Authentically, Izzy

a novel

PEPPER BASHAM

THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Authentically, Izzy

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Maps by Lydia Basham.

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ANSLING
ISLE of MARA
KERNVIK
SKERN
CARLSTERN
OLD INSVYTHE
PORT ALASTAIR
NEW INSVYTHE
TERFORD
WAITHE
PORT QUINNICK
MOUNTCASTER
S.I. AIRPORT
ISLE of SKREE
FIACLA

ANSLING
EVENSCROFT
WAITHCLIFF
MANOR
LOCH INNIS
MARRA
BRAE
LIMMICK
HELMS FOREST
TOFT VIK
SKERN
LOCH SELLA
LOCH KWEITH
ELRI
CARLSTERN
CASTLE
LOCH BRISEND
WICKTON FOREST
OLD INSWYTHE
HEBVERN VIK
QUINNICK
CASTLE
ROE
OYSTERN
PORT ALASTAIR
NEW INSWYTHE
PORT QUINNICK

PROLOGUE

Dear Reader,

This is a cautionary tale.

A tale of family, literary classics, podiatry, matchmaking, Shakespeare, and distance. Not exactly the sort of word grouping you may expect in a typical story, but some things aren't meant to be . . . typical. For example, shark hats. Or maybe heartbreak-induced introversion. (All right, the introversion was already there, but the heartbreak certainly didn't help.)

But there are pairs of things that do go together wonderfully well, like chocolate and peanut butter, mountains and seas, books and romance . . . unless, the date is allergic to peanuts, the mountains and seas are a world apart, and the only romance the heroine has had any luck with has been fictional. (See previous note about introversion.)

But two things that never go together well are family and . . . matchmaking, and that is the premise of this story.

Sort of.

And there are books.

Lots of books.

And a copious amount of talk about *The Lord of the Rings* with a swoony foreigner named Brodie. Who is almost perfect, until . . . he's not as perfect.

And a cliff house, but that's for later.

Anyway, I'll let you discover how all those fit together—or don't—for yourself.

And good luck.

Izzy

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PS: And just because Luke is always right doesn't mean Luke is always right. I know of at least two times when he wasn't, and both were about women.

From: Taugen en Compt

In an attempt to bring more people to live among the beauties and vastness of The Skymar Islands, their majesties, King Aleksander and Queen Gabriella, along with the support of Taugen en Compt Houses of Parliament, are offering a substantial financial stipend for natives who encourage someone to relocate to any of the Skymarian Islands, whether by marriage, employment, adoption, or other means listed in the following attachment. Our islands are easily overlooked among the many larger countries surrounding us, but for those who wish to be a part of a vibrant community with varied landscapes, occupational diversity, and a quieter European life that combines our Scottish and Scandinavian cultures amicably, this is an excellent opportunity for resettling. Attached you will find a document outlining the financial remuneration, as well as an extensive list by which individuals may relocate under these specifications.

Taigh, Hlem, en Trolach
(Home, Faith, & Family)

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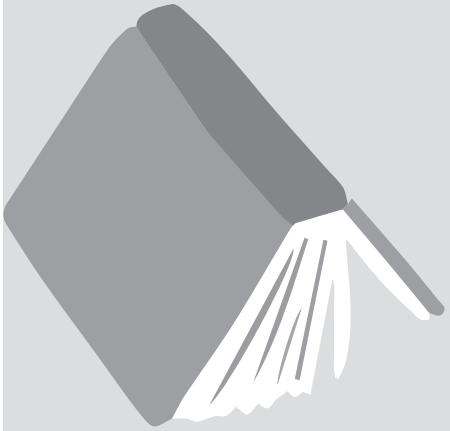
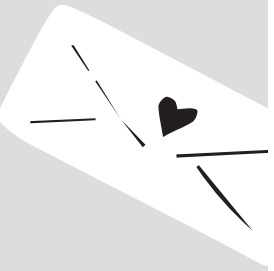
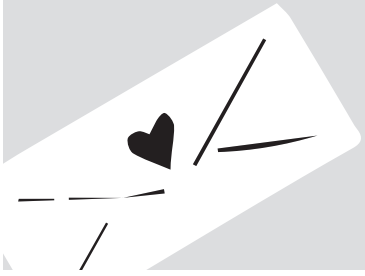




PART 1

Of Matchmakers, Island Dwellers, & Clark Gable



CHAPTER 1

From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 14
Subject: Heart-to-Heart

Izzy,

You know I love you. I want to begin with that.

Now, the only reason I'm emailing you instead of talking to you face-to-face is because I feel you won't hear me out. And you have no choice this way because your love for words and your natural curiosity will force you to read my message.

