



JEN TURANO



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Jen Turano, *In Good Company*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2015. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2015 by Jennifer L. Turano

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turano, Jen.

In good company / Jen Turano.

pages ; cm

Summary: "In 1880s East Coast society, Millie and Everett are determined to prove themselves as a nanny and a society gentleman, respectively. They both have one last chance, each other"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1276-5 (pbk.)

1. Title.

PS3620.U7455I5 2015

813'.6—dc23

2015006513

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Paul Higdon

Cover photography by Brandon Hill Photos

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Jeb, Madison, and Morgan Turner
Love you!
Jennifer



1



LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK—JULY 1882

Consider yourself dismissed. Effective . . . immediately.”
Miss Millie Longfellow squinted against the bright light that suddenly filled the cluttered broom closet she was standing in, resisting a sigh when Mrs. Cutling loomed into view. Swallowing past the lump that had formed in her throat, she took a hesitant step forward. “Forgive me, ma’am, but did you just say *dismissed*?”

“Indeed.”

“But . . . why?”

Planting a hand against a fashionably clad hip, Mrs. Cutling, Millie’s employer for all of one week, narrowed her eyes. “I would think the reasoning behind your immediate dismissal is obvious.”

“I’m afraid not.”

Mrs. Cutling’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. “Did I, or did I not, hire you to watch after the children?”

“Yes, of course, but . . .”

“And you believe you’re doing an adequate job of that watching as you lurk in the dark depths of this broom closet?”

“Oh, I wasn’t lurking, Mrs. Cutling. I was simply biding some time in a location that was certain to keep the children out of view.”

“Should that make me feel more disposed to keep you on?”

“I don’t exactly understand what *disposed* means, ma’am, but since I was only keeping out of sight so that the children wouldn’t think I was cheating as we go about playing a rousing game of hide-and-seek, then yes, I do think you should allow me to keep my position.” Millie smiled. “While it might seem as if we’re only playing, we’re actually working on mathematical skills. You’ll be pleased to learn that little James, being only five, was the one who suggested I, currently being the seeker, count all the way to one thousand before I start looking for him and Edith.”

Mrs. Cutling’s lips thinned. “I’m sure James has no concept of how long it would take for you to count to one thousand. Furthermore, you should have known it was hardly wise to leave the children to their own devices for that extended amount of time.”

“They wanted to be sure I’d be out of the way long enough for them to find a proper hiding place.”

“And find one they did.” Mrs. Cutling moved closer to Millie and took a viselike grip on her arm.

Millie didn’t so much as flinch. Through her many years of service she’d had cheeks slapped, hair pulled, and once, a warming pan tossed directly her way. She’d been lucky to dodge the hot coals on that particular occasion, but in all fairness, she hadn’t truly blamed her employer for throwing the pan, since Millie had unintentionally set the lady’s bed on fire with it.

What she had learned, though, through all the violence she'd suffered over the years, was that the slightest reaction seemed to bring some of the high-society ladies she worked for great satisfaction. That satisfaction was normally followed by more violence, which was why she was very careful to keep her emotions in check these days.

Fighting the urge to dig in her heels when Mrs. Cutling began tugging her away from the broom closet, Millie soon found herself hustled through a series of dark and narrow passageways. To her surprise, instead of escorting her through the kitchen—a place that was certain to bring Millie unwanted speculation from the cook and scullery maids—Mrs. Cutling pulled Millie down a bright hallway that had numerous crystal chandeliers hanging from the thirty-foot ceiling.

Before Millie had a chance to remark on the beautiful paintings lining the wall, she was marched through French doors that led to the back garden. Heat immediately began traveling up her neck when she stepped out onto the tiled courtyard and found herself pinned under the disapproving stares of at least ten society ladies. All of ladies were dressed in the first state of fashion, their day dresses cut to perfection, while stylish hats embellished with ornamental feathers and large brims lent delicate skin protection from the summer sun.

“As you can see,” Mrs. Cutling began, “my friends have come to call.”

“How lovely,” was all Millie could think to respond.

“It *should* have been lovely,” Mrs. Cutling countered. “However, I don't believe any of my friends expected to encounter such an execrable display when they accepted my invitation to lunch.”

