

# **North & South: Unfailing Love by Patricia E. Mones**

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*By Patricia E. Mones*

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*Initial Story Idea: dcorrell, 'Tina'*

*This story began as a lark in response to a challenge by a friend, Tina, who had an idea for a continuing story for North & South, by Elizabeth Gaskell and 'North & South', the BBC miniseries production. This being my first attempt at writing, I tentatively took her initial outline ( Part I ) and wove my own tale around it, only to discover that I love to write. At this time and over seventy chapters (and counting) later, I am working on Part IV of the 'Unfailing Love' saga.*

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### ***PART I: A Misunderstanding***

#### ***Chapter 1***

Margaret left the house bright and early, wanting to take advantage of the unusual weather they were enjoying in Milton. The sun shined brightly on her upturned face, giving her pleasure as she felt its rays caressing her skin. *This is a good sign for our gathering this evening! It has been so dreary lately...always raining! Seeing the sun has to lift everyone's spirits, and I'm sure we will have a successful debut as Mr. and Mrs. John Thornton because of it!*

She smiled in anticipation as she skipped down the steps and crossed the mill yard. Passing

under her husband's office window, she looked up expectantly, confident of catching a glimpse of him as she always did when heading into town. It was their affectionate routine that when they were to be parted, even for a short while, she would wave to him and blow him a kiss, which he would promptly return. He had left her in their bed an hour before, kissing her awake, just before he left for work. He knew she had to go to town and would be waiting to see her pass by...only this time, for some reason, he was not there. The window was empty, and Margaret could not repress her disappointment that he had forgotten to watch for her. She considered climbing the steps to playfully scold him but decided that she must give him credit for having a good reason for not waiting for her. The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed: something important had come up, and she told herself that she *would* understand. *I will not be like some other women I know...hovering over their spouses, seeking to be noticed and gratified at every turn...and then becoming annoyed or hurt when things don't go their way. I trust John's judgement completely, and if he's not here to see me off, I know there is a good reason for it.*

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After weeks of planning, several loose ends still needed Margaret's attention, and for several hours, she moved purposefully from shop to shop along New Street in Milton. After completing her last errand, she finally turned toward home, and while on the way, her thoughts dwelt excitedly on the evening's event...the occasion of their first dinner party! For Margaret, this gathering of family and friends would be a milestone, announcing to the world that she was John Thornton's wife and, indeed, the mistress of their home. *I want John to be proud of me...and not give his mother any ammunition to use against me!* she thought with a smile.

Margaret considered her evolving relationship with Hannah Thornton. Although it had improved considerably since her return to Milton, when John had been able to convince his mother of their devotion to one another and the inevitability of their marriage, she often had the impression that Hannah was watching her, evaluating Margaret's fitness to be the wife of her son...*Perhaps a quick visit to the his office will help calm my nerves. It's along the way...and I do love to surprise him!*

Turning the corner and moving happily along a side street that led to the mill, Margaret observed a dishevelled-looking man huddled against the front of a pub frequented by mill workers. As she drew near and had almost passed him, Margaret could not help noticing that the man scrutinised her. Glancing at him nervously, she was surprised that the desperate look in his eyes was familiar to her, and then she remembered where she had seen that expression before...This was Stephens, the same man whom John had beaten after he was caught smoking inside the mill!

Averting her gaze and quickening her pace, she recalled the infamous beginning of her relationship with John Thornton. Her outrage and abhorrence knew no bounds as she witnessed his beating of this man. Ignorantly, she had condemned his violent reaction to a flagrant

disregard for the safety of the mill and everyone who worked there. After John had sternly informed her of another mill that had burned to the ground in twenty minutes, taking the lives of over three hundred people, because of an 'accidental' flame, in contrast with Stephens, who intentionally ignited a match, knowing full well that he put everyone in danger, Margaret had been chastened. She shook her head in amazement at how greatly things had changed between them. *We have travelled so far since that day and understand each other perfectly now. Thank goodness those times are behind us, and we'll never have to live through such unpleasantness again!* she thought, sighing with relief.

As if hearing her thoughts, the man left his place against the wall and lurched toward her, saying loudly, "I know you! You was at Thornton's the day he tossed me out... You're his woman, I hear...though it's hard to imagine anyone fallen' for the likes of him! Because of Thornton, I've been black listed from the mills...Livin' off charity..." His voice broke as he struggled for control. "...I cannot hold up my head in front of my mates! My children...they never have enough..."

Before Margaret could respond to Stephen's indictment of her husband, her indignation changed to compassion when the man began weeping as he clutched the sleeve of her coat. Begging Margaret to represent him to John in seeking his old position at the mill, Stephens refused to allow her to pass until she gave him her word. Her heart was stricken with pity, and she promised to do what she could. Disengaging herself from his grasp, she continued on her way, quickening her steps until she was practically running the remaining distance to Marlborough Mills.

Slowing her pace as she entered the mill yard, Margaret paused to catch her breath, as she leaned against the gate. The dinner party was all but forgotten, as her thoughts dwelt on her encounter with Stephens. Having witnessed firsthand the devastating effect of a strike on the working class in Milton, Margaret's heart went out to him. She had seen the consequences of desperation arising in men unable to provide for their families. Her mind returned to the sight of a crazed Boucher who, driven mad by the pressure of a long strike and tormented by the sight of his starving children, had picked up a rock in an attempt to stone her husband, hitting her instead.

As was her way, Margaret attempted to see both sides of an issue, and so, too, in this case, she could empathise with each party. Being raised by a man whose vocation as a clergyman encompassed meeting the physical, as well as the spiritual needs of his flock, had had its effect on her. Comforting the sick, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked were part of an indelible creed written in Margaret's heart. She was her father's daughter, indeed...and now Stephens and his family needed her help. Consequently, Margaret was compelled by her conscience and by her character to do something about it. John must be informed of the dire need of this man and his young family before another tragedy resulted, as it did for poor Boucher.

As she crossed the mill yard, Margaret smiled and responded to the friendly greetings of the workers. Since returning to Milton, she had experienced secret gratification in her ability to bring about the reopening of the mill. Who would have guessed that she, very recently as 'poor as a church mouse', would be able to rescue Marlborough Mills by an enormous infusion of capital? Chastising herself for this line of thinking, she renewed her determination to not dwell upon or acknowledge her changed financial status. Margaret sternly reminded herself that the inheritance left by Mr. Bell did not really belong to *her*, but had been placed under her stewardship by *Providence* in order to help those in need. Hidden beneath this humble outlook on her good fortune, however, lurked the smug belief that she had been deemed worthy...had been entrusted with the means to bring about the happiness of so many...because she was above being corrupted by wealth.

Mounting the steps that lead to John's office, Margaret smiled as she thought of the happy and loving reception that awaited her. Unannounced visits generated a tender response in her new husband, his face lighting up with pleasure at the sight of her. Having John Thornton as a lover and a husband was very exciting, and her heart fluttered with anticipation as she reached the top step. Peeking into his office unobserved, she was surprised to see him slouched in his chair, his brow furrowed. He stood up suddenly, unaware of her presence, and moved to the window where he gazed blankly into the yard, his thoughts apparently far away.

*...and in a melancholy place, I see. What's wrong? Why does he frown so?...I haven't seen that gloomy expression since I first arrived in Milton!*

Tip-toeing behind him, she whispered, "A penny for your thoughts!" as she encircled his waist with her arms. Startled, John turned around suddenly, an indignant expression on his face. Seeing that it was she, he sighed, as relief traded places with irritation. "Oh, it's only you!" he said mysteriously.

"*Only me?* John Thornton, whom were you expecting?" she chided playfully. She had come to enjoy the light-hearted banter that seemed to flow naturally between them when they were alone...an endearing sign of their growing intimacy and understanding of one another. John smiled at her teasing and said, "Never mind, my love. It's not important...Tell me! What have you been up to today? Tonight is our first dinner party, and I'm sure you must be overwhelmed with last minute things to do!" he said, pulling her into his arms.

Margaret loved this part of their love play! As she looked into his deep blue eyes and encircled his neck with her arms, he kissed her repeatedly, punctuating her words with his lips.

"Well...*kiss!*...you are correct that I *do* have much to prepare for tonight. I confess that I'm a little nervous... *kiss!*...and so-o-o..." she said laughingly, drawing out the last word for emphasis, "...I headed to my biggest supporter in Milton in order to bolster my courage!...*kiss!*...Yet, I find I

have a more urgent mission for coming here to see you than our silly dinner party, John.” At his curious look, she continued, “On the way here, I ran into Stephens... You remember Stephens, don’t you? The man who *introduced* us, so to speak?” she said, raising one brow archly, as her eyes sparkled with mischief.

John’s smile faded, and he lifted his chin slightly as he looked at her intently and waited for her to continue. “Yes, I can see by your *pleased* expression that you recall him perfectly,” Margaret bantered lightly. To her surprise, John’s face contorted into a scowl, and unsure what lay behind that ominous expression, she rushed on, anxious to unveil her proposal as quickly as possible. “I know Stephens has not been a first-rate employee in the past, but I am sure he has learned his lesson. So I would like you to give him back his position... starting at the bottom of course. I realize that there are consequences for breaking the rules at the mill, however, I want...”

“No.” Margaret stopped mid-sentence, startled at this abrupt interruption of her speech, quite sure she had heard him incorrectly, but his face was set like flint, and his voice was deadly serious when he repeated, “No. No position... and no exceptions.” The mood of their loving encounter broken, he released Margaret from his embrace, his arms dropping to his sides.

Hurt and flustered by his change in demeanour toward her, yet determined to be heard, she said “But why, John? I have spoken to him myself just now. I left him weeping, begging for me to intercede in his behalf. I really think we should do this for him.....”

“We? There is no we in this situation, Margaret. *I* am the master of Marlborough Mills... and here, my word is law. Stephens will never work here again,” he stated grimly.

Devastated by the ugly tone their conversation had taken, Margaret fought to keep tears from creeping into her eyes. *What is happening? This cannot be the same man whom I know and love! Who is this self-important stranger that has taken his place? Well! He doesn’t know with whom he is dealing, that’s for certain!*

Her gaze, furious and her tone, cutting, Margaret replied, “Well *Master* Thornton, have you suddenly forgotten to whom you are indebted for the reopening of this mill?” As they left her mouth, she knew she would regret these bitter words, but provoked as she was, there was no stopping them. Like an actor in a play, incapable of deviating from her lines in the script, she continued unmercifully, “If you may recall, *I* was the one who made it possible. It was *my* money that was used to rescue the mill...” *Oh, God, did I really say that? What have I done?* Margaret groaned inwardly, knowing for certain... that her world had just crumbled before her eyes.

A terrible silence followed her remark, and the look of disbelief and betrayal on John’s face was agonizing for Margaret to witness. Finding herself trapped suddenly in a nightmare of her own design, she did not know how to escape from it or how to undo the damage she had done, and her

heart sank as John backed away from her, his eyes never leaving hers, their expression a mixture of pain and despair. "I have wondered if you would remind me of that fact," he said quietly. Reaching for his coat, he turned and walked toward the door and opened it swiftly. Margaret, now in a state of panic, knew that if she allowed him to leave, the words she had spoken would torment them for the rest of their lives. She called to him, her voice quivering, "John, wait! Please don't leave...I have something more to say to you!"

Turning his head and looking back at her, he said distinctly, "I'm afraid it will have to wait. I have *your* mill to run, Madam..." and then he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

## *Chapter 2*

The slamming door caused the windows to shake and Margaret's heart to shudder. Groping for a nearby chair, she sat down, her strength suddenly deserting her. *What have I done?* Tears rolled down her cheeks, as she stared ahead, her eyes wide, but expressionless. Trying unsuccessfully to swallow the painful lump in her throat, she clasped her both hands to her breast. Her heart was breaking. *If I lose John's love...if I have driven him away...* The dam holding back her emotions finally gave way and waves of sobbing broke from her. Adrift in a sea of emotion, Margaret had never felt so alone...so forsaken...not even when her parents had died.

"God help me!" she whispered...and then she heard a still, small voice, deep within her heart. *'Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,'* it said, and then, *'The love of money is the root of evil.'* Margaret's conscience joined in, saying, *How many times have you read those words in Scripture, Margaret?...And yet, you have fallen into a pit of your own making, perhaps destroying forever the precious gift of John's love. How deceived you have been! You have taken pride in being above the corrupting influence of the money, and at the first opportunity, you have thrown your inheritance from Mr. Bell in John's face. You!... Who have not earned a single penny of it! You have used your good fortune to shame him...a man who has worked hard all his life, using his God-given talents to create a very successful enterprise and who deserves to be praised for all he has achieved. Margaret, you are guilty of ugly pride!*

"Lord, help me to make it right with John...I love him so dearly!" she prayed through her tears. Her sobbing eventually gave way to a quiet, tearful remorse. Margaret was chastened to the core, and she knew there was only one course of action for her. Trembling with humiliation and shame, yet at the same time longing to begin healing the breach between her and John by facing him and begging him to forgive her, she tried to prepare herself for what lay ahead. *He may not be able to forgive me...or forget what I said. But what choice do I have? I must try to reach him!*

Margaret wiped her tear-stained face with her sleeve, and then letting herself out of the office, she descended the outer staircase. Keeping her head down in an attempt to hide her pitiful appearance, she walked briskly across the yard and had almost reached the house, when she was pulled out of her sorrowful reverie by the gentle touch of a hand on her shoulder. Bracing herself to meet John's haunted gaze, Margaret turned and found herself looking into the countenance of her friend, Nicholas Higgins. Perceiving something was amiss from her tear streaked face, he became concerned, saying, "Margaret? What's wrong?" As she opened her mouth to speak, the only sound that could be heard was a stifled sob. Without hesitating, Nicholas took her by the hand and led her into the deserted eating hall.

Once inside and away from prying eyes, Nicholas removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and lowering his head to her level, he began dabbing the tears that flowed down her cheeks. Feeling comforted as she looked into the warm gaze of her friend, Margaret realized that she had come to love this good man who more than once had proved his loyalty to John and her...as he did now when she needed a friend so desperately.

"Tell me what's ailing you, lass! You look as if you've lost your best friend!" Upon hearing this painful truth, so innocently spoken, Margaret lowered her head and began sobbing in earnest. Alarmed that he had apparently said something to increase her sorrow, Nicholas pulled her close, cradling the back of her head in his hand as she wept with her cheek against his chest. Comforting Margaret in this way was so reminiscent of his relationship with his daughter, Bessy, and in a significant way, Margaret had come to fill a void in Nicholas' life since her death. Moved to tears, as his recent sorrow over the loss of his daughter resurfaced and blended with his compassion for his young friend, he held her tightly and stroked her back, whispering in her ear, "There, there, Margaret!" He remembered how much he had needed *her* to get through his grief...and now she needed *him*.

