The sudden urge to touch didn't come as a surprise to Margaret. She couldn't say where exactly this compulsion had arisen from or for how long it has been silently brewing in her fingertips, only that it was not an entirely new feeling. She had never acknowledged it before and doing so made her feel uncomfortable, ashamed almost. She didn't know why she should feel this way. He was her husband after all and thus such things should be allowed. But it did not mitigate the feeling of embarrassment that flared and flourished in her stomach.

I originally published this at FFN a few months ago and have tweaked this version a little. 'Touch' is set during the course of one evening and doesn't really go anywhere plot wise. It's more about the thoughts, feelings and experiences of Margaret (Ok..read as: this was really written in a fit of PMS to salve my smutty cravings)

It is based on the premise that Margaret and Mr Thornton were forced to marry as a consequence of their actions during the riot. So emotions are still running high here and they are both having to make some big adjustments to their life. I have always felt that Margaret (being so pure and rightly judgemental) would have a shadow self that is intrigued by the illicit and carnal aspects of humanity. The medicalisation of women's sexuality during this period also interested me and this fic is how I decided to explore these ideas.

Thanks to neska-polita (over at ffn) who has pretty much acted as my Beta for this piece.
In the dimly lit sitting room the sound of her husband's breathing and the occasional 'pop' of the fire were the only sounds permeating the heavy night. Watching the steady rise and fall of Mr Thornton's chest, Margaret thought over the latest conflict they had had that morning and how her life had altered (and yet in many respects also remained the same).

She had been a wife for a little over four months now and if not pleased with that fact, was at least resigned to it. She had to be; there was nothing to be done for it now. But at times she was so overwhelmed by all of the tension, the arguments and the cautiously restrained emotion. It seemed that she always had to be on her guard in this house and she resented it. It was wearing. For the first time in many weeks, Margaret allowed herself to acknowledge just how fed up she was of it all. How she hated to feel so…so, on edge around him, how she wished that she didn't feel that way; that they could be on friendlier terms. That she could be calm around him and not feel so out of tune.

Echoes of some of the words hurled between the two sprang to mind unwillingly, all disjointed and out of place. She wasn't even sure who had started it or where it proceeded from, only that it was one of many misunderstandings in their relationship.

'Why do you always feel the need to remind me that I am not the sort of man you would have willingly married? …Do you think I find this marriage easy? …Do you think that I don't see the way you tense up when I am near you? That I didn't hear how you wept on the first night you spent in this house and how much I wanted to give you some sort of comfort?'

'What do you mean? I do not understand what you mean by saying that I am always reminding you of the type of man I would prefer to marry. When have I ever said such a thing?' 'You don't have to say it, for it to be true…'

His voice had taken on a slight edge then and he had cleared his throat savagely before turning his back to her. She hated when he did that; when he would rather stop a conversation short than discuss his real thoughts. How on earth were they ever supposed to get along if they never said what they really felt? Margaret had tried to respond, had actually opened her mouth to do so, but didn't know what to say. She certainly didn't hold her husband in contempt; not anymore. In fact, as she had spent more time in his company and learnt more of the man behind the Mill Master, she had started to find aspects of his personality to admire. He was definitely still too stubborn most of the time and took offence entirely too easily but she had come to realise two surprising things about him. That there was a great kindness hidden behind that dark and stormy brow and that as much as he often pretended otherwise, he really was fond of his sister. When he thought no one was paying him heed, Margaret would often catch his face softening as he looked at Fanny. He looked almost wistful. But just as quickly as it came, the look was gone. She sometimes thought that she saw a similar, yet entirely different look when he glanced at her, but she could never be certain.

Margaret remembered the way he insisted on sulking and ignoring her for the rest of the morning meal, before leaving abruptly for the Mill. He had given her a terse nod of the head before departing. Why did he always have to feel like the injured party? She had been affected as much as he had with this arrangement.
When he had said that she had wept on her wedding night, he had not been exaggerating. Margaret had been anxious and angry during the week leading up to the wedding. She didn't want to marry Mr Thornton. She could not see that her act to shield a human life should be viewed as something shameful, something sinful; something that would lead her to be forced into marriage for the sake of respectability. Margaret had not understood Mr Thornton then; she barely understood him now but she was trying.

She had fought off a pounding head ache during the wedding breakfast and attempted not to flinch when Mr Thornton had taken her arm and threaded it through his own as they wove their way through the gathering of Milton's finest. They were to act the part of a newly married couple for the audience who had been so ready to condemn Margaret as a fallen woman only weeks ago. Finally when most of the guests had left and it came time to part with her parents, Margaret had had to clench her jaw hard and dig her nails into the palms of her hands to prevent the tears of resentment and frustration welling. It had taken nearly an hour for the angry, deep crescent indents on her palms to fade. It was no surprise to anyone in the house (apart from Mrs Thornton, perhaps) that Margaret retired early that evening. Alone.

Margaret had lain awake for many hours as the deluge of embittered thoughts crashed upon her. At the altar, in front of God and half of Milton, she had promised herself that she would make the most of this situation. After all, many people married without affection and lived respectable lives. But not many married without choice, the petulant voice in her head had cried. The emotions that she had suppressed and controlled for weeks had finally burst its banks and she wept bitterly until sleep took her. By morning, she was a little more resigned to her fate and appeared as unperturbed and confident as always. If by chance the new Mrs Thornton's complexion had been a little paler and her tone of voice a little less clear and bell like, no one was ill mannered enough to comment.

Shaking her head slightly to dispel the memories, Margaret continued to stare at the rise and fall of her husband's chest, thinking over the subtle changes in her feelings regarding him. The more insight she had gained into his character, the easier it was to begin to see his virtues and like him.

Margaret could just make out the flicker of his eyes under their lids as he lay in deep sleep, the thick, tangled lashes whispering at the movement. He had fallen asleep while reading the newspaper. They had sat in strained silence for well over two hours, neither willing to forget the morning's argument. She had only realised that he had drifted off when she heard the broadsheets fall to the floor. He really must have been exhausted. She moved her eyes to his face; he wasn't the most handsome of men but when his face was relaxed, he seemed less imposing and one could appreciate his sharp, strong features better. He looked oddly vulnerable in sleep and she wondered if that was always the case.

Margaret felt it was easier to be with him when he was so defenceless. She didn't feel as though she had to have her guard up ready for the next attack.

Looking at this smooth, angled face Margaret was reminded of the impressive marble statues that she and Edith had seen at some exhibition in London long ago. The marble had felt cool and silky under her fingers, almost like a rose petal turned to stone. Remembering this, Margaret had an urge to run her finger down the bridge of Mr Thornton's nose; to feel whether it was as hard and straight as it looked. To feel whether it would be smooth like the marble or rough like the hands of the factory workers she befriended.

This sudden urge to touch didn't come as a surprise to Margaret. She couldn't say where exactly this compulsion had arisen from or for how long it has been silently brewing in her fingertips, only that it was not an entirely new feeling. She had never acknowledged it before and doing so made her feel
uncomfortable, ashamed almost. She didn't know why she should feel this way. He was her husband after all and thus such things should be allowed. But it did not take away from the feeling of embarrassment that flared and flourished in her stomach.

She continued to look over his face, her eyes following the line of dark stubble beginning to show on the jutting jaw line. She felt hot and stifled, like her skin was too small for her body and every bit of warmth clawed at her neck, inching its way to face, staining her ivory cheeks crimson...
Dancing on the precipice

II.

