



Girlebooks Presents
Farida Mestek

MARGARET'S REMATCH

Girlebooks Presents

MARGARET'S REMATCH

BY FARIDA MESTEK

© Copyright 2010 Farida Mestek
All Rights Reserved

This ebook was designed and published by Girlebooks.
For more ebooks by the gals, please visit
<http://girlebooks.com>

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other, except for brief quotations in printed reviews—without prior permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author's use of names of actual persons (living or dead), places, and characters is incidental to the purposes of the plot, and is not intended to change the fictional character of the work or to disparage any company or its products or services. The book has not been prepared, approved, or licensed by any persons or characters named in the text, their successors, or related corporate entities.

Cover art by Janice Tarver

Table of Contents

Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	10
Chapter Three	21
Chapter Four	33
Chapter Five.....	45
Chapter Six.....	55
Chapter Seven	68
Chapter Eight	78
Chapter Nine.....	94
Chapter Ten	108
Chapter Eleven.....	116
Chapter Twelve	128
Chapter Thirteen.....	138
Chapter Fourteen	149
Chapter Fifteen	160
Chapter Sixteen.....	174
Chapter Seventeen	188
Chapter Eighteen	200
Chapter Nineteen.....	216
Chapter Twenty	235
Chapter Twenty-One	251

Chapter One

James Westfield was not an idle man and was never known to neglect his duty, unless it concerned his sister-in-law, in which case, like any man facing an unpleasant task at hand he was in no hurry to fulfill it.

It was no secret within the family circle that Mr. Westfield disliked Margaret Fairfax with a passion that defied his sense of duty and obligation. And the fact that he let his emotions, however intense, effect him so as to render his actions almost non-existent was rather shocking for a man who always prided himself on doing his duty and never avoided responsibility before.

Indeed, no one who had any knowledge of his steady character and reputation would ever believe upon hearing that it took James Westfield almost four years to make up his mind and act upon a promise given to his late wife under the most grievous of circumstances.

On this particular afternoon, Mr. Westfield was seated within the solitary comfort of his study with a cup of tea, a frown rapidly taking hold of his face and a newspaper reluctantly put aside for later perusal as he was once again pondering the matter of his sister-in-law and her impending arrival.

He was prompted into this unpleasant contemplation by a report of the most alarming kind that he received early in the morning and that concerned his sister-in-law and her latest display of impropriety. It made his tea taste bitter, the

aforementioned lady's arrival highly unwelcome and the longing to read the newspaper greater still.

It was unfortunate that while her elder sister, Isabella, held such a special place within his heart, Miss Margaret occupied a much more inferior position – that of Mr. Westfield's least favourite person in the kingdom. It seemed that he had made up his mind to dislike her and nothing short of miracle would ever change that.

The origin of his dislike went back to their very first meeting when Margaret – no more than ten at the time – freely and with great feeling of outrage spoke on the subject of Mr. Westfield and his intention of marrying her sister. Mr. Westfield was duly shocked and offended for he was not accustomed to being subjected to preposterous displays of sisterly affection of such kind; the scene created inevitable rupture between him and Margaret and both parties eagerly maintained it in the years to come.

But unless he wanted to see Margaret Fairfax ruined forever, he had to put his personal sentiments of aggravation with the lady behind and complete the task entrusted to him by Isabella. Shaking his head with shame, anger and self-disgust, Mr. Westfield abandoned his chair and decided to take a turn about the room. Having a walk, even within such a confined area, was a fine idea and luckily for Mr. Westfield he was in possession of a finely-proportioned room that invited such an invigorating activity by providing ample space

for stretching one's legs. Whether it was enough to vent off one's bad mood was yet to be seen.

Before long his feet carried him towards the most prominent feature of his study – Isabella's portrait in all her unforgettable beauty. She was sitting by the window, resplendent in the gown of golden muslin against the blue streaked with wispy grey sky outside. He lovingly traced the contours of her face. She was timeless, forever preserved in the glorious strokes on canvas, gazing at him with soft glow of her eyes. Her understanding smile and sweet motionless grace moved him to tears and took him into the realm of joyful memories tinted with sorrow.

At the age of three and twenty James Westfield had the misfortune of losing his father, however, when life robbed him of his esteemed parent it swiftly supplied him with a heartening remedy in the charming person of one Isabella Fairfax. Their encounter took place at Lady Theodora Allingthorpe's private ball, whence he was taken along by a well-meaning friend, and though James was not at all inclined to be entertained at the time, the mere sight of Miss Fairfax was enough to make him stay and pursue her acquaintance.

He was taken in at once by the softness of her smile, her earnest eye and not a trace of artificial affectation about her. She reminded him of a Greek goddess as she gracefully moved across the room in her white flowing dress, ringlets of fair hair neatly held in place as if by magic and her marsh-like green eyes shining with laughter and wisdom, striking in someone so young.

They were married soon afterwards and had a son. It was a perfect and beneficially equal match, but after a few years of its blissful felicity Isabella's health gave way to illness that strongly resisted treatment of the time. As her life was being cut short, she entreated her husband to bring her younger sister to Northbrook Hall to make sure that she came to no harm, for she trusted no one but him and his good judgement to take care of Margaret and guard her interests now that she herself was rendered powerless in this endeavour.

After Isabella's marriage, Margaret remained in London with Lady Theodora – an elderly relative of theirs – on whose account Isabella had some reservations, in particular, concerning her notions regarding the upbringing of young ladies. Having been their victim once, she could not trust Her Ladyship to be the kind of mother figure that Margaret needed at the tender age of fifteen, situated in the very heart of London.

However, in the face of the terrible loss, Mr. Westfield's and Margaret's long-standing feud was put to rest and an uneasy truce was reached when Mr. Westfield himself drove Margaret to her sister's deathbed. Bad feelings on both sides were forgotten and promises of future cooperation were made. It was only natural that while their mutual dislike was strong, their love for Isabella was stronger and it looked like a matter of time before the power of their affection would conquer other – less cordial – sentiments.

But in her next letter, delivered with a rather shaky hand, Margaret revealed that her health was suffering greatly and according to physicians any movement at the time were considered highly inadvisable. She begged Mr. Westfield to put off her moving in until such a time when she was well enough to attempt it without further deterioration of both her body and mind. Mr. Westfield, who was in no better state to entertain guests, least of all questionable ones, agreed to her continuing stay under her Aunt's roof and thus the matter was settled to everybody's satisfaction.

Three years later Mr. Westfield became aware of the fact that his delay, while not entirely unjustified, brought about some undesirable consequences that had to be dealt with instantly. He would go after her, bring her to the country, and scold her and keep her out of trouble in the future, even if it meant not to allow her to step beyond the gates of Northbrook Hall.

Resolutely, Mr. Westfield took some ink and paper and rang the bell. His mother and sister had to be informed, the lodgings had to be prepared and a letter to London had to be composed and dispatched at once.

*

A fortnight later, Margaret Fairfax was sitting in her Aunt's fashionable breakfast-parlour, wistfully looking around and wondering with a kind of sad fondness when she would be sitting here again. But the sigh that she produced soon afterwards was not one of regret but that of relief. After all, she had been stationed in one place long enough to become sensible of certain evils of

her situation. Not to mention that the latest scheme in which she took part was too heavy on her mind and conscience to make her further stay in London a pleasant one.

Unfortunately for the comfortable state of her mind, Lady Theodora despised travelling of any kind and Margaret could not count on any other source that would provide her with a change of scenery but that of her brother-in-law's benevolent invitation, the arrival of which took her completely by surprise. Astonished but relieved, Margaret resolved to exert herself most powerfully in order to establish herself in his favour and household to the best of advantage.

But as the time of Mr. Westfield's arrival drew nearer, Margaret became agitated by the clutter of thoughts that robbed her of her customary composure and disrupted the pleasant solitude that an early morning always supplied her with. She even abandoned her usual pursuit of playing the pianoforte, instead plunging herself into gloomy reflections; reflections of painful nature upon her character, her imprudent behaviour and the wretched outcome of her latest ballroom adventure. Distressed by the recollections and overwhelmed by many instances of her irresponsible conduct, Margaret took to pacing the room, thinking furiously.

What an odious person she had become and how forgetful of Isabella's lessons on all things virtuous and honourable! If only her sister could see her now she would not live down the shame! Was it possible that

only the constant stream of Isabella's advice kept her on the path of goodness and now deprived of her guidance, her faultless moral and the strength of her opinion she was straying far from its original course?

The affair she had helped to unfold was nothing short of scandal and while Margaret's name was not out in the open yet, she feared that if it were to happen, the damage to her reputation would be irrevocable. Therefore, it was prudent to remove herself from London at present and relocate to a place where she would make new acquaintances and forge new friendships, find new things for contemplation and conversation, discover new interests and passions that would fill her life with meaning.

And to add to all that she also needed to acquire a project that would compel her to apply her mind, to exercise her accomplishments and to challenge her dedication. Naturally, such an aspiring scheme required a worthy object and Margaret could not have found a worthier one in any other person (for that was only to be a person) but that of Mr. Westfield – her disapproving brother-in-law.

Margaret was determined to show him that she was worthy of his regard and good opinion and that given the chance he would find her much improved and a valuable companion within his household. However there was still the danger of his discovery as to how she chose to spend her time while in town. And if Mr. Westfield decided to compare her youthful blunders with those of nowadays, her plan to gain his

approbation would instantly fall through under the severity of his disapproval.

The clock struck ten. Margaret started with a gasp and, catching a glimpse of her reflection in the window, sent her maid to fetch the mirror. Meanwhile, she decided to enjoy a breath of fresh air and closing her eyes concentrated on the task. There was something particularly dear about the refreshing force of the spring air that spoke of many a warm and sunny day to follow. Only now did Margaret begin to understand her sister's constant need for more air and her predilection for living in the country where it came in unlimited quantity and much better quality.

When the maid returned, Margaret's cheeks assumed less feverish glow, her spirits were comfortably restored and she happily examined her features in the mirror.

For the occasion of Mr. Westfield's arrival, she made a few but capital changes in her dress and hair-style. Today she wore a plain gown of pale yellow muslin, trimmed with light-green lace and sporting moderately puffed sleeves. Though eye-catching in its simplicity and elegance, it had no place within her London life, but was bound to make a favourable impression on Mr. Westfield, who was a known admirer of simple female elegance and no excess whether in fashion or feelings. Margaret's hair was arranged accordingly in a simple but very pretty way and admitted only an addition of a few ribbons.

As she studied herself and estimated the amount of time, thought and preparation she had undertaken,

Margaret was struck by realization that she had never before wanted to impress anyone so much. She stared in amazement at her image as if seeing it for the very first time. Her wonder transformed into curiosity as her thoughts turned to her two close friends, trying to calculate their reaction to her decidedly new looks. Surely they would be vastly astonished by her appearance!

How great was her own astonishment when, as if on cue, Mr. Clifford Stockley and his sister Catherine were announced and promptly stepped into the room. For one stunned moment the three of them exhibited identical looks of incredulity on their faces. Margaret did not expect the Stockley siblings to visit her so early in the morning, considering how late they said their farewells the previous night, while her guests were indeed shocked to find her so much altered. Pale muslin, not a feather, a bandeau or a jewel and flustered face was not the look one would often spy on Margaret Fairfax in London.

Chapter Two

Margaret was the first to recollect herself, greeting them with a welcoming smile and an enthusiastic hand-shake.

‘Upon my word!’ exclaimed Clifford Stockley, taking her hand for a kiss. ‘Have you decided to give up the city charm in favour of country flavour?’

He looked her up and down and shook his head in wonder.

‘Have I succeeded then?’ asked Margaret archly, twirling for Stockley’s benefit.

‘Succeeded! I daresay you will be laughed out of London before the day is out! Do make sure that Mr. Westfield whisks you away before anyone can get a good glimpse at you.’ he told her teasingly.

‘I will do my utmost.’ returned Margaret and then spoke more gravely. ‘At any rate, it is Mr. Westfield’s good opinion that I seek to engage, not that of my London acquaintances. They do not matter to me anymore.’

‘Then I imagine you will.’ replied Stockley, before addressing his sister. ‘Catherine, do not you find Margaret the most charming creature?’

Catherine inclined her head and smiled but without so much as a hint of her brother’s warmth.

‘Indeed, you look lovely, my dear.’ she said, taking Margaret’s hand and motioning for them to take a turn about the room.

Unlike her brother, she had to spend some time in arranging her thoughts so that she could proceed with all the warmth of an intimate acquaintance. Though she and Margaret were rather close, their station in life was by no means equal and Margaret made matters worse by being too likable to permit Catherine to like her without reservations and that sizzling jealousy that can ruin even the best of friendships.

Near the window she drew them to a halt and facing each other, touched Margaret's chin with superiority of an older and more experienced friend. With an eyebrow raised Catherine's features reflected a delicate trace of disbelief.

'I must confess to being astonished at this extraordinary manifestation. When you mentioned your intentions regarding your brother-in-law, I had no idea that I would find you so much affected on his account. It does make one wonder whether there's more than re-establishing of family ties on your mind.'

Margaret gasped.

'Indeed, Catherine! I do not know whether I should feel offended at you for believing me capable of such deception or flattered that you think so highly of my scheming skills. But I would think that knowing me as you do and seeing as you've been the one I confided in and discussed every detail of the matter, you shouldn't have so completely misunderstood my intentions towards Mr. Westfield.'

Looking her friend in the eye, she added with finality.

‘Believe me, Catherine, I am merely making peace with my brother-in-law. You know very well that it was Isabella’s dearest wish to see us reconciled and I think it is high time we put our misunderstandings behind and proceeded along the path of mutual good will.’

Catherine decided not to press the point any further and swiftly removed lines of doubt from her face, replacing them with a sincere smile, while her mind was busily conjuring up ways in which to turn the present situation to her advantage. Ever since their meeting in Brighton some years previously, where Margaret had been sent to treat her nerves after the loss of her sister, Catherine intended to see her married off to her brother. The fact that they took to each other from the very start of their acquaintance and formed such a strong bond of friendship was very gratifying for her scheming mind. Though several years have gone by without bringing about the favourable outcome of such a promising beginning, Catherine was as determined as ever to see Margaret and Clifford married and herself comfortably settled under their roof as the favourite sister of one and the best friend of another.

But while Margaret’s unhurriedness to enter matrimony did not surprise Catherine, as she was well-established and independent, she was rather dismayed on her brother’s account. Clifford had the sole heiress of a considerable fortune wrapped around his finger and he did nothing but indulge her conviction that they were nothing more than friends. Such a useless course of action exceedingly angered Catherine, for she

had always given them ample space and opportunity to act upon their affection and as she herself had not had a single chance of receiving an offer of marriage from a baronet's son, it was up to Clifford to support their family and improve their situation by entering a suitable match.

And now Mr. Westfield was to enter the scene and ruin it all. He would never acknowledge the connection with the Stockley family as suitable for his late wife's sister and would be a perfect candidate for the part himself! However, Catherine was gratified to ascertain that Margaret's stay in London had not spoilt her and resolved to ensure that once the idea of marriage entered her head it would be in connection with her brother. In fact, she intended to put the idea there herself as soon as she had the chance.

Having thus reassured herself, Catherine now turned to the present where Margaret was angry with her for suggesting that she could have any design on Mr. Westfield and as it was not in her interests to part with her friend on such terms she conceived a sort of diversion. Thus she suddenly exclaimed –

‘But this is the most wretched business! I am awfully vexed at your going away!’

