
A Twist of Fate

Chapter One – Unexpected Changes

It was early still, with only the first pink tinges appearing on the horizon, when John Thornton surveyed the sleeping form of his wife and smiled. It was almost a dozen years since they had married, but time had hardly aged her and she was still beautiful. Observing his watch, he reluctantly rose, lightly kissing his wife's cheek, feeling a small bubble of warmth well up in his chest as she smiled unconsciously in her slumber.

He still remembered how they had met as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. He still remembered her still form, the slow trickle of deep red from her temple which had contrasted so starkly with her ashen face. He still remembered the panic he had felt, how she had felt in his arms as he had carried her inside, how he had frantically rushed for a doctor. How he had ventured to call upon her the next day, despite his mother's disapproval of his showing so much attention to the family newly moved to Milton. How he had gone there to ask after her, to find out how she was, and... he knew not what.

Hardly a day went by that he did not silently thank God for not taking her away from him before he had even had a chance to realize what she would mean to him.

Thoughts of how they had first met and their courtship were at the forefront of his mind due to a visit that was expected later that day; he was not sure why exactly they were passing through Milton, but he would probably find out today. Sighing, he pushed away his ledgers and put down his pen. He clearly was not going to get any more work done today, so he made up his mind to go back to the house to assist his wife prepare for their guests.

‘Who are our guests again?’ she had asked the previous night, as she traced lazy circles on his chest.

He had been drifting to sleep a minute previously, but suddenly he became alert. Momentarily he stiffened before forcing his muscles to relax. ‘Just some old friends of mine from London,’ he said, as carelessly as he was able. ‘You don’t know them.’

‘Oh,’ she had said. ‘I see.’

Before she could open her mouth to ask any more questions, he cut in, his voice rather more brusque than he had intended. ‘It’s late; you should get some sleep. We have a long day tomorrow.’

She had said nothing more, but the gentle movements of her finger on his chest stopped.

She had been flitting about the house anxiously all morning, hoping that everything was in order for these special friends of her husband’s. At present there was nothing more she could do and she settled in the drawing room to wait, getting some sewing done while she was waiting, a habit she had picked up from her late mother-in-law.

She smiled as she thought of Hannah Thornton; the woman had not taken kindly to her at first, seeing her as the woman who had come between her and her beloved son, but before she had died they had managed to become friends. In Hannah she had found the mother she had lost, and in her, Hannah had found a daughter she could actually be proud of.

She started at the sound of the door opening, looking up to see her husband enter the room, quite a few hours before he was expected. Her face lit up at the sight of him and as he returned her smile and kissed her on the cheek, she sighed.

Mother, how I wish you were here! I wish you could see how happy I am; I wish you could have known him, known what a wonderful man he is.

Then bringing her thoughts back to the present, she talked her husband through the menu for their guests’ dinner that evening.

That evening, everything was perfect for their guests. She was so curious to see these mysterious friends of her husband's that she did not notice the slight shadow that crossed his face as they entered nor his odd constrained manner in introducing them.

'Elizabeth, this is Mr. and Mrs. Lennox. Mr. Lennox, Mrs. Lennox; this is my wife, Elizabeth Thornton.'

Chapter Two – How It Came to This

Elizabeth stepped forward to shake their hands, smiling in welcome. 'I'm so pleased to finally meet you.'

As they led their guests to the drawing room, she fell easily into conversation with Mrs. Lennox, who seemed a very intelligent, sensible woman, not at all like the stylish airhead Elizabeth was expecting when she first met the London lady. Mrs. Lennox was a tall, almost regal-looking woman: something about her bearing and the way she carried herself instantly commanded respect. She was a very beautiful woman, perhaps a year or two older than her. Elizabeth liked her almost at once; she took an avid interest in the cotton industry and Milton in general, which was more than could be said for many a lady Milton-born and bred.

She was so interested in talking to the Lennoxes that she did not notice her husband's uncharacteristic silence when they were discussing the topic closest to his heart, the cotton industry. She was so engrossed in hearing Mr. Lennox's plans to perhaps begin dabbling in cotton that she did not notice his wife quietly edge away to the window where Mr. Thornton was standing.

'It is good to see the mill-yard so busy again,' observed Margaret quietly, finally breaking the silence.

'Yes,' he said stiffly. Then he inwardly shook himself. He would not give her the satisfaction of mistaking his awkwardness and thinking that he was still bitter about what had happened all those years ago. Accordingly, he was able to temper his voice to a more natural tone as he made

conversation. 'You might like to know that with Nicholas' help, we've started a medical fund for the workers – every week the workers contribute a small fraction of their pay and then when they are ill, they can all afford a doctor's fee.' Seeing her face light up, he added hastily and rather gruffly, 'It is a good business practice, of course. If they receive treatment, their illness is gone sooner and they can return to work sooner.'

Margaret had the grace to suppress her knowing smile. 'I am glad of it.' For a moment they both stood in a silence less awkward and more companionable than before. Then Margaret roused herself. 'Mr. Lennox and I actually came to discuss a matter of business with you.'

