



ROSEWOOD

A Midsummer Meet Cute

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CHAPTER 1



NO WAY THAT is Regency appropriate!” I said for the millionth time, my eyes transfixed on my sister’s laptop screen. There, amid the well-groomed greenery of a twisty garden labyrinth, was a hot, brown-skinned lord of the manor doing seriously R-rated things to a milquetoast but moaning lady. I wasn’t a prude or anything, but all those barely covered heaving bosoms were a lot to take on a school night. “Jane Austen would definitely not approve!”

“Don’t be such a snob, Eila.” Mallika threw a piece of popcorn in my direction without blinking her thick-lashed brown eyes. Her calling me by my name rather than Didi, or older sister, revealed the depth of her feeling. Mal probably wouldn’t care if an airplane flew by in the background of her favorite new obsession, the implausibly sexy Regency-era romance-slash-detective-series called *Rosewood*. “What do you care? You hate Jane Austen anyway.”

“I’m sorry, excuse you, please!” I protested. “I do not hate Jane Austen. I just prefer more literary writers, like Shakespeare!”

“Literary?” Mallika asked without taking her eyes from the gymnastics happening on the laptop screen. “Is that just a different way of saying dead white male?”

If there was anyone who knew how to push my buttons, it was my sister. I mean, who was the feminist in the family? Was it march-attending, postcard-writing, president-of-the-school-gender-equality-club me, or Mallika, whose primary extracurricular activities involved buying and/or making her own clothes, watching celebrity TikToks, and skimming library romance novels for all the smutty bits?

“I don’t get how you’re so into all the Austen movies,” I said. “I mean, it’s not like you’ve taken the time to read a single one of her books, but you own, what, *three* ‘I heart Mr. Darcy’ bags?”

“Well.” Mallika’s dimpled face was the picture of serenity. “I do heart Mr. Darcy! And, in all bisexual fairness, the future Mrs. Darcy too! And even *you* like it when I slow down the Colin-Firth-getting-out-of-the-lake-in-a-wet-shirt scene!”

I didn’t respond because my sister wasn’t wrong. I also appreciated it when Mallika reversed and replayed the scene in the Keira Knightley *Pride and Prejudice* where Mr. Darcy flexes and unflexes his hand after helping Keira into her carriage. But I wasn’t about to admit that now.

“Plus, don’t even get me started on those fluffy modern adaptations!” I said, pointing at the bedazzled pink self-designed T-shirt Mallika wore that declared: CHER HOROWITZ FOR PRESIDENT.

“Just because teenage girls like something doesn’t make it less worthy, or serious, or *literary*!” Looking not particularly serious at all, my sister waved the fluffy pink pom-pom-topped pen she’d

made to go along with her shirt. “Plus, *Clueless* was way ahead of its time in terms of LGBTQ+ representation! And there’s a whole theory that the main character, Cher, was actually queer herself—that even Jane Austen’s *Emma* is about compulsory heterosexuality!”

“Okay, fine, whatever!” I squinted at my sister, annoyed that she had actually made an interesting point. “But what about those other modern adaptations, like *Bride and Prejudice*? Yes, hashtag representation matters, but just because we are Desi does not mean I have to give a pass to Aishwarya Rai’s terrible acting!”

“Well, *Rosewood* isn’t modern day.” Then, even as the laptop lord and lady moaned some more, my sister clarified, “How can you argue with the Regency formula? A brooding and proud hero, a poor and possibly rain-drenched heroine, some interfering-slash-embarrassing relatives, goofy clergymen, amazing costumes, and sexual tension for days! How does that not do it for you? Not to mention the costumes?”

“You said costumes twice,” I pointed out. “But other shows have already perfected that formula. *Rosewood* is like *Bridgerton* meets *Murder, She Wrote*! I mean, how many violent deaths could have really occurred at those Regency balls? And the fact that no one in that entire fancy-pants society—”

“The ton,” my sister interrupted me in a hoity-toity voice. “The upper crust of English society was called *the ton*.”

“I stand corrected.” I rolled my eyes. “As I was saying, the fact that no one in the *ton* realizes that the detective solving the crime every week is just Lord Rosewood in a fake mustache and glued-on sideburns? I mean, *come on!*”

“It’s a very thick mustache!” Mallika protested. “And those muttonchops really change his face shape! Lord Rosewood is both a sexy but brilliant aristocrat and a master of disguise!”

On-screen, the aforementioned Lord Rosewood was nibbling at his lady love’s earlobe while surreptitiously affixing some kind of wax onto her thumb to get her fingerprint. Then he progressed his earlobe nibbling down to some neck nibbling, much to the lady’s very vocal delight. I reached out to turn the computer volume down. The scene was doing something upsetting to my equilibrium, and I found it easier to watch without all the groaning.

“I just don’t get everyone’s obsession with the Regency these days!” I said. “It’s all so trivial! No depth! *Rosewood* has, yes, some random murder-y plot, but mostly just a whole lot of suggested bodice ripping and multicultural eye candy.”

Both Mallika and I went quiet for a moment as the lord and lady on-screen did things that were definitely NSFW. Good thing Ma had been called into the hospital right after dinner.

“Clearly, people in ye olden times got it on as much as they do now,” Mallika said, snapping her gum. I noticed her light brown cheeks were a little redder than they were before.

I tilted my head, taking in the complicated poses that the noble couple were now attempting to undertake. The woman had some shrubbery poking into her side in a probably painful way, but she didn’t seem to notice. Plus, was it entirely ethical for a detective to be hooking up with someone who was also a murder suspect?

