The Best Laid Plans

by Pandemic

Summary

Antonia finds out she is not that good at matchmaking, should probably listen to what her heart is trying to tell her, and the enigma that is Natasha Romanov intrigues everyone.

Or the Jane Austen’s Emma AU.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Antonia Stark, pretty, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, was incredibly fortunate to live an incredibly comfortable life; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

She was the only child of a most affectionate and indulgent mother; and had, as such, the use of their sprawling household as she saw fit. Hartfield was a large estate, and her mother often commented on how she brought movement and noise into it, the lifeblood of its brick walls. Her father had died too long ago for him to be any more than a whisper of a thought; and his place had been supplied by an excellent man as household butler Jarvis, who had fallen little short of a father in affection.

Jarvis had been in the family for seventeen years, less as a butler and more of a highly disapproving yet amused uncle with an alarming fondness for Antonia which included sighing and hiding her ridiculous schemes from her mother. The use of the term butler had all but ceased, and the shadow of any authority he may hold over Antonia (aside her desperate wish to please him) had all but dissipated. This left Antonia to do whatever she liked; always heeding Jarvis’s judgement, but never at the expense of her own.

This left her often in trouble within the ton. She had been well educated and, with no firm hand of a father, was never told off for speaking her mind within the household. Unfortunately for those around her, this transferred over into society’s gatherings, unable to resist the temptation of showing those up who think themselves better. Despite the Stark’s family money that always opened doors that would prefer to stay shut, her outspoken and erroneous ways left her wanting for most companionship, and her dance card was often left almost blank, not even the hardiest of bachelors wishing to contend with her wicked tongue. Not that this swayed her.

This particular evening, Antonia was busying herself with pulling apart her late father’s pocketwatch, if only to put it back together again. The pieces within were worn from this now regular routine, but she enjoyed noting how the mechanism worked, how it continued to work no matter the changes made to it. *Beautifully immovable,* she mused with a smirk.

“A Captain Rogers to see you Antonia.” Jarvis spoke from the doorway, acting the part of loyal houseservant if only for a moment.

“Oh do not bow Steven, it sits so poorly on you.” Antonia grinned, and rose up to bounce on her heels. Steven was the most intimate family friend she knew of. Whilst Antonia might be the lifeblood of Hartfield, Steven was very easily the unshakeable foundations that stayed unchanging throughout her life.

If Antonia thinks hard, she remembers Steven’s first arrival at Hartfield, under the wing of his mother. She remembers very little of Sarah Rogers, aside from being awestruck by her beauty. She had been a small woman with such delicate and pale features you wondered whether they had been carved in marble. Yet they did little to hide the humour ever present in her eyes, or the ferocious love she had for her son that came first miles before anything else.

If Antonia truly thinks about herself, she thinks she probably only remembers little of Sarah Rogers simply because Steven had eclipsed her in every way.

“You look like Ferric.” Antonia giggled and Steven looked down at her indulgently. *She was only ten to his sixteen, and as such he quickly adopted a role as her protector in chief.*
“Are you telling me I look like your foal?” Steven mused, a grin trembling at the corners of his mouth.

“Yes! All legs and angles and no coordination whatsoever!” Antonia had laughed, a barking sound not at all ladylike, yet when Steven joined in with her she thought it was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

Steven now lived but a mile from Hartfield, visiting often to her mother’s delight; who loved him every part as much as she did Antonia, apparently for his “words of advice and wisdom”. He split his time between his own sprawling estate and London where he visited his friends from his time in the infantry often. Antonia loved her mother dearly, but her inability to relinquish the hold on her was close to stifling at times. She had never travelled beyond Highbury, never visited the world as she so longingly wished to. How she wished, every time they waved Steve off, to just jump into the carriage and ride off with him to London!

But Steven did have a cheerful and pleasant manner that hid a sickeningly dry delivery of humour that had all those around him reaching for their sides in laughter, and as such was highly sought after and respected within town.

Why he chose to associate with Antonia, the town (and Antonia herself) had no idea.

“I was merely stooping to look your unkempt state, Antonia, is wearing your nightclothes out of your bedroom a particular fashion statement? Maybe I should bring my own to match.” Steven delivered with a smirk and a glint of humour in his eye, and Antonia felt an unbecoming flush rising to her face, hurrying to put herself together. This side effect of Steven’s attention was becoming increasingly hard to bear, making itself apparent this past season.

“I have been too busy to think about appearances Steven.” She waved him off, “I have far too much to do to concern myself with how I look.”

“Well at least make yourself presentable, Miss Hill is arriving shortly.” Steven reprimands slightly, and Antonia groans.

“Oh please God have me mercy on my soul, has she received another wonderful letter from her niece?” Antonia moans, ignoring the stern look Steven rewards her with.

“Antonia, be kind. She has … come down in the world these past years and we have to look after her.” He speaks softly, and Antonia has to ignore the little part of her that wants to nod and agree to anything the man has to say.

“I know, I know. But it’s just Natasha seems to write to her aunt every week and she seems to gain at least eight accomplishments in between one and the next! And Miss Hill seems to make it her life’s mission to come here every week to tell us about them!” Antonia moans as both Jarvis and Steven smuggle a grin.

Natasha Romanov was an orphan, the only child of the elder Mrs Hill’s youngest daughter.

There was very little to remember her parents by, the marriage of Lieut. Romanov to Miss Jane Bates accompanied only by the memory of him dying in action abroad – and of his widow sinking under grief soon afterward.

The compassion of a friend of her father changed her destiny from an orphan to be brought up at
Highbury with no advantages, connections or improvement. Colonel Coulson had always held high esteem for the late Romanov for he had saved Coulson’s life in the infantry. He sought the child out and took notice of her, bringing her up within his household to such a degree of success he undertook the whole charge of her education to be brought up for educating others.

Natasha Romanov had been exceedingly lucky, or at least as lucky as an orphan could be. She had the good fortune to fall into good hands, knowing nothing but kindness from the Coulsons, and given an excellent education. However her childhood before the Coulson’s had been bitter – if the rumour mill was to be believed – with a mother neglecting her in her haze of grief to the point of abuse.

It was perhaps those reasons that she was so quiet (to be fair, a quality most men held in high respect that Antonia had the luck of not possessing) and meek. Steve had argued her case in a heated debate with Antonia one evening.

“It does not matter the luck she has been dealt with. Imagine living day to day with the sobering thought that if the daughters of the Colonel had suitors, and Natasha found herself in the way of those – and with her being as attractive to the male eye as she is rumoured to be this is sure to occur – that the Colonel would send her from the house without a second thought? Not out of spite, but out of success for his daughters. Antonia, you have never been collateral and so I understand that you cannot see this but be fair to the girl. You cannot live a fully happy life with that hanging over your head!”

Happy life or not, Antonia would admit to hosting a certain… jealousy towards Miss Romanov. Despite the nasty tongue rumours could have, the words on Miss Romanov were nothing but achingly pleasant and praise-filled. Oh how elegant Miss Romanov was, how well she carried herself. Her height was pretty, her figure graceful, not like Antonia’s almost garishly tall features that Steve poked fun at regularly. Her face was a graceful beauty, one that did not slap you in the face but one you would remember and wish to see again. Her hair fiery, a memorable dash of colour against a pale face.

In hindsight, Antonia realises that perhaps jealousy coloured the majority of her feelings toward Miss Romanov, and made her unkind in the first instance. And, well, can you blame the pair for being at war from then on?

“Natasha’s writing is always so very handsome. I do say she writes the most handsome letters I have ever read. Wouldn’t you say it is handsome? She’s so kind, taking the time out of her busy life to write to me.”

Miss Hill stood in what was considered the very worst predicament in the world, despite holding much public favour; she was neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. She had no intellectual superiority to excuse this particular fate, never boasting beauty or cleverness. She was plain in the saddest and ugliest sense of the world, nothing to become her both inside and out. And yet she seemed a happy woman; the simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature insured that very little could be said in negative of her.

Except, perhaps, the fact she seemed to live for the letters received from her niece, which she devoured voraciously and made sure everyone else around them were given recitals of them as well.

“Natasha is so very accomplished, there is nothing she cannot do. Do you know only last week she played the pianoforte to a room of the Colonel’s most esteemed guests, and they were all so very
impressed. Have I told you her skill at the pianoforte Mrs Stark?”

Antonia’s mother nodded slowly, as though she wasn’t quite sure of whether her response was actually needed for the woman to continue on with no sign of stopping. Antonia perched on the edge of a seat, ready to run at a moment’s notice and looking toward Steven stood at the window. Rolling her eyes at the man and mouthing the words ‘help me’ simply had Steven silently laughing and shaking his head.

“She is so very adept at French, did you know? She speaks it as well as any native. French is such a romantic language, I have no doubt she will find a partner. Only someone as accomplished as herself of course. But in the Colonel’s circle there are bound to be many up to the challenge.”

“I’m going to ask Captain Rogers to teach me Chinese.” Antonia bolts headfirst into the conversation, earning her a stern look from Jarvis who sits to her mother’s right, and an indulgent look from her mother herself. Emboldened, she continues, “Do you think Natasha can speak Chinese?”

Miss Hill is only stopped but for a deliciously quiet moment, “I’m sure she could… Natasha is equal to anything, I’m sure Chinese would be only another latent ability yet uncovered. Did I tell you she is halfway through a reading list featuring 100 titles? One hundred!”

“I did not know you could speak Chinese, Steven.” Antonia’s mother gracefully interjects, and she thinks everyone is thankful for the relief. Steven strides over from where he stood and grins, raking a hand through his hair.

“Yes, through my time served in the infantry it was discovered I had an affinity for languages and it was quickly put to good use. I do believe however, that myself and Miss Stark have some business to attend to, do excuse us.” Taking hold of Antonia’s elbow, he steers the pair of out the room and down the corridor.

“Oh thank you, thank you!” Antonia praises as though she was praying at the altar. Steven only shakes his head.

“You were just going to end up in a bizarre one-upmanship between you and Miss Hill. I don’t think your mother needs to watch that.” Steven jibed, “Besides, Bruce is here from London and looking for you.”

“Bruce is here and you left me in a room with Miss Hill? I think you have a sadistic streak Captain.” She is all set to continue when he hears laughter from outside.

Antonia peers out the window to the gardens of Hartfield. Steven’s cousin was running amongst the hedgerows chasing a giggling Miss Ross. Bruce caught her around the waist and smiled down at her, a sight rarely seen from the overwhelmingly quiet man.

“They make a handsome couple.” Antonia mused.

“No, Antonia. None of your scheming. They are merely friends.” Steven chided.

Antonia refused to be swayed, “I don’t think so Steve. Natasha Romanov may be the champion of the written word or pianoforte; but people, their hopes, dreams, aspirations. There I am the expert.”

“Really?” Steve asks, smirking before his voice goes quiet, pondering, “I don’t suppose you can tell if I’ve got any hopes or dreams.” His eyes stayed fixed on Antonia a beat too long, causing her to fluster and the next words come out too close to biting.
“Not you, of course, you’re not the romantic sort.” Antonia bites out, missing Steve’s face falling, “But your cousin and Miss Ross…”

“Bruce and Betty? Surely not.”

“Surely yes! I have been scheming for the past six months now. It will be my greatest success.”

Steve pauses and Antonia can almost see the cogs turning, “And how do you surmise that? Success implies endeavor, Antonia. Just because you say ‘I think it would be a fine thing if Miss Ross and Mr Banner were to marry’ and then repeating it to yourself every so often, it’s not the same as bringing it about.” Steve chides gently, “If… IF they were to get married, it is because they themselves wish to, not because you have schemed it.”

Antonia nods with an innocent look that she knows isn’t fooling anyone.

“I, Elizabeth Ross, do take thee, Bruce Banner, to be my wedded husband.”

“Say nothing.” Steve hissed with little rancour and Antonia could not cease the smug grin painted across her face, “This does not prove you as a matchmaker, but simply that you made a lucky guess.”

Antonia frowns, “Nothing lucky about it. Just talent, and intuition.” She boasts, watching as the sides of Steve’s lips quirk up in an all too familiar gesture that meant he was trying to stop from smiling.

“Now… who next.” She mutters, mostly to herself, far too delighted with herself to note a worried look from her companion.

Now, despite the evidence to the contrary, Mrs Stark was fond of society, and society fond of her. But this was in her own way. She loved having her friends to visit, and these fell into different causes and categories. From her long residence at Hartfield (for she and Mr Stark had wedded young, and sadly he had died young too), her good nature, her fortune, her beauty, her intelligence, and her daughter, she could dictate visits of her own inner circle as much as she liked. She was not for want of company, but she did find large parties and late hours a horror – aside that of the company of Captain Steven, who fell into a category entirely unique that spared him the judgement of Maria Stark.

Intimate evening party dinners were what she preferred, steering the conversation in a manner perfectly suited to her role as hostess. And she could also completely destroy her dinner mates in a game of cards so gracefully you could not complain.

Long standing regard had brought the Reeds and the Xaviers (though Maria had often admitted she bore the company of the heads of house only for the delight in company of their two children); and by Mr Hammer, a young man living alone without liking it, the privilege of exchanging any evening he found himself idle for the elegancy of Mrs Stark’s drawing room.

After these, came a second set; of whom were Mrs and Miss Hill, and Mrs May, three ladies who would grab at any invitation to Hartfield and whom were fetched and carried home so often that Mrs Stark thought James and the horses knew the journey by heart.

Mrs May was the mistress of a real and honest old-fashioned boarding school where girls were sent,
often to be out of the way, and work their way into an education, but never enough to be boastful. The school was held in high repute – Mrs May keeping the children in a house of ample house and garden that in the summer opened its impressive bay doors to the sun to allow the children to bask in the warmth, and in the winter cultivated a fire so hearty it kept the house warm enough to wander without winter clothes.

It was no wonder that a train of twenty young girls followed her to church like ducklings. Mrs May was a plain woman but who bore the brunt of hard work in her youth and as such felt she deserved a seat at Hartfield, occasionally losing a few sixpences at Maria’s fireside through a particular thrilling game of cards.