Since you do not seem to be as invested in your romantic future as you ought to be, I have decided, as your loving cousin, to help you pursue what we discussed last week at church. Before you gasp aloud, which I can practically hear all the way down Cherry Blossom Street, you need to understand that you have it all wrong. You think some Prince Charming is going to walk into your library and sweep you off your sneakered feet, but it doesn't work that way in real life. Not nowadays. And certainly not for someone who spends more time with fictional humans than real ones. You are missing out, Izzy, and I can't bear it. You are already thirty and not a date in sight.

I must rescue you from yourself.

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I don't say these things to hurt you, but to spur you into action instead of allowing you to keep hiding in your books. Heart-to-Heart is a wonderful online dating community recommended by several of the locals here, and I've taken the liberty of setting you up a profile. Currently your profile photo is Minnie Mouse, so unless you want the entire single dating world of Heart-to-Heart to think you're a Disney Princess–loving high school student, you'd better hop right online and fix it. I feel certain there's a book-loving man living relatively nearby waiting to speak bookish to you 'til death do you part. You just haven't met yet. Here is your chance.

Time is running out, dear Izzy.

Your loving cousin,
Josephine

PS: And yes, you still have to love me because that's what family does.

PPS: Heroines usually are swept off their feet while wearing something much more alluring than sneakers. I just thought you ought to know.

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From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Josephine Martin
Date: February 14
Subject: Betrayal

Josephine,

I have disowned you and will henceforth refer to you as Josie, both publicly and privately, until the day you die. And I promptly rewrote the horrid bio you set up for me. I am *not* a recluse. I take Samwise for walks in the park downtown daily, and sometimes we go on hikes in the mountains. I get a cup of takeout tea from Beans & Things every morning before arriving at the library, plus I attend church on a regular basis. And I do have friends! My regular conversational partners at Beans & Things are excellent company and, while sharing charming and humorous stories as well as upcoming weather patterns, they keep me apprised of local news.

In addition to those facts of my habitual social interactions, I go to the movies with Penelope every time she's home from school, which is once a month, and have lunch or a bike ride with Luke when he visits or I drive the hour to see him. So, as you can see, I am not, nor have I ever been, a recluse—except for my senior year of high school but, after such an awful perm, who can blame me? I love your mother, but her experiments with color and perms should never befall a high school girl. Ever. Especially one who was still trying to outgrow her pimple apocalypse.

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And, how could you even write in that horrid bio that I have a dozen gray hairs or more? Who does that? I haven't found any, let alone a dozen, nor do I while away my hours weeping over sappy movies. I weep over excellent writing and greeting card commercials. Do you know me at all?

I am perfectly satisfied with my quiet life, and though I won't deny I'd love to meet someone special with whom I can enjoy long conversations and walks, I seriously doubt my "Prince Charming," as you call him, will find his way onto an online dating community with a tacky caricature of Cupid as its

logo. Once I figure out how to remove my profile from that embarrassing website, I plan to do so, but in the meantime, at least I've changed the profile picture and given a more accurate account of "the reclusive librarian" in your description. (I am inwardly cringing, I hope you know.)

And, Josie, leave my love life alone.

Sincerely,
Irritated Izzy

PS: Please thank your charming husband for sponsoring three tables at the annual library fundraiser. No one has ever purchased more than one, let alone three, and from our very first local podiatrist. He truly has a foothold in my heart (sneaker-fitted or no).

PPS: With my rather disastrous romantic history, it's no wonder I wear sneakers. Faster getaway.

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From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 14
Subject: Reality check

Izzy,

If by "regular conversational partners" you mean the Farmer Four who get coffee every morning before going to their respective farms that they tend in their *retirement*, then it's beyond time to broaden your friend group. Avis Dalton turned a hundred at

least fifty years ago and I don't think the other three are too far behind him.

You need even more help than I realized! Do you even hear yourself?

I will respond more later. Cleo just jumped across the kitchen and knocked over the cereal boxes again. Remind me why I'm the one who had to keep Penelope's cat? Are you really allergic to cats, Izzy? I have my doubts.

Josephine

PS: Patrick loves supporting the library and books, though he was a little surprised you did not have many in the category of footcare. I told him you'd make immediate additions upon his request.

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 15
Subject: Firstborn drama

Oh Izzy,

I just heard about what my sister did with the whole dating site and I'm so sorry. On Valentine's Day of all days in the world!! How could she! I'm sure you hoped you'd be able to get out of such sisterly bossiness since she's not your biological sister, but I just think Josephine can't help trying to fix everyone's lives, whether they need fixing or not. She's been trying to do it for years. Do you remember the parakeet we had growing up? He didn't listen

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to a thing Josephine said and it nearly caused her to have a breakdown at ten years old. It's a wonder she's survived being a big sister to Luke all these years. I think she could have gone into burglary with her particular gift for intrusion. We studied about firstborns in my psychology class at school and Josephine fits the profile to a T. Except the list didn't mention color-coordinating bedsheets and winter hats, but I took that to fit under the "structured" category.

