

What I Call A Universally Acknowledged Truth

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What I Call A Universally Acknowledged Truth

by [alfrescotree](#)

Summary

Jane Austen AU - It's 1813, and Lady Penelope Hartford is desperately seeking a husband for her daughter.

Chapter 1

Dearest Aunt Penny,

It has been much too long since our last correspondence. It shames me to be in such infrequent contact with my favourite Aunt! Mummy is presently arranging our annual visit to the seaside, but I have decided to break with tradition this year. Do you think you would be able to accommodate me at Woolford Park for a visit? London has begun to overwhelm me and I find myself longing for the peace of the English countryside. I believe a change of scenery will do me the greatest good. I have such fond memories of Uncle Charles and yourself; you have always been so good to me.

*All my love,
Tilly Ruteledge*

P.S. Please tell Miranda that Benji adores her painting. The squirrels are exquisite.

Lady Penelope Hartford read the letter twice before moving to the chaise lounge and reading it again. Her joy grew as her eyes passed over each word. Her niece wished to visit them, the Hartfords in little old Surrey! This was almost too much to bear. She had always suspected that the Ruteledges' life in London was not as charmed as they would like society to believe. Tilly wishing to spend time in Surrey could only be confirmation of this. She called for Mr Hartford, to whom she immediately relayed the news.

“Just think what a prize it would be to have the Earl of Rochford’s daughter with us in Woolford! She would surely draw a higher class of suitors to our circle, and one of them may well be a fine husband for our Miranda. Heavens, even Benji would do. She may be married by midsummer!”

Mr Hartford’s reaction was more muted. “I’ve no objection to Miss Ruteledge visiting, but I must say I am surprised at your eagerness to associate with her, given your history with her mother.”

“Nonsense! I have no qualms with Belinda’s family, it’s only her smug face that I cannot bear.”

Penny had maintained good relations with Belinda’s children despite her disdain for their mother – a testament to her social prowess. She held a special fondness for her niece, who reflected more of herself than her own daughter. The opportunity for Miranda to spend the summer with her more genteel and refined cousin was too good to refuse. Invitations were sent and arrangements were made, and it was decided that Tilly would be a guest at Woolford for two months.

Penny and Belinda's rivalry stretched back to childhood and was extreme even for a pair of sisters. They had been great beauties in their youth, and Penny had been the first to wed - a perfectly respectable match with the mild but affable Charles Hartford. All was well until Belinda unexpectedly married an Earl. Belinda became the Countess of Rochford, and their subsequent divide in class was responsible for the present frostiness between them. As the lady of Woolford Park, Penny lived in comfort but had no real title, and the Hartfords remained on the fringes of the aristocracy. Belinda's smugness only sealed Miranda's fate. If Penny was unable to outclass her sister, then her daughter must.

These things were easier said than done. Miranda, an indulged only child, now possessed a healthy amount of disrespect towards her parents. Attempts to introduce her to sons of Lords and Ladies had been unsuccessful, and Miranda had proved entirely unwilling to accept her mother's assistance. Penny remained undeterred however, and Tilly's imminent arrival had only spurred her on.

Miranda was indignant at the suggestion.

"For the last time, I am not marrying cousin Benji!"

"It's 1813. No one minds! Would you not even entertain a courtship? He *will* be an Earl one day."

"Mother!" she shrieked. "*I* mind."

Penny sighed deeply, resigned but undefeated. "It's simply something for you to consider. With Tilly arriving next week you and her brother could have a nice fall wedding. Honestly, you really must stop rejecting suitors or you'll develop a reputation."

"I believe you've established a reputation as the overbearing mother," Miranda teased.

"Such impertinence! Everything I do is in your best interest."

Benji was not mentioned again, and they did not quarrel for the remainder of the day.

Chapter 2

Ever since the announcement of Tilly's visit, Miranda had noticed a change in her mother. Her inquisitive eyes gleamed brighter, she stood taller, and her manner grew even more affected than usual. As the day of arrival drew nearer, Penny's attention was diverted to the state of Woolford itself. The opportunity to showcase her source of pride and joy had injected new purpose into her life, and the household became a flurry of activity under her direction. Yes, only the finest china must be used when Miss Ruteledge arrives. No, the ball must be held in the Assembly Rooms. Yes, please make sure the gilt candelabras are on display. While Miranda felt this was all very unnecessary, it was a welcome respite to have Penny preoccupied with other matters.

She relayed all this to her closest friend Stephanie Sutton during an afternoon stroll. The gardens of Woolford Park were a respectable size, and Miranda enjoyed the freedom of the expanse, away from prying eyes and sensitive ears.

Their meetings of late had diminished in light of Miss Sutton's engagement to Mr Norman Jones, and she had been dearly missed. The match had been a surprise to almost everyone in the village, for Mr Jones was seen as a dim-witted eccentric with an excessive number of cats. On closer examination however, his faults were tempered by his devotion and sweet nature. Stevie had even grown fond of his cats, and she had become particularly attached to the runt of a litter, a tabby kitten named Heather.

While the engagement of a young lady inevitably displaces her from her social circle, Miranda's resentment at the loss of Stevie was somewhat soothed by the happiness of her friend.

"Oh Stevie, I've missed you so. I've been unable to speak so freely for weeks," she lamented.

"It won't always be like this," consoled Stevie, "Besides, you'll have Miss Ruteledge to keep you company soon."

"Don't remind me! She'll be here this time next week." Miranda had not seen Tilly since they were children, and their subsequent communications had been limited to superficial letters, written only during the obligatory occasions.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"I cannot say. Mamma's reverence for her suggests she will be unbearable, yet I do not wish to judge her too harshly, for heaven knows what she must think of us. Fancy choosing to spend the whole summer in this village! The poor girl will be bored senseless after a week." She plucked a bluebell from the side of the path and began rolling the stem between her fingers. "But perhaps she'll distract mother from trying to find me a husband."

"Well she'll need to be quite the handful, because nothing short of the Spanish Inquisition would distract your mother."

They burst into laughter. This was not as aggrandising as it sounded, for the usual order of affairs at Woolford went something like this: Penny would hear of an aristocratic bachelor in town and arrange for Miranda to be introduced to him. These suitors were sought after only for their title, which Miranda concluded was inversely proportional to their agreeableness. As she abhorred the artificial nature of these affairs, her attitude was rendered so hostile that any resulting connexion ranged from indifference at best to abhorrence at worst. Mother and daughter would quarrel, Mr Hartford would play peacemaker, nothing would be learned, and the whole sorry business would be doomed to repeat itself again once this latest gent was forgotten.

“Let us speak no more on the subject,” Miranda declared. “How is Miss Heather?”

“On the mend. I consulted Mrs Beeton’s handbook, which advised regular feedings of milk fortified with egg yolks. I dare say she’s very lively now.”

They reached the end of the path, which faced the empty cottage next door. Miranda had just turned to head back when they were startled by a squat gentleman bursting out the front door. “What-ho ladies!” bellowed Charlie Cumberland. “Deepest apologies for giving you a fright. Long time no see Miss Sutton, or should I say, Mrs Jones. I expect you’ll be next Miranda, eh?” He said with a grin.

“Certainly not,” Miranda said coldly.

“So she says,” Stevie added with a smirk.

Charlie was an old associate of Mr Hartford and was as loyal as he was irritating. Over the years he’d become well acquainted with the family, so much so that he was entrusted to play chaperone to Miranda and Stevie on occasion. Unusually, he was a bachelor of good breeding that Penny did not pursue for her daughter. Apparently, their disparity in height was deemed an unacceptable spectacle. She did draw the line somewhere, it seemed.

“What on earth were you doing in there?” Miranda asked.

“Checking on the interiors for your father. A lady has expressed interest in the cottage.”

“Goodness, after all this time?” Miranda pondered. “No one has lived there for years.” Details of the previous owner were scarce. All she knew was that they had passed before she could remember - at the time, a temporary agreement had placed the property in the Hartfords’ care. That arrangement had lasted for most of her life.

“Indeed,” he said, pulling out a slip of paper from his breast pocket. “A Miss R. Parker,” he read.

“How curious,” Miranda murmured to herself.

“Well! Perhaps the village is not so tiresome after all,” Stevie remarked.

Chapter 3

The ladies planned to take afternoon tea at the Assembly Rooms a few days later. The rooms on the high street were not the largest or most sophisticated (though Penny insisted otherwise), but Miranda preferred them to swankier establishments. They had wiled away many an hour there prior to Stevie's engagement, so Miranda welcomed the return of this tradition.

Before they left, Penny had dispensed her usual brand of advice. "Miranda, Viscount Richard Twistington of Sudbury is currently in town. A barouche and four thousand pounds a year! Make sure you get his attention!"

"Yes mother!" Miranda called out as she waltzed out the door, with no intention of doing any such thing.

The rooms were lively and humming with activity today. It was not unusual to see unfamiliar faces as travellers passed through town, and they overheard one gentleman deep in conversation with Clive, the barkeep. "This cake is delicious Mr Evans, but I venture a smaller portion would better suit the afternoon appetite. Wouldn't miniature cakes be charming?"

Miranda made a mental note of disagreement with this, as she objected to any downsizing of food, particularly cake.

Their usual seats were occupied by the aforementioned Viscount, a priggish man in livery surrounded by an equally ghastly entourage. As they walked past, she heard him snicker and make a distasteful comment on her height.

She suppressed a scowl and held her head high. "It's such a pity that the manners of some come up so very short," she said to Stevie.

"We cannot expect much from feeble minds," she replied with a smirk.

They were loud enough to have the desired effect, and he was shamed into silence thereafter.

"And to think mother would be thrilled to have him as a son-in-law!" Miranda exclaimed later. "She would marry me off to any living creature with a title if she could."

"Wealth is no indicator of true class," Stevie said sagely. "But it can lead one to overlook any flaws."

"If only she could be as wise as you."

"She's not always wrong though. It *is* advantageous to know how to attract a gentleman's attention."

"I can do that," she protested. "I certainly got the attention of Mr Twistyface."

Stevie rolled her eyes. "We'll disregard him. But being versed in the language of love is a useful skill for a lady." She produced two fans from her purse and handed one to Miranda. "A well-manoeuvred fan is terribly alluring. Norman could not resist my charms."

Miranda grimaced as she inspected the ornate wooden fan. "Has my mother put you up to this?" she asked. "I cannot understand why we must communicate with these silly instruments anyway. I doubt any suitors interpreted your messages; it's all flirting to them." She fanned herself in a coquettish manner and batted her eyelashes. "What does this mean?"

Stevie gasped. "You just told Clive you're in love with him!"

Clive glanced in their direction and gave them a saucy wink. Miranda dropped the fan in horror.

"You're not even opening it correctly," Stevie said. "It's all in the wrist. Here, let me show you." With a graceful flick of her wrist, her fan unfolded elegantly into a half moon. She let it touch her cheek with a shy flutter.

Miranda tried to imitate her action without success. "This one is too stiff, if you'll excuse me." Exasperated, she flicked her wrist harder, causing the fan to slip out of her grasp and go flying through the air. By the time she realised what had happened, she could only watch as it sailed towards the bar, striking the gentleman speaking to Clive squarely in the back of the head.

Miranda froze as the fan clattered to the floor, still remarkably closed. The gentleman turned and frowned before examining the fan at his feet. When he saw their shocked faces, his expression turned to one of mild amusement, and he began walking towards them while Clive stifled his laughter.

"He's coming to us!" Miranda whispered. "Hide!" She was slinked halfway down her chair in a dreadful panic when his voice startled her.

"Pardon me Miss, I believe you've –ahem– *mishandled* your fan," he said. He did not appear amused now. In fact, his countenance did not betray any emotion. Once she could see his features clearly, she was dismayed to find he was exceedingly handsome. He tried to avert her eyes at first, but upon meeting her gaze, his dark eyes were soft and kind, and she was surprised to detect a lingering sadness within them.

Her face turned scarlet. "I cannot apologise enough sir," she began. "It must have been a... a..." As she spoke, she tried to conjure up an excuse to no avail.

"A poltergeist!" Stevie blurted out.

Miranda shot her an incredulous look. "Yes... a poltergeist," she echoed.

His nonchalance broke at this. "A poltergeist?" he repeated slowly.

"The spirit world is quite unpredictable, sir. I'm certain it meant you no harm." *What am I saying?* she thought. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Clive in hysterics, having given up

all pretence of not listening.

“Well, I can only hope the poltergeist had a case of poor aim,” the gentleman said cheerfully, before leaning in, close enough so only she could hear. “*Although*, if it was aiming for a better target,” he murmured, glancing at the Viscount, “that could be arranged.”

“Is that so?” she said, a little too eagerly, “I wouldn't dream of such a thing, of course...”

“Certainly not,” he replied hastily. “Forgive me for the suggestion.” He turned to leave and added a final remark. “It's all in the wrist,” he said with a wink.

The gentleman rejoined Clive, leaving Miranda and Stevie mortified. Miranda spoke up first. “A poltergeist??” she hissed.

Stevie dismissed her with a wave. “He's only a visitor. Be thankful you won't see him again.”

Miranda was thankful, but a part of her was disappointed to lose the well-humoured stranger.

Chapter 4

The weather was stormy that night, and as the rain battered down, Lady Penelope and Miranda sat down to their needlework after supper. Penny was working on a tapestry of the queens of England, while Miranda had devised a pattern that was quite rude when viewed upside-down.

"How was your afternoon tea with Miss Sutton?"

Miranda chose her words carefully. "Very pleasant. She gave me a lesson in the language of the fan."

Penny clapped her hands together in delight. "How marvellous! Did it go well? Was the Viscount there?" Her earnest delight caught Miranda off-guard, and though she bristled at the mention of the Viscount, she could not bear to tell the truth.

"There were a few mishaps," she said, selecting her words with care, "but I say we certainly caught the eye of some."

"Well, you will surely improve. Oh! You can put your new skills to good use during the ball next week! I've put in so much effort planning already."

Miranda's heart sank. How hideous, she was now going to need extra lessons from Stevie. Her reply was hesitant. "I don't know if that will be necessary. It is Tilly's night after all," she offered. "Besides, I thought it was to be a reasonably small and intimate affair."

"Yes, it will be quite modest," Penny said, shifting in her seat. She was a terrible liar. "Only one hundred guests."

"One hundred guests?? That's practically the entire village!"

"Quite. I wouldn't consider anything less for the daughter of an Earl."