Before she was fully conscious of what she was doing, Margaret had risen from the horribly flamboyant settee (obviously Fanny’s choice) and made her way to the well worn arm armchair opposite, in which Mr Thornton was currently slumped. She stood just inches from his left elbow, close enough to brush against it with her starched linen skirt if she wished.

Margaret felt as though she were momentarily suspended in a world in which her actions were not dictated by her reason, where her body didn't obey her command. It unnerved her, this strange feeling of not being in full control. Her breath usually so calm and sedate, seemed to hasten without her consent while she stood there, so close to him. The sliver of skin on the upper reaches of her neck seemed to prickle frenziedly at the mere thought of stroking that nose, just out of reach. She noticed that her palms had begun to sweat a little: she didn't like it but neither could she pull herself away. Margaret was fascinated by Mr Thornton in a way she had never before allowed herself to be. So she did something she never normally would have.

She reached out and traced the skin over the apple of his cheek with a single fingertip; she couldn't help but be a little surprised at how soft it was. Much softer than seemed appropriate for a man who had shouldered hard labour, lived through both prosperity and poverty and braved thirty odd years of hellish northern winters. Margaret thought that it felt rather like the smooth skin of a sun-warmed peach; the kind that her father was so fond of.

Feeling her lips curl upwards at the childhood memory from so long ago, Margaret refocused her straying thoughts on her husband's face. Husband. It was still such an out of place notion, particularly as she had not wanted him to be thus.

Touching him this intimately without his knowledge felt illicit, almost like stealing something rare. Margaret rather liked it. She flushed further at this thought, and the stinging heat began to grow, insidiously snaking its way down to her stomach. Her sense of what was right riled against her actions but that heat that had started to coil down low, made the stronger argument; it urged her on. Praying that he remained asleep she continued her journey over the still somewhat foreign terrain. Slipping her finger upwards towards the temple where the dark hair began to become sparse she spied a lone patch of grey hair weaving its way through its brothers. Odd that she had never noticed that before.

Margaret may have been embarrassed to be caught in such a manner, but she would not hide behind her shame. No, she would own her actions.

'What are you doing?' John’s voice was thick and raspy from sleep. His heavy brows thrown together in confusion as he stared at her. Margaret thought that he seemed discomposed to find her there, his usual silent confidence withered in her presence. Unconsciously, she threw back her head in that old way, seemingly wearing her guilt and shame like a queen wore her golden mantle. Margaret may have been embarrassed to be caught in such a manner, but she would not hide behind her shame. No, she would own her actions.
She matched her husband’s gaze but didn’t answer, forcing John to repeat the question. His grip on her wrist tightened a little more, beginning to turn the skin beneath it an angry pink. He hadn’t realised what he was doing until Margaret struggled to break free. He immediately let go and looked away.

It was in that moment that she thought she saw something, a flickering of something deep and turbulent as he gripped her harder. It made her heart pound.

John looked up at her again, and for the first time thought that she was a little embarrassed. The high points of her cheeks were covered in a fierce flush that scraped its way down her supple ivory neck and disappeared, sliding beneath the modest neckline of blouse. Even though she persisted in her regal stance, he now noticed the way her fingers fiddled with the fabric of her skirt. He suddenly wanted to feel those fingers on his skin again. He swallowed forcefully at the thought.

He had told her, on that second evening of their marriage (having spent his first lying awake and listening to the sobs in the next room, trying to think of some appropriate way to offer comfort) that he would make no demands on her body. He would never ask that of her, not while she disliked him so much. John had thought that he was being a gentleman. But apparently, he was once again wrong in his estimation of that word.

He would never forget the look of scorn that Margaret had given him. She was so quick to temper. She had accused him of denying her the opportunity to have a family and making a liar out of her. She had said that she felt dishonest (to God and to society) pretending that they were man and wife and that she had understood what it meant to accept his proposal. She was ready to do her duty as every other wife before her had. Margaret may not have desired this marriage but she was ready to do what she must in order to make her new life work.

John remembered how she had stood there in her room, cheeks heated and head thrown back, rather like she was standing now. In that moment, he had been so frustrated with this woman for misunderstanding the good intent behind his words that he took hold of her tapered arms and pulled her close in an awkward motion, wanting to show her what her choice would mean. John had dropped his head down, intending to touch those wide, vicious lips with his own. He remembered the feel of her body tensing up the moment he touched her. She was like a statue, so cold and unmoving. He had let her go with a bitter laugh; clearly she had no idea what she wanted.

In the end it had been her slight touch to his forearm that had stayed him. She wanted, quite rightly, to know the reasons behind his decision.

In truth he had been so caught up in the present difficult situation that he hadn’t thought as far ahead as children. He needed to make her understand why he wished for things to be this way between them for the moment.

So there in Margaret’s room, beside the girlish single bed, John had told her rather bluntly, that he had no urge to consummate the marriage if love wasn’t at the core of the act. He had told her that it would be like bedding a random woman from the street—a body for use and nothing more. Margaret’s dark brows had risen slightly at his crude language but remained silent. He had told her that he needed her to feel some measure of affection for him; he couldn’t be the only one with feelings invested. Otherwise the act became base and disrespectful to both people involved. Finally, she seemed to understand him.

The fire hissed as the last bit of timber caught flame, breaking John’s reverie. Margaret had not moved an inch. She was still staring at him with the same, slightly wild look, the same look she had worn when her body was shielding him from a sea of angry people.
Apparently John wasn't as infallible as he liked to believe, because despite all his gentlemanly resolutions, at this moment he wanted little more than to sink his body into hers...
He was close, so close that she could see the little patch of stubble just under the left side of his chin that was a little longer than the rest. He must have missed it when he shaved that morning. For some reason this innocuous little tuft set her heart beating harder.

After staring at her for what seemed like an eternity, John had risen from the chair and clasped her rather forcefully toward him. He hadn't done anything further. He just held her like that; hands firmly resting on her upper arms, her rigid skirts brushing his rumbled trousers. Then he kissed her.

The kiss was messy; his mouth was hot and hard as his lips slammed against hers. His chin rough, scraping her cheek a little and making the heat there quiver and sting. He seemed to be breathing her in, and Margaret felt close to drowning, the whole world losing focus. She held rigid, trying to regain some sort of equilibrium. This was not at all like she had imagined a kiss to be. It was too desperate, not the languid affectionate communication she had always anticipated. Then, as suddenly as the kiss had started, it stopped.

John broke away quickly and let her go, striding away from her and out of the room. Margaret was utterly confused. What had happened? She followed instinctively, unwilling to leave so much gone unsaid this time. She cared little if it ended in another conflict, not while the viperous heat at the base of her stomach coiled tighter and she grew more uncertain of herself.

Margaret caught up to John at the entry to his room

'Why did you run from me?' Her voice sounded thready; it was the first time she had spoken to him that evening.

It took John a moment to respond, and even then he wouldn't look at her. He seemed ashamed, humiliated even. 'I want you too much. Because, despite the fact that I know you do not love me, do not even care for me well enough to call me a friend, I desire you. Hell! I even desire you when I feel you so stiff and cold in my arms.'

He looked at her then, to see how this proud, refined young woman took his awkward, rough words. She definitely looked surprised, with her dark brows arched high on her forehead and her lips turned down slightly at the corners.

Margaret could hear nothing but the rush of her blood through her ears and the drumming of her heart as her husband answered her. 'I want you too much'. This is what he had said. The words were so crude and coarse, yet they didn't repulse her; quite the opposite she was ashamed to admit. Margaret hadn't missed that note of melancholy that laced his voice either. She reached out to grab hold of his hand, suddenly desiring the contact, the feel of his skin again. Whether this was done more for his benefit or her own was questionable.