After Nicholas had gently shushed her cries and had given her a little encouragement to tell him why she wept so unconsolably, Margaret unburdened her heart to her friend, and she found confessing the tale of her despicable pride and possessiveness over the money she had inherited, as well as her shameful treatment of her husband, strangely cleansing to her soul. However, Nicholas knew her well and could sketch a different likeness than the bleak one she drew of herself, a portrait highlighting her generous and loving heart. After listening patiently to her story, he finally said, "Margaret! Margaret! Don't be so hard on yourself! Yes, you've made an error, but we all make errors! Look at you now, though...you're filled with sorrow for your misdeeds, and that must count for something! Don't go on so!"

Smiling through her tears, Margaret said, "Thank you, Nicholas! You are such a dear to comfort me, but I've done wrong and have injured not only myself, my character...but, more importantly, I have injured John! I have wounded the spirit of a man who has every right to feel proud of all

he has accomplished. I have reduced him to a man who believes his wife thinks she is responsible for all he is...and all he will become! This is so far from the truth...and yet, I have selfishly created this impression, and I don't know how to undo the damage that I have caused!"

Nicholas looked into her eyes that were begging him to rescue her from such self-loathing, and though he longed to do so and hated to add insult to injury, he realized he had to tell her all that he knew...that Stephens had come to the mill that very morning in a drunken state, demanding his old position back, and when turned down, he began to abuse John as being nothing more than a *gigolo*, a fortune-hunter, marrying Margaret for her money. He then proceeded to malign Margaret's good name by implying she was a woman of loose morals, and John had to be restrained by Nicholas himself, when he tried to beat Stephens for the second time.

Margaret sat down on a bench close by and closed her eyes as her heart sank even lower. She was truly humbled. John had been correct in his assessment of Stephens all along, starting with that first beating many months ago. Stephen's unforgivable behaviour this day only confirmed John's opinion of him. He was a man of low character and not to be trusted, much to his shame and the detriment of his family. For Margaret, however, the most painful aspect of all, as it must be for John as well, she felt certain, was Stephen's humiliating reference to him needing her money. It was a low blow delivered by a desperate and despicable person...and one that John might easily have disregarded...if a similar theory had not also been uttered very recently by his own wife!

*It was hard for him to accept the money from me at first, but I had assured him that it was my pleasure to give it...because I loved him so. Oh, Margaret, you hypocrite! You have deluded yourself that you were incapable of becoming corrupted by the money that you inherited!*

Her thoughts drifted to the weeping Stephens who had deceived her as well. *No wonder John was in such an agitated state when I arrived today! As a loving spouse, I should have noticed that something was very wrong. I ought to have taken the time to find out the reason behind his gloomy mood, but did I?...No! I merely reacted to his unusual behaviour! Why didn't I try to discover the source of his troubles? Oh, how much there is to learn about love...and how painful the lessons can be!*

Honestly examining her shortcomings and their consequences, especially the wounds they inflicted on the one she loved more than her own life, was an excruciatingly painful process, but a necessary one. For Margaret, coming to terms with her secret pride was humiliating, but she knew that running from the truth was not the answer. Bowing her head, she offered up a prayer of repentance for not trusting the wonderful man that God had given to her, as well as for becoming possessive and prideful over money.

It was not Margaret's way to linger, suspended in a state of guilt and self-pity, and what she needed to do next became clear to her. Jumping up from her seat with a determined light shining in her eyes, she cried, "I know what I must do to begin healing the injury that I have caused!" She looked around distractedly, her mind racing as she planned her next move. "I must... Nicholas, I'm going back into town, and if anyone asks for me...that is...if John should ask for me..."

Margaret paused, a pained look on her face, as she contemplated the likelihood that John would *not* ask for her. Nicholas guessed what was in her thoughts, and gently lifting her chin with his finger tips, he looked her in the eye and said, "Don't worry, lass. John is no fool." Margaret smiled, grateful for this encouragement, and said, "You know me so well, Nicholas! If he should ask... tell him that I must finish my errands for tonight's dinner."

Hurrying to the door, Margaret stopped suddenly, and turning, she smiled at Nicholas, before walking back to him. Standing on tip-toe, she threw her arms around his neck, hugging him for a few seconds, then she whispered, "Nicholas, Thank you for being my friend...for believing in me even when I don't deserve it!" Releasing him finally, she smiled up into eyes that clearly expressed his great affection for her, and she said, "We are looking forward to you and Mary being at our dinner party tonight. We have invited an interesting group of people, and I'm sure you will both enjoy yourselves."

The hesitancy in Nicholas' eyes was obvious, and seeking to be an encouragement to him as he had been a comfort to her, she grasped his hand and said "You are a man of consequence, Nicholas, an important part of the operation of Marlborough Mills!" Raising one eyebrow archly over her luminous blue eyes, she continued, "You can be very *charming* when you want to be and will look quite dashing in that new suit of yours!...I only wish we knew more single ladies to invite..." At his burst of laughter, she chuckled, obviously pleased at his enjoyment of her playful scheming. Wagging his finger at her, his eyes twinkling with humour, he said, "That'll be enough of that kind of talk, Margaret! I don't think there is any woman of your acquaintance that would be interested in the likes of me."

Margaret shook her head in playful disagreement, as she thought, *If I knew such a woman, and if she knew you as I do, my friend, she couldn't help but love you!* Aloud she said, "You will come, though, won't you, Nicholas? After all that has happened today, I will need you there to give me confidence...as an ally...to help me get through the evening!" Nicholas nodded resignedly, and answered, "Aye, lass. I will be there, if only for your sake."

Releasing his hand, she gave him a bewitching smile, and then she was gone...crossing the shipping yard quickly with an obvious spring in her step. Nicholas watched her go, and the smile on his lips gradually faded as he thought, "John, I *pray* that you're no fool..."

### *Chapter 3*

John left his office in a trance, oblivious to the polite greetings from the mill hands working nearby. *I need to get away from here.* Exiting the mill yard, he walked toward the outskirts of town and ascended the hillside path next to the cemetery. Halfway up the hill, he left the path and headed for a stone wall that ran beneath a copse of trees in the distance, knowing that this quiet spot was not frequented by passersby and would give him the solitude he needed.

Removing his jacket and cravat, John sat down on the stone wall resignedly. An aching sadness in the center of his chest reminded him that his world had just fallen apart, and his disjointed thoughts began to focus on the moment in time when it had happened. "*Well Master Thornton, have you forgotten to whom you are indebted for the reopening of this mill?*" Unable to keep his thoughts from reliving the painful scene between them, he raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. He had feared this day would arrive...and now it was tearing his heart to pieces. *How could she do it? How could she take the precious gift of our love and toss it aside?* "Margaret!" was all he could say, his voice breaking

He had almost convinced himself that theirs was a balanced relationship...a partnership in which both gave equally...she, from her substance...and he, from his knowledge and expertise. "...a *business proposition*," she had said... "blessed and sealed by our love." That was their desire from the beginning...to come together as husband and wife...to build a life...a family, first of all, and to rebuild their enterprise. What had gone wrong?

Why had she come to the office today? *Stephens! This all began with Stephens and Margaret's desire to help him.* Helping the downtrodden was her passion...even if it meant going against his authority. John thought he knew Margaret, and although he had seen some evidence of haughtiness and pride early in their relationship when she rejected his proposal of marriage so cruelly, he had observed no such demeanour in her since then. In fact, she had been the personification of sweetness itself...an answer to all his prayers for a kind and loving mate that would put an end to the loneliness that had been his life until then. This afternoon, however, another side of Margaret's nature revealed itself, one that pushed back when confronted with his authority. *Why didn't she trust me? Why couldn't she accept my decision regarding Stephens?*

He knew there were other women who would have welcomed the opportunity to marry *John Thornton*. Being the son of Hannah Thornton, however, had spoiled his desire for the average woman. His mother was strong and opinionated, and she was a survivor, never allowing defeat or discouragement to sidetrack her from her determined course of raising her family without a

husband. Many thought her cold, incapable of real affection, but he knew better. The love and pride that beamed from Hannah's eyes when talking to or about her son were very evident to those who truly knew her. John was not blind to his mother's defects, yet he still held her in the highest regard. She had been both mother and father to Fanny and him, protecting them from the harsh realities of life by her fierce love and courage alone, and because her love for him was unconditional, he could forgive her anything.

Many of these same attributes had attracted him to Margaret. She had the same strength of character and the same determination to do what she perceived as right in spite of the obstacles in her path. His mind drifted to the scene of her standing with outstretched arms protecting him from the frenzied strikers and then turning to throw her arms wildly around his neck, heedless of all consequences. Smiling in spite of himself, he shook his head at the memory.

Another image of Margaret came to mind. At his mother's dinner party, when he had first realized that he was hopelessly in love with her, how courageously she had stood up to him then, incurring the disapproval of all at the table! She had stood up to him this very afternoon as well, and yet her vehemence concerned more than a disagreement over feeding needy children. On this occasion, her deeply concealed contempt for his acceptance of her help and for his inability to survive economically without her was revealed and brandished as a weapon...a weapon which she used to crush him.

His smile faded, and his thoughts reluctantly returned the present. *How do we go on? How do I forget her scornful expression...or erase the revealing words she spoke? How do I live each day knowing she believes everything I have accomplished is solely because of her...and how do I live each day believing the same...knowing that I could not have started again without her help. How do I look into her eyes...knowing she despises my dependence on her?*

The effect this introspection on John was devastating. The idyllic life he had with Margaret was over, and he realized that he had to make a decision about the future. They could try to go on as before, ignoring what had taken place, pretending that all was well between them for appearance sake...or they could dissolve their bond totally. Either choice brought a chill to his heart! Finally, an irrefutable fact became evident, and his eyes burned with unshed tears when he grasped its finality. *I would rather sever all ties between us, than live a lie...knowing she has become contemptuous of me.*

The slanted shadows and cool breeze remind John of the lateness of the hour, and when he recalled the dinner party planned for that very evening, he felt ill. *The charade begins!* he thought hopelessly. Looking into the future was like trying to see into the darkness where hidden pitfalls surrounded him no matter which direction he turned. He looked down at the city of

Milton, noticing the ominous haze hovering over it, as if forces of darkness and despair were gathering there, ready to destroy something...or someone...and for the first time in a long while, he feared the future.

Although not demonstrative about his faith, John did believe in Providence... certain that that there was one who kept watch over the affairs of men, and in desperation, he prayed for divine intervention in his life. His voice hoarse with emotion, he whispered, "Margaret...I *need* her!...Help me!" That simple statement was all he could manage, but it summed up his need, and he trusted that the cry of his heart would be heard and understood.

As he sat with his head bowed and his eyes closed, he felt an inexplicable lightening of the burden that weighed upon him. The sensation was pleasant, as if a door in his heart had opened slightly, allowing a comforting sense of peace to fill it, and rising immediately, he descended the path and quickened his pace toward home, strangely hopeful.

John re-entered Milton and was walking briskly along the main thoroughfare, when he suddenly came to a halt and stared across the street, where to his chagrin, he watched Margaret as she shook hands with his own lawyer, Mr. Pryor, in the doorway of his office...*My God! Is her contempt for me so complete that she conducts business affairs without my knowledge?*

The anguish that this revelation inflicted was quickly followed by another sensation...the resounding reverberation of a door in his heart slamming shut.

#### ***Chapter 4***

Nicholas left the mill earlier than usual and headed out of Milton proper before turning onto the footpath that led through the cemetery and toward Princeton. Passing beyond the area where the wealthier citizens of Milton lay in eternal rest beneath majestic monuments proclaiming the community's loss and heaven's gain at their passing, Nicholas entered another path...a narrow, less travelled one that led the way to an obscure burial area reserved for Milton's less prosperous citizens. Situated on the back side of a hill, behind a grove of trees that formed a natural boundary between the loftily and humbly departed, as well as between their respective mourners, lay the resting places of Nicholas' family. He frequently stopped for a visit on his way home, as he did this afternoon.

Standing before the simple headstones that read "Rebecca Lucille Higgins, Beloved Wife and Mother" and "Elizabeth Ann Higgins, Beloved Daughter and Sister", Nicholas took off his cap

and closed his eyes. During these visits, his physical proximity to these two loved ones prompted him to unburden his heart as he would have spoken to them in life, telling them about his and Mary's day, and he always left there feeling comforted, as if they sat before him, listening to him understandingly. On this day, his thoughts dwelled on Margaret and John and their troubles, and so he spoke of their love for one another, as well as their pain.

"It broke my heart to see her so forlorn! Margaret learned something about herself today...and she is ashamed at how angry and fierce she can become when she and John don't see eye to eye...But, that is just part of growing up and learning how to get on with someone you must live with day in and day out. The heart of marriage is remembering what it was that drew you together in the first place...the love and esteem...and choosing to demonstrate it even if your spouse doesn't seem 'worthy' at the moment. Like *you* always said, Becky, "You never have to be sorry or ashamed of your behaviour if you treat others the way you want them to treat you."

"Do you remember the tiffs that *we* used to have in the beginning, as we learned how to live with one another? It wasn't easy, and I know that I made you cry more that I care to admit...but through it all, I knew you loved me and would forgive me. I can't remember *you* doing anything that needed *my* forgiveness...Although," he said with a chuckle. "...I'll never forget the time you tossed my clothes out the front door for all our neighbours to gawk at when you were tired of asking me to pick up after myself. I had to walk off the anger I felt after *that* drama, I can tell you!...Until I reached Elm Street, that is, and had a pint with my mates. I started telling them my tale of woe, and then suddenly I couldn't stop laughing as I imagined you hurling my bundle out the door...and I knew that I had a special woman on my hands...one who wouldn't allow herself to be taken for granted...one who would keep me on my toes." Nicholas paused as his emotions welled up within him. "I remember that I couldn't get home fast enough...to tell you that I was sorry and that I loved you...and that I needed you." His mind drifted to their passionate love making that afternoon...the perfect ending to a misunderstanding. Her touch had melted away all his tension and replaced it with...peace.

The comfort that such memories provided was short-lived as his present reality intruded. When was the last time he had felt such tranquillity? It had been years since Becky's death. *Perhaps I never will experience that peace again.* The thought of living out the rest of his days without the joy of caring for someone and knowing that she cared for him equally was depressing. Nicholas sighed and his eyes caressed each headstone as he prepared to depart. Before turning away, however, he lowered his gaze until it rested on a tiny marker that was situated between Rebecca's and Bessy's headstones. "Baby Higgins, Son," it read, and Nicholas swallowed the lump that formed in his throat.

