Modern fake dating AU: Margaret needs a date to Edith’s wedding to avoid her aunt’s match-making. Sadly, the only one she can think of is her ex-girlfriend’s boss.

“Stop laughing!”

Bessie pressed her face against her hand, leaned on her elbow and laughed harder. Margaret kept glaring at her as she finally managed to tamp the laughter down to a really wide grin.

“Where do you even find these situations?” she asked. “My family’s really weird too, but I’ve never-“

At that point, she succumbed to her own amusement again and buried her face against the table as she laughed.

Margaret sighed, waiting it out. This was why you didn’t stay friends with your exes, she thought petulantly. They lulled you into a false sense of security about being on good terms and then betrayed you in your hour of need with their incessant giggling.

“You know Aunt Shaw,” she said when Bessie stopped laughing again. “It was bad enough when I was just met her for lunch last year, but Edith’s wedding will just exacerbate all her worst match-making tendencies. I can’t not turn up without a date if I want to have a moment of peace.”

Bessie’s smile died and for a second she actually looked serious.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I would offer to be your date, but-“
Margaret nodded. “That would just add all the assurances that it is just a phase and whispers about what a horrible influence you are on me. And it wouldn’t stop the match-making anyway.”

They’d hit their heads against that brick wall a couple of times, but it had never even occurred to Margaret to ask Bessie to do it now. It had been exhausting enough when they were dating; she wouldn’t force Bessie listen to her relatives’ comments, insensitive and rude on so many levels, not when they hadn’t been together for a few years and Bessie was happily together with Tina.

“Don’t worry.” Bessie patted her shoulder, her smile friendly and helpful for change. “We’ll find you a suitably straight, white and male date. Let’s start off by listing all the men you know.”

It was a long list, obviously, but when the additional criteria of ‘would consent to go down to London for at least four days and pretend to be Margaret’s boyfriend’ and ‘would not be utterly insufferable about it’ was applied, it was neatly narrowed down to nothingness.

This time, it was Margaret who rested her face against the table. “This is hopeless. I’ll just have to resign to a week of ‘This is what you missed on Britain’s Most Eligible Bachelor’, P.S. Margaret you are already almost thirty, you should have married at least three years ago.”

She couldn’t see Bessie from her current position, but when she spoke, Margaret just knew she was smiling that wry smile that always accompanied either the best or the worst ideas.

“Don’t despair yet, all is not lost.” She heard Bessie push the list towards her on the table. “You forgot one person from your list of men, you know.”

Margaret raised her head just a fraction. “Who?”

Bessie smiled at her. “Mr Thornton.”

Margaret almost fell off her chair.

“He’s probably free next week anyway,” Bessie said like she actually thought it was a viable idea. “Mrs Thornton is making him take his annual holiday and he always just takes a last minute trip somewhere because he keeps hoping he can convince her to let him work. If you move quickly, he won’t have the time to book it.”

“Bessie,” Margaret interrupted, “I cannot ask him.”

Bessie tilted her head, and yep, that definitely was her ‘worst idea’ smile. “Why not?”

Margaret gave her an unimpressed look. “The first time we met, I as good as told him that he gets sadistic enjoyment from seeing his employees die of overwork.” She felt herself blush just thinking about that particular meeting between the board of a local business owners’ association and a charity she’d been involved with at the time, all the more embarrassing for how ridiculous and high-handed her own volunteering efforts had been then. “He hates me.”

She wouldn’t have felt bad about it if only it had been true. It wasn’t, though, as Bessie was happy to tell her some weeks later when Margaret recognised her as John’s employee at a pub and struck up a conversation. Too bad the damage was already done by then.

“Well he clearly doesn’t hate you because of that,” Bessie pointed out. “He asked you out just weeks later, and I’m pretty sure hate-dating is not a thing.”

Margaret snorted. If he hadn’t hated her before, he definitely did after Margaret’s refusal.

“I called him ‘a soulless robot whose programming only enables him to count profits’,” she said.
“And I told him he could only ever think of human relationships as transactions.”

Bessie shrugged her shoulders as if to concede the point but didn’t look much deterred. “It’s worth a shot, unless you can think of anyone else.”

Margaret closed her eyes and tried to will some other idea into existence. It didn’t work out.

“I can’t ask him.” She looked at Bessie. “Not after everything. It would be-“

She couldn’t even find the words to express how unthinkable it would be. He very discreetly avoided her company as well as he could when they both happened to be at Margaret’s parents’ house at the same time, and the few times they’d had to interact without Richard Hale’s conciliatory presence, Margaret had been practically able to feel the iciness radiate off of John towards her. She’d been afraid she’d get frostbite in July.

“If he hates you as much as you think,” Bessie said, “you really don’t have anything to lose.”

That much at least was true.

“He’d say no anyway.” Margaret fiddled with the paper in front of her. “I’d just make a fool of myself for nothing.”

“In his eyes, it might even the scales a little.” Bessie chuckled. “He might like you better for it.”

“I couldn’t.” Margaret shook her head. “Even if I somehow got through it without spontaneously bursting from embarrassment and he didn’t simply shout me off his property, his mother would skin me alive if she ever heard I’d so much as asked him. No,” she shook her head again, for emphasis, “I’d rather face Aunt Shaw’s best match-making efforts alone than subject myself to that.”

I hate you, Bessie, Margaret thought to herself as the doors of Marlborough Markets slid open before her. If you hadn’t mentioned him, I would never have even thought of it.

Margaret didn’t usually frequent the shop, not after she and Bessie broke up and she stopped picking Bessie up from work. The place still felt familiar, though, flush with the embarrassing memories very much alike to those of their first meeting.

Their second meeting had been just there, on the aisle Margaret was now walking down in search of John or at least an employee who could point her in his direction. She’d come in to drop by some papers drafted after the meeting, just in time to witness John quite literally kick a man out of the shop, shouting profanities Margaret had never heard him use since, not even in the ensuing tense argument between them. Margaret had pushed the papers at him and went after the man, intent on asking if she could help him somehow, but he’d already been gone.

A couple of weeks into their friendship, the episode had come up with Bessie who’d told her the man had been fired for harassing his female co-workers.

Margaret had felt a sudden wave of gratitude he’d been too quick to leave for her to find him, and an urge to apologise to John for her words. The first had passed as quickly as it came and she’d never acted on the second.

She didn’t find an employee, but she did find Tommy Boucher sitting on one of the garden chairs on display, completely absorbed in his book.
Bessie was at work, then. He was waiting for her shift to end so that she could take her back home.

“Hey, Tommy,” she said, walking up to him. “I didn’t know Mr Thornton recruits employees your age.”

Tommy obviously recognised her voice; she could see the corners of his mouth turn up even as he continued to read, probably meaning to reach the end of the paragraph before looking up.

“Fear not, Margaret, you do not have to call authorities on me about child labour,” said a voice from behind her.

Margaret spun around, not even surprised to see John stand just a few metres away from her, obviously having just closed the door behind him, wherever that led. Of course it would be like this, of course they would start off this conversation with yet another misunderstanding. Could they even talk any other way?

“I didn’t—“ John was looking at her with a thin, uneven smile. Margaret couldn’t tell if they had both been joking. “Could I speak to you? In private?”

John’s brow furrowed and his eyes dropped to Tommy, who seemed to have concluded that his book was more important than their conversation and was reading again.

“Of course,” John said in a voice that made Margaret suspect he only said so because he was too shell-shocked she would even ask. “We’ll go to my office.”

Margaret followed him along the aisle, past the freezers and through another non-descript door into a narrow corridor that was lined with what she assumed to be changing rooms for the staff and led to a small room cramped with binders and filing cabinets and sheets of paper.

It really didn’t surprise her that John was not the type of person to embrace the idea of going paperless. It suited his personality, somehow. Margaret could easily picture him there, poring over his papers well past midnight, barely avoiding dipping their edges into a half-eaten microwaveable meal he’d meant to wolf down but had forgotten.

John took a seat behind his desk and made a gesture for Margaret to sit down on the only other chair in the room.

He probably hadn’t meant to choose the most uncomfortable chair possible for his visitors. Probably. Margaret wondered if this was where he conducted job interviews.

“You wanted to speak to me?” John asked, pulling Margaret out of her thoughts.

“Yes, I—“ She took a deep breath. The worst he could do was to yell her out of the building. “My cousin is getting married in a few weeks.”

John raised an eyebrow. “I’m aware, Richard told me. He and your mother are not going, I gathered.”

“They are not.” Margaret swallowed. “But I am. And I wanted to ask if you’d go with me.”

It was good John’s chair had armrests on both sides, lest he might have fallen off as he startled at her words.

He gathered his wits quickly, however. Margaret watched as his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed twice in quick succession, but that was the only sign of any feeling as a mask of
impassivity settled on his face.

“And why, pray tell me, would you want to ask such a thing?”

Briefly, Margaret outlined her reasoning to him, leaving out the part about her reasons for asking John specifically. She had been horrendously rude to him once under the guise of honesty; that was a mistake she didn’t intend to repeat, at least if she could help it.

