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**North & South: A Continuation**

by gallygaskins

Summary

Following on from where the book/BBC adaptation left off, see how both John and Margaret learn to accept each others differences and how they cope together against his mother.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Prologue – A Chance Meeting

“… We have to wait for a North bound train!” Henry Lennox exclaimed, whilst he continued to read his newspaper.

Making a move from her seat and out of the carriage, Margaret Hale stepped onto the platform relieving herself of the confined space and company she had been sat with for what had seemed like days. She had been quiet for most of the journey back from Milton mulling over and reflecting upon what Mrs Thornton had said to her, assuming Margaret’s coming to Milton was only to gloat over her son and to find that even if that had been the case, not that it had been, then John wasn’t there anyway. Mrs Thornton had no idea where he was, what he was doing or when he was to return. Where had he been? She had waited for as long as she could sitting in silence in the Thornton’s living room sipping tea and idly chatting when the need arouse but it had been in vain, all of it, her business proposition, her kindness toward his mother, her intention, everything. She felt so wretched and miserable, nothing had been achieved and now she hadn’t a clue what to do next.

Margaret had been set that morning when she had awoken. She had wrestled with sleep the previous evening but the insomnia had helped her decide upon what she was going to say, how she was going to use Henry to make the idea seem more plausible so as to give John and his mother the right impression of the venture and then she was going to find the opportunity to tell John how she was feeling, about him. Having become such ‘the heiress’ that her cousin described had given her fresh rigour, it meant that she was now in a position to give opinion more readily without the fear of propriety hanging above her head. Yes, she would still be sensible, it wasn’t honourable to be rash or indecent but she could fight her feelings no longer and she so wished to tell John about her brother, about that fateful night when he had seen them embracing before Frederick had embarked his train, about how her feelings for John had grown since the moment she realised that she was in love with him. She absently surveyed the North bound train as it pulled into the station coming to a stop.

It was then that she saw him, John Thornton, mindlessly brushing away the wisps of curled hair that whirled about her face from the rush of air around the platform, her heart nearly exploding just from one glimpse of the man that had spirited himself before her as if in answer to her plea. He was travelling alone on the North bound train. She couldn’t take her eyes from his face wondering at his expression and how downcast he looked to her, that and his general appearance, gone was the cravat and the coat, stubble was growing upon his face; he was the picture of a downtrodden man. How he mirrored her feelings from earlier on when she had been surveying the factory alone, ‘but’ she thought, ‘he does seem to be more relaxed then I think I have ever seen him’. The next thing she knew her feet were taking her across the platform stopping only a few feet away from his carriage.
John moved to open the door. He wasn’t sure why, maybe to get some fresh air or stretch his long legs, he really didn’t care which, he just needed to move around for a while and get out of the stuffy compartment. As he moved to alight the carriage he looked up making sure that he wasn’t about to walk into any of his fellow passengers but all was lost to his mind as he became aware of her presence, firstly unsure of the vision that stood a little way from him then realising that it was actually Margaret. He caught himself smiling as he noticed her eyes watching him; that pair of beautiful bewitching blue eyes he had remembered from his dreams were looking directly at him, he couldn’t believe his luck. His smile turned lazy as he made his way onto the platform and took the few steps that were needed to close the gap between them. Without thinking he asked, “where are you going?”

“To London,” she answered anxiously as she looked behind her toward Henry who was still engrossed in his newspaper, “I’ve been to Milton.” She looked back catching John’s mesmerising smile rendering her more nervous of the situation that she now found was unfolding before them both.

“You might guess where I’ve been,” he said in almost a whisper as he beamed further, pulling the yellow bloom from his waistcoat pocket and handing it over to her.

All nervousness was lost as she took the rose from him and smiled. “To Helstone, I thought it had all gone!”

“Found it in the hedgerow, didn’t have to look hard,” he shook his head still in disbelief that she was stood there in front of him. “Why were you in Milton?” His handsome eyes sparkled with his question.

She looked up at him; “On business,” she answered, “that is, I have a business proposition …” she stared back toward where Henry was still sitting in his carriage, “Oh dear, I need Henry to help me explain.”

John gently took her left arm and looked at her wearing his best business expression, “You don’t need Henry to explain.” He said, remorsefully letting her go before leading the way up the platform to take possession of one of the wooden seats that was placed there.

Momentarily Margaret looked back toward Henry again, who had by this time noticed that she was talking to a man he knew as Mr Thornton from Milton. He scowled at them as he folded his paper.

“I have to get this right,” she started as she sat down beside John on the bench. John’s left arm found its way along the back of the seat they now occupied, stretching along the top rung hoping
that the act would put Margaret more at ease. But nothing could stop the torment that was going
on inside of her at that moment; she tried to keep her head as she summoned up the courage to
begin her explanation. “It’s a business proposition,” she looked up at him and his ever watchful
eyes as they danced with delight and happiness. The feelings they invoked within her making her
shift her gaze quickly back down to the floor. She continued, “I have some fifteen thousand
pounds; it is lying in a bank earning very little interest. Now, my financial advisors tell me that if
you were to take this money and use it to run Marlborough Mills, you could give me a much better
rate of interest.” She slowed her speech as she looked up at him. His smile continued to beam as
he watched her struggling with her words of commerce, catching her glances as she looked up at
him and then back at her hands again as she became nervous once more under his loving gaze.
“So you see,” she continued, “it is only a business matter, you would not be obliged to me in any
way, it is you who would be doing …” She stopped as John took his arm from its resting place
behind her right shoulder and gently took hold of her right hand as it sat with its partner nervously
feeling the yellow rose petals between her fingers. “… me this service,” she finished.

Margaret could no longer fight the urge, she had to touch him, kiss him even. Her left thumb, as if
with a mind of its own, began to caress the skin of John’s right hand before clamping both of her
hands around his, lifting it to her rosy red lips and kissing the back of his fingers. John could
hardly contain himself; her slightest touch had given him so much joy. He reached up with his
right hand cupping her cheek, caressing the rosy skin that now lay beneath it moving around to
touch her ear above and neck below. She looked up at him a worried expression set upon her face
not knowing what to expect but hoping that what would come would be good.

Tentatively they brought their heads closer to one another. Further anticipation brought them
closer still as they began their first kiss, none of this being lost on the ever watchful Henry. They
kissed again and again, John bringing his left hand to join the right upon her cheeks, his long
fingers now revelling in the touch of Margaret’s face beneath. Their eyes closed, both lost to all of
the tenderness they were sharing with their continued embrace.

They broke apart to the sound of the South bound train conductor’s voice, “London train now
departing, London train now departing.”

Margaret suddenly got up from her seat without looking at John, her determined action leaving
him stricken. Could he possibly have done the most stupid thing in his life, going too quickly with
the first kiss and having to let her walk out on him again because of that first shameless exchange.
After all, he’d allowed her to make the first move, she had kissed his hand and that was all the
encouragement he had needed to let her know that ‘any foolish passion on his part’ had never
been entirely given up, had never been given up at all. He couldn’t look, couldn’t watch her
return to her carriage and leave him desolate. After all she had only wanted to talk business, he
had encouraged the rest with his Northern ways, he was sure that Mr Henry Lennox would never
have acted in such a way. He made his way back toward his empty compartment.

Margaret had retraced her earlier steps back to her carriage only to find Henry waiting there, her
small bag in his hand. “Henry, I …” she started to explain. Henry held her bag out for her to
take, still sullen and hurt by the events that had played out before him. “Goodbye, Margaret.” He
stated, stepping back into the carriage and closing the door behind him, finalising their relationship. Bewildered but nevertheless truly happy she realised that she was now truly able to do as she wished. Carrying her bag she made her way back toward John, toward her new life.

John caught her reflection in the window of the carriage as she made her way back over to him, not quite believing that any of what had transpired was actually happening, he turned around to make sure that she was in fact standing next to him. He smiled his realisation that she was indeed there. “You’re coming home with me?” He asked of her. She smiled sweetly back at him, answering his question by giving him her bag and stepping into John’s carriage. He followed her in, shut the door and took his seat next to her once more, this time it would be forever.

As soon as the train was away from the station he had his arm around her, realising that this was where it was meant to be for all eternity. Again they tenderly kissed, enriching the experience with each new embrace, enjoying the moment, enjoying their moment. For soon they would be in Milton with all of the troubles that their ultimate union was going to cause.
Chapter 2

Chapter 1 – A Northbound Train Journey

John watched Margaret as she claimed her bag, opening it to find her book and place the yellow rose within its pages ready for pressing. “Is this all a dream, Margaret?” He asked, placing his arms around her again as she sat back in her seat, her head finding his shoulder to lean upon as the gently rocking train continued on its Northward journey, “or are you really here in my arms?” He kissed the top of her head.

“How can you not see me, or hear me, or feel that I am here?” Margaret countered, grinning with her contentedness.

“I am aware of a presence, my love, but you may be an imp whose actions would only add to my sorrow of losing everything dear to me in my life.” He answered, his smile fading. She pulled away to look into his eyes.

“Give me your hand,” Margaret ordered, resolute on shedding John of his unhappiness. “Is this not my hand that you touch with yours?” She asked of him waiting for him to at least nod his head. Once he responded she began to guide his captured hand over her body, “This is my face, John. These are my lips, my neck, my shoulder, my arm, my waist, my breast.” She watched as his smile began to appear again, leaving his hand on its final resting place she tenderly took his cheek into her possession. “I am here, John, all of me. There is no place on earth I would rather be than here right by your side. That is, if you still wish me to be so as you once declared to me you did.”

“Yes, my love, I do still have those feelings and honour what I said before, I love you Margaret Hale and I wish to marry you. God strike me down if its not so, but I think you know me better than that. I know I am not what would be considered a gentleman but I don’t want to possess you Margaret, not that I could now anyway.” He sniggered, “in fact, it would be the other way round, wouldn’t it?” He watched as she laughed at his words. “You do understand, don’t you? I’ve never wanted to own you; I’ve just wanted to be able to love you.”

“Then I accept, my gentle man,” Margaret answered, her eyes shining from his words and his tender affection, “but I may wish to own you.” She teased.

“Margaret, you are an imp!”
“No, just a woman in love and I do love you Mr Thornton, with all my heart.” John brought her to him kissing her again, his left hand wanting to delve into the thick mass of hair that was pinned upon Margaret’s head as their united passion increased. They had to stop, they both knew it but neither wanted to. Reluctantly they pulled apart never breaking eye contact for a second. “I do believe that I am in for quite a contented life, John, if your kisses are anything to go by.” Margaret said, breaking the silence.

“My enthusiasm for you has been building up inside of me for so long, Margaret,” he started to explain, then caught her eye; “I’m going to have to get used to your teasing aren’t I?” She nodded her agreement. “Mmm, well madam, perhaps it is not I that should worry about whether their actions are inappropriate or not, it seems like my wife will be wilful even in the most civil of company.”

“It seems that whenever I am near you I can not help myself,” she answered, “and to be honest, having experienced life in both the North and South; I know where I have been happiest. I know there were times when I felt that I would never understand life in the North, your ways, your customs but I don’t believe I have ever felt more alive than when I have been there, especially when I have been in yours or your mother’s company. Life in the South is so dull, so sanctimonious, I knew no different when we first came to Milton and for that I am sorry,” she took his hand in hers, “yes, the South has it beauties and charms but so does the North, and I am sitting next to the most charming of them all.” She smiled up at him. “Have I told you I love you, John?”

“More than once, but I think I shall never tire of hearing you say it.” He answered playfully. “What do you think mother will say?”

“I don’t know, John.” Margaret said thinking of her earlier conversation with Mrs Thornton. “When I spoke to her earlier she was already decided that I had ‘come to crow over you and to look over all of my possessions that you had worked hard for all of your life’, that I had some plan to triumph over you now that the mill had been shut down. She believes me impudent, I am sure.”

John smirked, “if she does it will be because of your numerous conversations that always ended in your telling her how you felt about her actions and words toward you. And then there’s the lack of attention to her son?”

“Now, who is teasing who,” she countered, he merely shrugged. “I don’t know whether I’ll ever be good enough for her son anyway.”

“Is any woman, after all a mother’s love is forever!”
“So is mine, John Thornton, once decided upon, of course.”

“And will you not be the same with our sons?”

“We are to have many then, are we?”

“As many as our love will allow, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“I think I like the sound of that.”

“You think you like the sound of that,” he closed his arms around her tighter, “I’m hoping for a large family, you know.”

“We shall be blessed John, I am sure of it.”

“You look so happy, are you truly as happy as you look.”

“I am, John, yes. I only wish my parents were here to see me, to see us, for I believe that you are happy also.”

“Beyond anything that I could ever have dreamt of.”

“Did you really dream of me?” Margaret asked.

“Constantly, but I cannot tell you the theme of my dreams yet, we will have to wait until we are married.”

“I do know something of the world you know, my cousin Edith …” John cut her off.
“I do not wish to know what your cousin has told you, you will find that we are dissimilar I think, especially with our social differences, I would not wish to disappoint you if I said I felt your cousin was wrong with some point of fact.”

“You could never disappoint me; you have always shown me to be true to your word, even if I have been less than desirable at times. For my actions haven’t always been prudent, have they?”

“Tell me about your brother,” he asked, feeling that the time was right, “please?”

“You know about him?”

“Higgins, sorry Nicholas, told me, well he told me in a round about kind of way, I just put two and two together, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry, I wanted to tell you, I wanted you to know who he was, who you saved me from having to lie about further even if that meant becoming something in everybody else’s eyes that only I and my family knew I wasn’t. I couldn’t betray him, at least not until I knew he was safely back at home in Cadiz.” A stray tear slipped from her eye and down her cheek.

John caught it and brushed it away soothing her, “it’s alright.”

“But it’s not is it, the only immediate family I have left in the world and I don’t know whether I shall ever be able to see him again because of his so called crimes.”

“Am I not your family then?” John asked delicately.

She smiled at his warming question. “Of course, you shall be soon. And with it I shall have another mother and a sister, although I think the feeling may not be mutual, in the beginning at least. I just miss Frederick so.”

“Tell me about him!” John urged.

“Frederick is older than I, by a couple of years. He left home to join the Navy as soon as he was able, mother and I were distraught; father thought it would be good for him, make him a man. His first commission was on the ‘Orion’ where he met with Reid, a man that disliked him for no
apparent reason. Reid was an odious man by all accounts and Frederick could never put a foot right. A few years later Fred was assigned to the ‘Russell’ and there he met up with his old nemesis Reid, again. Reid was the captain of this vessel and used his title to uphold what he saw as being right. He beat the children that were on board, and worse; some of the higher echelons of his staff were right there with him.

“Frederick wrote to my father on every occasion that he could telling father of the crimes that were being bestowed upon the crew, father never relayed the true horrors to me but told me that they were horrendous. However, I have since read Frederick’s letters and conclude that Reid was obviously of a tempered nature and found delight in bringing others down especially those that could not fend for themselves or fight back. Frederick and his colleagues that were against Reid decided to get rid, one night they rounded up Reid and the staff that were helping him, put them all on a boat and set the boat sail. The next thing they knew they were being hounded by the Navy, set up by Reid as mutineers. Many were caught and hung. Fred managed to escape to South America at first but then made a safe passage to Spain, which is where he now resides with his wife, Dolores in Cadiz.

“When I realised that mother was very ill I wrote to him, urging him to come home and see mama before she passed away. I was wrong to do it. I know that and father reiterated the danger to me when I told him of what I had done, but I felt that it was the right thing to do, the right thing for mother at the time when she was at her worst. The day you came to see us, the day when you saw Fred’s coat and cap hanging on the hook in the hall and mistook my disrespect at not asking you in as an affront to your kindness and friendship, it pained me. I was caught between keeping my brother a secret and honouring you for your benevolence, outside of the family Mary was the only other person who knew about him and I had to do my bit, for that I am sorry. I must confess I defended you,” she looked up at him before continuing, “my brother’s opinion was very similar to my own when he first arrived but I set him straight. I told him that we had to thank you for your kindness, that you had been very good to us, that you were in fact a gentleman.

“Then when you saw us embracing at the station I thought my world was about to come to an end, I wasn’t worried for myself you understand, more for the fact that we were still endeavouring to keep Fred a secret. Fred asked me who you were so I quickly told him that you were Mr Thornton who we had already talked about, I also told him that something had happened to make you scowl and I asked him not to judge you, I didn’t tell him anymore, and I haven’t done since, I only wished for him to be safely ensconced on the train and on his way back from whence he had come. Just as Fred was about to alight Leonards came upon us and in his drunken state started to try to grab at Fred, saying he remembered him from Helstone and that there was a large reward for turning Fred in.”

“Leonards was from Helstone?” John interrupted.

“Yes, he was the draper’s son. Anyway, they fought, Leonards fell down the stairs but we saw him walk off, neither of us ever expected there to be any kind of investigation into his death as neither one of us had seen him dead. Fred was soon away on the train and I returned home. Sleep evaded me, I could only keep thinking of the way you looked at us, at me. I thought all was
lost. And then, after I had thanked you for your help once more, when you made sure there was
to be no inquest and you told me that you didn’t do it for me you did it for your friend, my father,
well at least I could thank god for that. That he at least had your friendship even if I hadn’t, he so
valued it, you know.”

“I valued his in return, Margaret, and, to be honest, I was thinking of you when I helped out. I
know I should’ve been more open to your explanation but all I kept seeing was you in his arms
and how I longed to have you in mine. You should’ve told me,” she nodded, “but I realise you
had your reasons and that’s why you couldn’t. I just kept thinking the worst until Nicholas told
me about your brother being over when your mother was dying. Do you know, I often wondered
why that man wasn’t there for you at the funeral, I mean if he were any kind of lover he would’ve
made sure he were there, wouldn’t he? I know I would’ve.”

“And that’s why I love you; you will always do the right thing especially by me. I misjudged you,
yes you have a temper and I hope that I will not see it often unless I deserve it but you only hurt
that man because his action could have caused something else so catastrophic, I see that now.”

“No, Margaret, you were correct I had no right to beat him just because I were his master; tell him
off maybe, send him home, sack him, but not beat him. I recognized that you were right, I’ve
never done it since.”

“I’m glad of that. Do you know, father asked me if you’d made me an offer soon after your last
visit? I had to confess it. He asked me if I felt I had done the right thing, I told him that I had
done nothing I wouldn’t do again but my insides churned from my lie, that was the moment I
knew I loved you so absolutely.”

“How do you want to know when I realised I was in love with you?” Margaret nodded, “Well, I
remember having some fanciful thoughts about you when I saw you in the mill, all that cotton
flying about and you just stood there all angry and glaring at me,” she swatted his arm, “seriously
though, I believe it was when your father introduced us properly, you were so feisty and yet
compelling all at the same time, an enigma, you quite took my breath away. I realised that
although there were many women in my life that had wanted to share my bed there were none that
turned my head like you had, my Margaret. I am sorry to be so forthright but I imagine that it does
not bother you, you do not seem to be easily offended by such remarks and you probably relish
upon them readily.”

“I do John, it is better to be frank and honest, isn’t it, than hide away for proprieties sake? I know
I have not yet seen and experienced many things but I am a great learner and I know you will be
my greatest teacher.”