She opened an account for me, too, and I don't have any trouble finding dates, so just imagine how bored she must be. If she sets an account up for Luke, too, can you imagine? He'll break her computer. The last thing my brother wants right now is another romance, you know. One solid disaster is enough for anyone, and he still hasn't gotten over it. (I considered sending him a link to the song "So Much Better" from *Legally Blonde: The Musical* as consolation, but I really don't think Luke would have appreciated it.)

I think men of true depth feel the sting of lost love the deepest of all. I read that once and felt the truth of it to the fiber of my soul. I really hope romantic catastrophes aren't hereditary. Between you and Luke, I'm doomed.

I suppose being happily married to a wonderfully indulgent man means Josephine must thrust her happiness on the rest of us. Once her babies are born, she'll have something else to take up her life instead of meddling in ours.

Twins! Can you imagine?!? That should keep her busy, if nothing will.

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I'm off to practice projection with Olivia. I really don't know why I'm the one people are always asking to train them how to be loud on stage.

Love,
Penelope

PS: I noticed you changed your profile photo, but Izzy, I wonder if you should choose something different. If you want to catch the eye of some would-be Mr. Right, maybe you should post a photo of a more well-recognized actress or something. That would be more culturally eye-catching. I doubt most people even know who that Éowyn person from those strange *Lord of the Rings* movies is, so seeing a woman with a sword might give the wrong impression. If you can't think of something better, you could always post your own photo. I posted a glamorous photo of the young Julie Andrews as my profile picture, because I really don't care about being culturally eye-catching if a Mr. Wonderful is classic enough to adore Julie Andrews. And you know how these dating sites work. It's not usually the best idea to put your real photo on display. Safety and all that. But if I was going to put my real photo, I'd add the one where I'm wearing the green sweater you bought me two Christmases ago. It brings out the color of my eyes and is one of my favorites, though Luke says the tree behind me in the photo looks like it's growing out of my head. He really doesn't understand style and artistry at all. Brothers!

From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 15
Subject: JOSEPHINE!!

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Izzy,

Do you hear yourself? You even type emails like an old person. "Henceforth"? "Perfectly satisfied"? "I weep over excellent writing"??? What are you doing with your life, my darling cousin? You should be thanking me for my attempt at an intervention.

And, you do *not* date. I'm not sure why, when there are plenty of nice men I've introduced to you. If you continue to compare every possible male specimen to one of your book heroes, you will become as single as the most fictional spinster you can imagine.

Spending time with my sister and brother does not count as non-reclusive activities, since they are your cousins. And the singles group at church has dwindled to such low numbers, they don't count either. Small-town, eligible bachelors are snatched up too quickly to take your time, Izzy. Heart-to-Heart® is the only option for you.

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And, for heaven's sake, take down that profile photo at once. Though the actress is lovely, no man wants to see a woman wielding a sword at him. It does not give off the best romantic impression.

And first impressions are vital. Especially online.

Lovingly,
Josephine . . . NOT Josie

PS: Patrick has a friend coming into town next week that I think you should meet. He's not a podiatrist, but he does have a promising profession: audiology. I've seen a photo of him and he has a lovely nose.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 17

Any woman who can carry a sword like that is the woman for me. Is that your most recent Halloween costume? I like cosplay too. I go extra on cosplay. I mean, if you're not going to go all the way with the costume, you shouldn't even try, right? But yours is epic. What a mood! I can create an awesome Aradon, if you want to be a pair. Where do you live? Is your sword real?

Tony

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 18

Tony,

I had to look up what the word "cosplay" means. That, alone, should tell you something about our compatibility.

Izzy

PS: A real sword is the only kind worth having. And I have no idea who *Aradon* is.

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Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 18

I like your bio but am concerned about your profile photo. Do you support the use of weapons to solve conflicts?

Paul

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 18

Paul,

Do well-honed words and a solid arsenal of glares count?

Izzy

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Josephine Martin
Date: February 19
Subject: I weep for your children

Josie,

What have you done to me?!? The only benefit of this online dating community is that I can think about my responses before I type them so I can say exactly what I want.

Otherwise, it's torture. What will your children think about this story when I tell it to them one day? They'll be horrified at the antics of their mother.

Izzy

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PS: The peach cobbler you made for Sunday lunch was amazing. I'd love the recipe.

Text from Josephine to Izzy: I'll give you the recipe if you stop calling me Josie.

Izzy: Never mind. I'll consult the library or Google for a recipe. Thanks anyway, Josie.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 20

Good riddance to the Witch-king of Angmar, is all I have to say.

And I'm glad to see you're on the mend after helping to save Middle-earth, but joining Heart-to-Heart? I find it difficult to believe things didn't work out with Faramir, even though he had a tendency to look down on my countrymen at first, but that really couldn't be helped.

He was my favorite character, apart from Samwise Gamgee.

Brodie the Hobbit

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 20
Subject: Hobbits and Heart-to-Heart

Penelope,

Someone messaged me on Heart-to-Heart, and he had no qualms about my sword.