Antonia often found herself walking through to the boarding school at her mother’s behest, who had society’s etiquette of keeping a friendship stoked drilled into her. So she found herself strolling there one morning, spotting Miss Hill sat outside in deep conversation with Mrs May, and waved enthusiastically in a manner not becoming for a young woman, but a manner good enough for Antonia Stark.

As she approached she saw Miss Hill’s features school into slight disapproval, “Miss Stark.” She started, “Walking alone?”

Antonia sat at the seat proffered by Mrs May and accepted the cup of tea she poured with a nod, “Why yes.”

Miss Hill gasped slightly, “But it is not safe. And now Miss Ross has become Mrs Banner you must find a walking companion. What if you had walked into the gypsies?” she says the last word quietly, hushed.

“Oh but they are on the west fields. Beside, Captain Rogers says they are not the bad sort of travellers, they come here every year.” Antonia spoke quickly, smiling, watching as Miss Hill shook her head.

“Are you here to call on Miss Potts?” Mrs May speaks up before Miss Hill can scold Antonia further, and Antonia is grateful for the interruption.

“I am, Mrs May, I believe she is home from her vacation?”

Miss Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts was the natural daughter of somebody. Someone had placed her in Mrs May’s care a few years back, and her beauty and intelligence had shone through to the interest of Highbury. That, however, was all that was generally known of her history. Despite their similarities, Antonia did not spend as much time as she wished in the girl’s company. Pepper had been away, as far as Antonia had been aware, to see some of her friends in the country who had been at school there with her. She walked toward the camp of Miss Hill, Mrs May and Antonia with a shy gait that Antonia was forever trying to train out of her.

“Miss Stark it is a pleasure to see you again, how have you been in my absence?” Pepper smiles and takes an awkward perch on one of the parlour seats.

“I have been well, Pepper. Antonia stresses the name hoping it will lead to Pepper using forenames as well, “How was your stay in the country? I do hope it was pleasant.”

Antonia was always struck by how Pepper could hide remarkably clever musings within a shy and faltering countenance. The intelligence, and beauty, of the girl could not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintances she had formed on her stay away in the country were unworthy of her. The friends from whom she had just parted, although very good sorts
of people if what Pepper was saying was to be true, must be doing her harm.

They were a family of the name Rhodes, whom Antonia knew the father as a particularly good character, as renting a large farm of Captain Rogers and residing in the parish of Donwell. She knew Captain Rogers thought highly of the son, an intelligent man he had always said had time for a passionate debate and knew himself well. But they could not possibly be polished enough for Pepper. She would improve her, detach her from her bad acquaintances and introduce her into good society and form her opinions and manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly very kind undertaking.

She was just so good with people.

Antonia was grateful for her life, of course. She knew of the evils of this world, of the poverty she could have been born into had fate been so unkind. And as such, she knew it was indulgent to be churlish toward her circumstance. But she sometimes wished for a mother not quite so tight-fisted in her affections that meant a complete inability to leave anywhere more than ten miles from Hartfield. She watched Bruce, able to come and go as he pleased, and Steve talk of a time in the infantry, of friends from the ton, and wish she could follow them and have stories of her own.

Steve had been gone nearly three weeks, and Antonia had found very little else to do. Managing an estate when you had a large income at your disposal was far easier than you would think, Antonia able to cast off most roles to the houseservants. She had taken a stroll as far as Steve’s main quarters at Donwell before returning home, and had fallen into discussions at church with Mr Hammer during Sunday mass, but other than that she found herself at want for things to do.

It was such a fate she found himself in one Friday afternoon before she noticed a broad figure cutting a swathe across the garden toward Hartfield.

Antonia’s face launched into a grin, before she turned and ran the steps down to the front door. If Jarvis noted her reaction, and her mother noted the quick change from sombre to joyful upon Captain Rogers’ return, neither said anything.
“So how have you been Mrs. Stark?” Steve asks, having finally fallen into one of the seats beside the roaring fire. He had come immediately from their mutual connections in London, to more fanfare than usual, given the news he brought of Mr. Ross and his wife. All was well in Brunswick Square, where Mr. Ross and his wife resided, making it a happy circumstance, further animating Mrs. Stark for some time.

Steve had a cheerful and friendly manner, which always did him good no matter the situation. He listened and responded to Maria’s many inquiries with good cheer.

Once the interrogation was over, Maria gratefully observed, “Steve it is so very kind of you to come out to call upon us fresh from your journey. You must be so very fatigued.”

“Not at all, Mrs. Stark. I found the walk quite refreshing, and the weather so mild I cannot bear to be too close to your great fire. Besides, I was sure Antonia would be up to no good without someone here to put a damper on her matchmaking. Who cried most when I wrote of extending my stay in London?” Steve asked, eyes glittering with humour.

Antonia gasped, and Maria looked on at them both with fond affection, “Oh I am sure of who you must have in your head for that notion – since one of us is such a fanciful and troublesome creature! I am sure you would not hold your tongue so well if my mother was not here.”

“My dear, I do apologise.” Maria intoned gravely, only the quirk of her mouth betraying her, “I am afraid I am sometimes so very fanciful and troublesome.”

The three laughed, the only other sound accompanying them the crackling hearth.

Now that both Pepper and Steve were at home in Highbury once more, and the earth realigned, Antonia could look forward to the upcoming Friday evening with fervour. Maria Stark held some of the most highly sought after invitations once a week, a close of the day met with dinner and fine company. Only those who Maria held in high regard were invited (or at least, those in high regard, and those Antonia wished to visit. Sometimes these didn't go hand in hand).

Most of the time Antonia’s invite went unused, since whilst she’d like to claim Steve was her guest, she thinks she would have an argument on her hands to the contrary, given the fact he was more than six years her senior and one of the most sought after dinner guests of the whole of Highbury.

However this particular evening she had requested of Miss. May that Pepper be allowed to attend, and as such she was incredibly excited to have what was shaping up to be an exciting evening ahead. Steve to her left, Pepper to her right, and every inch of her scheming laid out in front of her.

“We have a new addition to our party.” Antonia smiled as everyone settled in their places at the dinner table, waving toward Pepper, “Virginia-“

Before she could finish her introductions the parlour door opened with a screech, stopping all conversation dead. Mr Hammer entering with a flourish.

“Forgive me, Miss. Stark, Mrs. Stark.” He bowed so low Antonia could see the patch of thinned hair
at the tip of his crown, making sure to hide her smirk before addressing the room, “But I was delayed in the village on the errand of one whose business I hold only just in higher regard than yours.”

The room huffs a small laugh, all at once relaxing after the commotion of the disturbance. It is only Miss. Hill who looks round, confused.

“On whose business?” she asks, loudly, as Miss. May whispers beside her.

“The Almighty’s.”

“Oh I see! God’s business. God’s business who he only just regards higher than the ladies Stark. How very civil. Civil indeed.”

Antonia’s voice trembles round a smile as she turns, “You are most welcome, Mr. Hammer as always. I think I only have one introduction to make. My darling friend, Miss Virginia Potts.”

Mr. Hammer turns and inclines his head to Pepper, who blushes prettily at the attention. “Well Miss Stark’s friend, can be one no less to me.” And with that he steps to his place at the table, opens his napkin with a flourish, and the meal begins.

What follows is nothing too much of note, Antonia thinks, just simple gentle guiding of Pepper through dinner etiquette with a series of frowns, nods, and smiles where appropriate.

She can feel Steve’s gaze on her the entire evening, noting how it makes the back of her neck feel alight.

Antonia was rather proud having given Pepper’s fancy a better direction than before. She was far more sensible upon agreeing that Mr. Hammer was agreeable in features as much as he was in manners. Antonia was subtle, at least she felt she was, in creating a liking on Pepper’s side. Her mother and Steven might disagree.

“Antonia, I pray you do not make any matches; your scheming is beyond the likes of poor Highbury.” Her mother chided gently one evening.

“Oh but only perhaps one or two more. In particular one for Mr. Hammer! Poor Mr. Hammer – you like him mother – we must find him a wife. He has been here a whole year and what a shame for him to be single much longer. I will do him such a service.”

Steven had laughed, such a long laugh that allowed his mouth to tremble upright at the corners in that way Antonia was so fond of, “To be sure, I do not doubt you would. But leave out your meddling and let him choose his own wife. Believe me, a man of six-and-twenty can take care of himself.”

Antonia shook off these words now, convinced of the match. Mr. Hammer, whilst quite the gentlemen himself with no low connections to be worried of, was at the same time not of any family that could object to the doubtful birth of Pepper. He had a comfortable home for her, and Antonia imagined a wonderfully significant income that would keep Pepper well in the years to come. He seemed good humoured, well-meaning and respectable as a young man could be.

She was satisfied with the knowledge that he found Pepper, with her shock of red hair and deep cherry lips, astonishingly beautiful. And he was a very pleasing young man, with looks most women would not object to. She knew he was thought of being very handsome by most, though not by her. There was a genteelness where Antonia preferred steel. Preferred broad shoulders tapered to slim waists. Roguish looks framed by corn-spun blonde hair.
But before she could allow her brain to wander, she thought back to the task at hand. She had to think of the match in front of her, before even beginning to presume one for herself. If Pepper could previously be gratified by James Rhodes riding about the countryside to fetch her flowers, she would be conquered by Mr. Hammer’s admiration.

Now, little known to Antonia, at this very moment a conversation was being held on exactly how troubling Antonia’s new project was. For whilst Antonia believed her machinations very welcome, to others they were viewed with a less rose-tinted eye.

“I do not presume to know what your opinion may be, Mrs. Stark,” said Steven, “of this great new intimacy between Antonia and Virginia Potts, but I don’t think it is a good thing.”

“A bad thing then? Do you really find it a bad idea – why so?”

“I think neither will do the other well.”

“Why Steven, you surprise me. Antonia will do Virginia good: and by keeping Antonia interested, Virginia does Antonia good in reverse. I am gladdened to see Antonia have a friend her age, who can keep her on her toes. But I can see this is about to be one more of our quarrels about Antonia, Mr. Rogers.”

Steven smiled wryly, “You seem to think every conversation we have is one of our quarrels about Antonia.”

Mrs. Stark smiled, and for a moment Steven was struck by just how much of a classic beauty the woman once was, “Yes, my dear. But that might only be because of how loathe you are to let a conversation pass without mentioning her name at least once.

Steven’s ears turned red at the tips with this deducement, “Mrs. Stark –“

“Mr. Stark would undoubtedly support me, if he was still alive. How fortunate it is for my girl to have a lady in the village for her to be friends with. And not only that, but for the girl to be close to her in intelligence, enough to keep that gorgeous mind from ticking over into ill use.”

Maria Stark’s eyes grew stormy, “If I could allow her to travel alone without the constant worry probably sending me into an early grave, I would. But as it stands I simply want what is best for her within the comfort and safety of Highbury. And whatever she wants within that, she will have. Antonia wants for nothing, yet I see her bored to her wits end. The books that litter our house have been thumbed over so much the letters are near faded. Every nook and cranny explored and discovered. If Virginia will allow her to be challenged, then she can be allowed to do so.”

“Antonia likes to feel the cleverest in the room, Maria, you know this. She is without a doubt one of the most intelligent people I have ever met, with a mind razor sharp and tone to match. However she will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience. And whilst Virginia is clever, she is Antonia’s inferior and as such will rely on everything Antonia ever says, thinks or does. A flatterer – that is what Virginia poses as a friend, and as such is dangerous to Antonia’s already inflated notion of herself.”

“I must depend on Antonia’s sense far more than you do, or at least am so anxious to hear her rebuke this with her wicked tongue as she will want to do, because I cannot agree with you. How well my darling looked last night!”
“Do not attempt to sway me from this conversation Maria,” Steven sighed, “I know you far too well. I will not attempt to deny Antonia’s being pretty.”

“Pretty?” Maria crows, eyes cunning, “Beautiful rather. She is stunning, my darling girl.”

“I confess I have seldom seen such a face or figure more pleasing than hers. But I am a partial old friend, Maria. I find no fault with her. I love to look at her.” Steven flushed at being so honest, “And I don’t think her vain. She is occupied so very little by how beautiful she is. Her vanity lies in her cleverness. I know you all insist to see her as an angel and nothing more, and I’ll forgive you for in being her mother lies your bias. But I won’t play into her vanity, if I’ll be the only one that she hates me for it.”

Maria’s eyes turn gentle, “I know you wonder at what will become of her, the curiosity is almost overwhelming sometimes isn’t it? I share your anxiety, but not your worry. I know Antonia is always steered right by you, and how much stock she puts in your opinion. You should never fear losing her support of you. It’s as immovable as Hartfield.”

Maria did well, she felt, to conceal some of her most privileged and precious thoughts on the subject, in the face of Steven’s arduous care and consideration of Antonia. There was only so much he could attempt to conceal his affection for her daughter, and as yet there were words that lingered, unspoken by both parties. She would not affect her daughter’s destiny as much as she would not force Steven’s hand. She would be happy, delighted, if the match was to come about. But she was too old for matchmaking, and the quiet if obvious transition which Mr. Rogers soon made afterwards to “What does Jarvis think of the weather, shall we have rain?” convinced her he had nothing more to say at the time of Hartfield, or the young girl he cared so much for that lived within it.

Antonia had done very well, very well indeed, in the weeks gone, to curry favour for Mr. Hammer in Virginia. She could not feel doubt at all in having given Virginia’s affections a proper direction and sense of purpose. She was confident in creating as much liking in Virginia, as there could possibly be.

Virginia was bright, to be sure, and in that she was aware that her circumstances of birth would not allow her to climb a much higher ladder than that of Mr. Hammer’s occupation. She was a true beauty, one that shone from within. And as such, Antonia was also thoroughly convinced in Mr. Hammer being close, if not all the way, in love with her. He talked of Virginia often, if perhaps mainly when prompted (perhaps he was simply shy), and praised her so warmly, that she couldn’t think anything but time would add more to his regard.

“You have done remarkably well, Miss. Stark,” said he; “You have made her a graceful beauty whilst teaching her much of custom and etiquette. She was a beautiful creature when she came to you, but the additions you have added are infinitely more superior.”