A matter of business... How well he remembered the last time he had heard those words or something like them, more than a dozen years ago now...

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He had been waiting in the drawing room of the Harley Street house, waiting for whatever it was that Margaret and Mr. Lennox wanted to discuss with him. He could not imagine what would require her to meet him in person – what was so important that Mr. Lennox could not send him a letter about it?

He suddenly became aware of the fact that this was probably the last time he would ever see her. After a few months without her, though he had by no means forgotten her, the dreams of terrible yearning, the dreams of her in his arms, the dreams which had haunted him for months after her rejection of him, had gradually slowed and stopped. Perhaps this was due to the fact that he hardly got any prolonged periods of sleep anymore, perhaps because he had been so worried about the mill that he could not think of anything else. But seeing her once at last night's dinner party had been enough to bring them back with a vengeance.

And now this one last meeting and then... nothing. He would spend another few months trying to get rid of the dreams and forget her, all in vain.

He started as the door opened and Mr. Lennox and Margaret entered. He shook hands with Mr. Lennox, who gave him a friendly greeting. Then he turned to Margaret, who was not looking at him, instead staring at her shoes. They shook hands briefly, before she hurriedly drew away her own limp hand. He felt a stab of hurt at this, but shook it away impatiently.

They all sat down and Mr. Lennox began. 'Mr. Thornton, my fiancée and I have talked this over together, and we have decided that we would like to invest some considerable capital which she has at her disposal, in Marlborough Mills. We know that we will never find anyone more capable of handling it, so we hope you will accept our business proposition and continue to run it.'

He would be able to continue running the mill – Lennox was investing! His momentary leap of joy was checked, however, as Lennox’s first statement sunk in. *My fiancée and I...* Slowly, he dragged his eyes over to Margaret. She was still staring at her shoes, her face having grown steadily more pale throughout the interview. His eyes lowered their gaze to her left hand, on the fourth finger of which was a lovely new diamond engagement ring.

‘Oh,’ he said. He felt strangely disconnected from reality, feeling as though he was watching all this take place from outside of himself. He felt like an actor in a play, forced to continue reciting his lines, unable to deviate from the script. ‘I... thank you. That is most generous of you and Miss Hale, Mr. Lennox.’ He waited for the contradiction, waited for either Lennox or Margaret to laugh and say that ‘oh no, he had misunderstood. *They* were not engaged, Lennox was engaged to a Miss So-and-So whom he had met at a public assembly a couple of months ago’. It never came.

He hardly attended to what Lennox was saying about him being ‘not obliged to them in any way – in fact it would be him who would be doing them the service. After all, he as a financial adviser knew that he (Thornton) could give them a much better rate of interest than any bank’. He was staring at Margaret, his eyes boring a hole in her, willing her to look up at him, to tell him by look or word that what he was hearing was not true, that it was all lies...

All it needed now was for Margaret to look up at him and throw herself into his arms and he would know that it was only one of his mad dreams. That was alright, he thought; it would be alright if her throwing herself into his arms was only a dream, because that would mean that her being engaged to Lennox was also a dream.

She did not look up. That confirmed it. This was no dream – this was real, every bit of it. For a second he brutally considered throwing the offer of money back in that pale, cold face, and it was only the thought of his mother and his responsibility towards her that stayed this impulse. He stared at her for the remainder of the meeting, but she did not look up once.

He stood up to leave at the end, and then said in a forced casual tone, ‘Oh, I almost forgot – congratulations to both of you. When is the wedding?’

Mr. Lennox smiled, taking Margaret’s hand. ‘On the twenty-first of next month. Do come if you can, Thornton.’

He forced a smile. ‘If work permits, certainly.’ There was no way in hell he would be attending *that* wedding.

Margaret finally looked up at him, raising up luminous eyes in which he could have sworn he saw the first signs of tears forming. ‘Goodbye, Mr. Thornton,’ she said softly, speaking for the first time during the interview. He nearly came undone.

Hurriedly turning away, he exited the room as fast as possible. He would never see her again, he thought. Little did he know that they would meet again once more, thirteen years later...

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Chapter Three – Margaret’s Story

If the recollection of that fateful day was what first occurred to Mr. Thornton at her words about ‘a matter of business’, it was impossible that Margaret would not find it foremost in her mind as well.

Well did she remember that day – she had sat in silence the whole time, staring at her shoes, reciting to herself the reasons why she had accepted Henry Lennox’s second proposal. *I like him*, she repeated to herself, over and over. *He is very intelligent and kind and a very good friend to me. And... this was the real reason why... he saved Frederick. Without him, Fred would never have been able to stand trial, let alone be fully pardoned!* Because of Mr. Lennox’s – Henry’s – superhuman efforts, because of his risking his own career and reputation as a lawyer, her beloved brother was free, and was planning to settle in England with his wife. And he had done it all for her, for love of her – he told her so.