Bitting her lip, Millie reached into her apron pocket and pulled out the small, tattered dictionary she always kept handy. The

sight of that dictionary evidently took Mrs. Cutling by such surprise that she actually took a step away from her.

“Is that a dictionary?”

Leafing through the E’s, Millie nodded as she scanned the page.

“What are you doing with it?”

“Since I don’t know what *execrable* means, I thought I should look it up so I’ll be better equipped to deal with whatever I’m about to see.” Ignoring the ladies’ tittering, Millie continued perusing the pages until she found the word she was looking for. Lifting her head after she read the definition, she glanced around. “Begging your pardon, Mrs. Cutling, but I don’t see anything out here of a wretched or”—she returned her attention to the dictionary—“abominable nature. Although”—she flipped the pages to the A’s—“I don’t know what that means either.”

“That will be quite enough, Miss Longfellow. I’m not going to stand around twiddling my thumbs while you scour that dictionary.” Mrs. Cutling crossed her arms over her chest. “Besides, girls of your station don’t need a vast vocabulary at their disposal, since no employer wants to hire a girl who puts on airs. If you ask me, your time would be better served learning how to be a proper nanny rather than wasting that time on such a trivial pursuit.”

Millie lowered the dictionary. “Begging your pardon yet again, Mrs. Cutling, but the pursuit of knowledge can never be overrated. Why, Mrs. Charles Hart firmly believes that all ladies, whether they be society or working, should endeavor to improve themselves through knowledge on a daily basis.”

Mrs. Cutling’s nostrils flared. “I don’t pay you, Miss Longfellow, to argue with me. But tell me—may I assume you used to be in service to Mrs. Hart?”

“I’m not certain that posing as a maid while at one of Mrs.

Hart's balls can be considered being in her employ, but . . . getting back to the children . . . ?”

“Why in the world would you have been *posing* as a maid—a situation that almost suggests you were up to something . . . reprehensible?”

Millie lowered her hand. “I’m sure you’ll be rather surprised to learn I know what *reprehensible* means, but there was nothing wicked whatsoever about me posing as a maid. Truth be told, Mrs. Hart has graciously offered me her hand in friendship, and with that friendship comes an inexhaustible amount of advice that Mrs. Hart enjoys imparting to me.”

Mrs. Cutling nodded to her friends. “Did you hear that, ladies? This girl would like us to believe she’s friends with none other than Abigail Hart, one of the city’s most intimidating society matrons.”

“It’s a good thing you’ve decided to dismiss her,” a lady wearing what appeared to be an entire bowl of fruit on her head proclaimed. “It’s obvious that, besides being negligent in her duties, the girl’s a liar. Such inclinations could have been detrimental to the children.”

Millie itched to look up the meaning of *detrimental* but put aside that desire when she noticed Mrs. Cutling’s friends were now advancing her way. Not caring to become the recipient of razor-sharp tongues belonging to bored society matrons, she caught Mrs. Cutling’s eye. “Perhaps now would be a good time to show me what mischief the children have gotten into.”

Mrs. Cutling blinked. “I almost forgot about the children.” She turned her attention to the far side of the courtyard and nodded at an elaborate fountain.

With apprehension tickling her spine, Millie moved forward, her steps dragging the closer she got to her destination. She came to a complete stop when she realized that the fountain,

one that sported stone mermaids spouting water out of their mouths, seemed to have acquired additional statues. These statues, however, did not fit in with the mermaids but instead seemed to be mud-covered blobs with lily pads stuck all over them. When one of the blobs suddenly raised a hand and rubbed what surely had to be a nose, Millie moved forward again as amusement bubbled up inside her.

“How absolutely brilliant!” she exclaimed as she stopped right next to the fountain, earning a smile from little James, his teeth looking remarkably bright against the mud he’d used to cover his face.

The blob next to him, six-year-old Edith, rose to her feet and let out a dramatic sigh. “Mother ruined everything by pointing us out to you.” She pulled a lily pad from her arm and dropped it into the shallow water pooling in the bottom of the fountain.

“It’s a good thing she did point me in the right direction, or I could have been searching for the two of you for hours.” Millie grinned. “I’ve played many a game of hide-and-seek, and yet I’ve never seen children use such inventive means to disguise themselves. It was completely *ingenious*—which means *clever*, by the way—to choose the fountain to hide in.”