"Oh forgive me, I did not realise her majesty had deigned to bless us with her presence," she said with mock reverence. "My understanding was that Tilly wanted an escape from her hectic social schedule in London."

"Darling, stop overreacting, and none of that sarcastic humour of yours please. A gathering of this size will be nothing to Tilly. It's only one ball and then she can spend the rest of her summer at her leisure."

The next morning saw the sun break through the storm clouds, bringing the promise of early summer. Miranda decided to take advantage of the fine weather by doing some reading in the

gazebo, and she was upstairs perusing the library when she noticed a small carriage outside the window.

At that moment, her mother rushed past and ordered her downstairs. "Our new neighbour has called! Come quickly and don't be rude." Goodness, that was fast, she thought. Charlie had only speculated on the possibility of a new resident a few days earlier, and she had forgotten to question her parents any further on the matter.

There was no mirror nearby, so she smoothed her hair and dress and hoped she looked at least somewhat presentable. As she hurried towards the chatter emanating from the drawing room, she was surprised that the new voice sounded familiar somehow. Without thinking any further, she pushed open the door and nearly fainted at the unlikely scene before her.

Exchanging pleasantries with her parents was the gentleman from the assembly rooms.

It was horror that washed over her first, followed by embarrassment and a tiny thrill of delight. She would later reflect on the implications of this development with tentative hope, but for now, her only thought was to escape.

She tried to slip out the room unnoticed, but it was too late. "Ah, there you are darling," her father said, as he ushered her in and led her to the gentleman. "And this is our daughter, Miranda."

She could only imagine his reaction while she attempted to avoid all eye contact. When she finally had to look at him for the sake of politeness, she was stunned to find him composed and entirely unruffled.

"Miranda, this is Mr Gareth Preston."

Chapter 5

"How do you do, Miss Hartford?" Mr Preston asked warmly. His straight-laced manner melted when he spoke to her, and she was instantly put at ease. Perhaps this wouldn't be so bad after all.

"All the better for meeting you sir," she replied. She suddenly recalled her conversation with Charlie, and his note from Miss Parker. "Forgive me, I was under the impression our new neighbour was a lady."

"Miranda!" Penny hissed in admonishment.

A flash of distress crossed his face. "Well, I hope I am a satisfactory substitute."

"Yes, you'll do tolerably well," she said with a smile. She was content to continue with the charade that this was their first encounter, but his next retort extinguished that notion.

"I trust all is well in the spirit world today?" he asked with a slight smirk.

"I do beg your pardon?" Miranda replied, aghast at his rashness. "You must have confused me for another," she lied, panicking while she grew increasingly flustered.

"You surely cannot have met?" Penny asked, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"We have not," Miranda insisted. "I do not claim knowledge of any other worlds, spiritual or otherwise."

Mr Preston flinched at this rebuff, but he remained amiable. "I see. I must be mistaken."

Miranda desperately tried to change the topic. "I trust your journey here was pleasant?"

"It was most satisfactory. I am saddened I did not make my move sooner."

"Mr Preston is the new landlord of The Hamilton Lodge," Mr Hartford said.

"How wonderful," Miranda said. The old lodge had sat in a state of disrepair for as long as she could remember. "Are you restoring it yourself?"

"Yes. It is in better shape than expected and should be functioning soon."

The rest of their exchange went more smoothly, and its subsequent course revealed that Mr Preston was the youngest of three brothers from Norfolk. His modest fortunes had taken an unexpected turn when he came into possession of the lodge, which had been willed to him by a childless uncle. By a happy coincidence, an old acquaintance also owned the empty cottage, and he had suddenly found himself with a new life laid out before him.

Once they felt satisfactorily introduced, Mr Hartford extended an invitation. "Say, we are holding a ball next Friday for our niece, would you care to join us?"

“Yes you must!” Penny exclaimed. “It would be a fine chance for you to meet everyone in the village. And our niece Miss Ruteledge is very well connected indeed!”

Mr Preston caught Miranda’s eye for a moment before he replied, “That is very kind of you. I would be delighted.”

They bid their goodbyes soon after. The moment he was out of earshot, Penny became hysterical.

"What on earth have you and Miss Sutton been up to? Spiritual world? Have you been dabbling in the occult?! Do you wish to be burned at the stake?!"

“Oh mother! Do not be ridiculous,” she exclaimed. “You may accuse me of many things, but witchcraft is not one of them.”

Penny sighed. “Such a shame his prospects are poor. It’s a great misfortune being the third son of an untitled family. There’s barely anything left to go around once your turn arrives. But isn’t he dashing?”

“I suppose so,” Miranda murmured, mostly to herself.

"Surely he should be commended for making the most of his fortunes. Overseeing the lodge is perfectly respectable,” Mr Hartford chimed in.

“Oh yes, it is an honest living to be sure,” Penny conceded. “I say, wouldn’t it be fortuitous if Tilly took a liking to him? Lord knows Belinda would be furious at her daughter lowering herself!” she cackled.

Miranda took great offence at this. “I can only presume that Aunt Belinda has nothing to fear, if Tilly is as supercilious as you.”

“You are a strain on my nerves Miranda. What am I to do with you?”

As soon as she was able to escape, Miranda put paid to her plans for the day and headed straight for the Sutton estate.

"He's moved in next door!" she wailed upon seeing Stevie, who was sat on the sofa brushing a bundle of fur on her lap. Heather the kitten had made a full recovery from her sickly start in life and was curled up in a ball, purring happily.

"Who?" Stevie asked, barely paying attention.

"The gentleman from the assembly rooms! The one I hit with a fan and spoke nonsense to about poltergeists! He's the new tenant next door!" she cried.

Stevie bolted upright and handed a yowling Heather to Miranda. “No, you cannot be serious! All those people in the assembly rooms and you took aim at your neighbour?”

“He paid a visit this morning and I’ve only worsened his poor impression of me. And now he’ll be attending Tilly’s ball next week!”

"I did not know you could care so much for a gentleman’s opinion,” Stevie mused.

“Nor did I, but something about him intrigues me,” Miranda said, sitting down next to her. “It was quite vexing, he was not surprised to see me again at all. It was as if he knew I would be there.”

Stevie raised her eyebrows. “Well there’s only one person who could have told him. Who’s the biggest gossip in town, apart from your mother?”

They cornered Clive at the assembly rooms that afternoon.

"Tell us everything you know about Mr Preston," Miranda ordered.

"I would not betray another gentleman’s confidence," he replied, with a glint in his eye.

Miranda pushed a shilling towards him. "For your troubles."

"But then again, a tongue is easily loosened," he said, pocketing the coin.

They first gave him a summary of the morning’s events.

"A poor impression of Miranda?" He laughed. "Oh no, he thought your fan debacle yesterday was quite the amusement. I'd venture to say he is quite taken by you."

"Is that so?" Stevie asked slyly.

"And why do you say that?" Miranda demanded.

“It would be uncouth of me to reveal all a man’s secrets. Don't worry, I spoke very well of you," he said with a wink.

"Clive!" Miranda felt the mortification would never end.

After the ladies had left, Mr Clive Evans justified that by not relaying his entire conversation with Mr Preston, he had not betrayed Mr Preston's confidence. And after all, he had not yet revealed that they were more deeply acquainted than either Miranda or Stevie knew. He was rather delighted at this turn of events...

"Clive, who were those ladies?" Mr Preston had asked. His countenance was reserved but there was a note of wistfulness in his voice.

"That was Miss Hartford who lost her fan, and her friend Miss Sutton. I expect you will become well acquainted with the Hartfords soon."

Mr Preston choked on his drink. "I beg your pardon?"

"She is your new neighbour to be," he said innocently.

Mr Preston composed himself. "Oh, you mean she is of Woolford Park? Yes, of course. I intend to leave them a card at the earliest convenience."

"Lady Hartford will be delighted to have someone new in her social circle."

"As will I. I was not aware they had a daughter. Miss-"

"Miranda," Clive finished helpfully. "Yes, she is their only child. Although I hear Lady Hartford's niece will soon be joining them for the summer. She's a socialite from London. I expect you'll receive an invite to their ball soon."

His eyes lit up at this last piece of information. "I do not wish to presume anything."

Clive was feeling awfully proud of himself when Mr Preston wandered in looking glum.

"What's wrong?"

"I fear I offended Miss Hartford this morning."

Clive sighed and poured him a drink. This was more difficult than he had anticipated. "Have a seat..."

Chapter 6

The next day, the appearance of a barrouche drawn by two pretty mares signaled Miss Matilda Ruteledge's arrival. She brought with her two lady's maids, along with an excessive amount of trunks overflowing with ribbons and silk.

On disembarking, it was evident that word of Tilly's beauty had not been exaggerated. She had the smug air of one born into the aristocracy, but while such haughtiness would have been unflattering in most, it did not distract from her delicate countenance and enviable flaxen mane. She wore a floaty blue pelisse and carried herself with a grace that Miranda knew she could never emulate. Her heart sank as Penny beamed with pride. This was what it would be like for the next few months, she thought, inevitable comparisons between herself and her fairer cousin, the ideal daughter her mother had wished for all along.

But Miranda's preconceptions were pushed aside as Tilly threw herself into the waiting arms of the Hartfords and greeted them with effusive warmth. "Dearest Aunt Penny! Uncle Charles! My darling Miranda! Goodness, how high you have grown! It has been much too long since I last saw your sweet faces! You have shown me such kindness for taking me in."

"Nothing is a trouble for a niece of mine," gushed Penny. After exchanging several rounds of air kisses and a rush of pleasantries, the Hartfords took Tilly on a tour of Woolford, which was now bedecked in all its finery.

As she was led from room to room, Penny launched into a well-embellished tale of Woolford's history and took great care to point out an "antique" ornament or piece of furniture every now and then. Tilly grew wide eyed with astonishment as they passed a "priceless" oil painting.

"Woolford Park is far grander than Mummy has relayed to me! It is not so dissimilar to home at all, although our parlour is twice as large."

"Perhaps her manners are not as refined as you think," Miranda whispered, while Mr Hartford stifled a chuckle.

"They are wanting in some aspects," Penny said through gritted teeth.

After several heavy handed hints from Miranda and Mr Hartford, the tour came to a merciful end. Tilly was ushered upstairs to her room and urged to rest after her long journey.

Several hours later, Miranda went to check on Tilly. There was no response when she knocked on the door. "Tilly?"

She gingerly pushed open the door and walked in to find Tilly was not asleep, but seated at the cherrywood desk by the window, deeply engrossed in writing a letter.

She jumped when she saw Miranda. "Oh! I am just writing a note to mummy, bear with." She angled herself so that the contents of the letter were concealed, and scribbled some final words with her quill. As soon as the ink was dry, she folded the paper and tucked it under a book on the desk.

"Is it urgent?" Miranda enquired. "You needn't worry about your family. Mother has already sent word that you have safely arrived. But the footman can send that in the last post if you like."

"No, no, no that's quite alright," Tilly insisted. "I shall leave it for my lady in waiting."

Miranda hadn't the faintest idea of what could be so pressing, but Tilly's serene smile quickly went back on as she walked over to the window and pressed her hands against the glass. The sky was particularly clear that day. Coupled with the fields that had been refreshed by the recent rain, it was a soothing sight.

"It is so peaceful here in the country, Miranda. What a difference mere hours of travel make! London feels a world away already."

"You may soon become bored here," Miranda said sagely. "Little changes sometimes except the clouds ."

"Perhaps, but for now it is a fine distraction. I feel some quiet boredom may be just what I need," she said, a thoughtful tone creeping into her voice. "I should like to have a simple life like yours, if only for a little while," She said dreamily.

Miranda balked at this. If only indeed, she thought.

"Are there kingfishers here?" Tilly asked, with renewed enthusiasm. "Oh I do love birds. I am so fond of the little chaffinches outside my window at home that I will often sneak them some crumbs from the kitchen. I always wanted an aviary in our garden, but mummy thinks they are unrefined. The only bird she's agreeable to is one on the dinner table."

Miranda, who was partial to a roasted bird herself, considered this a sensible opinion, but Tilly's unlikely interest was so endearing that she held her tongue. "I'm quite certain there are."

Tilly clapped her hands together. "Splendid!"

Tilly declared herself refreshed from her journey the next day, and an afternoon outing to the town centre was arranged for the two ladies, with Charlie to accompany them.

"May we take the carriage?" Miranda asked. "All this exercise is disagreeing with me. And surely we cannot expect Tilly to walk?"

Penny did not take the hint. "Some exercise will do you all good. Tilly is here for the fresh air, after all."

Charlie, who fancied himself a bit of an outdoorsman, promised to keep an eye out for any wildlife that might interest Tilly, but he became distracted during their walk into the town and they suffered through a much too long speech on his days in the military. Although Tilly did not seem to mind too much, she appeared relieved when it was time for them to return to Woolford for dinner.

They were about to pass the post office when a gentleman exited in front of them, forcing the group to acknowledge him. Miranda recognised Mr Preston's figure before he saw her. He seemed in a sombre mood and startled when their eyes met. "Miss Hartford," he said, giving her a small nod. "How good it is to see you outside of home. How do you do, Captain Cumberland?" His gaze landed on Tilly and lingered for far longer than Miranda thought necessary. "And this must be your cousin who I've heard so much about."

A pang of jealousy stirred within her, crushing whatever reassurance she had found in Clive's words. She was no match for Tilly.

"Matilda Ruteledge," Tilly preened, stretching out her hand. "A pleasure to meet you sir. Miranda! You did not tell me you have such a handsome acquaintance!"

Miranda blushed deeply. "Mr Preston is the landlord of The Hamilton Lodge. He lives next door."

"An inkeeper! How quaint!"

Gary bristled at her reaction. "Where is your party heading to?" He enquired.

"We were just returning to Woolford," said Charlie. "Would you like to accompany us?"

"I should like that. It was such a fine afternoon I had to walk. Exercise invigorates the constitution."

"I agree! Exercise is refreshing to the mind and body." Miranda said.

Tilly objected. "But you just said that you would rather-"

"Rather take a walk than waste my time in the carriage, yes." Miranda hastily interjected.

Once they had left the high street, they discovered the paths through the fields were only wide enough to accommodate two pedestrians. Miranda was about to suggest Charlie and Tilly walk together when Charlie piped up.

"Why don't you two ladies set off together first? Mr Preston and I can discuss his plans for the lodge. What's this I hear about a tavern?"