And overpowered by feelings of imminent separation, she took off towards the nearest couch. It should be said that her grief, at least in part, was genuine. Catherine did not wish to part with Margaret as the latter provided her with an access to London's best drawing- and dining-rooms and with her gone the

number of her card-parties and balls would be diminished either in number or quality.

Margaret, aware of her friend's aptitude for dramatics, smiled and addressed a reclining Catherine, whose face was now covered by a gloved hand as if shielding her from sufferings Margaret was about to inflict upon her.

'I must confess that I have my own share of astonishment.' she said teasingly. 'Do you not want to know what this is about?'

Catherine nodded feebly, apparently too weak to speak.

'Allow me to observe that one is not accustomed to seeing you out and about at such early hours of the morning. Indeed, I could have sworn that you had no idea of their existence.'

'This is the most shocking discovery, I admit.' replied Catherine. 'But it is all Clifford's doing. He was quite alarmed on your account, you know. He could not bear the thought of your having breakfast in solitude, without anyone to cheer you up, bid you farewell and wish you a safe journey. So he was adamant that we had to come and make sure that you had company until Mr. Westfield's arrival and would not wait another moment! Upon my word, I cannot recall ever seeing him so overcome.'

'I am grateful for your concern, Stockley.' said Margaret, obliging him with a tender smile. 'But you should not have worried yourself so. I am perfectly capable of handling my lonely hours and indeed take

pleasure in them. As a matter of fact, for the last few years mornings were the only part of the day that I had to myself. I luxuriated in them. And as for the journey, I am quite looking forward to it. I am finally going to meet my nephew and isn't it a compensation enough for whatever else it has in store for me? But I thank you. I can only imagine how much trouble you went to in order to get your sister here in such an early hour for something as trivial as a good-bye.'

Stockley gave Margaret a dazzling smile and moving closer, bent his head to her ear and pronounced –

'It was no trouble I assure you. In fact I must confess that my intentions were not quite as noble as my sister depicted them to be for I have come here with my own secret agenda.'

'Indeed?'

'Aye, I decided that I shall never forgive myself if I allow this last opportunity to go to waste so I ask you most beseechingly to reconsider your decision and remain in town. I am going to be dreadfully lonely here; the conversation will turn stupid, the balls will be dull and Catherine will become vicious. As you well know, you were the only person to hold her off my back and now with you gone she will descend upon me like a pack of hounds on a fox.'

Margaret found the comparison a matching one for there was something about Stockley's uncanny likeness to that particular mammal that always made an impression on her. Perhaps it was something to do with his pointed chin or his light-brown eyes that were

always crinkled at the corners, giving him a permanently sly look. This fox-like effect was further reinforced by his general manner of walking and talking and his short reddish hair that stood forever on end. And of course, he would have firsthand knowledge about what it meant to be hunted.

There was a recent rumour of a card debt and his father's inability to pay it and as painstakingly as Catherine tried to keep this information from reaching Margaret's ear, she could not compete with the force of gossip network that was run by none other than Lady Theodora herself. Finding herself in its immediate vicinity, the fact that Clifford Stockley had landed himself in debt could not escape Margaret's sharp notice, especially where her friendly interest most eagerly prevailed in the matter.

Clearing her throat to attract Margaret's attention, Catherine continued where she had left off –

‘And so here he was, banging on my door at ungodly hour and scaring my maid into a fainting fit. I had to lend her my salts otherwise she would have been quite out of her senses and not minding me at all! I was afraid that my dear brother had gone mad over the night or had been in his cups as unlike as that was if not for the present circumstances. But once I could get a word out of him, for he was quite beside himself with worry so much so that it made him incoherent, I knew that we had to set off at once. I dare say, we did a right thing too, because you were unusually pale and out of sorts upon our arrival. And though I might not have as

strong a claim on being here as Clifford does, I do have my own share of low spirits at your leave-taking. It all came about so suddenly!’

Margaret took Catherine’s hand in hers; her eyes were bright with tears yet unshed, but she managed to produce a smile.

‘I’m surprised to hear that. I have received a letter from Mr. Westfield a fortnight ago and I’ve been busy making all the necessary arrangements ever since. I do believe that I informed you of his invitation and my decision to accept it as soon as the following day. Don’t you remember my complaining that I haven’t slept a wink, thinking about it? I’m sure Stockley here can confirm it.’

Catherine gave a sigh, narrowed her eyes and looking at her brother said –

‘I should tell you that Clifford is quite determined to visit you at Northbrook Hall as soon as our father can spare him. As it happens, one of his friends from Oxford, a Mr. Jones, invited him there to shoot; and his estate is but four miles off Northbrook! Isn’t that the most favourable coincidence?’

‘Indeed!’ replied Margaret, turning around and locating Clifford by the pianoforte. She frowned as he started lifting the lid. ‘I will be very pleased to meet you there.’

‘And I will be ever so pleased if you played something for us. It will take some time for me to see you again, thus I shall be deprived of your delightful singing and partnership. I don’t love performing duets

quite so much unless you are not playing and singing alongside me.'

Margaret made her way to the pianoforte, looking at it with an expression of a person who was denying the temptation, but speedily losing the battle. She looked up at Stockley and confessed -

'Your sister is right. I was feeling so melancholy ever since I woke up that I just couldn't face playing anything at all. I had the most peculiar feeling as though a part of me that enjoyed doing it for the pleasure it brings left me. I was almost afraid to touch the keys as if they were going to break down under my fingertips.'

She didn't touch them even now, though her fingers started playing an imaginary tune in the air.

'But we're here with you now and I'm sure that you can brave anything and put your fears to rest. How about playing a duet? Some country air; simple and lively? And though Catherine is no fan of pianoforte in general, I'm sure she won't mind us.'

'Indeed, I won't.' said Catherine promptly and with alacrity. 'Go ahead, Margaret. It will be a long while until I see you and my dear brother side by side; not to mention, appreciate your lovely singing. I do prefer your style to anything else.'

It was hard to say if Margaret heard them or not as she moved dreamlike to join Stockley on the settee, but it was obvious that their persistent and earnest entreaties had their desired effect. And as soon as the song was chosen, she and Stockley became cheerfully

unaware of anything around them but their animated singing and that perfect union of their voices. Though neither being a professional, they both sang with eagerness and energy and emotions, thus making it a worthwhile experience to anyone nearby.

Catherine meanwhile adjoined to the window and cast a sharp, curious glance on the street below. She could swear that amidst all the animation that she was no part of, she heard an unmistakable sound of a carriage stopping at the door; and sure enough when she looked out a man was just stepping out of it.

She had never seen the illustrious Mr. Westfield in person, but the rumour had it that he was an exceptionally handsome man, though of rather rigid and uncompromising morals and quite uptight about conventions and regulations. Not a man of town. That was a pity. She turned away from the observation of the new arrival and spared a glance at the happy couple.

Margaret could play with her eyes closed and that is precisely what she did when sped away along the fast joyous stream of sounds running through her veins. But a wounded sound, coming from the instrument on Stockley's side made her frown and open her eyes. Her questioning gaze however did not reach Stockley, because at that very moment it was intercepted by a disapproving look of a man, framed in the doorway.

Margaret gasped and her fingers, losing their footing and looking for refuge, slipped into her lap. She inwardly cursed her luck. It was most unfortunate that Mr. Westfield chose that particular moment to arrive.

Standing up, with her back to the window, she completely missed Catherine's self-satisfied smile.

Chapter Three

James Westfield walked briskly along the hall scowling at the walls. He wanted the meeting to begin and conclude within the next quarter of an hour and if possible without the dubious honour of meeting Lady Theodora Allingthorpe again. In his opinion the staggering amount of her portraits lining the walls was more than enough for a preliminary greeting. He shook his head at such an exhibition of vanity and self-importance in the woman whose only virtue had been her uncommonly pretty face in her youth and nothing by way of additional worth behind it.

However, the sight that greeted him upon entering the room was enough to erase his contempt for this lady and fill him with indignation on behalf of another – his errant sister-in-law. He drew in an angry breath. The display of an indiscreet passion at the pianoforte that met his eyes needed no assistance in its interpretation. But then he expected nothing better from a girl brought up in the household that so assiduously promoted vanity and dissipation. He stopped and upon catching Miss Margaret's astonished gaze gave her a hard look, seeing no reason to hide his feelings of displeasure either from her or her companions.

Margaret meanwhile felt quite faint. This was not how she imagined their long in coming meeting to begin. They were supposed to start from a new page, unmarked by her faults and his reprobation. Naturally,

composing herself in the face of such an obvious disapproval of a man whose whole demeanour showed that his worst suspicions were confirmed was harder than ever, but gathering her wits and taking a few deep breaths, Margaret ventured forward to greet her brother-in-law. She moved across the room to where he was stationed as a motionless statue in the doorway, surreptitiously assessing his figure and features.

Mr. Westfield didn't change much, she supposed, at least his negative attitude stayed the same. But it struck her rather forcibly that she had never seen him look so handsome before. Though whether it was because he had always been outshone by the effect of Isabella's presence or because she had never had a reason to suppose him to be a kind of man to catch her fancy Margaret couldn't say. Either way it came as a shock to her already fragile nerves and so profound was this new incomprehensible discovery that she was quite startled to find herself in his immediate vicinity.

He greeted her with a bow and kissed her hand before straightening and waiting for her to proceed. Margaret was looking at him without uttering a single word as a peculiar sensation of wonderment spread in her chest and coloured her cheeks, making it rather difficult for her to recall her lines. She was only vaguely aware that they were not alone in the room and that an introduction had to be issued as soon as the general inquiries were made. Taking it as her cue, she said with a cordial smile that was nervously turning upwards at the corners.

‘Mr. Westfield, what a pleasure to see you at last. I trust you had a comfortable journey?’

It was remarkable how freely she spoke, considering the erratic beating of her heart that was caused in part by his intense stare and in part by the unexpectedness of her contradicting thoughts.

‘Miss Margaret,’ said Mr. Westfield with another bow, ‘the pleasure is all mine. As for the journey it went just as I expected upon leaving the grounds of Northbrook this morning. Dry weather and excellent roads are the best companions for a lone traveller. I will further save you the trouble of enquiring after the residents of Northbrook Hall by assuring you that my mother and sister are both in excellent health and are impatiently waiting for your arrival. Not to mention a certain young gentleman who is excessively curious to finally meet his aunt.’

Margaret smiled and a curtseyed. It was funny how cautious they were behaving now, trying hard not to fall into the abyss of unpleasantness that was the inevitable outcome of all their previous encounters. During the silence that ensued, Mr. Westfield took his time to acknowledge, however grudgingly, some of the admiration he found himself feeling on Miss Margaret’s account. He was impressed by the strong, clear quality of her voice and the way she unflinchingly met the brunt of his severe gaze was most admirable. The only outward sign of her discomfort that he could discern was a sudden blush that dusted her cheeks, which suited her. James was resigned from the moment he saw

her again to admit that she didn't need anything to supply her natural beauty with, but the blush that made her face even more radiant and animated was hard to ignore. Her features didn't betray much liking to Isabella's with her fair complexion and dark hair and eyes, but the general air of elegance and grace about her was a striking family trait.

The fact that she took the situation in stride and didn't break into a sweat he regarded both as admirable and despicable. On one hand, James was relieved to find that she had outgrown her habit of flying into temper the moment she saw him and was well able to adapt to a situation that might not be at all pleasurable to her. But on the other hand, he couldn't condone the fact that Miss Margaret yet so young had no scruples whatsoever about playing pretence. He felt that such blatant display of acting skills merited not admiration but censure. Still, he couldn't completely discount the fact that she was at least partially genuine in her display, because the soft glow of her eyes and her inviting smile could not be all a lie.

Margaret, uninvited into his contemplation, was confounded by Mr. Westfield's penetrating gaze. Though an object of many a look, she has never been subjected to one so meticulous, never has she been a subject of such scrutiny! It made her shivery, but she refused to give into any sort of reaction. She could hardly pass it off for a shiver caused by a draught. It would be so much more violent than that! It made her

feel quite odd, as if Mr. Westfield was prying away layer after layer of her personality in search for the real thing.

Was he perhaps wondering if the person standing in front of him with an earnest look and welcoming smile was the same person who flew into temper with him on more than one occasion? Or perhaps he was imagining that it was just a fake identity conjured up for the moment to be discarded once the show was over?

A few feet away from her Stockley and Catherine were getting restless. Silence had long since overlapped the banks of propriety and they were all in danger of being pulled under its uncomfortable weight. Margaret, so caught up in thinking about the right thing to say, had all but forgotten about their presence.

‘Mr. Westfield, may I have the pleasure of introducing you to Mr. Stockley and his sister Miss Stockley?’ she asked in the voice of forced eagerness with a slight motion of her hand in their general direction. ‘Very close friends of mine, sir.’

The lady curtseyed and the gentlemen bowed. Margaret inwardly winced at Catherine’s affected manner, having learnt long ago that her brother-in-law despised any exhibition of extra finesse. This was perhaps one of not so many points on which she readily agreed with him, preferring Stockley’s easy and cheerful manner. Her eyes darted towards Mr. Westfield’s face to catch the first signs of displeasure there.

However, Mr. Westfield spared only a fleeting glance to Catherine, dismissing her simpering smile at once,

instead addressing his full attention towards her brother. Watching him keenly, Margaret became alarmed by his reaction. She wasn't expecting him to welcome her friends with warm embrace and effluent professions of never-ending joy at making their acquaintance, but she was quite unprepared to divine the look of such an open hostility upon his face.

She frowned and wondered if her friends were subjected to such degree of disagreeableness by their connection with her; and the idea did nothing to endear Mr. Westfield to her. She glanced at Stockley to see how he was coping under the strain of such an obvious dislike and received a barely discernible shake of his head in return. Unfortunately, this exchange was immediately perceived by Mr. Westfield, and the look on his face became so grim that Margaret felt like running for the shelter against the on-coming thunderstorm. And then, just as she was about to appeal to Mr. Westfield to take some refreshment, everything spiralled out of her control and into the depth Margaret was not ready to face and in fact was astounded to find herself facing, when Catherine stepped in to take part in the conversation.

At first Margaret assumed that it had something to do with Mr. Westfield's attitude towards Stockley, but it took her only a second to realise that Catherine was quite unconcerned with her brother's affliction as her gaze was securely fastened on Mr. Westfield with such rapt attention that Margaret was safe to assume that it

hadn't deviated from the man ever since she had laid her eyes on him.

Margaret was instantly bothered by the knowledge of Catherine's ways in the company of men. She often joked that at her age and with such meagre means at her disposal her sharp tongue and provocative conversation were the only things to grant her a man's notice and attention. And there was no saying what Catherine could use as her opening line; all Margaret was sure of was that whatever it would be it wouldn't be restricted to roads and weather.

If she could but prevent Catherine from saying anything at all! But Mr. Westfield had already caught her would-be furtive glance once and it would be plain humiliating to be caught sending secret messages under his nose again. Her pride wouldn't bear it and something told her that the stretch of his good will wouldn't either. So bracing herself against the blow, she smiled tightly and listened with bated heart. However, her resolve to be calm and collected was rather shaky and as breakable as thin glass that started cracking with Catherine's first passionately spoken words –

'Mr. Westfield! What an exceedingly charming meeting this is! I am positively delighted to make your acquaintance!'

