

This scene comes from Henrietta's and Charlotte's tete a tete during the pre-Twelfth Night ball at Girdings, as Henrietta pumps Charlotte for the details of her possible, hypothetical, not-quite-sure-what-that-was Almost Kiss. I hated having to cut this scene, not only because I love the best friend dynamic between Henrietta and Charlotte, but because it reveals so much about the way Charlotte views the world.

*"You mean kiss him myself?" demanded Charlotte, laughing at the sheer absurdity of the notion.*

*Henrietta wasn't laughing. "That is one idea."*

*"You sound like Pen!"*

*"Not all of Pen's ideas are bad."*

*"No," protested Charlotte, before Henrietta could come up with any other absurd ideas. "I wouldn't want a stolen kiss in a corridor—especially not if I were the one stealing it. I want...."*

*And there she faltered. She knew precisely what she wanted, but it was almost impossible to reduce it to words. She wanted him to steal the kiss, but it was more than that. She wanted the sort of single-minded devotion of Tristan for Isolde or Leander for Hero, the sort of devotion that overleaped oceans and toppled empires. Admittedly, there wasn't much in the way of ocean or empire available at Girdings, but it wasn't the specifics that mattered. Her parents proved that. They had conducted their grand love affair against the domestic backdrop of an ivy hung brick house outside a small market town, expressing their devotion in smiles passed across the breakfast table along with the sugar bowl and the Morning Post. There hadn't been any ships launched or any cities gone up in flame, but it was quite recognizably the same emotion. That was what Charlotte wanted. She wanted Robert to look at her as if she were the only thing that mattered in the whole wide world.*

*As always, Henrietta already knew exactly what she meant.*

*"True love," Henrietta finished for her.*

*Charlotte looked down at her gloved hands. "Well... yes."*

*It sounded rather silly dragged out into simple prose. Charlotte hunched her shoulders, which suddenly felt much barer than they had before.*

*"True love takes different forms," said Henrietta gently.*

*Shaking her hair back out of her face, Charlotte looked earnestly across at her. "In some ways, yes," she agreed, thinking of her parents, of Beatrice and Benedick, of Guinivere and Lancelot, of all the loves, loves triumphant, loves doomed, loves trumpeted across the ages, loves*

*unsung. But all had one thing in common. “To be true, it has to be reciprocal. A one-way love doesn’t count. That’s just infatuation.”*

*Shaking her head, Henrietta squeezed her in a quick hug. “I love you, but sometimes you think too much.”*

One of the major tensions between Charlotte and Robert—at least from Robert’s side of things—is the fact that Charlotte was raised in the ducal household and he wasn’t. Charlotte, of course, is completely oblivious to this. This scene, excised from Chapter Three, takes a dark turn as what began as a careless comment on Robert’s part—teasingly calling her “Queen Charlotte”—becomes a reminder of the social gulf between them.

*“Princess Charlotte,” Charlotte corrected. “Queen Charlotte sounds too much like lese majeste.”*

*“Usurping the place of the real Queen, you mean?” said Robert, amused.*

*Charlotte nodded. “I was named after her, you know.”*

*“I didn’t know.” Those sorts of compliments to royalty weren’t in his experience. In the taverns and stews in which he had spent most of his youth, women were named things like Nan or Polly or Saucy Sal, short, pithy names you could bellow to bring you another tankard of ale.*

*“It was meant as an olive branch to Grandmama. I think Papa hoped that if he showed that he still remembered his responsibilities to the family that Grandmama would become reconciled to his marriage.”*

*“Did she?” Robert had no need to wait for a response; the expression on Charlotte’s face was eloquent enough. “That would be a no, then.”*

*“A very great big no,” said Charlotte decisively.*

*“Was it very hard for your parents? Having to give up all this?”*

*“Hard?” Charlotte looked at him in genuine confusion. “No. It was lovely.”*

*“Lovelier than a ducal estate?”*

*“It was different,” she said finally, and although she spoke softly, Robert knew he had been dismissed as firmly as if it had been by the Duchess herself.*

Christmas wouldn’t be Christmas without presents. This scene was also a casualty of Chapter Three (you can just imagine the slaughter that chapter occasioned; bits of eviscerated text everywhere!). For all that he’s honorable to a fault, Robert has a bit of the con man in him. He’s

very good at charming his way out of awkward situations—all of which, of course, Charlotte takes at face value.

*“I just wanted to say thank you. For the present.”*

*It took Robert a moment to remember what she was talking about. Present? Oh. Right. It had been a length of silk, purchased as random, hastily dredged from his baggage when it belatedly dawned on him that the holiday season was generally accompanied by gifts. It hadn't been much of a gift, but it had been the only one appropriate for a person of the female persuasion. The hunting knife would not have gone over well.*

*Charlotte was thanking him for that?*

*She was a duke's daughter; she must have received gifts far richer. His gift had been a mere bagatelle, the make-shift provision of the moment. Had he remembered, he would have found Charlotte a more appropriate Christmas gift, but small female cousins hadn't exactly been at the forefront of his mind when he had set off for Girdings.*

*No one, however, appeared to have apprised Charlotte of this crucial fact.*

*“It was truly lovely of you,” she said, as though he'd showered her with ropes of emeralds, instead of a length of cheap bazaar silk, bought for a few rupees on a whim.*

*“It matches your eyes,” said Robert gallantly, having no notion what color her eyes were, and only the vaguest recollection of the color of the silk.*

*His little cousin didn't seem to notice anything the least bit suspect about that statement. Her cheeks pinked with pleasure. Above them, her eyes were a pale grey-green. Robert fixed the image in his memory, resolving to find her something that would suit them.*

*Jade might do, if fine and translucent enough. Jade set in silver.*