“Bessie mentioned you were taking time off,” she finished lamely, barely daring to look at John’s direction.

He watched her intently, still showing no emotion. She waited for a few moments, certain he was just pretending to mull it over before coldly asking her to leave, and was just about to make her excuses when-

“What dates did you say I would be needed for, exactly?”

Now it was Margaret’s turn to almost fall off her chair from surprise, but somehow she managed to give him the information without her voice even quivering.

He reached for his calendar on the table and seemed to check it.

“Fine,” he said. “It has been a while since I’ve been to London. But—” he glanced at her and then dropped his gaze again, “you should probably pass on to your aunt that I am very private with my affections.”

Margaret understood what he meant without him needing to elaborate. “Trust me,” she said, risking a small smile, “she is quite used to seeing me display very little physical affection in front of her.” She would probably be too relieved to see Margaret’s plus one was not Bessie again to even notice. “She will think nothing of it.”

“Yes.” The left corner of John’s mouth almost quirked up. “I imagine she wouldn’t.”

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On her way out, the memory of John’s parting handshake still fresh on her skin, she ran into Bessie who was walking out with Tommy.

“Told you so,” she said before Margaret even had the chance to give her the good news.

Margaret pretended to swat at her arm. “Shut up.”

“I will, but only because Tina’s making spring rolls and I don’t want to be late.”

She was laughing, though, when Margaret looked back to check.

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“And you will have to tell me everything when you come back,” her mother said, holding on to her hand. “Will you promise?”

“Yes, mother, I will.” Margaret placed her other hand on top of her mother’s. “I will memorise every detail, and take pictures, too.”

If she drowned her mother in details about the bridesmaids’ dresses, perhaps her mother’s mind would be too occupied to wonder who she had gone to the wedding with, if anyone at all. Margaret had no illusions about her abilities to look her mother in the eye and tell outright lies and
Margaret had no illusions about her abilities to look her mother in the eye and tell outright lies and she had no intention to reveal to her parents who she was going with if she only could help it.

“And congratulate Edith for me.” Her mother’s gazed dropped down to the blanket. “The last time I saw her, she wasn’t even old enough to drink, let alone get married—“

Margaret squeezed her hand but didn’t say anything. Her mother’s strained relations with her own sister’s family were not a topic to be discussed, she knew from experience, only acknowledged before swiftly changing the subject.

“I will,” she promised. “And I’ll get you as much details as I can about her husband, too. I think Aunt Shaw said he was in the army.”

“Edith always did enjoy romantic stories.” Her mother sighed, looking down at her own legs stretched out on the bed in front of her. “I dearly hope she won’t be disappointed.”

Margaret swallowed and quickly changed the subject again.

“How’s she been?” she asked Dixon, the nurse who took care of her mother, when she met her in the stairs.

“Oh, Miss Margaret,” Dixon said and shook her head, “there’s no change in her physical state, it’s just the dark winter getting her down. What was your father thinking, bringing her here?”

Not knowing what to say – it was no secret Dixon had come to greatly admire her patient, and while Margaret thought her a little unfair to her father, she couldn’t honestly say her father’s decision to move up north had been discussed with her mother as much as she’d have liked – Margaret made her excuses and went downstairs where she ran to the man himself, just back home from his weekly bridge club meeting.

“Oh, Margaret, how nice of you to stop by!”

She had time, so she sat down in the kitchen and he made them a pot of tea.

“Is it tomorrow you’re leaving for London?” her father asked as he sat down opposite of her. At her nod, his brow furrowed as if a particular thought had occurred to him. “Fancy that. Maybe you’ll be on the same train as John. He’s going to London too, for his holiday.”

“Is he?” Margaret hoped she sounded convincing.

“Yes,” his father said. “I don’t know why, he usually goes abroad. Although we did discuss an interesting exhibition on Ancient Greece they have in the British Museum, maybe he thought there’s no need to leave home to see the world.”

Margaret took a particularly long sip of her tea and didn’t answer. Mercifully, her father was well aware that she and John were not the greatest of friends and seemed to attribute her silence to that.

“Well,” he said as the pot was empty, “I won’t keep you any longer. You much have much to do, packing and such.”

“I do.”

She did, but mostly she needed to flee before she accidentally spilled the whole story. Her father was well acquainted with Aunt Shaw’s determination, and he might have understood the reasons for her deception, but she still had a feeling the same wouldn’t go for her means.

In any case, as John’s friend and her father, he already had to walk a thin enough line. She didn’t
They met at the train station. John was already on the platform when Margaret arrived, pacing a small circle.

“Good morning,” Margaret said and regretted it instantly. She sounded like she was speaking to the conductor.

He stopped pacing, not without effort it seemed. “Good morning.”

That was the last thing they said to each other in a while. Once on their seats, John pulled a stack of papers (definitely work, from what Margaret could gather from a brief glimpse) and began reading, and Margaret took her cue from him and began skimming over the research for her next article.

They were almost in Birmingham when she decided the silence was too awkward to bear. He’d barely looked up since the train’s departure.

“I thought your mother makes you take time off so that you’d stop working for a while.”

He startled and then looked at her for a long moment as if trying to determine if he was being mocked or not. By the time he seemed to decide that it had, indeed, been a simple joke and not at his expense, the time for laughing had already well passed.

“Well, what she doesn’t know will not hurt her,” he said and went back to reading.

She felt too mortified by her first attempt to even consider a second, and while he did put away his work some time later and turned his head towards her a couple of times as if about to say something, he didn’t try to start a conversation either.

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“Well,” John said as they contemplated the double bed in their hotel room; Aunt Shaw had insisted on making the reservation so Margaret hadn’t had the chance to intervene and request two beds, let alone two separate rooms, “this is awkward. Not surprising, but awkward.”

At least Margaret could see the faint blush on his cheeks. She was quite certain her own were positively aflame.

“For what it’s worth,” she said, “I don’t toss and turn in my sleep. I’ll have no trouble sticking to my side of it.”

“That’s not what I-“ John shook his head. “Never mind. Do you prefer left or right?”

“Neither, really, but I do prefer a nightstand near the socket, so right, unless you had the same thought?”

He hadn’t, but there was a flash of a smile on his lips at her words, and she counted it as a win.

“You said there is to be a family dinner this evening,” he said as she had got her suitcase open on the bed and was pulling out her dress to hang it.

“Yes.” She bit her lip, happy to turn around to hide it from him. “Aunt Shaw is rather fond of dining her relatives, I’m afraid.”
“Is there anything I should know? Did you tell her anything-“

He struggled to find the words, but Margaret understood what he meant.

“I didn’t, which means she will probably ask tonight, or then Edith.” Unable to use hanging her
dress as an excuse any longer, she turned to face him. “Is there something particular you’d want to
tell them?”

John busied himself with his own suitcase, but Margaret had just the time to see the thin line of his
mouth. “I am not an adept liar. I’d prefer as little fiction to memorise as possible.”

“Well, then, how about-“ She took a deep breath, happy he was too intent on not looking at her to
notice, and hope her suggestion would not offend him. “Everything is the same, except I said yes.
When you asked. Except- Later. Last May. They do know of Bessie.”

If her words upset him, he didn’t show it; his hands continued unfolding his shirts as steadily as
they had been earlier.

“I will try to remember that,” he said and turned his back on her to put the shirts away.

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Aunt Shaw had picked the restaurant, a trendy place that Margaret instinctively did not care for,
and not only because the long journey had made her hungry and she only needed one look at the
portions to know that her hunger would not be satisfied there.

“Margaret!” Edith sprung to her feet the second she saw her and rushed to pull her into a hug like
the last time they’d seen each other wasn’t over a year ago.

Margaret hugged her back and then pulled away, smiling. “Edith, congratulations! I can hardly
believe you’re getting married!”

A tall man beside Aunt Shaw laughed. “Neither can I. Can hardly believe my luck, right?”

“You must be Steve,” Margaret said and walked up to him, offering him her hand as he stood up
from his chair.

“At your service, ma’am.”

“And who is this, Margaret?” her aunt asked, nodding towards the end of the table where John
was standing.

Margaret returned to his side and curbed the impulse to take his hand. It would have suited the
situation but probably not his wishes. “This is John Thornton. John, these are my aunt, my cousin
Edith and her fiancé, soon to be husband, Steve Lennox.”

“How do you do,” John said as they took their seats.

“We were just about to order,” Edith said and Margaret hoped her stomach would not growl right
then. “Henry said he’d be a bit late, apparently we shouldn’t wait for him.”

Margaret’s smile slipped, but hopefully no one noticed. “Henry’s coming?”

“Oh yes.” Aunt Shaw smiled down at her menu. “He’s been to France on business, that’s why
he’s late.”
“You have me at a disadvantage,” John said, his voice betraying an attempt at that conversational cheerfulness that he was generally very lacking in. Margaret felt a jolt of affection towards him. “Who’s Henry?”

Margaret took a quick breath that she hoped no one noticed.

“Henry’s Steve’s brother,” she said and, attempting the same cheerfulness he had, added, “He’s actually the one who introduced Edith and Steve, wasn’t he?”

“He was.” Steve closed his menu. “Good old Henry, always a great wingman.”