Even though years had passed, it still hurt him that he never had the opportunity to know this infant son who had died at birth before Bessy was born. He wondered how it would be to have

full grown son, since he would have been twenty three this year, had he lived. What kind of man would he have been? Would he have married by now, perhaps making Nicholas a...*grandfather*? He smiled at this idea, as it was a bit shocking to think of himself in that way, but the more he thought of it, the more pleasant the notion became. *My children would have children to love and for me to love as well. What could be better than that?* Nicholas recalled that his mother had been barely eighteen when he was born forty-six years ago and had become a grandmother by the age of forty-two, so having grandchildren of his own began to seem like a natural and happy event. Thinking of his mother and father and how he missed them added to his melancholy and loneliness. Why had they moved so far away? He would welcome their company just now...his mother's company, that is, since his father had died several years ago, but her company would be more than enough for Nicholas. To him, she was the sweetest mother on earth, and he longed to see her again.

Lost in thought, Nicholas put on his cap and began to make his way back to the main path. In truth, his daughter Mary was his sole means of becoming a grandfather. *Mary...*His youngest child had truly blossomed since her sister's passing! Determined to protect his only remaining child from the unhealthy mill conditions that had taken Bessy from him, he had proposed that Mary serve in the new kitchen that he and Thornton had conceptualised and implemented several months before to provide nutritious, inexpensive meals for the workers. To Nicholas' surprise, he discovered that she was not only a good cook but an organised leader of the kitchen staff, a fact that impressed even John Thornton who noticed that her painful shyness began to diminish as she gradually assumed responsibility for overseeing the project and was able to command the respect of the older servers and workers by her diligence and gentle directives. It was not long before the worker's affectionately nick-named the facility 'Mary's place', and to his amusement and pride, it was not uncommon for Nicholas to overhear one worker say to another, "I'll meet you at Mary's" or "I wonder what sweet Mary has cooked for us today?"

After her debut in the public eye, Nicholas noticed other changes in his daughter. Arriving home from the mill late one evening very shortly after the kitchen had opened for business, he was surprised to find her writing at their table by candlelight, struggling to make a list of supplies needed for the next day's meal. Her mother's premature death had prevented Mary from attaining more than the most rudimentary education, and she had needed his help to complete her list. It was then that Nicholas realized, to his shame, how neglected she had been in comparison to her sister Bessy who, being older, had spent more time under the tutelage of their literate mother and had learned to read and write with a fair degree of proficiency. From that point on, he and Mary worked on the basics of reading, writing and ciphering as often as they could, and he was astonished by her aptitude and thirst for learning.

In her quest for reading material, Nicholas sometimes found her painstakingly studying days-old newspapers that he frequently brought home, and her subsequent questions about local and

national events indicated an increasing awareness of the larger world in which she lived. Almost daily, she would discuss the challenges she faced at the mill's kitchen with her father, seeking his opinion on how to handle situations involving the people with whom she worked, and Nicholas was able to give her guidance based on his experience and talent for encouraging and bringing out the best in those around him. Nicholas found Mary's diligent and level-headed ways refreshing, and father and daughter drew closer as they lived each day increasingly dependent on one another for companionship. He dreaded the day when she would meet someone who would want to take her away from him.

As he made his way through the cemetery, Nicholas saw in the distance someone who looked very much like John Thornton sitting on a stone wall. Nicholas decided to head in that direction in order to speak to him, but when he came out from among the trees that temporarily blocked his view, he found that he was too late and that the man was no longer there. *Was that Thornton? Why would he be here?* he asked himself. Then he knew...*He had to walk off his hurt and anger!* Nicholas' heart went out to his friend and he prayed that all would go well for him and Margaret that evening and that they could repair the rift between them.

Tonight would be an interesting, but not pleasurable, event for him, since attending the Thornton's dinner party would be the first time that he and Mary would mingle socially with those above them, and he could not quell the apprehension he felt when he considered who the likely guests would be. Rubbing shoulders with the masters, most of whom hated him, especially his former employer, Hamper, was an honour that he could easily forgo, but for his attachment to Margaret and John. As he made his way home to get ready for her party, the image of Margaret's tearful smile and trembling voice, declaring how she would need him this evening, lingered before him.

He would always be grateful that she had befriended not only Bessy, but also Mary, whose unpretentious and quiet demeanour made her easily overlooked as a potential friend. Their common grief over the loss of Mary's sister had drawn them together. Margaret's friendship had exposed his younger daughter to manners and speech, as well as involved her in situations like this evening's dinner, all with which she had no experience, nor likely ever would, but for Margaret. Yet, it was this friendship and these experiences that were greatly contributing to her transformation. Nicholas could not but wonder how much greatness went undetected in the average man or woman...an ember that remained hidden forever because nobody had extended to them the hand of friendship, guiding them gently out of the darkness and into the open air where with encouragement and opportunity...the fuel and oxygen for greatness...they could suddenly burst into flame, causing their light to shine brightly for the first time.

Margaret's generosity knew no bounds, a case in point being the gift of one of one of her lovely gowns to Mary for the evening's festivities, as well as the loan of jewellery and the use of her

maid, who had done Mary's hair at Margaret's house before she left the mill that afternoon. It bothered Nicholas that he could not provide such finery for his daughter, but he had swallowed his pride and accepted Margaret's generosity out of his love for both her and Mary, not wanting to offend one young lady or sadden the other on this special day for them both. Mary had been thrilled at the opportunity to dress up and attend Margaret's party, and it did Nicholas' heart good to see his shy, hard-working daughter so happy. On that thankful note, he had made up his mind to go with her to the dinner party, determined to demonstrate his appreciation for all Margaret had done for them by remaining quietly in the background and by not providing a reason for her to regret their inclusion.

Upon opening the door to their humble abode and stepping from the brightness outdoors into the darkness within, Nicholas was assailed by little arms and hands that clutched at him excitedly, as a cacophony of high-pitched voices greeted his ears. "Nick-lus! Nick-lus!" they cried together. Looking around him, a broad smile on his face, Nicholas stood with his legs apart and his arms raised slightly, as a boy and girl of three and four years respectively, stood on tiptoe as they raided his coat pockets and a little girl of approximately two years of age clung to his leg, squealing happily at the top of her lungs.

"What are you searching for Gracie...Teddy? You know I never have anything for you, you little imps!" Nicholas said fondly, barely able to repress the laughter that welled up inside him. "And what are you up to, my little Beth? Are you looking for something, too?" He reached down and picked up the child from his leg and held her high in the air over his head, much to her delight. "Sweets! Me wants sweets!" the little one cried with one finger in her mouth, amidst her giggles, as Nicholas tossed her lightly up in the air, before catching her, and then tossing her up again. Finally, he gave her a kiss on her chubby cheek, before lowering her to the floor, saying in pretended exasperation, "Enough! Let me show you that *Nick-lus*' pockets are empty!" and then squatting down to their eye level, he ran his fingers through his pockets, as he looked mischievously into three sets of eyes who gazed at him in delighted anticipation. "No...nothing there!" he said, shaking his head sadly, and as their smiles began to fade, he slowly reached into his breast pocket. "What is this? What do I feel here?" he exclaimed in mock surprise, and withdrawing his hand from his pocket, he held up three peppermint sticks, and just before they could respond, he heard a stifled gasp from close by.

As the three small children began to cheer happily, Nicholas turned his head toward the sound that had come from the corner of the room, and he was shocked to see the form of a woman standing in the shadows. He blinked several times, as if he did not know how to interpret this apparition and then he slowly raised himself up, as the woman stepped into the light. She appeared to be a woman in her mid to late thirties, modestly, yet fashionably dressed in black, whose sophisticated bearing seemed strangely out of place his home. On each side of her stood two older children whose hands she held in her own, and standing between them and Nicholas

was a smaller boy who stared at Nicholas fearfully. Mary stood on the far side of the room, dressed in an exquisite pink gown, holding the tea kettle in one hand and a cup and saucer in the other, a sorrowful expression etched on her pretty face.

Nicholas took all of this in with one glance, and extending his hand to the boy of five or six who stood between them, he said, "Come, Tommy. It's all right, son. Come to me." The child moved quickly to his side, and Nicholas placed his hand tenderly on the boy's head, as fear suddenly gripped him. *Who is this stranger? Why is she holding Ruth's and Noah's hands in such a familiar manner?*

The woman appeared flustered by his assertive action, and she cleared her throat nervously, before she said, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Higgins! Please forgive my unannounced intrusion into your home. You see, we have something in common, you and I...something we need to discuss. Kind as you are, you have been the *accidental* guardian of these children...where I am...or will be...their *lawful* guardian. I am Mrs. Beth Finney, and my sister is...or was...Mrs. Boucher."

## ***Chapter 5***

William Latimer briskly entered the barber shop on the corner of New and Clinton Streets and took off his coat, hanging it on the wooden coat tree by the door. Nodding to the barber, he took his seat in the chair offered to him and opened his copy of *The Times* and began scanning the articles on the front page. Predictably, scandals erupted regularly in town involving some in government service charged with collusion or fraudulent representation... essentially, betraying the public's trust, and now, also predictably, the public wanted its pound of flesh. Blame for the current economic situation, however, was more difficult to pin on anyone in particular, linked as it was to global events, but the general public, often uninformed, held the leadership in London responsible, regardless of the justification of their claims. There was no doubt about it...heads would roll in the next election.

Latimer smiled to himself. *What was the expression? 'It's an ill wind that blows no one any good.'* He had an uncanny talent for seeing the upside to the same events that normally depressed others, causing them to lose confidence in Parliament's ability to put an end to corruption or to move quickly to shore up the floundering economy. This ability had enabled him to prosper during times of national recession by 'hedging his bets' so to speak. Someone always benefited from the downfall of the high and mighty or the ebb and flow of the economy, and Latimer was determined, not only to discover who that *someone* was, but to hitch his wagon to that fellow's star.

Recently, he had discovered such an opportunist very close to home in Watson, Thornton's

brother-in-law. The man had masterfully anticipated the devastation to the economy of Britain involving international trade and the shortage of cotton, as well as other commodities, brought on by a severe drought in the producing countries. Before anyone could react to the possibility of future shortages, Watson had bought up as much of the market shares as he could, knowing that the price of raw materials would skyrocket within a year when they became scarce. Being Watson's banker, Latimer was in a unique position to learn of the windfall that would come Watson's way if events played out as he anticipated, and not being afraid to take a chance, he had followed Watson's lead and had become very rich as a result.

He had tried to interest Thornton in Watson's plan, but like a stubborn fool, the man had refused to take a chance on a scheme that would essentially capitalise on the hard luck of others. His lofty principals had prevented him from having the financial means to escape the effects brought on by the striking riffraff who worked in the mills, and he had lost everything. Amazingly, his luck had changed when he married the Hale woman, a nobody really, who suddenly and ironically came into a fortune that was made as a direct result of Bell's willingness to follow Watson's and his lead. So...Thornton had landed on his feet once again, opening his mill and doing so with a clear conscience.

Latimer could not help but be envious of the younger man. Until recently, he had seemed to lead a charmed life. After working his way from the bottom to the top of the pile of mill owners, an outstanding feat for a lad who began his climb with his father's debt on his back, Thornton magically maintained his dominance over the other mills without making some of the cost cutting measures his competitors had adopted to increase their profitability. In fact, he seemed determined to spend *more* than necessary on payroll and innovations to his mill that would benefit his workers. Disregarding Latimer's advice not to waste his money on such intangible improvements, Thornton had declared that these adaptations to the mill would increase his business because the workers would be healthy and happy; consequently they would work harder and longer, thereby improving his bottom line. Latimer suspected he actually *cared about his workers*...and what had *they* done in return? They had bitten the hand that fed them, causing everything to collapse on Thornton's and their own heads in the end.

Now Thornton was at the top of the heap again because of his new, rich wife. Snorting in contempt, Latimer wondered what she had done to ingratiate herself on that troublemaker, Bell. There were rumours floating around Milton about her wantonness, having been seen embracing a stranger at the train station late at night a while back. Was it Bell? Thornton obviously did not care about her character, only her money. It had galled Latimer that the man had never taken a second look at his daughter, Ann, since she had returned from Switzerland. She had acquired all the accomplishments and deportment that the finishing school she had attended there could provide, and she was pretty as well, but Thornton's heart had already been stolen by the defrocked preacher's daughter. *I wonder what the real reason was behind Hale's decision to*

*decamp to a northern city like Milton. Had he become involved in some scandal? Like father, like daughter, perhaps?* There was something about the new Mrs. Thornton that irritated him. If it had not been for her inherited fortune, she would be as poor as the mill hands, and yet he always received the impression from her that he did not quite measure up to her standards. The brazen hypocrite!

In fact, he had become sick and tired of these Thorntons...except for one, that is, and it was only because of *her* that he was prepared to tolerate the others. Hannah Thornton had captured his fancy several years ago with her dark hair and lovely face and figure, but he was unable to act upon this attraction at that time, not having been a widower long enough to properly 'move on' to someone else. His recent prosperity had helped to expand further his already inflated self-complacency and that, combined with a sneaking suspicion that Hannah admired him as well, had given him the courage to finally act. This evening, at their dinner party, he planned to make his move, showering Hannah with attention that would reveal his ardent intentions. Now that her son and daughter were married, she would no longer be needed at home or at the mill. He had always admired her intelligence and her astute attention to the operating of the mill, and he felt that they thought alike, putting business before pleasure...not that he did not look forward to certain pleasures...but everything in its place, and business came first.

His haircut and shave finished, Latimer paid the proprietor, put on his coat and walked out the door. He had one more stop to make before he went home to dress for the dinner party, and he turned his steps toward the local flower shop. He needed a boutonniere for his button hole, first of all, as well as a corsage for Ann...and one for Hannah. He wondered how she would dress that evening. It was traditional for widows to wear black, he knew, but there were variations in style among which even a widow could choose...styles that could send a *signal* to an eligible male...telling him she was *available*. Smiling at the thought of how surprised and pleased she would be that he had found her worthy of his attentions, William Latimer picked up his pace as excitement for what the evening held for him filled his mind.

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Ann Latimer heard her father enter their home and give his brusque directive to the servants to prepare his bath. She had finished her bath moments before and now sat at her dressing table in a silk robe as her maid arranged her hair in preparation for the Thornton dinner party. She had anticipated this pleasant reprieve from her quiet existence for weeks. Her father had purchased a lovely gown for her, and her excitement increased as she gazed at it as it hung from a hook on her wardrobe door. Ann smiled at her reflection in the mirror. *Perhaps I will meet someone new this evening!*

A knock was heard at the door, and without waiting for her invitation, William Latimer entered

her dressing chamber. At Ann's request, her maid left the room, and her father stood before her and gazed admiringly at his lovely daughter. Where had the time gone? It seemed like just yesterday that he watched his wife nurse their new infant and now she was all grown up, ready to start a life of her own...if she only could find a suitable husband.