"I would be happy to," Mr Preston said. Miranda's heart fell, then lifted at his next remark. "But it would be rude of me to hold you all up," he added. "Why don't you walk with Tilly instead? You would be most a informative guide."

"Oh yes, Tilly would love a tour from someone like you," Miranda said emphatically.

"Why Miranda has lived here all her life! She would surely be just as knowledgeable!"

"Yes I suppose so," Mr Preston acquiesced.

I would like to hear about the lodge too," Tilly opined.

"My, you are popular Mr Preston! I shan't keep you from the ladies for too long," he said with a wink.

"It must be the novelty of someone new," Mr Preston said with a sigh. "I trust you all shall be bored of me quite soon."

She watched as the two gentleman set off ahead of them. She and Tilly began walking, neither of them particularly happy with the arrangement.

Tilly stretched out her arms and let her fingertips brush the tips of the tall grass around them. "Is Mr Preston coming to the ball?" she asked.

Miranda's stomach tightened. "I cannot be certain," she lied. "He may well be otherwise occupied,"

"Oh I do hope he is there. I should like a dance with him."

"Surely a lady of your standing could dance with any gentleman your heart desires."

"You are too kind cousin Miranda," she replied, with uncharacteristic modesty.

"But it's the truth, is it not? Mamma says you are courting the son of a duke."

Her sunny demeanour withered. "Oh, you must mean my dear Rupert... I am afraid I have lost every hope I held for that connexion..." She grew teary and Miranda immediately regretted mentioning the subject.

"Then let us not speak of him," she soothed. "He must be a fool to have upset you so."

Tilly sniffed and was coaxed into a smile. "Oh Miranda. Your words comfort me in ways you cannot know."

"But what do you mean?"

Her guard let down, she caught a momentary glimpse of a different Tilly.

"Not everyone is willing to accept my feelings on the matter," Tilly said, her voice turning cold for a moment. "Please do not mention this to Aunt Penny," she said curtly. "I have

already downplayed the attachment and I hope that will put the matter to rest."

It stunned Miranda to think that they were more similar than she had thought. "Not a word," she assured her. Before she could say any more, Charlie cried out from ahead. "Oh look Tilly!" he exclaimed, as he pointed to the sky. "A blue tit in the fir tree!"

Tilly squealed and ran ahead to join him. "Oh how delightful! Look at its vibrant wings!"

Miranda was gladdened by their simple joy, and for the first time, she considered how stifling Tilly's life must have been, with all its rules and expectations and restrictions. While she was lost in thought, she realised Mr Preston was waiting for her. Now free of Charlie, he hung back and gave her a tentative smile.

Chapter 7

Miranda approached Mr Preston gingerly and they began walking side by side. She had longed to be alone with him, but now the circumstance had presented itself, she was overcome by shyness. They walked without speaking, the silence only broken by the sound of their boots rustling through the grass.

"How unusual this is," Mr Preston murmured.

"What is?"

"Meeting you in ordinary circumstances," he said, with a hint of playfulness. "It seems we are destined to cross paths in less than ideal settings."

"And what would be an ideal setting?" she asked, her heart quickening.

He thought for a moment and let out a sigh. "One where I could start over," he said, mostly to himself.

Miranda wrinkled her brow. How cryptic. "I'm sorry I pretended not to know you yesterday," she said.

"The fault lies with me. Had I perceived the situation better, you would not have found yourself in such a predicament. I hope I did not cause much conflict between you and your mother "

"Oh, it was *awful*," she said with a grin. "I don't know if I shall ever recover from the scolding she gave me."

He chuckled at this. "You hide your suffering well."

"How is your head?" she asked.

"A little bruised. No permanent damage."

They continued trading gentle barbs while moving at a leisurely pace. Up ahead, Tilly and Charlie were now engaged in an animated conversation on the fauna of South England.

Miranda and Mr Preston's gazes flickered at each other every so often, and she soon found herself studying his every feature, sneaking glances at every opportune moment. They were almost the same height, with him being just taller, an uncommon occurrence for her. He had a slight tan from the fine summer weather, and his features were well-defined, but not too sharp, with pleasingly gentle edges. She envied his dark lashes and kind eyes that were so expressive, with unknown depths. They were always tender beneath what she had initially perceived as sternness, but there was a mournful quality to them too, one which she had noticed on their first meeting. His curly mop of hair was slightly unruly, which gave him a boyish air.

"Why did you move to Surrey, of all places?" she asked, breaking herself out of her reverie. "It must not have only been because of the inn. A sleepy town like this would have bored most gentlemen."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "I must admit it was simply circumstances that brought me here at first. But on acquainting myself, I'd say it has its charms," he said, their eyes meeting for a moment. "And I wanted a fresh start, somewhere no one knew me."

"Why? So you could hide your sordid criminal past?" She teased. "Good word, sordid..."

"Something like that," he said. His face, which was already pleasing to gaze upon, radiated an earnest warmth when he smiled. "But any deeds, good or malicious, would have attracted little notice back home," he continued. Everyone only knows of my elder brothers in Norfolk,"

"Ah, so you're a gent off to make a name for himself," she postulated. "Well if your brothers are more noteworthy than you, they must be extraordinary gentlemen."

"I would not go that far. The order of one's birth grants some pecuniary advantages."

"What a pity. We shall have to settle for you."

"You wound me Miss Hartford. I assure you I am the superior one."

"But assurances are not adequate to convince me," she said half-seriously, thinking of all the empty words she had heard before. "A man can only stand by his actions."

He did not reply, and when she glanced at him, his eyes were bright with a hint of a smile on his lips.

"You are an intriguing lady, Miss Hartford."

Before she could respond, they were startled by a honking noise from behind them. She turned to find a solitary goose, perturbed by some action it had deemed most offensive. Mr Preston's jaw tightened and he hurriedly excused himself before walking off at a great pace, almost overtaking Charlie and Tilly, which only enraged the goose even more.

"Mr Preston, wait!" Miranda called, breaking into a run. "It is only a goose, I assure you its bark is worse than its bite!"

"They bite?!" came his panicked reply.

The goose was now in a proper flap. Tilly was delighted by the sudden appearance of a new avian friend and began chasing after the goose herself. "Anser cygnoides! Isn't she darling?"

"Certainly not!"

"You must turn around and make eye contact with the bird!" Charlie shouted. "Assert your dominance! Running shall only provoke it more!"

And that was how three of them ended up in pursuit of a goose, with poor Mr Preston leading the pack.

Incredibly, Tilly managed to tame the goose in the end. As a few feathers were lost in the commotion, she insisted on bringing it back to the pond at Woolford to recuperate, after assuring Mr Preston that he would never have to lay eyes upon it again.

"What did you say about ordinary circumstances again?" Miranda asked, while Tilly cooed at the goose, which was now happily tucked under her arm.

"I must have tempted fate," he said. He flinched as Tilly brushed past and the goose hissed at him one last time.

Miranda began laughing at the absurdity of it all, and he couldn't help but join in. The whole ordeal had dissolved much of the tension between them. She found herself remarkably relaxed, and by the time they reached the entrance of Woolford, she felt more lighthearted and carefree than she had been in many months. Outside the front entrance was Penny, who was waiting to greet them.

Chapter 8

"You're all back just in time for dinner!" Penny announced. She glanced at the goose nestled in Tilly's arms. My goodness Tilly, did you wish to provide the main course?" she asked, eliciting a gasp of horror from Tilly.

"And how nice to see you, Mr Preston! Would you like to join us?" Penny enquired.

"Yes, that should be marvellous."

The words had scarcely left Mr Preston's mouth before Penny wedged herself between him and Miranda and offered to give him a tour of Woolford's grounds.

"By the way Miranda, Miss Sutton called earlier and is waiting in the drawing room. It would be such fun to have everyone around the table!" she called over her shoulder, as she steered a helpless Mr Preston away.

Miranda was miffed by this gesture, but there was little she could do in the moment, and her desire to speak with Stevie was more pressing for the timebeing. She rushed off to the drawing room.

As soon as she saw her, Stevie sprang up from her seat and hurried over, wide-eyed and breathless with excitement. "I saw you all from the window. What happened? Why was Mr Preston with you? Was Clive right? Pray tell!" she demanded.

Miranda was only too happy to inform her of the afternoon's events. "We had a fortuitous meeting on the high street and he joined us on our walk back. He called me an intriguing lady! And then I discovered he has a terrible fear of geese..."

"Oh my, that is odd indeed."

"The geese? I gather they can be quite frightening"

"No, calling you intriguing. That is a nice way of putting it," Stevie said with mock confusion.

"You do realise there's no need for you to articulate every thought, little one."

"Ah but that means he has certainly taken a liking to you! And are his feelings returned?"

Miranda pondered this. For so long she had discarded the notions of romance, believing her heart had been hardened against such things. But Mr Preston had provoked such a response in her that she had begun to believe that such mutual affection was possible. If nothing else, he had awoken a piece of her that she had believed to be long dead.

"Truthfully, He is unlike any gentleman I have ever met," she declared.

"Oh Miranda, you are smitten. You shall be Mrs Preston by summer's end!"

Stevie let out a squeal of happiness and clapped her hands, while Miranda was more tentative. They immediately subdued themselves as they were rejoined by Tilly and Charlie, who were in high spirits.

“Miss Sutton!” Tilly exclaimed, embracing her with an air kiss on both cheeks. “What a delight it is to meet Miranda’s dear friend.”

“And you,” Stevie replied sweetly, dropping into a perfect curtsy. “One could scarcely believe that Miranda is related to a lady of such poise!”

“Oh nonsense! She has grown up very well indeed, much like her mother.”

Heaven help me, Miranda thought.

Stevie chuckled. “Well, I do like to think some of my tutelage was also responsible.”

“I say Miranda,” Tilly said, turning to her, “the company you keep is delightful! How lucky you two were to have one another growing up.”

As they walked down the hall to dinner, Stevie spun around, taking in all the extra new furnishings. “Goodness Lady Hartford, what have you done? The house is unrecognisable!” She exclaimed.

“Your powers of observation are lacking, Miss Sutton. The house has always been the pinnacle of refinement,” Penny said in a huff.

“Don’t mention it,” Miranda whispered. “She’s been working on impressing Tilly non-stop.”

At dinner, Miranda dug into her gammon and potatoes with great gusto, causing Tilly to remark, “What a great eater you are Miranda! Aunt Penny must never worry about fattening you up!”

Miranda tried not to take offence at this.

“So Tilly, tell us all the news from the Ruteledge Estate,” Mr Hartford asked.

Tilly dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Well, Mummy and Daddy are hosting a debutante ball this year, and Benji is debuting with Lady Scoffington of Bromley. Well bred, perhaps too much, and just as odd as him.”

“Ah isn’t that lovely,” Penny said, with a note of disappointment in her voice. “There is a lid for every pot it seems. Perhaps even you, Miranda!”

Miranda stabbed her fork into her gammon.

"And what about your fair self?" Penny continued. "I hear you and a certain Duke may soon give us cause for happiness."

Charlie's mouth fell open and he dropped the sprouts on his fork. Tilly was unfazed, however.

"You must not pay attention to such rumours Aunt Penny," she said, setting down her cutlery on the side of her plate. "I assure you I am quite unattached." Her smile was beatific.

Miranda marvelled at how Tilly defused the situation with grace, before Penny pressed on.

"A lady as fine as yourself? But that cannot be! It will not do. We must find you an eligible gentleman before summer's end. Ah, Mr Preston, what is an unmarried girl to do?" Penny asked.

Mr Preston turned pink at the insinuation. "I could not possibly be called on for advice," he said coolly.

"Oh leave him alone Penny!" Tilly cried with glee. "You are too naughty."

Miranda's emotions flared as the two ladies dissolved into laughter. She snuck a glance at Mr Preston, who gave her an indecipherable look.

Alas, she was unable to speak to him alone for the rest of the evening, and they had to make their goodbyes in company.

"I shall see you ladies at the ball," he said with a small nod.

Miranda curtsied. "and you, Mr Preston."

Penny pulled her aside that evening. "Miranda my dear, I pray you will take full advantage of Tilly's time and learn a thing or two from her. She is said to be an excellent musician and seamstress, and she once courted the son of a Duke. She has been invited to Almacks and could have the pick of any young gentleman in London."

"How wonderful for her," Miranda replied, her voice laced with sarcasm. "Has it ever occurred to you that marriage is not of the highest importance in every lady's mind?"

"Not of the highest importance! Darling, it is the means for ladies to secure their futures and establish alliances between families. What could be of higher importance?"

She knew that the practicalities were an unfortunate truth for the fairer sex, but she tested her boundaries further. "It has come to my attention that one's own happiness must be of greater importance, for how strong can an alliance be if a marriage is weak in heart?"

Penny stared at her in disbelief. "Happiness? Oh you young ladies of today think everything is a fairy tale. Happiness will not keep a roof over your head."

"Perhaps not, but I cannot accept that it should be forsaken for security alone. Stevie is besotted with Norman and has a stable future."

Don't be what I call ridiculous, Miranda. I fear Miss Sutton and her engagement have been a poor influence on you! Simple men may be fine acquaintances, but a match would be beneath you, quite frankly. A young lady of your breeding is well-positioned to marry into high society. Now, there is another gentleman I have been meaning to introduce you to. Edmund Detorri is a naval officer..."

At this, Miranda tuned out the rest of the conversation, only nodding and murmuring agreement at the appropriate points. Her heart had begun to form an attachment to Mr Preston, and her mother's disapprobation would not be a deterrent.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The days became full after that, and between the Hartfords hosting Tilly and Mr Preston managing work on the inn, Miranda did not see Mr Preston again until the ball. It vexed her that their opportunities to cross paths were scarce despite their proximity, and it appeared that their first few encounters had been pure serendipity.

Pleasingly though, Mr Hartford had begun stopping by The Hamilton with regularity and had struck up the beginnings of a friendship with Mr Preston, and Miranda became increasingly interested in the titbits of information she acquired this way. Her father reported that Mr Preston was a hard worker but had a highly strung constitution. He was an excellent card player, particularly at Whist, and his favourite drink was homemade elderberry wine, which his family had made from their own summer fruit back home.

As the ladies were getting ready for the ball, the final touches had Penny flitting about the house in a dreadful tizzy, darting about like a deranged moth. Her last minute demands concerned everything from the music (“Supper will be after the fifth waltz, have you never been to a ball?”). To the floral arrangements (“The lavender is much too fragrant and will sully the entire room! I specifically requested lilacs!”), to the attendees (“Charles, do be a dear and make sure the Gavestons are off the guest list. Miss Theodosia turned her nose up at my choice of venue and she is disinvited.”)