“Oh, but you mustn’t give him all the credit, Steve,” Edith said, gently swatting at Steve’s hand. “It was Margaret who introduced me to Henry, she deserves equal thanks.”

“Always a pleasure,” Margaret answered with a smile and hoped her distaste at having to even think back to the last time she saw Henry Lennox didn’t shine through as blatantly as she feared it did.

They’d met when she’d been doing research for an article she was writing, and, not unlike John, after a few weeks of acquaintance he’d asked her out. Completely unlike John, however, he had done it again after her rejection, and then again, and then she had ran into him while out with Edith and she didn’t know how, but a couple months later he was a regular guest at the dinner parties which Aunt Shaw was so fond of hosting and which Margaret stopped attending even semi-regularly when she got tired of his expectant looks and words that always had two meanings.

“You are too modest,” said someone from behind her, and she didn’t even need to turn around to see they’d just been speaking of the devil.

Henry greeted the table, assured Aunt Shaw that France was lovely as ever, even in February, and then turned to John.

“And you must be Margaret’s-“

“Boyfriend,” John said as he stood up to shake Henry’s hand, the word odd coming off his tongue and not only because of his and Margaret’s little secret. “John Thornton.”

Henry looked down at the hand as he shook it, and Margaret became suddenly very aware that John’s hand had always felt calloused to her. “Charmed.”

The waitress came by to take their orders and after that, they sat down in silence. Steve, whom Margaret could appreciate for his genuine good-naturedness if nothing else, broke it.

“So, John, what do you do?”

For a second, John’s eyes flicked over to Margaret. She had no idea why; perhaps the company was so unsettling for him that even her face could give him some resemblance of comfort, or maybe he was looking for confirmation that he could speak the truth.

“I manage a grocery store,” he said stiffly as he looked back to Steve.

Margaret felt the impulse to point out that he also owned it, but she didn’t dare for fear that it would hurt his pride somehow. If he’d wanted it known, to better blend in with Aunt Shaw’s Louis Vuitton bag and Henry’s Prada sunglasses, he’d have said so himself. She thought she knew him that much.

“Well, that’s a step-up for you, Margaret.” Aunt Shaw’s tone made it sound like Margaret had
switched from buying her clothes from Tesco Extra to buying them from Primark. “Your earlier-friend, worked in a grocery store, isn’t that right?”

“She still does,” John said, so evenly Margaret didn’t even dare to glance at him to see the storm she was sure was gathering in his eyes. “In fact, I work with Bessie. In fact, she is, I believe, about to become Assistant Manager.”

Margaret hadn’t known; she hoped the surprise didn’t show up on her face. She’d have to remember to congratulate Bessie.

Aunt Shaw didn’t respond, but luckily the exchange seemed to remind Edith of some pre-wedding worry she had about the place cards and demanded her aunt and fiancé’s attention for a moment, which was wonderful except it left Margaret to attempt a conversation with Henry Lennox and a very tight-lipped John.

“Were you in France for long, Henry?” she asked the first thing to come to her mind that didn’t seem like the first step on a mind field.

“No, no, just for a few meetings.” Henry’s mouth smiled at her. “It really is quite… lovely, Paris looks even more romantic just a few days before Valentine’s Day.”

It wasn’t what he said; it usually wasn’t with him. It was just the way he said it that made Margaret want to look away and forcefully insert herself in the place card conversation.

“You went to Paris last year, didn’t you?” Henry continued, his eyes piercing through Margaret. “What did you think?”

Margaret glanced at John, not even knowing why; perhaps it brought her relief to see it in his eyes that she was not the only one feeling very uncomfortable right then.

“To be quite honest, I don’t quite understand why it is touted as such a romantic city,” she said. “I enjoyed the culture, the museums and the theatres, definitely, and the parks were lovely to take walks in, but it is just a city like any other. You can find romance in whichever city you find yourself in, I don’t see why we should crown one as the most romantic of them all.”

Henry raised his eyebrows and turned to John. “Well, I hope you were not hoping to charm her with romance for Valentine’s. Based on that, you would be quite unsuccessful.”

A muscle in John’s jaw tightened. “We’re spending the day at a wedding. That is quite enough romance in my opinion.”

Henry shrugged his shoulders and turned back to Margaret, that odd intensity that Margaret didn’t like in his eyes again.

“Quite a prosaic way to spend your first Valentine’s together as a couple, isn’t it?”

Margaret forced herself to laugh, clinging to what hopefully would be her escape from the conversation. “Well, I could hardly miss Edith’s wedding, I hope it will be the only one of its kind.”

It worked; Edith spun around on her chair and exclaimed, “Good heavens, I truly hope so!” while Steve laughed and repeated the sentiment and began ribbing at Henry about his best man speech.

Margaret looked at John and hazarded a smile. He didn’t quite smile back, but the muscle in his jaw relaxed.
“Have you been to Paris?” she asked as it seemed they’d fallen out of the general conversation.

She still didn’t get a smile, but the look in his eyes softened. “I took Fanny there, as her graduation present. It was always her dream to see Paris. Not with me, of course.”

Margaret laughed. She’d only ever met John’s sister a few times, at the annual dinner John’s mother hosted and to which she was invited because Hannah Thornton couldn’t bring herself to be so rude as to exclude her from her father’s invitation, but she could easily imagine the ever so animated Fanny Thornton dragging her less enthusiastic brother along the banks of the Seine or the garden paths at Versailles.

“I mustn’t speak to her about it as I just have, I assume?” she said, the left side of her mouth quirking up.

This time, John seemed to understand she was joking, and for one quick second, the sight of his smile was able to stop Margaret from breathing. Then the moment passed, but the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach didn’t.

“It would hardly matter now. Paris lost much of its shine after she saw it. Now, if you’ve some unpleasant opinions about Mozambique, those you should probably keep to yourself. At least until she actually finds the time and money to go there, of course.”

Margaret laughed again, ducking her head as their entrées were brought to them. She was just about to tell John that she knew much less, good or bad, about Mozambique than she’d have liked, when Steve turned his head and asked John something about retail. It was a simple question that required a long answer, and Margaret listened quietly as John began explaining it to Steve.

He had a pleasant voice, she couldn’t deny, when he wasn’t using it to scold someone, and she’d never, not even when she thought the least of him, been able to ignore the aura of authority about him, like he’d struggled hard for every bit of self-worth he had and was well aware that he had it now. It was quite becoming, actually, and she rather startled as Henry’s voice just inches away from her ear broke her concentration.

“He seems like he’s great at his job. Tell me, does he ever smile, or was he just not programmed that way?”

Margaret’s eyes flashed immediately back to John, who didn’t look like he’d heard. Her ears were red, she could feel it without even needing to check in the mirror, her own comments from a few years ago echoing in Henry’s words.

“I know you’re joking,” she said, not wanting to be the one to ruin the dinner, “but it isn’t funny. Please stop.”

Henry shrugged, not seeming very sorry, but at least he did as she asked.

“Does he dance?”

Margaret didn’t know. She had a hard time imagining him as a clubbing sort of person, but she had a hazy recollection of him waltzing with his mother at a mutual acquaintance’s birthday party.

“He was just asking,” his arm was still pressed against hers, and she couldn’t move away without also awkwardly moving her chair, “to see if I should reserve a dance with you now or if waiting until the day itself would do.”
Margaret looked away. She caught John’s eye, frowning as he watched their interaction and then quickly turning back to Steve.

“Knowing Edith, there’ll be no shortage of dancing opportunities, am I right, Edith?”

Edith was more than happy to use her question as a springboard to start a discussion on songs she absolutely wanted played, and Margaret could slowly start breathing easier as Henry sat up straighter in his chair and concentrated on his salmon.

The rest of the meal went amiably enough, but Margaret was still happy to make use of her mostly suppressed yawn when they were finishing desserts to make a swift exit. John seemed all too willing to go along with it, and after Aunt Shaw had given them, or perhaps just him, a long look and informed them that she was paying, they said their goodbyes and walked out.

As the restaurant door closed after them, Margaret allowed herself to let out the long breath she’d been holding.

“I’m sorry about them,” she said. “They’re—”

“Not very much different from what I expected.” He gave her a very quick, wry smile bereft of any actual happiness. “The happy couple seemed quite pleasant.”

So he didn’t want to talk about it. Margaret couldn’t really blame him; she had an inkling as to who he’d thought them alike to as he’d been forming his expectations.

“What are were you planning on doing tomorrow?” she asked. A change of subject could only be a good thing right then. “I’m afraid Edith talked me to folding napkins with her, but you shouldn’t feel obliged to follow.”

He glanced at her, and she thought he might have actually smiled. “They had probably planned it beforehand. Steve asked me to help transport the drinks.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, but she couldn’t quite keep herself from smiling. “I didn’t bring you with me to provide them with another pair of hands.”

He didn’t answer because he almost tripped on uneven pavement, and the next time he spoke, it was to say something about her father’s bridge-playing friends. Mostly, though, they were silent until they reached their hotel again.

