I am safe, and strong, and glad

by seren_ccd

Summary

As the train rumbled north and the sunlight filtered through the trees, Margaret tried to pin down precisely what she was feeling. Everything felt so very close to the surface, and her skin tingled with every swipe of Mr. Thornton’s thumb on her hand. Post the end of the scene on the train platform in the UKTV series.

Notes

This was such a lovely prompt and pairing to play with! I really hope you enjoy it!

Huge thank you's go to my wonderful beta! The title is from Sonnet XXVII by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

As the train rumbled north and the sunlight filtered through the trees, Margaret tried to pin down precisely what she was feeling. Everything felt so very close to the surface, and her skin tingled with every swipe of Mr. Thornton’s thumb on her hand. She smiled out the window as she caught sight of their reflections; her round, pale face flushed with happiness and his dark hair tumbling over his forehead while he wore a soft smile that she’d never seen before.

He lowered his head even further, and she turned as he did. His nose brushed alongside her own, and she couldn’t hold back a sigh.

He chuckled and said, “I’m sorry. It’s always where it shouldn’t be.”
“Your nose?” she asked, looking up into his eyes.

He nodded. “It’s always been something of a burden. It took quite a while for the rest of my face to catch up to it.”

“I think it’s imminently suited to your face,” she said, raising her hand and running her finger down the slope of said appendage, stopping when she noticed the warm, startled look in his eyes.

She blushed instantly and dropped her hand, turning once again to look out the window.

“I don’t know what’s come over me,” she said, her head falling back to thump against the seat. “I’ve done such things today that I would never have imagined myself doing. Not in a thousand years.”

He was silent and still beside her. Then, with such care, he asked, “Do you regret them?”

“No,” she said quickly, turning her head and grasping his hand tight within hers. “Not one of them. I might, perhaps, regret that I don’t feel any regret, but that is rather a nonsensical feeling, so no. I regret none of my actions this day, Mr. Thornton.”

“I’m glad,” he said, smiling once again.

“There is so much I don’t know about you,” she murmured. “So much you don’t know about me.”

“I know the most pertinent facts and attributes,” he said. He squeezed her hand and looked hesitant before he added, “I should tell you, Higgins has told me of your brother’s struggles.”

Margaret felt her heart stutter. “Oh. Oh, I…”

She frowned and looked down at their clasped hands. A part of her suggested letting go of his hand, as it would be the proper thing to do. The rest of her told her to hold on ever more tightly.

“I’m glad you know,” she said at long last, her voice quiet, but firm. She looked up. “He was who I was protecting that night on the train platform.”

He nodded. “I had surmised as much.”

“But, you didn’t know, then, did you?” she breathed, certain things becoming clear. “You protected me, then, didn’t you?”

His hands tightened and relaxed on hers even as he nodded.

“You are always protecting me. Doing the honourable thing,” she murmured. “And I have always been turning it aside. Mr. Thornton—”

“John,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I would… I no longer wish to be simply Mr. Thornton to you, Miss Hale.”

“Margaret,” she said faintly.

His eyes rose to hers and her heart raced at the wonder she saw there and knew it must be reflected in her own.

“Margaret,” he murmured, and she shivered at the sound of her name in his rumbling but gentle voice. “I… You have mentioned how I have a habit of wanting to protect you and be honourable and I…” He hesitated but forged ahead. “I must offer my protection to you once again, but please know that the urge to protect you only stems from the honest desire to have you by my side.”
He seemed to struggle with the words, and Margaret felt a pang in her chest as she realised how much this man had suffered through her constant refusals to acknowledge his true feelings for her. Impetuously, she leaned forward to press her lips to his in a brief kiss.

His eyes were wide when she pulled back, and she said in a rush, “I know that I have behaved most unseemly and improperly and that you are trying to offer for me, not only as a result of my behaviour today, but because you… Because you…”

“Love you,” he breathed. “I’m trying to propose marriage because I love you. I have always wanted to protect you because of that love. It is the deciding factor for my actions this day and the days before. Marry me, Margaret.”