To escape this, Tilly and Miranda had barricaded themselves in the dressing room on the second floor. Miranda had chosen an ivory dress embroidered with flowers and foliage at the hem, with leafy tendrils encircling the neckline and waist. It gave the impression of one walking through a field of flowers, which Miranda felt was appropriately playful for a young lady. As a finishing touch, she paired it with a cream Shetland lace shawl that belonged to her grandmother. It was knitted from wool as thin as spider silk and was fine enough to be pulled through a wedding ring.

Tilly’s gown was white and trimmed with gold. At first glance it appeared plain, but up close it had a sheer layer of intricately embroidered cotton muslin. The tailoring was impeccable, and its simplicity was strikingly beautiful.

They were sitting in front of the mirror when Tilly handed her a necklace with a large honey-coloured gemstone.

“Try this one.”

Miranda held it up to her neck, then put it back down. “I cannot. It’s much too fine,” she said. While the Hartford ladies had plenty of their own jewels, Tilly’s were of another class, and Miranda felt faintly embarrassed wearing something fit for court.

"Nonsense! It complements your dress and colouring perfectly, you must," Tilly urged, fastening the necklace on for Miranda. "There. Isn't that lovely?"

Miranda touched the necklace, the jewels cool beneath her fingertips. "It is, yes," she acquiesced.

Tilly selected a delicate pearl and emerald piece for herself. "So, which gentlemen are vying for a spot on your dance card tonight?" she asked.

"I expect my mother has filled it already, each partner more detestable than the last." *But there is one whom I hope there is room for*, she thought. Mr Preston was increasingly lingering in her thoughts, and this was distressing and thrilling in equal measure.

"You must point him out to me! Is it that fellow from the assembly rooms?"

"Clive?!" Miranda spluttered. "Certainly not. And what about yourself? I expect you'll be rushed you off your feet all evening."

"And I shall be pleased for it! It should be nice to know some company outside of mummy's circle. A country gent is appealing in his simplicity."

When Penny had finally calmed down somewhat, she became misty eyed when she saw the two ladies atop the stairs. "Girls! You look marvellous. Oh Miranda, I do wish you would wear something in your hair."

The Hartfords and Tilly pulled up to the assembly rooms in their carriage, just in time to see Norman and Stevie arriving.

Stevie, dressed in butter yellow satin, rushed to them with a squeal and pulled Miranda into a hug. "This shall be a fortuitous night, I can sense it."

The ladies gathered together and made their way into the ballroom, where Penny soon whisked Tilly away to show her off. "Have you met Miss Ruteledge, *daughter of the Earl of Rochford*, *MY NIECE*?"

The assembly rooms were lavishly decorated and resplendent with fresh flowers, signalling the start of summer. Penny had outdone herself.

Miranda soon spotted Clive at his station, where he was having a tense conversation with a churlish gentleman. He appeared quite short and curt in temperament, and Miranda took an immediate dislike to him. After some heated words, the gentleman stormed off.

"Who was that?" Miranda asked Clive.

“Heavens if I know! Another whining aristocrat here to preen himself. Quite handsome though, wasn’t he? In a loutish sort of way, but still.” He shook himself from his reverie. “But never mind him, for I have good news!” He said, slapping the counter. “Mr Preston has offered me a position at The Hamilton once it is completed!”

“Clive! That’s marvellous!” Miranda exclaimed.

“He’s put me to work devising the menu with him. Keen interest in food, that man.”

“Is that so,” she said, filing away this.

“I hope to be seeing a lot of you there,” he added under his breath.

“Shhhh!”

“Oh shush yourself,” he said with good humour, shooing her away, as the first dance was about to begin.

As everyone got in formation for the opening quadrille, a cheerful Mr Preston made his entrance and approached Miranda. He looked even more handsome than she remembered, though his slight discomfort in such a setting was evident.

“Good evening Miss Hartford,” he said, his eyes bright. “You look beautiful.”

Miranda’s cheeks coloured. “I must give credit to Miss Ruteledge. She insisted on ensuring I was well dressed this evening.”

He smiled at her, and as they paired off to their respective partners for the first movement of the quadrille, the words he murmured under his breath made her face burn. “You always look beautiful,”

She was uncertain if he had meant for her to hear him, but it did not matter. The words induced such a heady state of delight that the first three movements of the quadrille passed in a blur. By the time it came to their turn to dance, she was positively glowing.

“My lady,” he said, taking her hand. His hands were slightly roughened by work, but his touch was gentle. As for his dancing, it was adequate if a little unrefined, but they were well matched in height and made a most striking pair. It was over in a blur, and as they looked into each other’s eyes, captivated, it was only Penny’s voice that pulled them back to the present.

“Miranda!” Penny called from across the room. “I must introduce you to Mr Detorri,”

Miranda groaned. Mr Preston drained in colour and fell silent.

“Oh Miranda, there you are,” said Penny, dragging her forcibly in front of the angry gentleman Clive had been speaking to earlier, who wore a tight smile. He was not unattractive, with heavy lidded eyes and an angular face, but there was something dour about him.

“This is Mr Edmund Detorri, Naval Officer from Norfolk.”

“How do you do Miss Hartford?” he asked in a startlingly high pitched voice.

Alarmed, Miranda managed to force out a reply. “Very well sir.”

“Lovely.” Penny said. “I shall leave you two to it.”

Mr Detorri gripped her arm a little too hard, and led her to the first waltz. His dancing was admittedly skilled, but he had all the charm of a paper bag.

She endured the dance whilst looking out for Mr Preston, but he had made himself scarce all of a sudden, and it was not long before Mr Detorri grew irritated with her distracted state.

“Are you quite alright?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, very well,” she said hastily.

“You seem awfully flighty. Frankly your mother warned me about you.”

“If only you had heeded her warning,” she mumbled, before she made a proposal. “Mr Detorri, I mean no disrespect, but I am merely enduring this to appease my mother. It would be to both our benefit if we simply get this dance over and done with tonight.”

“Your intentions are quite clear,” he replied, his voice full of contempt.

They bowed to each other half heartedly at the conclusion of the waltz and went their separate ways.

Having extricated herself from Mr Detorri, she wandered off in search of Mr Preston. She grew increasingly uneasy until she finally spotted him across the room, paired in a dance with Tilly, no doubt concocted by Penny.

Tilly was radiant in her element, and they made a fine pair. Very fine, in fact. A flash of jealousy flared within her, but she reminded herself that Tilly was the guest of honour after all, and as his social circle here was still yet small, it was perfectly acceptable for him to only dance with ladies he was acquainted with. They would surely have more opportunities tonight.

But to Miranda’s disappointment, he seemed to go out of his way to avoid her for the remainder of the evening, in a subtle manner so that he could not be accused of being rude. His gaze averted itself so their eyes never met, and in every dance thereafter, it seemed assured they were always separated by design. With every missed glance and step aside seeming more and more deliberate, Miranda’s discontentment grew until she was convinced she was mistaken about him after all.

During refreshments, she slunk into a chair decorated with rosebuds next to Stevie. “He’s ignored me entirely since the first dance. I surely have misread him,” she said, forlorn.

“No, no!” Stevie insisted. “It must be something else.” She leaned in. “I watched him during the quadrille. Perhaps he tried to hide it, but he only had eyes for you, Miranda! A gentleman with such affection in his gaze could only be looking upon a lady in his favour.”

“How can you know that?”

“I am a master of matters of the heart, Miranda. I can sense all glimmers of lust within my sphere.”

Just then, they spotted Mr Preston as he slinked through the red velvet curtains out to the balcony.

“Go follow him!” Stevie hissed.

“Alone? Someone will see.” An unmarried young lady meeting with a gentleman in private was deeply frowned upon, particularly during such a public occasion.

“The refreshments have made them far too tipsy to notice tonight. What on earth did Clive put in the drinks? Besides, I’ll make an excuse for you if need be. Go!”

The two ladies hugged and Stevie wished her luck.

Miranda gingerly made her way to the balcony with as much nonchalance as she could muster, careful not to take a direct path too quickly or draw any attention. She reached the doors and slipped behind the heavy, ornate curtain into the cool night air, where Mr Preston was leaning against the balcony railing.

He startled at the sound of her footsteps and turned around. “Miss Hartford?”

“I was hoping we could have another dance this evening, but you have proved rather elusive tonight,” she said. She had meant to be civil, but she was so frustrated that she blurted out, “Your behaviour tonight has been most perplexing.”

He recoiled at her words. “I hope you understand my distance was no reflection of your actions,” he said, apologetic, before adding quietly, “or indeed, my feelings.”

Her mouth went dry. “Then why?”

He took a deep sigh. “I wish not to burden you with my quandary. Besides, my waltz is poor anyway,” he said with a grin.

“Perhaps I can give you a lesson,” she said, surprising them both with her boldness.

His eyes widened. “Please.”

She took his hand and instructed him through the first steps, and they were soon shuffling slowly around the moonlit balcony, the music from inside faintly floating through.

There was a moment where everything clicked and they fell silent, their steps transforming from tentative to carefree. They even giggled when he tried to spin her under his arm and she almost tripped over his feet. She had to grab on to him so as not to fall, and they ended up holding each other in rather close proximity.

She suddenly felt very shy, her newfound confidence all slipping away from her. After what seemed like an eternity, she found her voice. “This is wonderful,” she whispered.

“Indeed. Lady Hartford is a formidable hostess.”

”I meant *this* ,” she said, looking into his eyes, where she saw a spark of recognition, the night coming full circle.

Stevie suddenly flew through the curtains with a bewildered Norman in tow, causing Miranda and Mr Preston to fly apart from each other. “Your mother is coming!” She hissed, before switching tack in a second, as Penny’s figure punctured the curtain.

“Oh Lady Hartford, Miranda was just showing us the constellation Cassiopeia!”

“...indeed I was,” Miranda said, gesturing at no star in particular. Isn’t he marvellous?” she said, as Stevie jabbed her sharply in the ribs. “She!” Miranda corrected herself.

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “I did not know you had an interest in cosmology.”

“But of course!”

“And what was Cassiopeia the queen of?”

Miranda observed Mr Preston mouthing something out of the corner of her eye.

“Opia... opium?”

The collective looks of horror told her she was wrong.

“Come now,” Penny ordered, gliding back into the ballroom.

“Aethiopia,” Stevie whispered forlornly.

Miranda helplessly looked back over her shoulder as she followed Penny, but she had an idea. She let her shawl slip from her shoulders and tossed it at Mr Preston, who caught it, utterly confused. She hadn’t the faintest clue if it would work, but as she walked away, she couldn’t stop her lips curling into a smile.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the very long wait between chapters! Thank you for bearing with me :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What were you doing out there?” Penny cried. “You should be with the guests, not hiding outside with the neighbour and Stevie.”

“My apologies, mother,” said Miranda, without her usual hostility, still placated by her encounter with Mr Preston. “We were simply lost in the excitement of the stars! I shall be on my best behaviour for the rest of the night.” Her state of mind remained distracted, however, as she couldn’t stop thinking of his hand holding hers, leaning into him almost in an embrace, the dark depths of his eyes...

Penny paused, unnerved at Miranda’s easy acceptance of her scolding. “Yes, well, I’m glad you understand...” As if reading her mind, she interjected Miranda’s thoughts. “I don’t want to see you with Mr Preston again! Tonight is for le mingling. And where has was Mr Detorri got to? Please tell me you made a good impression.”

Miranda swallowed hard. “Oh I think I treated him perfectly appropriately.”

Penny rattled off a list of gents she was to dance with, and she dutifully complied without complaint. There was the heir to a sizeable fortune who was far too young, an exceedingly dull clergyman who kept treading on her toes, and many more, all of whom fell short in her eyes, but she endured them all the same. She and Mr Preston avoided each other for the remainder of the night, careful not to draw any further undue attention. Though once, when their eyes accidentally met across the room, a shiver of pleasure ran down her spine.

Between the dances she managed to sneak in a debrief with Stevie, who was eager for news.

“What happened before I got to the balcony?” she whispered.

“I offered to give him a waltz lesson. Under the stars Stevie! It was wonderful.”

“He needed lessons from you??”

A swift glare from Miranda silenced Stevie, who then enthused, “Oh how romantic! I didn’t know you had it in you. And the shawl?”

“Mother does not want to see him near me again. He’ll have to find a way to return it to me now.”

It wasn’t until they were headed home in the carriage that she finally got a chance to speak with Tilly, whose hair and dress were a little worse for wear, but she was bright eyed and flushed with happiness.

“Oh Miranda, the people of Surrey are such a delight! Do you know, one gentleman asked me to bless his chickens! I don’t know that I have ever enjoyed myself so much of an evening. Aunty Pen-Pen, you are a treasure! I may never want to go home,” she cried, before falling asleep on Miranda’s shoulder, her soft snores punctuating the happy silence.

The evening was declared a splendid success. Penny retired to bed, and Miranda lay in bed gazing at the moon outside her window, too alert to sleep, reliving a waltz in the cool night air over and over.

The next morning, the shawl did not reappear, much to Miranda’s dismay. But no matter, Tilly declared that for the remainder of her stay, she should like to take a daily walk around the gardens each morning with Miranda, to further her education on the local flora and fauna, and partake in some more birdwatching. Charlie had readily agreed to serve as chaperone and guide.

Miranda was not thrilled with this prospect, but she bargained a deal to join them until they reached the gazebo at the edge of the grounds, near the orange vines, to which Charlie and Tilly did not object.

After a light luncheon of cucumber sandwiches and lemon syllabub, a letter arrived for Miranda. “Please tell me that’s not another invoice from the dressmaker,” her father complained, as she snatched up the brown envelope and ran upstairs. She tore it open and unfolded a letter written in an unfussy hand. It was from Mr Preston! But as she began to read, she was rendered speechless.

Dear Miss Hartford,

If I have misread your intentions, then please disregard this letter. But if I am correct, allow me to continue.

I must confess I was at a loss when I came into possession of your shawl on the evening of the ball. I trust you have been well since, as there was a bitter wind at the evening’s end, and I feared you would catch a chill.