The wording of it may have been complex, but the meaning struck true in Antonia’s brain. He thought Virginia beautiful, and upon seeing how quickly she took to etiquette and education under Antonia’s wing, could see how well she would fit into his own home.

Why she was so magnificent at this game of matchmaking! Why she only had to cast her mind back to yesterday, to remember just how good she was in ways of the heart.

They were painting on a sunny soaked afternoon, in the front facing garden at Highfield, as they were want to do. Virginia’s easel sat close to Antonia’s, enough so that Antonia could hear the snick of the paintbrush as it slid easily across the canvas. They exchanged words here and there, of lighting and colors, of jokes and jests, and everything in Antonia’s head was quiet for one blessed
It was at this very moment, that Antonia heard footfalls accompany the sounds of nature, and Mr. Hammer strode toward the couple, first stopping towards Virginia. He quietly took in her painting, pointing toward a tree or two in the artwork, admiring, before stepping toward Antonia’s.

He stood close, enough so that Antonia could almost feel his breath on the back of her neck, “How extraordinary.” He mused, “Women these days are so accomplished in all areas.”

Now Antonia would not claim to be this easily flattered in polite company, but in the moment she allowed herself a smug grin. As easily flattered as a peacock, Steven would always say, and she could never argue. “You flatter us, Mr. Hammer.”

“Oh yes,” he continued, crowding further into her space, to the point she stepped forward to ease herself of the claustrophobia of his close quarters, “I see how wonderfully you have captured the... light, and er, the true essence of Hartfield. Delicate, yet eloquent.”

He continued in this form for a while yet, before Antonia could bear it no more and turned so she faced him, “Mr. Hammer?” she questioned, noticing how his spottings of facial hair were almost grey in color, the wrinkles that framed his eyes unbecoming at such proximity, “Do you not think that the human form would be such an excellent subject? A watercolor, of Miss Potts. What say you to that?”

He turned, casting his eyes across Virginia in a way that definitely hinted of affection, and it was all Antonia could do to not crow her excitement, “Oh yes, a depiction of Miss Potts in your fair hand. That would be perfection. I should like that more than anything, anything at all.”

“I must be off, just a short visit to thank you and both Miss Potts for your marvelous work in the parish.” He bowed low and deep, before stepping over to Virginia to repeat the same. As he did so, Virginia caught eyes with Antonia, and smiled giddily.

As he took his leave, she stepped quickly up to Virginia, excitement brewing.

“I told you his affections ran deep.” She cried, “Whose painting do you think Mr. Hammer has commissioned me to paint?”

Virginia flushed deeply, freckles more prominent than ever, “I assume you would not toy with me, and you mean that he has asked to paint my likeness. Or at least, you’ve designed it as such.”

“Don’t be so modest! You have come along wonderfully, and he is quite smitten. You will be married by the New Year.”

“You are so fanciful,” Virginia spoke indulgently, “It would be like trying to stop the tide to not get caught up in your excitement.”

Chapter End Notes

So I have returned! Hopefully for good.
Now, Antonia knew, this had to be perfectly orchestrated, else lose the appeal completely. She
dressed Virginia up in some of her finest attire, cinching the waist in where it was slightly too large
(and oh, how that wounded her ego some). She curled Virginia’s hair with her iron and made sure it
framed just so.

The end result was overwhelmingly pleasing, or at least definitely gained the right attention from Mr.
Hammer when he arrived.

“You will present such a divine countenance in Miss. Stark’s great artistry, Miss. Potts.” He said,
tone heavy with compliments, “You must remain ever so still, so that your beauty can be captured
perfectly by Miss Stark’s gentle hand.”

Virginia smiled weakly as he looked toward her, before the smile turned to a grimace once his back
was turned. For the pose they had chosen, whilst best to show off Virginia’s lithe figure and milky
skin, involved holding a vase just so and as such, her arms trembled with it. Antonia caught her eyes
and grinned, excitedly, for the compliments Mr. Hammer had just bestowed.

“Now, Miss. Stark. The beginning of the painting I see before me indicates previous practice, honing
of your enormous talent.” Mr. Hammer came close to Antonia’s painting, index finger curving across
the picture without quite touching it.

“Yes, I have practiced before it is true. Though not in a great variety of faces. I had only my family
and close friends to study from. I have many of my mother – although the idea of her sitting for a
picture made her laugh, so I could only draw by utter stealth and therefore they are not the greatest
works I have ever created. Mr. Jarvis, over and over again – my kindest friend who would sit
whenever I would ask him. Elizabeth Ross, now Banner, a few times though she was never one to
sit still, always in such a hurry.” As she speaks she reaches to her reticule, skimming through the
pictures that are folded in there. One in particular has her hurry over it, a picture of royal blue and
freshly cut corn.

“Oh!” Mr. Hammer crows, “but what is this?” he reaches down and plucks the picture from her
grasp, and Antonia flushes at the intimacy before them both.

“My best, I would say. My best and my last.” Antonia gazed onto the portrait, “Steven would never
sit for a portrait either, always vastly too busy, so I stole this from him one evening he fell asleep in
front of the fire at Hartfield. The fire makes for such a warm glow across a portrait I feel. But my
mother and I decided never to show him it – far too much a flatterer we felt. Too handsome – and
Captain. Rogers would never let me live it down.”

The picture she gazed upon was indeed flattering. It had been painted not long after Steven’s
conscription had ended, in fact if she recalled he had been released not a day earlier for returning.
Antonia remembers nothing but profound gratitude for the Almighty as she flung her arms around
him on the steps of Hartfield, and her mother ushering them both in with tears in her eyes.

He had attempted to make conversation, stringing one or two words together in a way that made next
to no sense, before Maria had placed a hand on his shoulder, had Jarvis start a fire, and tell him to
sleep.
“Sleep my darling, we can talk of how glad we are to have you back when you have had a moment or two’s peace.”

No longer were the words spoken than he had deflated, eyes heavy, and done just that. It was a mark of how truly shattered he must have been, how he must not have even stopped at Donwell to shed his outer clothes before coming to Hartfield. A wave of tenderness threatened to overwhelm Antonia right where she stood as she thought of how he must have been so worried as to what they thought about whether he’d return that he’d rushed to them with no regard for his health.

And in that moment, Antonia could do nothing else but sit and paint his likeness, else her fingers grow itchy with ill use. She let the brush strokes guide her, wanting to remember every moment of this night. The fire bathed him in a glow so intimate she felt she was intruding, but she was loathe to leave now.

The finished article was something so decadently seeping in affection she showed it only to her mother, before both agreeing it was far too flattering and vowing to not show it to him “until the time was right”.

As such, this was the first the picture had seen the light of day in a long time (aside for those times Antonia peeked upon it, but those would remain utterly private to herself and only herself until her dying day).

Upon gazing upon it, Mr. Hammer’s lips twisted, and it was the first time Antonia was struck upon how this man could even look ugly where occasion granted it, “I see. I suppose to have a likeness painted for a beloved family friend would seem appropriate, particularly given your mother’s love for him. Indeed she sees him as a son, I suppose, and I’m sure you see him as a brother.”

The word brother was heavily stressed, oddly so. And what was even more odd was Antonia’s reaction that followed, her brain so vehemently denying and throwing away the notion that Steven was anything like a brother, to the point she felt sick.

Nevertheless, she smiled and inclined her head slightly, noting how the set of Mr. Hammer’s shoulders relaxed upon this assent. Tucking the portrait lovingly back into her reticule, she turned to focus once more on finishing the portrait of Virginia, encouraging Mr. Hammer to compliment her at every turn.

The very day that the portrait was finally done, and Mr. Hammer entreated with taking the likeness down to London to choose a frame, provided a fresh occasion for Antonia to help her friend. It had begun as a usual day, with Virginia at Hartfield soon after breakfast; after a time going home to return again to dinner. However this particular day she returned far earlier than usual, with an agitated and harried look, grin affixed to her face so wide it would nearly split her face in two.

Upon arriving back to Mrs. May’s, she had heard, that Mr. Rhodes had been there not an hour before, and finding she was not there nor particularly likely to be back soon, left a parcel.

To Antonia’s horror, upon opening this parcel not only did it contain a gift from Mr. Rhodes two sisters (who adored the ground Virginia walked upon) but also a letter from Mr. Rhodes. A letter that was a proposal of marriage!

“Such a handsome letter I have never seen in all my life. He writes as though he really loved me so very much – but I don’t know. I don’t know what to do. My mind is abuzz with a vast variety of
notions and I feel sick. Please instruct me, Antonia. You would never lead me astray.” Antonia felt sick herself at this news, but heady with the power it granted her. She scans the letter preferred to her, using the time to think of the best course of action. The style of the letter was far above her expectations, the composition would not disgrace a gentleman. The language, although plain in essence, was strong and expressed warm attachment. Antonia has to sit in the closest seat available to her in the parlour for the shock of it, and Virginia throws herself into the closest chaise with excited abandon.

“It is a good letter.” She affirms, “So much so that it is likely one of his sisters wrote it for him. But I can hope to be honest enough to say it is a better written letter than I had expected from him. No doubt he is a sensible man with a natural talent for thinking strongly and clearly and when he takes pen in hand he naturally finds proper words. It is so with some men, even if not well educated.”

“My mind is riotous.” Virginia answered this discourse quickly, face stormy, “I don’t know what to do.”

“What to do? In what respect? Do you mean with regard to this letter? What could possibly be in doubt? You must answer of course – and speedily. It will not do to leave a man – even of his standing - waiting.”

“Of course.” Virginia nodded, “but what shall I say. Oh please Antonia, do advise me. I am aware of my station. I am aware of what this means.”

“Oh no! The letter must be all your own.” Antonia continues, “You write so prettily. You must be very clear and properly conscious of the pain you will inflict.”

All at once, it’s like the light goes out from Virginia’s eyes. Her shoulders wilt and she takes a moment before replying, quietly, “Oh. So – so you think I should refuse him then?”

“Should refuse –” Antonia stopped, rudderless, “Oh! So, you weren’t just asking for help regarding the phrasing. You actually want to accept a proposal from James Rhodes?” Antonia’s tone turns scathing without meaning to, the words bitter as they are spat out.

“I do.” Virginia starts, but the tone becomes questioning in the face of Antonia’s incredulity, “I don’t? I do. Oh Antonia please help me.”

“I have nothing to do with your own decision, Virginia. It is up to you to know your own feelings.” Antonia stands up, looking at the letter once, before sitting down beside Virginia, hand outstretched upon Virginia’s shoulder in comfort.

She approaches the next words carefully, “I think –“ she speaks as though trying not to spook a skittish foal, “I think as a general rule if a woman is in any doubt as to whether to accept a man or not, she ought to refuse him. Although, of course I do not want to influence you. But understand that. In doing so, if you were to accept this proposal you doubt so clearly, I would lose you forever as a friend. For I could never visit a Mrs. James Rhodes of Abbey Mill Farm for fear of ridicule and being outcast by high society. No, no if you don’t accept we can remain firm friends forever.”

“Well.” Virginia speaks with a slight colour of sadness, but Antonia dismisses it as sadness for the possibility of their friendship terminating, “Well, I suppose I must refuse him.”

“Yes! Yes of course! Come, we – that is to say you – must write this letter at once! To delay would be discourteous and unfeeling.” Gently steering Virginia to the study, Antonia congratulates herself soundly on navigating this sticky situation with such prowess.
Virginia slept at Hartfield that night. Her heart seemed weary, and it was little Antonia could do to refuse her a night of comfort. For some weeks past she had been spending most of her time there, and Antonia judged it best to have her with them as much as possible. The next morning she made her excuses to visit Mrs. May’s for an hour or two, before promising to return.

Whilst she was gone, Antonia busied herself by irritating Jarvis with constant quick-witted questions, and sitting with her mother for as long as she could (which, naturally, amounted to less than a half hour. Antonia was never one for sitting still).

Captain Rogers called before too long, and sat for some time in thick conversation with Mrs. Stark, before she made her excuses and readied herself for a turn about the garden.

“My complexion only remains this way due to our nature’s wonderful fresh air, and I would be silly not to entreat it on such a gorgeous day as this. I hope you don’t mind me leaving you with just Antonia for company, Steven.”

“Oh I’m sure Antonia and I can manage just fine by ourselves for now.” Steven promises, missing the smirk that idles round Maria Stark’s face.

(For whilst she promises herself she isn’t a matchmaker, she can’t help a gentle nudge here or there, lest she never see her grandchildren.)

Once Mrs. Stark has departed, Steven turns to Antonia with a most becoming grin, “No Miss Potts today, looking fetching amongst the roses?” Antonia rolls her eyes and makes for the house, “No, no I am not teasing you. Miss Potts is a pretty thing, and I am inclined to give you a compliment and say she seems much improved. Improved due to your influence.”

“Oh Steven I know how you loathe to ever concede my brilliance, so I will take your compliment and hold it dear since it unlikely I ever hear another one.” Antonia’s voice drips with sarcasm, “And she will be here soon once she can extricate herself from the Highbury gossips.”

“It is possible she is simply more tolerable of Highbury gossips than you are. But perhaps, she is delayed on far more pleasant business?” Steven rocks up on his heels behind her, seeming buoyed and exciteable, “I have good reason to believe your friend will soon receive wonderful news. News that you will be happy to hear.”

“How serious?! I can think of but one thing – who is in love with her? Who makes you their confidant?”

Antonia was in half hopes that Mr. Hammer may have dropped a hint. Captain. Rogers was sort of a general friend and adviser to most, and she knew Mr. Hammer was not alone in looking up to him.

“I have reason to think,” he replied, “That Virginia Potts will soon have an offer of marriage from James Rhodes. He is desperately in love with your Miss Potts and means to marry her. He came to me for advice, as he knows I have a thorough regard for him and all his family. He came to ask me whether he thought it imprudent to settle so early, but seemed utterly transfixed by your Miss Potts. He always speaks with such purpose; open and straightforward with good judgement. An excellent man, and despite my doubts of the match I gave my blessing. I must say I’m surprised your friend has been able to keep the good news to herself. I thought he must of spoken to her yesterday, he was so wonderfully determined.”

Antonia turned, “How do you know Mr Rhodes did not voice his thoughts yesterday?”