“Of course,” she said, smiling as tears burned behind her eyes. “Yes, of course, I’ll marry you.”

The next few moments were nothing but a haze of sensation as hands clasped and lips met, and it was only the call of the conductor down the carriage that pulled them apart.

“Oh, my,” Margaret said pressing the backs of her hands to her cheeks, willing them to cool. “I’m without a ticket. The one I have is for London, and oh, heavens, I think Henry may still have that one, not that it would help me.” She smiled and shook her head, reaching for her change purse. “Is this what love does to you? Turns your head right round ‘til you forget yourself?”

“You love me?” John (for he was John, now and always would be) spoke so quietly, she almost didn’t hear him.

Margaret raised her head to look at him and smiled at that look of wonder in his eyes that seemed to deepen with every passing moment. “Yes,” she said placing her hand on his cheek. “Did I not say?”

“Margaret-”

“I love you,” she said simply. “I suspect that I’ve loved you for some time now. I love you so much I hardly know who I am anymore.”

“You’re Margaret,” he said as his unfettered smile infused his voice with joy. “My Margaret.”

The door to their compartment opened, and the conductor walked in, looking them both over. If he wished to remark on John’s lack of coat and the fact that they were an unchaperoned couple, he made no such conversation.

As she watched John purchase a ticket to Milton for her, she wondered who this person was, sitting beside John Thornton. For it couldn’t be plain, quiet Margaret Hale, smiling so wide her cheeks ached from the long-forgotten feeling of pleasure and happiness. The Margaret Hale of two hours ago would never have thrown caution and propriety to the wind and boarded a train with a man alone.

*Or would you?* she thought to herself. *You once dared to throw yourself in front of this man to stop further violence from occurring. Perhaps you have always had this in you, Margaret Hale.*

The thought calmed her whirling thoughts somewhat, and she watched as the conductor left the compartment and John turned back to her.

“Are you well?” he asked, his forehead furrowing as he looked her over. “You look very grave.”

She shook her head. “Not grave. Only…pensive, I suppose. It has been a very eventful day.”
“Quite,” he said, exhaling and resting his head against the seat, even as he took her hand in his own once more. “I’m afraid I’ve hardly been able to truly comprehend some of the events. May I ask if you were in earnest in regards to investing in Marlborough Mills?”

“In complete earnest,” she said.

He sighed and looked at her. “There will be talk.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But there has always been talk. I’m not afraid.” She frowned. “Are you?”

He shook his head slowly and lifted their clasped hands to his mouth to place a kiss to her knuckles, and then said, “Whispers have always surrounded my family. I have always clung to the belief that as long as I knew the truth, they could not hurt me. But it hasn’t always been pleasant, and I would do everything in my power to spare you from pain of any sort.”

“Oh, don’t make such statements as that,” she said turning even more towards him, the rumble of the train. “Pain is not something one can always hide from. And I wouldn’t wish for you to bear the brunt of anything that can be shared.”

He closed his eyes as he kissed her hand once more, and they remained curled towards one another for several moments.

After some time in which they eased apart slightly, he said, “Your family. They will be concerned if you do not return to London.”

“Henry will…explain,” she said with a frown as she pictured Aunt Shaw and Edith’s looks of confusion and hurt. “I shall write to them as soon as I’m able.”

“They will not object?” he asked, and she thought she detected some of the Thornton pride in his tone.

“They may say whatever they like, but I am the only person in charge of my future,” she said, not entirely sure if she spoke for his benefit or her own. “I’m all that’s left of my family, you see.”

“Not anymore,” he said firmly and decisively, and if she hadn’t already loved him with every fibre of her being, his quiet assurance that she would no longer be alone would have surely sparked feelings of tenderness and adoration.

Margaret adjusted the nightgown that Mrs. Thornton had handed to her not a quarter of an hour ago.