Would it not be churlish to refuse him after all that? And in any case, Mr. Thornton – but no. She had resolved never to think about Mr. Thornton. She had resolved never to dwell upon the Milton manufacturer, the friend of her father’s, the man who had proposed to her and been rejected and yet had saved her from the inquest, the man whose rare smile took her breath away and made her heart beat so fast inside her chest that she thought it would explode. She had resolved never to think about the man she would never see again, especially when Mr. Lennox was making her a proposal of marriage.

‘Yes, Mr. Lennox,’ she had said, the day before Mr. Lennox had invited John – Mr. Thornton – to their Harley Street dinner party. ‘I will marry you.’

And now the man she had resolved not to think about was sitting not two metres away listening to Mr. Lennox – Henry – babble on about their business proposition. She could feel his gaze upon her, but she could not look up. She couldn't bear to see the disgust that would no doubt mar his features as he looked at her – probably he would take Mr. Lennox for the 'lover' he had seen her with at the train station. Suddenly she wished to tell him about that, to make everything clear to him. Fred was safe now, so there would be no harm.

She almost looked up but then was seized with fear that it would be indifference and not disgust that would be on his face. He had told her coldly several months ago that any foolish passion on his part was entirely over. She knew that he had meant it – hadn't those words tormented her for months afterwards? What would he care what she could tell him about Fred? What difference would it make for her to abruptly bring about the topic and babble on like a fool while he merely looked coldly puzzled, having entirely forgotten about the scene he had witnessed at the train station, the very thought of which brought a flush of shame to her face even now, months later?

She would not tell him. He would never know. And as she finally raised her eyes to his and bid him goodbye for what she knew would be forever, she wished she had had the courage to face his disdain and tell him all. Even as he turned away abruptly and strode away, no doubt so disgusted with her that he could not bear to remain in the same room any longer, she wished she could rush after him and slap his face, hard. She wished she could raise a hand to strike him so that he would look at her in shock instead of disgust and she could force him to listen to her and she could tell him everything.

However, she did not call out, he did not turn around, she did not slap him, he did not look shocked, she did not tell him everything, he did not forgive her and confess his love.

In her imagination of the possible outcome if she had called out to him, Mr. Lennox stood obligingly in the background twiddling his thumbs as he intently examined the curtains.

In reality however, Mr. Thornton left and Mr. Lennox was the one who took her hand in his, exultant in the promise she had made to remain with him for the remainder of their lives. She closed her eyes and thought of Fred and, steeling herself, decided to honour her promise. Mr. Lennox was a good man, a good friend – she respected and esteemed him. For now, surely that was enough? And in any case, Mr. Thornton – no. She had resolved never to think of him again. Little did she know that in thirteen years she would *have* to think of him by dint of being in his presence once more...

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Chapter Four – The Other Woman

Elizabeth listened intently as Mr. Lennox told her more about his plans. He and his wife had come to Milton, he explained, to learn a bit more about the cotton industry, and also to go over a business matter with Mr. Thornton. She in turn shared with him some of the many things she had learned about the industry in the years since her family had moved to Milton, and he seemed impressed with the extent of her knowledge.

Elizabeth liked this man – he did not simplify what he was talking about for her benefit and nor did he assume that patronizing manner that some Milton men invariably adopted when speaking to ladies. In that respect, Mr. Lennox reminded her of her husband – neither of these men underestimated her and both actually seemed sincerely interested in hearing her opinion.

She glanced over at the latter man, hoping he was being at least passably attentive and hospitable towards Mrs. Lennox. Really, but she had not seen him look so moody and taciturn since during the first few months of their courtship and marriage. She had never been able to pinpoint the exact source of those occasional bouts of despondency; it seemed too profound to be simply worry about the ups and downs of the mill business. Any questions about what was wrong and entreaties to confide in her had been curtly brushed away, and she could not help feeling hurt, but knowing his family history, she did not probe further, reasoning that he would come to her in his own time.

Despite this and despite their unfortunate first meeting, Elizabeth felt that she and John shared a good relationship. They had progressed over the years to a more harmonious balance from that first meeting where one had been distressed and guilt-ridden and the other unconscious. Now *that* was a story they could tell their grandchildren...

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Elizabeth Maria Brown was the only child of her parents, and probably would therefore have been much spoiled by over-indulgence had not her father been carried away by consumption when she was but a year old. The people of the small town of Cranford where they had lived, twenty miles from Milton, had called it indelicate when her mother had remarried three years later, choosing for her second husband none other than the family doctor who had tried his best to save Elizabeth's father.

Neither Elizabeth nor Mrs. Brown cared what other people said. Elizabeth had a father again, a man who was loved by her first for making her mother happy, and then as she got to know him, for his own sake; and Mrs. Brown had through him discovered that the heart was large enough to love again – and though nobody could ever take Mr. Brown's place, Dr. Bennet had made one for himself.