Margaret had trouble keeping back her horrified gasp as she watched Catherine move forward as if wanting to emphasise her delight by shaking his hand. Thankfully, she stopped in time to leave proper room between the

two of them and leaving Margaret to enjoy a few calming breaths, continued –

‘But I dare say you must be vastly shocked at finding us here at such an early and what some might call an improper hour for a call. But I can assure you, sir, that neither my dear brother nor I would ever have allowed ourselves such liberties if not for the circumstances of a peculiar nature that unite our families most intimately.’ she stopped as if recalling something and with a swift look at Margaret went on. ‘But I fancy that you must have an inkling to what I’m referring to by now. We love Margaret so, you know. She is almost like a sister to me.’

Margaret received the look of what Catherine assumed was tender sisterly affection and let Catherine take her hand for demonstration with breathless ‘Indeed, Catherine!’. But it wasn’t until she was startled into disbelief by a meaningful glance deliberately thrown between herself and Stockley, that was speedily and only too well understood by its intended recipient, that the whole horrifying picture unveiled in front of her eyes, rooting her to the spot speechless. Mr. Westfield stood distant and cold, casually leaning on his cane with a look of polite enquiry on his face that prompted Catherine to proceed.

‘I know that my brother will call me a terrible busybody for interfering,’ said Catherine with a little laugh. ‘But as my friend considers you her immediate family, I see no reason for you to be kept in the dark as to the matter at hand. But as I’ve mentioned already,

I'm sure it won't come as a surprise to you to learn that Margaret's departure came as a real blow to dear Clifford. He is so attached to her. It is quite a tragedy to be parted for what can only be an uncertain future at such a time as this. I don't know if I could bear it myself.'

Clifford made a negative motion with his head to deny his sister's words while Margaret felt as if all breath had been knocked out of her. She dared not look into Mr. Westfield's face, but there was nothing that could stop her from hearing his frosty reply.

'That would indeed explain a great deal, madam. But as you so wisely noted, I must admit that an idea of an attachment did cross my mind.'

Forcing her eyes to leave the floor, Margaret looked at him, grateful to see that unlike his words his countenance showed no appreciation for Catherine's information. Margaret's cheeks put on a feverish glow and she couldn't contain her feelings of distress when she next exclaimed in a high voice.

'Indeed, you are mistaken, sir!'

Then she took a moment to stitch her wits and words together. What a wretched situation to find herself in and with the help of her friend too! Mr. Westfield or not, she decided to give Catherine a piece of her mind. She turned an accusing glare at her friend and said in a more controlled voice now:

'Catherine, I do not know how you came by such an astounding notion! But I can assure you that there is no reason at all to suppose an attachment of such

particular nature to exist between Mr. Stockley and me and your brother here can confirm it too.'

Stockley bowed his acknowledgement and before Catherine could blink the look of fake surprise away, Mr. Westfield spoke grimly, his cold grey eyes never leaving Margaret's face.

'In this case, Miss Margaret, I must impress upon you the indecency of your conduct in the presence of a gentleman without such a handy excuse at your disposal.'

The severe look on his face once again told Margaret that he expected nothing better from her and that incensed her even more than Catherine's silly talk. But before she could unleash her temper Stockley intervened with a solemn look that was quite unusual for him.

'I beg to differ, sir. I for one fail to perceive anything inappropriate in sharing our mutual passion for music in the privacy of one's household that your arrival had disturbed.'

Mr. Westfield's expression hardened and his cane made a rattling sound against the floor. Undaunted, Stockley went on.

'If you should speak of an attachment of any kind then speak of our attachment to music. You must forgive my sister for running away with her ideas. She has always been an impressionable creature but having no particular fondness for music she has never had an opportunity to experience the effect it can have on an

individual. I can only assume that this is the reason for such an error to occur on her part.'

'Oh dear!' cried Catherine covering her face and shaking her head in shame. 'Upon my word, I feel quite shaken! How embarrassing! What a mistake to make! But you must have misled me dreadfully for I could not have misjudged the situation so unless I had something to go by.'

'If we did, Catherine, it was done unintentionally.' said Clifford firmly, sending Margaret an encouraging smile. Then taking out his pocket watch and raising his eyebrows in surprise he said –

'I do believe we've trespassed long enough on your time, Miss Margaret, even though you've been very kind not to mention it. However we must not detain you from the pleasure of catching up with your brother-in-law any longer. I'm sure that you and Mr. Westfield have matters to discuss that do not admit the intruding presence of strangers. Not to mention a journey to start.'

And with many recurring wishes of safe trip and farewells he bowed away, leading his reluctant sister out of the door. For a moment Margaret's and Mr. Westfield's eyes met and her heart sank. His relentless glare boring into her was more than she could bear. She dropped her eyes to the floor with a heavy sigh, before shakily taking herself to the table that had been cleared of the remnants of her solitary breakfast and supplied with a tea-tray.

Margaret wondered bitterly how it all could have gone so horribly wrong. She had a hard time wrapping her mind around the fact that Catherine went out of her way to ruin their reunion, knowing how important it was for her. There was no mistaking her intentions, though Margaret was yet to divine the cause for such pretence on the part of her friend. But she knew Catherine too well to believe that this damage was done unintentionally. Catherine was an excellent judge of people, and it was inconceivable to suppose that she could be residing under the false idea of an attachment existing between her brother and her friend. Margaret shook her head. There were so many thoughts to digest and neither time nor place to do so! She longed to be left alone and knew that the day ahead of her was going to be a difficult one.

She took another deep breath and watched Mr. Westfield pacing the room. She lost count of how many times she had to pull herself together and make an effort to be cheerful in the last quarter an hour, but hoped that the offer of a much belated cup of tea would be the last of it for now.

Chapter Four

The room was tense with unspoken words and Margaret had no idea how to act around her brother-in-law now that her anger melted into weariness and robbed her of those spontaneous outbursts of unrestrained speech that at one time used to accompany it. Though she had often spent long hours in the company of Mr. Stockley and other young men, the present scene lacked their warmth, cheerfulness and companionship, thus failing to make her feel at ease. And the fact that Mr. Westfield proceeded to pace the room with heavy accusatory steps did nothing to soothe her anxiety and make her comfortable. Margaret's next attempt at addressing Mr. Westfield completely failed when the motion of her lips was not followed by the sound of her voice, for at that very moment she was immobilized by the sharpest of looks that fell upon her, robbing Margaret of her carefully prepared speech. Upon catching a glimpse of Mr. Westfield's face, as he stormed past her, Margaret was not entirely sure that a cup of tea was such a good idea after all; unless she suggested throwing it against the wall – Mr. Westfield certainly looked cross enough to take her up on her offer in such a case. But as there was no doubt in her mind that Lady Theodora would not condone the demolishing of her favourite china, she willed herself to speak and do what any young lady in her situation would do, besides falling in a dead faint, for that would condemn her in his eyes further still.

‘I hope you will forgive me, sir, for being such an inattentive hostess,’ she said in a low, slightly trembling voice as he directed his stormy eyes towards her pale but resolute face. ‘I’m surprised at myself for I have completely forgotten to spare a thought to how fatigued you must be after your journey. Come, sir, take a seat, while I make you a cup of tea. It will restore your strength and spirits in a trifle. Here is an assortment of refreshment and I recall your particular fondness for cold mutton.’

As soon as the last word left her mouth Margaret had to turn away in order to hide her smile; but it was not her fault that years of looking after her Ladyship and coaxing her out of her numerous fanciful fits left her with a habit of talking with indulgence in her voice. Naturally, it earned her another glare from the man, but Margaret had to admit that as the novelty was wearing off they were becoming less and less intimidating and rather something she was rapidly becoming used to.

For reasons best known to him, Mr. Westfield refused Margaret’s offer with an annoyed shake of his head as if he would rather she stayed silent and not disturb him, which provoked Margaret to keep offering him tea until he gave in. Now that the shock of Catherine’s betrayal was steadily leaving her, Margaret found herself on the brink of saying something that she would no doubt regret at a later date. Indeed, more than once, she had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from pronouncing her most challenging

thoughts, fearing that they would make Mr. Westfield storm out of the room without a backward glance, not to mention put an end to his reluctant invitation. But when she spoke next she couldn't quite keep a note of impertinence from entering her words for it was becoming such fun – throwing her brother-in-law into the arms of rage – that she completely forgot her decision to produce a favourable impression on him and gain his regard rather than irritation.

'Mr. Westfield, with all due respect, I do not think your refusal at all wise and I can only hope that it has not originated from an impulse to spite me and do as you please – as I would have probably done if I were in your place. But then we are so unlike that it is rather foolish of me to suppose it. However, whatever the origin of your refusal might be I must insist, most adamantly, that you take some refreshment before setting off again. Besides, I'd rather not have us make a stop at one of the inns. My aunt holds them in perfect dread and says that they are absolutely unfit for young ladies. Quite horrid was her expression I believe.'

A disdainful scoff was all the answer Margaret had to content herself with until Mr. Westfield finally deigned to make a reply.

'Miss Margaret, I would never go so far as to vouch for all the inns in the kingdom, but I can assure you that if we were to stop at an inn, you would be perfectly safe with me. I take my responsibilities to heart and I am not about to let anything happen to you. As a

matter of fact I fully intend to keep you out of harm's way henceforth.'

'I'm afraid I offended you, sir.' murmured Margaret in shame and distress for Mr. Westfield looked heartbreakingly grave and earnest. 'However it was not my intention. It would never cross my mind to imply that I would find myself in any sort of danger by your side.' That is beside the danger of invoking your anger and disapprobation was left unsaid. 'I only meant to point out that it would be prudent to have something by way of food before leaving. But I fear I have chosen the wrong way to go about it.'

Mr. Westfield shook his head, looking at her with something like amusement, though a bit sour at the edges.

'Do not trouble yourself, Miss Margaret on my account. After all, this is the part of your nature that I know only too well, wouldn't you say? However, my concern lies less with my needs than with the fact that I promised my mother and sister that we would be back by dinner-time and I wouldn't want to worry them unnecessarily, especially knowing that their main concern would be for your person.'

'But I am sure that they wouldn't want you to hurry so as not to take due care of yourself. And judging by your account the weather conditions are such that allow us to spare a few minutes more to our comfort. Not to mention that my aunt would be most disappointed to have missed you and I must absolutely restore to pleading with you to spare me the agony of

reading her next letter. Trust me it is not going to be pretty and I will be obliged to place the whole blame on you and thus completely ruin your image in her eyes.' said Margaret.

'Well, I wouldn't want to disappoint Lady Theodora for the world.' replied Mr. Westfield curtly, wondering why he let his sister-in-law trap him in the meeting that he had hoped to avoid at all costs by nothing more than her earnest eye and engaging smile. He made a quick mental note to be more careful in future so as to not let Miss Margaret manipulate him so easily and even go as far as to disabuse her altogether of the notion that she could have any power over him and his actions.

Meanwhile the inflection on the word 'Lady' caught Margaret's attention and she had to wonder once again at Mr. Westfield's reaction to her Aunt. However, Mr. Westfield didn't supply her with any more clues and putting this puzzling bit of study away, she busied herself with making tea.

But when the tea was served she once again had no idea what to do next. She deliberated whether to join Mr. Westfield or to go upstairs and entreat her aunt to make haste. She was convinced that at least an hour had gone by since her maid returned from announcing the arrival of her brother-in-law to her Ladyship and Margaret had to wonder why her aunt was taking such extra amount of time to come downstairs. Unless she didn't want to descend, which was not at all the impression that Margaret had gotten when conversing

with her on the subject of Mr. Westfield the other day. As far as she had observed her Aunt was as eager to meet Mr. Westfield as he was to flee her and that made no sense to her at all.

But before she could decide on anything definite, Mr. Westfield spoke, surprising her by his wish to engage her in a conversation; it looked like his anger had completely dissolved, bringing instead a mood for talk.

‘I must register my surprise at Lady Theodora’s assenting to spare you so easily, Miss Margaret.’ he began. ‘I was under the impression that she didn’t generally let you out of her sight. Thus I was preparing myself for more of a fight on her Ladyship’s behalf.’

‘I dare say she is going to miss me exceedingly, sir, for I have been her constant companion for many years now and I know my aunt’s ways like no one else. I can assure you that it was not a light decision to make on either part, but one that had to be made as you very well know. Naturally I couldn’t leave Lady Theodora without anyone to make her company, for she cannot bear the mere idea of having no company around and so I arranged for her granddaughters to come and stay with her from now on. And being stationed here at their age would be most advantageous for them as they have come out this year and don’t have much opportunity where they live. But as they are to come only in a few days time my maid will remain here for now.’

‘One does have to sympathise with Lady Theodora’s dependence on others. It sounds almost like an affliction to me.’ replied Mr. Westfield unsympathetically.

Though it was gratifying to know that she was not the only person around to live under the continuity of his disapproval, Margaret’s keen sense of duty and obligation demanded that she defend her aunt in the face of such open dislike.

‘Really, sir, you are quite unfair. I do not think that Lady Theodora deserves such harsh stricture. She is an exceedingly generous person and it was very kind of her to take Isabella and me in and devote all of her time and effort to our upbringing. I am very grateful for the care and affection that she had provided me with and I can only hope that I have been able to pay her back in kind.’

‘Somehow I don’t have any doubts on that score.’ was Mr. Westfield’s less than satisfactory reply.

Margaret started to expand on her aunt’s many amiable qualities next, but for all the good that it did she could have as well saved her breath for she desperately needed it when Lady Theodora swept into the room in the glow of gems and flutter of frills, her face standing out in its unnatural blush, garbed in fashions that no woman of her age had a right to wear, while her powdered hair done all the way up precariously crowned the whole thing and swayed from side to side unless she carefully measured the size of her steps.

Margaret's knees almost gave away at the sight and mortification like she had never felt before washed over her when Mr. Westfield, who had vacated his seat more out of shock than any pleasure of seeing the mistress of the house or haste to greet her, gave her a knowing look. Margaret was in agony: the effect Mr. Westfield's presence had on her female friends and family was astonishing and she wondered if she was the only person around not compelled to make a fool of herself at the mere sight of him. And though she had to concede that she was not exactly guilt-free in trying to impress him, at least she had an advantage of not going overboard in her attempts.

Margaret wanted to close her eyes, to shut the sound of Lady Theodora's voice, to die of shame, to flee. But her escape route was cut short when her aunt spread her hands in welcome, her bracelets giggling at her folly. After an exceedingly emotional greeting that involved vigorous shaking of hands, at least on Lady Theodora's part, Mr. Westfield was obliged to take a seat that her aunt was patting by her side.

Mr. Westfield suppressed a grimace while he studied an elderly lady in front of him. She was a reputed beauty once, but decades of old age destroyed every bit of it, leaving in its wake a great number of wrinkles and a prominent beak-like nose that gave her an appearance of a very battered hawk. Her large dark eyes, that were a downfall to many a man in her youth but lost much of its brilliancy by now, were fastened greedily upon him and he could almost imagine the touch of her claw-like

fingers before they actually made contact with his gloved hand, making a shudder of revulsion crawl across his skin.