Standing there, in the doorway of his room, she held his hand flat atop her left, navigating the clefts and peaks with the tips of her fingers. These were strong hands, she decided, strong enough to snap her wrist if he wanted to but also strong enough to carefully hold her prone body, as they did on that day that changed the course of their lives.
Folds of skin covered the joints of each finger and a hairline scar was just visible in the dim oil lamp light. It traversed each of the knuckles, slashing its way across his skin. She briefly wondered how he had gotten it and made a note to ask him one day. She came cross the dent between his wrist and thumb and paused, captivated by this valley that fell between the two taut tendons running to his first digit**. She had seen this dent numerous times before when his hands were working with something (holding a pen, cutting with a knife) and lately (she dared not think how long) she had had difficulty in pulling her focus away.

It occurred to her then that this structure could be hers if she so wished, because she was sure that he would give any part of himself to her if she only said the word. She felt selfish at this thought. But she was beginning to understand that she wanted him. She wanted this part of him. And every other part of him, she had laid her fingers on. Despite what she had felt in the past, tonight was different. She was different.

Tonight he had said that he wanted her and she allowed herself to remember that many months ago, in a conversation she would rather forget, he had told her that he loved her. They both knew that she couldn't return those feelings, not yet. But she started to wonder whether this, this touching and talking without words was a part of building those feelings. So she placed her lips on this spot and claimed it as hers.

Margaret noticed that the skin beneath her lips was of a slightly different texture to the skin over his cheek; a little less smooth. She took her lips away from the little furrow on his hand, the one that now belonged to her and raised her eyes.

It seemed as though John was holding every muscle in his immense frame still. The forearms that were peeking out of his rolled up shirtsleeves were rigid, the muscles fiercely trying to push through the skin. His feet were firmly planted at shoulder width apart, keeping his body from swaying this way or that. Margaret looked up to his face; it held a look of forced composure belying the storm she knew was brewing just beneath the surface. He was holding himself in check again.

It frustrated her that he was holding back when she was not. She had seen him let go before and it had been her holding back then. She sighed. They never seemed to be in tune with each other. She thought that this discord was part of the uneasiness between them. If only it was removed than maybe they could be friends. She smiled. she began to think that she would rather like that.

Something seemed to snap then, bringing John back into motion. Perhaps he had seen her lips curve up into a smile? Margaret didn't know and didn't particularly care; she just wanted him there with her, in that place of ferocious heat and confusion.

John cleared his throat, attempting to force speech from vocal cords that were struck dumb. In the end he could only produce one syllable 'why?'

Margaret looked at him with an open face; she knew what he was referring to. 'Because I wanted to.' The hand that still lay in hers gripped her palm frantically. She could almost feel the hope pouring out of that gesture. Margaret didn't want to hurt him. Not tonight. But neither could she lie. She continued. 'Because I have this need, this urge to touch. Not the same need that you have to touch me I think. Mine has a different origin, it is new and overwhelming. It's not borne of deep feelings..of...of love. I'm sorry.' Margaret was babbling. She always did when embarrassed. She ended up staring at their joined hands; her husband's and hers.

To her surprise, John turned their hands so that Margaret's lay on top of his. He began to mimic her previous exploration, running his lithe fingertip across the ridges of her knuckles, then flicking over each tendon that ran up to her slender, white wrist. She knew with absurd clarity that he was searching for the same little dent she found on him before. With the hand that sat beneath hers, he
moved her thumb out and up and there it was. That same little dent. Margaret wondered briefly if he was going to claim this part of her like she did with him. She actually hoped that he would. She wanted to belong to someone.

What she never expected to feel was the tip of his tongue in that crevice. It was only a tiny swipe but it sent her already overheated body on fire and the creature in the pit of her stomach dipped lower seeming to strike at the patch of flesh between her legs, making the area sting and pulsate.

Chapter End Notes

A/N * I'm referring to the anatomical snuff box here (The deepening of the flesh between the tendons of the abductor pollicis longus, extensor pollicis longus and brevis – particularly visible when the thumb is abducted and extended). It's a favourite piece of surface anatomy for me and I've always had a little kink for it when it appears on a pair of well formed masculine hands.
John hadn't planned on kissing her hand. He hadn't planned on using his tongue to taste that little sliver of innocent skin; but he had and he could never regret it. The force of passion that surged through his body at that moment was utterly breathtaking in its intensity. But it was also a devastating reminder of the disparity of their feelings. Had she not, just moments ago reminded him of that?

He also remembered what else she had said and that lifted a little of the terrible heaviness from his chest. She desired him. He had desired Margaret long before he loved her, so he knew where this could lead and that knowledge was his salvation. Then the memory came; the unbidden ghost of the touch of her arms around his neck. Oh how she had clung to him for one small moment! This recollection melted all power of self control like wax before a flame. In this instant, he knew that he would willingly throw them both into the depths of hell for one glimpse of rapture.

The thick pounding of blood below his abdomen intensified as he made his decision, reminding him that they were wed and thus nothing they did with mutual agreement could be so very terrible.

So without further thought John took Margaret's hand and placed it around his neck as it had been that day of the riot, needing her touch so much more than he did then.

Margaret found herself entangled with her husband. He had taken her hand, the one that now belonged to him by virtue of a kiss (a lick really), and placed it around his neck. Tall woman as she was, she had had to move closer to him to allow the hand to sit comfortably. She was so close that there was no longer a gap between them. Their clothing intermingled and their breath wove together, dripping with the secret, hedonistic words of lust that had sat on the tip of the tongue unspoken. They were the kind of words that the mind shied away from thinking about in polite company; the kind of words that could only be murmured to a lover in the cover of darkness and complete trust.

Margaret thought that Mr Thornton's skin felt warmer at his neck than on his hand. She wondered why. Maybe this was the area that all his warm blood rushed to in moments like these? Although as she remembered the instructive letter she had received from Edith just prior to the wedding she knew that this supposition was lacking in logic. She knew that all of his untamed heat would be surging in the same direction as hers, preparing their bodies for what should naturally follow. She wasn't certain if she wanted that yet. Margaret felt that it was too much, too soon. But the swirling, coiling, indefinable darkness in her groin reminded her of the pleasure she had already felt tonight and anymore misgivings were banished. She knew at least that she wanted this touching to continue. This would be her starting point.

After a time of charged silence, Margaret detached her arm from around John's neck and loosely held his hand beside her, trying to calm the jittery feeling that had overcome her muscles. She just needed one moment of stillness before throwing herself completely into the raging torrent.

She never was granted that moment, because John was there beside her and he had already decided
As she entered the threshold of his room, Margaret was instantly assaulted with his mouth again: the thin lips, hot breath and rough chin. The kiss was more frenzied than the last and she once more felt out of breath. It was such a foreign sensation, it felt so invasive. She didn't like it. She didn't want him this close yet. It was too overwhelming.

But he wasn't stopping, so Margaret pushed her hands against his arms with as much force as she could muster. He broke away stunned. Margaret gasped for breath in relief, trying to calm herself. She didn't know why she had felt that way. Things had been fine before then, she had wanted this.

Margaret looked to John who had leapt away from her as though forcibly slapped. He looked completely unsure of himself. She needed to explain.

'I couldn't breathe. I'm sorry.'