On returning home, I questioned your shawl repeatedly on what I was to do, but it was unyielding and decidedly loyal to its mistress. In vain I tried to coax my way into its good graces. I complimented it on its fine lacework and the softness of its wool. I asked how many dances it had seen, through where it had travelled, if any suitors had ever wrapped it lovingly around one’s shoulders, but it remained stoic. Upon whispering it a secret though, the lace rippled with delight!

Such a headstrong garment! It is not unlike its owner, whose spirited nature enchants me so. If she’ll have me, I will gladly relinquish the shawl in exchange for another dance.

Ever yours,

Mr G. Preston, esq.

Miranda sat down on her bed to steady herself, a flush rising in her cheeks.

Well.

Chapter End Notes

Gary's letter to Miranda was heavily inspired by a real letter written by Daniel Webster, an American statesman, who wrote of a bonnet left behind by a special lady. (Link: <https://tinyurl.com/y69nar7v>)

Mr Preston's Diary

I am in a wretched state. Everything had been unfolding better than I dared hope, and now I have this mess on my hands!

But I must explain from the beginning. Following "The Incident", my move to Surrey became a matter of some urgency. I have since settled here in earnest, finding my new surroundings more than adequate. While I have been focused on restoring the inn, the remaining bulk of my attention has been taken up by my dear new neighbours, who I have grown extremely fond of.

The mistress of the house is a force to be reckoned with, but the daughter, Miss Hartford, is unlike any lady I have ever met. Alas, I know we cannot be, and yet, I cannot help but hope.... Her playful nature is a joy to behold, and the way her eyes brighten when she is happy lifts my spirits in every way.

The Hartfords held a ball last evening as a welcome for their niece, a delightfully flighty girl from the London set.

The evening was going swimmingly, when horror of all horrors, I laid eyes upon one Mr Edmund Detorri. I could not fathom why he was here, of all places. He could not possibly know.... And yet here was Lady Hartford about to foist him upon her daughter! I could not risk being seen with Miss Hartford, so I made myself scarce outdoors. It worked, but I am afraid this did not escape her attention, for she did notice and she found me there too, lovely as ever and asking far too many questions. It shames me to think she interpreted my actions as a rejection, if only she could know the truth!

But it was what came next that was my downfall. She suggested we take a waltz outside. I have endured many dances in my time, and yet none were as tender or sweet as this one, for I shall treasure the moment in my memory. The moment was cut short though, as a most peculiar thing happened - we were interrupted by a vexed Lady Hartford, and Miss Hartford threw her shawl at me as she was dragged off by her mother.

It is clearly a special garment and is scented of lemons. She was confident I had an idea of what I was to make of it, but what? I questioned Miss Sutton, and she assured me with a wink that it was simply so I would have reason to see Miss Hartford again.

I returned home plied with port from Mr Evans, and in my tipsy state, decided I must write to Miss Hartford and send her the shawl (I dared not deliver it in person despite her proximity, for fear of angering her mother). I began writing, but in my ill state I thought it would be a fine idea to instead address a mischevious note to the shawl itself. The intimacy of its contents was deeply improper. I fell asleep soon after, with no intention of sending the dastardly thing.

This morning was exceptionally chaotic at the inn, and in my hurry I forgot all about the letter, much to my detriment. I never intended for it to reach her, but alas! This evening I find

the valet had taken the letter from my desk and sent it! I did not realise until it was much too late, for she has already replied!

I sit with her letter in front of me now:

Dear Mr Preston

I request your presence at the gazebo by the orangerie tomorrow morning.

Yours,

Miss Hartford

So succinct, she is surely furious. How will I make amends?

Chapter 12

Ever since Miss Hartford's response had arrived in the mail, Mr Preston had spent every waking second fretting over their meeting. Was she offended, asking to meet so she could scold him? He could infer little else from her reply, and left untamed, his doubts had flourished wildly since the evening prior. Despite their idyllic night at the ball, he could not be certain his feelings were reciprocated, and even if they were, he would have a new dilemma on his hands, one he never expected to arise quite so soon.

To appease Miss Hartford, he set off for the gazebo armed with her shawl and a cake tin filled with his latest creation. It was unusual for a gentleman to set foot in a kitchen, but his ancestors were bakers and he had always been close to his family's cook, so it remained a cherished pastime for him and a quirk to his peers. Now that he had taken ownership of the inn, it was proving rather useful. Even when in emotional turmoil, he could be confident in his skills, and he had taken extra care with this batch.

The Hartford estate was a bit of a maze, but he had a faint memory of its paths after the unfortunate goose encounter (ghastly creatures), and he located the gazebo without much trouble. He was contemplating whether he should pick some orange blossoms nearby when Tilly's sharp giggle rippled through the air, twinned with Charlie's distinctive tone.

The voices raised the hairs on his neck. He'd forgotten she wouldn't be alone.

Blind panic flooded his veins. He dove behind a well-manicured hedge and dropped to the grass, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. He flinched as the voices grew closer and tried to embed himself in the foliage. After an agonising minute, he heard goodbyes exchanged, and they mercifully retreated.

He peeked through the hedge and found the path empty, the moment of chaos gone as quickly as it had arrived. Relieved, he began extracting himself from the shrubbery, only to collide with Miss Hartford herself!

She stumbled and let out a yelp of surprise, and he scrambled to catch her before she hit the ground.

"Oh Mr Preston! What on earth were you doing in the hedge?"

"Do forgive me," he cried. "Charlie and Tilly gave me quite the fright. Are you alright?"

"Much better now," she replied with a slightly dazed smile. "I ought to have warned you."

Caught off guard, her demeanour had an ease he had not seen before. She was always more lovely than he remembered, and try as he might, his memory never quite conjured up the exact radiance of her eyes and rosininess of her complexion, and loveliest of all was her smile with a hint of mischief.

He was studying the gentle curve of her bottom lip when to his surprise, she reached for his hair and plucked a leaf out of his curls, then froze when she realised it was a rather intimate gesture. It was then he became aware he was still holding her, for longer than necessary, and he hastily released her.

They dusted themselves off in a flustered state and walked into the gazebo in silence, tension thrumming in the air.

He reached for her shawl and paused. "Before I return this to you, I wanted to apologise for my letter."

She frowned. "Apologise?"

He took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Once it left me I feared it was too presumptuous and most unseemly, and your reply was so brief that I thought it had surely upset you."

Her eyes widened. "Oh..." she began, wringing her hands. "It is true my reply was succinct, but for reasons so very different to what you presume."

Still, he thought it prudent to tread carefully. "If I have been wrong in my assumptions, you will hear no more from me."

She immediately became distressed and protested so. "You misunderstand me, for you surely realise I cannot possess any ill feelings towards you. But we are obliged to be discreet in public, hence my request to meet here."

He did not dare breathe, for fear of disturbing his fragile hopes.

"In fact," she continued, her voice trembling a little, "I asked you here because I found your letter very well written indeed." She looked him directly in the eye. "An opportunity to glimpse a gentleman's true feelings is rarely unwelcome, If that is indeed what they were."

He felt faint. The suspense bloomed into joy, and the sense that this was only the beginning overwhelmed him. His anxieties seemed trivial now, dwarfed in comparison. Only moments ago he did not dare imagine this moment, and now it was here, fully realised. He began laughing, wondering how much more emotion he could possibly bear.

"Oh please do not laugh now!" she cried, swatting his shoulder playfully, "or I shall think you are the one joking."

Overcome by her delight, the words tumbled from his mouth. "Miss Hartford, *Miranda*, make no mistake, the sentiment and affection was as true as can be."

He loved the sound of her name, the syllables flowing from a touch of the lips to a tap of the tongue. He reached out and offered her his hand.

Their eyes met and her cheeks turned pink. Her fingers brushed his tentatively, then came to rest perfectly in his palm. He thought he might float away.

"You really liked it?" He asked.

She nodded, her eyes shiny with tears.

He knew there was no easy way forward for them, to say nothing of what he had left behind him. For sure there had been matches of greater disparity, but they were rarely in this configuration, and therefore entirely frowned upon. With as much tact as she could muster, Miss Hartford explained that her mother had all but dismissed him as a prospect, on account of his relative lack of status.

Fortunately, neither of them were one for convention, and there was a sense that they should enjoy whatever time they had now, fleeting as it may be. Miranda expressed that while Lady Hartford's opinions were always loudly proclaimed, they were not so unalterable that she could not eventually be swayed, but they would need to tread carefully.

"if we see through the summer without rousing suspicion, I believe she will be more agreeable, particularly once Tilly returns home," she explained. "Let this be our meeting place. No one need know."

He was keenly aware of she was risking for him. If they were discovered, it would be her reputation on the line.

Reality sank in. "It's too dangerous. I cannot have you do that for me."

A flash of irritation crossed her face. "Why not? We shall just make sure we don't get caught," she said, wagging her eyebrows. Her boldness was terrifying.

"Can a union borne of deceit be happy?" he pondered, mainly to himself.

"Oh my dear Mr Preston, deceit is an awfully strong word. I prefer shenanigans."

Resigned to her wishes, he reached for the cake tin. "Perhaps it is not so necessary now, but I brought a peace offering in the event you were angry with me," he said, opening it to reveal several delicate squares of faintly pink cake, covered with pale lemon icing.

Her eyes lit up. "My, you set a dangerous precedent. I shall be in a foul mood and expect this every time now," she said with a wicked grin.

"Ah, but I too may have ulterior motives. I'm planning to serve these at the inn, so do be honest in your assessment. This one is rose and apple."

She picked up a piece with care, took an eager bite and closed her eyes. "It's heavenly! So fragrant and light." She reached back into the tin. "I presume this all for me?"

He beamed with pride. "Everything. Oh! And your shawl," he said, handing over a paper-wrapped parcel.

"I'm glad my master plan worked out."

“You did baffle me when you threw it at me,”

“And look what has happened now. I’m a genius.”

She started to untie the parcel, then turned her head to face him.

“Don’t I owe you a dance?” She asked sweetly.

Before he could reply, The sound of distant voices filtered through the air, and she gasped and pushed him out towards the hedges. “They’re coming back!” she hissed.

He scrambled to his feet and she grabbed his hands. They were warm and somehow already familiar, like home. ‘Write to me,” she said, and he nodded.

He gave her hands a squeeze goodbye and made a hasty exit over the hedges. He ran all the way back home, his heart fluttering.

Chapter 13

Miranda's encounter with Mr Preston and its abrupt end left her in a haze of heightened awareness, breathless and her hands burning from his touch. The leaves of the hedge still trembled from where he had made his escape. She scrambled to pull herself together before Charlie and Tilly made their imminent reappearance, and she flitted about around the gazebo, fretting over what to do with the cakes and trying to expunge any evidence of his presence.

"Good god Miranda, what treats do you have there?" Charlie cried from behind her.

Tilly gasped in delight. "Is this a picnic?"

"Surprise!" She exclaimed as she spun around, hoping she didn't look too flustered. "I did not expect you back so soon. I thought a morning snack would be most refreshing, so I had the kitchen prepare us a little something..."

Charlie peered into the cake tin. "How marvellous! How did you smuggle them here?"

"A lady never tells," she said with a wink. She gulped hard as soon as their eyes were turned.

They descended upon the cake and immediately sang its praises. "It's delicious!", "lighter than a baby's conscience!"

After much chatter and thanks given to Miranda about the wonderful surprise, they made it back to Woolford. The whole morning was so emotionally taxing and exhilarating that she immediately claimed a headache and locked herself in her bedroom to recover. There was a mild pang of guilt for abandoning Tilly, but she promised herself to make it up later.

Alone, she crumpled into a heap on her bed. The emotions that had been stirred up within her were unfurling shyly, bubbling up to the surface and making themselves known. Their depth and sincerity astonished her. What was once a nebulous concept was all of a sudden very real and tangible, and while the future was as uncertain as could be, it failed to dampen her spirits. After all the misunderstandings and false starts, to find they had landed on the same page felt like a rare and precious thing, and she wondered if she might tip over and drown in it at any moment. The risk involved was great for sure, but the dizzying heights were immeasurable.

Her jangled nerves gave out in exhaustion and she soon fell asleep in earnest. She dreamt of floating through dense greenery as thick as treacle, guided by a warm hand, the taste of rose on her lips.

When she awoke, fuzzy headed and disoriented, she wondered if the entire morning had simply been a dream, but then she spotted her shawl draped over her chair in plain sight, a touchstone of certainty, and all felt right in that moment.

When she emerged for afternoon tea, Tilly was in fine spirits. "Is your headache better Miranda?" she cooed.

“Much better. I trust Charlie wasn’t too bothersome this morning?” she asked, reaching for the teapot and pouring a cup for Tilly, then herself.

“Never! He is quite the delight. So knowledgeable. We spotted two barn swallows, so graceful in flight!”

“Charlie’s nature is not agreeable to everyone, but his heart is good. I am so pleased you two get on so well.”

“And you and I. I only regret not visiting sooner.”

Miranda added milk to her cup and did not stir, watching it slowly bloom through her tea. She had considered a summer with Tilly to be a great burden an awfully short time ago, and now she was ashamed of her error in judgement, as she increasingly liked her very much.

She considered confiding in Tilly for a moment, the words lined up on her tongue, but she decided their friendship could not withstand such a loaded secret so soon. She stirred her tea and offered Tilly a plate of shortbread, golden squares dotted with candied orange peel, a specialty of their cook. “Then we have much time to make up. Biscuit?”

Thereafter, she dashed off a note to Miss Sutton, a frazzled scrawl in red ink.

Urgent news re: you know who. Talk soon.

When she broke the news to Miss Sutton that evening, Stevie let out a shriek that drew her maid and two footmen to her room.

Apologies were made and repeated reassurances were given that she had been momentarily overcome and had not taken ill. Once everyone was ushered out, Stevie squealed into a pillow and kicked her legs with hushed delight, jostling Heather the kitten, who remained soundly asleep at the head of her bed. “Secret rendezvous with a gentleman! How romantic! Well I never Miranda, you are a dark horse. You must tell me *everything*. What happened? Any kissing?”

“Stevie!” Miranda chastised her. “No we just talked... and held hands,” she added in a whisper.

Stevie let out another high-pitched squeak and clapped her hands.

Miranda flopped back on the bed and gave Heather a scratch under the chin. “He is so lovely Stevie. Not like the others. I feel seen by him. For who *I* am. And the cake he made! The cake was extraordinary. So light and heady with fragrance...” she sighed happily.

“How odd for a gentleman to bake! But clearly he has an aptitude for it. Norman and I have yet to arrange the wedding breakfast. Do you think he would be interested?”