Lady Theodora's greatest achievement to date was her swift rise in society from obscurity and low birth promoted by her beauty, excellent mind and quick-thinking when in sight of a suitable prey. Her husband adored her and it made her vain. She had an active sort mind but once married she lost any need for improvement and succumbed to an idle life that she had so effortlessly and undeservingly acquired. Upon her husband's death her disappointment with life grew considerably and her two daughters were subjected to her tyrannical nature until they were both driven away from her side by entering into most disadvantageous marriages.

The unexpected arrival of the Fairfax girls soon afterwards lifted her spirits and supplied her with purpose in life – to bring them up like her own flesh and blood and see them settled well upon the fulfilment of their education under her guidance. If a rumour that somehow made its way through tightly-guarded walls of her masterfully constructed pedigree was to be believed, she had entered the Allingthorpe family as a governess to the younger son, but setting her sights on the elder one soon elevated herself to a much higher position.

'It's been a long while, has it not dear James?' she asked in a lilting voice that carried across the room, making the feathers on her head move.

Mr. Westfield inclined his head, but remained silent and by the tightening of his jaw Margaret could tell that he didn't trust himself to speak just yet.

'I do hope you will oblige an old lady by giving her permission to call you by your Christian name. It is such a trifling matter in my age and I do fancy that such allowances can be easily made on a part of a young man such as yourself.'

'Lady Theodora,' said Mr. Westfield, forcing himself to unclench his jaw. 'I do believe that you've been calling me by my name since the very first time we met and I see no reason why we should stand upon such ceremonies now.'

'Aye-Aye!' cried Lady Theodora, upon which a sudden cough seized her and she made a few delicate attempts at clearing her throat into her ornate handkerchief. 'This is quite so. But I could never look at you and call you anything but dear James! Such countenance as you have! Such distinct eyes and mouth! Upon my word, my dear Allingthorpe would have had hard time stealing my heart, if you had been around at the time!' she gave a simpering laugh and tightened her hold on his arm.

'But my dear James I have a bone to pick with you! I do believe that you haven't been to London ever since you took dear Isabella off my hands. And now here you are to take away my dearest Margaret. She is a darling of mine and I would never have let her go if you were less handsome, but you – my dear James – I cannot refuse. I dare say, if I'd had but such a chance I would have

naturally preferred your company to that of a lady of advanced age and poor health. I do believe I spend most of the year bedridden for I have such terrible aches in my joints.'

'Indeed, ma'am, you have to say just one word against my going and I will gladly stay. I'm sure that Mr. Westfield can spare me just fine.' said Margaret, her cheeks colouring when Lady Theodora exclaimed without looking at her once.

'Upon my word, child, what nonsense you talk! But now you look so surprised, dear James! Indeed, they say that I look but half my age! However, I can tell you this – I've lived long enough to know that this new fashion makes a girl look plainer than ever. It is fortunate that Margaret has the most enviable complexion and such glow to her cheeks that doesn't need help of exercise or fresh air to make it stand out most admirably on her pretty face. It sets her quite apart from any other girls I know and oh! How many plain ones there are these days!

'Take Isabella's complexion, if you will. It was too dark to be considered conventionally beautiful and I insisted most adamantly upon her using my powder-box when leaving the house or receiving guests. But she wouldn't hear of it! Quite stubborn, you know. I was obliged to take the air quite a lot for my age to bring about the desirable effect in her cheeks and I am no great walker. I do believe it is quite a waste of time too, but there you have it. I was half-dreading that though pretty in her own right she would fail to attract an

attention of some handsome gentleman. But there you came and I couldn't be happier with such a lucky turn of events. And that fancy talk of hers too!

This, however, was more than Mr. Westfield's restrained and countenance could bear as he said through clenched teeth –

'For my part, your Ladyship, I can assure you that I have found nothing deficient in Isabella, be it her complexion,' he sneered, 'or her manner of talking.'

With a stiff bow he informed her that they were far behind their schedule and thus had to set off at once. Lady Theodora was amazed that no matter what she said, it would not defer their leave-taking and she was quite disappointed with the outcome of their meeting and its shockingly short duration. As Mr. Westfield made his way for the door, with a hasty farewell, Margaret hurried after him, appalled by her aunt's conduct and afraid that in his anger and resentment he would change his mind and leave her behind.

Chapter Five

As the carriage was slowly taking her away along the streets of London, Margaret could finally allow herself to draw a relieved breath. In the state of distress and mortification that she now resided under, Margaret did not wish to encounter anyone else on her way out of town, and was quite overcome by frenzy when confronted with a blur of faces she vaguely recognised. She hastily leaned away from the window lest she was seen by some or other of her acquaintances, as they had a rather annoying habit of delaying her journey and making matters generally worse, and glanced at Mr. Westfield instead. But the sight of his glowering presence made her heart beat faster and she quickly looked away with a frown. It was enough of a confirmation that the journey was going to be an uncomfortable one. But Margaret firmly believed that some pleasure had to be obtained from it she cast around for its source and promptly decided to set her eye for the contemplation of nature reawakening from its winter slumber and re-emerging from under the irregular patches of snow in greens and yellows. But no sooner had this favourable plan formed in her mind than Mr. Westfield fixed her with such a look that could not be possibly denied. Checking a regretful sigh, Margaret abandoned her pursuit and faced him, in quivering anticipation of remonstrance to follow.

As for Mr. Westfield he was completely caught off guard when upon chancing a glance at Miss Margaret

and beholding her distressed features, his towering rage was abruptly replaced by sympathy towards her. It was not hard to imagine what her mind was being occupied with and the many varied emotions her face displayed made her a study in colour and expression. Mr. Westfield wondered if there was an artist in the whole of the kingdom who could catch and show every one of them in their swift succession, adding to the impossibility of the task the warm glow of her hazel eyes and the unceasing upward and downward movement of her lips. She was looking out of the window as if the sole enjoyment of her life depended on capturing those passing pictures the road supplied her with and the image of such sweet oblivion was very enticing. Mr. Westfield had to concede that when she looked this intent on her task it was hard to remember the many flaws of her character, the recollection of which unfortunately brought him to his current predicament.

The scene that had played itself at Lady Theodora's duly impressed as to the danger of Miss Margaret's further stay under her aunt's roof. It also opened his eyes to the damage that had already been inflicted and in order to alleviate the blame for his delayed actions he chose this very moment to impart upon her the wrongness of her previous conduct and set her on the path of improvement that would hopefully guarantee that he would not have to witness the evils of her upbringing in future. He deliberated for some time the best way of breaking her peaceful contemplation but

Margaret, all fidgety from suspense and mistakenly interpreting his long and brooding silence for anger and resentment, rushed forward with an apology on behalf of her aunt –

‘Mr. Westfield, I must apologise for my aunt’s behaviour. It pains me to admit that her conduct was exceedingly inappropriate and I am ashamed and vastly astonished for I have never before seen Lady Theodora behave with such indecorum as to make a spectacle of herself. I am shocked by such complete lack of manners and an abominable disregard for your feelings that she had displayed. However, I plead with you not to take her words in earnest.’

Mr. Westfield inclined his head and seeing as Miss Margaret was hurt much less by the discovery of her aunt’s indelicacy and vulgarity than he had originally assumed and having no material reason to spare her feelings on the subject launched an attack.

‘Miss Margaret, I am glad to find that you possess enough common sense to see the faults of those close to you and have courage to face rather than deny them.’

Margaret barely refrained from rolling her eyes. It was amazing how even his commendation held enough scepticism to convey how doubtful he found it in her case. ‘However there is a rather grave matter I am about to discuss with you, which plainly shows that such an ability is lamentably absent when in connection with your own self.’

Margaret blinked and stared. A shiver of unease, a burst of cold, that had nothing to do with April chill, struck her and her hands clutched the inside of her muff for support.

Mr. Westfield cleared his throat.

‘I would like to start with informing you that while I couldn’t – but let us speak plainly here – I wouldn’t take you to Northbrook Hall for my own selfish reasons, I knew only too well of Isabella’s reservations on Lady Theodora’s account to feel completely at ease when leaving you in her care without ensuring in some way that you wouldn’t come to any harm.’

Margaret opened her mouth even though she wasn’t entirely sure what she wanted to say, when Mr. Westfield raised his hand to stall her.

‘I know that she had been most kind to you and surrounded you with care and affection,’ he smiled grimly at that, prompting Margaret to lift an enquiring eyebrow. ‘But you were growing into a very impertinent young lady and her guidance along with your troublesome nature posed a certain danger – danger, I’m afraid to say, that didn’t escape you on the whole and thus prompted my arrival on such a short notice.’

‘Mr. Westfield, I must say that I am at a complete loss as to the meaning of all this, unless you are trying to tell me that you have entrusted someone with the task of keeping an eye on me while at the same time keeping your distance.’ cried Margaret in growing amazement.

Mr. Westfield had the grace to look uncomfortable at that.

‘You must take into account the reasons behind my actions, madam. I didn’t trust your aunt. I didn’t trust you for that matter. You didn’t give me a reason to. On the very first day we met you made a horrible scene and created an image of yourself such as I could not trust not to fall to the ailings of youth and one day do something to embarrass yourself as well as your sister.’

‘Excuse me for pointing this out, Mr. Westfield,’ said Margaret in a trembling with indignation voice, ‘but I believe that at the time of our first meeting I was but a child! A child, secure in the knowledge that there would be no more farewells in her life and then severely disappointed. How could you base your assumptions on unguarded actions of a mere child? Have it never crossed your mind that I was simply too distraught to be polite to someone who was the reason the world as I knew it came to an end? I was a step away from losing the dearest person to me and I believed, perhaps naively, that after the loss of my parents, I wouldn’t have to face another loss of such kind. But then you came along and served as the means of ruining my happiness!’

The words struck Mr. Westfield just as hard as the day they were first flung at him. There were tears in Margaret’s eyes now, trembling, falling, twisting with rage.

‘By heavens!’ exclaimed Mr. Westfield. ‘I do not believe that you could be so very selfish as to suppose that your sister would never have a family of her own.’

‘And I do not believe that you find it so very unlikely that a highly accomplished woman would choose not to marry, especially,’ Margaret stressed forcefully, ‘if there is a danger that a man will choose to constantly misunderstand her and form opinions without taking pains to learn more about her reasons beforehand. Honestly, you cannot imagine that every single woman regards marriage as the only viable option.’

‘Certainly not.’ bristled Mr. Westfield at the challenge in her voice. ‘But you must admit that the tendency is generally in favour of matrimony.’

‘But not without its exceptions, I’m sure. Your sister is not married, is she not?’

‘I do not see how my sister comes into all of this.’

‘I’m just saying that I was convinced that Isabella and I would never part. It was never a matter of question. She had no design of marrying anyone at all. I remember how Aunt Theodora was in despair over her lack of interest in young men and their lack of interest in her. She scolded her dreadfully, saying that with her beauty and fortune she could have anyone in a heartbeat and that instead she chose to waste it all on nothing. But Isabella had a superior mind to those simpletons around her and she wouldn’t be budged off the shelf for the sole purpose of obliging Lady Theodora’s newly found love for matchmaking. We used to laugh so much over it with Isabella. I would

sneak into her room after every ball I was too young to attend and she would tell me all about those puppies bullied into pursuing her by our aunt. She had no way of knowing of course that Isabella had adopted a special tactic of dealing with unwanted suitors.'

Mr. Westfield was not prepared for the terrible force with which scenes of the past and much happier life hit him. How charming he found Isabella standing on the veranda wrapped in a shawl, her gaze too far away in the sky to be aware of his silent, watchful presence. He stood there in rapt fascination until his shuffling feet alerted her and she looked his way. Her eyes were laughing and she started talking about the stuffiness of the room, the ugliness of the city and her conviction that she would love balls so much better if her aunt but consented to carry them outside, on the lantern-lit lawn in front of the house, filled with the fragrance of the summer flowers and insects whizzing over their heads.

He recalled with startling clarity severe disappointment that stabbed him when he found that this fancy talk was nothing but a ploy to drive him away and then the overwhelming elation that caught and cradled him at knowing that every bit of her little speech was indeed true.

Isabella's words, clear and merry, still rang in his ears: 'I don't wonder that you look so surprised; or should I say appalled? I must have bored you to death with my quaint talk and really is this any way for a girl to talk at a ball? But I believed you to be another suitor

whose company my aunt would want to force upon me tonight. You see, it has become a recent occupation of hers to produce a poorly assorted collection of gentlemen to supply me with.'

'And your recent occupation I presume has become to discourage most strongly their advances.'

'Indeed!'

'But what if a gentleman is to your liking?'

'Impossible! Our tastes in men are so different as to render my aunt's efforts in matching me with a perfect candidate completely fruitless.'

'So am I to understand that this passionate speech of yours was brought forth by the necessity of driving me away and that it holds no truth whatsoever?'

'No, indeed. But I can plainly see now that you are not one of my aunt's selection and I am glad for I have heard a great deal about you, urgently whispered into my ear upon your entering the room, to know that I wouldn't mind not to discourage you just yet, Mr. Westfield.'

He was brought back to present by Margaret's voice, so different: dull and filled with pain.

'But though some of them might have been fine fellows they were no match for Isabella. I was sure that there would be no man interesting and understanding enough to inspire her affection or smart enough to challenge her mind and give her answers she was looking for. The realisation that there was indeed such a man was earth-shattering. It affected me so much that I couldn't think rationally for the agony my heart and

soul succumbed to. And as for my mind, it retreated completely and let me indulge in my despair and self-pity. And of course I blamed it all on you.'

Margaret shook her head and smiled ruefully.

'I am only too well familiar with that expression on your face, Mr. Westfield. You are shaken beyond words. But you do not have to worry yourself over it anymore. I do not feel the same way. You might not have given it any consequence, but I have grown a lot and I am reasonably smart now to realise where I have erred and to apologise. I can also acknowledge my complete ignorance in matters of the heart's desperately seeking its perfect match. I didn't see it for what it was. I believed Isabella to be in earnest when she spoke that she would not marry upon any account - but a child seeking reassurances will believe a lesser falsehood.'

'I fear I must apologise, Miss Margaret,' started Mr. Westfield in a low voice, greatly perturbed by her admission. 'I have severely underestimated you and have given little regard to your sufferings on the occasion. I have shielded my eyes against them and let my wounded pride act in place of my common sense.'

'Upon my word, please say no more!' cried Margaret and then smiled at his bewildered expression. 'We have been both in the wrong and we have at last admitted to it with good grace. But is it any reason to abandon our long-standing tradition of disliking each other and holding grudges?

'You have shared with me your reason for keeping an eye on me, but I cannot say that I admire the means

you have chosen to employ in doing so. In my turn, I have given you my reasons for my abominable behaviour and though you accept them now I'm sure there still remains a great deal of things you hold against me.

'Hence, I may conclude that the number of our grudges is restored. You must admit that it gives a particular distinctiveness to our relationship. And if I am not mistaken, you wanted to address one of those things I have just mentioned. I do believe you wanted to discuss something pertaining to my lack of discretion.'

Mr. Westfield regarded Margaret thoughtfully for a while, before shaking his head.

'I think we will leave it for another time, Miss Margaret. I would not want to be accused of judging you wrongly once again for I'm afraid it will put us at in imbalance that considering the situation we simply cannot afford. And for the sake of keeping our peace I propose that we dedicate the rest of our journey time to our own devices.'