John looked at her with the usual serious mien, the openness of before having vanished. He visibly swallowed. 'I didn't realise. I should not have kissed you like that. Not now.'

He sounded so hollow, as though someone else was speaking for him. She hated to see how she had affected him. She hated this power she had to so easily wound him. It was a heavy responsibility. She shook her head, 'No, I had wanted it. It is just that once it started, I felt... defenceless.'

'And that makes you afraid', he finished for her. Margaret nodded. John took a deep breath, one that made his shoulders rise and chest expand. She knew it was to calm his feelings. When he was ready he spoke again.

'I do not think either of us is ready for this. I can not...' he shook his head, leaving that thought go unspoken. 'You are uncomfortable already. We should just leave this be.'

Margaret didn't know how to answer. He was right on some level; she was uncomfortable with his kiss but all of the other touches …they had been unlike anything else she experienced at the hands of another person.

John took her hand and together they made their way back out to the lonely hallway and along to her room. He did not look at her again but left her with a small squeeze to her fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

*Note: I have used a few words and ideas in the second paragraph that are from Gaskell's. (original paragraph: 'He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck, impatiently felt as it had been at the time; but now the recollection of her clinging defence of him, seemed to thrill him through and through,—to melt away every resolution, all power of self-control, as if it were wax before a fire.')
Margaret stood in her small cold room, her arms wrapped protectively around herself, endeavouring to find some comfort in the gesture. She was attempting to understand what had happened. Everything was terrifyingly pleasant before that last kiss. It had felt right and sort of liberating to give in and follow her more basic instincts; the ones that genteel women were not supposed to feel. And John, well, he had returned her advances in kind and for one small moment there was no animosity between them; no hurt, resentment or regret. There only seemed to be this shared benevolence (she could not yet call it love) that made her happy. This shared moment was somehow special.

Then it all changed, like a cold tail wind changing direction to slap one across the face. Margaret needed to know why she had suddenly felt uncomfortable with that kiss. She knew that having him so close had scared her a little. She had felt stifled with him there, invading her mouth like that. Margaret did not like to surrender herself so completely to another person; it frightened her to feel so vulnerable. She was sure that some of this fear was somehow connected to her earlier resentment over their marriage and the guilt that weighed heavy in her chest. The guilt of finding herself unable to return John's feelings because although he had never said those words to her again, she knew with perfect certainty that he still loved her. She could see it in the way that he looked at her or the way he spoke gently to her and even when they argued. Margaret felt as though she were the cursed star that he was forever doomed to circle but never able to clutch in his grasp. And she was sorry for it.

Margaret rubbed her arms a little, trying to regain some of the warmth that had enflamed her earlier. The storm of desire had died the moment that she and John had parted at her room, leaving her void and chilled. She stared unseeing into the night that was as inky black as her hair and wondered what John was feeling.

John paced along the floor boards in bare feet as he thought about the way this evening had unfolded. The cold had well and truly numbed his toes to a painful level. He was glad of this; it gave him something else to feel instead of the usual ache that his wife unconsciously inflicted.

He had been completely taken by surprise to wake to the feel of Margaret's soft fingertips gliding over his face. He had initially thought that he was having one of his many dreams that featured her. The reality had been so much more visceral. Even after she had told him that her actions weren't guided by love, he had still felt thankful for her touch. He had been happy for that one moment. Then he had kissed her with the force of his entire soul and the moment had been ruined; he had overwhelmed her. He didn't seem to be able to learn how to express himself to this woman.

John rubbed viciously at the day's growth on his chin. It was irritating him tonight. He decided to shave. At least that was one frustration that he could take care of. He made his way to the small
walnut stand with the mirror and the Dutch patterned porcelain basin and ewer. John reached for the soap and began to lather it between his hands with a little water from the ewer. He thought that he heard the subtle swish of fabric but dismissed it out of hand. He could not, however dismiss the bell-like voice that rang out behind him.

Margaret needed to speak with John; she needed to make him understand what had gone wrong between them. So, with her usual decisiveness, she had stridden out of her room and back to his. She did not knock. She was his wife and he had told her once, months ago that she was always welcome to come and find him there if she ever needed him. Well she needed him now.

When she entered his chamber she thought she heard soft noises coming from the dressing room. Perhaps he was readying himself for bed, washing off the day's grime and putting on a clean white night shirt. The thought sparked that last little ember that had almost gone out at the pit of her abdomen. The resurgence of warmth gave her confidence. She continued forward and was mildly surprised to find him still clothed and leaning over a washstand, chin soaped and razor in hand.

'Why are you shaving at this time of night?' The words tumbled out of mouth without thought. John turned to look at her. He seemed taken aback to see her there. A moment passed before he answered warily. 'I could not sleep and the beard was itchy.' He appraised the length of her and fired a question of his own. 'Why are you still in your dress?'

Margaret was quicker in her reply, 'I did not want to go to sleep.'

Margaret could not help but notice that he had unbound his throat to shave, the piece of cloth that made up his cravat, lying on the stool beside him. It made her stomach muscles contract to see this new piece of skin for the first time.

She shook her head, clearing it of this new distraction. She needed to talk with him. She wasn't sure how to start, so she just let the words and half formed phrases tumble out uncensored. She trusted that John would make sense of it, or at least try to.

'I was afraid, you see? You were so close taking possession of me for that moment and I...I had thought that I wanted that, to be part of that. But I...I just couldn't match you. I couldn't surrender to you, be so...so vulnerable in front of you.'

John's voice was hoarse and agitated when he spoke. 'Margaret, I never wanted you to surrender; that is not what that kiss was about! My love is not about domination.'

Margaret noticed that he had put down the razor and was breathing hard again. He always seemed to breathe more forcefully when he was upset.

'I am vulnerable because I love you. You make me vulnerable. But you don't use that against me. So why do you think that I would be so callous as to use your feelings against you?'

Margaret felt a little measure of shame at his words…’but you don’t use that against me.’ Oh but she could, so easily use his love for her to wound him. She moved to place her hand on his. It was an unconscious gesture of comfort. She spoke quietly, feeling highly exposed. 'I want us to be friends. I do not want us to be at odds any more. I think...I think that I want to be able to love you.' John groaned in response; a deep rumble that seemed to reverberate through his chest cavity and straight into hers.
Wrap yourself around me: do it, just define me.

Chapter Notes

Title chapter from 'Turn me on' by the Grates

VI.

John grabbed her at the waist and pulled her against him, leg to leg, stomach to stomach and forehead to forehead. His breathing was laboured but he did not kiss her. He would not risk this new and fragile thing between them.

Eventually he broke the silence, 'Thank you.' It was so softly whispered that Margaret almost missed it. She wasn't sure he had meant her to hear at all. She pulled out of his embrace a little and looked at him in curiosity. John shrugged his shoulders a little, 'Thank you for wanting to love me. It is more than I ever expected.'

Margaret shook her head at his self-deprecation. 'You are a man worthy of love.' She flushed but looked him directly in the eye as she went on to explain. 'I might not feel that, not yet.' Her voice faded a little but she held his gaze. 'But you are you and somehow, in this mess of a marriage I came to realise that I like the person you are. I would never change you.' There. She had said all that lay in her heart. She felt lighter for doing so; it put them both on an even footing. She heard a murmured 'thank you' before she felt a kiss upon her hair and a squeeze around her waist. His touch at that place had sent a trail of prickly heat up to her chest and across to her breasts. She felt her nipples constrict and peak against the chemise, her blood pulsing fast and hypnotic through her arteries.