The weddings in their village were usually modest affairs, even for the wealthy, and Stevie’s would be no different. The ceremonies were held in the morning at the local church with a small number of guests, followed by a celebratory breakfast before the newlyweds were waved off on their honeymoon.

“Yes, I expect he must. You’ve chosen a date?” She’d been so caught up in her own unfolding drama that she’d almost forgotten Stevie’s impending marriage.

She nodded. “The first reading of the banns is this Sunday, so only two weeks after that.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A small amount, naturally, but mostly it feels... right. In fact I’ve never been so certain of anything,” she declared.

“How nice that must be,” Miranda said wistfully. Studying her friend, Stevie did appear perfectly serene, the picture of contentment. Confident but settled. Rock steady. Her rock...

“And then you shall be moving away,” Miranda lamented, tears filling her eyes. “My dearest friend. You have been like a sister to me always.”

They had played together since they were tiny, Stevie’s boldness complementing Miranda’s more cautious nature. Countless letters and secrets and jokes passed between them in these walls and gardens, a summation of a lifetime of friendship.

“Oh stop it or I shall cry too!” Stevie wailed. “Lucky for you I’ll still be in the village.”

“Not next door though.”

Stevie covered her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I will always be here if you need me.”

It was true they were blessed that Stevie would still be near and not across the country, but having taken her proximity for granted, the mere distance of a few hundred yards suddenly seemed a world away.

“Promise?”

“Always. All I ask in return is that you give me *all* the gossip,” she said with a wicked smirk.

Miranda attacked her with a hug. “A small price to pay, Miss Sutton,” she said, as they descended into giggles.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Most infuriatingly, it appeared the universe conspired to prevent Miranda and Mr Preston meeting again in the coming days.

Firstly it was the weather, their idyllic summer rudely disrupted by a deluge of squally showers, which then rendered the paths too muddy for recreational strolls. Then Charlie caught a minor chill (brought on by sneaky trips to the tavern in the rain) and was confined to his home, forcing Miranda to accompany Tilly on her walks. Miranda was indifferent to Tilly's impromptu nature lessons, often daydreaming about Mr Preston's perfectly unruly curls and lovely eyes instead, but she did enjoy visiting Tilly's tamed goose (now christened Ferdinand), who would follow Tilly around like a charmed baby chick.

Secondly, Stevie's wedding preparations were in full swing, and Miranda was naturally appointed as a bridesmaid along with Stevie's favourite sister. She was duly summoned to assist with the preparations, spending much of her spare time selecting flowers and determining the most appropriate shade of pink for a bride.

Love always finds a way though, and Mr Preston dutifully wrote to her as she had requested.

She implored him to call on the Suttons to offer his services for the wedding, and his reply was grateful but tentative.

What a splendid idea. I'm touched you thought of me, but does she know about... us?

Us. She reread the sentence over and over, a flurry of delight running through her veins.

She knows enough. We share so much, and my dearest friend would never betray my confidence.

Very well. I shall call upon the Suttons then.

Stevie had accepted with glee. "How wonderful Miranda! You and your beau incognito at the wedding!" she squealed, as they pinned silk flowers on a bonnet.

Miranda was able to intercept the mail with surprising ease, for her parents paid little attention to such things, and the household staff asked no questions. She began scheduling

her day around the postman's visits, each envelope slipped through the door a sliver of her heart. His letters were always effusively polite and revealed a depth of emotion she could not have anticipated, and she treasured every one. In her bedroom she had a mahogany box with a false floor, and she saved each letter there, stashing away the box at the back of her armoire.

She almost considered sneaking out to see him on her own, but decided that without the plausible deniability of their current arrangement, weak as it was, even she could not rise to that level of rebellion. Not yet anyway.

if absence makes hearts grow fonder, then absence with a dose of secrecy was a most heady concoction, and their subsequent meeting was all the more sweet from their time apart.

He had arrived first, and Miranda was so giddy with delight that she started skipping up the path.

"I say, that is a curious gait Miss Hartford," he called out.

"It's a gallop sir. I find it makes every walk more jolly, if not less taxing."

"Is that so? I must try it sometime."

"Oh do try it now, it's ever so fun," she pleaded.

He sheepishly bent his wrists in front of him and galloped down the path.

"Such elegant lines! A natural equestrian," she exclaimed. "You would be most excellent at dressage!"

"Why thank you my lady," he called out, slowing to a trot and circling around her. "The Preston men pride themselves on horsemanship."

They came to an abrupt stop, almost crashing into each other. When their eyes met, his expression was so sweet and earnest she thought she might faint on the spot. Their hands brushed together. "I've missed you," she said softly.

"Me too," he murmured. "You don't know how much I've wanted to see you."

She lowered her eyes and grinned. "All your letters gave me some idea. Not many people entertain my hijinks."

"But that is what I like most about you. Promise me you won't ever change."

"Never."

"Good. Ah! I have something for you," he said, producing a small wrapped cake seemingly out of thin air.

"Oh! What culinary delight do we have here?"

“It’s a surprise.”

She took a bite. “Cherry and almond? My favourites! How did you know?”

“Just intuition,” he said, suppressing a giggle through his serene smile.

“What’s so funny?”

A blush rose on his cheeks. “Miss Sutton and I had a chat about you when we were discussing the wedding breakfast,” he confessed.

“You didn’t! What did she say?”

“She divulged a few of your tastes, food and otherwise, but suffice it to say that she made it clear I will be in grave danger if I ever were to treat you poorly.”

Miranda tried not to laugh at the mental image of Stevie attacking Mr Preston, although she was certain Stevie would more than hold her own. Nevertheless, she was moved by her friend’s protectiveness. “Don’t you be deceived by her diminutive nature. She can be a force to be reckoned with.”

“Oh I took her quite seriously and gave her my word. I don’t do that lightly.”

“Good.”

They talked until their time was up, and he bid her farewell with a chaste kiss on the hand. As soon as he was gone, Miranda flopped over on the wooden bench and sighed happily. It was proving to be a most excellent summer.

And so it came to be that Miranda cracked her life in two - one shard on display to all, the second a secret nestled to her chest, fragmented but brilliant. Their time together was short, but there was nothing she looked forward to more. Having once thought love was beyond her, it was most transformative to find her heart growing more accommodating by the day.

In their other chance meetings in public, they were cordial but kept their distance, eyes meeting and sharing the subtlest of smiles, their secret safe. Penny stopped bringing up the unsuitability of Mr Preston to Miranda, satisfied that line of inquiry had been snuffed out, and once again recommenced her presentation of eligible gentlemen. “I do wish you would give Mr Detorri another chance, darling. You barely met him at the ball...”

It was quickly established that Tilly and Charlie could be trusted to be gone for half an hour, but no more than two-thirds. Mr Preston would await her arrival out of sight and run up to meet her, almost always with cake.

This plan went swimmingly, until one rather thrilling morning when Charlie and Tilly returned unusually soon, Tilly having torn her dress on an errant branch in the woods. Miranda managed to help him escape over the bushes, but she was discovered looking rather guilty among the foliage.

“Oh my goodness me Miranda! What on earth are you doing in there?”

She froze, shellshocked. “I thought I saw a tiger crouching in the hedge, and I had to check.”

Charlie was unperturbed. “In Surrey? Good gracious. Are you sure it wasn’t one of the village cats? Norman’s ginger tom is a portly old thing.”

“Do you know what, it might have been a, um... dragon?” she suggested, her voice rising to an unnaturally high pitch. She felt rather hot. “I think the heat is playing with my mind.”

“Oh Charlie!” Tilly shrieked. “Miranda must have heatstroke! The delirium is already setting in!”

"Oh no no no I'm fine! No mythical creatures here, see!"

They insisted on rushing her back home to cool down and rest. Miranda later recounted this episode to Mr Preston, “...And that is how I ended up in a cold bath with some ghastly salt and sugar drink, which was actually quite nice once you get used to it, but it took two whole hours for me to persuade them I was of sound mind again.”

"Only two hours?" he teased.

Mr Preston brought her cakes almost every day, wondrous new flavour combinations she had never tasted. The sweet fragrance of rose and apple was followed by lavender and earl grey, pear and ginger, and a very nice peach and basil. He insisted she was doing him a favour and that her feedback was most helpful for business at the inn (which was nearing completion), though curiously they were almost always tailored to her tastes.

She always looked forward to these treats, until one day she bit into the cake and immediately spat it out.

“It’s savoury!” she cried.

“You don’t like it?” He asked, looking wounded. “The cheese and bacon are from the farm at Pemberley.”

“Well,” she began, trying to spare his feelings, “It is not unpleasant per se, now I know, but it is most unexpected when you are anticipating something sweet.” She took another bite.
“Sometimes perfection is not to be altered.”

He laughed and pretended to write something down. “Duly noted.”

"You haven't put any surprises in Stevie's wedding cake have you?" The wedding was this weekend, and they would not see each other again until then.

“Oh good lord no. She liked the rose and apple one the most.”

Miranda nodded in approval. “Oh that one is *stunning*. Maybe you’ll make our wedding cake someday,” she said dreamily, without thinking.

“What?”

”Nothing!” She hastily stuffed the rest of the cake in her mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Quite a few sitcom references in this chapter! I hope you enjoyed it x

Chapter 15

Stevie was a radiant bride in her best dress, a soft pink number overlaid with fine white lace. By her side was Norman, who had scrubbed up surprisingly well. He had shaved off his beard for the occasion, revealing a kindly round face that set off a round of hushed whispers around the church, for it was much more handsome than expected.

The besotted couple glowered with happiness as they exchanged their vows, blessed by the golden morning light, leaving their guests misty and dabbing their eyes. Even Heather, now more cat than kitten, was a guest of honour along with Norman's cats, who were only too happy to be wrangled by the village children. "Beasts at a wedding! Well I never," Penny proclaimed before being shushed by Miranda.

Miranda bid her dearest friend teary congratulations, her joy bittersweet. The evening before, she had visited the Suttons to see Stevie one last time before she was married. While their friendship remained as strong as ever, she knew things would be different now, no matter how much they insisted otherwise, and though she looked forward to their hijinks ahead she was also left with a bittersweet longing, wishing they could wring out just a bit more time with things as they were.

The guests made their way to the wedding breakfast at the Sutton family manor after the ceremony, where the cake, and indeed all the food, had been organised by Mr Preston. Everyone was very impressed with the feast before them, silver platters laden with everything from hearty meats and pastries to delicate finger sandwiches and dainty sweets. The centrepiece was a three-tiered pink cake iced in white and decorated with an elegant arrangement of edible flowers, flavoured with the rose and apple Miranda had found so delightful.

After the couple had cut the cake and everyone was stood around eating and chatting, a most curious thing happened.

As Tilly took a bite of cake, a strange look came over her face. "Is that rose?" She asked.

"Yes! Made to order from my secret recipe." Mr Preston called from across the room, delighted she had recognised it.

Tilly froze, a realisation dawning on her. "Oh!" She gasped. Her eyes darted between Miranda and Mr Preston and then back to Miranda, who realised with horror that Tilly's memory was far too good.

It was all over in a split second, the moment imperceptible to anyone else. "It's beautiful, Mr Preston," Tilly crooned.

Tilly was very quiet thereafter until an opportunity presented for her to excuse herself, and she rushed into a side room.

Miranda ran after her, almost tripping over the Persian rug and knocking over an ornamental vase on the way. Her summer rendezvous suddenly seemed like a very foolish idea indeed.

Inside, Tilly was frantic. “Mirandikins, that cake is the same as the one you surprised me and Charlie with that one morning, and if Mr Preston made that one too, then you and Mr Preston...?”

Miranda’s chest tightened. “Oh Tilly, I don’t know what you speak of,” she cried. “He is our neighbour, and I knew he was planning the menu for the inn. It’s just some cake between friends, nothing possibly untoward with that...”

Tilly could only blink at her in shock. Miranda thought she could see the cogs turning in her head if she looked hard enough.

“But you told us you had the cooks prepare the cake, and I saw the way he looked at you today, and how you were always so joyous after our walks. Charlie said it must have been the fresh air and a good book, but I knew it couldn’t be the book you were reading! Gulliver’s Travels cannot possibly be that good!”

Miranda took pause at this. “Actually it is rather good, sometimes I feel like I’m in a positively Lilliputian world...”

Tilly let out shrill wail of frustration.

“Alright then,” Miranda cried, almost tearful. “Yes, we’ve been... seeing each other while you’ve been on your walks, and it’s been *wonderful*,” she half shouted.

Tilly’s mouth fell open, and she had to lean against the wall for support.

“Please don’t tell anyone Tilly, it’s already complicated enough, and I can’t bear to lose him. In truth, I think I- I love him,” she said, the last three words arriving with surprising ease.

“Oh Miranda, this is so very unexpected,” she said, clutching her chest and sinking down the wall. “Are the two of you engaged?” she whispered.

Miranda knelt on the floor next to her. “No! ...but I think we might be, in time.”

Tilly gave her a look of reproach. “Do be careful cousin. If he is as good as you say, he would do the honourable thing.”

“Would he?” she asked, doubt creeping into her voice.

“Yes! A true gentleman wouldn’t allow the lady of his affections to remain unattached officially!”

“But this is just a temporary arrangement. In fact, I’m sure we shall sort it out by summer’s end,” she insisted with a nervous laugh, the words ringing hollow out loud.

“That may be, but are you certain he willing to commit himself to you? Or is he merely out to ruin you for nothing? You musn’t leave it too long.”

“I suppose, but I beg of you, please don’t tell anyone”

Tilly patted her hand. “Of course not, what good would that do? If he makes you as happy as you say, then I suppose I can’t be anything but delighted for you,” she said, her eyes gleaming.

“Oh Tilly,” she wept.

They hugged each other and cried it out, before drying their tears in haste and returning to the breakfast perfectly composed, their absence barely noticed.

“Nice work,” Stevie whispered to her.

“You saw?”

“My emotional detector is highly sensitive. But don’t worry, no one else is so in tune.”

“Clever girl.”

The happy couple were waved off on their honeymoon (to Bath, where the water was good for the skin. Norman would do well to take advantage of it, Penny noted). Before Miranda left, she was able to sneak in a conversation with Mr Preston next to her mother.