It probably should have been awkward, Margaret thought as she brushed her hair, to share the room, but it wasn’t. They took turns changing in the bathroom and the bed really did seem wide enough that they could easily both sleep on their respective sides. There probably would have been room for a third person in the middle.

She was already under the covers when John came out of the bathroom, and after he’d climbed into the bed as well, she turned off the light. The only slight awkwardness was about how odd it felt just to go to bed like that, without anything else, to be prepared for such vulnerability as sleeping in someone else’s presence required and yet act like virtual strangers.

“Goodnight, John,” she said into the darkness just to make it feel less awkward.

“Goodnight, Margaret,” came the reply, and she could turn to her side and close her eyes with her mind a little more peaceful.
John was an early riser, a fact which surprised Margaret not at all. He was on his phone when Margaret finally managed to stop blinking at the morning sunshine in her eyes and struggle herself into a sitting position on the bed.

I was right, Margaret thought to herself, he is a robot. Only maybe I was wrong about what kind of robot film we are in.

“Won’t your mother realise at some point that you’re working just as much, just from afar?”

John looked up from his phone and then tilted it slightly towards her. On the screen, a very familiar assortment of brightly-coloured candy, every piece in its own box and some still covered in gelatine, flashed.

“I like to think I am old enough for my mother not to care if I start my morning by playing Candy Crush,” John said, the right side of his mouth quirking up.

Margaret couldn’t help laughing and to her delight, that brought out a more balanced smile on John’s face.

“I feel like I should take a picture and send it to my father,” Margaret said. “His serious and hard-working friend John, wasting the morning away on time suck games with his hair sticking out in all directions. Surely that’s grounds for kicking you out of the bridge club.”

“No, for your father.” John put his phone away. “I’m not so sure about Hamper, though.”

He got out of the bed, gathered a bundle of clothes to take with him to the bathroom and when he came back, he was once again the put-together John Thornton she’d come to know. There was a softness around his mouth, though, that she usually didn’t get to see.

Perhaps they could be friends, Margaret found herself thinking. She’d always thought she’d blown her chances to be nothing more than coolly cordial with John when she let her writer’s imagination paint John a very vivid picture of how exactly Margaret viewed him, but maybe all was not lost.

—

Aunt Shaw had pulled her most grandiloquent strings when securing the place where Edith and Steve’s wedding reception was to be held, and Margaret had to admit that the Edwardian building with its own small park was a very beautiful backdrop that probably fit well into Edith’s dreams of a grand, romantic wedding.

Its kitchen was probably very practical, especially as the guest list covered over four hundred names, but Margaret could hardly appreciate any of that with two large boxes of napkins in front of her that were waiting to be folded into swans.

She’d always imagined a simple wedding for herself, if she were to have one at all, and that conviction was truly cemented as she set aside the fiftieth swan and reached for the next napkin.

As her phone vibrated to signal a message, Margaret decided she’d earned a break.

*Lie to me that I don’t hate knitting.*

Margaret snorted at the text. She could really use a moment just talking to Bessie right then.

*You do,* she sent back. *But you’re going to love how great Tina looks in that sweater when you’re finished.*
She didn’t get a reply within a minute so she sent, *If it makes you feel any better, I’m spending today folding napkin swans. It’s a species I’d like to see go extinct.*

Two swans later she got her reply.

*I’m telling WWF.*

*At this point, I wouldn’t even try to cover it up.*

“Margaret, are you there?” Edith appeared on the doorway. “Do you need any help?”

Margaret looked back on the boxes. “If you have time to spare. I’m quite slow at this, I’m afraid.”

Edith did, and the next hours went by significantly quicker as they chatted about Edith’s honeymoon plans and Margaret and Bessie kept up a sporadic correspondence, mostly to complain about their respective tasks.

Well, at least they went by quicker until Edith came to a subject that Margaret probably should have guessed couldn’t be avoided altogether.

“It must be quite serious between John and you, with him coming here and all,” Edith said. “How long have you two been together?”

Breathe in, breathe out, speak like it isn’t a lie.

“Since last May. We’ve known each other longer, he’s a friend of my father, but that’s when it started.”

“You look happy,” Edith said with the conviction of someone two days before their own wedding. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you with anyone, it suits you.”

“It’s been less than two years,” Margaret answered pointedly.

She really was not in a mood to argue about whether Bessie counted or not, and luckily Edith, never very confrontational to begin with, seemed far too focused on thinking of pleasant things to want to get into it. As an added benefit, as she changed the subject to the wedding menu, they could also smoothly move away from discussing John and Margaret’s relationship.

It was near nine when Aunt Shaw declared they were done with the preparations for the rehearsal dinner and offered to drive Margaret back to the hotel.

“Steve said he and Henry dropped John off there, too,” Edith told her. “You could have dinner together. Did you know that in Spain, they actually-“

Margaret closed her eyes and smiled. She couldn’t help thinking that her cousin might perhaps have more in common with Fanny Thornton than she’d ever come to realise.

Back at the hotel, Margaret spent the lift ride up to her and John’s room flexing her fingers; she wouldn’t have been surprised if all that folding had given her carpal tunnel syndrome, and spending the rest of the day washing silverware hadn’t really helped. Whatever Edith suggested about Spain, though, she wasn’t hungry; actually, the thought of settling down on the bed with a book and an occasional comment at John’s Candy Crush habit sounded incredibly tempting.

It didn’t happen, mostly because John was nowhere to be found. Margaret shrugged – he was a couple of years older than her, she wasn’t going to mother-hen him – and made herself comfortable on her side of the bed. However, after five minutes she was still feeling oddly restless
and definitely not in the mood for quiet reading by herself.

More out of curiosity than genuine craving (it happened to be on her night stand), she checked the price list for the minibar and quickly put it back. It would probably be cheaper to go down to the hotel’s bar, and she was on her feet again before she even realised she wasn’t actually hungry or even that interested in a drink. It would be something to do, though, and maybe the walk downstairs would tire her feet and make her more willing to curl up with a book.

It didn’t. But the trip was still not completely wasted, because she didn’t even have to take two steps into the bar before she recognised one profile, far more weary than she remembered seeing it in the morning and practically on display where its owner was sitting on one of the bar stools and sipping a whiskey.

“You look like you could use another one,” she said as she claimed the bar stool next to John.

John’s eyebrow arched a little. “That’s one way of saying it.”

She ordered herself a glass of wine just to have something to occupy herself with, but he seemed content with the last drops of his whiskey, swirling it in his glass like that would make it better. (Maybe it did. Margaret had never been a fan of whiskey, she didn’t know how it was supposed to be drunk.)

“I take it at least we’re not going to run out of drinks at the wedding,” Margaret said after a moment of silence. “You look exhausted.”

John moved his glass from one hand to another. “I am.”

She thought of asking him if it was more than the physical exhaustion; despite Steve’s good-naturedness, she couldn’t quite trust Henry hadn’t made the day taxing in more ways than simply the obvious.

“At least it was work you’re familiar with, right?” she said, fiddling with her wine glass. “Bessie told me you often help to unpack the deliveries.”

It was, it seemed, the wrong thing to say. John’s hold on his now empty glass tightened to such an extent that his knuckles seemed white even in the dim light of the hotel bar.

His voice was the angriest whisper Margaret had ever heard when he said, “Small mercies, right? I may have been stuck the whole day with strangers doing brain-numbingly dull things, but at least I’m used to such menial labour.”

Margaret turned to look at him. She wanted to ask him what was wrong (not if; that seemed to be obvious), but it was quite possible he wouldn’t tell her. In any case, he was looking a lot like he regretted his tone, and she didn’t want to start an argument.

“They’re easy to get to know, at least,” she tried, choosing her words as carefully as she could. “Very lively and easy to talk to.”

John snorted incredulously, the contrite expression gone in a flash. When he spoke, the anger had turned into venom. “Oh, excuse me, I forgot no acquaintance or relative of yours could have a single fault. My bad, truly, Margaret.”

It had been quite a while since he’d been like this with her, Margaret thought as she squared her shoulders and let her anger take hold, all open rudeness and dismissal. But if he thought time had eaten away at Margaret’s ability to hold her ground, he was sorely mistaken.
“Maybe you’d remember it better if you made more of an effort to see past them,” she said. “We cannot all measure up to your high standards at all times.”

He squeezed his glass and then pushed it away so suddenly that Margaret feared the movement would send it over the counter and onto the floor.

“What, aren’t you going to tell me all about how my standards,” he spat the word out like it was poison, “are all wrong anyway? Surely no exemplary gentleman such as Henry Lennox cannot ever be rightly appreciated by-“

“What about Henry?” Margaret interrupted him. Somewhere in the back of her mind a thought flashed that they were talking of quite different things, but she ignored it.

“Quite a charmer,” John said, his hand clenching into a fist. “A great paragon of gentlemanly virtue, I assume.”

Margaret wanted to slam her glass against the table and storm away, but she didn’t. Of all the things they could fight about, she’d never have assumed it would be over John defending Henry Lennox to her. “Oh, indeed, I could give you a list of his gentlemanly qualities.”

John sighed, and it was as if all fight left him along with that breath. He closed his eyes and suddenly looked ten years older.