And he knew who Faramir was. I'm intrigued. I might message him back, but I'm not certain yet. He knows about *The Lord of the Rings*. That's a definite plus in his favor. I wonder if he's short? Or has hairy feet?

Izzy

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 20

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Subject: Hobbits and Heart-to-Heart

Izzy,

Who is Faramir? Is he the audiologist Josephine wants you to meet? What an unusual name? Is it Indian? And why in the world would you think he has hairy feet? That's just gross.

Oh dear, why are you always talking about that book series? Can't you become obsessed with another type of ring to change your *real* world instead of a fantasy one? (Though, I am a big proponent of imagination. And imaginary worlds, as you well know. Just recall my excellent part as Dorothy Gale in sixth grade. If I hadn't tripped over the cowardly lion's tail, it would have been a perfect performance.)

But I am proud of you for messaging the guy back. Maybe he'll be nice, at the very least. Maybe online is a perfect way for you to meet Mr. Right. You've always been excellent with writing and reading words, even if you don't necessarily like speaking them as often.

Penelope

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PS: Make sure he's not married, but his height really shouldn't matter, Izzy.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 20

Brodie the Hobbit,

Faramir is still as valiant as ever, but we've decided to take a step back from our relationship to ensure our mutual affection isn't

due to the natural camaraderie of suffering joint loss and trauma after the Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

Samwise is one of my favorite characters too. No greater friend, which is why my dog shares my favorite hobbit's name. There are definite perks to being a hobbit. No one judges you if you eat heartily, get lost in a good book, or enjoy solitude with an excellent cup of tea. There's a lot to be said for a hobbit's life.

Éowyn-for-now

PS: Though adventures are highly suspicious, I prefer the literary variety, so perhaps I won't be too suspicious a friend for a hobbit.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Lord of the Rings clarification

Penelope,

Please tell me you're teasing about Faramir. I just can't believe you don't know who he is. I lived with you from the time I was twelve until I was nineteen and *still* you don't know who Faramir is? I'm going to choose to believe you're joking.

And I may not be an expert at romantic relationships, but I feel asking Brodie, the hobbit, about his marital status on our very first communication might send the wrong message. Besides, I don't expect him to respond to me. Good men are usually snatched up too quickly, or that's what Josie says. And, as we all know, I've had my fair share of not-so-good men, so I'm not the best judge. Anyway, he likely found my profile picture intriguing

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and made a spontaneous comment. Either that, or he's Josie in disguise and I plan to make her reveal herself.

Speaking of Josie, the date she's set up for me is with an audiologist named Steve. I know nothing else about him, except that he's allergic to peanuts and prefers to meet at the restaurant instead of picking me up at my apartment.

When is the next time you'll be home from school? I'd like to pick your brain about the online classes program at your college. I've felt so unsettled for a while now, you know? Where do I fit? I'm not even sure. What does a woman who adores books, tolerates small groups of people, and has a magical love for bringing together the right people and the right books do with her life? There's not really a job description for "book pusher," and even if there was, it sounds like a profession where one might get arrested. If stepping through magical, fictional wardrobes was an occupation, I'd likely volunteer, just to have a chance to see the "professor's" library. And then there's my recurring daydream of owning a manor house on a cliff by the sea, but since I don't fly, and rarely travel, the ceramic replica of one I have sitting on my bookshelf will have to do. I've placed it right beside *Jane Eyre*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Dracula*, among a few others of my favorites that feature grand and mysterious houses.

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Speaking of daydreams, I think it's past time for me to think about my future besides just working at the library—though it's still one of my favorite places because I can travel to hundreds of worlds without leaving my chair. Plus, Aunt Louisa makes the best coffee and it's served all day long.

What are men to coffee and books!

Love,

Izzy

PS: Do you remember who Samwise is?

PPS: I've researched opening a bookshop, but that requires math.

PPPS: Oh, and apparently Steve has a very fine nose.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 21

Éowyn-for-now,

I'm glad to hear you're taking things carefully with Faramir, since, as you stated, you both have suffered such trauma. Fighting orcs and Nazgûl is one thing, but suffering under such a father as Faramir's is quite another, poor man. Perhaps it would be wise to test the waters with someone who's had a healthier family dynamic?

Samwise is a great example of friendship and the perfect name for a dog. My dog, Gandalf, passed away last year, and for a little while I had hopes he'd "rise from the dead" as his namesake had. I don't think I've ever had such an excellent dog. Perhaps my new puppy, Argos, will live up to his predecessor, but for now he seems more interested in destroying every pair of shoes I own and unrolling the toilet paper at the speed of light.

Yes, a hobbit's life is a superior one, made all the better by the camaraderie of a good friend, an excellent pipe, and an occasional adventure now and again, literary variety or no.

What do you and Samwise enjoy doing together?

Brodie the Hobbit

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From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Re: Lord of the Rings clarification

Izzy,

Of COURSE I remember who Samwise is.

He's your dog.