“Well I admit I do not presume to know he didn’t, rather that I thought she had spent the whole day
with you, leaving little room for love confessions.”

“Now I will tell you something, in return for what you have told me. He did speak yesterday, or
indeed he wrote, and was refused.” She shrugged, and made to move across the room. That flower
arrangement by the portrait of her parents needed fixing to be sure.

“That she is more of a fool than I thought her. What foolishness from the girl!”

“Oh!” Antonia crowed, “To be sure, always utterly inconceivable to a man that a woman should
ever dare to refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anyone
who asks her.”

Steven’s face was red in apoplexy, “A man does not imagine any such thing Antonia, don’t turn this
into one of your lectures! Miss Potts refuse Mr Rhodes? It is madness. You must be mistaken.”

“I saw her answer. Nothing could be clearer.”

She watches as Steven takes a moment to digest her statement, before recalculating, “You saw her
answer? – Nay you wrote her answer, Antonia! You persuaded her to refuse him. Look at me,
Antonia.” Antonia catches his eye, caught in his bright blues once more, “You are the reason for this.
You could never lie to me with any success.”

“And so what if I did. I did no wrong. Mr Rhodes is a respectable young man, but I cannot admit
him to be Miss Potts equal and rather show surprise that he should have even ventured to address
her.”

Steven barks a harsh laugh at this, grating, “No, he is not her equal. He is far her superior.” Antonia
laughs in return, “Your infatuation with that girl blinds you. Miss Potts is a natural daughter of
nobody knows whom. She is bright, to be sure, but with no experience and little education to lend
her. She has no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations. At her age she can have
no experience, and whilst her wit protects her it won’t do anything but comfort her if she grows older
and alone as gossip shrouds her for rejecting the one man who loved her to abandon!”

“My worries about the match were for him, I thought he could do no worse. But he was so in love
with her – he IS so in love with her, he would not be reasoned with! For Christ’s – I even thought of
you! I even thought ‘Antonia will think this a good match’”

“A good match – how little you must know of Antonia to say such a thing.” Both their voices were
raised now, like kindling to an open flame, “My intimate friend, marrying a farmer? It would be a
degradation.”

“A degradation?!” Steven roared now, before biting his tongue to instead utter fiercely, “For
illegitimacy and intelligence to be married to a likewise intelligent and what’s more respectable
farmer? Degradation for a man who has worked for his labours, born the sweat and dirt on his brow
to be rewarded with his true love? By God – Antonia – I truly thought that this friendship was a very
foolish intimacy. But now I see it is not unfortunate for you but for Virginia. You have built her up
now, with falsehoods of her background ideas above what, unfortunately, she is able to claim to, and
soon no one within her reach will be good enough for her.”

“Well for once we are in agreement that those within the circle she resided in before meeting me
were not good enough for her!” Antonia retorts weakly. To be on the receiving end of Steven’s
disappointment was a heavy burden indeed, and one she was not accustomed to.

“Oh for – vanity on a young head produces every sort of mischief.” Steven bites back, “Miss
Virginia Potts is clever yes, pretty to be sure. But James has no vanity, he would not have proposed if he did not think something there. I know she was halfway in love with James Rhodes before you stuck your hand in and tore her in two. I am not wrong here, do not lie to me. We are beyond lying, you and I.

“We think so very differently on this point, Captain. Rogers, that there is no point in canvassing it. We are merely making each other angry. But as to the idea that I would not let Virginia marry James Rhodes, it is impossible; she has refused him, and so decidedly, I think, that will prevent any second application. I won’t pretend I did not influence her a little, but I assure you she doubted the match more than I had any sway in. I can imagine that before she had seen anyone superior, she might have tolerated him. But having been accustomed to my office now the case is far altered, and she knows what gentlemen are now. Nothing but a gentleman with education and manners has any chance with Virginia.”

“Antonia the words that spill from your mouth are nonsense!” cried Steven, “James Rhodes had all these qualities to recommend him and simply because he comes from a labourer background, as you might do well to remember, did I you will treat him no better than a street urchin! You have an inflated sense of self, one far worse than what I ever thought. It would be better to be without wits than to apply them as you sometimes do, Antonia!”

“There! There! See how you force my argument! Men do not like girls who argue.” Antonia crowed, ignoring Steven’s guffaw, “Men like girls like Virginia. Who bewitches his senses with her beauty and satisfies him that he is right! Were you to ever marry she would be just the woman for you.” Antonia ignores how bitter those words taste on her tongue, “And love? Why should a woman marry for love, when the world can give her so much more than that in one season?”

“Ha!” Steven laughed once, voice sounding pained, then allowed the room to silence. Antonia made no answer here, trying her best to keep her face still, despite the discomfort that crawled across her back. She did not repent for what she’d done, she thought herself a far better judge than Steven on these matters; but yet her habitual respect for his judgement had her vehemently disliking having it so loud against her. To have him just opposite her in an angry state, with her knowing she was the sole cause, sat at a dichotomy in her bones. Some minutes passed in this unpleasant silence, clear that he was thinking. When he at least speaks with evidence of these thoughts, it is far quieter than before.

“Antonia. Your views on Virginia, on marriage, are best known to yourself; but as I know you love yourself a matchmaker it is fair to suppose plans you have. And as a friend, I shall just hint to you that if Hammer in the man, it will be in vain.” He continued, “If you won’t listen to reason, listen to me. Hammer will not do. Hammer is a respectable vicar of Highbury and unlikely to make an imprudent match. He may talk sentimental, but he is nothing but. He’s an opportunist and will climb the social ladder any way he can. His general way of speaking, in unreserved moments with only men present, suggest he does not mean to throw himself a way. He speaks of ladies his sisters are intimate with, who all have dowries spanning thousands of pounds. Even if he were infatuated with Virginia – which I don’t believe he is – he’s too pragmatic to throw that away.”

Antonia couldn’t believe he’d seen through her as clear as glass, “Yes you are ever the pragmatist – knowing nothing of passion or ardour so great you could choke on it!” Antonia bursts out, before biting her tongue.

“Passion? I’ll give you passion –“ Steven steps forward into Antonia’s space, one shaking hand reaching up to frame her face. The moment grows thick, draped in silence as Antonia stares into Steve’s heated eyes. Her limbs feel like jelly and she can do little but wait, biting her lip in anticipation. Steven breaks eye contact to tracks the movement, zeroing in on the now flushed skin.
"Antonia -" he starts, and coughs once, his voice a husky semblance of what it was before, his fingers play with the curl that forever bids free of the rest of her hairstyle, pulls it gently, "Antonia you drive me to madness."

He moves closer, slowly, giving her every opportunity to push him away, but Antonia finds herself loathe to do anything but wait for his arrival with pursed lips and heavy eyelids. She can practically count every eyelash. Yet suddenly, the moment is shattered between them as the far off sound of a door closing breaks into their reverie. Steven’s hand drops, and he quickly steps back, Antonia having to will her body not to follow him into his intoxicating space again.

“I will take my leave.” He says, abruptly, and rises with a crisp bow before walking off. Antonia can do little but watch his figure depart, fighting with herself not to raise fingers to her lips and wonder what on earth had just happened, and wonder why it felt like a loss.

Chapter End Notes

Only two days between updates? I'm spoiling you.

I also may or may not be slightly, R rating this soon. Depends on where it takes me, but the argument this chapter was crying for a bit of heat so here we are.
Captain Rogers might quarrel with her, but Antonia would not quarrel with herself. He was so much displeased that she did not see him at Hartfield for weeks, and when he did stop by, the air was stilted and conversation sparse. Any words exchanged were through the gentle mediation of Maria Stark, who could not fathom the murky waters they were now wading through. When he takes his leave though, his eyes burn into Antonia’s, so much so she would not be surprised to smell smoke rising from her petticoats.

“Antonia, what have you done to our Steven?” Maria queries once the doors are shut, and Antonia whirls on her with a glare.

“Why must you think I am the one to blame,” – said she, “I am your daughter and surely your confidence should side with me!”

“Because dear heart,” Maria says softly, “Steven normally stares at you like you hung up the stars, and today he can only look anywhere but you.”

Antonia flushes, mind rocking back to that scene so overplayed in her heart.

Truly, she is unable to understand Steven’s motivations. She knew that whatever had disturbed them had broken a moment so finely strung she was unlikely to experience it again. There had been a stirring of … something in her heart she had long thought not only dormant, but inaccessible to her. But she refused to investigate it. She was sorry, but she would not repent, and on she must forge with matchmaking Virginia, and push aside any observations of her own heart.

So when Maria questions further she simply shakes her head, and prays that Steven will come to terms with her lack of forgiveness. Her stomach roils with the thought of never speaking to him again.

The Picture (for it was of such worth it was permanently capitalized in her head), elegantly framed, came safely to hand soon after Mr. Hammer’s return from London. Being hung over the mantelpiece in the common sitting-room, when he visited next he looked at it thoroughly, sighing out sentences of admiration just as he ought. As for Virginia’s feelings, Antonia could visibly see them forming into a strong and steady attachment as her youth and timidity allowed. Before long, Antonia was thoroughly satisfied of Mr. Rhodes erosion from Virginia’s mind, and replaced with a contrast of Mr. Hammer.

Her views of improving her friend’s mind by reading and conversation that was useful, had never led yet to more than a few chapters scattered here or there, not to Virginia’s attempts. It was Antonia who was far more easily distracted, much more pleasant to allow her imagination range and work so fluidly with Virginia’s own, than be constrained by novels Antonia had read thrice over.

It is upon one of these conversations that Virginia pauses, gazes at Antonia awhile in a way that suggests to Antonia she is about to ask a question she will not like.

“I wonder, Miss Stark, that you are not married. For you are so charming, even if you are as stubborn as a mule.” Virginia grins as Antonia huffs a laugh in response.
“My being charming, is not quite enough to entice me to marry; I must find other people – or rather one person charming. I assure you, I have no intention of marrying at all. Someone very superior would have to come along. And even then I would rather not be tempted.” She squirms as she speaks, ears aflame as though she’s been caught out on a lie. She brushes away the thoughts of golden hair and deft fingers.

“It is so refreshing to hear a woman speak like that.”

“Were I in love, it would be a different thing. But I have never been in love. It is not my way, or nature, and I don’t think I ever will be. And without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a gilded situation as mine. Fortune, employment, consequence, I do not want for any of these. I believe few married women are half as much a mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield. And never could I be held in such high regard, to be thought of so truly and beloved and important in any person’s eyes as I am my mothers.” Merely a few weeks ago, these words would have been true, but for whatever reason they now seemed hollow on Antonia’s lips. She doesn’t pause too long to study that, banishing such odd thoughts from her brain.

Making their way back from Mrs. May’s to Hartfield, Virginia in tow, it was then that they proceeded in a heated discussion over Goethe’s book the Sorrows of Young Werther. It was an unfair discussion, really, as Antonia nearly had that novel memorized whilst Virginia had only been introduced to it in the recent months.

“How sad,” Virginia muses toward the end of their conversation, “If you were to go through your life, without a period where you thought Werther was written exclusively for you, and your heartache.” She says such words quietly, with misery apparent on her face. Antonia feels uncomfortable in the face of such a confession, partly due to admittedly never experiencing love so powerful, but also that she feels partly to blame.

Nevertheless, she brushes such thoughts aside, as the bend in the lane ahead of them presents them with a familiar face, “Ah, Virginia, here comes a very sudden trial of our stability in good thoughts. Well, I hope it may be allowed that if compassion to those written of in the novel has produced exertion and relief to us, then it has done as a novel should. If we feel wretched, then the novel has proved its worth.”

Virginia could only answer, “Oh dear yes.” Before the gentleman joined them. He spoke of presently making his way to Mrs. May’s, but now that they had made attendance themselves, he would now defer their visit, and accompany them home.

‘To fall in with each other on an errand as this,’ Thought Antonia, ‘this will bring a great increase of love on each side, perhaps even a declaration. God’s – what I wish to not be here and allow the flames of love to kindle and grow.’

Anxious to separate herself from them as soon as she could, she soon sought possession of a narrow footpath, raised on one side of the lane, leaving them to the main road. But she had not been there two minutes in quiet contemplation to herself before she found Virginia attempting to follow her, questioning look upon her brow, and that in short they would both be soon after her. As such, she quickly dropped to the ground, feigning an alteration in her boot was required, begging them to have the goodness to walk on, promising she’d follow in good time.

After taking as long as she could, drawing out the moment as far as it would stretch, she set out once more, slowly ambling forth as casual as she could make it. She gained on them, however,
involuntarily; even the slowest pace she could make was still a fair sight faster than theirs, cursing her long coltish legs, overviewing their fairly exuberant conversation. Mr. Hammer was speaking with animation, Virginia listening with a very pleased attention, and Antonia was beginning to think on how she might draw back a little more when they both looked around, and she was obliged to join them.

Mr. Hammer was still talking, and Antonia was disappointed when she found he was only giving his fair companion an account of yesterday’s party at his friend Cole’s. Not only seemingly innocent, but also a fairly tedious subject.

‘For sure, this would have soon led to something far more invigorating,’ she told herself, ‘If I could have only kept longer away!’

Mr. Hammer must now be left to himself. It was no longer within Antonia’s power to superintend or quicken his thoughts or actions. The coming of her second family, of Mr. and Mrs. Banner, was so very near at hand, that first in anticipation, then reality, it became her prime motivation. During their ten stay at Hartfield it could not be expected that anything beyond occasional assistance where fortuitous could be afforded.

Mr. and Mrs. Banner, upon marrying, had quickly moved to London, for Mr. Banner’s line of work. A doctor by trade, Bruce Banner was a tall, gentlemen-like man not only highly intelligent, but also in the line of work that could afford to pay him well for his thoughts. Sometimes out of humour, he was not an ill-tempered man; but his temper was not his great perfection. He could sometimes act ungracious, or say a severe thing. As such, Elizabeth Banner paired him so perfectly it seemed faultless.