Fifteen years later, after her mother's death, Elizabeth and her stepfather had decided to make the move twenty miles north to Milton. Dr. Bennet's protégé was quite ready and capable of taking over the Cranford practice, and Dr. Bennet had a month previously received an invitation to Milton from an old friend of his from medical academy in Edinburgh, Dr. Donaldson. The latter was thinking of retiring, and could think of no one better to take over his practice than his old friend, he said. Once her mother, a Cranford woman through and through, had died, there was nothing to keep either the doctor or Elizabeth in the little town anymore. Both felt they would be glad of a change to prevent them from dwelling on her mother's death too much.

Nothing was left to be done except to pack and be off directly. Her stepfather left two days before her, to make the house ready and to have Dr. Donaldson introduce him to the people who would be his future patients.

At first she had protested against this and had wanted to arrive in Milton with him, but his reasons for her staying were reasonable and practical, and anyway in two days she was bundled up in a carriage on the way to Milton, loaded with the trunks which contained everything she had ever owned.

She had been to Milton once when she was a little girl, to visit an aunt who was now dead, or so her mother had said. She had no memory of the city, and in any case it was very much changed over the past sixteen years. It was not like Cranford which seemed ever to be the same; rather it was an ever-changing place, always bursting with new machinery and ideas.

This was the opinion she had formed in the years since it had become her home. At the time she had simply been so excited to be finally seeing a new place that she was prepared to overlook the forbidding grey haze that loomed as the city approached, the haze which she soon learnt was due to the smoke from the factories. This did not matter to her: she was nineteen, she was finally seeing a new city and she had not been this happy since before her mother's death.

She was so absorbed in her own thoughts and in taking in the scenery around her that she did not register the coachman's shout of 'Watch out, man!'. She did not realize anything was wrong until she felt the carriage swerve sharply, causing her trunk which was sitting on the luggage rack behind her head, to slide towards her and slam into the side of her head. For a few moments, she was vaguely aware of the feeling of something warm and wet trickling down the side of her

face as well as a pair of anguished blue eyes watching her, eyes which were set in a face she could not quite make out through the haze in her head and the glass of the carriage window, but then her eyes rolled back into her head and she sank into nothingness.

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Chapter Five – New and Old

Before joining his wife and the Lennoxes at the dinner table, John Thornton's steps had carried him up to the childrens' room to make certain that they had eaten and been put to bed. Sarah the undermaid, who had been the greatest help to the young Mrs. Thornton during and after her first confinement with her presence of mind and her cheerful efficiency, had been promoted to the task of being nursemaid to the new little Thornton, and any that followed. She was now assuring her stern master that his daughters and son had been both fed and put to bed, but still he stepped into the room himself, as if he thought she was lying, she thought with a mixture of amusement and annoyance.

Still, for all his abrupt ways the master was as good a master as one could come by. He was fair-minded if rather strict, gave a generous salary, and his affection for the mistress and his devotion toward his children were touching to behold. Shaking her head and smiling, she went on her way.

Meanwhile, inside the childrens' bedroom 'the master' stood still for several moments, silently listening to the rhythmic sound of their breathing as their chests rose and fell in slumber. Their presence calmed him as nothing and no one else could, not even Elizabeth.

Sighing, he tiptoed out of the room and started to walk back to the dining room before he was missed.

It did not show in Margaret Lennox's face, which was as composed as ever, but the memories associated with the Thornton house, the memories which had been inundating her ever since she had stepped foot into the house and heard the deep voice of its owner once more, were threatening to overwhelm her. Sitting at this dining table, where she had dined once before, long

ago, seeing the front step where she had taken a blow from the rioters – they brought back recollections of a time both after and before Henry.

She felt guilty even thinking about what might have happened, if things had turned out a little differently. She had promised herself thirteen years ago that she would never think of Mr. Thornton in that way again, and would try and be the best wife she could possibly be to Henry, who had given up so much for her. She had succeeded. Henry was there, Mr. Thornton was not. It was as simple as that.

Henry had, in his love for her, entirely lost that sarcastic, materialistic streak in him which she had used to so dislike – he could not be materialistic when he had found his greatest happiness in her and their children. She had discovered in him depths of feeling and tenderness which she could not have possibly imagined in the previously stoic London lawyer.

Sometime between their wedding and the birth of their first child, Margaret had fallen in love with Henry Lennox. It was not the same wild, passionate longing she had once felt for Mr. Thornton; there was something slow and persistent about her love for Henry that made her feel as if it would outlive time and eternity.

Her lips curved upwards slightly and her nerves settled. A bond like the one she and Henry shared could not be shaken by ghosts of the past or an old, half-forgotten girlish love.

He did wonder sometimes. Mr. Thornton could freely admit that to himself, if to nobody else. He did sometimes wonder what it would have been like if his life had taken a different turn thirteen years ago. He tried not to often dwell on the first happenings of that day, the day which had been the most momentous of his life in two senses. By some crazy twist of fate, he had experienced the brutal end of one dream and the gentle beginning of another on the same day...