Margaret turned away with a smile. She could go on and comment on the excellence, perfect timing and exceptional sense of his suggestion, but knowing that it would only aggravate Mr. Westfield and gain nothing of consequence kept quiet, throwing herself into the task of following nature's progress on their way.

Chapter Six

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly undisturbed by collisions of any kind and the silence was almost comforting as it settled around them. In fact, shortly after it was established, the journey acquired a certain peaceful quality about it that was happily maintained by Margaret who, smiling contentedly, enjoyed the swaying feeling of a change. It had been an eternity since she left London and the scenery unfolding in front of her eager eyes, despite its occasional grey and monotonous air, was more than enough to satisfy her thirst for new sensations and occupy her mind for miles ahead. From time to time it would wander off in the direction of Mr. Westfield, followed by a swift furtive glance; he seemed to be residing under the permanent influence of a frown that Margaret believed was strongly connected with her presence.

But while Margaret was thus happily occupied, her companion was not at all pleased to find himself deceived. He supposed he could attribute his feelings on the matter either to the suspiciousness of his nature when in connexion with his sister-in-law that prompted him to question her every move and motive and believe that some sort of mischief was lurking behind it or to the suspiciousness of the whole business in general. As he reflected upon the events leading up to their silent treaty, his thoughts took on an unexpected turn when he fancied catching something

like a triumphant smile blossoming in the corner of Miss Margaret's mouth and he had to wonder if it was not all a part of a masterfully planned and well-executed diversion. After all, she had once again managed to manipulate him into doing what she wanted with him being none the wiser; the subject of her ill-advised conduct was dropped in favour of sympathising with her younger self. But then he had to stop this train of thought and think again, very carefully this time, for it seemed very unlikely that Miss Margaret, whatever her drawbacks might be, would use the memories of her sister in order to divert his attention. It was not possible that Margaret Fairfax would use such despicable means, which begged the question as to whether it was his perception of his sister-in-law as someone untrustworthy that affected his attitude towards her.

But if he had to do the unthinkable and compare the Fairfax sisters, the picture he would get would make a lot of sense. With Isabella they were so well-attuned that they had no trouble agreeing on almost every matter; with Miss Margaret they constantly argued and it was a matter of honour to have the upper hand in any argument of theirs. And as far as James was concerned, for whatever reason, he found himself on the losing side of their arguments too often to be deemed tolerable. And he couldn't help feeling a great deal of resentment at the thought of Miss Margaret and her untraceable power over his actions and decisions. Looking at her bright face, he made a mental note not

to be sidetracked again and address the issue of her questionable behaviour in London at the very first opportunity. It was with a sigh of profound relief that he beheld the sight of his ancestral home.

Northbrook Hall was a handsome mansion house of moderate size with high windows and fashionable columns; neither outstandingly grand nor odiously plain, but of comfortable appearance and size to fit the residing Westfield family and without being in any danger of running out of spare chambers and parlours if a guest arrived. It stood in a half-circle of tall trees on a generous slope that gave it an advantage of overlooking the whole of Northbrook, which was its principal settlement.

Margaret only vaguely remembered it from a few times that she came with a visit and was surprised to find, upon being handed out of the carriage by Mr. Westfield, that there was still some way on foot to be covered to the actual gates of the house. As she caught Mr. Westfield's amused eyes on her she belatedly realised that she let the astonishment of such a discovery take hold of her face and blushed. She wondered if he had been watching her ever since her feet touched the ground and blushed still more. With a sigh, she bent down to pick up her skirts, but stopped when Mr. Westfield made an exasperating sound somewhere in the back of his throat and offered her his hand. Smiling cheekily Margaret took it and together, leaving the bustling servants to their affairs, they started their measured ascent up the long winding lane

towards the gates and beyond into the welcoming embrace of an animated figure of Miss Westfield, wrapped in a heavy shawl against the capricious weather of April.

Anne Westfield was a few years younger than her brother; she was a vivacious and laughter-prone girl with easy, inviting manners and teasing nature that she unwearyingly practiced on Mr. Westfield. She had pleasing features, but it was obvious that the burden of beauty in the family rested with Mr. Westfield. However, in the absence of outstanding beauty, Miss Anne was supplied in abundance with good humour and happy disposition that made her a charming person all on its own. Perhaps in order to distinguish her; perhaps in order to make amends for its negligence when supplying her with inferior looks, Nature had provided her with keen observation, insight and instinct that often showed her things that escaped other people's notice.

Miss Anne stared curiously between her brother and her sister-in-law, relieved to see them both in one piece and if not exactly on speaking at least on friendly terms. She had half-feared to meet an enraged set of travellers as she was aware of their mutual dislike and inability to stay in the same room together for five minutes straight without trading insults. She kissed her brother in greeting, whispering something in his ear that made his countenance, that had cleared considerably at the sight of his sister, darken and Margaret watching the scene with unguarded interest

for she had not yet had an occasion to see Mr. Westfield outside his austere demeanour, realised with a pang that Miss Anne had probably mentioned her name and the instantaneous effect it had on Mr. Westfield's mood was not at all flattering.

Margaret was on the point of turning away so as to save herself from humiliation of having her tears of hurt and bitterness witnessed when Miss Anne came up to her and surprised her by enveloping her in a hug. It was such a genuine tender sisterly gesture that Margaret, rapidly overcoming her astonishment in favour of being treated kindly at least by one Westfield, held on tight in pure desperation, silently grateful and unable to hold back sobs that would have been much more embarrassing were they not muffled by her sister-in-law's shawl. It vaguely registered in her mind that fatigue and many varied emotions that she had experienced throughout the day left her with no other alternative but to cry for the utter relief that tears would bring.

Margaret hadn't had a chance before to get to know Miss Anne well, because whenever she made an appearance at Northbrook before she had Isabella and her own personal battle against her brother-in-law to pursue to pay any attention to anyone else. But it would have made things so much easier and would spare her the mortification of committed mistakes, if Mr. Westfield had brought her to Northbrook Hall after the loss of Isabella. She would have been in good hands and Miss Anne seemed like a really sympathetic person

and someone who understood things without naming them. Margaret wished, now that Miss Anne appeared to be the only reason she was still standing, that she had had someone like Anne in the time of loss and pain to rely on and to help her to deal with her loss in a better way. But Mr. Westfield made it abundantly clear that he didn't wish to see her anywhere near his property and to cheer her up Lady Theodora proposed going to Brighton where Margaret, suffering greatly both in body and mind, fell into the clutches of the calculating Catherine Stockley. The latter had made a quick but very precise assessment of Margaret's delicate state and played the part of an understanding and loyal friend so well as to leave no doubt in Margaret's mind that she had found a perfect companion to provide her with comfort and support.

Mr. Westfield watched the scene with a major feeling of foreboding. His sister's eyes flashed warningly at him over the top of Margaret's bonnet and he knew that they were going to have a talk and that it would be highly unpleasant. He cursed. He wondered if he was too harsh with Miss Margaret or too hasty in forming his notions. But he knew the answer by now and it made him feel uneasy and an odd mixture of anger, resentment and repentance seized him. But it was such a familiar feeling by now that he didn't even try to rationalize it. It seemed that nothing was quite rational when it involved his sister-in-law, and the uncomfortable feeling grew. One thing was for sure though – he was extremely susceptible to Miss

Margaret's guilt-invoking charm and damn if he knew why. Her presence alone provoked him to experience all kinds of conflicting thoughts that he didn't want to examine too closely because it would mean that he was looking too much into the situation that didn't warrant all of the attention on his part.

As if aware of his questioning gaze Margaret straightened and brushed away tears from her eyes. Now was neither the time nor the place to have a breakdown; it was a very personal matter that had to be reserved for when she was in the solitude of her room with an adequate number of pillows to assist her. Another reason that prompted Margaret to put off her self-pity feast was the fact that she was not the only contender for Miss Anne's shawl. A stout little figure was clutching it from behind, peeking shyly at Margaret with large, curious eyes. Immediately Margaret's whole world shifted and found its focus in the little boy of about eight with glowing cheeks, bright hazel eyes and brown curls swaying in the wind. She smiled widely and outstretched her hand. Her nephew smiled back and took her hand in his.

Mr. Westfield blinked, startled. Apparently he was so caught up watching and making sense of his sister-in-law that he remained completely oblivious to the presence of his son. However, parental negligence was not the only reason why the appearance of little James had so far escaped his notice. In fact, little James made quite sure that he wasn't seen by his father. Miss Anne

laughed when she saw her brother's reaction and ruffling the boy's head said cheerfully:

'Don't be angry with him, James. He was so keen to finally meet his aunt that he resisted being sent to bed most adamantly. However he was not without fear that his father would not approve of such goings on and remained hidden in the shadows of his other aunt, who as you very well know can never pass the chance of letting her nephew have his way. But I believe that in this case, for it is not all that often that we have the pleasure of having Miss Margaret with us (she cast a teasing look at her brother), our frivolous behaviour can be excused. What say you, dear brother?'

'I say that you are talking entirely too much, dear sister.' replied Mr. Westfield with affection.

Anne laughed again and Margaret laughed alongside her, and unless the darkness of the hour played tricks, she could have sworn that she saw Mr. Westfield lift the upper corner of his mouth in a reluctant smile too. Margaret looked back at little James, tracing his features for any reminder of Isabella but failing that she was confronted with solid resemblance to his father.

They walked the rest of the way to the house hand in hand in Miss Anne's and Mr. Westfield's wake, who was rather disgruntled by how quickly and completely his son took fancy to Miss Margaret. Little James emboldened by his aunt's smiles was chatting enthusiastically about his pack of hounds, his many trophies and a toy fleet his father was making for him.

By the time they entered the house little James had already made plans for their fishing and hunting trips.

In the drawing-room Margaret was introduced to Mrs. Westfield, who had been taking a nap and was not pleased at being interrupted.

‘Mama is asleep, though I do not know what she means by it,’ Anne whispered to Margaret before succumbing to a fit of giggles, the cause of which Margaret was yet to discover. ‘We left not ten minutes ago and she was quite occupied with her knitting-basket. Oh well, you will find that my mother is a creature of habit and taking a nap before and after dinner and any other time of the day happens to be one of those habits she staunchly adheres to.’

‘Anne, it completely escapes my understanding why you insist upon making such a racket with that infernal whispering of yours. It brings church bells to mind and scares my sleep completely away.’ said Mrs. Westfield in a voice of discontent, opening her eyes and contracting her prominent eyebrows.

‘But mama,’ said Anne with a smile. ‘I believe that if you were truly asleep or indeed in any need of extra sleep for that matter, neither church bells nor my whispering would be in any danger of waking you up.’

‘Infernal child.’ said Mrs. Westfield fondly with a shake of her head and, upon noticing her son, added: ‘Your brother was never this much trouble; or any trouble at all, which was always something of a puzzle, considering your father’s character.’

‘Mother, may I please present Miss Margaret Fairfax.’ said Mr. Westfield, drawing his mother’s attention to Margaret.

‘Mrs Westfield.’ said Margaret in awe.

Mrs. Westfield had intimidating, commanding air about her; at the same time she looked much younger than any other woman of her age normally would. Her face while austere was young and smooth, without the burden of age lines and her hair, escaping from her cap in cheerful ringlets held no grey in it. Her eyes when fixed upon Margaret were large and deep, possessing an assessing streak that was reminiscent of her son’s. Her mouth was a thin line, not quite frowning, but not smiling either. It was just there, unclassified and Margaret had to restrain herself in order not to fidget under her unblinking stare.

‘Well, I’m very well pleased with your arrival,’ said Mrs. Westfield approvingly.

‘The pleasure is all mine, ma’am, I am sure.’ replied Margaret with a smile.

‘Anne was quite in raptures when James announced it. Took us quite by surprise.’ she said musingly.

‘But what a surprise it was!’ exclaimed Anne, cutting across her mother in a rush of embarrassment.

‘Yes, yes,’ agreed Mrs. Westfield absently, her gaze now travelling the range of the room with a critical eye. ‘Anne will have a much livelier company from now on.’

‘And so will you, mama.’

‘I am perfectly content with my own company, Anne. It is you I am worried about. I do not like that

you have to stay at home with only myself and occasionally your brother for company.'

'Do not worry about me, mama. I have enough on my hands to keep me busy but if you mean my lack of entertainment, you know perfectly well that I have never acquired a taste for Assembly Rooms and card parties..'

'Oh very well, Anne, be it your way if you please. I do not think that we could possibly move this conversation into the dining-room, I suppose, or do you plan on starving us to death? You made me wait these three hours at least.'

As their party moved to the dining-room, Margaret found herself rather confused. She wondered, having witnessed the scene between Mrs. Westfield and Anne, at the possibility of Mr. Westfield with his uptight righteousness fitting in the same room with his sister's easy-going character and his mother's eccentric ways. The rigid code of morals that he upheld and promoted was admirable and astonishing, considering the unconventional atmosphere he lived in.

Just how far his rigid control went was clear when little James went to bed without a single word of protest. No more than a look passed between the father and the son and little James, bowing in a perfect gentlemanly manner, was lead away by the maid. Margaret felt irrationally upset that he didn't put up more of a fight and felt quite resentful towards Mr. Westfield, for her palm felt quite lonely without James's warm little hand in hers.

The conversation at the table was very animated, but Margaret found that she could not follow it. For one, the subject was very uncommon for her and, for another, her head started giving her some grief and she barely kept herself from rubbing her temples to ease some of the unfortunate ache that had gathered there during the day. Mrs. Westfield, sitting at the head of the table, had given up all the pretence of sleep that Margaret attributed to the reviving charm of food, was talking about alterations and improvements she was going to introduce to the house and the grounds once the weather dried up a bit. The subject was so foreign to Margaret's concept that her participation in the conversation was limited to occasional nods and shakes of her head that produced rather unpleasant sensations whenever they became too vigorous.

Anne, when noticing how pale Margaret looked, squeezed her hand reassuringly and said: 'I told the cook to prepare something light and nourishing for dinner today. Heaven knows you need some fortifying and easily digestible foods. I know how unwholesomely brooding my brother can be on the road.'

Margaret smiled, too tired to talk, drank some wine and managed to enjoy her meal. However she was very grateful when Anne finally took pity on her and excusing them both in order to accompany Margaret to her bedchamber. Margaret gave up every notion of untangling the confusing web of thoughts for the day, believing that only a good night's sleep and a clear

head would make any sense of them and was soon fast asleep.

Chapter Seven

After dinner the Westfield family returned to the drawing-room to take their coffee. Anne's eyes shone with intent in the candlelight and once Mrs. Westfield was presumed to be safely distracted, she drew Mr. Westfield into the conversation that he had been dreading ever since his arrival and that he would have rather avoided having altogether.

'Dear James,' said Anne with the sweetness of expression that did not fool him. 'I must once again point out how astonishing I find the fact that only the danger of Miss Margaret's forthcoming marriage inspired you to act upon your promise. It does make one wonder as to your possible motives. After all, why would you go out of your way to do something that you had been strongly opposing to for years in order to prevent an event that would be quite beneficial for you, finally putting an end to this loathsome duty of yours?'

Mr. Westfield sighed and looked at his sister with an aggrieved air.

'The marriage of such nature – if there was going to be one in the first place – would put Miss Margaret at a distinct disadvantage in the eyes of the society and her reputation, not to mention her whole life, would be ruined forever. And though the intelligence that I'd had at my disposal prior to my departure was not confirmed upon my arrival in London, it did alarm me considerably at the time and I would have done everything in my power to prevent such an event from

taking place, if it was proved to be true. Entering an engagement on such a short acquaintance with a man of questionable origins and no fortune or any redeemable qualities to speak of is not something I would have allowed in her case, considering the ties that bind our families.'