Elizabeth Banner was a pretty, elegant little woman of gentle and quiet manners, that also hid a layer of steel beneath. When first courting, Antonia had worried incessantly that Bruce’s ill-humour would swallow her whole, but upon watching the two interact, she realized she was worrying over nothing. Mr. Banner was nothing but utterly respectful, so irrevocably in love he was. Captain. Rogers used to joke that Elizabeth could have told Bruce the sky was green and he’d have nodded and agreed for all the world to see. And not only did she reveal his adoration, but also his capacity to learn. They truly were ideally suited, and each complimented the other so perfectly it was enough to make Antonia heartsick.

She had wanted them to stay close with all her heart. However, Highbury, whilst a large town, was still that – a town – and had not afforded Mr. Banner the luxury of options other than doctor of the people. And, well, Bruce Banner had always wanted, and deserved, more than that. More than running noses and winter chills. As such, they had not visited Hartfield since long before the season began, and Mrs. Stark, no matter how much pleading, could not be induced to make so far as London to visit.

She thought much of the perils of the journey for her visitors, as well as the fatigues of her own horses and coachman who were to bring some of the party the last half of the way; but her alarms were needless and the sixteen miles were easily accomplished. Before long Mr. and Mrs. Banner and their newborn – the whole reason for the trip in actuality – reached Hartfield in safety. Once the usual welcomes were dispersed of, Mrs. Stark quickly had the newborn safe in the cradle of her arms, smile beatific across her cheeks, and to all the world it would seem nothing else mattered. Jarvis had the fire roaring, and soon it was all that accompanied the chatter and excitement of the party, safely ensconced in Hartfield’s wonder.
“Bruce, London looks good on you.” Maria voiced exactly what Antonia was thinking. Bruce wore not only London, but marriage, well. He’d always carried a slightly harried look, as though everything was all too much at once, but it had weathered into contentment and pride, in particular gazing upon his wife and babe. “But pale. How I wish you had come here in autumn, rather than the seaside.”

“Elizabeth adores adventure, and I am afraid I am nothing in the face of my wife’s excitement.” Bruce smiled, an entire one that lit his whole face, painting every inch of love on it for the world to see, and Antonia’s chest squeezed with the sight of it. Suddenly she felt herself longing for someone who felt the same way about her. Why she was suddenly some lovelorn fool she had no idea.

Jarvis entered the room presently, “A Captain. Rogers for you, Mrs. Stark.” And with a swift bow, the object of these bizarre thoughts percolating in Antonia’s brain came presently into the room. Antonia was helpless to do much more than stare, even as she kicked herself internally from doing such an obvious thing.

“No,” Maria said with gratitude.

“I had to make sure Bruce would not rub in his happily contented self too much without a check here or there, Maria.” Steven grinned, eyes scanning the room. They skated across Antonia’s own, barely connecting, before settling on Bruce and smiling. The slight, however small, felt like a dagger between the ribs, and Antonia had to hold back a gasp.

So, she mused, they were not to talk of their last meeting.

Or indeed, as the night wore on, it seemed they were not to talk at all. No matter which way the conversation turned, Steven would not engage Antonia in anything more than the most basic of pleasantries, such as passing the salt at dinner or asking how much ham she required when carving the plate. The lack of chatter between the two rankled Antonia, and according to the questioning glances spared to her from her mother, the quiet did not go unnoticed. A party without the two of them bickering and joking was fairly awkward, no matter how they attempted to encourage chatter amongst the others. She had hoped they might now become friends again. She thought it was time to make up. She had certainly had not been in the wrong, and he would never own that he had.

Scheming was necessary to facilitate friendship once more. Concession must be out of the question, but it was time to appear to forget that they had ever quarreled; she had hoped it might not rather assist the restoration of friendship, that when he came into the room after supper, she was alone holding the Banner’s baby, a young girl of the name Harriet. It did assist; for though he began with grave looks and short questions, his gaze soon burned with fierce affection, and he was soon led on to talk of them all in the usual way, and to take the child out of his arms with perfect amity. Antonia could feel their friendship shrouding her slowly once more; and the conviction giving her at first great satisfaction, then a little confidence, she could not help herself saying, as he was admiring the baby.

“How good it is that we think alike about our godchildren. As to men and women, our opinions are sometimes very different; but with regard to these children, I observe we never disagree.”

“If you were as much guided by nature in your estimate of men and woman, and as little under the power of fancy and whim in your dealings with them, as you are where these children are concerned, we might always think alike.”

“To be sure – our discordancies must always arise from my being in the wrong.” Antonia said, sarcasm ever slightly colouring her tone.
“Yes.” Said he – smile affixed to his face that gave Antonia so much pleasure she felt heady on it – “and for good reason. I was six years old when you were born.”

“Oh, a material difference if difference at all. No doubt you were much my superior in judgement, at all of six years old. Does not the lapse of twenty one years now bring our understandings a good deal nearer.”

“Yes, with nearer being the key phrase.” He replied, before biting his lip, pausing a moment, and ploughing on, “But come, my dear Antonia, let us be friends again, and say no more about it. I will give you one apology, for my behaviour toward the end of our quarrel. It was foolish and impulsive and I do hope I have not overstepped my mark.”

The words were rushed, by the end Antonia’s face aflame as she remembered exactly what Steven was referring to, “Ah. Please.” She waved her free hand quickly, stopping his apology dead, “Please, let’s think nothing more on it.”

“Indeed.” He spoke gravely, eyes dark with something Antonia could not quite place, “We are old friends. I apologise for jeopardising that.” And that, it seems, is to be that, as he leans forward to the babe in his arms, “Tell your godmother, little Harriet, that she ought to set you a better example than to be renewing old grievances, and if that she were not wrong before now, she probably is.”

“That’s true,” she cried – “so true. Little Harriet, grow up a better woman than your aunt. Be infinitely cleverer and not half so conceited.” Her voice drops an octave, “I cannot claim to be sorry that Virginia took my advice. I only want to know that Mr. Rhodes is not so very, very bitterly disappointed.”

“I cannot satisfy you there, I have yet to see a man more so.” Was Steven’s abrupt answer. And so that is where they left it, this ill-fought truce betwixt them. Steven returned his gaze to young Harriet, and as such Antonia was free now to stare unabashed, bask in his silhouette, and commit the lines of his face to memory as she was used to, and all was right again in Antonia’s world.

There could hardly be a happier creature in the world than Mrs. Bruce Banner, in this short visit to Hartfield, going about every morning amongst her old acquaintances with her child in tow, and talking over what she had done every evening with Antonia and Maria, two very close friends falling just shy of blood relative in affection. She had nothing to wish for otherwise, other than that the days did not pass so swiftly.

In general, their evenings were far less engaged with friends than their morning, but there was one dinner engagement they could not hope to decline.

Randall’s was home to one Mr. and Mrs. Marvel. A couple of exceptionable character, easy fortune, and incredible estate. Maria got on well with the pair, and as such an open invite always wormed its way to them every Christmastime. It was a busy party, though invites were still highly sought after. As such, the inclusion of Virginia on the list was one Antonia worked hard to achieve, but was glad to see it come to fruition. Perhaps, in an evening of merriment and slightly sped up through inebriety, there would be a love confession from a certain vicar? Antonia could only hope fervently for such.

The evening before this great event (for it was a very great event that Mrs. Stark should dine out, in particular on the 24th of December, when normally she was the hostess, never the guest) had been spent by Virginia at Hartfield, and she had gone home so much indisposed with a cold, but for her own earnest wish of being nursed by Mrs. May, Antonia could not have allowed her to leave the
Antonia called on her the next day to find her doom already signed with regard to Randalls. She was exceptionally feverish, skin alight with heat and sweat, a bad throat causing her to croak every assurance that she’d be better soon. Antonia sat with her as long as she could afford, attempting to raise her spirits by insisting on how much Mr. Hammer would be depressed when he knew her state. Upon leaving, she impressed on her how awful the evening would be, how devastated Mr. Hammer would be on hearing she would not be making the evening, and how much they would all miss her.

She had not advanced many yards from Mrs. May’s door, when she was met by the man of the hour – Mr. Hammer himself, evidently coming towards Mrs. May’s, intent on inquiring as to the illness of Virginia, and carry some report on her state to Hartfield. Shortly after they were stumbled upon by Mr. Banner, returning from his daily visit to Donwell with a healthy and glowing face. They joined company and proceeded together. Antonia was just explaining the nature of her friend’s illness, and how she was confined to bed with a cold, a great deal of heat shrouding her and causing a throat very much inflamed. Something, apparently, Virginia had suffered with often.

Mr. Hammer looked suitably alarmed, though before long he enquired after their attendance at Randalls, “I assume you will be in attendance tomorrow?”

“Yes!” – said she, “Even Mrs. Stark has been persuaded to it. But… you will not want to go, Mr. Hammer, with Virginia so very ill?”

“I am very much looking forward to it!” Mr. Hammer spoke so enthusiastic Antonia was near bowled over in alarm, “though being a poor bachelor, I, that is well – I cannot afford a carriage, and it should snow…” Mr. Hammer lets the sentence hang awkwardly between the trio for a moment, and Mr. Banner’s manners skip into the fray, much to Antonia’s annoyance.

“Oh, we are taking two carriages, for safety. Come with us in ours, if you please.”

“Well that is very generous of you!” Mr. Hammer crows, smile huge and full of teeth.

Soon afterwards Mr. Hammer quitted them, and she could not but do him the justice of feeling that there was a great deal of sentiment in his manner of naming Virginia at parting; in the tone of his voice while assuring that he should call at Mrs. May’s for news of their friend, and he smiled himself off in a way that left the balance of approbation much in his favour.

After a few minutes of entire silence between them, Bruce Banner began with –

“I never in my life saw a man more intent on being agreeable than Mr. Hammer. With men he can be rational and unaffected, but when he has ladies to please, every feature works.”

“Mr. Hammer’s manners are not perfect,” Antonia acknowledges, “But when there is a wish to please, one ought to overlook, and one does overlook a great deal. There is such a perfect good temper and good will in Mr. Hammer as one cannot but value.”

“Yes,” said Bruce, slowly, with some slyness, “He seems to have a great deal of good-will towards you. Why, I felt I had no choice but to offer use of the carriage to him, your manner was so encouraging.”

“Me!” she replied with a smile of astonishment, “What a bizarre thing to say. Are you imagining me to be Mr. Hammer’s object?”

“I do not say it is so; but you do well to consider whether it is so or not, and to regulate your behavior accordingly. I think your manners to him encouraging. I speak as a friend, Antonia. You
had better look about you, and ascertain what you do, and what you mean to do.

“I thank you for your concern; but I assure you that you are quite mistaken. Mr. Hammer and I are very good friends and nothing more,” she walked on, amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from partial knowledge, not well pleased with her friend for imagining her blind and ignorant, and in need of counsel. He spoke no more, and Antonia relegated his observations to obscurity, ignoring the gut feeling that had her wondering whether he was right.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Antonia, you really don't know your own heart at all.

Bruce and Betty's daughter is named Harriet as a nod to the original, far more vacuous, Harriet of the novel.

The novel Virginia and Antonia briefly discuss is The Sorrows of Young Werther by Johann Goethe, a semi-autobiographical novel written as a selection of letters of a man so heartsick it spurred the Romantic movement of the late 1780s, and made Goethe a literature celebrity of his day. Worth reading, or at least having a foray into should you have time or feel the need!
Mrs. Stark was so set on the visit to Randall’s that despite the increasing coldness, she would not shirk it, and set forward the next evening with punctuality not seen before in her. Elizabeth set forth with Maria in the first carriage, the cold severe but the duo too well wrapped up to feel it. By the time the second carriage was in motion a few flakes of snow were finding their way down, and Antonia stared out the carriage window to find herself glad indeed that she had furs and rugs across her to imbue her with warmth.

Bruce and her made light work of the trip in the second carriage, idle chatter and jests accompanying the drive so much so that before long they were arrived at the vicarage. The carriage turned, the step was let down, and Mr. Hammer, spruce and smiling, was with them instantly. He was all obligation and cheerfulness. So very cheerful, that Antonia began to think he must have received a different account of Virginia that what had reached her.

“What an excellent idea!” he chirped, “Sheepskin to cover the seats in carriages in winter – impossible to feel cold with such precautions! How wonderfully cozy we all are.” He accompanied this with a shuffle, moving toward Antonia with a smile. Bruce caught Antonia’s eyes and smirked, shrugging ever so slightly much to her annoyance.

“I enquired as to Virginia’s health, to be told she’s much worse.” Antonia intoned, stressing every word in hopes the mention of his beloved would awaken him from the excitement he was infused with.

Her words seemed to have gone remiss, as Mr. Hammer stared out the windows before turning and looking at Antonia. He was so close Antonia could see the line of sweat beading his fat upper lip as it curled, “I don’t know when I have ever looked forward to an evening more. The modern days have indeed rendered carriages perfectly complete. One is so guarded from the weather, that not a breath of air can find its way without permittance. Weather becomes absolutely of no consequence – despite the snow that seems to be starting outside.”

“Yes,” said Bruce Banner, short, “and I think we shall have a good deal of it.”

“Christmas weather.” Observed Mr. Hammer, not to be swayed by Banner’s impolite reply, “Quite seasonable, and at least we are fortunate enough that it did not begin yesterday and impede today’s party. I was once snowed up at a friend’s house once for a week and nothing could have been more pleasant.”

Antonia shook her head firmly as Bruce attempted to smother an incredulous look, and spoke coolly, “I cannot say I wish to be snowed up a week at Randalls with a newborn child back at Hartfield and work that awaits me back in London.”

Any other time, Antonia may have watched the exchange with amusement, but she was far too much astonished by Mr. Hammer’s spirits, Virginia forgotten in the expectation of a pleasant party.

“I wish you would learn to arrive at a dinner party in the correct manner.” Antonia hissed as she stepped out the carriage.
Steven Rogers was eccentric, for the youth of him. Despite having more than enough finance to hold his own horse and carriage, he refused to do so. Horse in hand, his cheeks were flush, hair askew and mud splattered the top of his boots. He was rumpled, not even close to the picture of a put together gentlemen.

Antonia thought he looked gorgeous like this, and it caused a vicious bite to her tongue, shaping her words to be acidic, “Why couldn’t you come in a coach?”

“Because I don’t need to. I was on the point of walking, but Winston here wanted an outing. Didn’t you, old fellow?” he speaks to the horse now, eyes roaming over the animal’s face.