“That I will, my love, that I will. Do you know Mr Bell gave me the belief that I wasn’t to loose
too much hope in the fact that we may be united?”
“I had no idea, what did the meddlesome old Eros have to say?”

“Meddlesome old Eros?”

“Yes, he tried to be quite the match maker where you and I were concerned. He could see something that I fear neither of us wanted to at the time.”

“I see, yes I suppose he were, meddlesome to a degree.”

“So what did he say to you?”

“He said that I shouldn’t worry about you interfering, as you were landlord in name only, not that I were bothered, I think I told him that it wouldn’t matter soon as there weren’t going to be that much to interfere with. But then he told me that I would be mistaken if I thought you had a bad opinion of me and he asked me not to judge you too harshly. I was angry and sent him away, my temper again. If I’d only listened I fear I may have known about Fred sooner.”

“Would it have made a difference?”

“Aye, I would have come to you directly, I would have asked for your hand immediately. Would you have taken me?”

“Yes, as much then as I do now. I do believe I should have listened to Mr Bell sooner.”

“Me too. Especially when he mentioned that Lennox hadn’t been bothered to turn up for your mother’s funeral, he said he thought he’d have been there for you.”

“Mr Bell really wasn’t going to stop at anything was he? I asked him to, after that scene in the street with Anne Latimer and her father, but instead of trying to get me to change my opinion he turned his attention to you. He asked me to marry him in a round about kind of way but that was after he realised my feelings for you; that must have been before he journeyed to Milton to speak with you. Well it may have taken us a while to realise our feelings for one another but we are together, perhaps it was for the best that we took our time.”
“And now we have the rest of our lives to keep making each other happy, if that’s what you want. I mean I haven’t really asked you properly have I not since your rejection.”

“I have accepted you already.”

“Aye, but I want to do this right, although I can’t really get down on one knee with the motion of the carriage.”

“Then just take hold of my hands.”

John brought her hands together in his and held them close to his heart. “My darling, my love, will you make me the happiest of men and do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

“I will John, yes. It would give me no greater pleasure than accept to become your wife.”

Their eyes dazzled as John kissed the back of both hands. Soon they were again within each others embrace, kissing the other fervently until they had to take breath. “I love you, Margaret,” he breathed.

“And I love you, John.” She answered. Margaret turned in her seat once more, looking out of the window trying to picture where she was on the route to Milton. “John, whereabouts are we? How far from Milton? I’ve travelled this line a dozen times now and I’m still not sure as to where we are exactly.”

“We’re about twenty minutes away from Outwood Station; I’ll have to do my best to get us a carriage as quickly as I can otherwise there won’t be any left.”

“Can we not walk? It is a fine evening.”

“It’s a fair distance, Margaret.”

“I know but I love to walk and we can take our time, it is not as if we have any luggage. I thought maybe we could pop in to see Nicholas, Mary and the children as well, if that is alright with you.”
“Yes, that is fine with me, I don’t think I would be able to stop you if I tried anyway, and it’s not like I have to get back to the mill at the moment. It would be good to see them. I’ve been so wrapped up in everything that I haven’t seen them in a while, and they will be glad to have you back in the fold. I’m sure we’ll have a welcome reception from them too when we tell them our news.”

“Shouldn’t we tell your mother first?”

“Perhaps, but I think it best that we have some kind of encouragement before we have the stern looks of disapproval. I should have asked sooner but will you stay with us? I’m sure mother will be happy to accommodate you especially with the knowledge that we are to be united.”

“Even if she is not particularly welcome to the news?”

“Even then, she knows how I feel about you, knows how I have always felt about you. The night you were injured and you ‘declared yourself to me’ through her and the servants’ eyes she begged me not to go to you directly. She wanted one last night safe in the knowledge that I was still hers. She knew that she would one day loose me to you, she always felt that you somehow saw yourself above the rest of us and therefore weren’t worthy.”

“She was right, I suppose I did at first but that was until I fully understood the man that I had once rejected. I certainly do not feel the same now and I hope, that in time, your mother will come to realise that too.”

“I’m sure she will, I have no doubt. So how about it, will you stay with us. I’m hoping for a short engagement, Margaret. I want to be wed as soon as can be arranged.”

“If that is the case then I would be delighted. I know you are an honourable man and wouldn’t ask anything of me before we are wed so I will stay. Providing, of course, that it is alright with your mother.”

“Have no fear; I will speak with her as soon as we are home.” John assured her.

“Then it is settled. Oh look, I think we are pulling into the station.”
Chapter 3

Chapter 2 – Another Business Proposition

Walking through the streets of Milton hand in hand it was difficult for Margaret to imagine a time when she and John had been constantly at loggerheads with one another over some idea or opinion that they didn’t agree on. But now she was happy, content with the knowledge that both of them could at least now settle down and enjoy their lives together. However, there would still be hardships to overcome not least setting up the mill again and, she envisaged, battling with Mrs Thornton.

She looked over at John, he was wearing a childlike expression, all seriousness shed as he kept hold of her hand, kept her close for fear that she would float away if he let go. His coat, cravat and hat were still discarded but it seemed right, yes he was a gentleman but there were times when he needn’t be so formal, after all she liked it, like to see him at ease. And this was definitely one of those occasions.

“You’ll wear your eyes out you keep looking at me like that.” He jested. “Can’t you see how uncomfortable you’re making me?”

“Nonsense,” she replied, “you look the picture of a very relaxed man, and I don’t believe that you could ever be ill at ease with me glancing at your appearance.”

He stopped bringing her to him. Bending his lips to her ear he whispered, “just my appearance little one?”

Margaret looked up at him; she noticed the devilish grin appearing on his face and his eyes twinkling from his insinuating remark. She flushed, she never realised that one small sentence could reduce her to such a quivering wreck; it wasn’t as if she hadn’t thought about it of course but she was always keen to keep her emotions in check. She was in earnest, he was so very handsome. The clipped velvety dark hair that she wanted to embed her hands into as they caressed. His icy blue eyes that sent a shiver down her spine every moment she caught sight of them. The lips that had already given her so much pleasure and were bound to give her more. Her face and hands still tingling for the sensation of being ever so gently lovingly touched by his strong fingers and thumbs. Catching the slightest glimpse of his neck and upper chest from the open collar of his shirt; enough, enough she had to think clearly; the street in broad daylight was no place for these images in her head, she had to compose herself. “John, you are the devil incarnate. How am I supposed to think clearly when your few words conjure up images that I really should not be thinking?”
“Then I shall speak no more of them until our wedding night.” She gave him her knowing look, his grin dazzled. “Look we are nearly at the Higgins’.”

“Yes, everything seems so still, this isn’t usual is it?”

“No, Marlborough was not the only mill to close in the area. Many of the workers have moved to more affluent areas in order to seek work. It is unfortunate that other masters had to share my fate but at least I have my angel,” he brought her closer to him, “to help me get back on my feet and reemploy some of these people.”

“John, will things ever be the same?”

“People still want to buy cotton, it’s becoming cheaper than other fabrics to produce and manufacture, and hotter climate countries other than England, even those as close as Europe, are interested in importing the fabric as it is as cool to wear as linen, but not as expensive and easier to look after. We just need to look to our suppliers, I fear that there will be trouble in having our supplies come from America; we may have to go Le Havre or buy Egyptian in order to get better returns. It will be easier setting up again; with not so much competition in Milton at least it will give us a better chance at succeeding more quickly. And you will get your return sooner.”

“I’m not worried about my return; I’m not even concerned about the rent.”

“You need some kind of return, its good business sense.”

“And what about family, John. We will soon be connected in such a way that nothing shall part us other than death. What’s mine is yours.”

“That is very honourable but you should get something.”

“Will it make you feel better if I accept something?”

“Aye, you must have something in return for your generosity.”
“Then I shall accept nothing more than a guinea a week for the rent, think of it as my housekeeping. I will have my solicitors sort out the paperwork.”

“By solicitors do you mean Henry Lennox?”

“Is that a hint of jealousy I detect in your voice,” he shook his head but his eyes gave him away. Margaret explained, “he is one of the solicitors in the practice, I only asked for his help at the time because his brother is married to my cousin. John, he asked me once to marry him when we were still at Helstone, even though I was still too young I knew my own mind. I wasn’t interested, he didn’t much care for the things I did, we would not have been a match made in heaven, besides I could never marry someone I didn’t love and had no intention of forming that kind of attachment to either. So you see, you have always been in my heart even when you were absent from it.”

“Thank you. I can now rest easy in the knowledge that there neither is nor has ever been anyone that has caught your eye. I am glad that I have always been your choice, I only hope that I will never disappoint you.”

“What am I to do with you, I have told you once already today that you could never do that. I am sure that there will be times when we disagree but we will come away from those arguments as friends and have fun making up.”

“Aye, love, I’m sure we will. Look we are here, do you want to know what I have planned before I knock?”

“What do you have in mind, my love?”

“I wish to make Higgins overseer, do you think he would accept? I feel that he would look after us, make sure the rest of the workers kept working and come up with ideas for running the place better, he has a fair head on his shoulders.”

“I think that would be a very good idea, and with his union ideals maybe we could all work together to make sure that all of the workers are treated fairly, if we give them respect, they will respect us and work harder for us do you not think?”

“Mmm, has anyone ever told you that you are not just a pretty face? You are right, but I will not have languorous workers trying it on.”
“I’m sure that Nicholas would not allow that to happen and if it is the case then those workers should be reprimanded. It will not be a difficult task.”

“Well it is set then, I shall ask him directly.” And with that John rapped on the door; it was opened seconds later by Mary. “Hello Mary,” John said, “is your father in?” She nodded that he was and opened the door wider for John to enter, “I’ve brought someone with me, and I hope you don’t mind?” Mary lifted her eyes and caught a glimpse of Margaret. Running to her she flung her arms around Margaret’s neck before allowing her to rejoin John and the rest of Mary’s extended family in their living area.

“Well my eyes must be deceiving me for I sure as … I never thought I’d be lucky enough to see you again, Margaret.”

“I’m here Nicholas, large as life itself. I have some news, that is to say we have some news,” she looked over to John who had never disconnected his gaze from her since she had joined him in the Higgins’ small rooms.

“I dare say you have,” Nicholas laughed, “Mary, I think our visitors would appreciate some tea. Come, sit down and rest you must be tired after your walk from the station.”

“How did you know we had come from the station?” John asked, as he helped Margaret take a seat.

“I’ve just got back from the Green Dragon, right commotion going on there; not too sure what was being said only that Master Thornton was seen arriving at the station with a pretty girl on his arm. Hand in hand they were as they walked across town. Daresay they were talking about you, Miss Margaret.”

“Yes, I daresay. Oh, I can’t contain myself any longer; we are to be wed Nicholas, John and I. Do you think that will do?”

“Do, miss? Aye, it will do very well. I’m very happy for you both.”

“You’ll come to the wedding won’t you? I’d be very disappointed if you didn’t!”

“Of course, miss, if that’s your bidding, I’ll have the whole family turn out if you so wish.”
“That would be fine, wouldn’t it John?” Margaret asked, forgetting her place momentarily.

John felt a tug on his trousers and looked down to see Thomas by his side, he stroked his head playfully. “Aye, wouldn’t have it any other way. Margaret’s seen too much heartache whilst she’s been in Milton it wouldn’t be right to not let her have her wish. Although,” he picked young Thomas up in his arms and placed him on his lap, “it would be my wish also.”

“Thank ye, master, we would be honoured. Here help yourselves to tea.” Margaret began pouring tea and handing out the cups.

“I’m not your master now, Nicholas.” He nodded to Margaret as she passed him a cup, he took a sip of the milky liquid. “Unless, that is, you wish to work for me again.”

“And for that I’d be honoured, when would this likely to be.”

“Soon, very soon I hope. Now that I have Margaret by my side, helping me out so to speak I’m hoping that we can get back to work shortly. I would need you there sooner though.”

“Why, got to whip me into shape before the rest start.”

“In a manner of speaking yes, Margaret and I would like so much for you to come back as the overseer.”

“What? Are ye serious? I mean you know I work well but this is more than I’ve done before? What about Williams?”

“You know as well as I what Williams were about, and it weren’t for helping out the business. Anything he did was for his own reward. Both of us believe that you’ll do right by us and right by the workers likewise.”

At this point, Margaret took up the reign, “we both feel that you will benefit us all, you’ll look after the mill, see that everything is working as it should, help out when new equipment is needed and train the employees, help settle disputes, use your skills to encourage the employees to work and make sure they get a fair wage in return, use your judgement with those workers that are not doing so well and help discipline them if needed. You are a born leader, Nicholas and we both
feel that you have what it takes to keep the mill open and on a sure footing, especially if we have
to get away on business or other matters. We both trust you.”

“Well, I’ll need to think about it for a bit.”

John and Margaret looked at one another briefly before John took hold of Margaret’s free hand
cressing it with his thumb. They were both unsure whether they needed to explain further to get
Nicholas on side. “We’ll give you as much time as you need.” John said, “just don’t leave it too
long, please?”

Nicholas got up from his seat and went to retrieve Thomas from John’s lap. “I’ve thought about
it, I don’t know if I’ll do a good job but I’ll do my best, thank you master, thank you Margaret, I
accept.” He took John’s hand in his own and shook it heartily.

“It’s our pleasure,” John replied, getting up from his seat and taking both Nicholas and Thomas
into a thankful bear hug.

Margaret was soon at there side and as her fiancé withdrew she took her turn and took them both
into her affectionate embrace. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“No, thank you,” came the reply.

Margaret felt John tap her on the shoulder, it was time to let go, not that she wanted to she felt safe
in the confines of the Higgins’ shelter but knew that she would have to face up to her demons
sooner or later. The time had now come. “I’m sorry, Nicholas, Mary, but we do have to go; we
still have to tell Mrs Thornton our news.”

“Oh, I can see why you came here first then.” Nicholas said, laughing.

John smirked, his eyes dancing with Nicholas’ remark but his eyebrows shot skyward, “We’ll see
you Monday, eleven o’clock alright.”

“Aye, master. That’ll do. I’ll see ye then.”

Mary ushered them to the door and hugged them both before they left, she spent longer with
Margaret as she was still slightly unsure of Mr Thornton, she’d seen he was a good man and if her friend was truly in love with him then he couldn’t be all bad. She saw him smile at the warmth she bestowed upon her friend and replied with her own before shutting the door behind them.

As they started to continue on their path toward Marlborough Mills, John resumed his stature taking her tiny hand back into his and holding her close to him. “Nicholas will see us right, I have no doubt.”

“Nor do I,” Margaret replied, “John?”

“Mmm, my angel?”

“Do you think your mother will know our news before we get home?”

“I suppose it is likely, if they are talking about us in the Green Dragon then word may have spread here quickly. Why? Does it make you nervous?”

“Yes, I confess it does. John, believe me when I say that I will do everything in my power to make your mother love me as her own, I have never wished to be against her but if she is so decided against me I do not know what I will be able to do?”

“Don’t worry little one, she will honour my wishes. And I’m sure she will learn to love you as I do, she only knows you by what has been said either to her directly or via some tittle tattle but once she gets to know your real qualities I’m sure she will have a change of heart.”

“I do hope so.” Margaret replied, she then realised that they were not taking the direct route through the graveyard. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a short detour, there’s someone I want you to meet before we go home.”
Chapter 3 – To the factory we must go, with a diversion along the way!

Fanny Watson emerged from the cab that had stopped outside the closed mill gates. She tried the catch, opening the gates onto the now desolate forecourt that had always been full of hustle and bustle for as long as she could remember. Making her way over the cobbles she quickly took the shortest route possible to arrive at the domineering doorway of the mill house that her brother and mother still occupied. She knocked the door and waited for an answer; she had anticipated a speedy response but was surprised when her mother finally opened the door.

“What is going on, mother?” Fanny asked, “why do you have to open the door? Where are all the servants gone?”

“Fanny come in, I’ll explain when we go up.” Leading the way through the corridor and upstairs, Mrs Thornton retook her usual position and motioned for Fanny to do likewise. “If you want some tea then you shall have to make it yourself, I’m afraid. I have only Jane here at the moment and she is too busy to look after such unnecessary tasks at present.”

“So where is everyone?”

“They are either gone or I have dismissed them, Fanny. Your brother and I can no more afford such luxuries until he finds some other work to satisfy our needs. We have the house to the end of the month and then we must find lodgings, I’ve been arranging the items ready for an auction to get rid of the goods we no longer require.”

“Where is John, I must speak with him. If you can not find somewhere else to live then you must come and live with Watson and I; we would love to have you.”

“No, Fanny. We must content ourselves with finding some lodgings; you are still too newly married to want John and me cramming up your household. As to where your brother is, I don’t know. He left early this morning and has not yet returned.”

“I hope he hasn’t gone and done anything stupid.”
Mrs Thornton’s angry eyes turned on her daughter. “Like what, Fanny!” She spat out. “He is not his father, if that is what you were insinuating!”

“No, mother, I meant no disrespect. I just wished he’d listened to Watson and joined him with his speculation.”

“And if you’d lost, what then, we would all have been in this position much sooner.”

“But he didn’t did he, mother. No, he and his fellow investors did very well. Even Miss Hale, even though indirectly. Mr Bell signed everything over to her before he left for Argentina.”

“I am very well aware of what Mr Bell did for his goddaughter. I’m sure I wouldn’t have been so rash, but John had said that Mr Bell didn’t have long left to live and had decided to entail it all over before his death rather than after it.”

“I wonder what she will do with her new found wealth.” Fanny said, flattening down her skirts.

“Why are you so interested, Fanny? I’m sure we will never be good enough for her company now, as I said to her this morning …”

Fanny looked at her mother sternly, “she was here?”

“Yes, she was here. I found her surveying her property.”

“What did she want?”

“She wanted to talk to John, she waited for as long as she could before she had to go and catch her train; and she was with some churlish looking man. Looked right down his nose at me I swear. I’m sure I wouldn’t keep such company if I had her wealth. I don’t know what kind of mischief she had in mind but I gave her my opinion, good and strong.” Mrs Thornton’s face clouded for a moment, “the only thing I don’t understand is why, after all that has been said or gone between us, and she still wanted to try and make some kind of acquaintance with me, give me her pity. I’m sure I shall never understand her considering I believe we shall never see her again. And I thank the lord for that; I could never understand how she had turned John’s head so.”
“Nor I, mother. With her pride as it was and the way she spoke to us all, her unforgiving sign of affection that she flatly denied by refusing him and then to be so indiscreet than to be seen in another man’s company so late at night; his heart still seemed fixed on her even after that.”

“Well, she is gone now. Out of our lives for good and good riddance I say. She will be looking for a new tenant but I am sure she will put that work to an agent here. Thankfully, I cannot see the logic in her ever having to return to Milton again.”

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Margaret had to stop, she enjoyed walking but with her last few months stay in London she had become unaccustomed to moving so quickly up hills and banks. She let go of John’s hand and leant against the iron fence that hugged the edge of the cemetery, gasping quickly to take much needed oxygen into her lungs and hoping that her heart would stop racing. John spun around searching for his companion, his face an apology. “Sorry, my love, I’ve been so impatient for this meeting that I quite forgot my manners. Here, I’ll let you catch your breath before we carry on.”