“It was nothing of the sort,” Mrs. Cutling argued, marching up to join them, apparently unimpressed with Millie’s attempt at broadening the children’s vocabulary. She leveled a stern look at her children before turning her disapproval on Millie. “I’m holding you responsible for their current condition.”

“It wasn’t Miss Longfellow’s fault, Mother,” James hurried to say. “It was my idea to hide here, so you shouldn’t be cross with her.”

“And it’s been great fun,” Edith added.

Mrs. Cutling drew herself up. “I see nothing fun about this, Edith. In fact, you and your brother have embarrassed me no

small amount this afternoon. Because of that, the two of you will be spending the rest of your day in your rooms—after you bathe, of course—contemplating the ridiculousness of your actions.” She pointed a finger to the dry courtyard. “Both of you . . . out . . . now.”

Millie watched as the two children scrambled out of the fountain, lily pads and slime dripping off them, which earned them a thinning of the lips from their mother. They sent Millie pitiful looks that clearly begged for help, but then two sets of little shoulders sagged when it evidently became clear Millie had no help to offer them.

A maid appeared from behind Mrs. Cutling, and without speaking a word, she took hold of the children’s filthy hands and led them away.

An ache formed in Millie’s heart as the children were marched toward the back entrance, their small feet leaving muddy footprints against the tiles. When they disappeared from sight, she forced herself to face Mrs. Cutling. “Since I’m sure you don’t want me to keep you from your friends any longer, I’ll just be on my way.”

“Not so fast, Miss Longfellow,” Mrs. Cutling said, reaching out a hand to stop Millie from making a speedy escape. “Before you leave, I must insist you apologize—not only to me, but to my friends, whom you’ve distressed today.”

A trace of stubbornness—something Millie had thought she’d put behind her long ago—took that moment to resurface. “I truly do not understand how seeing two sweet children being children could possibly distress anyone.”

“They were filthy.”

“Children can be expected to be filthy upon occasion, especially when they’re playing.”

“My children are not permitted to be anything other than clean and tidy and, more importantly, free of slime.”

“A little slime never hurt anyone.”

A distinct touch of frost entered Mrs. Cutling’s eyes. “My dear, your parents may have allowed you to participate in unacceptable childhood amusements that allowed you to get slimy on a regular basis. But, in my world, children are expected to behave properly at all times, no matter their tender ages.”

“I grew up in an orphanage, Mrs. Cutling, and that experience led me to believe that all children deserve to enjoy a true childhood, one that occasionally comes with dirt, fun, and quite often, slime.”

“Good heavens!” another one of the ladies exclaimed. “I don’t believe I’ve ever met a nanny with such radical ideas.” The lady sent a sniff Millie’s way. “For your information, dear, Mrs. Cutling’s father is a Patriarch. Because of the exclusiveness of that particular honor, Mrs. Cutling’s children will always be held to a higher standard.”

Mrs. Cutling rolled her eyes. “I hardly imagine Miss Longfellow knows what a Patriarch is.”

Not appreciating the whole rolling of the eyes business, Millie threw caution to the wind as she stuffed her dictionary back into her pocket, clasped her hands in front of her, and cleared her throat. “The term *Patriarch* was coined by Mr. Ward McAllister, the social arbiter of New York society. He, along with the assistance of Mrs. William Astor, in an obvious attempt at keeping the newly rich from entering their sacred inner social circles, devised a list that consisted of twenty-five names of gentlemen whom they considered . . . worthy. These twenty-five men were then each given the *daunting* task of choosing four of *their* worthy gentlemen friends, along with five appropriate ladies,

all of whom were then included on Mrs. Astor's invitation list to her annual Patriarch Balls."

Millie wrinkled her nose. "Although, if you ask me, I don't really understand why everyone puts so much stock in what this Mr. McAllister thinks. It's clear he's a somewhat pompous and overly ambition sort who has entirely too much time on his hands, since he has nothing better to do than devise questionable lists."

Dead silence settled over the courtyard. All of the ladies were staring back at Millie with their mouths gaping open, although a few of them were beginning to turn a little pink, and Millie didn't think that was because of the sun.