“A gentleman should arrive in a horse and carriage. If the Coles, who are traders, can keep a coach, then the master of Donwell Abbey should be more than equal to it. A gentleman –“

“This gentleman,” Steven interrupts, “Likes to visit a place as and when he pleases, as well as leave it when he wishes without sending for horses a day in advance before he goes forth into the cold air. He likes to be able to do as he pleases, without having to pander or cause issues to those who work for him by asking them to rush their arrival, or departure.”

“I am ashamed to arrive with you!” she whispers now, for Mr. Hammer is hovering not too far away.

“Oh but you don’t arrive with me.” Steven’s eyes sparkle with humour, “Mr. Hammer is waiting to attend to you.”

Antonia looks past him to where Mr. Hammer stands, smiling awkwardly, waiting.

“Steven, please, if you like me even a bit you will hand your horse off to one of my groomsmen and help me inside.” Antonia speaks fast, pushing the words out and ignoring how her face flames at the request. She feels stupid, but she knows she cannot give any quarter to Mr. Hammer’s bizarre behavior this evening. She isn’t sure what has given him such airs this evening, but knows in her heart it cannot be encouraged, in case he thinks he can set himself at a higher prize than her beloved Virginia.

“Do you truly require me?” Steven asks, serious now, and upon Antonia nodding he moves quick. She adores him for this, for this serious side he can possess where required, for his dependability. Before long he has handed his horse over to one of her groomsmen with a few muttered instructions before stepping back toward her. “Mr. Hammer, please make your appearance at the door, Antonia and I have some catching up to do.” His tone brooks no argument, and Mr. Hammer sets his jaw in an grimace most unpleasant before nodding and sharply turning for the house.

“Have you got yourself into yet more trouble, my dear Antonia?” Steven asks, and Antonia can’t help the rush of giddy heat at being named so affectionately by the Captain.

“Not at all – I just feel he is odd spirits this evening and would do best to stay out of his way where possible. Bruce believes him in love with me. Me! – what an idea!”

Steven takes her hand, wrapping it up around his arm, before staring at her so seriously she feels she should reach forward and tidy the errant hairs framing her face, “I can very well imagine.” Voice husky.

Antonia leaves that unanswered, for she is unsure of what she would even say. They speak no more, comfortable in each other’s silence, and make for Randall’s.
Some change of countenance was necessary for both of them as they walked into Mrs. Marvel’s
drawing room – Antonia must calm her racing heart and flushed face, Steven Rogers must disperse
his odd gazes and serious tone. Antonia must smile less, and Captain. Rogers more, to fit them for
the place. Antonia could not help the smile as nature prompted, show herself just as happy as she
was for it was a true enjoyment to be with the Marvels. Mr. Marvel was a great favourite, and there
was not a creature in the world to whom she spoke with such unreserved, as to his wife.

Mrs. Marvel was perhaps one of Highbury’s true, unadulterated beauties, almost exotic in her
countenance. Not only that, but marvelously intelligent, she did not wait long before marrying. In
fact, Antonia would love to hate her, but she could not, when the woman was so utterly charming.
Many a day had been spent in Mrs. Marvel’s attentions, the woman fifteen years her senior, making
it feel like the gentle instruction of an aunt. The very sight of Mrs. Marvel, her smile, her voice, was
grateful to Antonia, and she determined to think as little as possible of Mr. Hammer’s oddities, or of
anything else unpleasant, and enjoy all that was enjoyable to the utmost.

The misfortune of Virginia’s cold had been pretty thoroughly gone through before her arrival. Mrs.
Stark had been safely seated long enough to give the history of it, as well as the history of his own
and Elizabeth’s arrival, and Antonia to follow, when the others appeared. Mrs. Marvel, almost
wholly engrossed by her attentions to her, was able to turn away and welcome her dear Antonia.

Antonia’s project of forgetting Mr. Hammer for a while made her rather to sorry to find, when they
had taken all their places, that he was close to her. She could not understand his insensibility towards
Virginia, especially since he not only sat by her, but was continually intruding on her notice, and
addressing her on every possible occasion. Instead of being able to forget him, his behavior was such
that Bruce’s earlier words took soil and rooted in her brain.

Can it be possible for this man to be beginning to transfer his affections from Virginia to me?

Steven sat down not long after, making it his personal ambition to gain a seat close to Antonia’s side.
His close quarters made Antonia smile, and caused Mr. Hammer’s own to slide off his face a
moment, face turned wretched, before the smile was in hand once more.

“Are you warm enough, Miss Stark? Allow me to fetch you a drink.” Mr. Hammer rushes to stand,
and in doing so catches the side of the tablecloth in his hands, nearly upsetting the display the
Marvels have set out.

“Oh, ah, no, no thank you Mr. Hammer, I am quite comfortable for now.” She elbows Steven subtly,
for she can practically feel his stifled laughter. Mr. Hammer continues in this syrup-like fashion;
anxious about her comfort, so delightfully interested in her mother, excitable about Mrs. Marvel, and
even crowing about Antonia’s own drawings with so much zeal yet so little knowledge it seemed so
terribly intimate that she nearly forgot her good manners on several occasions. For her own sake, and
Virginia’s, she could not be rude in hopes fortune would turn out right. Yet how it pained her to be
civil when news was stirring amongst the others, yet in the height of Mr. Hammer’s nonsense she
could not understand it! She heard enough to know that Mr. Marvel was giving some information
about his nephew; she heard the words “my nephew” and “Clint” repeated several times over, yet
before she could quiet the nonsensical Mr. Hammer, the subject was so completely past that any
reviving question from her would be awkward.

Now, it so happened that despite Antonia’s resolution of never marrying, there had always been
something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Clint Barton, which always interested her. She had
frequently thought that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and
condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, to almost belong to her. And she
knew that others thought it a good match, if for how much the very being of Clint Barton was
thrown in her face. She had a great curiosity to meet him, a decided intention to find him pleasant and of being liked by him to a certain degree, and a sort of pleasure in being coupled by friends’ imaginations. Perhaps of recent, the idea of him had perhaps interested her less, but she thought that perhaps only due how hard she had been working on her matchmaking.

With such thoughts, Mr. Hammer’s civilities were woefully unreciprocated, and ridiculously ill-timed; but she remained polite, while feeling very cross – and thinking that for sure Mrs. Marvel would bring forward the same information again at some point during the visit. And she was not wrong, when she finally was happily released from Mr. Hammer, and seated by Mr. Marvel at dinner, he made use of the very first interval in the cares of hospitality, to say to her.

“We want only two more to be the right number. I should like to see two more here at Randall’s – your lovely friend, Miss Potts; and my nephew – and then we are complete. I don’t believe you heard me telling the others in the drawing room that we are expecting Clint. I had a letter from him this morning and we are to expect him within the fortnight.”

Antonia was giddy with this news, and assented to his proposition of Mr. Clint Barton and Miss Potts making their party perfectly complete.

“He has been wanting to come to us,” continued Mr. Marvel, “ever since September; every letter has been full of it, but he is attached to those he must be pleased, and who seem to only be pleased by too many sacrifices. But he is made up, he will be here about the second week in January. He even set off earlier this week, saddled up and left to make a mad dash for Highbury, before news caught up with him of his grandmother falling ill, and so he had to turn back.”

“How good for you! And Mrs. Marvel is so anxious to be acquainted with him, that she must be as happy as yourself.” Antonia continued – “And do not worry so on my account. I have waited eagerly to meet him for nearly 20 years, a few more weeks will not be so difficult to bear.” She says this to see the grin it puts on Mr. and Mrs. Marvel’s faces, and she does not do wrong. She misses, however, the long sigh and grimace of Steven across the table. “I think to set off recklessly, impulsively even, to risk disobeying his grandmother in order to do a duty to his very close uncle shows a fineness of spirit in Mr. Barton. A keenness of feeling even, a most romantic nature, and a thoroughly good heart.”

“ Hmm.” Steven nods across the table, “It is the horse I feel sorry for.”

A laugh rallies around the table, “For my part it only makes my anticipation even stronger.” Antonia responds, laying it on as thick as she can, “Any woman could not resist such heroic and gentlemanly impulses.”

“I thought gentlemen rode in carriages?” Steven bites back, tone devoid of humour, and Antonia looks at him questioningly. She thought they had buried whatever grievances they had. She raises her eyebrows at him, but before he can follow himself up, a raised cough of attention causes her eyes to skitter across and land on Mr. Hammer, who smiles and raises his glass at her in toast. She smiles, awkwardly, and raises her own, hiding her grimace behind it.

The chatter in the room continues, enough for Mr. Marvel to lower his voice beside her, “We hope there will not be another put-off. Between us, I hope he will have no reason to stay away, His grandmother is – she is an odd woman! – But I never allow myself to speak ill of her, on Clint’s account, as I believe her very fond of him. I used to think she was not capable of being fond of anybody, except herself; but she has always been kind to him, if not to me. And it is compliment to himself that he should excite such affection in her, as she has no more heart than a stone to people in general.” His eyes grow dark, “And a devil of a temper.”
Antonia enjoyed this subject, so well, in fact, that she began upon it once more to Mrs. Marvel, soon after they move into the drawing room. “The first meeting must be rather alarming, though how exciting, to meet someone you husband is so fond of.”

Mrs. Marvel agreed, but hastened to add, “I will be glad to meet him, but I cannot depend on this meeting taking place. I am very much afraid it will end in nothing but my love’s disappointment. I dare say he has been telling you of how exactly the matter stands.”

“Yes – it seems to depend upon nothing but the ill-humour of his grandmother, which I imagine to be the most certain thing in the world.”

“She seems to have a sixth sense whenever he gives his attention elsewhere and call his conscience home, that much is true.” Elizabeth adds in agreement, she lowers her tone as the gentleman follow behind, “She keeps him like a dog on a lead.”

“I do hope you are talking of Miss Potts cold. We are all aware of the danger.” Mr. Hammer interjects, placing himself in the middle of Mrs. Marvel and Antonia on the chaise. It causes him to brush up close beside her, and his hand brushes her leg in a way that, if she wasn’t still clinging on to the hope he would be good for Virginia, would have caused Antonia to cause a scene something ferocious. She saw, out of the corner of her eye, Steven grow antsy, and feign a need for fresh air. Oh how she wished she could join him than stay here under Mr. Hammer’s mounting inappropriate affections!

Nevertheless, she swallows her anger and turns hastily to him, “Oh yes, we are all so very concerned. Maybe you wish to leave soon so that you can find out the latest news of her condition?”

Mr. Hammer swallows another mouthful of the wine that has not strayed from his hand all evening, and brushes past her query with no more than a shake of his head, “I hope, Mrs. Marvel, that you – like myself – have been urging Miss Stark not to go within half a mile of May’s when there is a chance of catching infection. Her health is absolutely paramount. So considerate of others, whilst never taking care of herself. Is this fair, Mrs. Stark? Have I not the right to complain?” his tone grows soft, intimate like that of a would-be lover and Antonia coughs awkwardly, ignoring the stares of the room. Though she tried to laugh it off and bring the subject back into its proper course, there was no putting an end to his extreme solicitude about her, vexing her just so. It did appear exactly like the pretence of being in love with her and not Virginia. An inconsistency that – if real – was utterly contemptible and abominable. Assuming himself to have the right of first interest in her; she could only give him a look, a look so fierce she hoped it must restore him to his senses, then left the sofa for the door, as it opened and announced Steven’s presence once more.

Steven always lifts a room upon entering, but this time he does so with such a commanding air it stops the room dead. His broad shoulders fill the doorway, and his gaze lands on Antonia, soft and as warm as the crackling fire of Highbury. “Now I don’t wish to alarm anyone, but the snow has begun to fall, fairly fast, but there is no danger of anyone being marooned here by it.” He speaks only to Antonia now, “I’ve just been down the Highbury road, the snow currently is not above half an inch anywhere. I believe Maria should head home to Highbury, with you and Elizabeth for sure. I can round up the rest and make sure everyone gets home safely.”

“I am ready, if the others are. I believe Bruce and Elizabeth will be glad to get home to Harriet in such weather.” Antonia beams at Steven, so aware of not only her needs, but her families. Maria hates the cold, dreads it, and her health Is not what it once was, a slight chill able to knock her for months.

“Excellent, I shall ring for the coaches. I have – taken the liberty – of bringing an extra coat. You never wrap up warm enough, Antonia.” He hands the proferred item to her, and she takes it
gratefully. It’s true she only brought one extra item with her, a shawl more suited to summer than winter, but she likes the way the red brings out her eyes. Conceited to be sure, but it appears Steven knows her so well to guess her wardrobe.

And secretly, in her own thoughts, that she won’t admit to anyone but herself, she will be thankful to have the comforting scent of Steven Rogers around her.

He stepped forward to the room, telling them he had been out of doors to examine, and could answer for there not being the smallest difficulty in their getting home, having gone beyond the sweep and the snow not more than half an inch deep. “Many places, even, hardly enough to whiten the ground.” He told the rapt group. He had seen the coachmen, and they both agreed with him in there being nothing to apprehend. Nevertheless, the alarm had been raised enough that no matter of appeasing it could be sought until their party was safe at home at Highbury. Thus the bell was rung, and the carriages spoke for.

A few more minutes to bear, and Antonia hoped to see the blasted most troublesome companion deposited in his own house, to get sober and cool.

The carriage came; and Mrs. Stark was carefully attended to her own by Captain. Rogers. They exchanged a few remarks, and Antonia was pleased to see a smile on her mother’s face. Elizabeth stepped in after Maria; Bruce Banner, forgetting that he did not belong to their party, stepped in after his wife very naturally; so that Antonia found, on being escorted to the carriage behind, that she was to be alone with Mr. Hammer.

Steven, entangled in the welfare of his own mount, could do no more than tip his hat at her, wish her a safe journey home, and tell her he would meet her at Hartfield, to check they all arrived safely. He said the last with a pointed stare at Mr. Hammer, a thunderous set of his jaw that gave Antonia comfort, at least she could see he was loathe to leave her. He spoke quick to Thomas, her coachmen, who turned and nodded, before sharply kicking his horse on, and the sight of Steven so in command had Antonia a flutter. Thus the door was shut on Mr. Hammer and her, and they were now to have a tete-a-tete drive. How she wished the roles of Steven and Mr. Hammer were reversed! She would have been thankful for his jokes and smiles on a journey such as this. She wrapped herself further into Steven’s cloak.