Penelope

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Brodie the Hobbit

Penelope,

The Lord of the Rings movie series should arrive at your college address by tomorrow. Clearly, you've gone too long without seeing it. I am certain you can find almost any answer for life within the wonders of this story:

Should I stay home tonight and read a book? *"All's well that ends better."*

Why can't you look Great-grandmother Eloise in the eyes? *"The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places."*

Should I climb to the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain? *"I'll get there, if I leave everything but my bones behind."*

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If Beans & Things only has one chocolate croissant left and you're third in line? *"There's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for."*

How can I best prepare for Christmas at Grandma Edgewood's? *"We come to it at last, the great battle of our time."*

Should I read one more chapter, even though it's past midnight? *"A day may come when the courage of men fails . . . but it is not this day."*

You see how well they work?

AND . . . Samwise is only the very best hobbit in Middle-earth . . . or any other earth, if you ask me.

In other news Brodie the Hobbit seems to be a legit sort of fellow. Maybe. Who can really tell? We're online so anyone could be anything. Just check your spam folder as a reminder of how many people with unpronounceable names have financially needy nieces that only you can save with your blind faith of offering money.

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Anyway, Brodie named his new puppy Argos. Isn't that wonderful? I'm dying to know what his favorite books are, but I feel that may be a little too personal a question to ask this soon in our conversation. Books are intimate things.

However, if he's Josie in disguise, I'll catch his blunder fairly quickly. Her favorite books have recipes or cowboys in them.

I wonder what his profession is?

My date with Steve, the audiologist, is tonight. Josie has warned me not to talk about books or sea urchins. She's afraid I'll bore him with my talk of books (of course) *and*, apparently, Steve had

a fairly traumatic experience with a family of sea urchins at the beach last year and now walks with a limp as a result.

Did you know our library has an entire section on sea urchins? Fascinating creatures, really.

Love,
Izzy

PS: If Brodie the Hobbit isn't Josie in disguise, I think he must be a writer.

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Sea monsters

Izzy,

Please don't talk about sea urchins. They always remind me of that creature I saw under the water when we went to the beach when I was six. I know you don't believe me, but I am sure it was a sea monster yet to be discovered. That's the real reason why I eat seafood with such ferocity.

Penelope

PS: Is *The Lord of the Rings* a musical? I think I would remember it better if it was.

PPS: Maybe meeting a man online or through Josie will turn out better than . . . previous relationships for you. One of my

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professors says, "Sometimes we can't see the cannoli for the cream." Wait, maybe he was talking about a marketing strategy, but you get the point.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 21

Brodie the Hobbit,

I am so sorry about Gandalf. Did you have him for a long time? If any animal should have the power to resurrect, I think it should be a faithful dog. They're such wonderful companions and the very best listeners in the world.

I've had Samwise for five years and despite having a propensity for pouting on occasion, he's the finest creature on earth. And much like his namesake, he enjoys digging. Often. And with great zeal.

Training a puppy is definitely an adventure I don't care to repeat for a long time. If Argos is as fast and clever as his mythical namesake, he'll learn that shoes are meant for wearing and toilet paper, though a fun toy, is meant for human uses. Samwise treated table- and chair-legs as teethers and ended up wearing my curtains more times than I care to admit, though, I must say, he looked excellent in pale blue with his golden fur.

Curtains are superfluous though, I suppose. I prefer as much natural light as possible and the view from my front window is worth seeing, once you look beyond the dilapidated furniture shop across the street and the train tracks. Someday, I'll move just beyond town where the mountains show from every window. They're blue-tinted mountains here, not lush and green like the Shire, but still lovely in their own way. I think I'd find complete contentment in a world of mountains and seas and fresh air and books . . . oh, and coffee and tea, of course. Maybe it's just because of mainstream bookshops

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nowadays, but I think there's no smell quite so wonderful as the combination of books and coffee.

Or tea for afternoon and evening.

Izzy

PS: I have great aspirations of hiking to the very top of our largest mountain, but then I realize what sort of energy that entails and reach for a favorite book instead. I know it's a pitiful substitute, but my legs are never sore afterward, and it's much easier to drink a cup of tea while sitting.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Word-vomit shame

Penelope,

I'm an idiot. That is why I don't have a boyfriend. I just wrote a note to Brodie the Hobbit about dogs and toilet paper and the color blue looking excellent on Samwise. And I admitted that I would choose a book over hiking! Now I'm sure he thinks I'm a lazy, bookish simpleton. And probably fat.

I need to stick to my books. They're much safer to my self-esteem. If I hear back from him, I'll know for certain he's too desperate to be reasonable or too mentally inconsistent to be trusted. Now I just need to figure out how to disable my profile from this blasted Heart-to-Heart, right after I go on this date with Steve, the audiologist.

Izzy

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PS: Maybe I should message Luke to see if he thinks talking to a man online about toilet paper and curtains is an unforgivable offense in a budding friendship. Luke has to be honest with me, doesn't he? He's family, after all.