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After his business proposition with Mr. Lennox and his fiancée – that was how he would refer to her in his head from now on; it would help to keep things clinical as far as possible – Mr. Thornton took the next train back to Milton, returning if possible, more dejected than before.

Perhaps it was unnatural in a man who had gone to London destitute and come back to Milton with sufficient finances to restart his mill and return to his former position as master and magistrate, but Thornton had to admit to himself that he had always harboured a hope, as long as Margaret – that was, Lennox's fiancée – did not marry, that she might change her mind about

him. Even when she had left Milton, this tiny shred of hope had not been totally abolished; not until now.

Arriving in the city at last, Mr. Thornton had the presence of mind to dispatch information to his mother of his intention to go for a walk before he returned home. He did not want to cause her any more unnecessary worry.

He retraced his steps of some three years ago, when he had under somewhat similar circumstances blindly taken an omnibus and walked through the fields on the outskirts of Milton. Then he had managed to come to the conclusion that there never was anyone like her, that he had loved her and loved her still. Now he only hoped to tire himself so with the exercise that he would be too exhausted to dream that night.

It was with this intention that for hours he trudged around fields and cottages, and up and down country roads, reliving Margaret's last words to him.

Goodbye, Mr. Thornton, she had said. Those were the last words he would ever hear in that voice. From now on his only connection to her would be through the letters of business written in her name by her financial adviser and soon-to-be-husband. Involuntarily, his fists clenched. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice the coach whose path he was slowly wandering into, nor did he hear the coachman's shout of 'Watch out, man!'

In the next few seconds everything happened very fast; the coachman swore profusely and swerved sharply off the road to avoid hitting Mr. Thornton who had only just noticed the presence of the coach.

'Miss, are yo' alrigh' back there?' the coachman called, over his shoulder, as he tried to calm the horses. 'Miss?'

Mr. Thornton recovered his senses and began stammering apologies to the coachman, who brusquely brushed him off with a sharp warning and a curt order to look in on Miss while he got the horses in a state to be driven. Ordinarily Mr. Thornton would probably have railed at such a tone of contempt, but today he did not quite feel like himself, and perhaps deep down he knew that he deserved it. Meekly obeying, he hurried around to the side of the carriage and looked through the window.

A pair of large brown eyes blinked slowly back at him and he opened his mouth to enquire after her and apologize for his carelessness when he suddenly noticed the slow trickle of dark red running down the left side of her face from a wound on her temple. His heart leapt into his throat and stuck there, making it difficult for him to draw breath.

Oh God, what have I done? he thought, as he saw the light fade from her eyes as she slumped back into her seat.

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Chapter Six – The Beginning

Elizabeth was satisfied with how the evening was turning out. Her husband seemed to have mellowed a little, and although he still seemed a little distant while he conversed with their guests, he was not as openly disturbed as he had been earlier during the day. She was glad that whatever it was, the worst of it had passed. However, she still saw on occasion the shadow of something dark flit through his eyes as unknown things called up unknown remembrances.

Much as she liked them, she suddenly wished that their guests were gone so that she could truly talk to him, comfort him, soothe away the troubles she could see furrowing his brow. Waiting until she caught his eye, she flashed him the signal that they had established in the first few years of their marriage, but which had lain in neglect for some time now; she put up her hand to her left temple, her gaze lingering on his. A simple gesture unintelligible to others, but fraught with meaning for them.

I love you.

He did not run his fingers over the knuckles of his left hand in the answering gesture. Instead he looked away, returning his attention to what Mrs. Lennox was saying.

She looked at her plate, its image suddenly blurring as she examined it intently. Had he forgotten their secret signal? Had he not seen it? Or did he not want to respond?

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Her head hurt something awful. She felt sore all over, but the centre of the pain was focused around her left temple. She tried to think what had happened to her – had she hit her head on something? Perhaps she hadn't been mindful of the crooked sloping ceiling of her bedroom again.

But no. Surely a mere bump like that would not have caused her to lose consciousness and would not have caused this dull, throbbing pain? She tried to open her eyes and tried to force out a sound from her dry throat, but even the efforts made her feel as if her brain was made of cotton wool. She gave up trying for the moment, hoping that by and by her strength would renew itself if she simply lay still for a while.

She tried instead to concentrate on what she could hear. There were voices murmuring to each other somewhere near her. She could not hear what they were saying, but could hear the rise and fall of their hushed tones as they spoke. One voice was as familiar to her as her own, so long she had heard it; but the other, a low rumble, was unfamiliar.

Unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. Something about the cadence of that voice soothed the sharp stabbings inside her head, and as she started to slip back into oblivion she tried to hold onto its velvety tones.

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Only at one other time in his life, after an event unsettlingly similar to this, had Mr. Thornton felt so relieved, as when Miss Brown had opened those soft brown eyes. She gazed at him in mild confusion for a while, and then spoke, though it was clear that every word was an immense effort. 'My father... where...?'