“It was one of Fanny’s,” Mrs. Thornton said, her face not revealing anything apart from the still slightly stunned look that lingered around her eyes.

She’d taken the news that John and Margaret were to marry with all the grace and dignity that the woman possessed, which was a great deal. Margaret had had the sudden urge to go to her and clasp her hands and ask if she’d tutor Margaret in how to hold herself so still and so regally, but she’d refrained herself.

Being a woman of immense practicality, Mrs. Thornton had then outlined what needed to be done. Margaret needed to contact her family; she needed to air out a guest room; and they all needed to have supper.

All occurred in that order.
Margaret’s letter to her Aunt Shaw and Edith was brief with promises for a longer and more detailed letter when she herself had composed herself to do so. In this letter, she merely said she was to be married, and to please be happy for her for her own heart was so full of the emotion she wanted them to have their share. She also reminded them that she was a woman of independent means, and this was her decision and her decision alone. She spent several minutes phrasing and re-phrasing, but in the end decided that a simple reminder that she knew her own mind was sufficient.

Well, it wouldn’t be sufficient for them, but it was for her, and this was her marriage and her engagement, and really, that was that.

She hesitated and then decided against writing to Henry. He wouldn’t welcome the letter, and he had already done her the great service of letting her go. Perhaps later she could try to make amends, but for now, she’d let it rest.

Supper was a simple spread of ham and potatoes, and despite thinking that she couldn’t possibly eat anything, Margaret found herself eating everything on her plate. She looked up at one point to find John doing the same, and their eyes had caught. If Mrs. Thornton hadn’t been present, Margaret felt as though they would have dissolved into childlike laughter. In place of that, she merely smiled at him and looked back down at her plate.

They sat in the study after supper and Mrs. Thornton discussed possible wedding dates and alternatives. Margaret, in an attempt to be tractable, agreed with most of her ideas and only held firm on keeping the wedding simple and soon.

Margaret joined them in their nightly prayers, a sterner affair than she was used to though the familiarity of the Psalms read gave her great comfort. Then she was quickly ushered upstairs to the guest bedroom while John stood in front of the fire in the study looking after her, his eyes steady and warm as she left.

And now she stood in a guest room decorated in a simple forest green in a borrowed nightgown. Fanny was slimmer and taller than Margaret, and the gown clung to her chest and hips and puddled around her ankles. Despite nearly tripping every time she turned, Margaret walked back and forth in front of the bed, thoughts and emotions swirling like cotton seeds in her mind.

Oh, I wish to speak to someone of all this, she thought, her fists clutching at the ill-fitting nightgown. I have accepted the hand of a good, strong man, and I have no one to share my joy with. She did trip over the gown’s hem when a novel idea occurred to her. She did have someone she could speak to. Someone who right this moment was most likely feeling as she did.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed her pashmina shawl and wrapped it around her body and then quietly left the guest room.

Feeling scandalous and daring, which appeared to be the theme for the day, she padded softly on bare feet down the hallway and the stairs. Firelight spilled from the open door to the study, and she spared a moment to fervently hope that it was not Mrs. Thornton’s habit to stay up with her son and then she entered the room.

John sat in an armchair near the fire, his long legs stretched out in front of him, and his gaze fixed on the flames. Another man might have held a snifter of something in their hands, but he held nothing, his hands were clasped loosely on his stomach.

Margaret studied him for a moment: the profile of his features stood out in sharp relief in the flickering flames, and his hair was inky black in the shadows. She experienced the strongest of pulls.
towards him, and she took a step forward.

The wood creaked under her feet, and she halted as his head turned to look at her. They both froze in place and simply stared at one another.

Eventually, he blinked, and his eyes softened. “You’re really standing there, aren’t you?” he asked. “You’re not some Margaret Hale-shaped figment that my imagination has conjured?”

“I am not,” she said smiling slightly. “Unless you are a John Thornton-shaped folly that my imagination has created.”