“Well, this person you wish for me to meet must be very important. Is it much further up this hill? I’m not sure my body will allow me much more exertion.”

“It’s not far now, Margaret. In fact, it’s just over there,” he answered, cryptically, pointing in the intended direction.

“Over there?” Margaret asked, looking over at the space John was pointing out. “Toward that Yew tree?” She slowly started on her way grabbing his hand as she brushed past him.

“Yes, that’s right,” he nodded, taking up the pace with her as they began to walk around the graves toward the tree. When they had crossed the distance, John took up the lead again and found his way around the old gnarled trunk stopping at a patch of grass with a freshly laid out bouquet of flowers and a slightly weathered grey headstone. Margaret surveyed the scene, standing atop the hill she could see around most of the town beneath her, her eyes followed the route they had just taken, “What a lovely spot, it’s breathtaking. Do you come here often?”

John merely nodded to her and turned back around toward the grave. Taking hold of Margaret’s waist, her ushered her slight body to stand in front of him, finally holding her in his arms and resting his chin against the top of her head. He began to whisper, “Well, here she is, I told you I’d bring the woman I love up here to see you, didn’t I? This is Miss Margaret Hale, father. My beautiful Margaret!”
Margaret turned her position in order to look into his face. She noticed the unshed tears in his eyes as he laid out his proclamation before him. Looking down at her he smiled his lazy smile. “Margaret, this is my father.” Glancing back she read the inscription, ‘In loving memory of Edward John Thornton, who departed this life 25th July 1839 ~ Cherished husband and devoted father, you shall be missed.’

“I’m glad to meet you sir,” Margaret said looking down at the grave before her. “I’m sure I would have liked you!”

John tightened his grip, leaning closer; “He would’ve liked you too. He’d have seen you for the same feisty, forward speaking yet remarkable and handsome young woman that I saw the first time I met you. I think he may have even given me a run for my money.”

Margaret smiled. She turned to face him as best she could with the strong hold he had around her waist, placing her small hands on his upper arms. “I think I would still have found the younger Mr Thornton the more attractive though.” Standing on tiptoe she kissed his cheek before resuming her position. “I’m sorry John, about your father. My father told me of the circumstances of his death; it came as a shock to both mother and me. In fact, I reprimanded myself on several occasions for treating you so harshly those first few times we spent in each other’s company.”

“Shh, little one, you don’t need to be hard on yourself. Both of us said things out of turn when we first met, but that’s all in the past. We have our future together to look forward too.”

“Do you feel comfortable talking about him? I’d like to know more.”

“He were the very best of men, he knew how to treat people properly and was well respected, before the end anyway. What did your father tell you?”

“That your father had speculated wildly with not only his own but other people’s money. He committed suicide as a result of owing so much without the hope of ever paying any of it back. That you took that job in the draper’s shop in order to help keep your family and put food on the table. That each week you put some money aside to not only start your own business but also to pay back your father’s creditors, it took some time but they were all paid back in full. I admire you so very much, John Thornton, I cannot understand why you wish to be with someone that has no idea of what you and your family had to go through.”

“Nonsense, I’ll not have that, you’re not so very different, you went through similar yourself when
your family moved here. I believe that was the reason I wanted to help your father so much when you all moved to Milton. After my talks with Mr Bell, I could see in your family what had happened in mine and wanted to do my bit as old Mr Bellingham had done for me. If anyone should be admired then it should be you, you have shown me that people can give kindness away so readily without expecting anything in return, a lesson I should’ve learnt a long time ago. Look at Higgins and his family; they look upon you as one of their own, a true friend. I was only ever thinking of my position.”

“No, John you were not! Somewhere along the way you changed, instead of the hard-nosed master you became someone who tolerated others despite their situation, you listened to other people and allowed them to put their ideas into action, your workers were happy and would have done anything for you.”

“Praise where praise is due, my love. We both changed. And for the better I’d say. If we’d both carried on like we had at the start well … I wouldn’t like to think about where we’d have ended up. Not here, I’m sure. I were 14 when he died, pulled out of school before my time, unsure of what to do next or how to look after my family; but I were all they had and I had to do what was right. I’ve always had to and always will, by you, by my family and by my workers.”

“I know you will. John, can I ask you a question? It’s rather forthright,” he nodded, “did you ever think of … well …?” She looked back toward the grave, “oh, I can’t bring myself ….”

“Did I ever think of killing myself? Is that what you wanted to know?” John asked, watching as Margaret nodded her head, “no, never. Even though things were so bad, I couldn’t bear to think of losing the one thing that I’d still not had chance to gain. You were always my angel, Margaret, and although you weren’t mine you always had this hold over me. I wouldn’t have let you down like that.”

Margaret smiled, “thank you!” She entwined her arms around his neck, pulling him closer to her with each passing second, giving herself up to his declaration and her own desire, thinking nothing of where they were or if anyone should pass. She had to show him again how much she loved him and soon they were once again sharing a sweet embrace. Unwillingly, they parted; each sharing their desires through their eyes as they stared into their opposite.

“I think we’re in for a bit of a storm tonight,” John said without even looking up to the sky, “been brewing for a few days as it’s been so nice. Best off getting home now, and give our news to mother, if you’re set.”

“Yes, we’ve spent a little longer here than perhaps we should have. Thank you, John, for introducing me to your father. I believe it’s helped me allay my fears about what your mother is going to say when we tell her.”
“I hoped it would, now come, 10 minutes and we’ll be home, I only hope we get in before it rains.”

“To be honest, with the way I’m feeling at the moment, I couldn’t care less if it did.”

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Mrs Thornton set down the tray that she was carrying on the side table that stood next to the sofa. She looked to where Fanny stood by the window. “You know I never thought I’d tire of looking over that yard, but lately … I don’t know?” She said solemnly. “It’s as if the whole world has shut down.”

“Don’t worry mother,” Fanny answered looking back over to her mother, “I’m sure John will have some idea to get himself back on his feet. I do hope he hurry’s up though, I’ll have to be going home soon and I hoped to see him before then.”

“Come and have some tea with me then, at least we can still enjoy that for the time being. I only wish I’d known where he had gone; he was very secretive this morning before he left. Said he’d be back before the sun went down though although it’s looking very dull out there now, Fanny. There’s a definite storm brewing.”

Moving away from the window Fanny crossed the room to take a seat next to her mother. “Yes mama, it’s getting very dark. Looks like its going to rain shortly.” She picked up her tea cup and sipped at the milky brown liquid her mother had poured just moments before, “ugh, have you no sugar in this house.”

“I’m sorry, Fanny, I didn’t realise that you now drank your tea with that little something extra. I’ll just go and get some for you.” Mrs Thornton got up and went back out to the kitchen to get the small pot of sugar that Fanny so desperately needed.

All alone Fanny wondered once more at where her brother could be. “Where are you, John?” She whispered expecting an answer but getting no response. She placed her cup back on its saucer and quickly resumed her position by the window. She surveyed the land around her still asking her question silently through her mind, startled slightly as she heard the lock of the factory gate being turned open. She looked down calling out to her mother. “Mama, come quickly, I think John’s finally home.”
Her mother rushed in placing the bowl of sugar on the tray as she passed it on her way to the window, calling out all the while, “is he, Fanny? Is my son finally come home?” She stood in her favourite position right in the middle of the window looking down toward the gate. “Aye, he’s back, I’ll go down and greet him at the door,” she turned away as quickly again and started heading for the stairs.

“Wait mama,” Fanny called after her, “there’s someone with him. Oh, I don’t believe it!”

“What is it, Fanny?” Her mother asked from the corridor.

“She’s with him, that Margaret Hale woman is with him! And they’re holding hands!”

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John could feel the tension in Margaret’s hand as he gently held it. They were stood before the sullen factory gates, each one apprehensive at the reception they were likely to receive from John’s mother. John looked over at Margaret searching her face for any kind of signal that would entice him to open the gate and step through into the factory yard, “Well, should we get on with it, or do you need another few minutes before we go in.”

Margaret looked up into his face, his gentle eyes were pleading with her to give him an answer, and she couldn’t refuse. She squeezed his hand and smiled, “let’s do it then, we can’t put it off forever.”

“Thank you,” John said, it now being his turn to show his gratitude to her overcoming her hesitation in speaking with his mother. “It’ll be ok, Margaret, she maybe fierce at times but she will come to understand why I love you so dearly. She may even begin to love you herself, in time!”

Watching John intently as he moved his hand toward the handle of the door, Margaret pulled on the other hand that she still had a hold of. “Don’t hold your breath,” she said playfully, “after all I have stolen her son away from her right underneath her nose, so to speak.”

John let go of both the handle and Margaret’s hand, his own flying to her face, cupping her cheeks and bringing his lips to meet hers once again. Breaking apart he replied, “and what a good job you did too. I love you, angel.”
“And I you!”

“Shall we go in then?” Margaret nodded; John turned and opened the gate pushing it just far enough back for both him and Margaret to get through. “So this is it then,” he said, regaining Margaret’s hand and leading her across the familiar cobbles to the front door of the factory house. “God willing, she’ll be asleep and our welcoming party will be reduced to just the maid.”
In a black fit of fury Mrs Thornton swept through the house, down the stairs and to the front door opening it just as John and Margaret reached it. Her face became much sterner as their united step backwards opened up the vista to one of them holding hands. “What exactly is the meaning of this, John?” She asked venomously, her eyes dark and wild.

“Mother, I’ll explain everything once we’re inside.”

“I want to know now, John. Before that woman steps one foot over the threshold of my house.”

“Our house, mother, and ‘that woman’ as you call her, is set to become my wife.”

“I shall not hear of it.”

“Just because you will not hear of it does not mean it will not happen. Let’s go inside, please. The storm is coming in.”

“You mean for her to stay here?”

“Of course, where else is she likely to stay.”

“Such impropriety.”

“Mother!”

“No, John, she is right,” Margaret began, squeezing the hand of his that she still had a hold of. “Take me back down to town, I will find myself some lodgings.”
His soft loving gaze fell upon her, “Margaret, we talked about this. Besides you have nothing with you, a fine fiancé I would be if I left you in lodgings with only that small bag.” He returned his attention to his mother. “Margaret is staying. I don’t much care for any protests you may have but this woman, this angel has saved me, saved us, so be thankful for it.” He pulled at Margaret’s hand, stepping into the hall and ushering Margaret up the stairs to the dowdy living quarters. “Batten the door and the windows, the storm is near.” He suggested to the maid who stood dumbstruck at the entrance to the scullery, before he too climbed the stairs.

His mother followed quickly, “Jane, what are you doing still stood there. You heard John, get to work.” The poor maid curtseyed and went about her task. Mrs Thornton rushed into the living room. “Why am I to be grateful? Why am I to share my home with this wretched woman?” She pointed sedately at Margaret who now stood by the window in her own favourite position.

“Because Margaret wants to invest her money in the mill.”

Fanny looked around the room not knowing where to rest her eyes first, the tension between all parties evident as she looked from one face to the next. “You should not have needed it at all if you’d followed Watson’s lead.”

“Will you stop going on, Fanny,” John shouted. “I was not prepared to follow in father’s footsteps and lose everything.”

“Which you did anyway, John.” Fanny remarked in a sing song fashion, making her point evident.

“If I may be allowed to say something,” Margaret began, moving away from the window and positioning herself next to John, “Fanny, I too would have done as John did, to risk so much money on a venture, that wasn’t certain to succeed, would have been too catastrophic an idea to comprehend.”

“But you did. You made money out of that speculation.”

“Only as a result of Mr Bell’s stake, had he not taken part then I would not have gained by way of it. Your brother did what he thought was best for the factory. It was either risk money in a scheme that could have failed or keep the factory going as long as he could, keeping all of those employees in work for as long as he could also, trying to get back on top of the manufacturing that had been lost as a result of the strike in order to keep his family. I don’t believe that you would be so discourteous toward your brother had Watson and even I lost money by way of that
speculation.”

“No, I don’t suppose I would.” Fanny stammered, Margaret’s words hitting home as she realised that Watson could have lost everything had the speculation gone badly. “I’m sorry, John. I was always led to believe that it wouldn’t fail.”

“Fanny, don’t worry yourself. Just never mention it again.”

“So, Miss Hale,” Mrs Thornton began, as she sat quietly brooding, “how exactly do you wish to invest?”

“That is none of your concern, mother.”

“Why? I just want to know what kind of hold she will have over my son.”

“Only the kind of hold that a wife has over her husband,” Margaret bristled. “I may not be your idea of the perfect life partner for your son, Mrs Thornton, but I assure you that I have only done what I did out of love and respect for him.”

“Love? You don’t have the first idea of what love is?”

“I know exactly what it is to be in love and believe that the love that had once been registered in my favour had been lost to me. I went to London believing the man I loved never wanted to be reminded of me. And as soon as I learnt that that man was in serious trouble the only thing I could think of doing was coming straight back to Milton and offer him as much help and support as I could offer him. At first it was only as a business proposition, until I realised that that man still loved me and wanted me. And when he asked me to marry him …”

“He asked you?” Mrs Thornton spat out incredulously.

“Yes, mother. I asked her again.” John quietly said, a smile creeping over his features, “and she accepted me, broken as I am.”

“But would she have accepted you had her position not been quite so favourable, I wonder?”
“Of course, my answer would have been exactly the same. I have no need for this wealth that Mr Bell has bestowed upon me but at least I can put it to some use to help my family, in which I would include both you and Fanny, and help out my friends, like Nicholas, Mary and all of the Boucher children that Nicholas has taken on as his own.”

“I can not say that I understand your motives, Miss Hale? Especially when you were so decided against John, at one point.”

“I was at first, I will not deny it. When he asked for my hand the first time I thought it was because he wanted to own me, possess me, like an ornament. I never realised that he ever felt true love for me, not until after he stepped in to help me out of a predicament that I found myself in. When I thanked John he told me he did it for my father as his friend and not for me. That’s when I believed I’d lost him, forever.”

“And what predicament did you find yourself in, as if I don’t know? Wandering around Outwood station at all hours with another man in tow.”

“That man was my brother.”

“Margaret, you really do not have to say anything else,” John cooed, he could tell that his mother’s words where getting to her.

“No, I must.” She turned from John to his mother, “Mrs Thornton, I have not carried on in such an immodest manner with any man at any time in my life as you seem to think I have. I had not seen my brother for many years and when mama fell ill, I wrote to Fred begging him to come home to see her. I knew that his return would put him in mortal danger so his coming to Milton and subsequent departure when he left, were done undercover of nightfall. It was the best way. When John saw us, I was embracing him. I knew I may never see him again and wished our last moments together to be something we would both remember. It was just unfortunate that a man we both knew from Helstone had moved up to Milton in search of work and, knowing there was a large reward on my brother’s head, tried to capture Fred for the money.

“I was questioned by the police, another person had seen me departing the station and, as such, I could have been considered a witness or party to Leonard’s death. John intercepted, quashing the need for an inquest and so allowing my ‘behaviour’ not to be questioned any longer. I thanked him for his help with the matter, but he told me he’d done it for my father. I have an awful lot to thank him for.”
John placed his hands on her shoulders, her back still toward him. He bent his head toward her ear but allowed the gathered party to hear him as he spoke to her, “you have nothing to thank me for. I told you that I had done it for your father, I had. But I had done it for you also. I was still very much in love with you and I couldn’t bear to think that people were thinking ill of you. Only I was allowed to do that.” He laughed, his eyes twinkling. “What do you think now mother?” He asked of her.

“I don’t yet know. I am yet to be convinced that this woman is here because she loves you, John.”

“I knew that it would be difficult,” Margaret began, “convincing you of my affection toward your son. I don’t much care if you ever take to me, but I will never see you go hungry, without clothing or shelter or without John’s love toward you. You and I will live under the same roof and if you choose never to speak to me or spend anytime with me, then I shall not despise you for it. And when John and I are blessed with children, I will never stop them seeing their grandmamma just because she still hates their mother. I just make you one promise; I will look after your son, love him for all eternity and never keep him from you.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I think I would like to lie down,” she turned to John, he nodded, “can you show me to my room?”

“Of course, little one.” He took hold of her hand once more, threading his way back out of the room and up the next set of stairs to a further floor above. He stopped outside of a door halfway along the landing. “Only the very best guest bedroom for my love,” he whispered, opening the door and walking with her into the surprisingly bright room. “If you want anything, just call for me. And later on, if you need me, my room is next door,” he pointed toward his room. “It'll be our room soon,” he encouraged. “Now, I’ll go and have a word with Jane, see if she can’t find you something to wear in bed and anything else a young lady might need, seeing as I’m not really up on what women require.” He walked back to the door, his hand on the door knob.

“John?” Margaret asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He walked back into the room. “I’m sorry, for speaking so wilfully to your mother.”

He stepped toward her, crouching before her, taking her hands in his as he steadied himself. His dark eyes smouldered looking into her cool blue orbs, a distressed picture upon her face. “She’ll get over it and it was nothing more than she deserved. Had you not said it, I would’ve been forced too. I know she does it because she wants what’s best for me, but she hasn’t seen the real you yet. I’m convinced that she’ll love you as much as me before long, then I’ll be fighting with her so that I can spend some time with my beloved.”

“Thank you.” Margaret leant toward him, pressing her lips to his.

He responded in kind, his passion for her being rekindled as he stood, folding her into his arms. “I
love you, Margaret and nothing my mother says will ever take that away.”

“I love you too, John. I just want this household to be happy.”

“It will be. I have no doubt about that. Now I best go before I get a lecture about spending too much time in your room with you, as you cast spells about me in order to keep me from my mother.” He grinned, watching a smile break across her lips. Reluctantly, he let her go and walked back to the door, “if I don’t see you before, sleep well, my angel.”

She watched him remove himself from her room. She sat on the bed once more and picked up her small bag. She pulled out the book that she had carried in it and leafed through the pages trying to find the yellow rose that John had given her that very afternoon. Her fingers stroked over the petals as she drew the bloom to her face and sniffed the perfume, its sweet nectar enveloped her senses as she lay back onto the bed. It wasn’t long before she fell asleep only waking when her body felt revived.

She sat up, inspecting the room, a small fire had been lit and on the chair next to the fireplace were placed some bed clothing. She changed as quickly as she could with no maid to help her undress. She sat in front of the mirror on the dressing table and began to methodically pull out the pins that held her tresses in place. Once that task had been completed she picked up the brush and gently pulled the bristles continuously through the long strands until she was satisfied that she had employed the brush long enough. A ribbon had been hung over the mirror and after she had plaited her hair behind her she tied the ribbon around the end of her now twined hair.

She made her way back to the bed and delved under the covers, tucking them around herself in order to keep warm during the stormy night that she could hear going on outside on the other side of the thick curtained window to her room. Thoughts passed over the events of the day, everything had been full of hope and excitement toward her and John’s impending union until they’d reached this place, this factory that she now owned and Mrs Thornton obviously speculated that Margaret would hoof them out of as an act of attrition against the Northerner’s. “If only you could speculate on me, Mrs Thornton,” Margaret said into the void of the room, “you’d see that I would be a well calculated risk and that I would never do anything to hurt any of you.”