Anne hummed under her breath and Mr. Westfield gritted his teeth. He loved his sister dearly and knew that her love for him was just as great, but he had to wonder as to why she would want to torment him so.

'I'm sure it was very noble of you to make such haste after years of indecision, and snatch her away from the danger of either an imprudent marriage or a disgraceful scandal or even a poor girl's broken heart-'

'If there is one to speak of.' snapped Mr. Westfield and Anne ignored him.

'- in the event of there existing a strong attachment on both sides.'

Anne shook her head.

'I must warn you now, James, that unless you are more careful and less impulsive when it comes to dangers Miss Margaret faces, people might start thinking that you have brought her with the prospect of making her an offer. I, for my part, would find such a conjecture more than justified. On one hand, it would be an atonement for the abominable way you had treated the poor thing all these years, while, on the other hand, it would be a perfect opportunity to make sure that her name and fortune remained intact and within the family.'

A long pause followed this pronouncement for Mr. Westfield did not quite know what to say. When neither his mind nor his vocal chords would cooperate, he left his armchair and started pacing the room, recalling that last time it was quite a decisive exercise. At length, he said: 'You are being ridiculous, Anne. I would never begin to imagine anything of the kind and I wonder at you for doing so.'

He was proud to note that his voice wasn't shaking with rage.

'Come now, James, do not tell me that the idea has never crossed your mind. After all, it is not something particularly uncommon to consider.'

Mr. Westfield shook his head.

'Not for me, Anne, I'm afraid.'

'How peculiar this is.' mused his sister aloud, taking a seat and contemplating her brother. 'I swear that ever since you've told me about the task you had to fulfil in regards to Miss Margaret, I couldn't help thinking that Isabella had issued this particular scheme as the best way of taking care of her sister. I do not believe Lady Theodora to be so very inept as to be incapable of bringing a young lady up to the best of advantage. Besides, it would make perfect sense as there is no other way to make absolute sure that she is well taken care of and comes to no harm. Upon my word, marrying Margaret Fairfax would be the most suitable option!' cried Anne.

'Perhaps, for a punishment.' replied Mr. Westfield. 'Thank you for pointing that out, Anne. Indeed, it

would be an appropriate punishment for delaying the fulfilment of my duty for so long and by doing so betraying Isabella's trust in me as well as her memory and love in the most despicable way.'

Anne scoffed. Mr. Westfield continued.

'Marriage to such a person would be nothing short of punishment I deserve.'

Presently his sister rolled her eyes, looking as if she wanted nothing more than to shake her brother out of this ridiculous attitude.

'Even if I believed in your inaccurate accounts of Miss Margaret's faculties,' she said. 'I would have strongly questioned any man who, under the circumstances, wouldn't find a balm of salvation in such a handsome face and pretty figure as hers.'

'Do you consider us such shallow creatures as to not see beyond what meets the eye?' exclaimed Mr. Westfield horrified.

'Rather.' replied Miss Anne stoutly, 'After all, am I not the daily proof of that? Do not deny that what a man sees is what he largely relies on when it comes to his designs on a lady; unless what he hears is even greater and comes in pounds.'

Mr. Westfield was aghast.

'But I am vastly concerned on your account, James.' continued Anne calmly, as if she hadn't just shocked her brother out of his countenance. 'While not as reprehensible as shallow nature or mean understanding that you so often associate with our sister-in-law, poor

eyesight can put one in a very unfortunate predicament.'

Mr. Westfield allowed himself a rather inelegant snort.

'My eyesight is perfectly fine to allow me to see beyond her pretty face and what I see there is enough to repulse me.'

Anne smiled in a way that implied that she knew something that her brother didn't.

'Nay, I do not believe you any more on that score, James. I have yet to discover your reasons as to why you would think so very ill of Miss Margaret, but I myself found her utterly charming, genteel, amiable, modest and betraying nothing of the deceptive nature you had accused her of possessing.'

'You have not seen her in the company of men.'

'I believe we were in the same room together.'

'This is not what I meant.'

'Well, I assumed that if she were such a prodigious flirt and as prone to exhibition of vice as you portrayed her to be, corrupting men's hearts right and left, she would have snatched the chance in the presence of such an eligible gentleman. Unless, of course, her technique is something so highly unique and sophisticated as to completely escape my notice. But I'm curious now as to what might have given her away in your opinion. Was it the paleness of her cheeks, or the hollowness of her voice, or the shadows under her eyes? Was it some sort of uncanny device that had made a particular impression on you? Pray tell me for I

am at a loss. What is it, James?' asked Anne, putting a comforting hand on her brother's arm. 'What it is about the girl that puts you into such an unbearable disposition and renders your company insupportable?'

Mr. Westfield made no reply but whatever it was that he wouldn't say aloud Anne read in his expression.

'Poor James!' she exclaimed. 'He is housing a young, pretty girl and cannot bear the thought of being attracted to her!'

'Anne if you do not desist this instant, you will drive your brother to liquor.' said Mrs. Westfield all of a sudden, making Mr. Westfield groan.

'And here I feared you were perfectly asleep, mama.' said Anne.

'As if anyone could attempt any sleep to be had with you in the room.' replied Mrs. Westfield.

Anne laughed and bidding her mother and brother farewell retired for the night. James sank into the armchair and shook his head. He had no desire to fall under the influence of Miss Margaret's undeniable charm. And here it was again: another obvious manifestation of her power over people and their actions. She and Anne have spent no more than a few hours together and his sister was already fighting tooth and nail for her. He, however, was determined to resist it.

*

In the weeks that followed Margaret was introduced to a much more extensive list of Mrs. Westfield's habits and received firsthand knowledge that all the

inhabitants of Northbrook Hall were entitled to follow them or face her wrath, for like any other lady of the house she did not like to be displeased. But that was by far the only comparison that could be drawn between her and any other lady of her means and situation. It very soon became apparent that she dominated life at Northbrook Hall, setting its tone and pace, and Margaret was unexpectedly startled into awareness that it was not Mr. Westfield's approbation and regard that she had to gain but that of Mrs. Westfield.

Through engrossing study of Mrs. Westfield's character and habits, Margaret discovered that the former possessed too many contradictions about her person to be considered an ordinary one: while every inch an intimidating person there was something about Mrs. Westfield that inspired instant trust and made you want to confide in her, seek her advice and assistance and rely on her ability to come up with a swift and efficient resolution. Despite or perhaps due to her propensity for naps, she was the most energetic person Margaret had ever beheld; she was never motionless and moved around the estate and its grounds ceaselessly no matter the time or weather and, considering the breadth and width of either, Margaret concluded that Mrs. Westfield was in excellent health and if she had but the slightest inclination for parties – something that the Westfield family believed to be a waste of time and perfectly good wine – she could outdance the most vigorous and ardent of youth. She had very few close acquaintances but the number of her

business correspondents was overwhelming and Margaret, whose pen hand was perfectly developed by years of answering her aunt's extensive mail, was very soon included into the morning routine of penning away alongside Anne; Mrs. Westfield preferred reading letters to answering them. She had short temper and was easily displeased and Anne made a conscious effort to remove all conflicts before they had a chance to invoke her mother's ire and to keep ineptitudes and follies of servants and neighbours from her mother's knowledge. And though Mrs. Westfield proved to be less intimidating upon closer acquaintance, Margaret couldn't feel completely at ease in her presence if there was no helpful Anne by her side. She was not at all versed in speaking her mind on the subjects that so completely engaged Mrs. Westfield and she feared that it would gain her no favour in her eyes. However, Margaret was nothing if not resourceful and in her next letter to her aunt she resolved to include a set of questions pertaining to the fitting of the rooms of her house, the wood panels, the staircases, the ornaments, chandeliers, the chimney pieces and whatnot; anything that would be of interest to Mrs. Westfield.

Another thing that struck Margaret in regards to her character was the fact that unlike her aunt she did not impose on anyone's time and was very well pleased with her own company; she liked to occupy her mind with thought and her hands with work and was in agony whenever the latter was unavailable. Her notions were bold and oftentimes shocking and though still

relatively handsome and of an age that would permit a second marriage she was decidedly against it, believing that a man would be nothing short of burden and that she did very well on her own to be in any danger of suffering from the absence of a husband.

When Margaret was not observing Mrs. Westfield and the ways of Northbrook Hall with keen interest, she was engaged with her nephew in the playroom that extended to the rest of the house. Just like his grandmother, little James possessed energy in abundance to remain still for more than five minutes at a time and so lively, adventurous and enthusiastic was he that he could not be contained within a single room no matter how big it was and how many distractions it provided. Soon enough Margaret found herself running around the place, along the galleries, up and down the stairs with a child and a pack of squealing puppies in tow in an extravagant exhibition of disarrayed hair and torn petticoat.

When she had a minute to herself she would go to her sister's old room, where she would indulge in her sorrow and heartache. She dearly wished to be able to have a look at Isabella's portrait that she knew hung in Mr. Westfield's study, but she was perfectly aware that he would not be pleased if she came by unannounced to what was his domain and asking him for permission was out of the question at present.

Ever since their arrival, Mr. Westfield's attitude towards her was confined to cold civility bordering on barely concealed contempt, conveying his sentiments

on the subject of her staying at Northbrook Hall with painful clarity. The next day he didn't say a word to her beyond inquiring if she was pleased with her accommodations and whether she need anything to further her comfort with a face devoid of any emotions and upon receiving a timid reply of 'Thank you, sir. I am perfectly happy with all the arrangements.' made no other attempt at talking or even looking at her. At which point Margaret felt a keen loss that must have been the result of her vanity and self-importance. But after occupying his mind and space for a whole day and being the sole focus of his attention, however negative, it was very hard to relinquish her hold on him. Now, though, the only time he let his gaze travel towards her was when she would come face to face with him along with little James, out of breath and in no fit state to be seen by a gentleman. And whenever that happened, for soon Margaret learnt to avoid galleries, staircases and rooms from whence Mr. Westfield was likely to make an appearance, an odd look would pass across his features that she could not quite place. And it was not until the second week of her stay at Northbrook Hall that brought back Mr. Westfield as she knew him in all his severity and disapprobation.

Chapter Eight

Mr. Westfield, upon entering the drawing-room to greet his mother after his day-long absence, was surprised to find her not around; an occurrence quite extraordinary all on its own as it was his mother's favourite spot in the evening. He was yet more surprised to find Miss Margaret making her own company, looking pensive as her gaze was firmly fixed on the pianoforte. It was enough to give him pause and forget about his decision not to approach her. Though, according to his sister, he had taken steps to ensure their distance a bit too far for that.

But what was Miss Margaret doing here all alone? Where was Anne in her offices of guard and confidante or his mother enthralled by Miss Margaret's handling of the latest knitting pattern? Or why wasn't she running rampages on his property with his son?

The girl was a menace as far as he was concerned and she was taking over his life, family and estate at an alarming pace and with every intention of permanence. It was, of course, the exact point of her coming here but no matter how much he reflected on the matter it did not appeal to him. Somehow she even managed to bring the level of ordinary everyday noise to a new height and the things that she was getting up to with little James he didn't even want to think about.

Only the other day he caught them with their hands full of purchase and their eyes bright with mischief, climbing a winding staircase leading from the cellar of

all places. He was struck dumb by the scene and by the time he got his faculties back in order to declare his astonishment and demand an explanation, they were already gone, though he suspected that the echoing sound of their laughter was not the doings of his imagination.

Stepping into the room he therefore revelled in her gasp of surprise, appeased that they evened out this week's score for appearing out of nowhere and startling one another into embarrassed silence. It was petty of him and he could acknowledge as much, but he could not take all the blame, because surely it was not his fault that Miss Margaret always brought out the worst in him and like any living creature he was allowed to exhibit occasional triviality of thought and ill humour. Not to mention, that when it concerned this particular lady he decided that it would be much better not to conceal his emotions in case some silly or inappropriate notion entered her head, promoted by his sister.

His petulance growing alarmingly at the mere sight of his sister-in-law, Mr. Westfield couldn't help remarking upon her wistful airs. 'I fear that it must be invariably dull for you in the country, Miss Margaret. I can only imagine what kind of hardship you endure when every next day is nothing but a repetition of the previous one with no entertainment and company to be had.'

Margaret laughed, though Mr. Westfield noted that it was not the carefree laughter that rang around the

house when she was playing with little James or walking hand in hand with Anne.

‘Mr. Westfield, if I didn’t know any better I would presume that you were calling me a shallow person who finds pleasure in nothing but entertainment.’ said Margaret in a reproachful voice. ‘Have you perhaps noticed my longing for music and it lead you to believe that I am in dreadful need of a dance partner to alleviate the dullness of the hour? Well, then I must hasten to inform you that this is not at all the case. You are disappointed, I see, but how can I ever feel dull around you? Have you no idea how entertaining I find your mistaken assumptions? Indeed, sir, it has become quite a favourite sport of mine to collect them. I do believe I will have to send a word to London to acquire a special box soon for the one that I use at present has no room there anymore. And while I miss my daily music exercises dearly, I would not change my present circumstances and company for the world.’

‘I’m afraid my mother has no liking for music and its performers no matter how accomplished they may be.’ replied Mr. Westfield sternly. ‘But I can assure you that playing the instrument, though an admirable quality in a lady that never fails to show her skills to the best of advantage, is not the only thing that you can spend your time excelling in. If I may, I would suggest employing your mind with a book. Surely some light reading would bring you no harm, even though you might be shocked to discover that it, in fact, offers the expanding of one’s knowledge and improvement of

one's mind. You will also find that the library at Northbrook Hall is quite extensive and provides for different tastes. You could always start with something light.'

'I almost forgot that you sharpen your eye in order to detect my faults like one would a pen.' said Margaret, the pitch of her voice rising slightly. 'I am certain that only this could have enabled you to root out the core of my shallow nature so promptly and without so much as trying. But I have to ask you, sir, if you make it your practice to treat your guests with such rudeness and contempt, or if you reserve this sort of treatment for me?'

Mr. Westfield bowed stiffly.

'I had no wish to offend you, madam. I was only speaking my mind – a *practice* I am sure you can relate to.'

Margaret smiled with faint amusement, looking at Mr. Westfield across the room.

'Then I'm sorry that you find my lack of interest in books offensive to a degree that prompts you to exhibit such asperity of judgement, but I must confess that there is just something about reading that I find wanting. It's quite a puzzle I suppose, considering the number of books stored in the libraries and the number of people finding the experience interesting. Perhaps, you will be kind enough to help me solve it?' asked Margaret archly. Really, how could anyone resist teasing Mr. Westfield out of his countenance, she thought, watching as his posture went rigid.

‘I’m sure there is a large number of your particular friends who would like nothing better than to assist you in your latest endeavour, Miss Margaret. I, however, must decline the honour.’ he replied frostily.

‘There, Mr. Westfield, you’re doing it again.’ said Margaret in a sing-song voice that made him snap: ‘Doing *what* again, Miss Margaret?’

‘Being rude and quite on purpose, I declare! I would not have believed it of you, sir. What a breach of hospitality to refuse the promotion of my comfort by indulging me in such a trifle! I reckon a man like yourself must be aware of the policy regarding houseguests but, of course, you may decide not to follow through with it. After all, there are exceptions to every case.’