Partly to distract herself of the sensations of her body and partly to satisfy her own curiosity, she touched her finger (the same one that had explored his face earlier) to the layer of soap on her husband's jaw, taking in the feel of it, so odd with the silky coat hiding the prickles. He caught her hand before it had progressed too far and wiped the soap off her finger with a nearby cloth. He then moved away from her and reached for the razor, intending to shave the hair along his jaw.

'No.' The word escaped Margaret's throat without thought. She swallowed. 'I like it like that. The roughness. Just for now... leave it.' It wasn't a question. John breathed heavily and washed the soap off instead. She could see his hands tremble a little as he used the towel to dry his face.

He turned to face her. 'You must now do something for me in kind.' He swept his eyes over her, from the very tip of her black crowned head to the toes of her half boots. It was a lingering gaze that seemed to see beneath the many layers of clothing she wore. Margaret felt the coil of tension in her abdomen tight again and the uncomfortable heat pulse up her neck.

'Let me take your hair down.' His voice seemed constricted and almost guilty. Margaret guessed that this part of her held some sort of fascination for him; much as his hands did for her. She nodded and he led her out of the dressing room and over to the solitary chair beside the fire. There was no vanity here or any other feminine furniture. In fact there was very little of comfort in this room. It was the domain of a man who had spent too many years alone.
John seemed to hesitate as he stood behind her, as though unsure of how to attack the numerous coils and loops of hair resting atop her head. She felt the moment that his hands touched her hair. It was an incredibly light touch and she was sure that he was purposely constraining his movements for her. This knowledge made her smile just a little. He managed to find the two shell combs first and removed them with care, placing them on the mantel shelf for safe keeping. The many pins seemed to cause him more trouble. His fingers were too large for such small implements but he managed to pull all thirty-three out in the end.

Margaret could feel John running his fingers through the heavy loops, untwisting them and allowing her long hair to rest unrestricted down her back. She thought that she would like him to do this for her every evening; how lovely it would be, how absurdly indulgent. He then swept the mass of black hair over her left shoulder and kissed the nape of her neck. It was a warm, lingering kiss; the kind that was only given between lovers. Margaret shuddered. It was still so new. He then placed his lips to the spot just below that place that now belonged to him and claimed his second kiss. He continued down until he reached the collar of her blouse.

Margaret was fighting for breath again, her ribcage feeling too constricted in her corset as his lips continued to caress her neck, eventually finding their home at the junction of her neck and shoulder. She was normally ticklish there, but his rough scruff had overridden her usual sensitivity, leaving her with a pleasant tingling instead.

He was so close to her now that she could smell his hair. It seemed to be the place where that unique smell that belonged only to him originated. She placed her hands in the dark, wiry mass, moving through it from scalp to end. He stopped his attention to her neck. She repeated her actions and triumphed in the small groan that escaped him. He whispered words close to her ear, panting them out. 'We need to stop this now if you want to return to your own bed this night. I do not think I can long control this... I want you too much.'

Margaret's response was instinctive. 'You have me.'

Margaret took a breath and bent to untie her boot laces, freeing her feet from the leather. They were almost in an equal state of undress now; she just needed to remove her stockings and they would both be bare foot. She liked that they would be doing this together, equals in their mortification and exhilaration.

Margaret’s stockings were the ordinary black ones she wore during the day; they were nothing special. She stood to make the task of unfastening them from her garters easier. She took a steadying breath, uncomfortable at the thought that John should witness this. No man had ever seen this part of her. A woman's legs were to be always covered and ankles were certainly never revealed to a man. The mere thought of it sent her heart galloping the little bit faster. However her desire for the two of them to be bared equally before each other was stronger than her shame. So, she raised the layers of clothing: the navy linen skirt, the petticoat, the crinoline and chemise, to just above her knee. With every new inch of skin exposed, her confidence began to waver. She fumbled at the garter just above her right knee, her fingers suddenly too stiff and unsteady for this simple task. Suddenly she felt the warmth of his hand over hers. She looked to him, her eyes wide and bottom lip caught between her teeth; anxiety written all over her face. His brow quirked up a little, silently asking permission to help. Margaret nodded.

The moment her husband’s fingers brushed the flesh above her knee, the beast roared into life again. It reared its head and struck her in that feminine place, piercing her again and again. She had to place her hands on John's shoulders to steady herself. He was crouched on one knee, attempting to help her remove this unwanted piece of clothing. After a few moments of fumbling, success came and he
carefully rolled the stocking over her knee and down her calf, allowing his fingers to skim her
overwrought skin as he went. Margaret wasn't sure if she liked this or not. It made her feel too much
all at once. It was overwhelming, having him down there. It was not decent she was sure, but she
was not certain if she cared for that kind of decency this evening.

Once that first stocking was off, John reached for the second one. But this time his hands drifted up a
little higher than before, grazing the flesh of her lower inner thigh. And this time Margaret was the
one to moan. The little sound escaped her without volition. Her blood vessels instantly dilated with
embarrassment, painting her skin a darker shade of pink. John lingered longer at the task, tentatively
exploring the bumps and grooves within his reach. But the longer he took, the more insecure
Margaret felt. The shame was licking her insides, burning like ice. She wanted this, but she wasn't
ready for all of his teasing touches just yet.

'Please'...her voice failed her. She tried again. 'Please just take it off. I can't...I feel… it is too much
just yet.'

'I am sorry.' He forgot about this exploration and deftly removed the second stocking, pulling her
skirts back into place. He rose and took her face in his hands.

'I am sorry. Please, you must tell me to stop if you do not want this.'

'I want this.' Margaret paused, considering how to explain. 'It is just different with you. When I touch
those places, it isn't so...I don't feel so...much. With you it is different.'
They stood together, him and her; still clothed, except for their feet. They had stood there for some moments in silent communion, becoming at ease with each other once more.

Margaret's compulsion to touch was rising again, so she reached out and placed her palm on his chest, the first time she had touched him thus. His body seemed to thrum under her hand. She was surprised that she could feel the shape of his musculature so easily beneath his clothing. It appeared that a gentleman's clothes were much less layered than a lady's. Margaret moved her palm along the plain black waistcoat and came to a halt at the first button of the row. She sucked in a breath and with some trepidation popped it out of the buttonhole, deepening the 'v' shaped opening of the garment. She looked to John's face, but he had thrown his head back, hiding his expression in the shadows. She decided to continue down the line of buttons, feeling braver with each one she undid. When she reached the last, she gently pushed the waistcoat over his shoulders and he turned his body to help her remove it. Margaret folded the piece of clothing carefully and placed it on the chair before turning to him again. For the first time she thought him fine-looking. His large pronounced features seemed less apparent in the dim glow of the fire and his frame was rendered a little less massive and imposing in just shirt and trousers. He seemed almost boyish with his shy solicitude and eager nervousness; much less the stern man she knew.

John took her hands in his, brushing the inside of each wrist with his lips. He smiled at her; a small shy upturn of the lips. He popped the little buttons at the cuffs of her blouse, leaving Margaret in no doubt of his intentions. But still he asked for permission and that made her heart swell. She told him that she would tell him when to stop. She knew that she wouldn’t. And in that moment, the innocent, righteous parson’s daughter was changed forever; in that moment she lost some of her sweet innocence as she acknowledged the shadow of carnal desire that had crept up on her.

Margaret wanted and needed in a way she never thought she would.