She felt above her head with her hand, allowing the palm to rest against the flock paper. She knew that it was the connecting wall between hers and John’s room and with the house in quiet she believed that he was on the other side, lying in his bed and sleeping. “Sweet dreams, my love,” she whispered, hoping that his heart would hear her and return the gesture.

.oOo.
John hadn’t been surprised when Margaret hadn’t come down for anything to eat, when he’d left her she had seemed a little out of sorts and when Jane had returned from her room he had caught her to ask how his bride-to-be had been. When Jane had replied that she had found her asleep he didn’t dwell on it too much. A lot had happened to both of them since their fortunate chance meeting, when he had stepped out of the carriage of his north bound train to discover she was stood on the station watching him with her bright eyes, quite taken aback by his own being there. And now, thankfully, they were sharing the same space and the same air.

He only longed for his mother to share his enthusiasm for Margaret, to understand what it was that she did to him when she looked at him with her bright blue eyes and gentle smile, tiny ringlets of wispy hair softening her features further. She was beautiful and she was his.

Dinner had been a quiet affair, as quiet as it had been since he had returned from Margaret’s room. Fanny had gone home and his mother had just sat, watching the clock, allowing the minutes to tick by without being very conscious of it. He’d picked up a much loved volume of Plato that Margaret had given him when she had first gone to London. He had treasured her gift and the books had been his constant companion whilst she had been away from him. They’d served as a reminder and now they were his comfort knowing that Margaret would never be that far away from him again.

His mother had turned in a little after eight that evening and he followed just a little later; making sure that the house was locked up tight before retiring to his room. He stopped outside Margaret’s room briefly wondering if she was asleep or awake before continuing the few steps to his own room, opening the door and going in. He noticed that Jane had brought up his discarded items of clothing from earlier and they now hung over the screen. He pulled off what was left of his clothing, hanging them with the other items over the screen and picked up his nightshirt, pulling it over his head and frame.

He began thinking about what it would be like to share this room with his wife, would she want to share it even? It was of fairly masculine taste and Margaret might not feel that comfortable in it. He hoped she would, it was one of the largest and they would easily be able to share, if that was something else she wished to do. He hoped she would want that too, to share his bed with him every night. He so wanted to fall asleep with her every night and wake up to her beautiful face every morning.

He crouched by the fire, picking up the poker and pushing it into the glowing embers, turning over the wood so that new flames would kindle. He sat back on the floor, his back resting against the bed as he looked over toward the dressing table. He closed his eyes to the scene, imagining Margaret there brushing her hair as she lazily watched what she was doing in the mirror. He felt it must be summer as she was wearing a nightdress that had no sleeves, the neckline reaching out over her shoulders leaving a great proportion of her neck and collarbone exposed.
He moved over toward her, bending down to sweep her hair away from over her back and kiss the curve where her neck and shoulder met. He watched her close her eyes to the sensation as he sat down next to her and began covering her silky smooth skin with his mouth. She turned herself toward him, smiling as he continued to assault her body as well as her senses with his generous caresses. “Oh, Margaret,” he breathed out, opening his eyes as she vanished from his minds eye. “That is not going to help me sleep well tonight.”

He stood up; crawling in between the covers, hoping that the day she was with him in his bed was not too far away. “I wish we could marry tomorrow but I know the best we can hope for is a month, I will speak to you about it tomorrow, Margaret.” He laid back, his head hitting the pillow and his eyes closing once more to sweet images of Margaret lying in his bed with him, allowing him to love her. “Sweet dreams, my love,” he heard her say, before rewarding her with his own response. “Sweet dreams, Margaret, my angel.”
Chapter 5 – Wedding preparations (part 1)

It was extremely early when Margaret awoke, refreshed with a new vigour now that she was back in Milton, back home, and with a renewed hope to dispel Mrs Thornton’s fears about her and what Mrs Thornton envisaged Margaret would do to her son. “How could I do anything to him?” She asked herself as she pulled back the covers and stepped onto the waiting rug, sinking into the deep pile as she stood. “Other than love him like he deserves and keep him happy.”

It was only a short walk to the window and she was soon opening the curtains on a bright early morning sky, the storm having blown itself out during the night. Wondering what the time actually was, her question was suddenly answered by the striking of a clock bell. Five o’clock. She surveyed the view, looking out across the empty courtyard, across the roofs and chimneys of both factories and houses alike up toward the lush green hills, where livestock grazed and trees soothingly swayed along with the gentle breeze that was whirling around them. She longed to be up there, wandering about in nature as she had done so many times during her childhood, knowing that any excursion would have to wait until she had company; John would never allow her to travel up there on her own.

She also realised that any early morning walk into Milton was out of the question too. John was not her gaoler but it wasn’t right to go gallivanting off without telling him, or any other member of the household; she would have to content herself with the factory.

Dressing as quickly as she could in the black pin striped dress that she had arrived in and brushing through the tresses of her normally pinned hair she walked down the two flights of stairs, out through the large mutely decorated front door and into the grey exterior of the yard. It seemed so quiet as life began to start its daily routine on the other side of the gate and as she walked the circumference she became gradually aware of how great this place actually was, how great it was set to become again.

Idea’s formed in her head as she threaded her way toward the out houses that lined one wall, she entered the one that she believed was the cookhouse, her eyes barely surveying the now empty tables and benches. She strained to see anything at all, there were few windows and she couldn’t quite make out how Mary could make a decent meal with the cramped conditions of the kitchen area. She would speak to John about it later. There were other out houses, one big enough for a schoolroom and even a nursery, there was also one that could easily be turned into a wash house where the workers could go to clean themselves up after their daily grind.
She wandered back out into the yard making her way to the far recesses, looking up at the windows of the house ascertaining which was her room and deciding which window would be the one to John’s. It didn’t take much detective work, the man himself appearing at his own window. She felt her heart leap into her mouth as she noticed him, watching him look out toward the same hills she had spied not an hour before. Before long his eyes were resting upon her as she continued to gaze up at him. She noticed the nightshirt he was wearing; the neck loosely laced offering her the sight of a little more of his neck and chest than had been afforded her the previous day. He moved, resting his hand against the frame above his head and leaning closer to the window, a lazy smile lingering on his lips as he continued to watch her own study of him, too caught up by the sight of him to want to move her feet away from the spot she now felt rooted to.

She lost sight of him when he finally moved away from the window and back into his room, silently hoping that he was dressing in order to greet the day with her. She began walking again making note of all the factory doors and gates, counting the windows on each of the floors, thinking that it wouldn’t be long before the factory would be working again and there would be a number of workers running around the yard going about their business, hauling cart loads of cotton into the factory and taking bolts of fabric out and sending them on their way.

She suddenly heard a door close not far from where she was stood, the brisk footfalls of leather against stone cobble coming in her direction and as she turned in their direction was soon greeted with a pair of arms about her waist, scooping her to him as he pressed his lips against hers. Reluctantly, they broke apart, “good morning, little one.”

“Good morning, my love. What are you doing up so early?”

“I might ask the same of you,” he smiled down to her, still holding onto her. “Couldn’t you sleep?”

“I think I may have had a little too much sleep, John. Apart from waking momentarily and putting on the nightgown that Jane had left in my room, I was soon asleep again.”

“So, you slept well then?”

“Yes, very well. Considering. And you?”

“Still not used to not having to get up, although that won’t be for long now will it?”

“No, I hope not. It’s something we should discuss.”
“And on Monday, we will. At eleven o’clock, with Nicholas,” he teased, “and not a moment before. I’d like to spend the next few days discussing our impending nuptials, if you don’t mind?”

He rested his thumb against her chin lifting it toward him, she smiled back, “no, I don’t mind at all, John. I think it would be a good idea. I need to write to Edith and Aunt Shaw too, I’d better let them know that I am alright and that I need my things sending up.”

“How do you think they’ll take the news?”

“Much the same as your mother, I expect. Aunt Shaw won’t be very pleased that I’m staying with you but at least I can argue that your mother will be keeping an eye on us to make sure that we act in accordance with respectability. My cousin will be sad that I will not marry Henry for a time, but I’m sure she’ll understand when I tell her that I am marrying my true mate.”

“Do you really believe that Margaret, that we are only complete by being together, two halves of a union that is a match made by the gods, that through suffering and disdain we finally came together as if we were meant to be only united to the other?”

“Yes, John. We may have been born into different worlds and, as such, have seen our relationship suffer because of that but we’ve both changed for the better and that is what has brought us together. I know I was offensive at first, not understanding your ways and customs, not realising that sometimes you have to rule with an iron fist. The man I saw you beat,” she watched him turn from her, disgusted by his own actions, “John, look at me?” She asked and he obeyed, turning his face back to hers, “the man I saw you beat, put everyone’s life at risk, including my own. There were other ways to deal with him and I know you realise that now but I shouldn’t have interfered then, it was wrong of me and I apologise.”

“You have nothing to apologise for, I had no right to do that to him,” he countered, his words heavy with his remorse, “although there was one good thing to come out of all that.”

“And what was that?”

“That I would truly come to understand you and your nature, my feisty girl. I was never interested in any woman until I met you, my Margaret. I would never have been happy with an Anne Latimer or a woman like Fanny, I need someone that is my equal, someone that will fight me, be forthright with their words and actions, someone who is bold and direct. You are all those things and more, my life will never be dull with you by my side.”
She beamed, “does that mean you wish me to help run the mill?” He nodded, “to help with decision making and giving opinions?”

He nodded again, “you’re putting your money into the place, and you deserve to be a partner, like anyone in your position would be.” He noticed that her eyes were watery, finally watching a tear float over her alabaster cheek, “why are you crying, little one?” He asked, tenderly wiping away the track from her skin.

“No one has ever given me such a gift. Firstly, you offer me your heart, and then you’re offering me a position in the mill. I hope I live up to your expectations, you will need to teach me everything.”

“And I will, in time. I also think that those ideas you have forming in your head will be a force to be reckoned with.”

“What ideas?” She teased.

“The one’s you were having when you were walking through the out houses earlier on.”

“You were watching me?”

“I’d been watching you for some time.” He said, “I heard the front door go, wondered if you were running off somewhere.”

“I thought about it.” She watched him scowl, “but only up into the hills, they looked so inviting when I looked up at them earlier. I didn’t want to worry you though so I decided to come down here and get some fresh air instead. What time is it?”

John let her go, reaching into his pocket for his watch, “six forty five, would you like to walk up there now?”

“You would take me?” She enquired.
“Yes, of course. It doesn’t take long and we can call back for breakfast before sorting out a few things in town as well as going and seeing the minister about you choosing the day for our wedding.”

“Thank you,” she started walking off in the direction of the gate, turning back to him when she realised he hadn’t moved. “Why are you still stood there?”

He grinned, “it will take us forever if we go that way and besides, I was admiring the view. You should wear your hair down more often.”

She walked back toward him, taking hold of his proffered hand, “it’s not customary for a woman of my age to wear her hair down, not fitting even.”

“Well, I like it and I hope I’ll see it more often.” He started off toward the side of the house, trailing around it to a small walled garden. Margaret noticed the herb patch and a small area that contained some flowers for drying and medicinal purposes. There was also a vegetable patch, why had she never noticed this before? There was a small gate in the back wall and once John had unlocked it they stepped out onto a small winding street that threaded its way upwards toward the hills that she longed to see.

He pulled her closer, enjoying the feel of her dainty figure fitting so perfectly against his as they strode up the bank, his stride shortened to keep in time with her own as they followed the cobbled track. Within half an hour they had stepped up into a field and were taking a path that wound its way along a tiny stream. At the top of the hill was a fallen trunk, it’s bark had been stripped away by the elements and made an inviting seat, John helped Margaret to sit before taking a place next to her. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful, John. I never imagined that the view would be so amazing from up here. What am I looking at?”

“Those hills,” he pointed at them, “are part of the Pennine Way and those,” he pointed further north, “the Yorkshire Dales.”

“Breathtaking.” She breathed out, unable to keep her eyes from wandering over the landscape before her, “do you ever come up here?”

“I come up here quite a bit, normally when I’ve had something to think about. Recently, it’s been because of you.” His eyes shone as he turned towards her. “Fate certainly dealt us a decent hand
this time; I still can’t quite believe we ended up on the same train station.”

“No, that was definitely a stroke of luck on both our parts. Thank you for bringing me up here.”

“My pleasure, little one. It’s now a place I hope we’ll share, as will our memories of Helstone.”

“John, I’m not sure I want to think of Helstone anymore. When Mr Bell went back with me it wasn’t the same. My romantic notions and memories of the place were destroyed like the roses that my mother so lovingly planted and grew and then chopped down by the parson’s blade. I’m old enough to realise that life moves on but Helstone changed for me beyond recognition, this is my home now. And it will be, forever.”

“I’m glad, Margaret. I’m glad you can consider Milton your home.” He placed his arms about her shoulders pulling her to him before laying the most loving kiss on her brow. He looked back at her gazing into the deep warmth of her eyes.

She smiled. “Milton has made me rich, John, not from wealth but with the people that I have come to know and love. And this is our place now, if you wish it, just so long as you allow me to come up here when I need to in order to vent my frustrations towards your mother.” She joked.

“Anytime you wish, my love.” He laughed, “I count myself lucky, you know.”

“Oh, why?”

“For now I have two difficult women in my life again.”

“Again?”

“Yes, I got rid of one when she married Watson. I must be a glutton for punishment.”

“So you must,” she conceded, “I promise that I will try to keep my tongue where your mother is concerned.”
“No, Margaret, don’t. Please don’t. She needs to understand the real you, like I do. You know you turned my head the first moment you gave me your forthright opinion of me. She just needs to see what it is I love about you, what it is that makes me happy, our banter towards one another and the fire inside us both. When we’re in that factory working along side one another, she’ll understand what it is you do for me, what you do to me, Margaret.”

“And you to me, John. She’ll truly understand when she sees how we are together, won’t she.”

“I know she will, even if she won’t admit it at first. Now, I think we should go and get some breakfast, get your hair properly attired and then we’ll see about seeing the minister, once I’ve got the licence that is.”

.oOo.

“So that is the last Wednesday in September, the banns will be read for the three preceding Sundays before the wedding. I trust that we’ll see you in the congregation on Sunday, Miss Hale.”

“Yes, of course.” Margaret replied, knitting her fingers together in front of her as they sat on top of her skirts.

“And John, I trust you’ll convey my joyful sentiments to your mother on this auspicious occasion. I should imagine she’s happy to finally see you wed?”

John and Margaret shared a look before returning their attention to Reverend Gardiner. “My mother is very happy that she is finally getting rid of me.” John returned, watching Margaret as she stifled the urge to laugh. He got up from his seat, the minister mirroring his stance, “thank you, sir. I’m glad that Margaret has been able to choose a date that fits in with us all, now we must go and arrange some of the other items we will need. Good day, Reverend Gardiner.”

“Good day, John, good day, Miss Hale.” He shook John’s hand energetically, before bowing toward Margaret and allowing them to carry on with their duties for the day. Margaret’s first call was to the bank and after conducting business with Mr Latimer, as Mr Bell had done previously, she was furnished with a letter of credit before her funds were to be transferred from her bank in London to the bank in Milton. Their next stop was at the dressmakers, where Margaret ordered two new gowns and had a couple of Fanny’s old plain gowns sized for adjustment, in order that
Margaret had something else to wear until her belongings arrived from London. And once John had taken himself off to the tailor’s, she looked through the book of wedding dress designs deciding on a few different styles. She’d ask John’s mother to accompany her the following day so that she could help Margaret choose.

She left the dressmakers and walked the few doors to the tailors where John was waiting for her, swatches of dark blue and mulberry draped over each shoulder. “What do you think?” He asked as he caught her watching him in the full length mirror he was stood in front of.

“The blue, I think?” Margaret said honestly, smiling up at him as he nodded his approval.

“The blue it is,” John ordered, glad that Margaret had been around to help. They stepped out onto the street and John ushered Margaret towards the jewellers. They stepped inside, “Good morning, Mr Jefferies.” John said tipping his hat to the gentleman behind the counter.

“Mr Thornton, it’s a pleasure. What can I do for you?”

“I wondered if it was possible to have a ring resized?”

“It may be possible; I’d have to have a look at it.”

John delved into the inside pocket of his coat, drawing out a small envelope. He opened the flap and allowed the ring to fall into his other palm. He turned to Margaret, “this was my grandmother’s engagement ring and I’d like you to have it, if you like it.”

He allowed her to pick it up, its emerald and diamond stones sparkling in the sunlight that shone through the windows. “It’s … oh, I don’t know what to say,” for the second time that morning, John was wiping the tears from her face.

“Do you like it, then?” He whispered before she nodded her approval. She handed the ring back to him before he handed it over to the jeweller.

Mr Jeffries studied the gold, “yes we can resize this, Mr Thornton it will not be a problem.” He went about his business taking Margaret’s measurement and writing down the requirements.
“Can you show us the wedding rings as well?” John asked, smiling as Mr Jeffries brought out the requested tray and set it down on top of the counter. “Which one do you like, Margaret?”

She cast her eyes over the tray at the various different rings on display, some contained stones whilst others were decorated and etched. She picked up one, a very delicate plain gold band. “This one.” She said, looking up to John.

“How did I know you were going to choose the plainest one?”

“Because you know my love for ostentation,” she teased, passing the ring to the jeweller.

He sniggered, “when will they be ready?”

“They will both be ready by Monday, Mr Thornton.”

“Thank you,” John replied, picking up his hat and donning it back on his head.

They were finally on their way back home as Margaret decided to tell John of her plan, “I’m going to ask your Mother to help me choose a wedding dress.”

“Do you think that is wise, my angel?”

“Probably not, but we have to start somewhere and where better than with the plans for the wedding.”

He smiled at her safe in the knowledge that Margaret would endeavour to make sure that she did everything she could to get his mother on side. “Rather you than me, my love. Good luck.”

.oOo.
“You seem to be writing a rather long letter, Miss Hale?” Mrs Thornton asked, her voice steady although inside she was still seething with hatred for the younger woman.

“I am writing to both my aunt and my cousin,” Margaret replied, “and I do wish you would call me Margaret.” John looked over to where Margaret was sat; he smiled at her response from behind his newspaper catching her eye as she raised her head to look at his mother.

“I’ll reserve that invitation until after you and John are married, if you don’t mind … Miss Hale.” John shook his head; his mother was going to be as stubborn as ever.

“If that is your wish. Only, will I still be expected to call you Mrs Thornton after that joyous day or will I then be able to address you as mother?” She smiled sweetly, as Mrs Thornton turned a glare upon her. If she was trying to frighten Margaret, she wasn’t succeeding.

“If this wedding goes ahead, as planned, then you will have earned the right to call me mother, but not until that day.”

“Mother!” John bit out; her haughty attitude was beginning to get under his skin.

“No, John,” did Margaret always have to jump to his mother’s defence? “Your mother is right, obviously she will not recognise me as a daughter before we are wed, but will have no choice afterward.”

He brought his paper up in front of his face again, desperately attempting to stifle that laugh he could feel developing in the pit of his stomach. He knew that if he looked at Margaret now, he would have no other choice but to let it out.