“I am not,” he answered, rising to his feet. “I am as real as you are it seems.” She smiled fully at him at that, and he returned her smile with an ease that she hadn’t expected of him. But he frowned. “It is quite late. Are you well? Is your room too cold?”

“No,” she said stepping further into the room. “No, the room is perfectly comfortable. I simply…”

She trailed off and felt a moment sheepishness slip over her and wondered if she had behaved too daringly.

“You simply-“ he repeated quietly and so gently that she felt compelled to tell him the truth.

“I simply felt too happy and too full of feeling and quite unable to keep it all to myself,” she said, looking down at the floor and her bare toes that peeked out from beneath the folds of Fanny’s gown. “It has been some time since I was able to share such thoughts with anyone, and I admit that recently I feared I never would be able to do so again.” She made herself look at him. “Until you. Until today.”

His face was a study. Emotions crossed it so quickly; confusion, comprehension, wonder, and then came the expression that she was sure had crossed her own face not a few minutes earlier in her room. The moment when he realised that he no longer had to hold burdens and thoughts to himself, that there was another who longed, who wanted to share them with him.

The last emotion she saw cross his face was one of determination, and then he was crossing the room, and she was in his arms, his mouth warm and firm on hers.

She clutched at his shoulders and pressed her lips to his with as much fervour as she possessed. The kiss was nothing like the ones they’d shared at the station or on the train. This kiss was one of two lonely people who had finally found someone they could cling to who would cling to them just as fiercely.

When he lifted his head from hers, Margaret was surprised to find herself settled on his lap in the armchair beside the fire. She ducked her head and hid her smile as she pressed her face to his neck.

His answering chuckle was low and sent shivers through her body. She lifted her head to look at him and marvelled at how free from worry he looked when he smiled.

“Do you know that I hadn’t even realised until this evening how lonely I’ve been?” she murmured. “One doesn’t ever dare to voice such things.”

“No, one doesn’t,” he said, trailing the pad of his index finger over the apple of her cheek. “One endures and perseveres, all the while feeling as though a part of oneself is missing.” He sighed and cradled her face in his hand. “I couldn’t sleep, either. I feared that if I did you would disappear.”

“It is going to take quite a bit more than closing one’s eyes, I’m afraid,” she said. “Not now that
we’ve come so far. I’m finding that I’ve become rather determined of late in pursuing what I want.”

“And you want me?” he asked, his voice dropping into a low register that resonates throughout her body.

“Yes,” she whispered, suddenly aware that she had trespassed onto very unfamiliar territory and was unsure of what it truly meant.

Unaware of her internal apprehension, John leaned forward to kiss her. She responded, but the hand that touched his face trembled. Alert as he was to her every movement, he pulled back and studied her.

“Are you well?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “You look frightened. Margaret, have I-?”

“No, no, you don’t frighten me,” she said truthfully. “I’m simply overcome, I suppose.”

“By today?” he asked. “Or by my…attentions to you?”

“Both, I suppose,” she said, laughing weakly. “The latter is taking precedence at the moment, however.”

“I desire you,” he said more openly than she had ever imagined him to be, although his cheeks had turned a lovely shade of pink. “Does that bother you?”

“Not bother, precisely,” she said, determined that if he could speak of such matters with such calm, then she could, as well. “I simply, do not know what to do. Women aren’t educated very freely on the subject, you see.”

“No, I suppose they are not,” he said, the corner of his mouth quirking upward. “And I also suppose you would not wish to speak to my mother about such matters.”

The expression on her face must have betrayed her inner horror at the prospect for he chuckled and pressed his forehead to hers. “Do not worry, I shall not say another word. But I would not have you be frightened of me.”

“I’m not frightened,” she said, curling her hand around his neck. “I’m…excited and eager to begin this life together, and yes, I’m overwhelmed by the day and what this all means.” She frowned. “It will not always be like this, will it?”

“How do you mean?” he asked.