"You look lovely, my dear," Latimer said to her surprise. He very rarely noticed her appearance or said anything about it, if he did. "Thank you, father!" she responded happily. When he had entered, Ann had risen from her seat, and her father looked her over from head to toe, making his daughter blush with embarrassment at his scrutiny. Speaking to himself, rather than to her, he murmured "Yes, you will do nicely!"

"Excuse me, father?" Ann inquired in confusion. Startled that she had heard his last comment, Latimer stalled for time by checking his pocket watch before he answered, "I want you to be very friendly to one of the Thornton's guests, this evening, Ann. He is the new doctor in town, Dr. Charles Morgan, the nephew of the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. Watson and the likely successor to Dr. Donaldson when he retires, I'm guessing. He stands to come into some money if he follows his uncle's advice. More importantly, he is *unmarried*...and *you* are not getting any younger."

Ann's heart sank. Her father was not expressing his love for her, nor the pleasure he would receive from seeing her have a wonderful time that evening. His primary concern was that she should ensnare a husband as soon as possible. *Why does he want to be rid of me so quickly...and live all alone in this big house by himself? Doesn't he need me now that mother is gone? Why do I never feel genuinely loved by my own father? Is he capable of loving someone? Oh, Mother, how did you bear it all those years?...Actually, I know how you did it...the Lord helped you to love him as if he was a better man, and he often rose to the occasion...But without you here, Mother, he's fallen back into his selfish, materialistic ways. I fear for him...*

Latimer did not seem to notice the sadness in her eyes, and he continued, "Pay attention to what I am saying, Ann. It is important that you sit quietly, agreeing and smiling at everything Dr. Morgan says...and *whatever you do*, don't start talking about *God*, do you understand?" Extremely hurt by his lack of caring and respect for her, as well as his insensitivity to her deeply held faith, it was impossible for Ann to respond. Lowering her head, she turned quickly and walked out of the room before her startled father could see the tears in her eyes.

Her father was right. She needed to leave this house as soon as possible.

## ***Chapter 6***

Hannah Thornton tossed her needlework aside impatiently and began pacing back and forth in

her sitting room. *What is going on here?* she thought in frustration. The hour of John's and Margaret's first dinner party was rapidly approaching and neither of them could be found anywhere. Knowing how eagerly her son and his wife anticipated the evening's gathering of family and friends, their prolonged absence from home made her uneasy. *I hope that nothing is wrong.* A premonition that one of them was hurt gripped her heart, and she walked to the window and looked down into the mill's shipping yard, hoping that they would appear and put her mind at ease.

As if summoned by Hannah's anxious thoughts, Margaret suddenly burst into the room, sending several of the parcels in her arms cascading to the floor. Looking worriedly at her mother-in-law, she quickly retrieved and then deposited them and her cloak on a chair before approaching her. Hannah's look of disapproval actually hid her relief that Margaret had returned safely, nevertheless, she blurted out, "Where have you been, Margaret?" Giving Hannah a kiss on her cheek, Margaret began, "Mother, I'm very sorry for coming back this late! You must have been frantic wondering where I was, but it couldn't be helped. My errands in town took longer than I anticipated."

Hannah's stern expression softened a bit, but her tone remained emphatic, as she said crossly, "Yes, I *have* been frantic! Of what are you young people thinking? Neither of you present...and your guests due to arrive within the hour! I was trying to imagine how I would entertain everyone by myself! This is not a promising way to begin your social obligations, Margaret!"

During this rebuke, Margaret stood completely still and looked intently at Hannah. "John is not here?" she asked quietly, as a shiver of fear ran through her.

"No, he is not!" Hannah said testily, before continuing, "...and I cannot find anyone at the mill who knows where he is. Oh, a child said he saw John walking out of town, but that's hardly likely since your dinner party is tonight..." Hannah's scolding slowed and then stopped, as a look of grief slid softly across her daughter-in-law's face. Alarmed, Hannah asked apprehensively, "What's wrong?"

Margaret looked into Hannah's frightened gaze, and her eyes filled with tears. She was unable to speak...unable to begin the shameful revelation of what she had done. Hoping that somehow an explanation would come forth involuntarily, she opened her lips to speak, but the only sound that could be heard was her panicked breathing. Increasingly alarmed, Hannah drew her arm through Margaret's and quickly guided her to the sofa in the corner of the room.

"Margaret, please! Tell me what's happened!" she commanded. "Do you know where John is?" Margaret looked straight ahead, her blank expression altered only by the tears which flowed down her cheeks. Her voice strangled with emotion, she answered, "I don't know where he is,

Mother,” and then looking into Hannah’s worried eyes imploringly, she continued, “...but if I did, I would go to him this very minute!”

Hannah’s heart was moved by Margaret’s suffering, a remarkable response considering her former unsympathetic attitude toward the young woman. From the beginning, before she even knew her, Hannah had convinced herself that Margaret acted proudly and above her situation as the daughter of a clergyman...worse still, the daughter of a ‘renegade clergyman’, and she had quickly determined that ‘Miss Hale was not good enough for her son’. Her prejudice was gradually giving way, however, to the truth...that John’s wife was unpretentious and levelheaded, her only ‘defect’ being a self-assurance that prevented her from cowering under Hannah’s occasional browbeating, a trait which Hannah secretly admired. Apparently, she was just the person John needed to bring happiness into his serious, care-worn existence, and Hannah was forced to admit that she could not have made a better choice for her son than he had chosen for himself. Oh, she had seemed too much a ‘Londoner’, complete with ‘airs and graces’, at first, but there was no denying now that the young woman *did* love her son passionately, which was a sure means of endearing her to his mother. As a result, Margaret was becoming her daughter, indeed.

Not finding it easy to show affection to those outside her immediate family in the past, Hannah was slowly being affected by Margaret’s open and honest expressions of love. Taking Margaret’s two hands in her own, she gently turned Margaret toward herself, saying “Speak to me, child!” That one maternal salutation accomplished in Margaret what no amount of coaxing could. Thankfulness flooded her heart as she read the sincerity in Hannah’s eyes. To once again have a mother in whom she could confide...and love...and by whom she was loved in return!

It was true that Hannah was very different from her own deceased mother, lacking the sweetness and gentle grace that Mrs. Hale had possessed, yet John’s mother had other qualities that Margaret valued. First of all, she was not given to self-pity, a trait which Margaret admired greatly, having borne with the oppressive complaining of Mrs. Hale for so long. Second of all, Hannah’s insightful intellect enabled her to think and act decisively when meeting challenges, in stark contrast to Margaret’s own parents, who became overwhelmed by the circumstances of life, often relying on *her* to deliver them. With a mother like Hannah Thornton to guide him, it was no wonder her son had become a man of strong character and wisdom!

The gentle pressure from Hannah’s hands broke Margaret’s reverie, and her thoughts returned to John and what he must be suffering. Knowing she needed wise counsel, she decided to confess her transgression to her mother-in-law...*to her mother!* Astonished by how right it seemed to turn to Hannah despite their stormy history, she began hesitantly, “I am ashamed to tell you what I have done.” Margaret looked down at her hands and sighed. “John and I had a disagreement...an argument. Instead of sensing that something was wrong...that there had been

trouble at the mill, which caused John to be out of spirits and moody, I reacted angrily to his abrupt response to a request I made. I thought he was being unfair and autocratic.” She paused at this point and bit her lower lip. *Oh, this was hard!* Before she could change her mind, she rushed on, "I proceeded to insult him by reminding him that it was...that it was only through me and my inheritance from Mr. Bell that the successful reopening of the mill was possible!" After uttering these words, she closed her eyes and began to sob as if her heart was breaking.

Hannah slowly disengaged her grasp of Margaret’s hands and sat completely still, Margaret’s words echoing in her mind...one thought only consuming her. *John is hurt!...My son is in pain! I know how much it hurt his pride to take Margaret's money! How could she betray him so?* Righteous indignation filled Hannah's heart, and she fought a battle within herself, sorely tempted to turn and lash out at Margaret right then and there. Seconds turned into a minute, and after wiping her tear stained face with the back of her hands, Margaret peeked at Hannah, who sat with her eyes closed and her mouth pressed into a thin line. “Mother, I would give my life to take back the words I spoke to John! You must believe me when I say that I didn’t mean any of them...that I never had those thoughts until today...when I became so angry. I am truly sorry!” she said sadly through her tears.

The sorrow and sincerity with which these words were spoken had their effect on the listener, and the outcome of the battle raging within Hannah’s heart was quickly decided. Turning to face Margaret once again, she began, “I once promised your mother if I saw you doing anything wrong or improper, I would speak to you as she would. Well, in this instance, Margaret, you have chastised and punished yourself far better than I could! I can see you are truly sorry, and I tell you from my heart, that you *are* forgiven! Who among us has not spoken in an appalling way to someone that we love? Lord knows, I have been guilty of that on one or two occasions,” she said with a twinkle in her eye, “and, if I’m not mistaken, *you* have been the recipient of my gift for tongue-lashing!”

Margaret stared in disbelief at her mother-in-law, not sure she had heard her correctly. “You can forgive me?” she asked incredulously.

“I can, and I do,” Hannah said simply, before continuing, “Margaret you are young, and you *will* make mistakes. The important thing is to learn from those mistakes and to strive not to repeat them.” With an amused light in her eyes and an encouraging smile on her lips, she concluded, “Believe me when I say, some of us are *still* learning and striving!” Hannah’s heart was so moved by the gratitude and love she saw in Margaret’s eyes that she pulled Margaret into their first genuine and heartfelt embrace, as a tearful smile bloomed on Margaret’s face.

*This is a miracle! She has forgiven me the unpardonable sin...hurting her son! Thank you, Father, for hearing my prayer...but John still needs to be touched, as well! Help him!*

The two women finally stood, and while her eyes betrayed her affection for Margaret, Hannah attempted to resume her usual reserve, saying dryly, "Go, now! Fix that red nose of yours! Your guests will think you've been lingering in the wine cellar. Dress yourself in that lovely gown, and prepare to make things right with John. I will be very much surprised if he hasn't forgiven you already!" Margaret blinked back tears of gratitude for this hope that she so desperately needed; as if scales had fallen from her eyes, she suddenly saw an *inward* beauty shining from her mother-in-law's lovely countenance. Smiling hopefully at Hannah, Margaret kissed her on the cheek and then turned and left the room with a comforting sense of peace in her heart.

## *Chapter 7*

After instructing the servants to prepare Margaret's bath in her dressing room, finally pouring the water that had simmered on the stove for over two hours into her bathtub, Hannah returned to the solitude of her sitting room. Absentmindedly, she picked up her sewing, but her needle merely hovered over her handiwork, as her thoughts returned to Margaret's confession. Speaking without thinking when provoked was an act of desperation, and Hannah was forced to admit that she, too, had occasionally lost control of her temper and had lashed out at her perceived adversary thoughtlessly, only to regret her passionate outburst immediately. Consequently, she understood how it could happen, and in the instance of Margaret and her son, since she was not directly involved, but an observer, she discovered that she could understand and feel the pain...of both sides.

Hannah marvelled that she could think so objectively where Margaret was concerned, a clear demonstration of how far they had travelled from the hostile place from which they had begun their relationship...When she and Fanny had visited Margaret and Mrs. Hale over two years ago upon John's request that they demonstrate some civility to the family of his new friend, Mr. Hale, she had been shocked at their humble manner of living, cramped and shabby, and situated in a lower class section of Milton. Yet, in spite of their meagre circumstances, Hannah felt the young woman had looked down on her and Fanny and their northern way of life in which she took great pride.

That insult was mild, however, compared to the mockery Margaret had made of Hannah's blatant satisfaction with her son and his popularity with the young ladies of Milton, laughingly insisting that not all the young women of Milton could be 'after him'. From that moment, the dislike she felt for Margaret Hale was intensified and continued to grow during the period that Margaret resided in Milton, reaching full maturity when the young woman had thrown herself at John during the striker's riot to ensnare him, she was sure. Why else would she do such a thing,

making such a public display, if she did not wish to capture his heart? Then she had crushed him with her rejection, and Hannah's dislike grew into hatred. When her son had arrived back in Milton with Margaret on his arm announcing their intent to marry and re-open the mill with her money, Hannah was beside herself. How could she live under the same roof with that woman?

...But then Margaret had surprised her with her straightforward and modest ways, so markedly different from the early impression she had created, and Hannah's prejudice became painfully obvious. The truth was that after many months of despising Margaret, Hannah now admired her for her strong character and maturity. She was able to relate to Margaret on a much different level than she could relate to her own daughter, and instead of frequently advising or correcting Margaret, as was her habit with Fanny, she found herself conferring with her as she would with a woman close to her own age and receiving surprisingly thoughtful responses and opinions in return.

In addition to Margaret possessing an excellent understanding, Hannah was pleased to discover in her a genuinely kind and loving heart. The young woman's tender feelings for her son were open for all to see, and Hannah sometimes had to look away, averting her gaze as it were, as the air seemed to crackle with the love and passion they felt for one another. Hannah could remember feeling passionate about her own husband in the beginning, but her short lived infatuation then could not compare with the maturity and commitment that she witnessed in her son and his bride, and for the first time in a long while, Hannah began to struggle with bouts of melancholy, reminded by her daily witness of the deep intimacy between John and Margaret, that she had missed an important part of life's promise...the companionship of someone whom she could admire and trust.

John and Margaret's loving relationship, although sometimes prompting negative self-reflections, depending on her mood, also had a pleasurable...an almost contagious effect on Hannah. She found herself longing for what existed between them, but had no idea how to attain it. Their level of devotion required a tenderness that she believed she did not possess. Unknown to her, this sad introspection was softening the hardened ground in her heart...preparing it for the sowing of the seed of discontent, a necessary pre-cursor to change. She felt she needed to grow in some manner... but how? At fifty-two years of age, she was too fixed in her ways, surely. Sighing, Hannah wondered what her life could have been, if only circumstances had been different...

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Life had been hard for Hannah Thornton, beginning with the difficulties she and her parents had endured as they struggled to get by during her youth. Hardship seemed determined to follow her into her married life, as well. After a few years of relative bliss, her spouse's true nature had

emerged, revealing his proclivity for greed and dishonest gain and throwing her dreams of being in a loving relationship for the rest of her life completely overboard. Her ship had crashed upon the rocks, finally, when he abandoned her by taking his life, forcing her to raise their two children all alone. The combined effects of these circumstances, instead of crushing her spirit, had forged in her an inner strength and independence that not only shaped her perspective on life, but also her expectations. Excluding her son, the men in her life had taught her that it was safer and wiser to depend solely upon herself and not upon others.