'I'm here, my dear,' her father the doctor said reassuringly, stepping through the doorway to be at her bedside. 'Don't try to speak, and don't overexert yourself. You've received quite a blow, and much as I know you will dislike it, knowing how much you wanted to explore Milton, I'm afraid I must forbid you to leave your bed for at least a week.'

Her look of unfeigned dismay sent a fresh stab of guilt through Mr. Thornton's already tortured conscience. However, she quickly schooled her expression so as to avoid giving her father any unnecessary pain.

As the doctor and Mr. Thornton left the bedchamber and walked down the stairs to the front door, Mr. Thornton's mind was racing. He felt terrible about what had happened, and knowing it was entirely his fault was even worse. Before he knew what he was doing, he started to speak. 'Dr. Bennet, I know that I am probably the last person you want to see in this house after what has happened, but could I possibly get your permission to visit Miss Brown tomorrow to enquire after her health?'

Dr. Bennet looked at him closely and sternly. 'Mr. Thornton, I cannot immediately forgive the shock and worry your carelessness has caused.' Seeing the younger man's face fall, he paused

for a moment before allowing a small smile to show. 'However, I also have you to thank for acting so promptly and taking care of my Elizabeth until I was able to be here. You may call on her tomorrow.'

Mr. Thornton smiled for what felt like the first time in days. The strangest thing was, he had hardly thought of Margaret once throughout the whole ordeal.

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Over the next few weeks, together they had devoured the works of Miss Austen, Mr. Shakespeare, Mrs. Browning, Mr. Hood, the Bell brothers (Miss Brown particularly admired Acton Bell's novel) and Mr. Boz, whose short stories and novels published periodically in his magazine *Household Words* were new to Mr. Thornton, who thoroughly enjoyed them.

Miss Brown also loved to read, and although their tastes were very different, both were willing to try to understand the other's preferences. She had promised to read Plato's *Republic*, and he in turn had agreed to read Mrs. Radcliffe's *Udolpho*.

They did not always agree on what they read, and this led to lively debates, which Thornton realized with some surprise, that he eagerly looked forward to. For instance, Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* was a point of contention between them. Mr. Thornton, while appreciating some aspects of the story, felt that the author was too biased towards the working class and against the masters, portraying them as unfeeling and indifferent to the plight of their employees. Miss Brown had disagreed and said that while there was some bias, at the end of the novel the master was able to forgive the worker who had murdered his son; she felt that the author's view was more balanced than he would accede to.

Over this time, Mr. Thornton was not entirely unaware of some shift in Miss Brown's feelings towards him. Her face would light up when she saw him and sometimes he would catch her staring at him. She would stiffen and blush whenever their hands brushed accidentally over the pages of their shared interests. She was guileless. He could read her admiration in her eyes, and seeing himself through her eyes, he liked what he saw. It was a nice feeling.

Perhaps it would be a crime against love to say so, but if he had not sensed Miss Brown's obvious interest in him, Mr. Thornton might not have begun to entertain ideas of being more than a friend to her. He liked Miss Brown and enjoyed her company; she was intelligent and very pretty, and he was reasonably sure she liked him as well. And in any case, Mr. Lennox's fiancée would very soon become Mr. Lennox's wife. He could not dwell on the past – he had to look to the future. Then why not...?

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Some might have thought it rather sudden that after only a month and a half of acquaintance, Mr. Thornton of Milton and Miss Brown formerly of Cranford were engaged to marry. The engagement had taken place on the twenty-first of the month after they had met. Mr. Thornton had very deliberately chosen that particular day to propose.

If *she* was going to be moving on, then so was he.

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Chapter Seven – Matters of the Heart (and Business)

They had all agreed that as such a small party it would be ridiculous to follow the ritual of the ladies repairing to the drawing room first and the gentlemen joining them later. Instead they had all gone together, and Mrs. Lennox directed a meaningful glance at her husband as they sat down.

Taking her cue, he sighed almost imperceptibly and began. ‘Mr. Thornton, Mrs. Thornton; my wife and I came here to talk to you about a business proposition we have for you.’ He glanced at his wife as he spoke and she smiled at him, placing a bracing hand on his arm.

Mr. Thornton listened silently, giving his full attention to Mr. Lennox.

Mr. Lennox continued. ‘We have thought about and talked about this a great deal, and we have decided that we would like to offer to sell Marlborough Mills to you. Our business relationship has been both long-standing and rewarding, so my wife and I believe that as we would like to sell, it would only be right to offer it to you first.’

Although the words were coming out of Mr. Lennox’s mouth, he was sure that it was all her idea. Mr. Thornton’s eyes found hers. She gave him a brief smile before she withdrew some papers from Mr. Lennox’s briefcase. ‘Please look over these, Mr. Thornton,’ she said, handing the papers over to him.

He took them, still unable to believe that events had taken this turn. Looking over them, he was startled at the price the Lennoxes had stipulated for the mill. ‘This is ridiculous!’ he exclaimed,

and then before he could stop himself, he burst out, feeling strangely defensive, 'Marlborough Mills is worth much more than this!' Only after he said it did he realize how absurd his words sounded. 'I cannot take it from you for such a pittance,' he amended, his voice firm. He held the papers back out to Mrs. Lennox.