Mr. Westfield glared at Margaret who gave him a confident smile and continued.

‘I must admit that I find your conduct and the change your countenance undergoes upon perceiving me rather taxing and nothing that I would have expected from a man my sister chose to bestow her heart upon. And it makes me wonder if perhaps my original fears and speculations on your account that you so resent due to the mode of my delivery have not been accurate to some extent.’

‘Miss Margaret, are you deliberately trying my patience?’

‘Sir, you have proved on more than one occasion that you find my presence trying without the added effect of my efforts.’ replied Margaret airily. ‘Your

attitude towards me these past few weeks was ostentatiously disagreeable, even though I believe I've done nothing to deserve it. Not to mention, that you put me in constant danger of expiring from the heating properties of your glares. I'm afraid that if you do not cease to glare at me whenever we are in the vicinity of each other I might turn into cinder.'

'In which case we shall all be saved a great deal of trouble.' muttered Mr. Westfield resentfully before he could recollect himself.

There was a crash as Margaret dropped the lid of the pianoforte she had been toying with. Her face was pale and her mouth was open as if to gasp, though no sound came out. Mr. Westfield, speechless and horrified with himself, watched as her whole body was seized by tremors and before he knew what he was doing he rushed to her side. Taking her hand he led her, unresisting and frail-looking, to the couch. After pouring and handing her a glass of wine with his own shaking hand he knelt by her side with his head bowed in shame.

'Miss Margaret, this was completely uncalled for. I am deeply ashamed that I let my anger and resentment overwhelm me so as to forget myself completely. There's no excuse for my treatment of you in such a way and yet I must beg your forgiveness.'

'Well, at least there is one thing less for you to hold against me now.' said Margaret softly, holding back her sobs.

Mr. Westfield raised his head and looked at her. Margaret smiled tremulously.

‘You can no longer blame me for being recklessly outspoken, considering that you are not exactly an example of restrained speech yourself. However, I was under the impression that we cleared my name of its juvenile crimes against you during our journey hither and left the early period of our acquaintance and all the episodes linked to it in the past. So how can you account for such an uncompromising dislike that you constantly display towards me? What else have you got to accuse me of that would justify such obstinate refusal on your part to believe in my goodness?’ she demanded in a voice thick with hurt and incomprehension.

Mr. Westfield sprang to his feet and highly agitated started pacing the room before stopping in front of her and declaring with a very solemn air: ‘Perhaps it is time to address certain issues of your stay in London, the contemplation of which gives me little pleasure and even less peace.’

Margaret’s face hardened and she raised a mocking eyebrow.

‘I am all attention, Mr. Westfield.’

Mr. Westfield clasped his hands behind his back and started pacing the room again, speaking in a rush of indignation: ‘Miss Margaret, how can you account for your many indiscretions while in town?’

Margaret frowned.

‘Do you have any particular incident on your mind you are referring to, sir, or is it your general surmise of my stay there?’ she asked coldly

‘Well let’s see, shall we?’ reared back Mr. Westfield. ‘Apart from your constant flirting and your infamous relationship with Mr. Stockley, I can point out at least one particular event that made it impossible for me to put off your removal from your aunt’s care any longer.’

‘Before you proceed, Mr. Westfield,’ interrupted Margaret, ‘I must warn you that your intelligence is quite inaccurate. There is nothing infamous as you put it about my relationship with Mr. Stockley. He and I are very good friends and everyone of our mutual acquaintance is well aware of the fact.’

‘As far as I recall his sister was not aware of it on the day I came to fetch you.’

‘I’m afraid Catherine’s behaviour on that day remains a mystery to me, but I can assure you that she did not mean the words she said.’

‘Or maybe she was simply judging from what was passing in front of her eyes?’

‘Then her eyes were deceiving her, I’m afraid. I can only repeat myself and confirm that there is nothing of censure to be perceived in my relationship with Mr. Stockley. I do not know why you were led to believe otherwise.’

‘So you deny the fact that at one point you were going to marry the gentleman?’

‘Indeed I do. Our affection is that of brother and sister and though we are not tied by blood we feel the

bond very strongly to entertain any other notion on the subject.'

Mr. Westfield muttered something under his breath that Margaret didn't catch, but she supposed that whatever it was, it was not in her favour.

'It is the truth, Mr. Westfield. Why do you find it so improbable to believe? My situation in life is such that I can very well afford to be friends with men without expecting or pursuing an offer of marriage.'

'I find it a disputable point, Miss Margaret, considering your recent exploits that would have left quite a blemish on your reputation if not for a lucky coincidence.'

'I'm afraid, Mr. Westfield, that you will have to be more specific for I am at a loss as to your possible implications.' said Margaret in a tense voice, her face flushed, her fingers clutching the empty glass.

'It has come to my attention,' said Mr. Westfield slowly, controlling his temper. 'that you entered an engagement with a man fully aware of his engagement to another lady. A man you barely knew I might add. A man you met at a ball for the very first time and took in by the force of your charms.'

'You forgot to mention lively music and inordinate amounts of wine, sir.' exclaimed Margaret and Mr. Westfield stared at her incredulously. 'Plied with wine he was. So happy to be there and so eager to dance! I could not refuse him for anything. It is not every day that you come across such a partner! A partner that combines handsome features, charming manners,

elegant turn and sparkling wit. Though, I suppose the latter was more to the effect of wine for I had not heard him say a decent word before that, or indeed any word at all. But, then again, it might be because we had not been introduced to each other at the time. Naturally, such a combination might make one lose head and embark upon an adventure of the kind you are referring to. But, Mr. Westfield, I must dispute such allegations in my case.'

'Do not feign innocence with me, Miss Margaret! I know all the particulars of this ignominious affair and I would like to hear an explanation as to what sort of a girl would do such a thing?'

Margaret looked at him and Mr. Westfield continued with an impatient sigh.

'I know that you made him so much in love with you that he applied for your aunt's consent on the morrow of the ball and was refused like so many before him. Nursing a broken heart and unable to bear the shame he brought on himself the gentleman was immediately dispatched to the army, while the lady, betrayed and disgraced, unable to bear the ridicule of the world shut herself up in the country.'

Margaret lowered her eyes, defiance gone. She could see how a report of such purport would affect Mr. Westfield's opinion of her. How he would regard her now and possibly forever. It was obvious that no matter how proper her conduct was from now on it would not erase the knowledge of what she had done to that poor girl; that she had served the means of ruining her only

chance at marriage; even though she could be acquitted at least of that part for she was not aware of the power of her own actions at the time.

How bitter was the truth. And the realisation that Mr. Westfield would never look at her with something akin to approbation pained her exceedingly. She had excuses, of course, but none of them would she dare voice to Mr. Westfield. One of them he was unlikely to believe. Another was unaccountably stupid.

For how was she ever to explain that she let Catherine pick up her suitors and dance partners and that she always relied on Catherine to provide her with information regarding them while she herself didn't care either way? All she knew was that none of the gentlemen she had ever met fit her requirements as to what a man ought to be in order to attach her, and though she had no definite notion of what it was exactly that she was looking for in a man, she was sure that she would know it when she saw it.

And no, she had no idea that Mr. Benjamin Linton was engaged because Catherine, for reasons best known only to her, omitted this crucial piece of information when she pointed him out to Margaret as a potential dance partner. More than that, Margaret wasn't even aware of his existence until that fateful ball. On their introduction she found him a fine young man and his company quite diverting and saw no reason not to follow him down the set again and again.

She also had no prior notion of there being a Maria Edgecombe who turned out to be Mr. Linton's secured

interest. She let Catherine play on her vanity, self-importance and indulgence and let her make a fool of herself. She was greatly ashamed that she had become a tool in Catherine's game. She blamed herself for encouraging the advances of Mr. Linton, without knowing the extent of the damage she was inflicting by doing so. Unlike Mr. Westfield, Margaret didn't have a crystal clear image of the events until it was already too late.

Later she found out about Mr. Linton's obligations to another lady as well as the reason why in case of his affections being engaged elsewhere he paid so much attention to another girl. Catherine boasted that she was the one to inform Mr. Linton that Miss Maria was enjoying attentions of another gentleman, placing a delicate hint on the source of her intimate knowledge of the fact. Margaret could very well picture the scene in her mind. The conspicuous absence of Catherine's brother, for who else would supply her with such a definite knowledge, and the sudden malady that took hold of Linton's fiancée that stopped her from attending the ball that night were proof enough of his lady's duplicity, and out of sheer desperation he threw himself into the charms of another lady, as unsuspecting of deception as he was.

'The strength of his feelings I believe was exaggerated a great deal.' murmured Margaret at last. 'He was not as taken in as your account suggests.' she added.

‘How can you pronounce such falsehood in the presence of ample evidence suggesting that Mr. Linton visited you the next morning? What else could his appearance signify at such an early hour unless he was impatient to secure your hand in marriage?’

Margaret sighed. That episode was exceptionally humiliating and Mr. Westfield had no idea just how much pride it cost her to confess to him what transpired that morning in her aunt’s house.

‘Mr. Westfield, you, of all people, shouldn’t be surprised to learn that not all men of my acquaintance seek my hand in marriage. The visit Mr. Linton paid on the morrow was not expected and quite insolent. I confess that by the time the morning arrived he had no place in my mind. Upon my entering the drawing-room where he’d been escorted by the servant I stopped short for I did not recognise the man standing there and wondered if some sort of mistake had occurred. He was in a pitiful state. Quite altered. I had never seen anyone behave in less manly manner. In short, he came to plead with me to send a line to Miss Edgecombe containing a true narration of an event so miscommunicated to more than one quarter.’

Mr. Westfield looked taken aback.

‘What did you do?’ he asked.

Margaret raised an eyebrow.

‘Considering that I had no idea who Miss Edgecombe was at the time?’

She shrugged indifferently.

‘I sent him away. And if you ask me I believe that I did them both a favour. Their marriage could not be considered prudent for there was neither name nor fortune on either side, therefore nothing was to be gained but misunderstandings and despair in the future. And I do not believe that their attachment was all that great if he was ready to believe in her wrongness and if she was so hasty in rejecting his affections after receiving an anonymous note. What good would come out of their union if they placed their trust in anyone but each other?’

Short silence ensued in which Margaret rubbed her temples with scented water that she had on hand and Mr. Westfield resumed his pacing. When he stopped he spoke again and Margaret winced at the pitch of his voice.

‘As I understand you maintain that there were no sentiments of affection involved between you and Mr. Linton?’

‘Indeed. I witnessed nothing resembling strong affection on Mr. Linton’s part and I do not believe that there was anything to suggest an attachment on my part.’

Margaret frowned, recollecting Catherine and her schemes and added: ‘Unless he was led to believe otherwise.’

Mr. Westfield shook his head.

‘I find it amazing how people around you are so often led to believe something that is not true. The

power you seem to exercise over people and their beliefs, which then turn into actions, is inconceivable.'

Margaret smiled thinly.

'Well, you do seem to be under its influence a great deal. Which gives you an advantage, Mr. Westfield, don't you think?'

'What do you mean?' he asked perplexed.

'Well, if you ever find yourself in a situation where you will be disposed to like me, all you will have to do in order to get back on familiar ground will be to recall that it is nothing but my power over you. I'm sure it will serve well to break the spell. But do not be alarmed, sir, I have no intentions of taking you in. At least not at present. I would not want to be bothered with such a disagreeable man.'

With that Margaret rose and marched towards the folding doors, leaving Mr. Westfield to gape at her retreating form. Stopping at the doorway, Margaret turned to address Mr. Westfield for the last time today. She was pleased to note that he had not moved all through her walk and looked very much out of his element.

'I fear that it is not in my power to convince you that things can and will happen independent of my wishes and actions. However, it is of very little consequence now, considering your opinion of me. I would not want to importune you on the subject any further.'

Thus Margaret departed, leaving Mr. Westfield with the distinct impression that he had just lost another argument.

Chapter Nine

It was at the time when Margaret's stay with the Westfield's reached its four weeks mark and life took on as natural and smooth a course as if she had been born, raised and spent the best part of it within the simplicity and quietness of Northbrook Hall that they entered the month of May with joy and great anticipation, particularly on the parts of the young ladies and their nephew, of finer weather that would allow longer walks and outdoor games as well as provide them with a wider collection of flowers to meet the eye, to sketch, to hang on the walls and to fill the air and every spare vase with the sweetness and freshness of their allusive fragrance. It was also at that time that Margaret received a letter from Catherine Stockley – her long-term friend of questionable character and suspicious set of morals.

While Margaret herself had no intentions of being the one to initiate their correspondence, holding onto the privilege of the injured party after their last meeting, she fully expected Miss Stockley to seek her company by means of engaging her pen ere long. It was very unlike Catherine not to wish to know all the particulars of Margaret's stay with the Westfield, on whose account despite her many assurances to the contrary she was greatly interested; not to mention that she wouldn't miss for the world Margaret's first-person account as to the eligibility of Northbrook grounds in terms of productive romance.

At this point, however, one may enquire as to why it would take Miss Stockley a whole month to contact her closest friend now that they were miles apart. But Margaret, being acquainted with the inner workings of Catherine's mind, knew that she would want to take her time in order to conjure up a plausible story or some handy excuse that would, firstly, explain her behaviour towards Margaret at Lady Theodora's and, secondly, would suffice in restoring their easy companionship of before, even if that meant that she would have to give herself over to the tormenting ways of curiosity.

With that came another piece of knowledge that had Margaret had a more solid impression of what was right and wrong would have alarmed her to the wrongness of it. Margaret knew perfectly well that whatever Catherine's letter contained by way of an excuse or an apology, depending on what she chose to pursue, would be quite a matter of fiction; however she could always count on Catherine to earn additional points for creativity. Naturally, Margaret couldn't help wondering as to what Catherine would employ this time around in order to convince her of her sincerity as well as the fact that she meant no ill by her actions when she took upon herself the unnecessary task of bringing up the subject of Margaret's non-existent relationship with her brother in the presence of perhaps the only person who would not appreciate this sort of information.

It all came about when their friendship upon losing its urgency a few years previously had acquired certain

qualities of a game. Though Margaret was acutely aware that it was not the wisest of ways of maintaining friendly ties or indeed not the most prudent of friendships, even without drawing comparisons between Anne with her cheerful personality and sound advice and Catherine with her head full of schemes and traps, she could not quite find it in herself to give it up. Not just yet at any rate, because even now, it seemed, a part of her at least still relied on Catherine's ability to supply her with entertainment; and, considering Catherine's idea of an entertainment, Margaret preferred not to dwell too closely on what it said about her as a person.

However now that they parted in much confusion and with less than cordial sentiments on Margaret's part, Margaret realised that she was not at all overjoyed at the prospect of such an arrival. And whenever she had a spare moment and happened to dedicate a part of it to the contemplation of this inevitable event she regarded it with a certain amount of dread. She knew that when this day came to pass she would not be strong enough to do the only proper thing under the circumstances and cease all the interaction between herself and Catherine.

