A Secret in the Open

“Will that be all ma’am?” my mother gently asked as she handed the lady a small glass of laudanum.

“Yes you may go,” moaned Mrs. Hamilton. She looked very much like an invalid encased by her down pillows and fluffy quilt blankets. Mother shooed me out of the room and into the hall.

“Will she be alright?” I asked, concerned.

“Mrs. Hamilton is fatigued by the preparations for Miss Jane’s season,” sighed Mother, “And nothing but a good dose or two of laudanum will calm her nerves.” I followed Mother downstairs to the servants’ quarters and watched eagerly as she began to hem a beautiful blue gown. “Watch carefully now,” she said, and with that my daily lesson began. Mother hoped I would become Miss Jane’s lady’s maid within the year. The prospect was both exhilarating and intimidating. I began daydreaming about life as one of the Two Hundred, one of the Two Hundred rich and powerful families who were invited to join in the most elite and prestigious social events of the season. Mrs. Astor, although known to be rather fickle, gave the best dinner parties. Everyone courted her good opinion. I was jerked back to reality by a sharp stab from the needle I was using, and diligently went back to work under Mother’s disapproving stare.
The weeks flew by in the dizzying rush that preceded Miss Jane’s coming out. The seamstress came to fit her newly ordered garments, a Hamilton family heirloom was reset, visits were made, and calling cards were received with anxious excitement. The day arrived at last. Servants scurried here and there. In Miss Jane’s bedroom, I stood with my mother helping her with the daunting task of putting Miss Jane’s curled hair up in an elegant style. At long last she was dressed in silk from head to toe, and with the addition of a pair of brilliant white gloves, her ensemble was complete.

The household migrated toward the front door to wish our beloved Jane the best, but I lingered a moment longer in her chamber. I looked around and saw the gold gilded brush, the fine handcrafted seats, and the glorious overflowing wardrobe and I felt dirty. Glancing down I could see my worn shoes, patched apron, and calloused hands that made such a vivid contrast to the world in which I was placed. I felt like an intruder, a phoney, an imposter.

In the weeks following the dinner, the house was in an uproar. The footman told the scullery maid who told the butler who told the rest of us that Miss Jane was a smashing success. Rumours were already spreading about a man named John Paxton, who had shown her particular attention. The cook came into the common room squealing about a visitor for tea. Overjoyed, the staff felt that the dashing Mr. Paxton would be perfect for our Jane.

I was assigned the task of assisting Miss Jane in preparation for our guest, my first true taste of what being a lady’s maid would be like. I busied myself with choosing the perfect day dress for the occasion. An excited smile danced at the corners of Miss Jane’s mouth. We all had high hopes for Mr. Paxton. She quietly chatted with me about Mrs. Astor’s luxurious banquet. She described the strange tasting oysters, exotic fruit, and
delicious ice cream. I was struck by the richness of it all as I skillfully braided and wove her hair in an elegant style.

By the time our guest arrived, Miss Jane looked radiant and I felt like an old worn out shoe. I was traveling through a polished world that held so much happiness but only highlighted my grime. I was perpetually pressing my nose against the glass of a life I would never know. While Miss Jane received roses, I received a scolding from the butler.

As if Mother sensed something was wrong, she sent me on an errand knowing how much I loved the freedom. Dawdling, I took a new route winding in and out of the massive houses that adorned this block of New York. I passed into the shopping district where the rich came to see and be seen. A newsboy on the corner hawked his merchandise, advertising for a paper that would accurately predict the stock prices for 1891.