Margaret began to write once more, dipping her pen in the black Indian ink and scrawling the nib over the paper once more in her fine hand. “I actually have a favour to ask of you, Mrs Thornton.”

“And what is that, Miss Hale?” Mrs Thornton had returned to her sewing, applying the delicate initials to the linen within her hands.

Margaret drew in a breath, setting the pen on the stand in front of her. “I would very much like your assistance and opinion with regard to the design of my wedding dress. And as I no longer
have anyone close enough to help me in these matters, I would like it if you could instruct me on what I should also have in my trousseau?"

“You want my help?” Mrs Thornton dropped her sewing once again, looking back over toward Margaret. John lowered his paper once more.

“You did promise my mother, on her deathbed, that you would be kind to me.”

Mrs Thornton dropped her gaze at the memory of seeing Margaret’s mother extremely ill, asking her to be a friend to her daughter. “I did. I will help you as much as I am able to, if that is your wish?” She turned back to her work.

“Thank you, Mrs Thornton. It is my wish.” Silence fell again over the three until Jane called them to dinner. Mrs Thornton left directly, with John following. He leant over Margaret’s still writing form before leaving the room, placing a kiss on her cheek. She didn’t look up from her writing but said, “did I do well?”

“Yes, little one. You did very well. Now don’t be too long else you’re dinner will get cold.” John requested, his hands circling over her shoulders.

Margaret rested her free left hand over his right, looking up to him. “I won’t, I have a couple of sentences to finish and I will be in. Go, the sooner you leave me to it, the sooner I will be with you again.”

He bent toward her, kissing her with as much passion as he knew he could afford, “alright, my love.” He said standing and retreating from the room.

Margaret looked back to her letter, re-reading the last lines in order to pick up from where she’d left off. With the pen full of ink and poised over the letter she began to write.

… You see Edith, Henry could never have given me anything to compare to what John can, Henry is far too materialistic and I care not for things. Henry would never love me as much as I deserve, but I know John will and I will never be able to love Henry as I love John. Our children will be born from love and if I had to live my life in squalor then I could happily do that with John by my side. He is my world, Edith and my home is by his side, here in Milton. I love him so very much, I can not even begin to try to explain to what extent I love him, and I just know my heart would break if I ever lost him.
I hope that you can be happy for me and will want to come to my wedding, I would love for you to be my matron-of-honour and for little Sholto to be my page boy. Please let me know as soon as possible as I also hope that you can come to me directly, in fact as soon as my aunt has sorted out my belongings in order to be shipped back here to Milton.

Yours most affectionately,

Margaret.

She collected her pages up, leaving the last to dry on top of the others. “That will do.” She said to herself, as she got up from her seat and joined the others in the dining room.

.oOo.

Hannah Thornton patted her lips with the crisp white cotton napkin before discarding it over her plate. She rarely ate desserts and tonight would be no exception, “I hope the two of you don’t mind but I’m going to retire to the drawing room now. Enjoy your desserts.” She watched her son and his fiancée nod their agreement before she drew back her chair and walked from the room and into the drawing room.

She could hear that the two now seemed to be very animated in their conversation as they happily chatted away in their new found privacy. Suddenly feeling down hearted, she began to think of a time she’d conversed with John on a similar level, before Margaret had been thrown into their lives that was sure, but at least she’d have an idea if anything other than talking or eating ensued in the room next door with its close proximity and adjoining false wall.

She took in her surroundings, thankful at least that they would now no longer have to move even if it was down to the southern woman that had charmed her way into her son’s heart. Her eyes rested on top of the small green leather topped bureau that Margaret had been sat at earlier writing her letters. She noticed the page with its formed words upon it written in the very fine copperplate font that Margaret had used. Could she bring herself to read the words? They were private after all, but she couldn’t help herself.

Hannah’s heart raced, the words were so heartfelt meaning that Margaret’s intentions were as she
had always claimed; she loved John. Not that that meant that Hannah would just lie down and accept it; she would still not acknowledge it until she was ready too. How could such a woman know what love was that she would dismiss it so readily the first time it was offered to her only to accept it when the fancy took her? John’s constancy would be his downfall; of this Hannah Thornton was adamant. The only thing was, how on earth was she ever going to get him to change his mind? Especially considering that John and Margaret had set a date for the wedding. She’d have to think of something and she’d have to think of it quickly.
Chapter 7

Chapter 6 – Wedding preparations (part 2)

It had been a long morning as Margaret Hale and Hannah Thornton arrived home after their excursion into Milton, just in time to sit down to a lunch of cold meat sandwiches and a slice of cake all washed down with lashings of tea. John took a sip of the creamy liquid from his cup before placing both the cup and saucer on the side table, he turned to Margaret who had taken her place by his side on the sofa, “how was your trip into town, were you able to order what you wanted.”

She looked up to him, a sullen expression on her face, “yes, thank you.” She spat out, turning to Mrs Thornton. “Your mother was very helpful.”

John noted the pained expression written across Margaret’s features, and then looked over to the dark brooding figure, “mother?” He asked.

“Miss Hale was her usual determined self. I honestly don’t know why she invited me, John, because my opinion didn’t seem to count for anything.” She picked up her cup and delicately sipped at the brew. “In fact, it was a wasted morning. There were far more important things I could have got on with here, than traipsing half way around Milton.”

He could see Margaret twitching on the seat next to him; she was seething with anger, ready to burst at any second. John’s hand found hers as they wrestled with one another on top of her lap; they steadied with his calming touch. “It was successful, though?”

Hannah Thornton couldn’t help herself, “if you consider the fact that Miss Hale hasn’t very long to put together her trousseau then no, it wasn’t. I just hope that her aunt comes up with something otherwise Miss Hale will be wearing rags.”

Margaret could take it no longer, standing up abruptly. “Thank you, Mrs Thornton; I’m sorry that you had such a wasted morning. I did honestly believe that it would give us the opportunity of putting our differences aside and start afresh,” she shouted, she wasn’t one for outbursts but this family certainly had a knack of bringing them to the fore. “Even if it was only for John’s sake!” She exclaimed. She looked down to him; she was distraught and ready to cry. The last thing she wanted was to allow Mrs Thornton see her do that, it would only encourage the older woman to believe she had won a small victory. She excused herself, feigning a headache and quickly ran to her room.
The door slammed behind her as she rushed for the bed and fell onto it, weeping into the covers. Her cheeks were still flushed with her anger as the salty tears tracked their way over them on their way to oblivion. Her body wracked with her sobbing as her heart cried out, her voice mimicking the noises tearing through her body in order to give them credence.

Then all was silent, she continued to cry but her voice quietened, her ears suddenly becoming aware of the gentle taps of a hand knocking on the other side of the door. John had probably sent Jane to look in on her and see how she was doing. “Please leave me alone,” Margaret called out, her voice small and cracked, turning slightly in order to allow the person behind her door to hear her.

The door opened a chink, “Margaret, it’s me.” John whispered, crossing the threshold into the room and eyeing her on the bed, her back toward him. She turned over to him, his heart breaking with her dishevelled appearance. His normally cool and stolid Margaret upset by a few cold and expertly calculated words of his mother. He closed the door quietly before quickly crossing the distance over to her, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling her frail form toward him, cradling her in his arms as he attempted to calm her down. Finally, as she began to take control of herself once more he asked her, “do you want to tell me what happened?”

She nodded, a brief smile passing over her lips before she rested her back against the headboard. “We left in silence and by the time we got to the dressmakers we still hadn’t talked, I’d assumed that she would at least ask me what I had towards my trousseau, if anything at all, but no, not one word did she speak until we entered the establishment. Then you couldn’t stop her. She kept asking what lingerie I had, if I had a shawl, about gloves, fans, bags, stockings, dresses. She quite drove me mad.

“Then she asked me about the wedding dress, I showed her some of the designs I had looked at yesterday and she dismissed them all, saying that I should go for something a little plainer. I couldn’t go for anything simpler; after all you know my hatred of ostentation. She looked through and found something that would have suited Fanny more appropriately than me. Finally, we compromised until she assumed that I wanted a white dress. I’d seen this beautiful light blue satin silk that matches the midnight blue of your coat perfectly, but she didn’t like that. She sniffed John, she physically sniffed, and I could swear that half of Milton probably heard her do it.

“I wanted that fabric, not only because it would match your attire but because I would be able to wear the dress again and blue is a lucky colour too. But that simply wasn’t good enough; the Queen wore white, every bride since then has seemed to have worn white so I should too.”

John was slightly amused by the battle of wills that Margaret was portraying for him, “so are you? Getting married in white?”
Margaret shook her head, the merest smile escaping her lips; she looked up at him through her eyelashes like a naughty girl. “I pretended to be ill, said I felt a little faint, Mr Stevens helped me out into the back and let me have a drink of water. He was very kind to me and we discussed my requirements, in private.”

“My clever girl.” John smiled; glad to see that she had got her way in the end.

“But I couldn’t get much else, your mother made it virtually impossible for me to order any other items, so at the moment my trousseau consists of my wedding dress, veil and a pair of gloves. However, I was able to order numerous pairs of boots and slippers from the cobblers, so I will be well shod.”

He laughed raucously, Margaret was sure that the windows would rattle. “Oh, Margaret.” He held her to him, kissing her brow. “So why did you get so upset with her?”

“She was making everything so difficult. I really believe she is trying to sabotage our wedding and she is so stubborn, I locked horns with her on almost everything this morning.”

“I know someone else like that,” John revealed, letting his hand raise Margaret’s chin up so that they were gazing into one another’s eyes, “but I love locking horns with her, it makes me feel alive.” She looked away, embarrassed by his honesty, “Margaret, look back at me, please.” She did as she was bid, the depths of her warm golden flecked hazel eye’s drawing him into their depths. He smiled, “you know, I said that once before, but you never did then.” He looked away briefly, reliving the moment.

“When was that?” She asked, her face shamefully close to his, their breath intermingling in the smallest void between them.

“When you left with your aunt after your father’s funeral. It was snowing and you got into that carriage with her. I just wanted some indication of how you felt and I called out, wanting you to turn around to see me watching you. But you didn’t, too wrapped up in your thoughts of your father I shouldn’t wonder. I just knew that … well …”

“What John?”

“If you’d looked back, I’d have never been able to let you go. One glance and I would have run
across that courtyard to the carriage and stopped the driver, pulled on the reigns, anything to get that carriage to stop so that I could ask you to stay with me, ask you to marry me, hold you in my arms and never let you go to London.”

A lone tear skimmed over her cheek. “I wanted to, John. I wanted to look back but I was so torn, I thought you hated me and if I had and you’d gone into the house I think I would’ve died there and then. I only wish I had now, we’d have been wed a lot sooner and I could be free to love you as a wife should.”

“No, little one. Everything happens for a reason. It was right the way it happened; I have no doubt about that. Now, I think I should leave you to freshen up a bit and go and speak to mother.”

“John?” She questioned just as he was about to get up from his seat on her bed, her hand resting on his elbow, a tingling sensation began to course through both of them. “Thank you.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, before getting up and moving toward the door. His hand was on the doorknob as he looked back at her. “You look like you want to ask me something else?”

“Well, yes, there is something else I wish to know.” He nodded his head, awaiting her question, “why do you avoid kissing me on the lips?”

“Ah, so my bold Margaret is still in there somewhere,” he teased, “you think I have avoided your lips?” He watched her nod. “I confess. I have. But there is good reason; the next time I kiss you on the lips will be the night we are wed, when I know that I will be able to claim you as my own without worrying about your reputation. Especially considering that you will then be my wife.”

“And you will be my husband.” He nodded, “then I thank you for that too. I shall see you in a little while?”

“You shall, now tidy yourself up, I’ll get Jane to come and help you.” And with that he was gone.

.oOo.
John wound his way down through the town, tipping his hat at passers-by that were known to him, exchanging words of greeting or thanks to those that offered him their kindness towards his forthcoming wedding and his engagement to Margaret. Even Anne Latimer was pleased that he was happy with his choice, endeavouring to persuade him and Margaret to attend a party that she and her father had decided upon giving in a couple of weeks. They would be honoured if the happy couple would be their guests of honour. John said that he couldn’t possibly answer without discussing it with Margaret first but would send word as soon as he had an answer for them. She smiled sweetly allowing him to go about his business.

Upon reaching the dressmakers in good time, he crossed the threshold and spoke directly with Mr and Mrs Stevens, asking them to put together a trousseau for Margaret that they thought would befit her. They were only too glad to help; he had been a very good patron of their store for a number of years and even gave him a swatch of the fabric that her dress was to be made from. He bid them good day and found his way into the jewellery store for the second time in as many days.

“Good day, Mr Jeffries,” he enquired, whilst taking off his hat and placing it on top of the counter.

“Mr Thornton, good to see you again. I see that your lovely fiancée is not with you today.”

“No, this is a secret call, Mr Jeffries. I wonder if there is something else that you can help me with. Something special that I can give Margaret the day we wed.”

“Have you anything at all in mind.”

John pulled out the swatch of fabric that Mr Stevens had kindly given him, “I’d like a necklace and earrings, something not too gaudy but that would go with this fabric.”

“Is her wedding gown to be made from this,” John nodded his affirmation, “sapphires would suit that best, with maybe a diamond.” Mr Jeffries stepped back into his strong room before bringing out a couple of examples. He laid them out on top of the counter.

John picked up the first, it’s ‘y’ shape was alluring but the stones were large and the whole necklace felt heavy. He sensed that Margaret’s neck would probably suffer from wearing it all day. He placed it back onto the velvet cloth before picking up the next. The mid blue coloured sapphires would match Margaret’s eyes as well as show off the colour of her dress and were set in tiny flower designs interspersed with diamonds winding their way around the whole circumference that would sit around her neck and over the points of her collar bones. It was perfect and he couldn’t wait to see her wearing it, couldn’t wait to put his fingers to the nape of
her neck and unfasten it for her. “Are there earrings to match?”

“Yes, Mr Thornton,” Mr Jeffries returned from his strong room for a second time with the items handing them over to John.

They were so delicate and so fitting for his Margaret, he knew she would love them. “I’ll have them Mr Jeffries. Can you keep hold of them for me; I want to give them to Margaret just before our wedding, if I take them now I’m liable to give them to her before then, spoiling the surprise.”

“Of course, Mr Thornton. Come back for them when you are ready.”

“Thank you, Mr Jeffries. Oh, there’s one other thing. Margaret’s wedding ring, can it be inscribed?”

“Yes, Mr Thornton, what would you like engraving on it?”

“My heart is yours, forever.”

“Very good, Mr Thornton. I will have that done for you.”

“Thank you, Mr Jeffries; I’ll collect the engagement ring on Monday.”

“Yes, Mr Thornton. Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Good bye, Mr Jeffries,” and with that he returned his hat atop his head and walked back to Marlborough Mills. He couldn’t wait to see Margaret’s face when she opened her presents from him, although that happy event would have to be put off for a little while as he wanted her to be surprised with his thoughtfulness. He hurried along the path wanting to return to his beloved as quickly as he could, in truth he wanted to make sure that she was out of reach of her mother after the shocking display that ensued between them earlier on. The last thing he wanted was for his mother to upset Margaret anymore than she had already done, he hated to see Margaret’s eyes shine with tears instead of happiness.

He opened the gate to the factory yard, closing and locking it behind him before dashing across the courtyard and into the house. He ran upstairs and into the drawing room. “Mother, are you on
your own?"

“Yes, John. If you’re looking for Margaret she’s in the garden, she took a book with her, wanted to be warmed by the sun’s rays, indeed.”

“Mother! I warned you earlier on. Don’t you think you’ve upset the apple cart enough today?” She didn’t respond to his question but the disapproving look was there when he took off his coat, stripped his neck of his black tie and rolled up his sleeves. “Not a word. I am in my own house and as such can do as I please with my attire.” He shot her his dazzling smile as she shook her head before he quickly returned down the steps and out into the garden.

He stood mesmerised by the sight of her; she’d changed her gown since he’d seen her earlier on. Admittedly it was one of Fanny’s old ones but she looked enchanting in the ivory gown with its antique lace, the shorter sleeves and slight v-neck allowing John a glimpse of Margaret’s creamy skin. She’d allowed her hair to be taken down as well, the sides had been plaited and pinned on her crown but the tresses had been left loose, hanging down her back in one long dark chocolaty brown curtain. If he’d not known it was her, he’d had believed her to be an angel. His angel. “Didn’t you tell me that I would wear my eyes out if I continued to stare at you on our walk home from the station the other day?” She asked him teasingly, never letting her eyes drift up from the page in her book.

“I laughed, “aye, I did but I can’t help it!”

She looked over to him, her eyes boring into his, “then, Mr Thornton, I’m afraid you may go blind.”

“Never, my angel.” He crossed the distance to her taking a seat next to her in the glorious sunshine, his magnificent smile never wavering. “Besides, you haven’t stopped looking at me either since you spied me.” He mocked.

In truth, he was correct. She couldn’t help but look, he seemed so relaxed when his tie was gone and his shirt sleeves were rolled up. She assumed that the somewhat forbidden sight of her flesh was having the same effect on him as seeing his neck and strong forearms was having on her. She wanted to reach up and run her fingers along the line of his jaw feeling the day’s dark stubble under her tips, wanted to trace the line of his inviting lips, pull his head down to meet hers in order to place a kiss against his mouth, she wanted the feel of those strong arms around her, have his long fingers splay down from her waist over her hips but she knew it wasn’t allowed, that even a chaste action would be frowned upon. And, as if to put pay to any ideas she had, she looked up to the dining room window. “We’re being watched.” She said flatly.
John averted his gaze up toward where Margaret was looking, seeing that his Mother was stood watching them. He turned his attention back to Margaret, taking one small hand into his and bringing it to his lips, placing the sweetest kiss on her palm. She could do no more than rake in a steadying breath, sure that her corset would split from the extra exertion her now erratic breathing was generating. “I can’t wait to kiss you properly, Margaret,” he began, “to hold you in my arms, run my hands through your hair, and have you do the same to me. And all in front of her too,” he said with mischief in his voice.

“You may regret ever saying that.”

“I will never regret saying that; I just hope I don’t embarrass you with my northern ways. You see, I fully intend to kiss you at every opportunity, in front of mother, in front of the servants, in fact in front of everyone. You shall never be safe from me, little one. At dinner parties we will be the talk of the town when they discuss my inappropriate behaviour of showing the world what my wife means to me.”

She laughed along with him, “whose to say it will just be your inappropriate behaviour they will be talking about. We are equals aren’t we? I believe there will be times when I shall want to show the world exactly how I fell about my husband.”

“Then we truly are a fitting pair.”

“Yes, we are. John, I love you.”

“And I you, my Margaret. Now, as tomorrow is Saturday I thought that maybe we could go for a picnic if the weather is good.”

“That would be lovely, but I want to visit Mary in the morning if I may?”

“Of course, little one, take as much time and as many supplies as you need, just promise me one thing?”

“What?”