Elizabeth alone knew how much Mr. Thornton had wanted to own his enterprise and she alone knew how much it was costing him to turn down this offer. A part of her screamed for him to accept such a wonderful offer, but a larger part of her was very, very proud of him for his integrity in not wanting to cheat the Lennoxes, who appeared to be unfamiliar with the value of what they were throwing away. She silently placed a comforting hand on his arm so that he knew he had her full support in whatever course of action he chose.

'Mr. Thornton,' Mrs. Lennox said, gently pushing the papers back to him. 'We know of nobody more deserving of owning Marlborough Mills, and certainly nobody more capable of running it. We must insist that you agree to our conditions.'

Elizabeth saw her husband stop and think for a long moment before giving a small nod. She saw him smile softly as he said quietly, 'Very well then, Mrs. Lennox. Shall we resolve our deal in the Milton way?' He held out his hand for her to shake, and as she took it and pressed it in both of hers, Elizabeth observed that both of them had nostalgic, slightly wistful smiles on their faces.

When she had first met these old friends of her husband's from London, she had assumed that he was well-acquainted with *Mr. Lennox*, his landlord and owner of Marlborough Mills. Now, seeing with a pang the moment of understanding between her husband and Mrs. Lennox, she was not so certain. There was a past there, she was sure, and one that she was completely excluded from.

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'Why to him, Margaret?' he demanded in frustration. 'Why are you always so concerned about him?'

Margaret regarded him coolly, unfazed by this outburst. 'Henry, I simply reminded you, that it would only be right to offer the mill to the man who has run it so capably all these years, and who has provided us with such a high return on the capital we invested in him.'

Henry stopped his agitated pacing and scrutinized her closely. 'That's not it, though, is it? If someone else was running Marlborough, you would still want me to offer it to Thornton.'

Margaret's colour rose, whether from anger or embarrassment she did not know. 'What are you implying, Henry?' she asked coldly. 'You might as well say it.'

For a moment, Henry looked as though he had thought better of whatever he had been about to say, but then it burst out before he could stop himself. 'You still care for him.'

Margaret bore this accusation with admirable composure, with no visible change in her features except for a suspicious brightness of the eyes. 'I once had feelings for him, yes. I told you that. But I also told you that I love *you* now.' Her voice revealed some of the hurt she felt now. 'Do you trust me so little that you feel the need for jealousy? Henry, I don't like your unnecessarily hostile attitude towards Mr. Thornton.'

Henry sighed and strode over to her and took her hand in his. 'I'm sorry, Margaret. I'm just petrified at the thought of losing you.'

Margaret squeezed his hand, smiling reassuringly. 'Henry, I am right here and I am not going to go anywhere.'

He returned her smile. 'Very well, Margaret. If it makes you happy, we'll go to Milton next week and I will talk to Mr. Thornton.'

Margaret secretly congratulated herself. This decision to sell to Mr. Thornton might not have been the most sensible to make, but she needed to do it. Their acquaintance had not ended on a positive note and she badly wanted to make amends. Now all she had to do was convince Henry to lower the price. She glanced at him and began to giggle at the thought of his reaction when she broached the subject.

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Chapter Eight – Old Wounds Healed

The Thorntons pressed the Lennoxes to stay the night, assuring their guests that it would be no trouble, and once these kind, hospitable offers were declined for fear of imposing and insisted upon while ridiculing those fears as nothing a few times, everyone was suitably satisfied that they had fulfilled their duty as members of civilized society, and the Lennoxes stayed the night.

The next morning the Lennoxes were to leave. It had been planned to be only a short trip of intermingled business and pleasure, and now nothing remained for them to do in Milton, but to get Mr. Thornton to sign all the paperwork for the purchase of Marlborough Mills. This took up most of the morning, but finally the gentlemen were finished with their business and were able to join the ladies for luncheon.

Mr. Lennox seated himself comfortably at the table before speaking. 'Well, Mr. Thornton, Mrs. Thornton; grateful as we are for your hospitality, I'm afraid we must catch the four o'clock train this afternoon.'

Elizabeth smiled warmly at him, and as warmly as she could manage at his wife. 'You know you are always welcome here, Mr. Lennox, Mrs. Lennox. We hope you will visit Milton more often in the future.'

Mr. Lennox shot an amused glance at his wife. 'Ah, I might visit, but I dare say young John will not want to part with his Mama any more often than absolutely necessary.' Mr. Thornton looked up. 'Our eleven-year-old son,' Mr. Lennox explained, discerning the other man's inquisitive gaze. 'He is very fond of his mother's company.'

Mr. Thornton's eyes were on Mrs. Lennox and his voice when he spoke was carefully casual. 'May I ask why you chose the name, Mr. Lennox?'