“I feel,” she struggled a moment for the words, “I feel as light as the air being here beside you. I didn’t know that I could feel this light and free.” She took a deep breath. “However, I am so very aware that tomorrow will dawn, and I will post my letter to Aunt Shaw and Edith, and you will go to the factory. I will remain here with your mother and sort through the minutia of my affairs as I join them with yours and…”

She closed her eyes.

“And-” John prompted, his voice gentle and soft.

“And I fear that I will lose this feeling,” she said, her eyes remaining shut as she spoke. “That the world will impose itself upon us, and I won’t be able to reclaim this lovely feeling again.”

A long moment of silence was eventually broken by his hand upon her face. Margaret opened her
eyes and looked at him while his hand carefully and delicately mimicked the caress of her cheek as
he had done on the train platform.

“I do not know what tomorrow will bring,” he said, looking fond and happy as he gazed at her. “I
know that there will be arguments as neither of us are very willing to concede defeat.” Margaret
couldn’t help but smile at this and he smiled back. “I also know that I love you, Margaret Hale, and
that I believe that you love me. I also believe, as I have never believed before, in fate.”

She frowned. “Fate?”

“Fate,” he said somewhat sheepishly. “What had to occur for us to find one another on that train
platform? Had you discovered me in the factory as you had planned, would our joining together have
occurred as naturally? What strange spirit possessed me to travel so far south whilst telling no one?
How did everything align so that we could meet at that precise moment?” He shook his head. “I am
the last man to ever give credence to the idea of a destiny that I had no hand in creating, but you are
here in my arms. And I cannot but think that if we can overcome our own prejudices and failings to
find such peace and contentment with one another, then we can overcome the trials that will surely
face us in the morning. Providence, in every definition of the word, is on our side.”

He spoke with such genuine feeling and earnestness that Margaret felt tears sting the back of her
eyes, and she could only nod in silence while his hand held her face.

When she felt composed enough, she said, “It may be a terrible sin to say, but I believe would like to
keep some of the day’s pleasures in my own hands without giving them all to Providence.”

The grin that spread across his face transformed him into the very picture of a carefree young man
that she knew he never had the chance to be, and she revelled in the sight.

“Then shall we end this day secure in the knowledge that tomorrow’s trials belong to tomorrow?” he
asked. “And know that whatever they may be, we will face them together?”

She reached up and cupped the hand that still cradled her face. “With Providence and our own strong
wills joined together, we shall be very formidable indeed.”

“We will not lose this feeling of lightness,” he said pressing his forehead to hers. “I promise you. It
shall always be here.”

“I promise to hold onto it for you, as well,” she whispered before lifting her mouth to his.

The next quarter hour was spent in a lovely and unhurried manner and it was only when Margaret
yawned widely that they got to their feet.

“I will escort you to your room,” John said, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm.

“I know that I should say ‘no,’” she said quietly as they left the study. “But it appears that my
adherence to propriety has become rather lax today.”

“As has mine,” he murmured. “And I cannot help but be grateful for our combined laxity.”

Margaret’s face flushed, and she ducked her head, even as she squeezed his arm in agreement.

When they reached her door, he gathered up her small hand in his and pressed a long kiss to her
knuckles. “I will bid you good night, Margaret.”

“Good night, John,” she said, suddenly shy to use his name even though she saw an expression of
delight cross his face.

“I will see you in the morning?” he asked, and she smiled reassuringly at the question in his voice.

“You will,” she said firmly. “I will be here when you wake.”

Warmth entered his eyes, and she knew she must leave or neither of them would be able to leave. Squeezing his hand, she slipped into her room and leaned against the door, exhaling happily. She thought she could hear an answering sigh on the other side of the door, and she closed her eyes picturing John’s dear face.

She didn’t remember crossing the room to her bed, so caught up in trying to recount all that had occurred in the day. She drifted to sleep with the recollection of his gentle hand cupping her cheek as her small hands clasped his own broad hand, the sounds of a busy train platform an unlikely accompaniment to their private union.

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