She addressed him with a small nod and a curtsy. “I trust you are well Mr Preston. Your breakfast was splendid. I pray the weather is as fine tomorrow morning,”

“As do I. I always cherish my morning walks,” he replied, his smile angelic. Tilly’s words echoed in her head. *Be careful cousin.*

A sense of unease lingered over Miranda for the rest of the day, and it remained while she tossed and turned in bed, running through every iteration of events she could dare think of. Tilly’s reaction had unsettled her, and her own carefree attitude suddenly felt impossibly silly. What on earth had she gotten herself into? When she awoke the next morning her mood remained subdued, and she took her morning walk with a knot deep in her stomach.

“...And she really could tell from the cake?” Mr Preston asked, his tone incredulous. She had recounted her meeting with Tilly while they were perched in their usual spots, now sitting almost scandalously close.

“Yes! You should take it as a compliment, the flavours are simply too memorable. That or Tilly has the nose of a bloodhound. But it’s okay, I’ve sworn her to secrecy,” she said with a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She stared across the garden, searching for the farthest tree in her view. “I’ve been thinking about us, and the future, and how fragile our situation suddenly seems.”

“Oh Miranda...”

“When we first met I thought I had nothing to lose, but the more time we spend together... the more I fear I’ll lose you.”

She did not intend to be so open with her feelings, but it all came tumbling out, pushed by her rising tears. “I’ve realised that we can’t do this forever. Of course I’ve known that all along, ever since we agreed to simply enjoy the summer, but I need your reassurance on what will happen after. Or if there even is an after. I need to know if we’re on the same path because if we are not, then I need to step away, while I can still bear it.” Her voice cracked at the end of the sentence and her vision blurred with tears.

For a second she thought he might cry. He reached for her hand and she let him take it.

“Miranda, you don’t know how much you mean to me. I shouldn’t have allowed you to be in this position in the first place, but I cannot say I regret what we’ve done. This has been the most wonderful few weeks of my life. I never want it to end.”

His words draped around her shoulders like a warm blanket. He brushed away her tears with his thumb, feather light.

“And if it should end? If mother does not approve, or worse?”

His expression turned serious. “I won’t let it,” he declared. “We’ll find a way. You’ve changed me Miranda. I can’t go back to who I was before you, and I don’t want to, whatever happens.”

“Am I that powerful?” She asked, a laugh breaking through her tears. “I ought to be more responsible with such abilities.”

“Oh but you are.” He said. “You came right into my life when I needed you, even if I didn’t know it.” Their bodies drew closer ever so slightly, desire flickering over his eyes for a moment before they backed away, the spell broken.

He composed himself and took both her hands. “Miranda, I’ve already decided that after the inn is up and running, I shall return to Norfolk to settle my affairs, because I know I want to stay here, permanently. After that... I want to make us real.”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Really?” Visions of their future together flashed through her mind.

“Yes, I want to do things properly, like I ought to have done from the beginning. If you’ll have me, that is.” He gazed at her with such earnestness that there was no room for doubt.

She let out an involuntary squeal and threw her arms around his neck. “Always,” she whispered, as she felt him smile against her cheek.

Chapter 16

With these new developments and their future more certain, the young lovers had a short period of stability before Mr Preston would make his trip home, before everything would change. Tilly gracefully turned a blind eye, and they now had more freedoms than ever.

Knowing he would leave soon, their meetings became hopelessly romantic, clinging to every sweet word and gesture. For the first time Miranda let herself fall headfirst into love, knowing he was a safe place to land, and she did so completely. She never tired of spending time with him, and she hoped he felt the same. It was in this time she felt they were their truest selves, and every moment was precious.

Stevie and Norman returned from their honeymoon, happy as ever and settling into married life. Despite Miranda spending less time with Stevie, they were delighted to find the foundations of their friendship mercifully unchanged, always picking up where they left off, and Stevie was only too eager to offer a willing ear to every new update on Mr Preston.

In this happy spell Miranda decided that having received so many cakes from Mr Preston, she ought to make a gift of her own for him before he left. Penny had been rigorous with her education, ensuring she developed her skills in ladies' pursuits like the pianoforte and needlepoint and painting. She could play well enough but felt her true talents leaned to her artistic side, so she secretly began work on a drawing of the Hamilton. She admired his devotion to the project, and he had spoken about it enough that she too felt invested in its success. She didn't have as much time with it as she liked, but after adding ink and a wash of watercolour, she stepped back and looked it over, satisfied that it was quite charming.

Meanwhile the real Hamilton, now fully restored, had its grand opening. There was now a small coffeehouse and tavern on the ground level, with lodgings above. The establishment was more genteel than rowdy, and Miranda's father and the local gents quickly became regular visitors, grateful for a fresh watering hole. The cakes they served were especially praised, which tickled Miranda with delight, and the locals remarked that the main street was brightened by the new addition.

All good things must come to an end, however, and when it came time for him to leave, the mood was solemn.

She knew it was silly. He would be back soon, their whole future ahead of them. And yet saying goodbye felt like a great loss.

"You won't even notice I'm gone," he lied.

"You're wrong. I shall miss you terribly. But the thought that our journey is just beginning shall sustain me," she said, with as much melodrama as she could muster.

"Your way with words is so pretty," he said with a chuckle.

He gave her a bouquet of lily of the valley as a parting gift, (a symbol of reunion, as Stevie sagely informed her later), and his eyes widened with surprise when she presented him with a parcel.

“For me?”

“Yes.”

He unwrapped her drawing and his face lit up with delight.

“Oh it’s perfect,” he declared, “I shall hang it proudly in the inn.”

They were acutely aware that this lovely perfect afternoon was the last time they’d be alone together for a few weeks.

”Why is this so hard?” she asked as she stood up with him, half laughing, half trying not to cry. A lock of hair fell from her bonnet as she bent her head.

He reached out and tucked it behind her ear, his fingertips grazing her cheek. Their eyes locked and his hand lingered for a long moment, before his fingers brushed her cheek, tracing her jawline down to her chin. It was the sweetest touch she had ever felt. Her face grew hot.

He was aching close to her now, close enough that his breath warmed her skin, and a moment later his lips touched hers and they were kissing. It was gentle at first, then bloomed into dizzying heights that made her head spin. He smelled like cotton and sandalwood, and his lips were softer and warmer than she expected. It was heavenly.

“I don’t want to say goodbye.” she murmured when they finally broke apart.

“Then let’s not say it.”

He pressed a final kiss to her forehead, and she skipped home with the memory of the kiss kingering on her lips.

She was well aware this was scandalous behaviour with a man she had no formal connection to, never mind all the time she had spent alone with him, but by now they had already broken so many rules with no consequence that this hardly felt like a great transgression. She could surely be forgiven this.

She immediately wrote to Stevie, who would just about die from this development.

She was so deliriously happy that she was only slightly irritated about Penny’s latest scheme.

“Miranda! Edmund Detorri is due back in town soon, and I have arranged for you two to take a carriage ride around town,”

“Oh mother, not the stuffy gent from the ball. How could you make me suffer like this? Again!”

“I do believe introducing you two at the ball was too much pressure. All I ask is you give him an honest chance. He is recently eligible, Don’t be so hostile darling, it is not becoming.” She sighed, defeated. “Just one carriage ride, that is all I ask.”

“Fine.”

Chapter 17

Mr Charles Hartford was a man of few words and even fewer displays of emotion. On the surface his temperament was mild and even, and an air of indifference appeared to be his permanent state. There was no question of his affection for his wife and daughter, however, and those close to him could vouch for his doting on Miranda, which bordered on overindulgence, some would say.

His aloofness belied a surprising awareness of all that occurred around him, however, and lately he had sensed a growing attachment between Miranda and one Mr Preston, their neighbour and the new landlord of The Hamilton. At first he had doubted himself, brushing it off as a trick of his imagination, but upon closer observation it became laughably clear. They were hopelessly in love, their feelings palpable.

His suspicions had begun at evenings with the other local gents, where Mr Preston often joined in with their drinks and card games. Mr Preston almost never brought up Miranda of his own accord, but the mere mention of her name never failed to capture his attention fully, and more often than not he had a kind word to say about her, praising her character and wit.

Miranda had been less discreet, taking a sudden and amusingly intense interest in his outings, interrogating him and eagerly hanging onto every detail. Once he grew aware of this he sometimes entertained himself by repeating a compliment from Mr Preston, watching her blush and smile to herself.

Then there were the increasingly frequent letters addressed to Miranda, who now immediately flounced up the stairs and shut herself in her room after the arrival of the postman. Once averse to exercise, she now joined Tilly on her morning walks without complaint, and her mood was always brightened on their return. She even became so bold as to suggest that they allow her to take some walks on her own, which nearly raised his eyebrows off his head. "I don't think that's a good idea darling," he'd said. This was met with an exasperated sigh and an eye roll.

Penny felt her revitalised demeanour must be attributed due to the fresh air and the presence of Tilly as a companion, but he suspected there were other reasons.

Like any good father, he had wrung his hands over the thought of marrying his daughter off to the wrong man. Mr Preston was a likeable enough gentleman, hardworking, good at cards, and an exceptional purveyor of cake, and he had thusly braced himself for the courtship announcement and prepared some questions on how he intended to provide for Miranda. However, time marched on, and the pair of them remained strangely silent on the matter.

It was curious that Penny remained entirely oblivious to this (perhaps willfully so), especially given her so called matchmaking abilities. While she rambled on about another potential new suitor from Norfolk, he only made one remark on the matter. "Perhaps Miranda would be more partial to someone *closer* to home, darling."

Chapter 18

The day after Mr Preston's departure, Miranda held an emergency afternoon tea with Stevie and Tilly, who were both humming with anticipation, aware they were about to bear witness to a major development.

Miranda was still glowing from yesterday's events, and she recounted every detail like an excited child, relishing in their giddy reactions.

"...and then when we were saying goodbye he tucked my hair behind my ear," she said, turning pink at the memory. "He stroked my face so gently, so lovingly..."

"Yes, and then what?!" Stevie demanded.

"*Well...*" she said coyly, "a lady doesn't kiss and tell..."

Tilly let out a sharp squeal and grabbed Stevie, who was about to fall off the couch. "Oh Miranda!"

"...but I'm not very good at being a lady, so let me tell you, it was perfect. I felt so alive! I couldn't have asked for a better goodbye."

"Oh, love is so beautiful," Tilly wept, before raising an eyebrow. "You know, they say being a good kisser is the sign of a good lover."

Miranda and Stevie shrieked in surprise.

"Tilly!"

"You're so naughty!"

"Who's they?"

"How do you know?"

Tilly smirked and said nothing, and they fell apart laughing.

Miranda had just caught her breath when the gravity of the situation hit home all of a sudden, and she immediately spun herself back into a panicked state.

"Oh my goodness, I'm going to be a wife! Stevie, am I ready?"

"Can I be your bridesmaid?"

“Yes of course you will be! But back to me please.”

Stevie cocked her head and stared at her quite seriously. “Miranda, maturity has never been your strong point, but I suspect it isn’t Mr Preston’s either. You’re perfect for each other.”

Miranda pursed her lips. “Not the resounding confidence I was hoping for, but I accept your honesty.” She sighed. “We are perfect, aren’t we? We’re going to be husband and wife! In our own house, with some dogs, and a few children. I think I shall be a permissible mother. Oh there’s so much ahead,” she said dreamily. Visions of domestic bliss floated before her, filling her with such joy she felt as if the vapours alone could nourish her indefinitely.

“Remember ladies,” said Tilly, throwing her arms around them, “we must always remain friends through it all. No matter where we go or where we end up.”

“Our children shall play together.”

“Our husbands shall be the best of friends!”

“We’ll grow old gracefully together!”

“*Disgracefully!*”

The trio sighed happily.

“And now I have an outing with Mr Detorri to endure this week,” Miranda lamented. “How ghastly!”

“He is a bit of a cad, from what I hear,” said Tilly, sipping her tea. “But just think, this is the last time you’ll have to put up with such suitors.”

Tilly’s words rung in her head as Mr Detorri’s carriage pulled them through the village.

The outing had not got off to a good start. Mr Detorri had arrived late, and she had been ushered into the admittedly grand carriage with a sense of being sent to slaughter.

“Best behaviour Miranda!” Penny had shouted, chasing after her with a puff of rouge and a cloud of perfume.

Mr Detorri had sat far too close with a most unsettling smile plastered on his face, more of a teeth display than a grin. Stilted greetings were exchanged, and they were off.

“So what brings you to Surrey again Mr Detorri?” she asked.

“Oh these little villages are so quaint, are they not? And the ladies aren’t bad either,” he said, eyeing her up and down and slithering up next to her like an eel.

She shoved him back across his seat. “I wish I could say the same for the visiting gentlemen.”

“Ooh, feisty!” he said with a snort. “I must say I usually get met with a warmer reception.”

“Well I’d say it is most certainly undeserved!”

He seemed to recoil at this, and they sat in stony silence for a while. When Mr Detorri next spoke, it was in a far more subdued manner, asking after her mother and some questions about the local landmarks. She begrudgingly responded in kind, and by the time they reached the main street they were managing to have an almost cordial conversation.

Miranda was rattling off some facts about the buildings when they passed the Hamilton, which brightened her mood immediately. “...and that inn is owned by Mr Preston. He lives next door.”

Startled, Mr Detorri leant over the side to look back at the building with a scowl on his lips. “Preston, you say?”

“Do you know him?” she asked, surprised.

He folded his arms and let out a huff. “Yes, unfortunately,” he said. “From home.”

Miranda frowned. They had both been at Penny’s ball when Tilly first arrived, but she hadn’t noticed any tension between them there. In fact, she wasn’t sure they had met at all.

“Well he’s not here,” she declared. “Apparently he’s returned home for a visit.”

“Tending to his neglected fiancée I suppose,” he muttered. “I see he’s made good use of her fortune.”

It took a moment for his words to register, for they were spoken so casually, they almost passed her by.

And then the full weight hit her like a bomb, sucking the air out of her lungs and obliterating everything she had known to be true.

Chapter 19

“Pardon?” Miranda asked, trying to hide the tremble in her voice. She was sure an eternity had passed since he had spoken. *This cannot be happening. I want to go back. Back to before I knew this.*

Mr Detorri shot her a quizzical look. “his fiancée.” He repeated.

She couldn’t breathe. Her heart was racing, fluttering like a trapped bird. “Oh yes, her name has slipped my mind. Do remind me.”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “He’s engaged to a lady by the name of Rosalind Parker.” The name sparked a fleeting sense of recognition, but it slipped through her fingers and vanished as quickly as it came.