To her way of thinking, her survival and the survival of her family would be secured only through the uncompromising firmness of her mind, and the strict regulation of her feelings. Consequently, while enabling her to live through severe hardships, her courageous, self-preserving instinct unfortunately had the side effect of fashioning a protective shell around her heart that often hindered demonstrations of empathy or affection, even when they welled up within her, bubbling just below the surface. She loved her children, to be sure, but after years of restraint, freely allowing herself to display great affection was not her way...not from a lack of sensibility, but from a deeply held fear that if she allowed her emotions to reign freely, she would be overwhelmed by them, and the semblance of discipline and control in her life would unravel...and what would she do then?

Vigilant self-control had become her way of life...except where John was concerned. Ashamed to admit her partiality, Hannah rationalised that the tender emotions she felt toward her son were her only self-indulgence and were to be expected, flowing naturally from her sense of gratitude for his support and for the enormous sacrifices that he made after his father's death. In truth, she loved him dearly and admired him for his strength of character, something his father had lacked. Sadly, his sister Fanny seemed to take after her father, demonstrating a similar lack of character and admirable qualities. Although Hannah would lay down her life for either of her children, she had little patience for her daughter's nonsensical ways. Try as she might to avoid doing so, not comparing her two offspring was impossible, and Fanny always came up short, while John always abounded in her respect and admiration, as she did, in his.

Until recently, Hannah had given little thought to the ways that she related to the people in her life. Habitually straightforward and blunt in her manner, she found communicating her thoughts directly and succinctly, without resorting to unnecessary flowery speech, as she deemed most consciously and artfully chosen expressions to be, was preferable, being expedient and leaving little room for misinterpretation. The introduction of Margaret into their family circle, however, had the effect of a whirlwind in their midst as Hannah's chilled bearing toward her made the young woman sadly aware of how lowly she was esteemed by her husband's mother, and for the first time, Hannah's abrasive manner had suddenly become unacceptable to John when it was directed at his wife. After several stern warnings from him that he was not pleased with her uncivil attitude toward Margaret, Hannah had the wisdom to realize that something needed to

change and that it was she who must adapt to the new dynamics within their family, like it or not.

Losing John's esteem and respect was something she would not risk, and so Hannah had moderated her words and softened her tone toward Margaret, discovering, to her astonishment, that the loving and grateful response her changed behaviour evoked in the young woman caused Hannah's own breast to be pierced with a poignant sweetness, bewildering her at first, until she finally understood what was happening. She had begun to love Margaret...and what she felt was joy. At that point, the carefully built wall surrounding Hannah's heart began to crumble, revealing her mistaken belief that strength of mind precluded tender emotions. *There is always room for love!...But is it too late for me to change direction and learn to follow my heart?* she asked herself doubtfully, not realizing that she had already changed course and had begun her journey.

## *Chapter 8*

John sat at a small table in the corner of a dark, yet attractively appointed side room at his club. The low lighting and deep colour of the mahogany walls, combined with the haze of cigar and pipe smoke, hid him from the view of the other patrons in the adjacent room. He had no desire to be seen by anyone he knew. Lifting his third drink to his lips, he sipped it, then suddenly raised it and emptied its contents down his throat. He had never turned to drink for emotional relief in the past. Why now? Because watching the woman whom he adored, who supposedly adored him, make her merry way up the street after exchanging farewells with his solicitor, was maddening...a terrible blow to his pride...and his heart. Reeling from the shock of her betrayal, he reasoned that having a stiff drink or two would dull the ache in his grieving heart, as well as give him time to recover and fortify him for the pathetic performance he must play as 'loving husband' in the evening's drama. In the end, however, he was not sure it had been a wise decision. His brokenness had *not* been relieved, as he had expected, but had changed into belligerence toward Margaret, and instead of sorrow, he now felt only bitterness and animosity.

*How long has this deceit been taking place? How long has she entertained disloyal thoughts about me? How many other business arrangements has she made without my knowledge?... I was a fool to take her money and think it would not come between us....Our love is not invincible, as we believed it to be.*

The thought that he had so misjudged his relationship with Margaret sickened him. Unsure of what the future held for them, he tried to imagine his life without her. As angry as he was, this thought was devastating to him. Recalling his recent prayer near the cemetery, he began to rail against the one whom he had petitioned.

*I told you that I needed her, that I didn't want to live without her!...And now, things have only gotten worse! Is this your idea of coming to my aid? Did you even listen to me? Are you there at all?*

The lump in his throat throbbed, as a storm raged in his soul...and then softly, as if in direct response to this angry challenge, a whisper...a verse memorised during his childhood, floated gently into his thoughts,

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
He leads me beside still waters,  
He restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
Your rod and your staff,  
They comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Startled by this unbidden recollection, John quietly placed his glass on the table. ...'Goodness and mercy will follow me'? *If only it was possible!*... A fragrance of hope lingered around the door of his heart, waiting for him to grant it access...waiting in vain.

Deciding there was no point in avoiding the inevitability of his duties toward his mother and his guests, he reluctantly left the club. By the time he arrived at Marlborough Mills, John had forgotten the promise he had heard. *Nothing can remain the same between us after what has been revealed today*, he declared gravely, and banishing all hope, he had entered the house.

~

John's sudden appearance as he walked into the sitting room startled Hannah, and still agitated by her troubled thoughts, she spoke to him irritably, demanding, "Where have you been, John? Do you realise your guests will arrive soon?" *Calm yourself, Hannah!* she chastised herself. *It*

*will work out in the end...It must! They love each other!*

Determined to hide his heartache from her as long as possible, John put a smile on his face and said with an exaggerated ease of manner, "I'm sorry to have caused you concern, Mother. I was on an errand in town," as he took off his hat and coat and handed them to a servant who curtsied and left the room.

"In town!" Hannah exclaimed, as an idea took shape in her mind. "Then I am surprised that you did not see Margaret. She has just returned from town herself."

John's eyes darkened immediately. Hannah knew her son well, and she knew the cold expression on his face revealed what was taking place in his heart. Deciding to 'go where angels fear to tread', to intervene between these two young people, both of them her children now, she began, "John, I have something to say to you about Margaret. She..."

"Stop, Mother! We will *not* speak of her...not *now*, not..." he paused, as a pained expression flitted across his face. Unable to maintain his composure, he abruptly turned from her and walked toward the door, saying in a slightly broken voice, "I must dress before the first guests arrive." Pausing with his hand on the doorknob, he seemed to reconsider, and suddenly he returned and stood before his mother once again. Hannah regarded him solemnly, hoping he would allow her to speak. "John..." was all she was able to say, before he bent down and kissed the top of her head, saying in a voice choked with emotion, "Forgive me!.. I should not have been so harsh...I want to thank you for always supporting me...and for your unfailing love!" Unwilling to enter into a discussion of his troubles with her at that time, he turned from his mother, who gazed at him in dismay.

As the door closed behind him, uneasiness and a dizzying sense of déjà vu overwhelmed Hannah. Unsure of its source, she closed her eyes, thinking, *What is it?* and then a vivid memory flashed before her, and she suddenly understood the source of her apprehension. When John had bent down to kiss her, his breath held an uncharacteristic odour of strong alcohol... a stench she had smelled on the breath of her now deceased husband every day for years, and she was immediately carried back to that painful period in her life, experiencing anew the fear and torment of that time, as the man she loved slowly destroyed himself. Shaken by memories she had suppressed for years, Hannah could not quell a sickening sense of dread at what lay ahead. *God help us...*

## ***Chapter 9***

The emotional turmoil of the day finally caught up with Margaret, and she leaned back in the

bathub, resting her weary body in the tepid water. As she rubbed her skin with a soapy sponge, water droplets dripped from her extended arm, mimicking the sound of the rain dripping off the roof outside her window. The weather had changed since she had climbed the stairs to her and John's room, and the sound of the steady downpour outside only added to the gloomy atmosphere within. In spite of her relaxed posture, her mind desperately pursued one train of thought.....*Where is he? Will he return for the dinner party? Will he accept my apology and forgive me?...Does he still love me?* The uncertainty of the answers to these questions began to dim the fragile hope that had filled her moments before, when Hannah had kindly tried to comfort her. Margaret shivered, and she slid her body beneath the steaming, hot water, her chin touching the soapy foam. She closed her eyes as waves of regret washed over her. *If only I could start this day again, how different its ending would be...*

~

It began so happily!...The sun woke her as its rays beamed through the lacy curtains of their bedroom window, and Margaret stretched languorously, a dream about their first dinner party still lingering around the periphery of her sleepy consciousness. When John entered the room a minute later, already groomed and dressed for the day, to offer her a sip of his coffee, as had become their affectionate routine, she sat up and placed her hands on his shoulders, pulling him down until he knelt by her side. Placing the coffee cup on her night stand, he encircled her with his arms, kissing her softly, and she melted unresistingly into his embrace. Drawing back a little, he smiled into her sleepy eyes. Loving to tease her, he asked, "Mrs. Thornton, will you be getting out of bed today? I'm sure there must be a *few* chores that you have to do before our guests arrive tonight," knowing full well that his energetic wife had been hard at work for weeks organising and planning this historic event in their young marriage. "Well, Mr. Thornton, I'm considering it, but I need to wake up more...since I didn't sleep well...thinking about the dinner party...among other things," she said with a smile.

John gazed into her lovely eyes, and seeing the happiness there, his heart filled with gratitude that he had pleased her as much as she had pleased him. "I'm sure we'll both sleep well tonight, exhausted as we'll be from entertaining our guests," he said with a charmingly innocent smile that poorly hid his hope for a different outcome. After offering her a sip of coffee and a farewell kiss, he was gone, and Margaret quickly rose from the bed, anxious to start her day, her heart filled with love for her husband.

Finalising a few remaining details was her only plan for the morning and early afternoon, after which she would return home to rest and then dress for dinner. Before she set out on her errands, she opened her dressing room door for one last look at her beautiful gown and smiled with pleasure. The gown was exquisite, and she knew it showed her to advantage, accentuating her feminine form perfectly. Her smile grew as she anticipated the look on John's face when he saw

her wearing it for the first time. Closing the door behind her, she fairly skipped down the stairs confident that all was well with the world, especially between John and her!...

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*How fragile happiness is...slipping through our fingers like grains of sand...How do we go back?*

She recalled her disillusioning visit to Helstone with Mr. Bell and her conviction that *there was no going back*. Those happy times of her childhood lived on only in her memory and in her heart, now. *Is that how it will be for John and me?...Our time together, when we lived only for each other...now just precious memories of a time to which we can never return?*

Tears welled up in her eyes. Until today, their love had been unmarred and blissful. On more than one occasion, John had entered the room as she bathed. She blushed slightly at the recollection of how he had gazed at her so lovingly and longingly...how he once insisted on washing her long, luscious hair, massaging her temples, head and neck tenderly with his long sensitive fingers, before joining her. He was a wonderful lover...passionate, yet gentle... and so intuitive of her needs. *Oh, John! I need you now more than ever! I long to tell my best friend how my heart is breaking with sorrow for what I have done! Lord, please make a way for us to return to our first love...*

~

John climbed the stairs which led to his and Margaret's bed chamber. He had been dreading this moment all the way home. How would they face each other knowing the truth of what lay between them? *One step at a time...Let me get through this evening...After that, I will make my decision on how to proceed.*

Entering their room, he was relieved to find that Margaret was not there. It was the first time that he had entered and was not excited at the thought of seeing her...of being with her. Looking around the room...this former haven for him...he swallowed the lump in his throat. This had been a holy place...where he and Margaret had become one flesh, one heart...one soul. *Margaret!* he whispered in despair. He gradually became aware of the sound of splashing water coming from the next room. *She's in her bath!...As much as I want to, I can't enter. Her feelings...and mine...won't allow it anymore.* The realisation that his passion for her must be held in check felt like a blade piercing his heart.

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Margaret stopped bathing suddenly. Footsteps on the stairs! She recognized John's tread immediately. *What shall I do? Can our love erase what has happened? I need to see him...to speak to him! I am so ashamed!...Yet, I must try...*

"John? Are you there?" she asked in a small, tremulous voice.

He halted his hurried dressing and looked at the door to her bath. She had spoken to him. How the sound of her voice affected him! His hands shook slightly as he attempted to tie his cravat. *What should I do? I don't have the strength to face her now.*

"Yes, I'm here," he answered quietly.

"John, I need to speak to you...Can you come in here?"

His throat tightened as he groped for words. Finally, in a voice that sounded colder than he intended, he answered, "I cannot speak to you now. The first guests are arriving, and I must greet them. I will wait for your downstairs." It took all his will power to utter that harsh reply and then turn and walk away. Grasping the handle of their bedroom door, he hesitated, his heart and mind in conflict. *Am I making a mistake by not going to her?* Instantly, he heard an echo of her haughty voice reminding him how much he had needed her to re-open the mill...and then he opened the door and walked out, closing it quietly behind him.

The sound of John's receding footsteps could be heard...mingled with the muffled sound of Margaret weeping...

## ***Chapter 10***

The sound of John walking away after she had pleaded with him to come to her was more than Margaret's fragile heart could bear, and she lowered her head to her arm as it rested on the side of the tub and wept. *Are his feelings for me completely gone?...Swept away by one indiscretion?* She knew she had badly hurt him and that it would take a miracle for him to forgive her...and for her to forgive herself...but she believed in miracles. Was not that the essence of faith? Hoping for and believing in what seemed impossible?

*Lord! You know what is in my heart. You know I am sorry for what I've done...for my arrogance*

*and pride and my cruelty to my husband. I beg you to go before me, clearing a path between us, allowing us...me...an opportunity to reach out to John...to tell him and show him how sorry I am. Help him to forgive me...please...*

~

As he descended the stairs, John's emotional state was infinitely worse than when he had ascended, earlier. Hearing Margaret's voice had affected him more than he had imagined. Her sweet tones tugged at a place deep in his heart, as though she was physically connected to him, and suddenly he knew that the pain of losing her respect was as nothing compared to the pain of losing *her*. She had been the answer to his dreams, and the death of that vision was unbearable.