Previous to this day, such a journey would not have been awkward but in fact a pleasure, and they could have spent the mile in the carriage speaking of Virginia. But now, she hated every second. He had drunk too much of Mr. Marvel’s good wine, and proceeded to talk nonsense. She immediately prepared a calm conversation about the weather and about the night; but before she could scarcely speak he interrupted her, seized her hand.

“How fortunate we are, that we are gifted with being alone. This makes what I want to say so much easier, for your undivided attention. Miss Stark,” he accompanied this with a sinking of his knee to the centre of the carriage, “make me the happiest man in the world. I adore you! Of course this will not be a surprise. I will die if you refuse me!”

“Mr. Hammer, stop this at once. You have obviously been drinking! Might I even dare remind you of your attachment to Miss Potts.”

Mr. Hammer laughed, pushing himself back to his seat, “I have no idea what you are talking of.”

“I speak of your regard for Miss Potts, this last month, your visits to Hartfield! And now you profess your love to me – what fickleness of character I am astonished! And angry!”

“But! – I have never paid the slightest bit of attention to Miss Potts, except as your friend. For
herself, I could care less if she lived or died.” Antonia gasped at such a confession, “No no no, everything I have done or said these past few weeks is to show my marked adoration for you. I never thought of Miss Potts in the whole course of my existence. If she has fancied otherwise, her own wishes have misled her for who can think of Miss Potts when Miss Stark is near. There is no fickleness of character when I have thought only of you.”

Antonia’s thoughts were whirring, upon hearing this, all unpleasant ones uppermost. She was too completely overpowered by her naïvety to immediately reply: ad two moments of silence being ample encouragement for Mr. Hammer’s state of mind, tried to take her hand again.

“Allow me to interpret this interesting silence. It confesses you have long understood me. Forgive me for being a novice, er, in the ways of love. But I assume you of course modestly refuse me the first time.” He moves forward, as though to kiss her, and she is so horrified she leaps backward, against the sheepskin as though it can save her, and all her brain can shout is Steve.

“No, sir;” she says the second word mockingly, “It suggests no such thing. I am so far from understanding you that I have been in most complete error with respect to your views, till this moment. Nothing could be further from what I want. Your attachment to my friend Virginia and your pursuit of her gave me great pleasure and I wanted nothing but success for you. Am I to believe you never sought Miss Potts – you have never thought seriously of her?”

“Never, madam.” He cried, “Never. Miss Potts is a very good sort of girl; and I am sure to see her happily and respectably settled, someone will look over her circumstance. I wish her well, but I am not, I think, quite so much to lower myself to marry beneath me.” Fury rages in Antonia at his dismissive tone, “No. My hopes were all entirely for you. Led, in part, by the marked encouragement you gave me –“

“You are much mistaken, sir! I only thought of you as a suitor for my friend. I am sorry you are mistaken, but I never gave you any sort of encouragement. I have no thoughts of matrimony at the present.”

Mr. Hammer guffaws, face sweaty and flushed, and Antonia is finally struck with how ugly he is, when he doesn’t have to please someone, “Oh of course, your only thoughts lie with that Captain!”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean!”

“Oh only that when that damaged labourer looks at you with those cow eyes you fall over yourself to offer him the world despite no offer of marriage on the horizon like some common whor-“ the words are smacked from his mouth before he can utter them.

“You would do well, now, Mr. Hammer, to stop before you forget yourself. You should remember you are not only talking of the family of Stark, a family that have looked after and guarded Highbury for generations, but also that of a decorated and highly beloved military Captain. And you, well, you are a vicar, you can be moved to other parishes at the people’s will.” Antonia’s fury will not be bridled now, not at the slight toward Steven, “I will ask you to be silent now, for I can forgive and forget what you were just about to utter should you remain quiet, and banish any vicious thoughts towards the Captain from your head. Otherwise the wrath of my family will come down on it.”

Mr. Hammer is pale now, and in this state of stewing anger (her) and swelling resentment and mortification (him), they had to continue together for a few minutes longer. If there had not been so much anger, and ill words, there would not be so much desperate awkwardness; but their straightforward emotions left no room. Finally they found themselves at the door of his house and he was out before another syllable passed, and she could not find it in her heart to swallow her anger and allow her manners to wish him a good night. He complimented her with such anyway, coldly
and proudly, with a colouring of fear, then finally she was conveyed to Hartfield.

There she was welcomed, with the utmost delight, by her mother, as well as a man who had caused such emotion in her in one night. Her mother departed for bed quickly, safe and sound in the knowledge all her most beloved people were comfortable under one room, but Antonia could not sleep yet. Her mind was still roiling.

Steven stood up as she entered the drawing room, eyes raking over her form and frowning when he noticed her tremble. He stepped forward into her space, and instead of flinching as she did when Mr. Hammer did the same thing, she welcomed it.

“Antonia, dear heart, why do you shake so.” He spoke softly, raising a hand to her shoulder and squeezing it in comfort.

“I – that is – Mr. Hammer.” She found she could not speak more, replaying those words Mr. Hammer had uttered so viciously. Damaged labourer with those cow eyes.

Steven’s gaze sharpened, “What did he do Antonia.” The words are toneless. This is not a question, this is a demand, this is a soldier ready to do battle.

“He. It’s nothing.” She shrugged him off, making for the door up to her rooms.

“Antonia, I thought we were beyond lying.”

“He professed his love to me, not Virginia, then proceeded to make some choice accusations that I felt ill-equipped to do anything with than threaten him with my house, and yours, coincidentally. Oh what have I done.” And with that she deflated, would have sunk to the floor had Steven not caught her and wrapped her in his arms.

“Antonia, you have done nothing to be ashamed of. It is he who should hang his head – abominable, detestable rogue.” His tone was furious, but the anger comforted Antonia, let her bask in it as someone else she respected so much could be angry on her behalf, “Did he touch you, Antonia. Tell me now for I will call on my horse at once and demand we duel at dawn if he did.”

“Oh Steven! Of course he did not touch me, I would not allow it.” Finally Antonia feels a smile tremble across my face, “Fancy that, I never thought I would see the day a man would offer to duel for me.”

“I would do that, and a great deal more, for your honour.” Steven’s voice is raw with emotion, and she will keep what Mr Hammer said a secret no matter what. For she will never highlight to anyone how Steven looks at her, for worry that he will stop doing it, “I am just glad you are safe, for whilst never was there any doubt in my mind that you can and could handle yourself, I must admit relief that you are safe from such misplaced idiocy, and will call on him anyway to relay my displeasure.”

Antonia moves to protest, “No. No this you will allow me, lest we tell Maria and unleash her untold wrath on the man.”

Antonia barks a laugh at this image, for a wrathful Maria is one to be feared of. Steven grins, beatific across his face. He is still holding her close to his heart; but she does not move to correct him, neither does he pull away, and instead they sway there a moment or two, allowing the quiet to settle around them gently.

Chapter End Notes
Another chapter the night after the last? Truly, I don't know why my muse has struck me so, but I'm not going to ignore it.

I There will be more times this strays from canon Emma, because as I write it these two write themselves.
Of Excuses and Empathy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of course, Antonia could not stew for long. But she could definitely be miserable for longer – what an awful business! It destroyed everything she had wished for – each blasted part of it pain and humiliation. And most of all, god, the pain for Virginia. She would have gladly suffered all the pain and humiliation alone, to spare the effects of her blunder on anyone but herself. If she hadn’t persuaded Virginia into liking the man, she could have borne anything. He could have doubled his efforts towards me, confessed devotion in public for everyone to see, should it have been solely confined to herself.

She couldn’t believe the level she had been deceived - that he had never thought seriously of Virginia. No matter how she looked back she couldn’t understand, aside the fact she had taken the idea upon herself and bent everything around her to it. His visits, his eagerness about the picture, crossing paths all those times in the village. All of it – for her. Why she was as thick headed as him.

Certainly, she had thought his manners unnecessarily full of syrup and gallantry. There was being a gentleman, and then there was a façade that went no further than the surface. She had given him the benefit of the doubt, and had assumed that it was merely proof that he had not always lived in the best society, that true elegance was sometimes wanting.

She was indebted to Captain Rogers (she tried and failed to think of him without blushing), and to Bruce. There was no denying the pair were more smart to this than she was. She remembered what Steven had once said to her about Mr. Hammer, the caution he had given of how Mr. Hammer would never marry indiscreetly, but she didn’t think either believed him of reaching as far as he had tried! It was dreadfully mortifying; but Mr. Hammer was proving to be, in many respects, the very reverse of what she had thought him; assuming, facetious, conceited and so very full of his own claims with little regard to others.

Antonia was clever, and she thought nothing of his attachment, merely insulted by his hopes. He merely wanted to marry well, and had the arrogance to raise his eyes to her and pretend to be in love. She knew there was nothing in his disappointment – no real affection either in his language or manners. She was not to trouble herself to pity him – he only wanted to enrich himself; and if Miss Stark of Hartfield, an heiress of thousands and the sprawling land of Highbury, was not as easily obtained as he hoped, he would try for another.

And the way he spoke once he knew the tables were turned! The filth that began to pour from his mouth! It didn’t bear speaking of. Even thinking of it turned her stomach. She couldn’t tell Steven, not of exactly what he had said. She couldn’t risk his friendship and she couldn’t risk the conversation that it would probably warrant. She wouldn’t.

The Starks had been settled for several generations at Hartfield, a branch of a very ancient family – and in comparison the Hammers were of no consequence. Hartfield was the lifeblood of Highbury, not only keeping the majority in employment, but lending its sprawling land to tenants. In fact, the only estate that rivalled them was Donwell. And, well, that belonged to Captain Rogers, left to him by his father. He had not wanted for it, but responsibility was a heavy burden, and when it was either accept the mantle that Donwell carried or leave it in the wind, there was only one choice. And so the two estates reached forwards together into the heart of England and carved their mark.

In comparison the Hammers were a little more than an inkblot across a canvas. Irrelevant, and one
that could easily be brushed over if given the right motivation. The Starks had long held a high place in the consideration of the neighborhood which Mr. Hammer had first entered not two years ago; where he had attempted to make his way as he could without any alliances or anything to recommend him other than his situation and civility. And to look above so highly to think her in love with him! She would admit that her own behavior had been so complacent and obliging, full of courtesy and attention. If she misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest blinding him, should have mistaken hers.

Yes indeed, on self-reflection she could agree, the worst error lay at her door. It was inherently foolish and wrong to take such active joy and such a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far and assuming too much. She had talked a dear friend into being very much attached to a man who she may never have thought of with hope, if not for Antonia’s thorough assurances of his attachment. She still firmly believed she was right in dissuading Rhodes’ attention, she would not fault herself there, but she got over-excited and under cautious with her sticky attempts to match make from there.

She could admit, away from a place that Steve would crow in victory at such admission, that he had indeed been right on her matchmaking efforts.

Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Banner were not detained long at Hartfield. The weather soon improved enough for those to move who must move; and Maria Stark having, as usual, attempted to persuade Elizabeth to stay with all her children, being obliged to see them off.

The evening of the very same day brought a letter from Mr. Hammer to Mrs. Stark. A long and sprawling note that was perfectly civil to say, with Mr. Hammer’s best compliments, that he was “proposing to leave Highbury the very following morning on his way to Bath”. His compliments and favour of Mrs. Stark did not go unnoticed throughout the letter, and Antonia was too thankful of his disappearance to care that her own name had been omitted throughout the letter. Indeed, there was not a whisper of recognition or askance after her throughout the note. Such a striking turnabout did not escape the sharpness of Maria Stark, who sent a pointed gaze in her daughter’s direction.

“And this, I suppose,” she starts, waving the letter around so that the wax seal glinted off the light of the roaring fire, “will have nothing to do with how Steve appeared this morning to me, hair askew and coat flying out behind him like some Regency hero.”

“I have no idea what you could possibly mean, mother.” Antonia replies, the picture of serenity. It is difficult for her to hold for long, and a smile trembles at the corner of her mouth. Though she had not been aware of Steven’s visit this morning, she’s thankful for it. A picture glances across her vision of Steve, windswept and wonderful, and her cheeks fill with red blood in response. She surreptitiously sits on her hands to stop them rushing to calm her heated face.

“You could never fool me with much success Antonia.” Maria just smiles, a benevolent one that hides a multitude of overindulgence Antonia has been lucky to be at the receiving end of all her life. “But if it required a visit from Steven I cannot imagine it to be for nothing, so I suppose I am glad my daughter has such a fierce protector and leave it there.”

Antonia nods, face fully aflame now. She is resolved more than ever to no longer keep Pepper in the dark. She should be fully recovered now from her cold, and it was only fair that she should have as much time as possible for getting the better of her other complaint before Mr. Hammer’s return. An uncomfortable penance of communication, she was warranted, and Antonia would bear such a grievance gladly for her idiocy.

She went to Mrs. May’s accordingly the next day, to undergo the fault of her sins. And oh, what a
The confession completely unmanned her, renewing her shame, and the sight of Pepper crying so prettily made her want to hit her head against the nearest hard surface repeatedly.

Pepper, for her grace, bore the admittance so very well. She refused to blame Antonia, and dismissed any moment Antonia tried to admit her shame.

“I should not have thought myself so high above my station.” She muses, later, and it is all Antonia can do to not leap across to her friend and shut her mouth with her hands.

“No, Pepper, dear heart. The fault lies with me. I thought Mr. Hammer worthy of love, but instead he’s a rogue.” The words are reminiscent of Steven’s, and Antonia’s voice catches furiously on the curse. Pepper’s tears fall abundantly as Antonia speaks, only furthering Antonia’s belief that Pepper was truly the superior creature of the two. Incensed now at the sadness she had bestowed on her friend, she could no more than swear to herself that she would not allow this state to linger around her friend for long.