“You’ll make sure my mother knows where you are going and for what purpose, I like seeing you get the upper hand with her.”
Chapter 7 – A pleasant dream

John and Margaret both lay back onto the rug that John had thoughtfully carried to the remote spot by the river in the woods that he had decided to take Margaret to in order for them to spend the day together on their own. His mother had been all protestations before they had left the mill, asking John to think of how his and Miss Hale's behaviour would be considered inappropriate and that John should think of Miss Hale's reputation. He'd just nodded and grinned at his mother before taking Margaret's small hand in his own and walked her out of the house.

John sighed, his chest visibly deflating with the exertion of his act.

"What's the matter, John?" Margaret asked her voice barely above a whisper.

He turned on his side, now able to survey the full extent of the beauty that lay beside him. "Nothing." He breathed out, his smile lazy as he caught her eyes thoughtfully watching him. "I was just thinking about mother."

"What about her?" Margaret asked.

"I just can't understand why she continues with this ruse of hers, one minute caring about what we do for the sake of propriety and the next, making you out to be some kind of demon that has been sent here to destroy me."

"She's just a concerned mother; she wants what's best for her son. Obviously she doesn't believe I'm it otherwise she'd be happy for us, well you at least."

John reached over, caressing Margaret's cheek, her nerve endings tingling and awakening something within her that was both agreeable yet alien at the same time. She closed her eyes to the sensation hoping that the feeling would never end. She felt John moving closer to her position, felt his warm breath against her cheek, felt his other hand on top of her head smoothing down her hair as it splayed out in a fuzzy sort of halo. She was rendered powerless, unable to move even a finger or think clearly as John began to move the hand that had been stroking her face. She felt it move down her neck, gently trace the exposed portion of her collar bone, before his fingers flittered down across the lace at the neckline of her dress, over the swell of her breast.
to the cleft at her cleavage. She raked in a steadying breath as her eyes opened wide; she looked down her body trying to focus on the position of his hand but failed. She could tell his hand was now over her breast, her nipple becoming taut through the layers of cotton and linen she was wearing. She shut her eyes once more; her head sliding backward as she felt herself beginning to swim within this unaccustomed tidal wave John was subjecting her too.

"Are you alright, Margaret?" John asked, his mouth almost on her ear. She nodded slowly, unable to respond in any other way. "I'd better stop," he said regretfully. "Before I'm unable to."

"No," she managed, as her arms found their way about his neck and drew him to her. "Please, John. Don't stop!"

"But, Margaret ..." He became lost in her embrace as she wound her arms about his neck, pulling him to her and kissing him gently on the lips. "Oh, God forgive me," he proffered, before fervently kissing his beloved's lips.

Margaret lay back down pulling John with her as she became lost to his sweet kisses, becoming aware of the sun's rays graciously warming her skin as it slowly became exposed to the elements of the August sunshine. John sat up, his handiwork becoming evident as he pulled open the tunic of Margaret's dress and attempted to free her from it. She helped him by sitting up herself and pulling the open neckline from around her shoulders. He leant into her, kissing the newly exposed décolletage, his hands skimming over her shoulders and pulling the fabric that still encased them down over the tops of her arms, his actions only aiding to increase her wanton desire. Her hands went to the tie of her corset and began pulling on the end of the ribbon but he stopped her once more. "I knew you would be the devil incarnate when I finally got you into my bed, my Margaret." He teased. "Let me do this, little one. All I want from you is for you to enjoy and savour every moment of it."

"How many times have you done this, John?" She asked, afraid of his answer.

"What? Made love to a woman?" He watched her nod her head. "Never. I have had women in my bed before, Margaret, but it has never been as an act of love, just necessity." She smiled, kissing him once more before settling back and allowing him to undo the constricting laces of the corset which she was soon free of. Skilfully, John continued removing her clothing until she was finally only in her vest and pantaloons. "Would you like to help me now?" He asked of her. She nodded her acceptance and together they continued stripping John of his clothing until he was in nothing but his drawers. She pulled at the drawers' waistband expectantly, like a vixen waiting to pounce on her prey but John pulled her hands into his and kissed the back of them. "Not yet, little one. I'm sure Edith has told you much about the joys of what go on between a husband and wife already but I need you to wait until I believe you are ready for me." She nodded again, lying back down and waiting for him to join her.
John began to trace his fingers over her skin once more, hoping to evoke the same reaction as he had done so before. She hissed inwardly as his fingers caressed her nipple through the now thin cotton material, his mouth kissing over the gentle swell that was exposed, his tongue languidly swirling in the same place and his teeth nipping at the flesh that now heaved in time with Margaret's increasingly rapid breathing. He moved in closer, his leg settling between her own as her body began to writhe from his touches. He wanted more of her but knew that he could easily shock or offend her if he weren't careful. Slowly he began to pull down the fabric of her vest, exposing one breast then the other, his hands covering them just as quickly in order to keep Margaret from feeling uncomfortable.

But Margaret couldn't have cared, she could feel her body react to his every command, it mattered not what he did as long as he kept her riding this new unchartered wave of erotica. His hands were still covering her breasts, moving them in small circles over her now erect nipples. Her hands slid up to his removing them from her, she knew not why but she knew she wanted to feel totally free, totally free to have him love her and love him in return. "John, stop treating me like a doll and make love to me."

John leant up, taken aback by Margaret's forthright observation and further still when she got up from her position on the rug, began tugging at her undergarments and freeing herself totally from her confines. "Margaret, I ...?"

She turned on the spot, standing in front of him, her arms by her sides, her hair flapping around in the slight breeze that had sprung to life as the sun had left its spot in the centre sky and was now descending. His eyes swept gluttonously over her body wanting to devour her, taking in every minute detail of her alabaster skin, the rose pink nipples as they stood erect in the cool breeze and the gentle movement of the dark hair over her sex. "Don't you like what you see?" She asked. He nodded, his own body aching with desire for her. "Well, aren't we supposed to be enjoying this?" She knelt down close to him, her nipples brushing up against his arm, her sex smelling sweet.

"Of course we are, but it's your first time, Margaret."

"What difference does that make, John?"

"I don't want to hurt you." He reached out and cupped her face in his hands.

"But surely, it won't be as painful if I'm unaware of the hurting taking place." She smiled. "Will it?"

"I suppose not, I never thought of it like that." He answered brightening. "So, my wanton
mistress, how do you think we should go about this?"

"Why not just take me this first time? We can appreciate one another next time, in fact, every time after this one. We have our whole lives together to make love." She got up again, "Why don't we play a little game of hide and seek?" She ran around the nearest tree, popping her head around it to see John's reaction, it was good; he had a playful glint in his cool blue eyes. "Come on, John, find me." She ran off again in another direction.

John got up, stripping himself of his drawers and running off after her. "Perhaps we can go for a dip?" He suggested, hearing the splash of water before he reached the side of the clear sparkling river. She was in the middle treading water and smiling coyly at his growing erection. He stepped into the water, moving ever closer as she began to splash him, but he was having none of it. He grabbed her flailing arms with ease and pulled her to him, their lips making contact as he pulled her into his embrace. Each murmured as they became lost in the moment with each other, their bodies coming together in a united appreciation. He picked her up, his hands circling her buttocks and allowed her to circle his hips with her legs as he walked them back out of the water and to their waiting rug on the bank. He set her down, joining her as she lay there before him. He took a position of foreboding above her but he could see she wasn't scared, he could see she wanted him, her eyes glazed, her body ready. But first he wanted to make sure.

He leant down, his mouth finding one nipple whilst his hand found the other, she moaned and wriggled beneath him and as he continued his assault, letting his other hand find her sex. She instinctively opened her legs, allowing him the access he so sorely needed. He inserted a finger to another cry of jubilation feeling inside her silky folds and establishing that she was indeed ready for him. He sat up pulling her to a seated position as well, physically pulling her onto his lap and allowing her to clamp her legs around his waist. He smiled up at her, she smiled back gasping with the realisation of what he intended her to do. She nodded her approval as she positioned her opening over the tip of his penis and slowly began to slide herself over him. Gradually she moved up and down, going at her own pace. She stopped briefly when her hymen finally gave way, the small amount of pain subsiding quickly as John pulled her into his embrace and held onto her.

"Are you alright, Margaret?" He whispered, noticing a few unshed tears skimming along the bottom of her eyelids. She nodded, kissing him with such adoration before taking up the reins once more and slowly encompassing the whole of him inside the whole of her, fitting them perfectly together. Steadily her rhythm increased and in so doing his did as well. Both encouraged the other with further embraces, kisses and loving touches to the point where neither could take it any longer and they came together. Margaret cried out in ecstasy, throwing her head back as the waves of her orgasm threw her over the edge. She could feel the hot flash of John's love fill her as he too met his orgasm full on before drawing her to him and kissing her sweat soaked skin. "Oh, Margaret?"

"Yes, John?" She asked, giggling at the sensation of his quickly receding penis escaping her cavity.
"How was that for you?" He breathed out.

"Remarkable. I imagined that our first time would be good ... but not like that."

"Really?" He watched her nod her head. "Good."

"What about you?" She asked timidly, "was it good for you also?"

"Oh, Margaret, that was truly amazing. I've never experienced it as good as that before and it's only set to get better."

"What do you mean?" She asked intriguingly.

"Do you not think that with each time a man or woman practises something, they get better at it? Like learning a language or to play an instrument?"

"I suppose so, yes!"

"So, going by that answer, don't you then think that when a man and a woman, especially those that love each other like you and I, that they also get better at the art of lovemaking each and every time they try it?"

"Yes, I suppose they do."

John helped Margaret to her feet and, after finding his drawers, began to help her dress. "I do believe, Miss Hale, that once you are mine and mine alone mind, we are going to have a very healthy 'behind closed doors' relationship, have many very good and varying love filled encounters and be blessed by having many children."

"Yes, I'm sure we will? They don't all have to be 'behind closed doors', do they?" She teased him, as he helped her retie the laces in her corset.

He leant in, whispering into her ear, "if this afternoon is anything to go by then I'm not going to
be able to stop you bringing it back outside. Besides, even once we are married, I don't think my mother would be very pleased to hear you shout out my name so clearly in the throes of our passion as she tries to sleep in the room next door or even at the end of the corridor. I'm going to have to quieten you down somehow."

"Oh, let her hear. Either that or she can move in with Fanny. I want the world to know how I feel about you; however they hear me say or shout it out."

John smiled, "thank you, little one. I rather liked the sound of you screaming my name out when we were making love."

"Good, I intend to do it all of the time, morning, noon and night!"

"Noon?" He asked, his eyebrows creeping up in mock shock. He pulled the now clothed Margaret to him, kissing her on the mouth.

"Yes, my love, should the fancy take us. I trust that we will be able to make the excuse of going to bed in the middle of the day if we are over exerted from the night before."

"But obviously, we won't be tired at all, just be going for another 'bout' in the ring so to speak?"

"Exactly!" Margaret slipped her hand into John's as they now began to make their way back to the mill. "John?"

"Hmm?"

"I cannot wait till we're married."

"Nor I, love." John raised her hand to his mouth, kissing it.

.oOo.
Margaret awoke with a start, the light rapping on her bedroom door only adding to the tension she was already feeling. "Margaret, are you alright?"

"Yes, John, I'm fine," speaking just loud enough for him to hear her, sighing inwardly so that he was unaware of any discomfort she was actually feeling.

"Thank God. You woke me up, calling out my name. Well, screaming more like. Thought you must be in some kind of mortal danger or have a terrible pain of some kind."

"No, everything's fine." She suppressed a giggle. "Go back to bed, it must be early."

"It's 4.15 am, little one."

"Then it's too early to be awake, John. Please, go back to bed until the time is right."

"Night then, little one."

"Goodnight, John." She could hear his feet pad away from her as John made his way back into his own room. The door was shut in virtual silence but she knew instinctively that he was now safely confined within its walls.

Letting out the breath she was seemingly holding she laid back against the pillows, images traipsing through her head re-enacting the vivid dream she must have had before she had be woken by John. She hoped that she had only awoken John, praying that no-one else would have heard her calling out his name or worse. If she'd screamed his name then what other noises had she also let slip from her lips.

And then there were the images, between her education and the stories that Edith had told Margaret about the bedroom antics of any married couple, she was sure that what she had envisaged had been accurate. Her dream played out again and again, she prided herself on her boldness hoping that she could be as brazen when she was eventually invited into John's bed as Mrs John Thornton. Going by what she had seen she felt sure that she was going to enjoy her married life.

It was then that she realised that that could have quite easily happened that very afternoon. Had John not made sure that there was always a bit of distance between them and any embrace that
was entered into was at least able to be stopped, things could have quite easily got out of hand.

She attempted to settle herself but this didn't appear to want to happen. She read a book but found she couldn't concentrate, reading the same page over and over again. She tried to start a letter to Edith but couldn't put pen to paper and write anything. She tried taking a turn about her room but her mind kept overflowing with her images of wanting and brazenness.

The pit of her stomach knotted, her groin momentarily ached before receding before aching again, she pooled between her legs at the images of John's nakedness before her. For such a collected individual she was beginning to wonder if she was becoming hysterical and if so, did that mean she should see a doctor. She needed to speak to someone, but whom? Jane would have listened and advised her but would then have gossiped about 'Miss Hale's problems'. There would be no room for a talk of this nature with Mrs Thornton. The matriarch's expected levels of propriety between John and Margaret were set exceptionally high, so much so that they had already crossed them on a number of occasions. This left John. Her beloved fiancé and dear friend.

Resolved, she picked herself up from her position in her bed, covered herself in the large dressing gown that she now possessed and stepped out into the corridor. She walked the few steps between hers and John's room and pressed her ear against the door but couldn't hear much, so she tapped on it calling out, "John? Are you awake?" Nothing was forthcoming, perhaps he wasn't there. She opened the door a chink and looked in; she could hear the clock on the mantel ticking away grandly over on the right so she looked over to where she envisaged the bed to be. It appeared empty from where she stood but that didn't mean it was unoccupied, especially considering that the bed was still made up on the portion of the bed that she could see. She stepped further into the room, closing the door behind her and moving into the room so that she was able to see over the bedstead.

She stopped; she could see him in the pale light from the last remaining embers of the fire, his back toward her. She circled the bed attempting to get as close as she could without waking him treading carefully. A loose floorboard underfoot signalled her arrival as John shot up in bed searching the room for the culprit and exposing his chest to the all encompassing gaze of his beloved.

"Margaret," he whispered, "is that you?"

"Yes, John. I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep."

"Come here, little one," he patted the bed cover beside him as he laid his body back up against the numerous pillows that sat behind him.
"I think I'd better not." She responded, taking a seat upon the chair next to the hearth.

"Afraid I'll pounce?"

"No," she laughed, "I'm afraid I might though."

John's face took on a puzzled expression. "What's troubling you, Margaret? Is it my fault you can't sleep?"

"No, no-one's fault. I just had a particularly vivid dream and I can't get back to sleep for wondering about it."

"Was it nightmarish?"

"On the contrary. It was very pleasant."

"So, why is it stopping you from sleeping?"

"Because it brings up too many unanswered questions, questions I will have for weeks unless I ask you about them now."

"Might this be the kind of conversation that only you and I should be having on our wedding night?" He asked, in his all knowing way.

"I suppose so. But I can't wait that long, I feel I must get these questions answered now."

"Alright then, could you pass me my dressing gown, please?" Margaret eyed him suspiciously. "It's either that or you can lock door." She did as she was bid, handing him his dressing gown, turning away from him as he put it on and resuming her place in the chair as soon as John had locked the door. He decided to sit in the chair opposite Margaret, pulling his lapels over the exposed part of his chest and draping the tails over his uncovered legs. "So, what questions do you need answering?"
"I have many."

"Margaret, we have as long as it takes. What is your first?"

"Alright, some questions might seem a little forward." She said apprehensively.

"It's fine, my love, be as direct as you need to be."

"How many women have you ever made love to?"

"None, little one. I can't deny that I haven't shared my bed with other women but I've never made love to any of them. That shall occur between you and me only, once we are married." She smiled knowing in her heart that this could be the only answer.

"Do you have any children?"

"Do you think my mother would have let me walk away from any child of mine? No, I was always careful."

"I had a dream tonight, a wonderful, remarkable vision of you and me, making love, John. And now my head is in a whirl and my body, well it feels so different."

"In what way does it feel different?"

"I saw you, in my mind's eye, naked before me."

"You know what I look like naked?"

"What I imagine you to look like, I mean. I've seen anatomical pictures and Edith has told me about when a man is ..."
John smiled, "when a man is?" He teased.

"Ready?"

"Oh, ready. She's told you about this." He watched her nod. "What else has she told you?"

"About copulation, about how a man forces himself inside his mate."

"It's a wonder you didn't have a nightmare with talk like that, and a wonder she ever became impregnated." His anger simmered. He crossed the distance between them and took her hands in his forcing her to stand in front of him. Leading her over to the bed he sat on the edge and motioned for her to do the same. His hand instinctively went to her cheek, brushing away loose tendrils of hair and swirling patterns over her smooth skin. "Margaret, when a man truly loves his mate, or in this case, his wife, things are not like that. He doesn't force himself upon her; he certainly doesn't force himself inside her. He makes her feel special, loved, comfortable, he adores her, he worships her, he makes sure that she is completely ready for him before he even thinks of going anywhere near her to form their ultimate union. I absolutely love you, Margaret and I would never allow anyone or anything to harm you, so why would I want to hurt you myself?"

Margaret shook her head, "but isn't it painful, the first time?"

"It is for most women, but once it's happened it never hurts again. I can promise you that. Is there anything else you need to ask?"

"Yes, why, when I saw you, did I feel funny?"

"Funny? In what way?"

"Funny... here?" She pointed to her groin.

"Oh, I'm surprised Edith didn't tell you what happened when a woman was physically excited by a man, especially after she was so succinct in telling you about men."

"Don't be churlish, it doesn't become you!"
He smiled. "How do you feel down there?"

"A little wet, if I'm honest."

"That's good, as it should be."

"I thought there was something wrong with me."

"Nothing wrong, it is completely natural. When a woman is ready for her husband to unite with her she becomes wet, probably much more than you are now already."

"How do you know I feel like that now?"

"Because you're inquisitive, you've chosen to speak to me about your dream and I bet you're itching to find out exactly what I have on under this robe."

"I am not!"

"You are!"

"Ok, I am. I can imagine you're feeling the same way."

"Yes, I am. But I can wait to have my time with you, wait to strip your wedding dress and your under garments from your body and love you the way that God intended me to."

"So, does this make me very naughty?"

"Depends on what exactly you dreamt about."

"I told you, you and I, together, forming a union that only two lovers should make."
"Where were we?"

"On the bank of the river, in the wood."

"Where I took you today?" She nodded, "Margaret, you are definitely wanton, I'll give you that."

"Won't you like to ...?"

"What, take you up to that spot on a lovely summers day and make love to you in that wood by the river?" She nodded again. He smiled, "I would love to, one day. But only after we have been married for a little while, then perhaps we can. Does that answer all of your questions now?"

"No, I have one more. Why was I screaming you name out in my sleep?"

"That may best be answered once we are married. Do you think you can manage waiting for just that one?"

"Yes, I can manage that. Thank you, John."

