eden and I work at when they upgraded. He runs the extension cord from the soundboard to my laptop through the sliding glass doors. We keep the sliding door mostly closed while I'm recording, and Eden and, I guess now, Harrison work at the kitchen table listening and modifying along the way.

Slipping on the headset Eden offers him, Harrison shrugs his shoulders. "I still don't see who we'll find to go along with this."

I smile at the use of "we," as if he's already a part of this little show of ours.

Eden stops the pre-podcast checklist I made for her. "We'll think on it, won't we? But, Harrison, maybe not—"

"What?" He scowls. "You don't want me setting her up with someone?"

I share a smirk with Eden.

Propping an elbow on my desk, I raise a palm. "You're not exactly a romantic, Harrison. I mean, when's the last time *you've* been on a date? And no, that dinner meeting yesterday doesn't count." I shrug. "Look, most of your friends think all a date requires of them is holding in their burps at the dinner table and using a toothpick flosser before going in for the good-night kiss—"

Eden snorts and leans back in her chair at the table, crossing her arms. "Right. The height of romance. And the rest of your friends who *are* mature and well-mannered are already married."

He doesn't refute our claims, but instead points to the invisible watch on his wrist.

"All right, people. Places."

Squaring my shoulders, I slip into my ergonomic chair, put on my headset, and check my microphone.

I let my plants' sharp, earthy scent and super-oxygenating powers seep into my lungs, calming my before-show jitters. "Here we go. Showtime."

Now if only the advice I give others would work on me.