Time must be allowed to extricate Pepper’s feelings so thoroughly from Mr. Hammer. She would have to allow a small mark of empathy towards Pepper for her attachment to Mr. Hammer, no small feat considering how horrifically his true colors had marked her attitude toward him. However, such a progress may be made, that in Mr. Hammer’s return they both may be allowed to meet again in the common routine of acquaintance. Both without Pepper’s sentiments being raised again, and without Antonia (for all her fiery storm) betraying her own and calling him out in a public setting.

Well, Antonia, a voice so like Steve’s rang in her head, you have been wont for drama.

Mr. Clint Barton did not come. When the time proposed drew near, Mrs. Marvel’s fears were justified in the arrival of a letter of excuse. For the present, he could not be spared, and his letter spoke at length of his “great mortification and regret”.

Mr. Marvel was exceedingly disappointed – much more so than the remarkably sanguine Mrs. Marvel. Though the disappointment does not last long, as hope always seems to conquer it, and before long they are in agreement that Clint’s arrival in a few months would be a much better time of year for his attendance. How clever he was to be rearranging to better weather, when he could surely stay far longer.

Such feelings rapidly restored Mr. Marvel’s comfort, while Mrs. Marvel was more quiet in her appraisal. She could only see how her husband suffered so when his charge wasn’t near, and how she bore the suffering of him on herself.

Antonia was not really in a state of spirits to care about Clint Barton’s arrival, except the disappointment it brought to Randalls. The acquaintance at the time held no charm for her at all. She needed to be out of temptation, for a while, until she could be assured that Pepper’s heart was mended.

However, she would be lying if it did not intrigue her. She was a curious creature after all. She announced as much to Captain. Rogers, prodding as much as necessary (and perhaps exaggerated a
little more) at the conduct of the Bartons, in keeping him away. And naturally, because it was a day
ending in y, ended directly in disagreement with Captain. Rogers.

“The Bartons are probably at fault,” said Captain Rogers, coolly; “But I dare say he probably would
not come even if the door was open to him.”

“What an inference! He wishes exceedingly to come, his letters speak at length of his desire; but his
uncle and aunt will not spare him.”

“I cannot believe that he has not the power of coming, if he made a point of it. A young man,
brought up by those who are proud, luxurious and selfish, is likely to be proud, luxurious and selfish
by default. If Clint Barton wanted to see his father, he would have contrived it between September
and January. A man at his age – what is he? – three or four and twenty – cannot be without the
means of doing just that. Of leaving under his own power. It is impossible.”

“That is easily said, and felt by you, who have always been your own master. You are the worst
judge in the world, Steven, of the difficulties of dependence. You do not know what it is to have
temper to manage.”

“On that Antonia, trust me if my father or mother was still alive, not even Cerberus could keep me
away. I would rather answer to family than be my own master.” The words are spoken with feeling,
and Antonia wants to pull her own back into her mouth.

Steven spoke very little of his own family, the destruction that littered his birth and upbringing. The
scythe followed his lineage, followed his friends, closely and furiously. What little he let slip out in a
puzzle piece only slowly unweaving itself even now to Antonia, was nothing but full of love and
praise. How very callous of her to suggest.

“Apologies, Steven, I do not know what I spoke of.”

Disagreement follows their friendship as easily as breathing, and Steven never risks losing her good
opinion for the sake of his own beliefs, or his commentary on her actions. She both loves and loathes
him for it, but she’s always reminded of his kindness toward her when she, as she is wont to do,
steps out of line in a way that nearly always has him as a casualty. He does so now, gracing her with
a small smile, before brushing aside the pregnant awkward pause in the conversation with aplomb.

“I have no quarrel with his trappings to family, I simply have quarrel with the fact we hear of him as
an idle wanderer – why he was seen at Weymouth only a few weeks ago. This proves he can leave
the Bartons. Yet he desires a trip of five or six hours to Weymouth over the two it would take him to
grace his own family with his presence. This makes no sense to me.”

“It is very unfair to judge of any body’s conduct,” Steve snorts in response to this, but Antonia
merely raises her eyebrows and barrels on, “without intimate knowledge of their situation. If you
have not been in the interior of a family, how can you comment or say what difficulties of any
individual of that family may be. We cannot be aware of his aunt and uncle, whether they have a
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“A man can always, if he chooses, do his duty; not by maneuvering or finessing, but by vigour and
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entreaty.”
“No –“ Antonia laughed in response, “but I am sure there may be some opposition to his returning. Such language for a man entirely dependent on his aunt and uncle to use! Nobody but you, o’ decorated Captain and natural leader, would imagine it possible. Nobody but you could use such language and still remain in favour. You could charm the birds out of trees.”

“Dependency, trust and respect is not ‘charm’, Antonia.” Steven smarts in response, “They would feel they could trust him, the nephew who has done right by his father, would do rightly by them.”

“We shall likely never agree about him, and thus add him to the long list of things we don’t agree on. It is nothing extraordinary. I do not believe him to believe a weak young man. Mr. Marvel would not be blind to folly, even in his own son. A yielding and mild disposition may not suit your notions of a man’s perfection, but it suits a great deal other’s.”

Steven’s mouth twists something fierce, an emotion Antonia cannot name flitting across his face, and Antonia continues, “Even if he has nothing else to recommend him than being well-grown and good looking, he will be a treasure at Highbury. We do not often see fine young men, well-bred and agreeable. Mr. Hammer is proof of that.”

“If I find him conversable, I shall be glad of his acquaintance, but if he is only a chattering idiot, he will not occupy much of my time or thoughts.”

“My idea of him is that he has the power of being universally agreeable. To you, he will talk of farming or ligature; to me, of drawing or music; and so on to everybody, having that general information on all subjects which will enable him to put everyone around him at ease.”

“And my idea,” said Captain. Rogers, “is that if he turns out anything like that, he will be insufferable. A practiced politician – a jack of all trades – who reads everyone’s character and knows enough to skim the surface but not enough to care or encourage. To display his own superiority in knowing everything and dispense shallow flatteries! My dear Antonia, I know you far too well to even try to endure such a person.”

“We will discuss no more, you are always so keen to find me disagreeable.” Antonia remarks in a cool tone.

“I do not find you disagreeable Antonia, I just find you naïve.” Says Steven, with a degree of vexation, that makes Antonia bound toward any other subject immediately, unable to comprehend why her words made him so angry.

To dislike a young man, simply for being of a different disposition from himself, was unlike the liberal and intelligent mind she was always used to from him. His high opinion was one she valued overmuch because he never put stock into anything incorrect, but now she was not so sure. She had never believed for a moment it could make him unjust to the merit of another.

Later, he would call it jealousy and Antonia would be gobsmacked that Captain Rogers was capable of such a base emotion, but that was for far later, and private conversations.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, I'm back!
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Steven’s mouth twists something fierce, an emotion Antonia cannot name flitting across his face, and Antonia continues, “Even if he has nothing else to recommend him than being well-grown and good looking, he will be a treasure at Highbury. We do not often see fine young men, well-bred and agreeable. Mr. Hammer is proof of that.”

“If I find him conversable, I shall be glad of his acquaintance, but if he is only a chattering idiot, he will not occupy much of my time or thoughts.”

“My idea of him is that he has the power of being universally agreeable. To you, he will talk of farming or ligature; to me, of drawing or music; and so on to everybody, having that general
information on all subjects which will enable him to put everyone around him at ease.”

“And my idea,” said Captain. Rogers, “is that if he turns out anything like that, he will be insufferable. A practiced politician – a jack of all trades – who reads everyone’s character and knows enough to skim the surface but not enough to care or encourage. To display his own superiority in knowing everything and dispense shallow flatteries! My dear Antonia, I know you far too well to even try to endure such a person.”

“We will discuss no more, you are always so keen to find me disagreeable.” Antonia remarks in a cool tone.

“I do not find you disagreeable Antonia, I just find you naïve.” Says Steven, with a degree of vexation, that makes Antonia bound toward any other subject immediately, unable to comprehend why her words made him so angry.

To dislike a young man, simply for being of a different disposition from himself, was unlike the liberal and intelligent mind she was always used to from him. His high opinion was one she valued overmuch because he never put stock into anything incorrect, but now she was not so sure. She had never believed for a moment it could make him unjust to the merit of another.

Now Antonia was quite lucky, that Pepper did not seem so truly attached to Mr. Hammer as to cause any considerable upset. However, she still was grieving the passing of a romance Antonia herself had (with admitted idiocy) heralded as her one true great love. And Antonia hated to say this, but oh it made talking with Pepper tiresome at times! Any possible recollection, any possible memory, and Pepper was back reminiscing of the scoundrel. Why just in the market square this morning she had caught sight of a pair of gloves in a shop window that ‘looked so strikingly like the handsome pair Mr. Hammer had worn last summer, wouldn’t you agree Miss Stark?’.

And well, Antonia was not known for her patience of character.

Safety in numbers must be sought, she resolved, and as they were just approaching the house where lived Miss. Hill, she determined to call upon them. Miss. Hill loved to be called upon, and they were quite safe from any letter from Natasha Romanov by her calculations.

“Miss Hill!” Antonia cried, tone pleading, when Miss. Hill opened the door to them on the third knock, “I know that it is Thursday and therefore there is no possibility of hearing any news of Natasha, but, well. Do you have any news of Natasha Romanov.”

Desperation makes for a cruel bedfellow, thought Antonia wryly as Miss. Hill’s face transformed.

“How very kind, Miss Stark. But something so very unusual has happened.” Miss Hill’s tone was giddy, and she beckoned them in quickly.

The house belonged to people in business, with Miss Hill occupying the drawing-room floor; and there, in the very moderate sized apartment, which was everything to them, sat a crackling fire, a tumbling selection of sweet cakes on the table by the window, and Natasha Romanov.

“No sooner did her letter arrive, than she did!” Miss Hill’s tone was ebullient.

“Miss Romanov!” Antonia cries, “I’m so pleased to see you. May I introduce my friend, Virginia Potts.” Pepper makes short work of a curtsy, Natasha nodding and offering a semblance of a smile, and they all take their places in the small room, giving Antonia’s mind time to work.
Natasha Romanov has grown into a beauty not even a dimly lit room can hide. She looks like a renaissance painting, fiery hair falling in corkscrew curls past her waist, framing a porcelain face and emerald eyes.

In short, Antonia takes a quick moment as they settle to run her fingers through her wild hair and wish she had known she was likely to run into Miss Romanov today. Between the beauty of both her and Pepper, Antonia feels utterly inferior.

“Jane was invited to go to Ireland with the Coulsons, to visit their daughter.” Miss Hill begins.

“You and Miss Coulson are like sisters, almost?” Antonia turns now, smile wide, attempting to engage the quiet Miss Romanov into the conversation about her. Natasha nods and begins to speak before Miss Hill powers on.

“Oh yes, ever since Natasha left the vicarage to live with Captain Coulson. Like her parents, Miss Coulson is kindness itself, she is elegant and gracious. Even if she is not as … handsome as Natasha.”

“Aunt!”

“I am sorry my dear, but it is the truth.” Miss Hill continues, not aware of the odd atmosphere the room is adopting.

“The estate your friend’s husband owns in Ireland, is quite stunning or so I am told?” Antonia deliberately leans forward and points the question to Miss Romanov.

She should have done better, for nothing but reaching forward and shaking Miss Hill out of the words that dripped from her mouth with abandon would stop her once she was in motion.

“Oh yes, it’s quite beautiful, Natasha says. But she has decided to come visit us in Highfield instead!” Miss Hill is overcome with enthusiasm, talking before Miss Romanov can even get a word in edgeways, “Natasha said Ireland is so very beautiful. Mr. Coulson says… what is it dear?” she asks at Natasha’s glare.

“I merely wanted to point out that as I am in the room, I can probably recount every single detail of my letters myself.” Natasha spoke softly, voice light in tone with her hands remaining folded on her lap. The very picture of a distinguished lady.

“Well, hold a moment, I can get your letter.” Miss Hill goes to stand, and Antonia is quick to stop her.

“That is quite alright, Miss Hill! I would love to hear from Natasha. How lovely that the Coulson’s have allowed you to visit.” Antonia speaks to Natasha warmly.

“The Coulson’s have always been so very kind to me and treated me with love and generosity.” Miss. Romanov is a woman of few words, to be sure, normally the type of person Antonia - who Steven liked to joke had a word count she needed to get out every day else perish from lack of attention - would run a mile from. But there was something calming about her presence. And you felt as though every word she spoke had been weighed and measured before tumbling from her mouth.

“This is true. They were all so very disappointed when she could not attend Galway with them.”

The conversation continued as such, without much headway, for the better length of an hour. Antonia could see dusk peeking at the windows and quickly made her leave, but not before suggesting the pair pay a visit to Hartfield before too long. Social niceties were tedious when they
contained a pair like Miss. Hill and Miss. Romanov – one an over sharer and the other as dry as
could be. But there was gossip to be had, Antonia was sure of it, for when they spoke of a Mr.
Murdock there was a tension there that suggested a need for further investigation. One away from
prying eyes and loud mouths.

“I wonder why the wonderful Miss. Romanov should be so reluctant to go to Galway with her
beloved Coulsons.” Antonia mused later as Pepper and her trudged through the countryside, “I
believe her to be even more reserved than I remember. So secretive and unforthcoming. And why
would she come stay in Miss. Hill’s tiny little cottage, when Mr. Murdock’s boundless Irish estate
was on offer? … Unless there was another reason she could not, or would not?”

It should be said that intelligent minds with little to do often wander in mischevious ways, and none
was more so intelligent with so little to do than Antonia Stark’s. And at this precise moment, an
ingenious and animating suspicion entered Antonia’s brain with regard to Natasha Romanov, this
charming Mr. Murdock, and the not going to Ireland. She was a romantic, at heart, one well
acquainted with Gaskell and Edgeworth. A fanciful notion struck her at once as to the relationship
between the two, and she was lost.

“Sorry, what did you say Miss. Stark?” asked Pepper, startling her from her reverie.

She shook her head in response, “Oh it doesn’t really matter, dear heart.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter shall see the long awaited arrival of our Mr. Clint Barton! Oh and the
upset it will bring...

End Notes

Well this was a beast to wrestle into coherency.

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