Margaret's skin erupted in goose bumps at the moment his hands reached for the button just above the swell of her breasts. It popped open easily and he moved to the next. She could feel his hands quiver as his progressed down the length of the blouse. They didn't seem to have stopped shaking all evening. He came to the last button; the one that sat on her waist and he paused a moment, placing the back of his hand there feeling the quiet movements of her breathing. John then pulled the tails of the blouse out from the waist of her voluminous skirt and popped open the last button before holding her hand, twirling her slowly so that her back was to him. He then slipped the light linen shirt off one white sloping shoulder and down the tapered arm, doing the same on the other side. Margaret was surprised to feel him place his mouth on her shoulder. She could feel the moment his lips made contact with her skin and the rougher scrape and pressure that followed. He had scraped his teeth.
along skin! That was a surprise. The dichotomy of pleasure and pain was alluring and Margaret wanted more of it. Needing more of it. She spun to face her husband, suddenly wanting to see his face. There was a lightness there that she had not seen before. Underneath the shyness, that boyish nervousness, he looked …..happy. Margaret was glad. If she could not give him love, she could at least give him this, this happiness.

It seemed that John wasn't ready to relinquish his lady's maid duties just yet. He rested his hands on her waist, just above the swell of her skirts, tracing the curve her found there. Margaret took one of those pesky hands and, finding that groove that belonged to her, raised it to her lips. Only this time, she did not simply kiss it. She nipped him there as he had her. The hand at her waist tightened in response. He spun her quickly (she was beginning to think that they were on a merry-go-round with all this spinning and twirling), his handslanding at the fastening of her navy skirt, unclasping it. Margaret told him that the crinoline beneath needed to be loosened as well. He kissed her lightly on the nape of her neck once more and searched for the ties of the dome shaped structure. He undid them, allowing the sea of fabric to fall haphazardly to the floor. He helped her step out of it and Margaret flushed anew at being so naked in front of him. She wanted to wrap her arms around herself in protection but resisted. This was all part of coming together as a man and a woman.

Margaret knew that she had to keep going, before she lost her nerve. So taking a steadying breath, she reached for John's cotton shirt. She gently held each wrist as she undid the buttons at the cuffs. The neck of the garment had already fallen open when he had removed the cravat earlier. Her hands came to hover at the waistband of his trousers. For the first time, Margaret felt younger than her nineteen years. She was so far out of her depth. She had never undressed a man before. The waistcoat had been a harmless little garment, revealing nothing more than his shirt. This expanse of white cotton however, would expose much more of his body once it was removed. John must have sensed her predicament because he began to untuck the shirt himself. But Margaret stopped him, 'Please, I want to.' So pushing all of her shy naivety to the side, Margaret slowly tugged the white fabric from beneath the black waistband. Her hand accidentally touched his stomach, the muscles instantly contracting from the contact. She did it again; this time laying the backs of her fingers there, feeling the warmth of him. She liked this part of him. She wanted to keep her hands there forever, soaking into his heat. John released a deep, broken breath and Margaret continued with her task. When the shirt was free, he tugged it over his head and let it join her skirts on the floor. His chest was now only covered by a thin undershirt. She wanted to see what lay beneath.

Margaret thought that she had never been made to feel so wanted before. She had certainly felt needed; needed by her mother to listen to her lamentations, needed by her father for her strength and courage, but never wanted for just who she was. But tonight she felt that John wanted her. Despite her faults and despite the fact that she did not love him, he still wanted her. Under his gaze she felt valued and respected and that made her body flush anew with pleasant warmth.
Of Silk and steel and flesh and bone.

VIII.

In a swell of impulsive gratitude, Margaret surged forward and placed a quick kiss on John's cheek. She wanted to thank him for his love. To have someone want her and accept her for all that she was, both the light and the dark, left her utterly overwhelmed. She had always believed that love was for the perfect individuals; the beautiful, the intelligent and the virtuous. It wasn't for flawed people like her. She thought of her parents who had married for love and now barely spoke to each other and sighed. No, love would not be easy for someone like her.

John wasn't perfect either. He had a quick temper and was far too severe in his judgements. He was stubborn and taciturn and too concerned about business. But standing there, watching the glow of the fire flicker and dance across the undulating terrain of his face, Margaret could not help but also think of his virtues. She thought on how he could be gentle when least expected and how kind he was when he thought no one was paying him heed. She thought of how he had the capacity to love. He was imperfect and yet he was capable of loving her, so perhaps love (the real, solid, enduring kind) could exist between two imperfect people after all. Perhaps there was hope that she could feel that one day.

John had seemed a little surprised at her sudden display of affection but he was quick to respond, clasping her to him in his usual clumsy way. But there was a difference in the embrace this time; an implicit hum of mutual intensity that was absent in the previous one. Margaret allowed her head to rest on him, at that place where his chest met his shoulder just below the clavicle. She inhaled deeply. He smelled unlike any other person she knew; of oil and soap and smoke. It was an acrid, earthy smell but she liked it. It reminded her of the lemon syrup cake she adored as a child, absurd as it was. It gave her that same feeling of comfort. She briefly wondered when she had started to feel comforted in this man’s presence, but left the thought half formed too distracted by the current events between them.

John gently set her away from him as he removed the undershirt. Margaret knew that she should have looked away but she could not. He fascinated her. This part of her, this dark, unladylike part of her was enthralled by him. The way his muscles slid over each other and against his bones with each movement sent new waves of painful lust crashing over her.

Her throat went dry and her voice cracked as she asked him to loosen the ties of her corset.

It was some moments before she felt his hands on her back. They fanned out to encompass her ribcage, like a large butterfly unfurling its wings. He spent some time trying to untangle the knot, his blunt, ungainly fingers unused to doing such delicate work. He seemed to fiddle with the lacing as well, unsure how it came undone. She heard his voice, hesitant and apologetic near her ear, 'Do these ties come all the way out?'It made her stomach clench in pleasure to have to tell him how it was
done. She liked that they were learning how to do this together. It made them equal, just as she had wanted. It made her feel less vulnerable when he was just as clueless as she was. But then she realised that perhaps that was too great an assumption; perhaps he had been this way with other women before. Margaret wasn't sure how to feel about it; she wasn't jealous but she wasn't exactly pleased by the thought. It made them so disparate again, because in the end he was a full grown man and she felt as though she was barely out of the nursery.

She suddenly realised that John's hands were now motionless, just resting at her waist. The ties had been loosened enough so she took a breath, and was able to push the steel busk together and pop the hooks out of their eyelets, finally freeing her body from the uncomfortable constriction.

She was ready for the cool air that would find its way under her chemise to attack the new skin; she even welcomed it as it helped with the heated feeling that hadn't left her all evening. What she wasn't ready for was the feeling of uncertainty that assailed her. She suddenly felt indecent being here like this, for finding such pleasure in being undressed by him. Had the other women in his past acted as she had? Shame flooded her body in an instant making her skin writhe in guilt as all her previous confidence left her in a rush. Was it wrong to engage in these intimacies solely for the sake of pleasure? Did that make her a whore? She was suddenly confused and anxious. She took a steadying breath and attempted to push these feelings down. It did not work too well.

Margaret looked to John, needing some kind of reassurance that what they were doing was not wrong. He had that same avid gaze that he had when he had kissed her earlier with such abandon. He wanted this, and despite the white-hot shame, despite the uncertainty so did she. She could not deny it; she would not deny it, because she would not lie to herself. This….this darkness was a part of her, just as much as the light was and she would learn to accept that. It was part of her imperfections, just as her height and her overly large mouth were.