"You've evidently misunderstood some of that information you claim Mrs. Hart has given you, Miss Longfellow," Mrs. Cutling finally said.

"Mrs. Hart didn't tell me about Patriarchs. Miss Harriet Peabody did. Though, in all fairness, she might have gotten her information from Mrs. Hart."

"Do not even tell me you're now going to try and convince me you're acquainted with Lady Harriet."

Forcing a smile, Millie began edging away from Mrs. Cutling. "Harriet and I have been friends for years, but . . . she doesn't really care to be addressed as Lady Harriet, just plain Harriet. Although . . . since she'll probably be married by the time she returns to the states, I suppose everyone will begin addressing her as Mrs. Oliver Addleshaw."

For a second, Mrs. Cutling appeared a little taken aback, but only for a second. "I highly doubt you share an intimate relationship with Lady Harriet, but enough about that nonsense. Since I have yet to hear a single word of apology come out of your mouth, do know that I will *not* be sending you off with a reference letter. I will also not be giving you any of the

wages I'm sure you feel you're due because I believe you put my children in grave danger. We're lucky they didn't drown in that fountain."

Looking down at the water, Millie frowned. "There's barely any water in there, Mrs. Cutling, and forgive me for saying so, but if you were truly concerned over your children drowning, one would think you would have seen them safely out of the fountain before running me down and spending precious time taking me to task."

That pronouncement earned Millie barely five minutes to pack up her belongings after Mrs. Cutling proclaimed her to be insubordinate. There were no fond farewells to give the children, no pristine letter stating how wonderful Millie was as a nanny, and not a single penny offered to see her back to New York City.

Before she knew it, she'd been deposited at the train station, where she purchased a ticket using funds she'd stashed away for emergencies. Unfortunately, the train was delayed due to a mechanical problem, and by the time Millie reached the wharf, the last ferry had departed from Long Island for the day. To her relief, a crusty yet completely delightful captain of a weathered fishing boat offered her a spot on his vessel, even going so far as to haul her heavy traveling bag up the plank himself when she accepted his offer.

The crossing proved to be memorable. Strong winds sprang up out of nowhere, and by the time they docked at the New York City harbor, she knew she was definitely looking the worse for wear. Her clothing was soaked, she was missing her cap, and she was absolutely sure that the neat and tidy bun she'd started the day out with was nowhere to be found, especially since a few strands of her brown, curly hair kept blowing around her face.

Besides looking less than her best, she was also fairly certain she smelled strongly of fish.

Giving the captain her warmest thanks once the vessel was securely docked, she dragged her heavy bag past numerous sailors, pretending to be hard of hearing when they sent whistles her way. By the time she put some space between herself and the sailors, her face was burning, but her embarrassment disappeared the moment she counted out the few coins she had left in her possession and found herself woefully short on funds. That meant even a trip on an omnibus was not in her future. Accepting a ride with a man delivering the very fish she'd escorted to the wharf, she consoled herself with the idea that although his wagon was less than comfortable, at least her unpleasant scent wasn't offending anyone.

When the delivery man dropped her off in front of the employment agency, nerves almost had her running after the delivery man and begging him to take her anywhere else. Mrs. Patterson, the woman who owned the agency, had warned Millie about losing another position, and Millie knew she was going to be in for a rough time of it once Mrs. Patterson learned she'd been dismissed yet again.

Reminding herself that she needed to secure new employment sooner rather than later, Millie squared her shoulders and headed for the steps. But before she had an opportunity to reach them, something hard and unyielding slammed into her. Dropping like a stone to the ground, Millie felt the oddest desire to simply stay there and let the world move on without her.

She was tired, smelly, discouraged, and didn't believe her life could get any worse than it was at that particular moment.

A second later, as she squinted up at what turned out to be a very large, very manly form, she realized she'd been wrong.

Her life could, indeed, become worse.

Peering down at her was none other than Mr. Everett Mulberry, a gentleman she knew through her acquaintance with

Mr. Oliver Addleshaw. With his sculpted face, green eyes, and brown hair that was normally stylishly arranged—not that it was at that particular moment—he was an exceedingly handsome gentleman.