“Why did you ask me to come here with you, Margaret?” he asked.

Suddenly, she felt as tired as he seemed.

“Because you took no for an answer!” she said with the last exasperation she could manage. “You never asked me again, you left me alone, you had a thousand chances to insert yourself into my life and you didn’t.” She didn’t know if the sound that left her next was a sigh or a laugh. “You know, you’ve got something in common with your precious Henry Lennox. He asked me out, too. Except he asked me out so many times that I thought it better to move up north to get my lack of interest across.”

John sat back, staring at her. “My preci-“

“I don’t have to talk about this,” Margaret said and threw a ten-pound note next to her wine glass.

She thought she heard John say her name as she rushed out of the bar, but she didn’t turn around to verify.

In their room, she changed into her pyjamas and then simply sat on the edge of the bed, fuming. She didn’t know how long it was, but her toes were already getting cold when there was finally a knock on the door.

She let John in without even looking at him and marched right back to the bed, pulling the covers on top of herself and pretending she might fall asleep anytime soon.

John closed the door and then stood there silently for a moment.

“Margaret-“

She pulled the covers on top of her head, not caring at all how childish it had to seem.

He took the hint, and Margaret listened to the quiet sounds of his getting ready for bed. The mattress dipped as he got on the bed, the lights were turned off, and after that, there was nothing.
They didn’t say goodnight that night.

John was already gone when Margaret woke up, but his coat was still draped over the armchair. It was no great surprise to see him spread butter on a roll in the breakfast room when Margaret managed to get so far.

She’d have loved nothing more than to eat separately, but the tension between them could not go on unresolved forever. John looked up as she dumped her tray on the other side of the table and seemed as if he’d like to say something, but Margaret didn’t give him the chance, leaving to get orange juice before he managed to open his mouth.

They ate in silence until the only thing left on John’s plate were the peelings of the orange he’d eaten.

He’d go soon enough, Margaret thought, swallowing the last of her bacon. Now or never.

“John.” He looked at her, face expressionless but not cold. “We should-“

Her phone rang, and Margaret wanted to curse it into the lowest pit in Hell.

“It’s Edith,” she said. “I should-“

“I have a work engagement this morning.” John looked away. “The rehearsal dinner starts at five, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” That was all she managed to tell him before he was up and out of the room.

Margaret sighed and answered her phone.

Her morning was mostly spent reassuring Edith about everything that had already been done. Steve stopped by to give her a kiss and drop off receipts for Aunt Shaw on his way to pick up the wedding car.

“Thought I’d find John here, too,” he said to Margaret. “Figured he might be interested to see the engine.”

Margaret bit the inside of her mouth. “He had a work thing.”

“That’s some work ethic,” Steve said. “Beats me.”

Margaret was half resigned to receiving a text from John somewhere along the way that he had gone back home, or perhaps left for Barcelona, or Rome, or Athens or whatever other weekend getaway he’d managed to book on short notice, but instead she got John, mouth a thin line but eyes friendly, appearing by her side quarter to five, just in time to greet those rehearsal guests he hadn’t yet met.

“You I haven’t met earlier,” Edith’s aunt, Aunt Shaw’s late husband’s sister said as she made her way to them after congratulating Edith, eyes trained at John.

While John sputtered his way through an introduction, Edith’s aunt, shot a quizzical look at
Margaret and John’s hands, hanging by their sides as they kept a respectable ten-inch distance from each other.

With more determination than genuine interest, they made conversation until it was time for them to be seated, at which point they showed Edith’s aunt to her table and sought their own seats.

Of course, through some scheme of Aunt Shaw’s or then simply by coincidence, they were in the same table as Henry. Margaret suppressed a sigh and prepared for a long dinner as Henry smiled at her with his mouth and put his hand on Margaret’s arm to compliment her bracelet.

If she were to seek a silver lining to the arrangement, though, it would have been that it made it abundantly clear that she and John would benefit from a mature talk about the previous night. She’d thought, when she’d calmed down enough to think rationally at all, that the two men would have bonded over something the previous day while working – that was the only explanation she could think for the previous night’s conversation – but John barely looked up from his plate and Henry barely glanced at him, opting instead to focus all of his attention on Margaret.

“What are you going to do after the wedding?”

Margaret moved a little on her chair so that Henry’s sleeve no longer touched hers. “We’ll probably go straight back home, right, John?”

They would not be doing anything. John still had a few days of holiday left, so he would be staying in London or going somewhere – Margaret hadn’t asked – and Margaret would go back home.

The corner of John’s mouth quirked up as he looked up at Margaret. “Probably. I’ll be needed at work soon enough.”

“Well it would surely be a pity for you to have to leave so soon,” Henry said. “The London break is suiting you, Margaret.”

Margaret looked down at her food and swallowed. “It is very nice to be here.”

“You could stay.” Henry swallowed a piece of potato. “If it’s about expenses, my guestroom is always open.”

She didn’t say she’d rather go and tell Mrs Thornton what she’d convinced her son to do. “It’s not. I have- I should get back to work, too.”

It was a lie; none of her articles were due in a few weeks, and London might have even been a better place for research.

“Perhaps a bit later,” Henry said. “You never come down to London anymore, Margaret. None of us understand why you moved north in the first place. Mrs Shaw was wondering about that just a few days ago.”

John’s fork clanged loudly against the plate; he apologised for dropping it and fell silent immediately after.

Margaret was quite tempted to tell Henry exactly why, but she didn’t want to ruin the evening. Edith probably would have forgiven her, but she was not quite as sure about Aunt Shaw.

“It’s nice to be close to my parents,” she said. “I’m just a short bus ride away if- “

She didn’t finish the sentence.
There was a short reprieve from the conversation as Steve stood up to talk and thank all of them for being there to test the microphones, and Margaret was more than glad to finish her dinner in silence. Afterwards, she managed to escape her table with the excuse of holding the baby of one of Edith’s friends while said friend went off to the toilet.

“I really like your dress,” she said to the surly-looking eleven-year-old who, going by the behaviour of all parties, was the happy older sister of the baby.

“I don’t,” the girl said and crossed her arms. “Mum made me wear it. She said I look cute.”

She did, but Margaret doubted that would be a good thing to tell her.

“Are you from London?” she asked next.

“No.”

Margaret wanted to laugh but it would have seemed rude and belittling. Luckily, she got a break from the conversation with the sudden appearance of John.

“Hey,” she said. “Sorry for running off and leaving you all alone, I didn’t—”

“It’s okay.” He pulled up a chair and sat next to her. “I can survive without chaperoning for five minutes.”

She couldn’t quite read his tone.

“What’s that?” the girl asked suddenly, saving her the trouble of coming up with a reply.

John turned towards her. “This? This is the chain of my pocket-watch.”

“Can I see it?”

Amused and intrigued, Margaret watched as John pulled out his pocket-watch (she wasn’t surprised he owned one, nor to hear it had been passed down from his grandfather) and showed the girl – Mary, she said, and laughed when he offered her his hand for shaking and very seriously told her his name was John – how it opened, what it looked like and how to wind it. She’d never seen him with children before, save for Tommy Boucher, and never for extended periods of time. It was obvious he was not very used to children, but it helped a lot that Mary seemed very determined to like him, and Margaret couldn’t help her smile as she watched the two of them interact.

“Margaret!”

“What is it, Aunt Shaw?”

Her aunt looked like she was about to start panicking, something about the kitchen and Edith being unavailable and everything being ruined. Luckily, Mary’s mother chose that moment to come back so that Margaret could give her baby back to her and go off with Aunt Shaw to smooth out any problems.

It turned out all that was needed was a few moments of calm and common sense, and getting Aunt Shaw to leave the kitchen so that Margaret could clean up the mess in peace without having to worry about her.

“There you are.”
Perhaps she’d spoken too soon about peace.

“Henry,” she said, turning around. “Aunt Shaw had a kitchen emergency. What are you doing here?”

His smile was just a little too wide for her comfort. “I thought I would keep you company. Your boyfriend seems to have abandoned you to play nursemaid and husband to someone else.”

She forced herself to smile. “He gets on frightfully well with Mary.”

Walking closer, he picked up a piece of bread from the small baskets that had been brought back from the dining room. “I immediately thought you were too good for him, anyway.”

Margaret looked away. “Quite the contrary, I’d say.”

He laughed; the sound came from closer than she’d thought. “As much as modesty suits you, Margaret, you can have too much of a good thing.”

She turned, he was standing maybe ten inches away from her and it was really tempting to push him away.

“I’m not being modest.”

Henry laughed. “You went to Cambridge, Margaret. I’m sure he worked really hard for his GCSEs before embarking on the promising career of a cashier.”

Margaret’s hand curled into a fist. “You just told me a lot more about yourself than about him.”

“C’mon.” He reached out to put his hand on Margaret’s arm; if she’d been less angry she would have felt cornered. “Leave him, and leave that cold, unpleasant concrete block of a town altogether. Come back to London, you can stay at my place.” He laughed. “Although I have to admit I lied, earlier. I don’t have a guestroom. But I do have a king-size bed.”