Margaret wondered where this left them. Was this wrong or right? John grabbed her hand and squeezed it lightly, throwing her a crooked smile. Surely this could not be so very wrong if they both wanted it? They were husband and wife after all and John did not seem to recoil at this part of her; in fact, she thought that perhaps he rather liked it.

She looked John in the eye as she asked him to take off her chemise, wanting to finally be rid of all her innocence; wanting...just wanting. She shivered slightly as he raised the hemline up her body. Margaret held her arms loosely above her head, allowing him to slip the fabric over them, shedding the last vestige of purity to leave the raw and unknown reality behind. There was nowhere to hide now.

Margaret now stood in nothing more than her drawers. Her hands had reflexively come up to cover her breasts, embarrassed at their motion when she moved her body. Her nipples felt tender under her hands, all raised and hard as they were. The skin was tinged pink from forehead to navel, all mottled and ugly. She felt jittery and on edge with all the emotions sweeping through her blood. It felt as though the next touch would send her crashing over a great precipice and she was somewhat afraid of going there alone.

John just stood there, his gaze fixed on her as it had been all night. She could tell that he was reigning himself in once more. She really wished he wouldn't. She hated that they could never be open with one another, that they always seemed to be hiding a part of themselves away in defence. She certainly did, although she trusted him now with this dark side of her, the one that she usually hid. She supposed that his trust would come in time.
She could see his fingers flex and extend and she was sure that he wanted to place them on her newly exposed skin; just as she wished to allow her hands to wander on his chest. Then she heard him.

'Margaret...’ Her name was ground out; a rough almost brutal sound that reverberated through his chest. She wanted to feel that vibration, so she moved closer and placed a hand on his sternum, commanding him to speak. He swallowed hard and obeyed, speaking her name once more. Margaret liked the way her name felt as it shuddered through his skin and bone to meet her hand. It always made her feel slightly heady (and terrified) to have him obey her so easily, to have this power over him. But this power also had the ability to wound. She needed to take care. Thinking over this, Margaret let her hand slip across a little to explore the rise of flesh over his heart. It was warm and firm. She thought it strange that this part of him should be hairy when it was not on her. She was also a little amused to see that he too had nipples, although they were smaller and flatter than hers. She wanted to touch one, but thought that perhaps they would be painful like hers, so refrained.

Margaret was a little taken aback when John reached out to mirror her actions and placed his hand over her breastbone, his palm catching on the edges of her breasts. She realised that she still had one hand covering her chest and let it fall, along with the one on his body. His hand stilled, just rising and falling along with her breathing. It was as though he was trying to meld his hand to her, trying to knit their skin together. But he did eventually move that hand, and when it happened, Margaret thought that all previous notions of pleasure must be overthrown in the face of this awakening.

His fingers were trailing lightly along the contour of her breast, skimming the underside and coming back up near the tops of her ribs. She thought that she would expire from this feeling, so deeply did it dig into her lungs, into her heart. She could not breathe, but it was not like before. It did not feel like drowning. It felt like being swung up high in the air and falling fast towards waiting arms. It was dizzying and erotic and strangely pure all at once. But then he found her nipple, and it all came crashing down. The pain was too much. She could not help the hiss that escaped her. He stopped immediately, withdrawing his hands. She explained, her voice lower than normal, ‘They are sensitive. It...it hurts when you tug like that...’ John nodded a little and placed his hand on the underside again, holding the fullness briefly before letting it fall. He then folded his large frame down and placed his mouth there, grazing her with his stubble as he swiped that curve with his tongue. She moaned; a little bubble of sound that made its way up and out her throat and into the night.

He did it again.
Somewhere beneath the haze of sensation Margaret was dimly aware of how absurd it was that they were both still standing there barefoot and bare-chested when it was so cold in this room. The fire was flickering away merrily but it did little to dissipate the coolness that had crept in as the night drifted on. The only real warmth came from the mouth that was currently on her skin. She wanted to ask him where he had learned to do this. Which woman it was that had shown him. She was certain that he was not inexperienced, some of his actions told her as much but at the same time he also seemed oddly ignorant (He had had no idea that her breasts could be painful). She itched to ask him about it all. She was actually about to open her mouth to phrase the question when he let out a frustrated grunt and pulled away.

'What is the matter?' Margaret asked, suddenly fearing that perhaps her reactions were indecent after all. She covered herself again, waiting for an answer. She saw the skin on his face flush an angry red, clawing its way down his neck to the top of his chest, but still he did not answer. He turned his head away instead, staring sullenly at the fire.

'John?' He seemed to heave a big breath before coming back to her. He reached out to take a lock of her hair, twisting it around and around his fingers as he spoke. It seemed to soothe him a little. 'It is nothing. I just needed a moment.' Margaret could not be so easily fooled. Especially when his actions make her doubt herself.

'It was not nothing. Tell me.' His heavy brows contracted together again, making him appear hawklike in the dim room, the shadows seeming to elongate his already proud nose.

'This is not how I thought it would be. I had promised myself that I would not abuse your trust; that I would not do ...this until there was love. But Christ Margaret! The things I am thinking. If you only knew you... would not wish to stay here with me.' He almost sneered at his last words and Margaret felt as though she wasn't grasping his whole meaning.

'I don't understand you.'

His answer came in a heated rush, as though he would rather have not said it, as though she had compelled him to answer against his will.

'I don't want to just bed you like any other woman! It was supposed to be different with you.' He dropped the strand of hair, apparently ashamed of himself. It seemed that Margaret had an answer to her earlier musings. He continued, softer than before, 'You mean much more to me than that.'

Margaret remained silent but hugged her body a little tighter. The action did not go unnoticed by the man opposite her. He frowned again before speaking in his usually defensive way.

'It was long ago,' he continued, 'While I was still working at the drapers... I was 20. She was much older. We...well...I never thought much of it then, but later I began to see that it was not how a gentleman conducted himself. I was so ashamed at my weakness. There has been no one since.'

He looked at her then, and Margaret was certain that he was waiting to be attacked. She could see it in the way his shoulders had tensed and the way his neck was held a little more rigidly.
She now understood the reasons behind the injunction he had placed on this act after their wedding, how he had told her that he would not do this with her until she loved him.

She knew enough of the world to have expected this, indeed she had thought about it only moments before, but that did not make it any less humiliating. For one small moment she had allowed herself to feel that they were equal in this, sharing the shame and embarrassment together. Sharing the pleasure. That was what disappointed her the most; finding that she was in this new place completely alone.

Margaret turned her head away from him. She didn't know where to go from here. Should they continue when he felt so strongly about the need for love in this act? The one thing she could not give him? She bent to retrieve her discarded chemise, feeling the need to cover herself more fully. But his voice stopped her. 'Please...'

She turned to look at him, and he moved closer. 'Please don't run from me. I will not touch you if that is your wish, but please stay. Just stay with me.' He seemed so distressed, as alone. Try as she might, she could not turn from him. She did not want to argue of over this. She did not want to do any further damage to this fragile thing between them. So she slipped on her cotton garment and grasped the hand that was waiting for her. Together they sat by the fire, she in the solitary chair, and he on the ottoman by her feet.

They spent many moments in silence, merely watching the flickering of the flames across the flooring; the patterns of light that chased each other.

‘Why did look so upset when I told you? Is it because I come to you unchaste…or… because I want more from you than you can give?’ John had spoken so quietly she had barely heard him.