Without realizing it, I had walked into an area I had never been before. New and strange scents accosted me. People were rough and hurried. Their poverty was evident. A dead dog lay in the street unnoticed and uncared for by the passersby. Beggars sat in nooks and crannies up and down the street. Every turn produced a new scattering of rotting refuse, grunge, and half-conscious beings seeking comfort against tenement walls. The loud sound of foreign tongues met my ears, almost disorienting me. In my haste to escape the horde of people, I went farther off my path. I found myself standing in front of a dark battered building. A child laughed and raced past me up the crooked steps that lead into the apartment. A small girl, presumably chasing the other child, stopped and stared at me. She was so thin I could see the outline of her collar bones through her soiled dress. She grabbed my hand and yanked me toward the door. For some reason, I followed her. The air seemed
murky and heavy. Disregarded items met us at every landing. I was panting heavily by the time she stopped. I could hear the loud cough of sickness from a nearby apartment as she pulled me into her home. It was small. Very small. Several beds were pushed into a room barely fit for one. The overwhelming odor of people made me gag. An old woman sat on one of the ratty mattresses watching over the children. She began to speak in a different language. I awkwardly shook my head. Understanding, she patted the bed beside her and smiled. Half of her teeth were missing and I couldn’t help cringing a little. Suddenly, the dark room and dirty air felt overwhelming and ominous to me, and I hurried out the door with a half wave.

I was chastening myself as I rushed out of the vicinity of the apartment. I heard voices ringing out from a nearby alley. I don’t know what possessed me to stop and listen, perhaps it was the urgent outrage that rang through every word, but I do know that it changed everything.

“Is Paxton in town yet?” came a gruff voice.

“Ha, John should know not to show up in these parts,” another male voice boomed, “Not after he ran off with that money from his father’s clerk, Brewer.”

“Lousy thing he did. I heard it from Brewer himself that his father warned that he would disinherit him. John turned right around and threatened to sell the family’s secrets to the highest bidder.”

I let out a gasp. This was horrible news. John Paxton was not the honest and caring man we had thought him to be. Someone had to tell the Hamiltons! Jane would be a social outcast if she married that scoundrel and his deeds came to light! I began to run. As I passed
Central Park, my thoughts began to turn in another direction. What would the family think? Miss Jane would hate me. She would be crushed, and I would never be a lady’s maid. Mother would be so disappointed. I began to question if I should even share such terrible news. If no one found out, everything would be fine. Doubt gnawed at me. The devastating secret ate away at my insides, knotting my stomach into an aching ball of anxiety.

By the time I reached home I was crying. Within a quarter of an hour my mother had heard through the web of servants that something was wrong and rushed to me. I poured out all of the details as well as my own uncertainties. Rubbing my back she quieted me. She looked me square in the eye and said, “You know what you have to do, don’t you?” Solemnly I nodded. Together we went upstairs to the sitting room where Mrs. Hamilton and Miss Jane were stitching patterns onto a seat cushion.

“Excuse me ma’am,” my mother asserted, much to the shock of the ladies who had always known my mother to be seen and never heard. Gently pushing me forward I began my story. When I finished and looked up I saw Mrs. Hamilton faint with disbelief and horror. Poor Miss Jane’s large tears tumbled down her cheek and onto her needlework.

The next week was gray. It rained outside and inside. The normal cheer was replaced with a thick blanket of disappointment. Much to the servants vengeful delight, Mrs. Astor discovered Mr. Paxton’s secret and promptly uninvited him to all of her social events. The other affluent families quickly followed suit. Very slowly, things got better. The view of the Hamiltons I received through the incident was infinitely valuable to me. I saw them as they really were. They hurt despite their diamonds. They were real people.
On my next day off I convinced Cook to give me a small basket of food. Begrudgingly she forked over some day old bread, overripe fruit, and cheese. I made my way through the streets of the rich, past the stores, and by the newsboys to the crowded filthy place where I had been only a fortnight before. I climbed up the rickety stairs and knocked. The small girl opened the door, and upon seeing me, said something excitedly to the old woman. I sat down beside her, offering her the basket. Looking around I saw a happiness that startled me. The old woman’s smile was beautiful and precious in light of her surroundings. The children giggled gleefully in the corner despite their lack of playthings.

The happiness they radiated was not wealth driven. I looked down at my shoes, my apron, my calloused hands, and back up at the children, and smiled.