PPS: And please don't bring up he-who-left-me-at-the-altar (though typing his name would be much easier than using all the hyphens). Despite rumors, he did not end our engagement because of my disinterest in rock climbing or my inclination toward using book and movie quotes. If someone else has said something better, then why not use their words? It's simple logic.

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Re: Word-vomit shame

Izzy, you do like quotes a lot. Sometimes I can't tell when it's you talking and when it's some dead author whose name I can't pronounce, but I just have accepted it's how you like to communicate. You know? Like some weird literary code.

And once Chip broke up with you after Dad hired someone *else* as business manager, we all knew why he'd dated you for so long in the first place. Scoundrel. That's what he was. I'm glad he's gone, Izzy. For one thing, I was sure you were going to die on one of those rock climbing adventures, especially given your history with ropes, and two, he didn't know your favorite color or book. That should tell you something about a fiancé for certain. Especially a fiancé for you.

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I'll write more later. Sandy needs me to help her get untangled from her twinkle lights again. I keep telling her to move them farther away from her bed, but she saw something on Pinterest she's determined to replicate.

Maybe Steve, the audiologist, will be the one for you. I "hear" he's rich.

Penelope

PS: Luke says I'm not funny, but I can use puns just as well as he can.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Luke Edgewood
Date: February 21
Subject: Advice

Luke,

Do men find women who talk about toilet paper and curtains offensive or just ridiculous? And if they prefer books and tea over day-long hikes to the summits of mountains, is that an immediate turnoff?

Asking for a friend.

Izzy

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CHAPTER 2

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 22

Excellent choice of profile photo. I find that profile photos are a creative way to show personality. If you will notice, mine is of Sherlock Holmes, the renowned fictional detective. His precise extraction of information and unparalleled gifts of observation are two characteristics to which I can attest as personal proficiencies of my own. I feel certain you would find those talents attractive, as most women should, but I rarely have the opportunity of encountering like-minded partners. Most have limited knowledge of the more important things in life and others offer too simplistic conversations for my taste. If you wish for further knowledge about my many interests, I could send you several essays I wrote on the subject. One is entitled "Why Modern Women Are Intimidated by Intelligent Men" and another is "The Unfortunate Plight of the Great Romantic Men of the Contemporary Age." Both speak to the difficulties men, like myself, encounter while searching for mates who are not intimidated by their superiorities. I look forward to your ready response.

Doyle's protégé

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Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 22

Doyle's protégé,

I believe you've hit upon the very reason why Sherlock Holmes remained single throughout the entire course of his fictional life.

Have you happened to read *Pride and Prejudice*? There is a character in the novel named Mr. Collins of whom you may find some particular interest . . . and similarity of mind. Also, I feel quite certain I do not have the skill set I need to pursue a future with someone of your caliber. I hope you find the eighteenth-century female of your dreams.

Izzy

From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 22
Subject: Steve

Izzy,

How did the date with Steve go? I tried calling you last night but you never answered, so I had high hopes it was because you were still out enjoying your time with him. Patrick says he's an excellent golfer and enjoys collecting books. If you can find anything in common, Izzy, you should pursue him. He's financially stable, has never been married, isn't in debt, and goes to church. Men like him are in high demand and short supply.

And he doesn't like to fly either. He's perfect for you!

You need to consider the truth of the matter. Time is not on your side.

Love,
Josephine

PS: I feel certain you can overlook his overuse of the word

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amplification. Everyone has their unique peculiarities. You, of all people, should appreciate that.

From: Luke Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 22
Subject: Re: Advice

I feel you need to clarify the context for me to give an honest answer for "your friend." Is this the same friend who locked herself out of the library during circle time with the entire second grade class from Falls Springs Elementary?

Luke

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 23
Subject: Re: Word-vomit shame

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Izzy,

I just reread your last note.

What kind of name is Argos? Did you spell that correctly?

Why does it matter if you're ridiculous? It's an online relationship. This is one of those times where you can be authentically yourself and not worry about how it comes across. In fact, it sounds like the perfect way to start the possibilities of a lifelong romance.

You don't have to worry about making a fool of yourself in front of him when you spill a milkshake down the front of your blouse just before going onstage for dress rehearsal for your debut part as Flower Girl #1 and then watch him cozy up next to the girl who beat you out of the lead role of Eliza Doolittle.

See? I bet you'll never have something like that happen with an online relationship. (I recognize my comment about authenticity may sound hypocritical since I still have my Julie Andrews profile photo up, but, as an actress of stage productions, I realize the crazies that are out there. In fact, I'm on stage with a few of them.)

Penelope

PS: He did trip over one of the flowerpots on set and got potting soil stuck on his perfectly straight teeth. (And before you ask, this time it was *not* my fault.)