Her mind registered three things at the same time. One, he’d moved even closer, two, suddenly her arm was extended and his hands were clutching his own face instead of her arm, and three, there was movement at the entrance to the kitchen as John took a small, wavering step towards them.

Margaret dropped her arm and let it hang limply at her side, her fingers unfurling.

Surprisingly, Henry recovered first, straightening his shoulders and turning on his heels with a glare aimed first at Margaret, then at John.

“Well, you can keep her,” he spat out as he moved towards the door. “No wonder you’re so grim, sleeping with that thing.”

Margaret watched motionless as Henry stormed out the room and John walked to her. Her skin tingled as he reached down to grab her hand and brought it up between them, holding it in his as if inspecting it.

“Make a fist.”

It was difficult to think from the shock of the past five minutes and from the distraction of him so close and gentle. “Why?”

“Breaking your hand when punching someone is more common than people think.”
She did as he’d asked.

“Does it hurt?”

Margaret took a shaky breath. “I just hit someone. Of course my hand hurts.”

“Does it hurt worse when you clench it?”

“No.”

“It doesn’t look deformed either.” He let go of it; she had to stop herself from chasing after his hand. “Looks like that, at least, is a problem Henry Lennox doesn’t bother you with.”

Margaret had no idea what to answer to that.

“About last night,” John said, saving her the trouble. “I wasn’t trying to defend him. Actually, I’d spent the day listening to- That doesn’t matter. I was cross with him and his implications and I heard disdain where you probably meant none. I’m sorry.”

“Misunderstandings seem to be our specialty.” Margaret chuckled. The memory of the day he’d caught up to her on that sidewalk and asked if she’d like to have dinner with her flashed through her mind. She had never apologised for the unfairness of her words; he probably still thought she-

John was turning away. “We should probably get back to-“

“John!” She spoke before the moment would be completely over and her courage would desert her. “When you asked me out-“ He turned back to face her; she dropped her gaze to the blender on the table. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” The forcefulness of his voice surprised her into looking up again. “For turning me down? I might have my shortcomings now and I definitely had many more then, but I never did fault you for that, that much at least I can say for my good character. You should never apologise for that.”

“No.” His gaze was stormy but she didn’t allow herself to look away. “For the things I said, the words I used. You’re not a soulless robot only interested in money, and you weren’t then. I had my prejudices and my own faults, and they came out that day in a way I’ve regretted for a long time. That’s what I’m sorry for.”

He deflated, his shoulders dropping and the fire vanishing from his eyes.

“Neither one of us was at our best that day,” he said, looking away.

Margaret was about to answer, to not let him so easily take half the blame, but there were steps in the corridor and soon enough Edith, cheeks red and mouth smiling, walked into the room.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she told them. “Come quick, we need someone to take a look at one of the flower arches, mother thinks it might be falling down.”

Margaret sighed, with a half pleading, half amused look at John, and he followed her out of the kitchen.

—

They didn’t get a chance to talk to each other until they walked into the hotel lift after waving goodbye to Edith and Steve who’d given them a ride, and at that point, Margaret honestly had no
idea what to say.

It seemed John shared the feeling, and they were in their room before either one of them spoke.

“I promised Mary’s mother I’d look after Mary tomorrow while she’s sorting out something with Edith,” John said, his words measured like he’d spent the silence going over them.

She had nothing to do, although she was fairly sure Edith or Aunt Shaw would think of something for her to do if she just thought about her free time too loudly.

“Okay.”

When she glanced at him the next time, he was looking at her but turned his head away quickly when their eyes met.

—

Margaret couldn’t fall asleep. Perhaps it was everything that had happened with John, perhaps it was everything that had happened with Henry before that (her blood still boiled at the mere thought), perhaps it was Aunt Shaw’s increasingly frayed nerves and the ensuing bouts of pre-wedding panic. Perhaps it was the way she could still feel John’s fingers against the skin of her hand.

Whatever it was, it wouldn’t let her sleep. And when she couldn’t sleep, her mind turned to bigger questions like some ham-fisted attempt to make use of the extra time her sleeplessness afforded her.

She would have to email Flora Thompson about the afterschool homework group she was involved in, ask her if she wouldn’t mind coming next Wednesday because Marjorie couldn’t make it and Margaret really didn’t feel up to facing Mike Smith’s physics homework on her own. If she couldn’t make it, Margaret would just have to try; she was determined not to leave a single child who came in leave without having the answers to their questions. Her father had stopped at nothing to help her with her studies, whether he was previously familiar with the subject or not. Most of the kids who frequented the group did not have that at home, and she could not fix that, could not give overworked parents more time or more money, could not make the absentee parents care more about their children, but she could make sure to give those kids that one little thing.

It was too little, she thought and rearranged her pillow. There had to be something more to be done, something more she could do. The worst part about trying to improve your community and the lives of others was that you were very quickly confronted with your own insignificance and limitations.

The pillow still didn’t feel comfortable under her head, and she rolled around on the bed, facing the middle.

That way, she could see John on his back, eyes wide open as he looked up into the ceiling.

“Can’t sleep either?” he asked with a crooked smile as their eyes met.

Margaret shook her head. “Too many thoughts.”

John turned onto his side so that he didn’t have to strain his neck to look at her. “And what does Margaret Hale think about when she cannot fall asleep?”

It felt foolish to say out loud, but Margaret was a bad liar even at her best, and in the middle of the
night was never her best.

“A community centre I volunteer at,” she said. “How there must be something else I could do for those kids aside from helping them understand Shakespeare’s sonnets and spell ‘ignore’.”

John let out a laugh, but it was too soft for Margaret to even consider he was laughing at her. “I should have known you’d try to carry the weight of the whole world on your shoulders.”

Margaret shook her head. “I’m not. I’m wallowing in guilt. That never helped anyone.”

John looked away, and Margaret was suddenly hyperaware that his father had killed himself and left a suicide note asking for forgiveness.

“How about you?” she asked. “You’re equally awake.”

She received a chuckle, but at least he was looking at her again.

“You’re going to laugh at me.”

“I promise I won’t.”

He shook his head, but he was smiling, too.

“I count expenses and profits. Work out how quickly I could pay off any outstanding debts if I went bankrupt and if I could give severance pay to all my employees, and how much.”

Margaret swallowed. “I can’t find anything funny in that.”

John held her gaze. “The shop’s doing well, it’s just— It’s just something I do. If you already told Elizabeth about making Assistant Manager, you don’t have to take that back.”

“I didn’t.”

They laid there in silence until Margaret began to feel awkward about wordlessly watching him.

“It suits you,” she said. “You worry about the world, too, it’s just that—”

“My world’s smaller?”

She risked a smile. “You’re more practical. I have to work hard to ground myself in reality so that I won’t wake up in five years’ time and realise I’ve only ever made grand plans and have no concrete progress to show for it.”

“Yeah, well.” John swallowed. “There’s such a thing as too practical.”

She didn’t know what to say to that — her impulse to reach out to take his hand and tell him it was okay didn’t seem appropriate — and they lapsed into silence again.

—

When she woke up, John wasn’t there.

I don’t even know why I’m surprised, Margaret thought to herself as she dressed quickly. I’ve only ever woken up next to him once, and before that, there was half a lifetime of happily not waking up next to him.

She did, however, find him in the breakfast room just like she had the previous day, this time
chewing on bacon and eggs.

“Did you sleep at all?” she asked as she set down her plateful of yoghurt.

“I did. At least five hours.”

“Well you’re lucky Mary doesn’t exactly seem like the hyperactive type.”

He chuckled. “I daresay she’s not. She got incredibly excited when she heard that the British Museum has two whole rooms full of clocks and watches, so I promised we’d go there.”

Margaret almost spat out her yoghurt.

“I guess I should have seen that one coming,” she said when her mouth was empty again. “Have fun.”

“I’m sure we will.” John took a sip of his water. “What are you doing today?”

“I don’t know.”

He seemed suddenly very interested in his bacon. “You could come with us, if you wanted.”

Margaret was about to smile and gently turn down the offer with a comment about how Mary hadn’t exactly seemed too fond of her the previous evening, but she thought again before she spoke. She didn’t have anything planned for the day, and- Looking after an acquaintance’s child together was a very couple-y thing to do, right? If it wasn’t for how desperately Aunt Shaw wanted to see her with a man, Margaret was sure her sharp-eyed aunt would have started to suspect something was off already.

“Sure. As long as Mary doesn’t think I’m intruding.”

John smiled, and Margaret could see the surprise on his face, try as he might to conceal it. “I’m sure she won’t. Although if you’re not too interested in clocks, Richard did mention that there’s a special exhibition-“

“On ancient Greece, yeah. He thought it would interest you.”

“Don’t tell him, but ancient Greece has lost its shine a little since I-“

“Actually started reading about it?” Margaret laughed as John dropped his head in embarrassment, managing a small nod all the same. “It happens to the best of us. I wanted to throw my copy of The Republic across the room when I first read it.”

John looked at her from under his brows as if he couldn’t quite believe his own ears. “I hated Aristotle even more. I wanted to strangle the poor guy after only a few pages.”