Pausing momentarily before the doorway to the parlour, John closed his eyes, steeling himself to face his guests and play the part of the happy newlywed. *How will I get through this evening?...And how will I go on when this evening is over?* Entering the room that was enchantingly alight with numerous candles, he began greeting his guests. Hannah, who stood in her daughter-in-law's place as hostess until Margaret arrived, could tell that her son was under great strain to act as if all was well in the Thornton household. She looked for an opportunity to talk to him privately about Margaret, but sensing her desire, he intentionally filled any pause in conversation with light banter with his acquaintances. He gradually greeted each guest including the local mill owners and their wives; his banker, William Latimer and his daughter, Ann; his sister Fanny and her husband, Watson; Watson's nephew, a recent arrival in Milton, as well as Nicholas Higgins and his daughter, Mary.

Nicholas and his daughter stood off to one side, separated slightly from the rest of the guests and apparently uncomfortable in their surroundings. Equally uncomfortable were the mill owners, who appeared surprised and displeased with Higgins' inclusion in the gathering. "What is Thornton thinking... inviting one of the hands to his party? And a known firebrand at that!" was whispered within their hearing, and Mary Higgins clung to her father's arm not knowing where to look, her eyes moistening with tears. Nicholas's manly face flushed darkly as he protectively put his arm around her, all the while wishing that they had not come. *Why have we been included?* he asked himself. Instantly, the faces of his two friends, John and Margaret, arose in his mind and then twinkles appeared in his eyes, as he looked directly at his thoughtless accusers. Nodding his head slightly, he communicated a silent challenge to them: *If Thornton wants me and my girl to be here, then I dare any of you to go against him.*

Nicholas and Mary were not the only ones to overhear the rude comments directed at them. Suddenly appearing before them was Watson's nephew, Dr. Charles Morgan, Dr. Donaldson's young, new assistant. He was a handsome young man with longish unruly blonde hair that was offset by his fashionable brown suit, complete with a gold watch on a chain and gleaming brown

boots. An ivory coloured shirt and cravat completed his look of distinguished elegance. Many a female heart had been captivated by the young man as he rode through the town and the surrounding district making house calls since his recent arrival in Milton...especially since John Thornton was no longer available for their romantic fantasies!

Having just arrived at the Thornton home and happening to pass close by the cluster of mill owners and their wives, Charles could not help overhearing their comments, intentionally spoken within the hearing of the objects of their scorn. Glancing at the handsome middle-aged man, who looked on defiantly, and the young woman who clung to him, Charles handed his hat to a servant and immediately approached them. After glancing in annoyance at the scandalised manufacturers, he introduced himself, as he extended his hand in friendship, and Nicholas grasped it firmly. Gazing in surprise at this stranger, Nicholas thought, *He is not cut from the same bolt of cloth as those others, I see.* Gratified by the younger man's good will, Nicholas observed Charles Morgan's eyes drift to the pretty face of his daughter. Moved by the sight of her tear-filled eyes, Charles reached for Mary's hand, as well, and then to everyone's surprise, he lifted it to his lips, as he bowed before her. Mary's astonished expression changed to a bashful, yet very becoming smile. No one had ever kissed her hand before!

A look of comprehension could be seen on Charles' intelligent face, as he observed Nicholas' eyes shift to the hostile group nearby, and without pausing, Charles said in a voice clearly meant to be overheard, "Miss Higgins, would you do me the honour of allowing me to escort you to dinner when that moment arises?" Looking very surprised, yet very happy, Mary could only nod and lower her eyes shyly.

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Margaret had finally finished her toilet and was assisted into her new gown by her maid. It had been purchased in London several weeks earlier when she and John, returning from their honeymoon, had spent several days with Margaret's Aunt Shaw and her cousin Edith, who happened to be visiting her mother for several weeks. How happy and long ago those days seemed now!

Margaret's gown was a teal blue lace that over-laid a silken slip of the same hue causing her luminous eyes to reflect its teal colour. Gold trim subtly edged the softly folded ruffle along her breast, as well as the scarf tied around her waist and along her hemline. The shimmering creation fit her to perfection, accentuating her lovely figure. Her thick hair had been arranged beguilingly on top of her head, yet several tendrils persisted in cascading around her temples and along her neck in very feminine way. Adorning her tresses were two fine gold and teal combs that accented the golden highlights in her hair and the colour of her gown. On her ears, she wore two dangling gold earrings, and around her neck lay a delicate gold chain and locket that hung upon her breast,

family heirlooms bequeathed to her by Mr. Bell that had originally belonged to his mother.

Margaret stepped in front of the looking glass and was amazed at the image she beheld. *What would mother say if she saw me now? Would she recognize her 'little Margaret'?...Oh, Mother, I really need you today! My heart is broken, and I don't know how to fix it!*

Her failure to speak to John, as well as his obvious intention of avoiding contact with her, was a crushing blow. Margaret had no idea how the day would end, but there was a hopeful place deep within her that refused to accept defeat. *I love him with all my heart, and I know he loves me...He must! Our love cannot be so shallow that it cannot weather its first storm!* On that barely hopeful note and with a brief prayer for guidance, Margaret began her descent, determined to greet her guests and to love her husband.

## ***Chapter 11***

John made the rounds, making certain that each of his guests was comfortable. Strangely, he found himself becoming increasingly *uncomfortable* with every passing conversation. Even trite discourse at this time required a level of concentration of which John possessed very little. In addition to his broken heart, he was still feeling the effects of the alcohol that he had consumed earlier, which increased his distraction and depression. His thoughts kept returning to that one room in the house where Margaret had called to him...and where he had rejected her.

His tender heart and rational mind continued to war with one another. *Did she expect that I would be at her beck and call, coming to her as if nothing had happened? There are consequences to all of our actions...and the consequences to hers will be far reaching, indeed!* This conclusion was not arrived at triumphantly, but resignedly, as regret and sorrow for the turn their lives had taken overwhelmed him. Then unexpectedly, he heard an echo of the verse that had drifted into his mind just before he left his club that afternoon. *"...Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me..."* Could it be true? Could they possibly survive this day and continue on as before? *That truly would be goodness and mercy!* Then his thoughts roamed upstairs once again, lingering outside the door to her bath. *What did she want to say to me? What is she thinking at this very moment?*

John remained talking with Nicholas and Mary while the other guests gathered in several small groups around the room. Curiously, during this painful time, John felt more comfortable in the company of Nicholas Higgins than with any other person in the room. This man, his friend, had no expectation of frivolous conversation and when John looked into his eyes, there seemed to be an unspoken empathy shining from them, like a soothing balm on his raw heart. *What is it with*

*Nicholas? He seems to understand my feelings...Perhaps he senses that I have been rejected this day...and he obviously has experienced rejection himself.* Not blind to the invisible barrier surrounding both Nicholas and Mary, he had been pleased to see the polite attention shown to them by the young doctor, Charles Morgan, and his appreciation for the character of the young man grew accordingly.

Making a comment to Nicholas about Dr. Morgan seeming to be a good chap, John noticed his friend's attention was focused on something across the room, and the expression on his face was enraptured. Turning to identify the cause of such devotion, John glanced searchingly at the roomful of guests who had gradually become silent as their attention was directed to something beyond them. His eyes were automatically drawn to movement on the stairs. Descending them was Margaret, and John's heart leaped at the sight of her. She stood smiling at those nearest her...a picture of loveliness and beauty!

*My God! How I love her!* his heart cried desperately.

Gradually, Margaret's gaze began to roam beyond the circle of guests who had gathered around her...her eyes searching for him. Across the room, John stood completely still unable to look away. Their eyes locked in an intense gaze that seemed to last forever. With an uncertain smile, Margaret nodded to him as she began her approach, walking slowly and gracefully towards him, her eyes never leaving his. Feeling a slight nudge from Nicholas, John roused himself and met Margaret halfway, as she reached out her hand to him. Looking down at it, he clasped it gently in his, a small smile touching his lips, as he recalled another time when she had extended her hand to him, and he remembered the excitement that had coursed through him at her touch. Glancing up, John searched her eyes, as he tried to comprehend the look that radiated from them.

*Margaret, what do I see in your eyes? I used to be so sure....but I cannot be certain anymore.*

Tearing his eyes away from hers, he folded her hand around his arm and began to circulate among his guests, greeting them once again, only now with his wife, their hostess, on his arm. As they approached Hannah, she looked uncertainly between John and Margaret. *Had they time to reconcile?* She looked deeply into her son's eyes, but there seemed to be a mask over his expressionless countenance. Turning her gaze on Margaret, she discovered both hope and anxiety in her look, and Hannah smiled, attempting to convey to her an assurance that she did not feel herself.

Finally, after making a complete circuit of the room, John and Margaret returned to Nicholas and Mary, and Margaret looked into the reassuring gaze of her friend for the second time that day. What she saw there was so comforting and so loving that she could not restrain herself, and reaching up, she drew Nicholas's head down and kissed his cheek. Not noticing, nor caring about the slight rumble of surprised conversation that this action provoked, she and John stood talking

with Nicholas and Mary, united momentarily in expressing love and respect for their friends in defiance of everyone. John's heart was pounding, his emotions a mixture of confusion and hope. *She has always preferred the company of Nicholas...a humble, unpretentious man...someone whose friendship I have also come to treasure. Does her preference for the company of Nicholas and his family seem like the actions of a proud person?*

As this moment hung precariously suspended in time, a delicious sense of nearness, of intimacy, enveloped them, and John and Margaret, each sensing what the other was feeling, were unwilling for the moment to end, their common bond with the Higgins's being a means of uniting them. Suddenly, there was a slight knock at the door, and following on the heels of a servant, came another visitor...Mr. Pryor, John's attorney, who entered the room carrying a small brief case.

After shaking hands with several of the mill owners, Pryor immediately headed directly for John and Margaret and bowing slightly, he said, "Mrs. Thornton, forgive me for interrupting your dinner party this evening. I hope my coming now will not cause you any inconvenience...but, may I beg your indulgence? I need to speak to you privately. By the way, Mrs. Thornton, may I add that you look exceedingly lovely this evening in that enchanting gown. Does she not, Thornton?"

Her heart beating with excitement and pleasure at the opportunity that Mr. Pryor's comment provided for further intimacy, since her womanly instincts assured her that John loved the way she looked tonight, Margaret looked up at him, and she almost gasped aloud at the expression of hurt and betrayal in his eyes as he stared at her in disbelief. As quickly as that look appeared, a cold, distant look took its place, as he glanced at Pryor, and then back at her. With a sarcastic tone to his voice, he replied, "Yes, indeed, Mr. Pryor. My wife has the means to acquire any number of enchanting gowns, hasn't she?" Bowing slightly, he added, "If you will excuse me," and then he walked away.

At that moment, the butler entered the room and made the announcement that dinner was ready to be served, and John walked directly up to Ann Latimer, and asked quietly, "Miss Latimer, would you do me the honour of allowing me to escort you to dinner?"

## ***Chapter 12***

After her schooling in Switzerland was completed, and she had returned to Milton, Ann Latimer had felt like a fish out of water, not knowing where or with whom she belonged. The truth was that she had been lonely since her return, missing the stimulation of the academic setting, where she had not only broadened her mind, but developed a pleasant social life as well. Many of her

acquaintances lived on the continent and were out of reach, except for the occasional letter. Her old friends from Milton were equally elusive, having moved on with their lives while she had been in Europe, either moving away or marrying and starting families, leaving them little time to spend with their old friend. When her invitation to the first Thornton dinner party had arrived nearly two years ago, Ann had been delighted and looked forward to the opportunity to be among interesting people once again and to hopefully make new friends.

At that time, numerous hints had been dropped by her father about the *eligible* master of Marlborough Mills, John Thornton, hints that she had dismissed quickly, since it was not her way to pursue any man ...that is, until she met him at Mrs. Hannah Thornton's dinner party back then. She would never forget her initial reaction and instant attraction to him, which could be easily explained, since he was the most handsome gentleman she had ever seen. She had persuaded herself that her budding friendship with Fanny Thornton was desirable, if only to bring her into closer contact with *John*, the name she called him only in the privacy of her heart.

Going to the Exhibition in London with him and Fanny had been thrilling at first...to spend so much time in his company was a lovely experience, although marred slightly by the presence of her father. William Latimer was one of those men who did not listen nearly as well as he talked, and when given an opening, he tended to dominate any conversation, steering it to the two topics near and dear to his heart. First, and foremost, he was passionate about the amount of money to be made by clever investments; second, he was almost equally enthusiastic about how 'a good woman, like his daughter Ann, for instance, was to be desired as a wife by any business man of good sense'. Ann's jaw had dropped and her face had turned scarlet the first time her father had spoken thus to John Thornton. She could not look at him and would have left the room immediately, if Mr. Thornton had not instantly changed the subject and directed his conversation at her. When she had found the courage to look up into his handsome face once again and when her father had turned his attention to one of the servants, Mr. Thornton had smiled understandingly at her, and then, to her delight...he had winked at her, whispering that he understood what it was like to have an outspoken, opinionated parent. From that moment, she knew she would always consider John Thornton as the perfect gentleman and a dear friend, even if their futures were not destined to align.

During the train ride to London, John had been attentive at first, but being the sensitive, empathic person that she was, she began to sense that his civility was a strain and that he was preoccupied and despondent. It was not until they crossed paths with Margaret Hale at the manufacturing display, and she had an opportunity to observe his behaviour, as well as Margaret's, did Ann understand what ailed him. The pent up emotion that flared up between the two told her that at least one of them knew what it was *to love*, and she guessed correctly that it was he who was desperately in love with Margaret Hale. Ann could not help being a little crestfallen at this development, wondering when and if she would meet another man who could compare with John

Thornton.

Being a realist, as well as a romantic, she had too much awe of the state of “being in love” to be tempted to interfere. From that point, she commanded her heart to cease fantasising about any future that she might have with John, and for the most part, she had succeeded. Never having had the opportunity to truly fall in love, she recognized her attraction to him was mere infatuation. Oh, there still remained an occasional butterfly flutter in her stomach when he looked her way, but those were becoming fewer and farther between. She wryly told herself that half the motivation for falling in love was the belief that there was an equal desire aimed at oneself by another person. Once it became clear that this was not the case, falling ‘out of love’ was not too difficult.

Knowing that John Thornton’s heart had never been turned in her direction had made a graceful extrication from the company of his silly sister, Fanny, most desirable. In truth, spending her time introspectively was more to her liking than the frivolity she endured with Fanny. After a brief episode of self-pity that she had not been his choice, Ann had decided that if a wonderful man like her friend, John Thornton, could fall desperately in love with a woman like Margaret Hale, then Ann wanted to learn more about her and her character. Believing that a person could be judged by the company she kept, a belief that gave her some guilt over her association with Fanny Watson, she was determined to seek Margaret Thornton’s friendship. Growing weary of spending too much time alone or in the company of her father, the invitation to Margaret's first dinner party could not have come at a better time for Ann Latimer.