'Oh, it was my wife's choice,' Henry replied, taking a sip of wine. Elizabeth looked at Mrs. Lennox in some concern; perhaps the room was overheated, because she seemed rather flushed. 'She wanted to name him for my father, the late John Lennox.'

'I see,' said Mr. Thornton.

Elizabeth ventured to fill the silence that had fallen. 'Did your husband say, Mrs. Lennox, that your son was eleven years old? Our eldest daughter Margaret is around the same age.' Mrs. Lennox looked up.

Mr. Thornton concentrated on his wine glass. Although he could not see her, there was no way he could block out her voice, short of putting his hands over his ears. 'It's a lovely name, Mrs. Thornton,' she said. 'Might I ask why you chose it?' The question was aimed at his wife, but he could feel her eyes on him.

Elizabeth smiled, placing a hand on Mr. Thornton's arm, saying the very thing he had been both expecting and dreading her to say. 'Oh, it was my husband's choice.'

Mr. Thornton had never noticed before, but they really did own quite nice wine glasses. 'May I ask, Mr. Thornton,' he heard his daughter's namesake say softly, 'why you chose the name?'

He looked up at her then, almost glaring, feeling rather exposed. If only Elizabeth's mother had been called Margaret. But no, that unobliging woman had been named Jane. 'I liked the name,' he said gruffly. 'Do I need to provide a reason for my choice?'

All at once a smile broke out on her face, as if a cloud had been removed from the sun, and her eyes sparkled with laughter. 'No indeed, Mr. Thornton,' she smiled, 'we neither of us need a reason.' He could not help smiling back, and he knew in that moment that they both realized that all of their misunderstandings were in the past, and that here and now, at this point in time, they understood one another completely.

And when he could catch his wife's eye, to her great delight he made the old return signal to her, running his fingers across the knuckles of his left hand; for the first time in a long time, he felt totally at peace, and he knew that he was finally ready to confide in her and tell her everything.

Epilogue

While their families were slowly taking leave from the Thorntons, first stating their intention of going home and then finishing off their conversation and moving towards the doorway only to begin a new one which was carried out over there, the two of them slipped off hand-in-hand, unnoticed into the second sitting room.

John wasted only a split second in a grin of triumph before he pulled her to him and placed what seemed like their first proper kiss in days onto her yielding lips (in truth it had hardly been three hours ago, but to people in love, details like this held no meaning). Finally they both sighed and smiled, resting their foreheads together. 'You don't know how long I've been sitting in that room making small talk while wanting to do that,' he said in a low voice, kissing her again quickly.

Margaret blushed. 'Don't tell anyone,' she whispered, her voice lowered as if someone would hear otherwise. 'But me too.' For a few moments, they were simply content to stand silently in each others' embrace.

‘One more day,’ John said softly, his chin resting comfortably on the top of her head, as if it were made to fit there. ‘One more day, and then the world will know what we are to one another.’

Finally, the leave-taking extended to the two lovers as well, and they separated for the night.

‘You know what’s unfair?’ Elizabeth said into the darkness, some time later.

John rolled onto his side to face her. ‘What?’ he asked curiously.

‘Well,’ she began slowly, ‘these past few days, I’ve been thinking about first loves and I just realized that something’s unfair.’

John raised his eyebrows and tried to suppress his grin. He thought he knew what was coming. ‘What would that be, my Lizzy?’

She looked up at him, her large brown eyes very serious in the moonlight. ‘Well, I married my first love.’ She snuggled closer to him as she said this, and he shifted his position slightly to enable him to wrap his arms around her. ‘But you,’ she punched him in the shoulder. ‘You loved someone else before you loved me. And I have no such story to raise the admiration of my gossiping companions – there are no heartbreaks, fist-fights or dreadful misunderstandings in my past!’ She pouted. ‘So you see, it’s really not fair at all!’

He smiled wickedly, trying not to roll his eyes. ‘Would you like a heartbreak, my love? Shall I arrange one for you?’

She waved his suggestion away dismissively, her lips twitching. ‘Oh no, it is too late now! Heartbreaks are only romantic when one is young and resilient.’

He kissed her hair. ‘And we are too geriatric for heartbreaks, at least tonight.’ He dropped the banter, serious now. ‘Try to sleep, love. I know you’re excited about tomorrow, and so am I, but we need to both be in a fit state to attend.’

She settled herself comfortably in his arms and soon the slow rhythm of their breathing was the only sound heard in the room.

The next day saw one of Milton's most memorable weddings as Margaret Thornton became the wife of John Lennox. They made a striking couple and they were obviously very much in love.

The people of Milton noticed the embroidery on the pretty young bride's wedding gown, and they noticed that the handsome young groom's dark suit had been sent for specially from London, and they also noticed that the church had been decorated with yellow roses which none of them had ever seen before in Milton.

What they did not notice, however, was the secret smile shared by the father of the bride and the mother of the groom. A smile that told of shared experiences, fond memories, the slightest hint of nostalgia and even a fraction of disbelief that John and Margaret were finally husband and wife.

The End