“So I take it that’s a no on the special exhibition?”

John flashed her a smile. “I won’t tell Richard if you won’t either.”

“Deal. There’s some interesting stuff in the permanent collections about the Industrial Revolution and cotton manufacture that I didn’t have the time to properly look at the last time I was there. That is, assuming Mary doesn’t get bored after the third clock and just want to go eat ice cream at a playground.”

She received a nod. “Sounds interesting. We’ll see how it goes.”
“I feel like I should make a comment,” John said as he sat down next to Margaret on the park bench, careful not to drop his ice cream even though his eyes never left Mary, sitting on the grass about ten feet away from them and completely engrossed in looking at pictures of clocks in her new book. “But I will refrain.”

“That’s wise,” Margaret said and licked at her ice cream. “And don’t try to pretend you weren’t getting weary, too, I saw you when she wasn’t looking.”

“That is a lot of concentration for a pre-teen.” There was a definite fondness in his tone. “Makes me almost jealous.”

“You’re the most focused person I know.” Margaret nudged at his side gently. “That’s high praise, coming from you.”

John took a particularly large bite of his ice cream and said nothing for a while as he ate it. Meanwhile, Mary seemed to be done with a chapter, closed the book and walked up to them.

“Ready to get ice cream now?” John asked her.

Carefully, Mary put her book in the plastic bag. “I think so.”

John walked over to the queue to get it for her, and Mary and Margaret followed him with their eyes.

“You should forgive him already,” Mary said.

Margaret couldn’t help the sharp turn of her head, but she tried to make her voice lighter when she asked, “What?”

“He’s all careful around you like Aunt Ellie is around Mum after they’ve fought.” Mary chewed on her lip. “He’s nice, and you look at him a lot when he talks about mechanical clocks and you don’t even like clocks.”

Margaret watched as John reached the front of the queue and pulled out his wallet as the seller began to scoop ice cream.

“I’ve already forgive him,” she said, more to herself than to Mary. “I can barely understand how I ever was cross with him.”

—

Margaret waited until Mary’s mother came to pick her up and then excused herself to make the phone call.

Bessie picked up on the third ring. “I was starting to think you might be dead.”

“Did you break up with me because I was falling for him?”

“Good evening to you, too, my day was fine, thanks for asking, no, I did not.” There was a short silence. “What makes you ask that?”

“I can’t remember when I started,” Margaret said. “I think it was later than that, but—”

“Margaret,” Bessie’s tone was calm, “we broke up because one day you told me you were going to take a two-week business trip and I realised I wouldn’t even miss you. I can’t speak about your
feelings but as far as I’m concerned, there were no jealous feelings. Our relationship didn’t end like fifties lesbian pulp fiction if that’s what you’re worried about. We just—Drifted apart. It happens.”

Margaret took a deep breath. It felt easier, after what Bessie had said.

“Now, though,” Bessie’s voice turned teasing, “about what you said. Which tone should I use when I tell you ‘I told you so’ about John?”

Margaret groaned. “I’m hanging up on you,” she said. “Oh, and congratulations.”

“For what?” she heard Bessie ask before she ended the call.

—

“Could you do my zipper for me?” Margaret asked as she walked out of the bathroom, feeling a lot like she was in a romantic comedy.

Or at least she would have, had John not done as she asked very quickly and effectively. Romantic comedies lingered for intimate close-ups of hands.

Margaret swallowed and told herself her skin wasn’t tingling where John’s hands had brushed against it.

She spent the next ten minutes on her hair, trying to be less aware of John just a few feet away from her doing his cufflinks.

“So this is awkward,” John said just as she decided her skills weren’t enough to make her hair any better, “but do you know how to tie a tie?”

Margaret turned to him, unable to stop her grin. “You don’t?”

His expression turned sheepish. “I tie them once and wear them forever, but this is a new tie so…”

Margaret nodded in acknowledgement and reached out her hand. “Give me it.”

She draped the tie around her own neck and quickly tied it, checking in the mirror that the knot looked good and then took it off as she walked up to John and got on her toes loop the tie around his neck.

“I take it you didn’t learn that by helping out your father,” John said, clearly intrigued, as he watched Margaret tighten the tie and make sure it looked neat.

She flashed him a quick, bright smile as she walked to the other side of the bed to get her earrings. “I most certainly didn’t.”

He didn’t ask, just continued to look at her with that look in his eyes. She made herself to look in the mirror and not look back. Her make-up wouldn’t be enough to hide it if she was blushing as much as she felt she was.

—

If the previous days had made her doubtful about how they could fake being a couple at the wedding, all those doubts vanished before they even made it out of the church. John wasn’t overly talkative, but he introduced himself readily to everyone who came to catch up with Margaret and stood by her side with a polite smile. As they walked into the church, he put his hand lightly to
Margaret’s waist.

“Is this okay?”

No, it most definitely wasn’t. It was downright Victorian to have such a strong reaction to it, but it made her want to turn around and throw her own arms around him and test if the material of his suit was as smooth as it looked by resting her cheek against it. Or jump up as high as she could to see if she could reach his lips to kiss him.

“Yes,” she whispered back. “It’s good.”

Unlike Aunt Shaw had predicted and feared, the service went off without a hitch, and Edith and Steve walked out of the church into an onslaught of rice with beaming smiles. For her part, Margaret was also happy to see all the indubitably very eligible single men in the audience that her aunt would not be trying to set up with her.

It was all very well, at least until the reception began.

It wasn’t that John did anything inappropriate; quite the contrary. He continued being the perfect fake boyfriend, staying close but not too close, implicitly but not explicitly affectionate, attentive to the guests they talked to but without talking so much that he’d give away he’d never heard Margaret mention any of them during their supposedly long and serious relationship. Margaret even noticed Edith’s aunt smile at them across the room.

No, it wasn’t that. It was just that as the reception dragged on, the utter pleasantness of it began to immensely annoy her. It was an act, and it was a great act at that; sometimes, when she turned to look at John for confirmation of something she’d just said, she almost believed it was true.

That was the problem. She didn’t feel relieved when she inevitably remembered the truth; she felt wistful.

There, at least, the blandly pleasant facade he’d taken up was of use. If he’d been his usual self, with his wry humour and that passion that was always lurking just behind the surface, she’d have been quite unable to convincingly act her part, at least without making him supremely uncomfortable.

“We met through Margaret’s father,” John told Mr and Mrs Sanderson, who were on the more tolerable end of the long list of Aunt Shaw’s friends, as they were waiting for the entrées to be served. “Richard and I play bridge together.”

“It’s been such a long time since we saw Richard and Maria, hasn’t it, George?” Mrs Sanderson exclaimed. “How are they doing?”

Margaret was all too glad to join in on the conversation, which thankfully moved from her parents to the recession and not back to Margaret and John’s relationship.

“That’s very interesting,” Mrs Sanderson said to John as he finished explaining the effects of something or other in his shop. “It reminds me about something I was thinking earlier when I was talking to Henry Lennox about—”

“Oooh, have you seen Lennox today?” Mr Sanderson turned to Margaret, probably judging her to be the least involved in the conversation that he’d been only half-heartedly following. “I’ve wanted to ask, but he seems so surly today so I don’t dare. You know him quite well, don’t you, has he told you where he got that marvellous black eye?”

Margaret almost choked on her water.
“No,” she said. “He hasn’t told me.”

She looked over to John who was nodding along to what Mrs Sanderson was saying but had also obviously heard the conversation. He’d flash her a quick smile, she thought, to show he’d heard and appreciated the irony of the situation, if they were actually together. They were not, though, and so he turned his full attention back to Mrs Sanderson and she looked down at the salad on her plate, trying to ignore the hollow feeling in her chest.

The speeches were long but at least they were amusing, and they also gave her something else to focus on aside from keeping up appearances. Of course, she should have realised that after speeches was the first dance, and after everyone had duly applauded, other people began to join in. Among the first were the Sandersons, which left John and Margaret alone at their table.

“Do you want to dance?” John asked after a few minutes.

He might as well have added, ‘That’s customary, right?’ It was implicit in the tone.

“We might as well,” Margaret said. “Although if I step on your feet, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The left corner of John’s mouth curled up. “Duly noted.”

She soon got an answer to her earlier question of if he was a dancer; definitely not. But neither was she, and there was nothing quite like a couple of times where either one of them almost stepped on the other’s foot to shake them off that carefully practiced fake relationship routine.

“I don’t remember when I last danced with someone who wasn’t my mother,” he said, “and she’s never learnt to let anyone else lead. Sorry about that.”

“I was at home with fever that P.E. lesson we were supposed to learn the waltz.” Margaret smiled up at him. “I suppose we’re even.”

They passed Edith, who greeted them with an excited cry and was promptly led away by her current dance partner. Seeing that that was Henry, Margaret had no doubt it was entirely intentional.

“Mr Sanderson was right,” John said with that wry smile she’d missed all day. “That really is a marvellous black eye. You’re a natural.”

“How do you know I haven’t got a lot of practice to perfect my skills?”

“You don’t seem the type.” They almost waltzed straight into a nearby couple, missing them narrowly. “You don’t pull any punches in an argument, but as to literal punches, I’ve just always thought you’d need a really good reason.”