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Watching Margaret descend the staircase was magical! She looked like a queen in her lovely teal gown and beautiful jewellery. Every eye was fixed on the lovely hostess as she greeted those guests standing near her. Then, obviously looking for and finding her husband, Margaret had practically floated across the floor toward him. The loving and intense look they exchanged made Ann blush, as if she and the others were watching something too intimate to be witnessed. When John drew her arm through his and walked with her among their guests, Ann was surprised to find that Margaret, despite her gracious decorum, seemed cloaked in a veil of sadness. John’s demeanour was harder to read...as if he wore a mask, hiding his true feelings. She recalled suddenly where she had observed that same guarded expression...when they had travelled to the Exhibition together...and she felt certain that the cause was the same now, as it was then...John Thornton was depressed.

Puzzled and troubled that this could actually be the case, she continued to watch for anything that would explain her suspicion. After greeting everyone, they stood apart from the larger group and remained near Nicholas and Mary Higgins. From the tittle-tattle in the room, Ann had

learned that Nicholas Higgins was one of John's hands and had been the leader of the strike that had broken the back of Marlborough Mills. That they could all be so companionable after what had taken place between them was astonishing! These Thorntons were unusual people, she surmised, disregarding the rules of polite society and, some would say, common sense. John and Margaret seemed to have a special bond with Nicholas Higgins that drew them to him during a time of obviously low spirits for them both. Intrigued, and liking John and Margaret the better for it, she also hoped to become acquainted with Nicholas and Mary Higgins, as well.

Despite the sadness she detected surrounding the newlyweds, they appeared to find peace and contentment standing together as they spoke to Mr. and Miss Higgins, but that moment was destined to be short lived. An elderly gentleman carrying a brief case in one hand was announced, and as he approached John and Margaret, Ann recognized him as an acquaintance of her father, an attorney from Milton. Too far away to overhear their conversation, her mind began to wander to the meal that they would soon share together and how her stomach was beginning to rumble. Glancing around, hoping nobody was near enough to hear, she happened to look in the direction of John, Margaret and the Higgins's once again, and her attention became fixed, as a look of pained incredulity crossed Margaret's face and John's expression shifted from anguish to coldness. Nicholas Higgins seemed alarmed as he looked back and forth between them, confirming Ann's assumption that something was very wrong. Abruptly, John Thornton broke from the group, and not wanting to be caught spying, Ann looked away quickly only to be startled by the sound of his voice close by, asking for the honour of escorting her to dinner! She could not help but glance at Margaret who watched her husband as if her heart was breaking, and she saw Nicholas Higgins put a protective arm around her shoulders.

Having begun to admire and respect Margaret, this turn of events disturbed Ann exceedingly. Turning to John, she stammered her appreciation for his kind offer, but asked if he could allow her a few minutes to visit the comfort room. Bowing courteously, he stood to one side, allowing her to pass before him. As Ann made her way across the room toward the doorway, she noticed that Margaret was also moving in the same direction with the attorney, Mr. Pryor, following behind her. The two women arrived at the doorway simultaneously and a look was exchanged between them during which Ann witnessed sadness in Margaret's eyes, as Margaret perceived compassion and concern in Ann's. Allowing Ann to pass first, Margaret entered a room off the foyer while Ann found her destination down the hall.

Confused by what had taken place, Ann needed time to recover and regain her composure. Her mind spun as she thought of John seeking *her* out for his dinner partner and of Margaret's distress. What could it mean? Was she the only one to notice that everything was not right between the Thorntons? Nicholas Higgins knew something, she felt certain, remembering the look of concern on his face as Margaret walked away with the lawyer. Making a decision to be true to her sense of integrity and loyalty toward Margaret, she was determined to remain aloof

and disregard any attention John might pay her. Fearing that she had taken long enough in her deliberations, she took a deep breath and left the comfort room, very anxious about how the evening would develop.

As Ann walked down the hallway, she could not help but overhear a portion of Margaret's conversation with her attorney in an adjacent room. "Mrs. Thornton, I neglected to get your signature on the triplicate form to be submitted to the Bureau of Records. I know you were understandably anxious for the submission of the paperwork as soon as possible, so I persuaded myself that stopping here tonight would not be impertinent on my part," said the kindly attorney. Then Ann heard Margaret say, "Oh, Mr. Pryor, if you only knew the mischief that this has caused!" The poor gentleman must have looked alarmed because Margaret quickly continued, "But, you would have no way of knowing that. It's just that I wanted to keep this from my husband...Please! Forgive my outburst, Mr. Pryor. Where do I sign?"

Her alarm increasing by what she had just overheard, Ann re-entered the parlour where the guests still remained waiting for John Thornton to lead the way into the dining room. He looked up as she approached, but then his gaze moved beyond her momentarily, his eyes revealing pain for the briefest second. Grasping her hand gently, he entwined her arm through his own as he turned and began the procession to dinner. Ann could not keep from glancing over her shoulder, and to her dismay, she saw a tearful Margaret standing in the doorway of the parlour watching John and her lead the rest of the guests to the dining room, as Nicholas Higgins extended his arm to Margaret, clearly offering himself as her escort. Ann's hopes for an enjoyable evening slipped away, and in her heart she whispered a prayer for her friends.

### **CHAPTER 13**

A very heavy rain was falling when Mr. Pryor left the Thornton residence, and from the doorway, Margaret watched him struggle with his umbrella when a gust of wind turned it inside out as he hurried to his carriage. Eventually, she closed the door and leaning against it, she closed her eyes, trying to shut out the memory of her husband's outraged glare. His confidence and trust in her had deteriorated rapidly, and the pain was more than she could bear. *Will we ever be able to come together as friends and lovers again? I can't go on without his love.*

They had stood close to one another while talking with Nicholas and Mary, and she had basked in the glow of his nearness. Was it just her imagination that John's hand had grazed hers several times as they stood with their arms by their sides? *I'm sure I felt his passion, as well as my own, increasing every second...and then everything changed. Mr. Pryor! Oh, why did he come here*

*tonight, of all nights? The worst possible timing! Just as I began to sense a thaw between us, Mr. Pryor interrupted, making John angry for some reason...and now he's more upset than before...as if I had betrayed him...again.*

Margaret heard the call to dinner and the movement of their guests as they assembled to enter the dining room. She sighed, wondering how John would accept her plea for his forgiveness. Would he believe that she was sorry and did not mean the terrible things she had said? There was only one way to find out, and moving away from the door, she entered the parlour and then stopped, her eyes obviously deceiving her. John was facing Miss Latimer, and then his eyes locked with Margaret's for a brief instant before he turned and took the young woman's hand and drew it over his arm. Margaret watched in tears as he and Ann Latimer lead the way to the dining room. The remainder of the guests took their places behind them, and a slight murmur could be heard at Thornton's unorthodox decision not to escort his own wife to dinner on the occasion of their first dinner party.

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Nicholas clenched his jaw in anger, never imagining he could feel such contempt for his friend. How could he deliberately hurt his wife, shunning and shaming her in front of their guests? How could he turn his back on Margaret, a lovely combination of beauty and tenderness, leaving her behind, alone and disregarded? It was true that John had received a terrible blow to his pride by Margaret's thoughtless reminder that he had failed...and that it was only because of her that he had been able to rise again from the ash heap, but those words had been uttered during the heat of an argument. Didn't he know her?...Didn't he understand that she had done it all for *him*, coming back under the pretence of making a sound business investment, but really wanting to invest in *him*...in *them*? She had returned to Milton, a place of sadness and loss for her, because she could not keep away, knowing that she had the means to help him. But it was more than that...

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After arriving in Milton again, when Margaret had failed in her attempt to speak with Mr. Thornton, who had mysteriously disappeared without a trace, concerning her 'business proposition' and had only seen his bitter mother at the mill instead, she had walked with Henry Lennox through Milton's main street for what she assumed was the very last time. Suddenly, she had spotted Nicholas on the opposite sidewalk, and making an excuse to her companion that she needed to speak to a friend and begging that he would give her a half hour before rendezvousing at that same location, she had crossed the street and run after Nicholas, calling his name breathlessly. He had spun around and seeing her, his face had lit up with pleasure, and after a heartfelt hug, Nicholas invited Margaret to join him at a nearby tea room where they could talk.

After questioning one another excitedly on how things were with each of them, Margaret was suddenly unable to meet his eye as she described her 'economic' reasons for wanting to meet with John. Nicholas watched her shrewdly, his lips pursed, but his eyes gave away his suppressed amusement. When she had finished speaking, he had said dryly, "Margaret, remember that it's Nicholas that you're speaking to...Tell me why you *really* came to see Thornton." Blushing and flustered that he could see through her story so easily, she had dropped all pretense and confessed the truth...that she sensed John needed *her* and not just her fortune. He needed her the way a man, who is wounded and tired of being alone, needs a woman...as a helpmate. Nicholas knew the money had nothing to do with her seeking John out. Margaret would have come to him even if she was penniless, willing to share his fate, sink or swim, if he had just given her a *sign* that she was restored to his good graces and had regained his respect after her brush with the law and her supposed indiscretion at the train station that night. Lacking that communication from him, she had used the excuse of her fortune, as well as his need, to justify coming to *him*... because she loved him.

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To be loved by a woman the way Margaret loved John was something to be treasured and protected, Nicholas believed. As he watched John walk off with another woman on his arm, he thought, *Do you know what you're doing, man? If Margaret was of the working class, and I was twenty years younger, I would have tried to win her myself! You don't know what it is to be loved by a woman and then have her and the life you have shared together suddenly taken from you...your life becoming a barren wasteland with nothing to look forward to but work and worry...and loneliness. But to willingly give up such a woman and such a life?...I told her you were no fool, John...but perhaps I was wrong.*

Margaret looked sorrowfully at Nicholas. There was no need to explain to him what she was feeling since she could see the concern, as well as the fury, in his expression. How prophetic was her utterance that she would need him as an ally...to help her get through the evening! As this thought crossed Margaret's troubled mind, Nicholas approached her and asked softly, "May I have the honour of escorting you to dinner, Margaret?" Unable to speak, she nodded and he crooked his arm, smiling sadly into her tear-filled eyes.

Looking straight ahead, but seeing nothing, Margaret poured out her agony in silence. *John! You're breaking my heart! I am standing at the end of the dinner procession at our first dinner party...instead of on your arm... And yet, I know that I deserve to be humbled for my arrogance...I just never expected that it would be by you...or that it would hurt so badly! Lord, I*

*have placed all of this in your hands...Please! Help him to believe in me...and love me again!* her heart cried, as she grasped Nicholas' kindly offered arm tightly.

What would she have done without Nicholas? Or without Hannah, for that matter? Her two unlikely allies, Nicholas and Hannah were the only ones who knew all that had transpired that day and could understand what she and John were enduring. She caught a glimpse of Hannah, several couples ahead, as she looked around, wondering what had become of her. Spying Margaret on the arm of Nicholas Higgins, as they brought up the rear guard, was not what Hannah had expected or wanted to see. Her mouth clamped shut and when she caught Margaret's eye, she shook her head in disapproval, but Margaret, with a sad smile, signalled that she was resignedly content.

*The waiting is over! I will soon know where I stand with him!* she thought, as the dining room doors were thrown open by two servants. In the ensuing draft, wind and rain immediately rushed in through the open windows, blowing napkins, place cards and flowers helter-skelter around the room. John rushed in to shut the windows, and then returning to Ann Latimer, he escorted her to the far end of the table, seating her in the place of honour at his left hand, and then he took his seat at the head of the table.

As the others took their places, Nicholas seated Margaret at the opposite end of the table from her husband, and when he seemed hesitant about where he himself should sit, Margaret touched his arm saying, "Nicholas, your place is next to John." Looking down at her intently, he said quietly, "Are you sure of that, lass?" Moved that he did not wish to desert her, her eyes filled up once again. Margaret swallowed the lump in her throat, and whispered in a small voice, "Yes, Nicholas. I am sure." She gave his arm a gentle squeeze of reassurance...something she did not feel at all.

The servants scurried around reclaiming fallen napkins, place cards and flowers from about the room. Margaret watched their movements expectantly, as new linens were furnished, flowers were quickly rearranged and the room was restored to order. A look of confusion and disappointment appeared on her face, as if something she had greatly anticipated had been left undone. Dismayed, she thought, *This dinner party is beginning disastrously for more reasons than one!*

Margaret's gaze shifted to John at the opposite end of the table. He did not seem to be aware of the presence of Ann Latimer sitting next to him. Knowing him as she did, she could detect the despair under which he laboured, and it broke her heart. His eyes were clouded over, and his posture revealed his defeat. That he was as dispirited as she was obvious. He looked up

suddenly, as if sensing her gaze upon him, and he returned it steadily. She could hear the question that she saw in his eyes. *How could you betray me...and our love?* She looked entreatingly into his eyes, willing him to receive her answer. *Forgive me, John! I have broken covenant with you, I know...I have failed to honour you and respect you, my love...I need your forgiveness...your mercy!* Overcome with emotion, Margaret closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Strangely moved by this sight, John continued to observe Margaret as she tried to recover her composure. Eventually, he watched her turn to Mary Higgins, who sat at her right hand, as she attempted to make conversation with her and Doctor Morgan on her left. Reminded by this sight of his duties as host, John sighed and turned to Ann Latimer only to discover that she was looking at him steadily, her expression one of compassion and concern.

Placing her hand on his, as it rested on the table, she asked quietly, "Mr. Thornton, are you unwell?"

At this direct and unexpected inquiry about such a painful subject, John looked down at the table, unable to speak. As she continued to witness his depressed demeanour, convinced more than ever that he and Margaret had become estranged from one another, Ann felt Nicholas Higgins, who sat opposite, observing her. Looking up at him, she found him staring piercingly at her. As he tried to read her intentions for making such a familiar gesture toward John, he asked himself, *Who is this 'pretty face'?...An opportunist, ready to move in at the slightest sign of trouble in Paradise, perhaps?* Ann swallowed, knowing that she was being measured by this man who glared at her, but her conscience was clear, and she met Nicholas' gaze without wavering.

At the same time, Hannah, who sat beside Ann, had also observed the intimate overture that she had made to John, and her womanly intuition was aroused at once. *What is Miss Latimer up to?* As indignation consumed her, Hannah lowered her gaze, debating whether she should intervene, and finally making a decision to do so, she turned to the young woman angrily and was on the verge of discreetly chastising her when she discovered that, although Ann's hand still remained on John's, her attention was no longer focused on him. Hannah followed her gaze until it rested on Nicholas Higgins, sitting across from Ann, his eyes locked on the young woman. Hannah's attention was suddenly transfixed by the intensity and intelligence of his expression as he riveted Ann in his penetrating glare, and she knew that he also had observed Ann's caress of John's hand and was experiencing the same outrage as she.