The first time she'd laid eyes on him, she'd actually become completely tongue-tied. Because Mr. Mulberry had recently inherited three young children to raise, Millie had found him slightly irresistible, until he'd had the audacity to immediately dismiss her offer of becoming a nanny to his slightly troublesome wards.

The moment he'd learned about her unfortunate propensity for getting let go from her positions, well . . . he turned adamant in his refusal to offer her employment.

The gentleman had not even given her a moment to properly explain all the past misunderstandings she'd suffered in those ill-fated employment situations, but had, instead, kept a careful distance between them whenever they happened to be in each other's immediate vicinity.

“ . . . and I cannot apologize enough for knocking you to the ground,” Mr. Mulberry was saying, pulling Millie abruptly from her jaunt down memory lane. “Do know that my preoccupied state of mind is in no way an excuse for my less-than-careful regard for your person.”

Pushing aside numerous curls that were obstructing her view, Millie was just about to take the hand Mr. Mulberry was offering her when his eyes suddenly widened and his offered hand was taken away.

“Miss Longfellow? What in the world are *you* doing here?”

Not appreciating the clear trace of horror in the gentleman's voice, Millie began struggling to her feet, reluctantly accepting the hand Mr. Mulberry finally thrust back at her. She soon found herself standing on her feet, even as she caught Mr. Mulberry's

eye. “How *lovely* it is to see you, Mr. Mulberry. I do hope you and the children are well.”

“You haven’t been dismissed from another position, have you?” he asked, completely neglecting to exchange the expected pleasantries with her.

Millie lifted her chin. “I’ve been excellent of late—thank you for asking. And—to answer your oh-so-charming inquiry—why else would I be here instead of looking after some little ones?”

“This is certain to complicate matters.”

“How can my dismissal possibly complicate matters for you? Unless . . . Your wards haven’t run off another nanny, have they?”

Mr. Mulberry frowned. “Mrs. Smithey preferred to be referred to as a nurse, but . . . yes, my wards somehow managed to run her off.”

“And they did this . . . how?”

Raking a hand through his untidy hair, Mr. Mulberry shrugged. “From what I’ve been able to surmise, it all had to do with an unfortunate game of walking the plank, a plank that was, strangely enough, set over a fountain.”

“Fountains do seem to be responsible for quite a bit of mischief today.” She ignored his immediate look of confusion. “How is it possible—if I’m summarizing correctly—that three children were able to run off a woman by playing a simple game of walking the plank? Did this nurse not come with stellar references?”

“She came with the very best of references, but I don’t believe she was expecting a frog to materialize on the scene—a creature, it unfortunately turns out, Mrs. Smithey is deathly afraid of.”

“It’s an unspoken requirement that women who choose to look after children for a living have a strong liking for all manner of creatures.”

“I’m sure that’s a valid point, Miss Longfellow. However,

in Mrs. Smithey's defense, I don't believe she was expecting the little monster—and those are Mrs. Smithey's words about Thaddeus, not mine—to prod a frog in her direction as she was halfway across the plank. That nasty business resulted in the woman falling off the plank and into the fountain." Mr. Mulberry gave a sad shake of his head. "She was packed and out of the house before I could offer her a substantial raise to keep her in my employ."

"How much of a 'substantial raise'?"

Mr. Mulberry immediately began inching away from her. "I don't believe I care for that particular glint in your eyes, Miss Longfellow. Although, glinting eyes aside, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask just the tiniest favor from you."

"You want me to look after your wards?"

"Ah, no. That's not what I want at all." He ignored her sputters even as he continued to inch backward. "What I need you to do is wait out here until I've secured a new nanny from the agency."

"Why would you want me to do that?"

"Because the last time I came here and managed to obtain the services of Mrs. Smithey, I was warned that there would be dire consequences if the children managed to drive that woman away. Since they *have* managed to do that—and somewhat quickly, I must add—I'm afraid the dire consequences I might face will involve you, once the agency learns you're out of work again."

He let out what sounded exactly like a sigh. "I wouldn't be surprised to hear Mrs. Patterson say something like we deserve each other, and I'd really like to avoid that, if it's all the same to you."

Millie summoned up what she hoped would be taken as a pleasant smile, nodded to Mr. Mulberry, and—right after he smiled back and began to look relieved—bolted for the agency door.