"My pleasure, now get to bed before mother wakes and finds you in my room." He allowed her the briefest of kisses before she stealthy removed herself from his room, leaving him to reflect on Margaret's thoughts and images. "Oh Margaret, you have no idea what you have done to me, telling me of your visions and asking me those questions. And if you actually call my name out like that when we are in the throes of passion ... well, I am never going to be able to contain myself."
For all the pleasantries the weekend had afforded both John and Margaret, Monday morning hadn’t come soon enough as far as the cold shoulder of the brooding matriarch was concerned. Dressed once again, in her customary black silk, Hannah Thornton arrived in the factory just as the clock struck 11.00 am. Three sets of bewildered eyes turned her way as her skirts swished across the floorboards. If anything was going to be decided about the running of the factory there was no way that she wasn’t going to have her opinion voiced.

Had it only been a meeting between John and Nicholas Higgins then maybe Mrs Thornton could’ve let it go but seeing as Margaret was also involved Hannah felt that she had a right to know what was to become of her own future. The ‘good mornings’ over with, she turned her full attention to the matter in hand. “So, John, I take it that there will be no more talk of unions and strikes by Mr Higgins here then if he is to be the new overseer?”

“Mother, Margaret and I …”

“Oh, this was Margaret’s decision was it? To bring in a dissenter at the helm?”

“No, mother, listen to me.”

“After all, as overseer wouldn’t Mr Higgins be the perfect instigator of reckless staff behaviour and have the employees believe that they can get away with anything they like?”

“Mrs Thornton, I respect your son …”

“Do you Mr Higgins?” Her eyes flashed towards him and then Margaret, “it wasn’t a long time ago that your strong words had the staff rioting and throwing stones at my son.”

“I lost one of my daughter’s, Mrs Thornton, to these mills; I think I have every right to speak out. My Bessie may have only been just another employee to you but to me,” his voice softened a little when he noticed a touch of remorse in the older woman’s eyes, “Marlborough was one of the only mills that had the wheel, I moved my daughter here because I realised that even though Thornton
could be the overbearing master he still cared about his staff and that it was the best I could do for her. She could still work for the time being and the illness that she had developed whilst at Hampers would be alleviated here a little. I’ve accepted the post of overseer here because I trust and respect both Thornton and Miss Hale to make sure that this time around the mill will be run with the very best of intentions towards everyone, including you.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr Higgins.”

“Think nothing of it. It would’ve only happened sooner had Thornton not allowed her to come and work here in the first place and for that I thank you both.”

“And now I understand that you have other children in your care apart from your one remaining daughter?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Boucher’s six children, the eldest not yet old enough to work.”

“And he won’t yet, if I have my way,” John pointed out. He watched his mother’s eyebrows arch. “Mother, he’s a bright child, he deserves an education.”

“And who will provide him with this education?” Hannah enquired.

Margaret stepped forward, “I will. I have every intention of turning one of the outhouses into a school room, another into a nursery, for a small sum each week we can provide these services to the workers families and in return they will be much more likely to work hard for us.”

“Miss Hale, with respect, you’re living in a dream.”

“Mother?” John warned.

“We’re in business to make a profit, John. How do you expect the mill to do that if half of the money earned is being spent on teachers and nurse maids? Your money won’t last long, Miss Hale, if you keep spending it as you intend to.”

“The dining room was a great success, mother. These other ideas will be too, as well as sick pay.”
“Sick pay? Is that another of Miss Hale’s ideas?”

“No, mother, its mine!” John’s voice reverberated around the quietened loom room.

A silenced Hannah Thornton mulled over what she had just heard, her eyes searching those of the three people she was surrounded with. She shook her head, “this is worse than mere speculation, John. This is financial suicide.”

“Then let it be!” Margaret cried out, “it is, after all, my money.”

“Don’t we know it? And what, Miss Hale, would you and my son live on if you lost every last penny of what was given to you?”

Margaret closed her eyes briefly, her lashes brimming with unshed tears. “Love, Mrs Thornton. I could live in a hovel as long as John was with me, loving me.” She felt him move closer to her, his hands gently caressing her arms and shoulders. One of her hands instinctively covered one of his. “My place is with John, wherever life takes us. The money and land that Mr Bell gave to me was substantial. Part of this fortune will be set aside so that John and I, and our family, can live well; and our family, Mrs Thornton, will always include you. As long as there is breath in my body I will endeavour to make sure that we are never in need of anything, that there is always food on our table and clothes upon our backs.”

“And the rest of your money?” Hannah wasn’t going to let this rest just yet.

“Mother, its Margaret’s money to do with as she sees fit.”

Margaret turned to John, reaching up and gently touching his lips with her fingers, “its alright, John.” She turned back around, “my total wealth stands at just over £30,000. A little more from the estate will be due to me once Mr Bell … well, when he is gone, but all in all the sum as it now stands is more than enough to keep us all in a life that befits us. However, if I had decided not to invest any money into the mill then I would have a building here with a rapidly decreasing value as it was not being employed to manufacture as originally intended.

“It is in the best interests of not only the family but also the local economy that this mill starts up again, employing local people as well as giving their families the opportunity to make their own lives better. Surely you can see that by educating our current staff and future employees, they will
be able to help us grow into one of the biggest and best mills in the world. We will be able to invest into the future of Marlborough Mill by increasing our current markets; by developing further what we already have here and from embracing new technologies as they become available to us. We can’t do that if we sit on our laurels and expect it to just happen, we can only move forward by learning from mistakes made in the past and one of the best ways to do that is by giving the workers something to work for. If they are receiving benefits by being employed by us, don’t you think they’ll be more than willing to help us in our endeavours?” Margaret looked from face to face, all as astonished as she was from the speech she had just made. Perhaps she did have a head for business after all.

It was Nicholas that broke the silence, “you’re really going to have your work cut out with this one, Thornton,” he teased whilst smiling at Margaret.

“I know,” John’s arms finding their way around her waist and staying there even with the disapproving looks from his mother, “even I wasn’t aware how intelligent and thoughtful my little angel was.” Margaret blushed.

Mrs Thornton smiled, for all the people she had known in her long life no one had stood up to her as Miss Hale had done and with such passion too. She stood, her hands clasped together in front of her, “now I understand you. Now I understand what it was for you to stand in front of John and take that blow to the head.”

Nicholas looked over to Margaret, “that were you?”

“Yes, Nicholas. Boucher hit me with a stone as I tried my best to shield John from the rioters. I had been the one to put him in the way of danger, I had to be his saviour too.”

“And what a saviour you turned out to be, my Margaret.” John said, she felt him smile against her head as his words were whispered into her hair.

“Thank you, Miss Hale. Margaret.” Hannah Thornton turned on her heel and strode towards the entrance of the room.

“Mrs Thornton?” Margaret called after her, prising herself from John’s grip and following the older woman, “mother?” Her affectionate tone nearly lost within the echo of Hannah Thornton’s retreating steps, but she stopped upon hearing it and turned around to meet Margaret’s gaze.

They shared a smile, “you’ll do.” Hannah said, nodding her head. “I couldn’t have parted with
him to anyone less worthy. Keep her safe, John, she’ll look after you.” And then she was gone.

Margaret turned back to the two men, “does that mean …” unable to finish her sentence she looked at John for an answer.

“She likes you, yes.” John nodded. “She’s finally accepted you as part of this family.”

.oOo.

It was later that afternoon, as Margaret sat in the walled garden reading her book, that the beginnings of a friendship between daughter and mother in law to be, were cemented. Looking up from the pages, Margaret noticed that Mrs Thornton was making her way towards her with a piece of fine ivory cotton in one hand. “Good afternoon, Mrs Thornton,” Margaret politely said.

“Back to formalities are we?” A smile touched her lips. “I suppose I should expect that after the way I’ve treated you, Margaret. For which I must apologise.”

Margaret’s confused expression echoed her thoughts, “apology accepted.”

“I rather think it isn’t, not yet anyway. I’ve been cruel and callous to you, unaffectionate. I can see why John loves you so dearly. I hope that you will love me too, in time.”

“Mrs Thornton …”

“Margaret, please, mother or Hannah will do, whichever you feel more comfortable with.”

“Hannah, all I’ve ever wanted to do is make you understand how much I love John.”

“I know. A lot can be said for a marriage based on such a mutual feeling of adoration. Unlike that of my daughter.”

“You don’t suspect Fanny marrying Wilson was for love?”
“No, I do not, Margaret. Fanny is very materialistic. Heaven knows I tried to raise my children without that streak, I managed it with the one but sadly not the other. Even John’s good sense never rubbed off on her.”

“Be rest assured that I will do my best with your grandchildren.”

“You are sensible, Margaret so I do not doubt it; you have experienced a life without material wealth and know what it is to be brought up by parents that evidently not only loved one another but bestowed that love onto you. As they did on your brother also.”

“Yes, we were very lucky. My mother and father married for love, as did my brother and now so will I, I knew that I would never be truly happy unless I was able to love and respect my partner and have it so ardently returned.”

“John is lucky to have found you, I am glad of it.”

“Even if our path was a little rocky?”

“Yes. I was rash with my initial judgement of you and never changed it. I only wish I had seen the change in you that John had seen, rather than fixing my ideas of your character and imagining that you were still the young, insolent woman that I had encountered on our first meeting. You only knew what it was to live in the south, I should’ve helped you understand what it was to be in Milton society instead of censuring you. And when your mother asked me to be a friend to you, I should’ve agreed to it. Maybe then I would have understood the woman that my son fell in love with sooner.”

“Hannah.” Margaret stopped taking Hannah’s hands into her own, “mother, if there is anyone at fault then it is me. I was quick to judge and slow to learn, the south was my paradise, I had been brought to hell. I didn’t know what it was to live in a world of different customs and ideas. As Nicholas rightly informed me, I was the foreigner, and should have taken the time to notice and embrace that, but, at first, it was too much for me. As I learnt Milton ways I realised that, on reflection, John was an excellent master and a kind soul. He has a temper, I know, and one I never wish to personally see, but I now realise why he did what he did to that man the first time I saw him. And I know that John has learnt from me that it wasn’t necessarily the right course of action to take. We’ve both learned to compromise and in so doing learned to love each other.”

Hannah smiled, “yes.”
They sat in companionable silence for a short time taking the tea that Jane had brought out to them. “What do you have there, mother?” Margaret asked, nodding towards the fabric still in Hannah’s hand.

“Oh, I came to ask you how you’d like your initials on your new linen?”

“How did you do them before? I’m not a great needlewoman, so any suggestions you have would be gratefully received.”

“Perhaps, one of these days I can teach you.”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Then it’s set. I’d like to try and intertwine the J & M together, maybe like two dancing ribbons?”

Margaret nodded, “that sounds perfect. I think you should know, I ordered the blue silk.”

“For your wedding dress?” Margaret nodded, “I thought you might.”

“Are you very angry?”

“Margaret, no. It’s your day, and I’m sure you have your reasons for choosing that fabric. I’m glad actually. Glad that you’re not afraid to be your own person with your own ideas. You and John will be very successful together. He needs a strong woman by his side, not some simpering idiot that agrees with everything he says. He needs someone that will challenge him, make him sit up and think, be his equal. And I have no doubt that you are that woman.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why were you so horrid to me the day we went to the dressmakers?”

“As you know, at first I didn’t think you were worthy of him. Then, when you were talking about the blue fabric, I knew that you were. But I couldn’t stop myself, I had to keep up the pretence, had to make sure it just wasn’t one occasion. I’m sorry.”
“It’s alright. At least we can be friends now.”

“Yes, so I hope my next little surprise will be welcome. Come with me.” Hannah stood, holding her hand out for Margaret to take. They threaded their way towards the house, Margaret following Hannah up the stairs into the room that had firmly become Margaret’s own. In the centre of the room was a rosewood chest inlaid with mother of purl butterfly’s and flowers. “Take a look inside.”

Margaret knelt in front of the chest, taking the handle to the lid and opening it up. Just under the lid were three trays, each with an array of items. “My trousseau?” Margaret looked up expectantly.

Hannah nodded, “yes, Margaret. I went back to the dressmakers the following day. I wanted to make sure that you had at least something to start with. Imagine my surprise when, after speaking with Mr Stevens, I found out that John had already secured your trousseau for you. I assisted in the selection, there are a few more things to come but I hope you’ll like what is in there so far.”

“And the chest?”

“It contained my trousseau when I married John’s father.”

Margaret got to her feet and slung her arms around the unsuspecting Hannah. “Thank you, mother. I shall treasure it.”

Hannah hugged back, “you haven’t seen it all.” They let go of one another, “come, take a look with me.” Hannah urged. Together they pulled out the top trays containing stockings, lace collars, gloves and jewellery. Underneath were hidden a couple of richly decorated corsets and under garments, as well as petticoats and a beautiful antique lace veil that had been Hannah’s. “You have your something old now, do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Margaret said, handling the delicate lace carefully. “Thank you.”

“It’s a pleasure.” Hannah remarked. She pulled out some carefully folded tissue paper and laid it on the bed, “this is special, Margaret. This is something that I insisted upon.” She carefully opened up the tissue revealing a hint of lace and ribbon. “I know this may be a little forward thinking, Margaret, but I was sure that you would like it.” Pulling the fabric away from the tissue she moved over towards the full length mirror inviting Margaret to stand in front of it. Hannah held the
garment up in front of Margaret. “Not a traditional night dress but something for the first night of your marriage.”

Margaret’s eyes twinkled with the thoughts running through her head at that precise moment. Knowing that John would love seeing the wide neckline that would allow him a generous sight of her shoulders and décolletage, not to mention her arms and a sizeable proportion of her lower legs. Definitely not a traditional night dress but fitting for a new bride none-the-less. “Thank you.”

Hannah’s smile was genuine, “I’ve also asked if I can stay with Fanny for a few weeks after your wedding. Don’t want to be in the way, so to speak.”

“You wouldn’t be,” Margaret protested.

“I would be. My minds made up, let me do this for both of you.” Hannah went to leave Margaret with her new gifts. “Perhaps you’d like to try it on?” She said before leaving Margaret to her solitude.

It was too much of an invitation to ignore. As quickly as she were able, Margaret managed to take off her dress and petticoats before putting the night dress on. But to her slight disappointment she was unable to imagine what it would look like for her new husband with the layers of underwear her body was still robed within. Undoing the laces of her corset she quickly removed everything else that she was wearing, catching a glimpse of her now naked body in the mirror.

Having never really looked at herself before she was at a loss to see what it was John would find so alluring about her. Her hands travelled slowly over her breasts, an unfamiliar arousal peaking her nipples as a finger tentatively ran over each centre. She froze momentarily, watching the nub pucker and harden before her very eyes, her orbs wide with growing anticipation. Biting her lip, she looked at herself once more in the mirror, her hands now searching over her waist, hips and fleshy bottom. She allowed one hand to trace over the small lump of her belly whilst the other felt over her mound and down towards her centre. She could feel a pulse in her groin, one finger exploring through the folds, feeling the silky wetness within. She moaned involuntarily, was this how good it would feel with John?

A short rap on the door brought her back to her senses. “Margaret?” John asked from the other side of the closed door.

“Just a minute,” she shouted back, managing to grab at the nightdress and pull it over her naked frame. “You may come in, John.”
John opened the door, a look of amazement on his face as he noticed what Margaret was wearing, closing the door behind him quickly for the sake of propriety. He visibly gulped, his wide eyes taking in every last detail as she stood before the window, her body a silhouette through the thin cotton. “Is that new?”

She nodded, “your mother had it made for me, for our wedding night, I thought I’d try it on.”

“You look beautiful,” he breathed, closing his eyes to the vision momentarily, “I only wish I hadn’t seen you wearing it now.”

“Has it spoilt the surprise?”

“Yes,” he said without thinking, then shook his head, “no, Margaret. It’s just I don’t know how I’m going to be able to keep my hands off you for another few weeks.” She looked at him expectantly. “I can see that you’ve nothing on under that shift. I’m trying to be a gentleman but all I want to do is make you mine.”

“In a couple of weeks ...”

He moved towards her, his hands finding their way to her bare shoulders, “in a couple of weeks, Margaret. Yes.” He moved her to stand in front of him, both now looking into the mirror, his hands tracing up her arms and over her chest, his fingers finding their way just beneath the cotton neckline to skim over the tops of her breasts. She shuddered slightly, closing her eyes to the new sensations she was feeling within her and leaning back against him for support. Feeling his mouth on her neck and shoulder gently kissing her delicate skin, she allowed her head to fall back giving him more access. He stopped suddenly, their desire glazed eyes meeting in the glass pane before them. “We shouldn’t be doing this yet.”

“Why not?” Margaret asked innocently.

“Margaret, this is for a man and his wife. I will not bring shame on you by deflowering you before you take my name.”

She moved away from him. “I see.” Rejected and hurt she began to pick up her earlier discarded clothing. “I suppose I’d best get dressed for dinner.”
John moved towards the door. “I’ll call for Jane to help you with your corset.”

“No, John, please.” She called from behind the screen. “I’d prefer it if you would do it.”

“I can’t, my love. It wouldn’t be right.”

She stepped from behind the screen, now clothed in her undergarments, her face awash with tears, “and will you continue to say it won’t be right after we’re married?”

“Oh, Margaret.” He went to her, his hands wiping away at her tear soaked cheeks. “You really have no idea what you do to me.”

“Then tell me what it is that I do to you. I want to know.” She asked, indicating for him to help pull the ties, he did as he was bid. “You keep saying that you don’t want to frighten me, but all you keep doing is stop any intimacy we share and leave me disappointed because I don’t understand what I’m feeling. You won’t even kiss me properly.”

He watched as she secured her petticoats in place, “we shouldn’t be talking like this.”

She selected a dress for dinner, asking him to help her with the buttons. “As I was a minister’s daughter I would agree with you, but as a woman in love I don’t.”

“Do you really understand what it is for two people to show how much they love one another?”

“Of course, they have a child together.”

“No, Margaret, any man and woman that lie together can have a child. Do you know how that child is created?”

“Edith told me that the man become’s excited.”

John smiled, “become’s excited. Did she say how?”
“Well, she said he grows.”

“Where?”

Margaret looked down to her clasped hands. “I don’t know where.” She whispered.

He brought her towards him, his hand at her chin bringing her to face him. “Every time I kiss you, I want more of you. Every time, I hold you or touch your soft skin, I get excited. I grow.” He took hold of one of her hands and placed it over his groin. “Can you feel how excited I am?”

Margaret coloured but continued to allow her hand to move over the hard, long, thick object beneath the dark fabric of his trousers. “This is how a man grows?”

John nodded, “please, little one, stop what you’re doing.” She did, withdrawing her hand away from him allowing him the time and space he needed to calm himself. “You are waking up to new sensations, the dream you told me about the other night made me realise that. But it will be so much better when it’s real for us. Do you know anything of how we become one?” She shook her head. “When we are in the throes of passion, when I make you mine, we have to join together, I fit inside you. Do you understand?”

“I’m not sure,” she said.

John rested his hand over her centre, even through the layers of clothing she responded to him. “When the time is right, I will fit inside of you here.”

“Your excitement will fit inside of me?”

“Yes, but only when the time is right.” His hand shifted back to her face, “I want to love you and create our children with you, Margaret, but only when the time is right.”