Discovering a kindred spirit in Nicholas Higgins, knowing that his response was identical to hers, astonished and mysteriously gratified Hannah, and she found she could not look away,

feeling an irresistible urge to gaze at his handsome countenance. The intimacy and connection that she suddenly felt with him, as she seemed to read his thoughts, caused her heart to beat a bit faster and a rosy flush to spread across her face. At fifty-two and a widow, it had been quite some time since she had felt such a sensation, and she rebuked herself for allowing it, not understanding what it could mean...and then slowly, as if hearing her thoughts, Nicholas' gaze shifted, and he was looking intently into *her* eyes, holding her captive, and then she knew what it was that drew her to Nicholas Higgins. As if a curtain had been drawn back revealing the heart of the man...she suddenly understood him.

### *Chapter 14*

As he scrutinised her, Ann Latimer looked innocently up at Nicholas, and he could detect neither guilt nor remorse in her eyes or expression, only openness...and courage, he believed, since she exhibited none of the fear that his intense examination often instilled in grown union men, some quaking visibly, as they scrambled to make excuses for their erring ways. He began to suspect that her intentions were, indeed, without guile and that he had been too hasty to judge her. Perhaps she *was* genuinely concerned for Thornton, who was obviously downcast following his misunderstanding with Margaret.

Nicholas had been very angry at John's rude, uncaring treatment of his wife that, when taking his seat beside John moments earlier, he had been sorely tempted to give his friend a fatherly swat to the back of his head. Now, Nicholas' heart went out to him, seeing how depressed he was and knowing that his pride had received a terrible blow... the betrayal by someone he loved and trusted, no less. Nicholas had misjudged John's impulsive decision to escort Miss Latimer to dinner. There was no interest in the young woman here, only a desperate need to cover his wounds and retain some self-respect. *Not doing a very good job of it, I fear. I've never seen a man so low without death being the cause!*

As these thoughts went through his mind, Nicholas felt, rather than saw, Hannah Thornton's attention turn in his direction. He was aware that she, too, had witnessed the young woman placing her hand on her son's hand by the slight, huffing breath she exhaled and the sudden straightening of her posture as she turned to Miss Latimer purposefully. When Nicholas sensed her gaze upon him, finally drawing his attention from the young woman, he was captivated by the expression on her face and in her eyes, as she appeared to watch him in fascination, and for a brief moment, they could not look away from one another...

Nicholas shook himself. What was he thinking, looking at Hannah Thornton so directly? She was Thornton's mother and had a reputation for abruptly putting in their place those who overstepped their bounds or shirked their duties at the mill. Thankfully, he had had no opportunity to witness that side of her personally, since his promotion to the respectable position of head foreman made him an unlikely target. In addition, Hannah Thornton's avoidance of him, stemming, he suspected, from her distrust of him and his history of organising the workers against the masters, made the intersection of their paths infrequent. Although, on one occasion, to Nicholas' amusement, while he talked with John at the bottom of the steps that lead up to their house, Mrs. Thornton had stepped out of her doorway, apparently intending to run an errand, and when she saw him at the bottom of the steps, essentially blocking her path, she had quickly stepped back inside the house and closed the door. *God forbid that she should actually speak to me!* he had laughed to himself at the time.

This evening, however, he and Mrs. Thornton had appeared to circumvent the barriers that separated them by unexpectedly sharing an emotionally charged experience involving persons whom they both loved. *Perhaps now she will believe that I am a true friend to her son and to Margaret... But then again, she might not take kindly to someone outside the family circle witnessing their troubles,* Nicholas warned himself.

He was confused by the seemingly fascinated expression on her face when he spied her watching him. *What did that look signify? Should I be flattered, or was she merely surprised that I am capable of intelligent thought?* He was nettled by the latter theory, but that disagreeable impression was quickly superseded by a more agreeable one, as he continued to review their brief, yet interesting encounter. He could not deny the pleasure he felt as their eyes met and lingered momentarily. For a brief moment, he felt he could see into her soul. What did he see there? He saw a woman who had strong character and clear-headedness and who loved her son and daughter-in-law enough to fight to protect them. Nicholas smiled to himself, thinking that he and Hannah Thornton were more alike than she would care to admit, since fighting to protect John and Margaret from anyone who would do them harm was his inclination precisely.

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Suddenly embarrassed that she had revealed too much of herself to this stranger in that unguarded moment, Hannah turned her gaze away from Nicholas Higgins self-consciously. Her spontaneous, instinctive admiration for him surprised her. She barely knew him. Oh, she knew *of* him from John who had come to respect and trust him, a fact that had not pleased her. He had been, after all, a strike leader, and up until recently, just a worker, one of the hands who worked at the mill, but John quickly promoted him soon after the re-opening of Marlborough Mills.

According to him, Nicholas Higgins was a natural leader, able to motivate and inspire the workers to greater diligence. John believed that under different and better circumstances, Nicholas could have easily become a successful mill owner given his natural abilities and intelligence and attributed much of the credit for the quick re-starting of the mill in large part to Nicholas Higgins' influence and popularity over the flood of willing workers that were recently hired.

It was this very influence that had frightened Hannah the most, assuming its origin was a self-centred quest for power, but that theory had been damaged as she watched John's friend demonstrate that, like her, he was ready to confront Miss Latimer. She knew, without him saying a word to her on the subject, that he loved her son and Margaret very much and would defy anyone who stood between them. Hannah generally concurred with John's opinions and trusted his judgement, but in the case of Nicholas Higgins, she was ashamed to admit that she had chosen prejudice and ignorance over truth. Gratified beyond words that her son had such a ferociously faithful friend and that she had the opportunity to learn the truth about him finally, she whispered to herself, *God bless him!*

As she was reminded of John and Margaret's dilemma, Hannah winced inwardly. She had been mortified by her son's disregard for his wife's feelings. She understood his pain, but could not condone his actions. Margaret was in pain, as well, and Hannah's heart ached for her. How would this evening end? They must come to an understanding! Miss Latimer seemed to sense John's low spirits, too, and Hannah had suspiciously wondered what was behind her seemingly sensitive inquiry. During the pause that her examination of Nicholas Higgins afforded, and after a few moments of reflection, Hannah admitted that Ann's actions might have been innocent, and decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. However, the real danger she feared was that, in spite of Miss Latimer's good intentions, John's wounded heart could be influenced by such kind-hearted words from a sympathetic, pretty young woman.

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At the same moment as Hannah's and Nicholas's reveries, Ann was lecturing herself for foolishly touching John Thornton's hand. She was not too naive to understand the implications of such a move. Mr. Higgins's baleful look and Mrs. Thornton's rigid posture and huffing made it clear that they had misinterpreted her motive. She had been genuinely concerned by the look of desolation upon John's face. Sympathy had welled up within her, and she had felt the necessity to do *something* to help him, and before she knew what she was about, she had reached out and touched his hand. Another lesson in the consequences of precipitous action!

At school, Ann Latimer had been the one to whom others had frequently turned when unburdening themselves of their troubles. She was known as a wise and sympathetic counsellor, but it had not always been so. Experiencing a personal crisis when her mother had passed away several years before, she had gone through a valley of deep depression and had only emerged with the help of a kindly pastor who shared the heavenly solace that comes from God's word. Receiving the healing comfort promised in the bible, she read the scriptures daily from that point on, and her wisdom grew accordingly. Realizing her gesture to John had been too personal and unwise, she chastised herself, *Will I ever learn to think first before acting? What must they think of me? But Lord, you know my heart. Do not allow my indiscretion to hurt John or Margaret... There is something terribly wrong here! Please help them!*

This silent petition was interrupted, when John began speaking softly words that were audible to the hearing of Ann, Hannah and Nicholas only. "Yes, Miss Latimer, I am unwell. I am in the midst of a dark storm that rages all around me. I cannot see the light of day, God help me!"

As Nicholas gazed at him with a look of deep sadness etched on his face, and as Hannah's eyes filled with tears, Ann Latimer opened her lips and began to deliver the words that were being poured into her heart for John to hear. She said,

*"...Love bears all things...believes all things...hopes all things...endures all things."* After a slight pause, she added, *"Love never fails."*

## ***Chapter 15***

Like an early spring breeze that blows unexpectedly after a long winter, the words Ann spoke washed over John bringing with them the fragrance of new life, a whisper of what is promised. He looked at her in wonder, and his eyes filled with tears unaware, as the meaning of her words sifted slowly into his mind and blossomed in his heart. Closing his eyes and bowing his head, his heart grasped at the hope that beckoned to him one last time. *Can these words be true for me and Margaret? Am I to walk in love no matter what befalls us?.....To bear?.....To endure?.....To hope?* His thoughts were slowly carried back to a scene in a church where Margaret had said:

*"John, my dearest love!... I take you to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, 'til death do us part ...according to God's holy ordinance...I pledge you my love and faithfulness...for the remainder of my days!...Everything I am, everything I have is yours, from this moment forth, and for eternity!"*

Then she had lifted his hand to her lips and tenderly kissed it!

Lost in a world of his own, John had lingered in that precious moment in time, but eventually awareness of where he was returned, and he opened his eyes. Only seconds had passed, but eternity was changed in his heart. As healing of his broken spirit took place, his soul and body were renewed, as well. The storm raging around him had subsided, and a light now shone on the path ahead of him...

*....Love bears...endures all things!... Lord willing, they would survive this storm!*

*....Love believes...hopes all things!... He now chose to believe what had seemed impossible.....the restoration of his love covenant with Margaret.*

*Love never fails!... He would not fail Margaret or abandon her! He would not give up on their love, but instead, allow his love for her to dictate his actions in spite of circumstances.*

John turned to his mother, and he saw the love and concern on her face. Moved by tenderness, he grasped her hand gently and smiled. With his other hand he grasped the hand of Nicholas who watched him, greatly moved, sensing that reality had been altered right in front of him, and he grasped John's hand tightly. Retaining his hold on each of their hands, John looked deeply into Ann's eyes and smiled. *Thank you...Thank you!* he said silently. Ann nodded and then slowly closed her tear-filled eyes.

Rising to his feet, John addressed his guests. "Excuse me, my friends....," he said, and as the murmur of conversation slowly subsided, he repeated, "Excuse me...I want to take this opportunity to thank each of you for coming tonight. You all have come to mean so much to us, and we are honoured that you are here tonight, helping us to celebrate our first dinner party...And so on this occasion, I will ask you to join me in a toast." As the guests picked up their glasses and turned to John, he held his own glass in front of him and then looked directly at Margaret. Her heart pounding, she gazed at him apprehensively, uncertain of what lay ahead. "I would like to propose a toast...to my wife," he said, his voice choking, "...my lovely wife...my help mate...my friend!"

Those around them lifted their glasses to her, while Margaret gazed in astonishment at her husband, and tears began coursing down her cheeks. *Can this be true?* she asked herself in disbelief. As the others drank the toast offered in her honor, Margaret watched John sip his drink, his eyes never leaving her face. *He has forgiven me...and yet he does not know all! My heart is overwhelmed!*

John thanked their guests and prepared to resume his place when he noticed that his napkin had fallen from his lap to the floor, and bending to retrieve it, he spotted a roll of paper under the table, nearby. *Blown here by the wind gust, no doubt!* he guessed. With a puzzled look on his face, he picked it up and placed it on the table. It appeared to be a scroll, tied with a red ribbon. *What is this?* Untying the ribbon carefully, he opened a single piece of paper, a document, which he quickly scanned until he stopped, his gaze riveted on one sentence. His breathing deepened and his eyes misted over as he read:

*I, Margaret (Hale) Thornton, do freely and without constraint, relinquish all ownership of, and rights over, the properties and buildings known as Marlborough Mills, as well as all personal income and monies, to be transferred to the sole possession of John Thornton. Being of sound mind, I do this willingly...*

John looked up at Margaret, his eyes wide with agony and amazement, and a stifled sob escaped him as he beheld her tearful, smiling face. An exquisite dialogue followed, as they gazed at one another across a table full of people, most of whom were completely unaware of the passionate conversation taking place.

John smiled as joy flooded his entire being. *Margaret! .....Margaret! You did not have to do this! Forgive me for my overreaction.....my petty pride was wounded, but I should not have doubted you, my love! Forgive me my foolish suspicions! You are the goodness that God reminded me of today, and I do not deserve you! I love you, Margaret!.....* his heart cried to hers.

Her heart answered, *John, my dearest love, for you will always be dearest to me!....I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your forgiveness! I behaved so badly to you, John.....I mistrusted your judgement and abused the gift from God that you are...and yet, in spite of my prideful behaviour, you have been merciful to me, and honoured me before our friends...I am humbled by your goodness!*

Simultaneously, as if by some secret understanding, John and Margaret rose to their feet. As the table conversation subsided in anticipation of an announcement, John, his eyes caressing her lovely face, said in a deep, throaty voice, “Margaret, may I speak to you privately?” “Certainly, John,” she answered. He made his way to her side of the table and pulled back her chair. Holding out his arm to her, she grasped it tightly and, without looking back, they walked out of the room, never taking their eyes from one another.

John escorted Margaret into his office and shut the door. Leaning against it, he looked at her earnestly, his heart pounding as joy and the love he felt for her washed over him. He was

enthralled by her beauty, as she stood in the centre of the room, trembling...yearning for his love and his touch. Finally, his passion overflowed, and he moved quickly to her, unwilling to wait another second before taking her in his arms. As relief, regret, joy and love moved their hearts, they wept, clinging to one another. Through their tears, they whispered to one another simultaneously, "Forgive me! Forgive me!" Then John was kissing her...his lips relentlessly seeking hers. Afraid to let her go, he held her tightly, and Margaret, set free from any reserve, ran her fingers through his hair, her heart delirious with joy. Gazing longingly into his eyes, she smiled. "I love you, John Thornton," she said softly, and with a look of intense love and desire, she grasped his face between her hands and began kissing him passionately, hoping he would understand how desperately she loved him and needed him...His heart pounding, he was incapable of ignoring her invitation, and he pulled away from her suddenly. Reaching behind him, he opened the door, and while still grasping her other hand, he pulled her out of the room. He lifted her in his arms and climbed the stairs with her, her arms flung wildly around his neck and her face buried against his cheek.

Oblivious that their first dinner party was taking place down stairs, they were lost to everything but what they saw in one another's eyes...and so, determined to experience fully the goodness and mercy that had been granted to them that day, John carried his Margaret across the threshold of their bedchamber, their haven, and closed the door behind them.....

## THE BEGINNING

"You anoint my head with oil,  
and my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me  
all the days of my life."

(This story is only Part I of IV parts...so far!)