“I had one.”

“I know. I could hear you from the corridor.”

Their eyes met briefly, and Margaret looked away.

Another couple almost crashed into them, and this time, it most certainly was not their fault.

“Well, I see I didn’t spend an afternoon carrying box after box full of bottles for nothing,” John said, and Margaret was happy to laugh and put thoughts about Henry Lennox behind her.

“You make a handsome couple,” Mr Sanderson said, he and his wife appearing by their side
seemingly from thin air, but probably thanks to dancing that was much more gracious than what Margaret and John managed. “It’s a pleasure to see a pair who moves well together.”

“You flatter us,” Margaret answered. “I’ve narrowly missed his toes at least three times during this song alone.”

The Sandersons laughed and danced away, and Margaret turned back to John just in time to see that infuriating, mindless pleasantness on his features again.

She didn’t need much time to make the decision. It was already the evening. It wouldn’t matter if she ruined everything now.

“John,” she said, her voice compelling him to look at her, “why did you come here with me?”

He frowned. “You asked.”

“But why did you agree? It’s not exactly a request you get every day.”

“You’re Richard’s daughter.” His tone was even, but his hold on Margaret’s hand tightened like he was instinctually clenching his hand. “He’s a good friend.”

Perhaps she was wrong, her brain suggested. How likely was it anyway that anyone would still carry a torch for someone who’d rejected them years ago in the most unkind way possible? But however unlikely it was, the fact could not be gainsaid that he’d come with her, and Margaret could not bring herself to believe even John would be so loyal as to do it out of friendship towards her father. She breathed in deeply to gather her courage.

“Dixon’s the best and most faithful friend my mother had ever had,” she said. “I wouldn’t even entertain the thought of doing this for her.”

He pursed his lips tightly, and she noticed the abnormal evenness of his breathing as he looked past her.

“Don’t ask me to say it out loud,” he finally said. “As if it hasn’t always been painfully obvious.”

She wanted to reach up and kiss him, but she was already craning her neck just to be able to look him in the eye.

“Will you lean down a little?”

He tried to keep his face passive, but she could see the frown. “Why?”

It was her turn now to squeeze at his hand. “So that I can get on my tiptoes and kiss you.”

He stopped abruptly; she almost stepped on his foot.

“I told you,” his voice was rough, “I’m not comfortable going that far-“

“Not for credibility,” she interrupted him. “Just- because. I want to, and you seem like you do too.”

Other couples were giving them odd looks, but she ignored them, focusing on the clench of his jaw and those eyes that were looking at anywhere but her.

“You said no,” he said. “You don’t think of me that way, and I respect that.”

“I spent yesterday with you looking after a pre-teen child who doesn’t like me.” Margaret
swallowed. “We’re in London, I could have done anything, and I chose to look at old clocks with you.”

He took a sharp breath but didn’t say anything.

“I’m very happy that you respect my no,” she said. “But I’d be even happier right now if you just said yes.”

Slowly, his eyes found hers, more unguarded and vulnerable than she’d ever seen them. He watched her for a few moments and then swallowed, slowly, so slowly leaned down, his eyes dropping closed, until his nose brushed against her forehead.

“Yes,” he said, sounding like he was bracing to receive a laugh in return and watch her march off the dance floor with disgust.

As it happened, she rushed to get up on her toes and push her lips against his lest he take too long a wait as an answer.

Their hands were still holding each other in the waltz pose; Margaret couldn’t think to do anything about them, but she did use the hand she had on John’s shoulder to pull him closer without regard to the small strain it put to her neck, and his, too, she assumed. For his part, John really didn’t seem to mind, readjusting his hand on her waist to better help her balance in her current position.

It had to end; neither of them were used to making such a show of themselves in public and while a wedding certainly gave them leeway when it came to other’s opinions, it did no such thing to her own.

She didn’t go far as she pulled away, searching his eyes to reassure him of- She found it hard to find words, even inside her own head.

He looked dazed, like he’d lived his whole life in a black and white world and she’d showed him a flash of colour, and he was looking at her as intently as she was at him.

Margaret couldn’t help it; she burst out laughing, out of pure joy, a happy, clear sound that she was sure rang around the room. She kept looking at him through it; the corners of his mouth pulled upwards until the smile of his mouth almost matched the smile in his eyes in exuberance.

“We’re on everyone’s way,” he said eventually, and she was all too glad to follow his lead as they started moving to the music again.

This time, though, there was a gentle but insistent pressure to his hand on her waist that hadn’t been there before and that made pleasant shivers run up her spine.

“Is everyone staring at us?” she asked quietly. “I can’t see over your shoulder to check.”

“Less now,” John practically whispered in her ear, which did nothing to help the state of pleasant agitation she was in to dissipate. “It probably hasn’t occurred to them that that was our first kiss.”

“I hope it stays that way.” She couldn’t really move any closer to him without making dancing really difficult, but that didn’t stop her from trying. “We’d never hear the end of it.”

It was difficult to keep craning her neck to look at John, so she moved her head into a more comfortable position, her eyes falling on his tie and the knot she’d made for him. She traced the pattern of the fabric of his suit jacket with her eyes and remembered her earlier idea of resting her head against the material. She could do that now, if only the song was more suited to that kind of dancing.
“Margaret?”

Her name on his lips pulled her out of her thoughts, and she looked up at him again. His mouth was back to its customary barest hint of a smile, and while there was still joy in his eyes, it was now mixed with uttermost seriousness and, she thought, disbelief.

“Mmm?”

“What happens after this?”

She held his gaze. “After what?”

As far as she could tell, he didn’t even blink. “After this dance,” he said. “After the wedding. After we get back home.”

Not breaking eye contact, she squeezed his hand. “After this dance, we’ll stay here and dance to the next song, and to the one after that until Edith’s sappy side finally obliges the band to play a song that allows me to rest my head against your chest like I’ve been wanting to do all day.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, and for a moment, there was nothing but happiness in his eyes again. “After the wedding, we’ll take a taxi to the hotel and hope sharing a bed is more convenient than awkward.” That got her a coy duck of his head. She’d never have thought such a gesture would be something he would ever do, but was very pleased with how it looked on him. “And after we get back… I don’t know, but if I’ve counted correctly, you have three more days of mother-imposed holiday left, and I have a few more days I can spend not working. Bessie mentioned you had a habit of booking last minute European getaways?”

He watched her for a moment like he couldn’t believe she was real, and then slowly, his smile unfurled again, as brilliant as ever. For a fleeting moment, he looked like he was going to kiss her again, but then, with a brief glance around the room, seemed to re-evaluate the idea and settled for simply watching her.

—

She woke up with her nose smashed against his naked side, his arm extended above and behind her so that she was essentially resting her head in his armpit.

There were worse places to wake up, she thought as she raised her head. He was already awake, which was not surprising, and had his phone resting on his chest so that he could see the screen from his current position.

He turned to look at her.

“Morning. Did I wake you up?”

“No,” she said, moving on the bed to press a quick kiss against his shoulder before resting her head there. “What were you doing?”

“I meant to look into those European getaways we were talking about,” he said, moving his arm so that it came to rest on Margaret’s waist under the blanket, “but it turns out one hand really is not enough to both hold up your phone and type search terms, so mostly I was just fumbling and trying not to swear too loudly.”

“I have a lot of trouble imagining you swearing,” Margaret said as she wrestled her hand free of the blankets and reached out towards John’s phone. “What did you want to search for?”
John held the phone in place as she typed the address he gave her. “I do swear,” he said. “Sometimes.”

“After you’ve hit your thumb with a hammer doesn’t count.”

Internet surfing was not that much effective with two hands belonging to different people, but neither of them felt like moving so they really had no alternative, and anyway, the clock told them they had three hours before check-out.

“Berlin could be nice,” John said and tilted his head to rest against Margaret’s. “I’ve never been to Germany.”

“It is nice. But I was there just a few months ago. Tromsø is in Norway, right? I hear it’s beautiful.”

John grimaced. “I went fishing there once.”

“Not a good trip?”

“I fell into the ocean.”

She did laugh at him, but it only made his smile a little softer.

“Krakow is great,” he said when he finally went back to the search results. “And it’s been years since I- Oh, you’re going to love this one.”

She made herself stop giggling and looked up. “What?”

“Paris.”

She started laughing again as if she’d never have stopped.

“It’s not a bad idea, though,” she said after a moment. “It’s a train ride, too, I’ve never cared for planes and airports always take a very long time.”

“Even if its reputation as the most romantic city in the world is unfounded?” John asked, teasing evident in his voice.

She turned to face him, taking the phone out of his hand and depositing it on the bedside table to be out of the way.

“I didn’t tell Henry,” she said as she moved so that she was practically on top of him, “but I’m pretty sure most of the romance always comes from your travel companion. I look forwards to testing that theory.”

“Fine,” John said after a few minutes, looking up at her with open reverence in his eyes. “Paris it is.”

They only managed to do their check-out five minutes before the expected time and had to run to get to their 13.03 train to Paris.

It was worth every second.

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