“Thank you, John, for helping me to understand a little more.” She reached up to caress a cheek before allowing her lips to find his. “And just to let you know, I’m not frightened, I never will be of you. We’ll fit together perfectly.”
Chapter 10

Chapter 9 – Margaret’s resolve

Determined to put the new sensations and feelings for John aside until they were united in matrimony, Margaret set to work in the factory. A mind employed on other things was a mind less open to temptation and she really needed to keep her mind on other things. Rightly or wrongly, John’s decision to keep his wife to be virginal until they were wed was highly creditable and gentlemanly but Margaret couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed by it. Naive to the ways of copulation she may have been, but naive to the ways of the world she wasn’t. She knew that there were many girls who hadn’t waited until their wedding night to be deflowered but if that was what John wished for then who was she to go against those wishes.

Having risen early she had walked to the Higgins’, taking her breakfast with them and walking back to the factory with Nicholas’ extended family in tow. Many hands made light work and soon they were all employed in the task of cleaning up the outhouses and whitewashing walls. A stone mason had been employed to open up a few windows; the hearth in the cookhouse had been extended; gas lighting had been installed and once the decoration was in order the school room, nursery and wash rooms, along with the new dining hall, were kitted out with the necessary equipment.

As work in the outhouses progressed, both John and Higgins began setting on the petitioned staff that had left their signatures should Marlborough Mills be started up again. Margaret, having consulted with Mrs Thornton beforehand, spoke with Dr Donaldson. A free clinic was to be set up in the nursery once a week for workers and their immediate families. The doctor also made suggestions for a school mistress and nursery maid; both successfully interviewed by Margaret and Mrs Thornton and began work as soon as could be arranged. By the time the day for the wedding arrived the mill was back to full working capacity and most of the original orders had been supplied in kind, if the mill was to survive and continue to flourish then a small gesture on John’s and Margaret’s part would only serve to help that goal. Repeat orders followed and new business won.

Monday evening finally arrived, dinner was called and Margaret left her room to join Mrs Thornton in the dining room. As she started her meal, Margaret looked to the empty chair at the head of the table, everything had been so busy recently that she had hardly spent any time in John’s company and she missed him deeply. In a few days they would be joined together as husband and wife but nothing could dampen the fear that this was how she would spend the rest of her days, eagerly waiting the return of her love so that they could spend a few minutes with one another before he felt compelled to return to work.

“There were countless evenings when I would find John in his office, sleeping atop an open
journal,” Mrs Thornton remarked.

“I’m sorry, Hannah,” Margaret looked across to the matriarch, “did you say something?”

“My son is a worker, Margaret, always has been. But if you want my advice, you’ll nip it in the bud now, before Wednesday anyhow.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“For whatever reason, John has always arrived at work before the first worker and stayed on long after the last has left for the evening. I hope that you can persuade him to do otherwise, after all there isn’t much point my and Mr Higgins’ looking after the place if John can’t trust us to do it when the two of you are on honeymoon.” Mrs Thornton smiled in encouragement, “why don’t you take some supper across to the office and make sure he understands that you won’t tolerate his absence. The last thing I would want for my children would be for them to be without their father whilst they were so young.”

Hannah was certainly a worthy ally, “you don’t mind?”

“Sometimes your own company is most pleasant. And I have plenty to be getting on with before Wednesday.”

Margaret moved around the table and planted a kiss on Hannah’s cheek, “thank you,” she said before leaving the room and finding her way to the kitchen. Once there she plated up some cold meat, bread and butter, a piece of pork pie she found in the larder and a couple of apples. Throwing a shawl around her shoulders, she picked up the plate and made her way out of the house and into the factory to the offices. The site was unusually still, considering the activity that had been ensuing constantly over weeks past; save for a couple of men, including Nicholas, who were inspecting some of the machines at the far end of the weaving room as she passed them on her way.

Through the narrow corridor and turning the corner, she stopped short as her eyes fell on Hannah’s afore mentioned scene. John was lying over a thick open book of figures, his quill still balanced between the fingers of his right hand, looking totally at peace with the world. As exhausted as she had become she had never realised that John must have been feeling the same. Apart from his lack of appearance each dinnertime she had assumed that he had at least eaten before he had come home to bed. Her eyes skimmed over his face, the black circles and bags evident.
She set down the plate, deciding that she would drop it should he make a sudden move whilst in slumber but not calculating that it would be Nicholas who would make her jump, his hand clamping over her shoulder as she continued to watch her husband to be. “Nicholas, what are you doing?”

“I’m sorry Margaret,” he whispered, “I saw you come back here and wondered if we could have a chat about the master.”

She nodded her agreement stepping with him back out into the carding room. “What is it?”

“I’m worried about him.” She would’ve told him the same but nodded for him to continue, “he’s working far too hard. I know that he doesn’t want to happen again what happened before but he doesn’t have to spend all his waking hours here.”

“Yes, both Mrs Thornton and I agree with you on that point. In fact, I was here to persuade him to come home myself.”

“Oh that’s good news, I couldn’t see you two having much of a life outside of this place if he carried on the way he’s going.”

The door to the carding room slammed shut, “I’ll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself, Higgins.”

Higgins dropped his head, his hands fumbling at his hat as he scooped it off his head, “I’m sorry, master, for speaking out of turn.”

“I’m not,” Margaret spoke up, her chin jutting forward stubbornly as she aired her opinion, “I’ll not apologise for thinking exactly what Nicholas has said. How do you think I feel? A bride to be waiting expectantly for her love to come home and join his family for dinner, only he never does come home.”

“I’m working Margaret, how do you expect me to make this a success for us both if I don’t put the hours in?”

“Because I expect you to delegate.”
“Delegate? To who?”

“To me, master. Or to Mr Simpson if it’s an office matter, that is.” Higgins gestured.

“Simpson doesn’t know figures.”

“Beg pardon, master, but Mrs Thornton does or perhaps you could look into hiring Mr Cochran that was at Hampers.”

“Higgins, you have a position of trust here because you are a good mill man, but do not presume to tell me my place.” John stormed back through the carding room door, slamming it behind him.

“I never …”

“I know, Nicholas,” Margaret stilled him with a hand on his wrist; “I believe he thinks this mill can’t run without him for the slightest moment. However, I intend to make sure that doesn’t continue. Do you think you could contact Mr Cochran for me tomorrow, perhaps speak with Mrs Thornton about arranging a time when she can interview him for the bookkeeper’s role. In the meantime, I’ll see if I can persuade him to stop working so hard.”

“He needs to eat, Margaret, he hasn’t joined us in the cookhouse for days.”

She nodded, suspecting as much. Walking back through to the offices she found John pouring over the journal he had been using for a pillow before, the plate of food untouched. “How are you John?” she asked seriously, taking a seat opposite him in front of his desk.

“I’m fine; I just wish to be left alone so that I can get everything done before Wednesday.”

“I see.”

He looked up from his work meeting her sad eyes, “you see?”
“Yes, this is the way it is to be. As soon as we are married and have a few days honeymoon, in that house, on our own, you’ll be back at work.”

“Well, I was thinking more than just a few days at home . . .”

“And then what do you expect? That I’ll be happy eating my meals alone whilst you’re in here every hour that God sends you so that we can reap the rewards? That I’ll go to bed alone in the hope that at some point during the night you’ll eventually pull yourself away from your desk and join me? And that on those occasions when you’re not so physically exhausted and malnourished that you just expect me to submit to your needs and desires that I’ll be happy to let you do what you must before crying myself to sleep?”

“Margaret? No ... I . . .”

“When I agreed to be your wife,” she sniffed back unshed tears, “it was because I believed I would be your equal in every way but I am not prepared to live in a soulless marriage. If I marry you on Wednesday then it will be because I know that you will only spend sufficient hours here as are required and no more. I will expect my husband to eat his meals with me, spend his days teaching me how the mill works so that I may take on some of the responsibility of its running and spend his evenings with me, chatting with me, reading novels with me before taking me to our room and making love to me.”

His chair scraped back across the wooden floorboards as he made his way to her. He cradled her in his arms and kissed her fervently. “Oh Margaret, don’t you see, I’m doing these things now to make sure that I can accommodate your needs once we’re married. I don’t want to be sat here night after night when the most enticing woman I’ve ever met will be lying in my bed waiting for me and me not being able to fulfil her every desire.”

“So why have you been doing it now?”

“I’ve been trying to forecast a budget for our next six and twelve months. With the orders we already have and the new business that is coming through we’re going to have to expand the mill. I’ve been trying to work out how we can best go about that before I had a talk with you, Higgins and mother tomorrow. Then if things need to be started whilst you and I are away then Higgins and mother know what to do.”

“Is that the only reason?” Margaret asked expectantly.
“Well, no,” he softened, “in truth, I’ve been avoiding you as well.”

“Why?”

“I’d have thought the topic of our last few conversations would’ve given you a fairly good idea. I’ve been finding it increasingly difficult to sleep with the anticipation of making you mine that I’ve needed something to occupy myself. Spending too much time in your company has not been exactly good for me lately.”

“Oh. I suppose this means that you will allow Nicholas or Mr Simpson to take on much of the responsibility once Wednesday is passed.”

“Yes, as well as mother, she will need something to do until her first grandchild arrives.” He held her closer to him; she could feel his broadening smile close to her ear. “I’ve also already had conversations with Mr Cochran about joining the mill too.”

“You better speak with Nicholas, I’ve told him to arrange a meeting between Mr Cochran and your mother whilst we are otherwise engaged.”

He nodded. “I’ll do that before we leave.”

“Leave?” Her eyes widened with the prospect of what was to come.

“You don’t think that I’d be happy with just a few days with you, do you?” Her brows furrowed, his thumb grazed her chin. “Margaret, we are going away. Certainly there will be a few occasions of business on our trip but, for the most part, you and I will be spending just over a month travelling in Europe.”

“Really?”

He nodded, “I wanted it to be a surprise for you, and I’ve had the dressmakers make you a few suitable gowns for your trousseau as well.”

She flung her arms around his neck, “it is a surprise, a wonderful surprise. Thank you.” She kissed him, their heady embrace intoxicating. “Is it rude to ask where we are going?”
He flashed a brilliant smile, “yes it is. You shall have to wait and see.”

“Alright, but only on the condition that we eat something together this evening and you have a meal with Nicholas tomorrow.”

He nodded his agreement. “What about dinner tomorrow night?”

“Oh, I’ll be far too busy preparing for Wednesday. Besides I’m staying at Fanny’s tomorrow evening so that we don’t entice bad luck. I’ll be able to walk to the church from there so I hope it doesn’t rain.” It was now John’s turn to look confused. Margaret smiled, “a silly romantic notion I had as a girl in Helstone. I do want to walk to the church though.”

“If that is what you want, then who am I to deny you? I’ll gladly walk back here with you afterwards, proudly showing my new wife off to the world.”

“That would be delightful,” she reached up and kissed the tip of his nose before taking up a piece of bread and offering it to him.

He bit into it gladly, chewing on the morsel with great delight.”Thank you for thinking of me.”

“My pleasure, but if the truth were known I only came across to make sure that you were keeping up your strength and stamina for Wednesday evening.”

“You really don’t have to worry on that score, little one. I intend for my new wife and I to take to our bed early, say about three in the afternoon.”

“It doesn’t leave us much time with our guests.”

“Hang the guests; there are much more important things that you and I should be sharing. It’s a good job the reception is at Fanny’s, it means you and I can slip out of the back door whilst no one is watching us.”
Margaret swatted his arm, “you are very wicked, John Thornton. We will have to stay for a little while. However, I’m sure that they’ll understand our quick departure if we have an early start on Thursday morning.”

“Aye, we do, my angel. A very early start.”

“Then I’m sure we will be allowed to leave as soon as is convenient.”

“I’m counting on it. I can’t wait for Wednesday.”

“Neither can I,” Margaret said a little mournfully, “I just wish that mother and father could have been here to share our joy.”

John folded her into his arms, “they’ll be watching.”

“Do you think so?”

“Of course, along with my father too, they’ll all be there together.” He hesitated before asking his next question, his eyes searching her face, “Margaret, can I ask you something?”

“Yes, John, anything.”

“Are you worried about Wednesday evening?”

“I must confess that I am, a little.”

“Then let me put your mind at rest. I will go as slowly or as quickly as you want me to. Should we not be successful then we’ll try again another time. I just hope that I won’t frighten you with my northern ways.”

“John, I am not afraid. I’m just a little apprehensive about myself. I hope that I am good enough for you.”
“You will be perfect, my angel. You could not be otherwise. You came into my life when I needed you the most and I will always thank you for that.”

“John, it is I that should thank you, had you not helped me to see the error of my ways, love me despite them even, I would’ve been condemned to live out my life as an old maid, I’m sure. Henry would’ve asked me to become his again, but I would have rejected him as brutally as I had the first time. I have been fortunate to be brought up with parents whose love for one another was always evident and never expected anything less for myself.”

His strong hands cupped her face, “and you never shall, there may be times when the road is rough but I will always love you, Margaret. Even after I have drawn the last breath from my body my love for you will never diminish. We have been very fortunate, despite everything we have found each other. You are my mate, my equal and you shall never doubt that. Ever.”

She kissed at the flesh of his hand. “Till Wednesday then.” She beamed.

Nodding his head, he leant in for the sweetest of kisses before leaning his forehead against hers, “till Wednesday, my angel.”

.oOo.

A sharp knock at her door roused Margaret from the day dream she had been imagining. “Margaret, are you awake? Margaret? Miss Hale?”

“I’m awake Fanny,” she called, getting up from the bed and making for the door. In truth, she had been awake for hours, the impending nuptials that she and John were to experience were drawing ever nearer and although she knew she would enjoy her day she was still a little unsure of what to expect come the evening. Readying herself and plastering a smile across her face she opened the door to her sister in law.

Fanny stopped short before her, a hand running quickly over her cheek, “you look a little fatigued and pale, Margaret. Did you not sleep very well? This is one of the best beds in the house.”

“It wasn’t the bed,” she replied quickly, “that was extremely comfortable.”
“The room then? The decor?”

Margaret’s hand found Fanny’s “everything is beautiful in your home, Fanny. I’ve been made to feel very welcome by you and your husband and could not wish for a better family to marry into.”

“Hmm, thank you.” Fanny nodded, “I shall have to get Eliza to help with your make up, she is a wonder with a brush. We need to flush out those dark eyes so that you will look beautiful for John.”

Ushering Margaret to the dressing table, Fanny started to unplait Margaret’s hair. “You know, I didn’t sleep much the night before my wedding either.” She picked up the brush, pulling it gently through the tangles, “first night nerves they call it.”

Margaret moved to face Fanny, “what do you mean?”

“Well, the first night of your married lives together, the expectations of what your husband will desire from you. In my case, I had nothing to worry about. Watson was so drunk I was allowed a reprieve.”

“A reprieve?”

“Yes, mother had warned me about what a man would expect on his wedding night, satisfying his carnal desires, what a man really wants from his wife.”

“When did you ...? When did it happen?”

“About two weeks later. He crept into my room late at night, did what he needed to and then left again.” Fanny looked away, “I didn’t think it would be quite so cold.”

“Oh, Fanny.” Margaret hugged her, “I’m sure it wasn’t meant to be so ...” But she couldn’t help thinking that it probably was. Both Fanny and Edith had shared similar experiences, was she to experience the same fate.

Fanny fought back tears before quickly smiling, “well, I have him to thank for this at least,” she motioned towards her stomach, rubbing the area where her growing child presently resided. “And
I’m sure that it won’t be like that for you and John. He really loves you Margaret, I only have to watch how he looks at you and wish I was half as lucky.” A gentle tap at the door stopped their conversation dead. “That will be Mary for you Margaret. I’ll go and get Eliza for you too and then the three of us can help you dress.”

The next few hours seemed like a dream, not only was she helped to bathe and dress, have her hair pinned up with lily of the valley entwined through her tresses and have her face made up as delicately as any English rose but she couldn’t help thinking that everything was done with John in mind. The sweet smelling rose and lavender perfume that was dabbed in places Margaret never expected, the garter’s expertly laced in order to hold up the stockings she wore, the way the neckline of her dress sat across her shoulders exposing as much of her décolletage as the cut would allow.

When she was finally encouraged to look into the mirror, she couldn’t quite believe what they had all done. Her hair was styled a little looser than her normal style and she loved it, her skin flushed at the thought of John’s hands unpinning it, the smell of lily’s intoxicating them as he ran his fingers through it before tracing along the neckline of her dress. “Am I not exposing a little too much of myself, here?” Her fingers attempted to pull the neckline further up her body.

Fanny pulled Margaret’s hands away from the dress. “Stop fidgeting, Margaret. You are exactly as you are meant to be; besides you have one last thing to put on.”

“The veil, of course.”

“Oh, yes, the veil. But besides that. Watson has just passed me this box; it is a gift from John for you.” Margaret stared at the velveteen cover, a hand absently stroking the fabric. “Are you going to open it?” Fanny squealed.

“Of course,” Margaret fumbled with the catch, finally opening the case. She closed her eyes briefly, not quite believing what she had seen before opening them again and taking in the beauty of the necklace and earrings that resided within the box. The bright blue sapphires and sparkling diamonds winked at her as she moved the box in the light.

“Would you like me to help you?” Fanny asked before Margaret handed over the case. She watched intently in the mirror as Fanny closed the clasp at her neck and settled the necklace over Margaret’s collar bone. Mary slipped the earrings through her ears, the gentle movement of her breathing allowed the dropped gems to twinkle suggestively. “The jewels are very fitting, almost like ...”

Margaret nodded her head, “almost like John knew the exact shade of my dress.” She smiled to
herself, yes, not only had he made sure that her trousseau would indeed be ready for her but he had obviously proffered a sample of the fabric for his trouble. “Will I do?” she asked the room.

“You’ll do very well, Margaret,” Mary answered.

“John will be in awe,” Fanny insisted. “How are you feeling now?”

“Loved,” Margaret simply stated, the smile never leaving her face. She checked the clock; it was nearly time to leave. “Has cousin Edith arrived?”

“No, maybe she’s at the church already.”

Margaret bit back the urge to cry, if Edith wanted no part of this wedding because of Henry’s affront then that was her business. She looked out of the window, “it looks beautiful out, I’m glad I decided to walk. Fanny would you be my bridesmaid if Edith isn’t there?”

“Of course, I would love to. Would you like some company on your walk?”

“Thank you, but no. I’ve arranged to meet Nicholas so he’ll escort me to the church.”

“Then I’ll wish you good luck now, I doubt I’ll have much time later on what with your leaving early.”

Margaret fought the urge to laugh, so John had already made the arrangements and now she was going to have to lie as well. “Yes, we have a long way to go on our first leg and feel it would be more beneficial leaving on the overnight train.”

“So you’ll have a reprieve tonight too,” Fanny suggested.

Nodding her head, Margaret smiled, “it does seem that way, Fanny.” She kissed her sister, hugged Mary and thanked Eliza. Gazing at herself in the mirror one last time she concluded that she was finally ready to become Mrs John Thornton come what may. For she knew that John Thornton loved her and would keep her safe no matter what, and in return he deserved her soul and her body; she had every intention of giving him both as soon as could be.
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