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From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 23
Subject: Steve, the audiologist

Penelope,

I'm so sorry about the play and the boy. It sounds as though he wasn't a good fit for you anyway. Your Flower Girl #1 outshines any Eliza Doolittle, I am certain. Men are so fickle; that is why I feel all the more resolute in my choosiness. Especially after he-who-left-me-at-the-altar (HWLMATA). And why not? If I'm almost perfectly content on my own, why would I long for halfway

content with another person JUST to claim I have a boyfriend. No, singleness (with all of my fictional friends) is preferable over a poor choice.

As ridiculous as Josie thinks it is, I've always found a lot of truth in romantic fiction. What's wrong with expecting a man to treat a woman well? To share excellent conversations? To have similar likes—even unusual ones? To experience mutual respect and humor? Why do those kinds of things seem more frequent in popular novels and Hallmark movies than in real life? Is it wrong to wait for a relationship like that?

I know in-person relationships haven't been my forte, especially the ones Josephine chooses, so maybe this online thing DOES have some perks. I think this is Josephine's seventh blind date for me in three months. Seventh! I am NOT that desperate.

As far as Steve the Audiologist goes? Medical encyclopedias. Those are the books he collects. And though I find historical books, of any persuasion, valuable and worthy of protection, I never imagined I'd meet a man who enjoyed discussing the facts within a century-old medical book ad nauseam.

Tell me, Penelope, am I as overbearing as that when I discuss my fictional loves? Please say no. I don't think I've ever heard the suffix "itis" more times within a thirty-minute conversation in my whole life. This is not what I want for my future.

Josie has already messaged me and I can't bear to answer her. Do you think I should pretend to be sick to avoid seeing her at church? No, I suppose not. If I am to be anything like my sword-wielding Éowyn, I must act brave enough to meet my pregnant, misled, matchmaking cousin face-to-face. But Steve the audiologist? Has my vibrant life of fictional wonders

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dissolved into the choice between spinsterhood and medical encyclopedias?

Izzy

PS: Sea urchins have no discernible face and can live up to two hundred years. I don't think there is a direct correlation between those two things. I just find them interesting.

From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 24
Subject: Stop ignoring me

Izzy,

I know you are ignoring me. Steve told Patrick that he enjoyed your dinner together, though you were a quiet date. Oh, why do you resort to your shy self with everyone except our family? You are much more interesting when you talk instead of sit there like a statue. No wonder strangers think you are aloof! Do you remember how long it took me to convince the youth pastor at church that you were not mute? You say it was because he wouldn't let you get a word in, but I don't believe you. I had no problem speaking to him at all, it just required a little extra volume.

It's one thing to be a good listener. It's quite another to not respond at all except with those large, unsettling eyes of yours. You must get over this shyness and force yourself to engage in others' lives for your future's sake, Izzy. Regular people tend to

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talk about more things than books, movies, and the pleasure of nature. Maybe you could find a book on audiology? Or golf?

Josephine

PS: I know I will see you at the library fundraiser. You can't ignore me there.

Text from Izzy to Josephine: Steve the Audiologist had a very fine nose.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: February 26

Izzy-for-now(?),

Blue mountains? Are they cold? Sad? (So sorry. Very bad pun.) I'm afraid my conversations improve with familiarity, though it takes some time to get beyond the notoriously imbecilic initiation or my unnerving silence (for fear of sounding imbecilic, I resort to speechlessness). My mother refers to my awkwardness as "lovely" and "an acquired taste," but mothers are required to say such things, I'm told.

I remember seeing sepia-colored, jagged mountains when I studied for a year in California, but blue ones? Now I'm intrigued.

We have beautiful mountains here. Most are eternally green. Very Shire-like. But I agree about natural light and a window view. I am currently renovating my own place and one of my goals is to ensure I wake to a view to help start my day with a proper perspective. As Keats said, "The poetry of earth is never dead," and there is something inspiring about seeing the world around us in all its beauty, isn't there?

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As far as Argos, I feel he will live up to his mythical namesake in speed, if nothing else.

Do you have other favorite books besides Tolkien's classic?

Brodie

PS: Tolkien is enough to study for a lifetime, but there are so many great books to enjoy and I get the sense you're a kindred spirit in that way.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Luke Edgewood
Date: February 27
Subject: Josie at work

Never mind my previous question for "my friend." I've decided to end all communication. He quoted Keats and called me a kindred spirit.

It's a trap.

Izzy

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PS: Josie is behind it all. I can smell her Rose d'Amour from here.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: February 27
Subject: It's all a trap

Penelope,

I've decided to end all of my communication on Heart-to-Heart. How silly I've been! I'd actually begun to look forward to Brodie's messages, checking as soon as I got home from work and smiling when his name popped up in my account, just like Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail*.

And then Brodie quoted Keats. And referred to his own social awkwardness . . . and I knew it all had to be some horrible farce.

I can't do it anymore. It's too perfect. Good, single men don't join online dating communities, do they? And quote Keats and call me a kindred spirit?