“Of course... lovely lady I hear.”

He scoffed at this. “Yes, quite.”

The rest of the ride back to Woolford passed in a blur, and next thing she knew she was back home with a blinding headache.

Penny had been waiting for her, and seemed to be in an impossibly upbeat mood. “Ah! How did everything go? Wasn’t Mr Detorri a charmer?”

Miranda unclenched her jaw. “We had a very... enlightening conversation.”

“Splendid!” Penny declared, before her delight turned to concern. “Are you alright darling? You look a little pale.” She pressed her hand to Miranda’s forehead.

Miranda brushed her off and forced her lips into a cheery smile. “It must just be the midday sun. I think I shall go lie down for a bit.”

“Yes, that would be a good idea. I’ll have the kitchen send up some mint tea.”

Miranda laid down on her bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to push down the sobs rising in her throat and failing to stop her mind from spinning, repeating Mr Detorri’s words in a hellish loop.

It cannot be true. It simply cannot. How can it be? And yet, she couldn’t swear that Detorri was lying. He said her name! Miss Rosalind Parker. She was sure she’d even heard it before...

She closed her eyes. Her thoughts began drifting back, all the way back to the first time she met Mr Preston. Their encounter at the assembly rooms, how sweet and serendipitous it had all seemed. Then her shock when he moved into the cottage next door...

She gasped. It was the cottage. Miss Parker was the lady who had enquired about the cottage! She had been so shocked when Mr Preston moved in, because she had been told the new neighbour was to be a lady. *Charlie had told her so. He'd said her name. Miss R. Parker.*

The sob in her throat escaped and she cried until there were no tears left.

Tilly came up to her room later with more tea, and Miranda was still on the bed, catatonic

“Miranda darling, I know it doesn't seem like it, but I promise things will be okay.”

“I cannot comprehend why he would hide this from me.”

Tilly took a deep breath, then smoothed her dress and sat down by her side. “I did not know if I should tell you, but I went through something similar with Rupert.”

Miranda raised her head off her pillow. “You did?”

She nodded. “We were good as engaged, when I became aware he was seeing ladies left and right, and had no intention of stopping. My parents insisted I overlook such a thing, for it was still a greatly favourable match, but I was unswayed and broke it off. A marriage like that would have been intolerable. Still, the pain was unbearable at first. I acted out and behaved badly, such that I was banished to the countryside,” she said with a chuckle. “I daresay it's been a very healing trip.”

Tears pricked Miranda's eyes. “You've been so brave Tilly. A true woman of honour.”

Tilly smiled and squeezed her hand. “As are you. All I'm saying is, acknowledge your pain and know it will pass. One day this shall just be a distant memory.”

Miranda looked out the window. The sun was beginning to set, the sky streaked with pink clouds. “I fear this wound will take a very long time to heal.”

Stevie came to see her the next day, and hugs were given and more tears shed. But despite the support from her friends, Miranda was desolate, sleepwalking through the surrounding days.

As Mr Preston's return loomed, the passage of time was agonising. Curiosity got the better of her, and when the opportunity presented itself at afternoon tea with her mother in the garden, she broached the topic carefully.

“I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have the old cottage empty again now Mr Preston’s away,” said Penny. “Such a nice young man!”

“Do you happen to know how he came to rent it?”

“I believe he’s a family friend of the owners, the Parkers. Very well to do couple I understand, though of course they never lived here. It was a terrible tragedy when they passed. You were just a little girl then. They left behind a daughter younger than you, Rosalind.”

She flinched at the name. “You know her?”

“Only through letters. Now she’s of age it was the first time we’d heard from her directly, when she informed us that Mr Preston would be arriving. It was nice to know that she had grown up seemingly well, despite everything.”

“Yes of course.” Miranda replied, a sobering sadness washing over her. And if Rosalind knew what I had been doing with Mr Preston, I will have caused her another heartbreak. Furthermore, not only was Mr Preston engaged to another, his fiancée was a wealthy orphan who had just come of age. It was difficult not to assume the worst.

What on earth had he been doing here? All the promises and sweet words, the hiding and secrecy that she thought was terribly romantic and her own doing, had she been playing into his hands all along? She was bereft, afloat with nothing left to cling to.

Chapter 20

Alone with her thoughts, Miranda had mapped out how she would confront Mr Preston in precise detail. Oh it would be high drama, screaming and crying and slammed doors. He would beg for forgiveness, she would deny him, and he would be left filled with regret and memories.

But when she glanced out the window and finally saw Mr Preston's carriage parked outside the cottage, her bravado faded to a whimper. Half of her wanted to run straight to the cottage and demand the truth, the rest of her wondered if it was better not to know.

She had no memory of walking there, but next thing she knew, she was standing before his door. She began knocking, not stopping until she heard the click of the lock.

Mr Preston opened the door, and her breath caught when she saw him. His hair was casually ruffled, his smile wide and eyes bright. He was still as handsome as ever, the bastard. "Miranda! What are you doing here? It's so wonderful to see you."

She tried to keep her expression neutral. "May I come in?"

"Of course," he said, beckoning her inside.

"I trust your trip went well."

She could stop here, she thought. Let everything remain untouched.

"Yes, better than I could've expected. In fact, I--"

She cut him off, unable to pretend any longer. "Who is Rosalind Parker?"

There was a flash of alarm in his eyes, but he remained remarkably calm. He frowned and cocked his head. "She's an old family acquaintance. Why do you ask?"

Maybe she was wrong. It was all a terrible misunderstanding.

"Just an acquaintance? Are you certain of that? That's curious way to refer to your fiancée, is it not?"

He turned white, and she knew. "What are you talking about?"

"Is it true?" she asked, a lump rising in her throat.

There was an agonising silence.

"Not any longer. It's not what you think," he said quietly. Her heart cracked in two. "You weren't to know. Who have you been talking to?"

Her anger rushed to the surface and boiled over. “Weren’t to know! Am I not worthy of such information? Mr Detorri thought I ought to know, and I must say I am very grateful to him for bringing it to my attention!”

At the mention of his name he burst into a fit of rage. “Detorri? Oh yes! How kind and noble of him! It’s a wonder your mother can’t see him for who he is, given her propensity for judging others.”

“Don’t you bring my mother into this!”

He shrunk at her reprimand. “Miranda, I promise I can explain, in time. I didn’t plan for any of this to happen when I moved here. That I would meet you, fall in love...”

“I cannot bear to listen to your lies any more,” she yelled, standing up to leave.

“Miranda, wait!” Despite everything, she couldn’t stop herself from turning around.

“You have to trust me,” he said, trying to reach for her hand. “We can go back to the way it was before... at your word.”

He had lost his mind. “I believe I have made an error in my judgement of your character. Do not write to me again,” she said coldly, while her vision blurred with tears and her voice cracked.

He held up his hands and stepped back. “Very well,” he said, his voice breaking. “I will do as you wish.” He picked up his coat and walked out, leaving her alone in his home.

This is ridiculous, she thought. He cannot even let me make a dramatic exit correctly.

It was too quiet all of a sudden. She walked around, taking in the interiors for the first time. She was loath to admit that it was rather nice. It was cozy, the furnishings modest but well made. A bouquet of dried flowers dangled from the ceiling. It smelled of honeysuckle and cedar. An oil painting of fruit hung on the wall. All of it was a glimpse into what their lives could have been together, their future, the one that now would never be.

There was a soft knock on the door. She begrudgingly walked over and opened it, expecting Mr Preston to have come crawling back, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when she found Clive on the doorstep.

“Good gracious Mr Evans, what are you doing here?!”

He stared at her with equal shock and confusion. “I could very well ask you the same! Mr Preston wrote ahead and told me he was returning today, I thought I ought to pop by and update him on The Hamilton...” His expression suddenly changed to delight. “Oh! Am I interrupting? Are you and-“

“No! We very much are not. He had to leave for a moment.” Her eyes filled with tears of embarrassment. She couldn’t stop the sob that escaped her throat.

Clive's face fell. He tried in vain to comfort her, giving her a feeble pat on the arm. "There, there, I'm sure whatever has happened can be fixed."

"I don't think this can be," she cried. "I really ought to go, will you stay until he returns?"

He nodded, and gave her a quick hug before she left.

"I would appreciate your discretion on this matter, Clive," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Of course, Miss Hartford."

When Mr Preston stumbled back to the cottage after a stiff drink and some solemn rumination, he yelped when he found Clive sitting on his armchair with his feet up and a glass of scotch in his hand.

"Good god Clive, what are you doing here?"

He uncrossed his legs and cocked his head. "I was coming to see you, like you'd asked, only to find a distraught Miss Hartford! What on earth have you done now?"

Mr Preston flopped down on the couch and stretched out his tall frame, before letting crossing his arms over his eyes. "I've ruined everything," he mumbled.

Miranda ran back home and straight to her room, flying past Tilly on the stairs. Tilly's face fell when she saw her tear-streaked face. "Oh, Miranda,"

"I need some time to myself. Please excuse me."

Oh how she hated him for taking her happiness with him. The subsequent days and nights bled into each other, blurred by her grief. She checked the mail each day out of habit, for the letters she knew would not be there.

Tilly and Stevie consoled her, tasking themselves with picking up the pieces and pasting her back together.

"I was fine before I met him," Miranda had bemoaned. "How can I be so weary now? Why does his absence feel so cold?"

Stevie sighed sadly. "Sometimes pain is the price we pay for love."

On one of her visits to Stevie and Norman, she found some solace in playing with their brood of cats. "It's good for the soul," Norman remarked gruffly, insisting that she hold a cuddly ginger tom in her lap. The purring was nice, she had to admit. Her favourite of course remained Heather, who had developed a preference for laying fully outstretched on her back.

"I wish I could be that relaxed," she said with a sigh.

Gary Preston was a liar and traitor. With the realisation that perhaps he was never hers in the first place, she cast him out of her heart and mind. Or so she tried. It was possible for short bursts of time, but the ghost of him always there, lingering.

While Tilly and Charlie continued their birdwatching, having ticked off the majority of Tilly's list, Miranda began taking walks in the garden alone, ostensibly making excuses that she was simply going out to read, then disappearing of her own accord.

This morning was unseasonably cool, with a fresh snap in the air that was rather invigorating, emboldening her to continue beyond the usual boundaries of Woolford into the surrounding woods. They were quite pretty, peaceful and not too quiet. Being in nature, life quietly simmering all around her, the cloud of her despair began to lift.

She was so engrossed in her reverie that she was entirely unaware of the imminent danger that was about to cross her path.

A carriage was approaching at speed, the wheels running smoothly over the favourable ground. Miranda did not hear any of this, and by the time the horse reared and the driver called out, she scarcely had time to turn her head before everything went black.

Chapter 21

As Miranda's eyes flickered open, the first thing she registered was the colour of the sky. It was a stark flat grey, almost white, fragmented by black branches and leaves. She sat up and held out her arms in front of her, inspecting her limbs and finding them unscathed. Her fingers ran over the floaty fabric of her dress. It was a diaphonous white nightgown, unlike any she owned. Despite the fine mist that hung in the air, she was not cold. It was quiet but not silent, the air filled with an otherworldly stillness. The woods looked familiar but different, with trees that seemed to stretch on forever.

"Fear not, help is on its way," she heard a man say.

She turned her head and jumped when she saw Mr Preston beside her.

"You're going to be okay."

His lips were moving but the voice was not his.

"Why are you-" she began to ask, when all of a sudden her ears began ringing and a powerful light began growing, brighter and brighter until it enveloped her in pure white. She squeezed her eyes shut and-

"Madam! Are you alright?" called out a gentleman's voice. Miranda's eyes snapped open and she gasped for breath. Everything was blurry, the sunlight was much too bright. A hand was on her shoulder. As her vision cleared, she saw a stranger kneeling next to her. He wore spectacles and his face was full of concern.

"Oh thank goodness you're back," he said, a smile of relief forming on his lips. "You're going to be okay."

"What happened?" Miranda mumbled, wondering why on earth she was lying in the middle of the woods. The pounding in her head was most unpleasant.

"You've had a nasty fall. I'm afraid you and Sugarlump gave each other quite a fright."

"Sugar... that's a nice name... One lump or two?"

He chuckled softly at this, then rushed to support her when she attempted to prop herself up on her arms. "Please be careful, you mustn't hurt yourself further."

He helped her up, but a searing pain shot up her leg when she tried to stand. “My ankle!” she cried, grabbing onto him.

“Right, we must get you home and send for a doctor. I know someone very good,” he said, picking her up with ease and lifting her onto the carriage. “Where do you live?”

“Woolford Park. North through the woods.”

His driver steered the carriage with great attentiveness, and the gentleman held her hand the entire way. The short journey passed in a daze as she slipped in and out of consciousness, and next thing she knew, he was carrying her into Woolford.

“Oh Miranda! What has happened?” Penny wailed, before gasping when she saw the stranger carrying her daughter. Mr Hartford and Tilly came running in, and Miranda saw her mouth something to them while gesticulating wildly.

“It’s nothing,” Miranda mumbled.

“I must apologise unreservedly for the intrusion,” the gentleman said. “She had a run-in with my horse. I have sent for the doctor already.”

There was a flurry of pillows and blankets, and a cool cloth was laid on her forehead.

Once it became evident Miranda was not gravely injured, Penny began oozing charm. “Oh Captain, you are too kind,” she crooned.

Captain? Miranda thought.

A most handsome doctor by the name of Dr Gale soon arrived, and Tilly and Penny almost fell over themselves at his charms.

Dr Gale pronounced her ankle a simple sprain. The blow to her head was moderate, but she was expected to recover fully with time. He prescribed a week of poultices and bed rest in a darkened room, along with a tonic for her aching head and the strain on her nerves. *If only he had one that could heal a broken heart*, she thought.

The situation under control, the Captain stood to take his leave.

“Please, won’t you come back and visit us?” Penny asked. “We must thank you for taking such wonderful care of our daughter.”

“Anyone would have done the same. But yes, I should quite like that, Lady Hartford,” he said.

Once everyone had departed, Penny became ecstatic, spinning around the room. “Miranda, do you have the faintest idea who that gentleman was? He is *Captain* Michael Jackford, son of the Duke of Bromley! A Duke! How fortunate your clumsiness was! This kind of introduction can form quite a fondness in a gentleman’s heart. Oh my girl, you have done well for once.”

Miranda did not take any of this in and soon fell asleep, deeply confused.

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