Margaret replied uneasily. ‘Because I thought that we were doing this together… learning this together. It is not the fact that you are unchaste that bothers me, it is that we are not what I thought we were. We are not equal in this. I was alone the entire time. I feel so...' Margaret let the sentence hang. She didn't really know how she felt and had no idea how to broach his need for her love. Part of her just wanted to go to her own room and curl up in bed. The other part wanted John as much as before.

'I'm sorry.'

Margaret realised that he seemed to be saying that a lot this night. 'Don't be. These things can’t be helped.' She noticed that he held his head in his hands and somehow, despite the discussion they just had, she wanted to feel that weight resting on her lap as it had been earlier. She touched is shoulder and ran her hand though his untidy hair. He gave in and lay against her.
Looking back on that evening, Margaret would never quite know what had sparked that last ember of lust deep within her when she was certain all such emotions were lost. She never really knew how they had gotten from quiet dejection to such blinding intensity of feeling. She could remember sitting with him beside the fire, the feel of his warm breath on her thighs as he rested his head on her lap. She could remember the way his hands had wandered to her ankles, tracing circles around the bones there, making her body betray her mind. She could even remember the shy ghost of a smile he gave her when she touched his face, but she never knew how they made it from chair to bed.

Looking back, She was sure that she began to fall in love with him just a little that evening, although she never knew it at the time.

They were completely unclothed; standing naked before each other. Equal at last, just how she wanted it to be.

He was all coarse and rough and gritty; the sinew, blood and bone strong and stable. Margaret thought this a physical manifestation of his life, and it made her proud of him. She on the other hand was soft and supple and voluptuous in the places he was narrow. But they seemed to complement each other. Then he moved to close the space between them and they were once more thigh to thigh, chest to chest and forehead to forehead; their skin cleaving together in this closeness, binding together the fractured parts of this fragile thing between them.

He gently set her away a little and drew his fingers over the prominent swell of her right clavicle, his circular motions almost hypnotic in their repetitiveness. Margaret could barely remain standing as all the breath left her lungs in a moan that fluttered through the darkness to reach him. She felt his movements slow and descend to the swell of her breasts, tracing the same path that they had before. She was lost in pleasure once more and happy to be so. She reached out to touch her husband, wanting him to feel what she was feeling. This time she would not be the only one lost. She would not be alone and neither would he.
Margaret could feel his heart beating strong and fast beneath her fingertips; a persistent drumming that tugged her own heart beat along with it. She inched them lower and around feeling her way along the firm plane at the side of his torso; the long expanse of skin and muscle that connected his underarm to his hip. She liked the way his muscles suddenly seemed to pull away when she reached the middle; she was sure he was ticklish there and made a note to test the theory one day. She smiled at the thought. Her hand halted at his hip, just upon the bone there making little circles in imitation of his earlier movements on her collar bone. She felt the moment a shudder ripped through him. It seemed to pass directly from him to her, surging through her blood and bone coming to rest with the heat at the pit of her stomach.

He grasped her hand.

She simply lay there in the sheets that smelled of him; heart drumming and veins humming with the onslaught of sensation, each touch seeming to grow upon the next, until she was taut with the fullness of it all. She hardly dared to breathe, so sure was she that something would snap and she would be left drifting alone again. But this time he stayed. His hand had drifted to that place where all the vicious heat had coiled, the place she had only touched once or twice before. It shamed her a little to have him there but then she looked to him remembering all that had happened this night and all unease was forgotten.

His fingers felt sharp and foreign against her sex as he learned the intimate detail of this part of her; flicking, sliding, circling around the pink flesh there. He was watching her face closely now, she could tell, seeking some sort of response from her. Then his face left her view and she felt the graze of his growing beard on the roundness of her hip. Long, lingering kisses followed, training their way across to the soft skin just above her pubis and suddenly his touch didn't sting so much. She noticed she was wetter now, down there and for some reason this made a flush of warmth spread violently across her stomach. Then suddenly her body was humming again and this time she knew she would fall off that precipice and instinct told her she would not come back the same.

It only took a few more firm strokes of those lithe fingers inside and around her before she broke from the inside out, shattering into a thousand tiny fragments that rushed to reform again. Her every muscle fibre was tingling softly as the waves of pleasure dissipated from her groin out to the very tips of her fingers and toes. Margaret thought that it felt a little like a very light sun shower, in which the tiny droplets of rain sprinkled the skin so pleasantly.

It was some moments before she felt she could look at John. He was still lying with her, body half pressed against hers. But when she did, she saw that he was again grappling with some strong emotion. It felt almost too private to witness so she once more turned her face away. But his hands were there in an instant, moving her hair out of her eyes and framing her flushed face. He kissed her tentatively on the lips, body tense and ready to break.

Thus far, Margaret had avoided looking at him; looking at any more of his body that she had not previously seen. It did not seem right, even with what they were doing. She had felt it all though. She had felt that male part of him, his phallus, when they had stood clasped together in the shadows. It intrigued her and frightened her in equal measures. As if he had been privy to her thoughts, John reached for her hand and placed it on his stomach, above the little inverted navel. He would not presume more than that she knew, but he seemed to need her touch. So, gathering her maidenly courage she let her hand skim where it would, following no particular trail until she had learned the
Then they began in earnest.

It was painful, burning and all wrong. She felt too small, too tight and completely out of tune. He was too much; too foreign, too thick, causing uncomfortable friction against her skin. He was endeavouring to be gentle she was sure, but it really did not feel like it. Surely she was supposed to be able to stretch more? She clenched her jaw tight as he pushed in further. She was too dry in that place now and the burn intensified, obliterating any vestiges of her previous pleasure.

So the stories she had heard whispered behind the hands of married women had been true. The first experience of this physical intimacy was raw and intimidating, not the idealistic stuff of novels.

The panic began to rise in her throat as the pain continued. She could stand it no longer. She tried desperately to find her voice and ask John to stop but as she glanced up at him, the words died in her throat. His face was a picture concentration and apprehension. It suddenly occurred to her that maybe this was difficult for him to as well. She could see that he was holding himself in check, most likely for her benefit. He always did put her first. And in that moment she felt how easy it could be to love him. Then he was withdrawing from her and the pain eased a little and she was certain that she could bear all of this for the both of them. But then he plunged back into her again and it was just too much. She could taste blood from where she a bitten her lip to control the burn of his re-entry. Margaret's hands touched his face, trying to gain his attention. His closed eyes flickered open, searching for hers.

'It hurts?'

She nodded, truthful as always.

'I'm so sorry.' He looked utterly dejected. 'I am trying.'

'I know.' Margaret's hands continued to hold his face, her thumbs smoothing over his cheeks in a soothing motion. 'I know you are.'

'What would you have me do?' John was still there, all hard and bold and hot. Margaret couldn't see clearly in the dim light but she was certain that he had flushed a deeper shade of red as he spoke, although he could not match her own blush of embarrassment at her next words. 'I think that I am too small or that I am not...that it is too...too dry...that I am not...not...' She could not finish the sentence. John's eyes widened a little and he nodded in understanding. He took her hands from his face, kissed each palm then laid them on her stomach before he once again pulled himself away from her.

She saw blood.

This was not as she had imagined, but she was glad all the same, because he was here with her and she was no longer so alone.

She reached for his face and lips slipped on lips, teeth clashed with teeth for endless moments and this time, she was not afraid. This time her body welcomed him and they cleaved to each other in the sweaty sultry confines of the night.
He kissed her some time later; a kiss of passion, of love, of hope, of reverence.

That was the kiss she would remember. That was the kiss that caught her soul and never let go. That was the kiss that changed her whole world and taught her in the months to follow, how to love him.

- Finis

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