So the only options are that he's a fraud OR Josephine has played some horrible trick on me to get me to fall in love with medical encyclopedias and fine noses. Do pregnant women become more ruthless as their babies grow? And if she's having twins, does that mean she becomes doubly ruthless?

I suppose I should try another date with Steve. At least he reads. The three previous dates she set me up with hadn't picked up a book (other than comic books) in years. Besides, he's an audiologist. He ought to be a good listener, right?

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Izzy

PS: Evergreen mountains? I looked up geography with evergreen mountains and there aren't any in the United States. Do you think he's lying? Josie has a lot of explaining to do when I see her at the library fundraiser tomorrow. How on earth could she pretend with such . . . believability? Do you remember when she was in the church Christmas play? She had trouble making the innkeeper's wife sound remotely authentic!

PPS: Sea urchins do not have brains. I'm not sure what to think about that.

From: Josephine Martin
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: February 28
Subject: What is wrong with you?

Izzy,

You did not act like yourself at the library fundraiser. I appreciate your special attention to me and Patrick (the cushion on my chair was a nice touch), although I can't help but think something is very wrong. I could tell you were trying hard to be talkative, even to Steve, but your heart wasn't in it. Was the turnout for the fundraiser not what you'd expected? Mother said it was the largest the library had in its history, which is in no small part due to you. You have so many wonderful talents that go unseen.

Are you in love? Are you a sulky sort of in-love person? It doesn't become you at all. Your smile takes on some sort of dangerous tenseness like a mad dog. Patrick did not seem to notice, but I did.

And I'm still not sure who you were talking about when you mentioned my friend Brodie? I have no friends named Brodie. Patrick has one named Bradley, if you'll remember. I tried to set him up with you two months ago, but you had an aversion to his cologne and his propensity of wearing waders.

Are you having second thoughts about him? I must say, I prefer Steve to Bradley.

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Love,
Josephine

PS: If you continue to look pale, I'm going to be forced to come visit you and personally make sure you're eating.

Heart-to-Heart

Date: March 1

I saw your profile picture on Heart-to-Heart. You are so cool. I've never seen anyone look so much like a real movie character before. You are awesome. I'd love to chat with you.

Marcus

Heart-to-Heart

Date: March 1

Marcus,

I think you may be too young for this web community.

Izzy

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From: Luke Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: March 1
Subject: Re: Josie at work

Izzy,

What does Keats have to do with anything? This "friend" of yours would allow a dead writer to dictate her future? I think your

friend is made of stronger and wiser stuff than that. If I recall correctly, kindred spirits are worth knowing.

Luke

From: Penelope Edgewood
To: Izzy Edgewood
Date: March 2
Subject: Puns & profile pics

Izzy,

I know you are depressed when you begin making horrible puns. I'm studying for an exam right now and will write more later.

I will say that the most ruthless acts I've noticed in Josephine lately have been about food, so I think you may be safe with Keats and Heart-to-Heart. What if Brodie is exactly who he seems to be? You once told me that authenticity is one of the most beautiful characteristics of a person. I've not seen a lot of it on the university scene, except when people are intoxicated or sleep-deprived. Oh, and also my drama professor, Dr. Lincoln—no one can wear that shade of pink without being completely authentic.

However, I don't want my only moments of authenticity to be while intoxicated (which has never happened, BTW) or when sleep-deprived. Now that I think about it, I don't want my most authentic self to be the one that comes out when I'm sleep deprived. I think I'm more like a Living Dead personality.

But anyway, isn't loving someone being comfortable with who they are by being exactly who you are? What a wonderful

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idea . . . and definitely not seen in the drama department often (Dr. Lincoln excluded).

Oh, I need to run!

Penelope

PS: I noticed you changed your profile picture to one of those old-fashioned authors. Why would you do that? Isn't that the author who cut off her ear and mailed it to someone? You are not being authentic, Izzy. Or at least I hope you're not. Your ears happen to be one of your best features. I hide mine with my hair.

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Luke Edgewood
Date: March 2
Subject: This day we fight

You are right, as usual.

This friend is made of stronger stuff.

Keats is no match for her.

I will come to the bottom of this like an impassioned and somewhat irrational Nancy Drew, or even better, Miss Marple.

Izzy

From: Izzy Edgewood
To: Penelope Edgewood
Date: March 2
From: Glorious authenticity

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Penelope,

I have decided to shower Brodie (or Josie, as the case may be) with the real Isabelle Edgewood. Why not? It will teach Josie a lesson and hopefully curtail any of her future matchmaking madness.

This day I fight!

Besides, the one sure way to run a fraud away is to beat him with . . . utter authenticity. Frightening authenticity.

Quote Keats?

Oh, I can do so much better than that.

Izzy the Valiant

PS: I have no knowledge of an author who cut off her ear and mailed it to someone. You are referring to an artist. The profile photo is of Charlotte Brontë. It's my attempt to garner my strength for the verbal tsunami to come.

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