“That is seriously acrobatic,” I observed. I wondered if I would have broken up with Brickson, my ex-short-lived-quasi-boyfriend

from our local Young People's Shakespeare Company, if he had known how to do some of the things Lord Rosewood was doing on-screen. I thought of Brickson's clammy hands and even clammier backstage kisses and gave a little shudder. "You know, I'm no expert, but I don't think that position was invented back then."

Mallika, whose head was tilted in a similar direction as mine, snorted. "Ever heard of the *Kama Sutra*?"

"We Desis knew a lot of things the Angrez did not," I said, unable to keep the smile out of my voice.

"They were living in trees still while we were inventing astronomy!" Mallika said in a fair imitation of Baba's voice.

"Not to mention geometry!" I gave the words Baba's cadence. Years of performing iambic pentameter had taught me to hear and reproduce the rhythm and musicality of dialogue. "And have I told you about the history of the number zero?"

Abruptly, tears sprang to Mallika's eyes. She reached out and hit the space bar, pausing the murder-solving hottie Lord Rosewood in the middle of an alarming pose.

"I miss him, Didi." My sister's lower lip was trembling. I stared at her beloved, familiar face—her wide, dark eyes, her curly lashes, and her thick hair that fell like a velvet curtain down her back. Mallika may have quit the Young People's Shakespeare Company because she was too lazy to memorize lines, but she was the sister who looked like a movie star, even with tears streaming down her face. I felt a lurch of protective love.

I reached out and squeezed my sister's hand, feeling something squeezing even stronger in my heart. "I know, my bonti. I miss him too."

It had been three years since our father had died, yet the sting still pierced at unexpected moments. But unlike Mallika, I couldn't afford to show it all the time. After all, I had her to take care of. Since Baba had died, Ma had gone back to full-time patient care in her pediatric practice, leaving me increasingly in charge of my sister. There were a little more than two years between us, but sometimes, it felt like twenty. Mallika had been so small when Baba died, so hurt and lost. And with Ma at work, I'd had to step in and fill the breach. On paper, I was soon to be a rising high school senior looking ahead to the rest of my life, but inside, I felt like a mother hen afraid to leave her beautiful, fragile, and somewhat immature chick.

Now I felt a sense of growing alarm at Mallika's rapidly escalating tears. She was doing the little hiccuping thing that meant that a full-on torrent of upset was just around the bend. Clearing my voice, I tried to change the subject.

"I really shouldn't let you watch *Rosewood*, Mal." I used my best scoldy schoolmarm voice. "You are only just finishing ninth grade. You know Ma wouldn't approve."

As predicted, my attitude dried her tears. "Don't act like you're so much older than me, Didi!" Mallika wiped her drippy nose with the back of her hand. Inwardly, I sighed. Only my sister could look this good doing something that gross. "And anyway, what Ma doesn't know won't hurt her!"

"Come on, the show's a little trashy," I said, not because I really believed it but because I wanted to make sure that Mallika wouldn't slip backward again into any more boo-hooing.

"I thought you said you liked *Rosewood* for its multicultural

casting.” My sister held her lips in a stubborn pout. “I thought you said that it was refreshing to see people who looked like us for once on shows, instead of always being invisible and erased in popular culture.”

“Dang, someone’s been listening to my rants,” I laughed. “Yes, all true, but I still think they go a little far with the sexytimes.”

“The only reason they got away with casting the way they did is probably because of the sexytimes,” Mallika pointed out. “Can you imagine that Regina Rivera-Colón, an Afro-Latina woman director, would have been allowed to cast more shows like this, or get a second season, if the first season of *Rosewood* wasn’t a blowout success? People may come for the Regency, but they stay for the smut.”

“Look, I’m not saying he’s not pretty to look at.” I pointed at the six-pack of the frozen detective-slash-nobleman on the computer screen.

“Just pretty?” Mallika eyebrows shot sky-high. “I know you said after the Brickson catastrophe you didn’t have time in your life for romance, but come on, Didi, even you’ve got to make room for a fictional boyfriend, or girlfriend, for that matter.”

“Okay, yes, he’s very, very pretty,” I amended with a snort. “Maybe you can design me an ‘I heart Lord Rosewood’ T-shirt.”

“So what’s your issue?” Mallika demanded.

I sighed. “I just think they could tell stories about petticoats and poison with less hedgerow humping. I mean, if I had any say in *Rosewood* season two, I’d tell them to trust the plot and the characters more, and rely on the bedroom factor less.”

“Well, then, aren’t you in luck!” With a mischievous look,

Mallika reached into her backpack and pulled out two thick-papered, old-fashioned envelopes, handing over one addressed to me.

“What’s this?” I ripped the envelope carefully open and pulled out the heavy stationery. The script was a beautiful calligraphy that didn’t look computer generated but handwritten.

“Your chance to tell the producers of *Rosewood* how to be more classy and literary or whatever.” Mallika’s face beamed with pleasure.





Dear Ms. Das,

The Hudson Valley Theater at Norland Manor (formerly the site of Norland Shakespeare Theater) is pleased to offer you a position in our first-ever summer Regency Camp! Thank you for your audition videotape; we found it both unique and delightful.

Please be aware that Regency-appropriate attire (which we will provide) and behavior (which we will train for) is required throughout your stay at Norland Manor, and that our no-cellular-devices policy is nonnegotiable. A full schedule of activities, packing items, and contract will be enclosed in a separate letter.

You may have heard that the producers of the international hit television program *Rosewood* will be scouting for a host of extras and minor speaking roles through our Hudson Valley Regency Camp. While this is true, your acceptance in our camp is in **no way** a guarantee of any casting in the television program. Rather, this is an opportunity to step back in history, into a time of manners and civilities, attention to self-presentation, and community making.





We seek only your affirmative reply that you will
join us!

Yours, as ever,

Lady Theodora Middleton

Camp Director