She would have preferred to receive Catherine's letter in the seclusion of her own chamber. However, she should have known that even Catherine's letter would bring her some trouble and instead of arriving in as discreet fashion as possible it came with the morning post and was delivered to her at breakfast. The moment

her eyes fell upon Catherine's unmistakable hand Margaret found herself in the most discomposed frame of mind. She blushed and cast an involuntary glance in Mr. Westfield's direction before having enough presence of mind to redirect it back undetected to the letter. Fortunately for her Mrs. Westfield was as ever unconcerned by the goings on in front of her eyes to pay any mind to Margaret's antics, while Anne and Mr. Westfield loved an early banter that distracted them most effectively from everything else around them so that for a few moments no-one noticed anything unusual to engage their attention.

However, Margaret's silence, her transfixed stare, the flush of her cheeks and her motionless attitude did not stand a chance of not drawing it sooner or later. And when their eyes with varying degrees of concern were finally fixed upon her person Margaret, being in the state of near panic, almost missed it. When she became aware of it she felt rather foolish for having worked herself into a fit over a letter, but at the same time she could not quite help having her spirits ruffled by its arrival as it brought back her fears and insecurities regarding her former associations.

Indeed, it was rather forced into the forefront of her mind by her solid friendship with Anne and by the continuity of her brother's remarks that had brought home the flaws of her character and her personal choices. But while her mind could not help rejoicing at the emergence of common sense, Margaret herself was stunned into silence by the embarrassing fact that her

thoughts, whenever they touched upon the subject of impropriety, instantly strayed towards Mr. Westfield. Though, considering that he was the one who followed her downward path into the abyss of indecency, cataloguing her every indiscretion and inconsistency, it was hardly surprising.

As she felt the weight of his stare, Margaret scolded herself for making such a scene and in such a public way over such a trifle. Darting another swift glance in Mr. Westfield's direction, Margaret caught that familiar narrowing of his eyes that indicated his growing suspicion. She dreaded to imagine what it was that he was assuming the letter communicated, but knowing his unflattering opinion of her, it was probably something to the purpose of another engagement-breaking scheme or her imposition on another man's heart. Such thoughts, naturally, could not fail to bring the level of her discomposure to such a degree that she had barely heard Mrs. Westfield's inquiry as to whether the letter was bearing news from her aunt.

'It's earlier this week.' she noted distractedly over her morning paper, before fixing her gaze on Margaret. She seemed to apply as much conscious effort on this task as Margaret did on putting the letter aside. Margaret hid a smile. Mrs. Westfield always read a newspaper at breakfast no matter how hard Anne opposed it. Margaret supposed that it was done mainly for her sake, but after a series of failed attempts to put an end to this particular habit, Anne gave it up as bad business. She went as far as appealing to Mr. Westfield, but he was

just as bad and rather preferred his mother to have gone through the newspaper by the time breakfast was over, for then it would naturally fall into his hands and it suited him just fine.

‘I do wonder if she had that new tapestry brought by now.’ continued Mrs. Westfield eagerly. ‘I hope she included a detailed account of it as well as the price. These days one must particularly mind the price. I am sure that it can not be too high for such a remarkable piece of work. I’ve been thinking about acquiring one myself. I believe that it will look lovely in the sitting-room that adjoins your bed-chamber, Margaret. Every time I venture there I find that the lack of one gives the room a bare look that is quite unattractive.’

‘You are very kind, ma’am. However I do not wish you to go into any trouble on my account.’ replied Margaret.

Mrs. Westfield gave her the look that clearly stated how silly that assumption was and that any attempts to stop her room-fitting crusade would inevitably fail.

‘I’m afraid I bear disappointing news, ma’am.’ continued Margaret. ‘The letter is not from my aunt.’ And upon catching Mrs. Westfield’s frown of displeasure added with a smile. ‘You may depend upon it that my aunt would never disrupt her routine for an out of turn letter.’

‘Oh well, then I dare say it must be a letter from a friend of yours. You must have been anticipating it for quite some time though for you look unaccountably

flustered. Well, do not let us keep you waiting any longer. Go and read it.'

Margaret shook her head and gave her a shaky smile the purpose of which was to encourage conviction.

'No indeed, ma'am, there is no hurry. Whatever this letter contains it can wait until after breakfast.'

Thus the matter was dropped, though not the intense stares of sister and brother as well as Margaret's awareness of them. She addressed Anne's half-curious, half-concerned look with a shake of her head and plainly refused to meet Mr. Westfield's eye. Unfortunately, her gaze kept straying towards him every so often as to make it quite impossible for Margaret to enjoy the rest of the meal without finding herself in the imminent danger of choking.

Once they left the table, Margaret's excuses for lingering ran low. Her nephew, on whose company she never before failed to count, was engaged to oversee the reconstruction of the parsonage house with Mrs. Westfield and upon applying to accompany them Margaret was gently but firmly refused for on such expeditions they preferred no one's company but that of each other and Margaret who could never participate in a discussion that would follow could not be considered at all welcome at the time.

Anne was engaged with a friend of hers who, recently married was reaping the felicity fruit with all that it involved and had practically no time left to dedicate to her dear friends. And as Margaret was not about to make Mr. Westfield's shooting party she was

left with no other alternative but to seek a nice spot of peaceful aspect and get herself to read the troublesome thing.

But as the whole of the house was now at her disposal it provided her with additional time to linger and upon entering the drawing-room she was suddenly struck by the revelation that she could indulge her hitherto denied pianoforte love now that Mrs. Westfield was out of earshot. What a lucky coincidence it was! However, it very soon became apparent that even her favourite pastime would not provide her with the kind of peace of mind that would banish her anxiety. Instead she felt restless; the movement of her wrist was inaccurate and resulted in musical delivery of a very inferior quality.

Abandoning the pianoforte in great distress and still greater disappointment, Margaret's steps took her to Isabella's old room. But as she was comfortably seated on the window-sill and stared into the empty grate of a prettily fitted fireplace, she felt that this room like none other could not be at all appropriate for such a trial. Isabella would never approve of Catherine and reading her letter as uncertain as Margaret was as to what it contained within its pages here was out of the question.

At last she decided upon the very sitting-room that Mrs. Westfield set her mind upon at breakfast. There, sizing up one of the walls for the possible addition of a tapestry, Margaret seated herself in one of the armchairs and finally opened the letter but did not quite attempt to read it just yet. What if it contained the follow-up

information on the unfortunate development of the Linton fiasco? With a deep fortifying breath Margaret lowered her eyes. Well, the beginning of the letter was very much ordinary and as no names linked to her past misdeeds popped out at her at the first glance she cast along the lines Margaret assumed that it was safe to read the whole of it.

‘Dearest Margaret – Has it been but a month since your departure? It certainly feels like a twelvemonth to me. And considering that you were the one to take an untimely farewell of the town and all of its pleasures it must sound as a rather shocking announcement coming from me as I am now stationed in the perpetually noisy and rapidly changing vortex of its motions. I can very well picture your surprise and do not blame you for it in the least. Perhaps the world has turned upside down or perhaps it is my particular affinity to abnormal wine-drinking that has come to play tricks on me?

I recall with greatest fondness how you used to caution me and on occasions plead with me not to overindulge with spirits, considered too strong for a woman’s constitution, but I would not listen to you, for do I ever? And now I fear that I am succumbing to its ill effects, for whatever useful properties it possesses I must have abused them most dreadfully to be of any use to me anymore. But I ask you not to hasten and scold me as you might find, in fact, that it is not at all the case at present. I know I sound contradictory and stupid but bear with me because the more I dwell on the state of

my mind and heart and my very soul the more I believe that this is a case of a broken heart. Upon my word, I'm afraid that losing you, my dearest friend in the whole of the kingdom, to something as appalling as country living was too painful an event as to leave me without my share of suffering. Do you miss me as I miss you, I wonder? But I do not wish to torment myself with such vexations so I will pretend that you do.

However truthful such a sentiment might be on your part I trust that you do not find your new life circumstances as unbearably dull and tedious as I seem to be finding mine. I am not going to bore you with gossip as I do not believe that it is worth mentioning unless we are the ones responsible for bringing it about and, by the bye, I haven't heard a decent one in a while. That is why I must implore you to reveal the details of your stay at Northbrook Hall and send your reply in the most expedient manner so as to alleviate the dullness of my stay and complete lack of excitement that I had to be content with as of late. Do tell if dear old Westfield has infected you with his dissatisfied airs by now. I would have inquired as to how you can stand living in the same house with such a disagreeable man if I had not had my own recollections of his countenance and figure to enjoy and thus render such question a silly one.

Upon reflection, I daresay that country living does have its benefits. And if I were you, my dear, I would have contrived to benefit from your current situation even further; though perhaps you have already done so.

After all, what else is to be done in the country in the course of those dull April days but to provide for the jolly month of May when you are finally allowed to change long evenings by the fire for longer strolls in the shrubbery? But I give you enough credit to know all of it by now and to have enough foresight as to prepare the grounds of Northbrook for the future steps that you'll make there as its rightful mistress.

I must say that this is the dulllest season that I had the misfortune of having lived to see. But as I attribute it solely to your absence my opinion might not be quite accurate. Not to mention that I hadn't had much chance of being out and about in any decent sort of society that I would wish to attend for a second time. Our connections are sadly too low to promote our consequence in its eyes and to allow us an entrance into its most refined drawing-rooms. But I do not mind it in the least for without your presence I would not at all be able to enjoy myself with as much spirit as I would have otherwise. But you understand that playing whist with my mama and aunt is not exactly my idea of fun while one is losing track of the game and the other is cheating us all out in the worst ways imaginable.

Alas, I've been cooped up at home almost constantly at my mother's side as her health is not what it used to be and it gives me some grief to consider for it leaves me entirely powerless in following my own pursuits. Meanwhile Clifford is out with papa doing heavens know what; undoubtedly something to his liking. I quite detest him for it, though if my father is to be

believed this is my brother's last chance at freedom. He suddenly decided that it is time for Clifford to support himself and make his own path in life.

He does not rely upon me to make a fortune by marriage (and rightfully so) but as he took it into his head that he must have at least one of his children settled by Michaelmas it naturally fell upon Clifford. If you ask me, I think that our dear papa made a bet he cannot lose for he must have staked something he has no means of paying. Silly old man! And poor Clifford! Now he has but two options: he either marries a wealthy heiress or takes a living in the country and becomes a clergyman! What a fine joke that is, wouldn't you say? My brother – a clergyman! I didn't laugh so much since that time at your aunt's when I played that major joke on the two of you. Your departure was such a sad affair that I could not support it without having some fun and you both played it so well that whenever I feel particularly out of spirits I recall the looks upon your faces!

It has been quite a long letter, has it not? And yet it doesn't convey even half of what I would wish to share with you. And before I take my leave in hopes of catching the post, I must relay to you some splendid news: I believe that very soon you will receive a certain visitor. Pray, this is all.

Yours etc.,

CS'

Thus the letter concluded, leaving Margaret in no doubt as to the identity of the unnamed visitor as well

as the fact that there was no way she would be able to face Mr. Westfield at dinner without Catherine's insinuations entering her mind and making her blush with shame. She had never disliked Catherine more. Overpowered by the violence of her thoughts and emotions, Margaret sprang to her feet and started pacing the room. Despite her expectations, the entertainment value of the letter was sunk by its disrespectful tone, its vulgar assumptions and the unrestrained glee over her distress. Oh! how odious! – to dismiss her sentiments with such an uncaring gesture under the pretence of a joke! What a mortification to endure!

Margaret clutched the letter with her vengeful fingers. She was beyond astonished that Catherine didn't even make an effort to sound contrite or remorseful or indeed unawares as to the sort of trouble she had landed Margaret in, blandly stating instead that it was all a grand joke played at her and Stockley's expense! There was no way Margaret could communicate such a letter to Anne without concealing half of its content and the name of her correspondent. But what a disservice to do to Anne by such a concealment!

Margaret's cheeks were on fire, her mind was reeling and the room was spinning all around her and though the fire was not kindled she felt as though the room was suffocating her with heat. With a sudden resolve that she so lacked upon receiving the letter Margaret ran to her room, donned a cap and a coat and left for

the soothing coolness of fresh air. Perhaps there she would come up with an answer if an inquiry were to be issued. Perhaps a name could be concealed without abusing Anne's trust, for if it were to reach Mr. Westfield's ear – but oh! she could not think of that!

The walk was done but no conclusion was reached and when summoned to dinner Margaret reported herself to be ill; and no more truthful a lie had ever escaped her lips.

Chapter Ten

Anne Westfield, having secured a particularly optimistic disposition from her father, was one of those fortunate individuals whose contentment with the world was of a rather independent origin and who expected everybody else to enjoy the same sort of unquestionable happiness that she did. However, with a mother whose temper was as fickle as it was quick, and an older brother who in recent years redoubled his efforts to occupy his mind with graveness of thought not at all beneficial for procuring a smile, she had to conclude that there were people who were not as prone to sentiments of general felicity as she was.

Upon Margaret's arrival, though, Miss Westfield had finally found the kind of companion whose mind was not confined to being either thoughtful or serious and whose aptitude for being cheerful and carefree also possessed an advantage of not appearing stupid. Miss Fairfax exercised her good-humour and contentment with everybody as assiduously as her performance on the pianoforte and preferred to think of the world at large much less than it deserved, which in Anne's opinion constituted the main reason for the constancy of her happiness.

Naturally, in the days that followed, Anne could not disregard her growing alarm at witnessing a complete change in Margaret's conduct that exhibited itself most prominently in her withdrawal from all family gatherings and most striking absence at meals. Anne

believed that she was not mistaken to think that it was provoked by the arrival of the letter, the delivery of which produced quite an effect on Margaret and plunged her into the state of gloom so great that it failed to pass within the next days or even produce any information as to its author or what it contained.

Anne's inquisitiveness on the occasion gave way to her natural delicacy and prevented her from the imprudence of an uninvited inquiry. However, she was not without hope that Margaret would seek her out in order to relate the woes that were plaguing her. Margaret, meanwhile, though never deficient in conversation before, preserved a most unique restraint in speech; and though it would undoubtedly get due approbation in Mr. Westfield's eyes, vastly disturbed his sister.

The number of sentences uttered by Margaret at this time could be easily counted on the fingers of one hand and, perhaps the most startling of all, when applied to by a member of the Westfield family she would not meet anyone's eye. For the most part Margaret kept adamantly to her room or that of Isabella, maintaining that she was quite unfit to be seen downstairs. But, when pressed to see a physician, abandoned her refuge and joined the rest of the family for breakfast with alacrity that contradicted her many assurances of poor health. Just as before, she failed to issue an explanation as to the oddness of her behaviour but was instead exceedingly generous in effusions of apologies to those

whom she had alarmed and inconvenienced with her sudden spell of indisposition.

She ate little and talked even less and upon perceiving the uncharacteristic pallor of her cheeks, Anne's fears heightened and grasping Margaret's hand with feeling, she urged the latter most beseechingly to see a doctor. To which Margaret gave just as ardent refusal:

'You are most kind, Anne. But I assure you with all my heart that there is nothing at all that is ailing my body,' and with profound sadness continued, 'it is rather my soul that is in grave need of mending.'

Such a proclamation, spoken with unguarded passion, was met with great deal of astonishment and upon catching the looks of shock directed her way Margaret coloured with mortification and hastily retreated from the room in the agony of self-reproach.

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Anne, who was the first to overcome her shock, 'I do not know what to think. A letter of any nature, but that bringing the gravest of news, cannot inspire such complete dejection in a single person.'

There she stopped to gather her thoughts and added with a shrewd expression and a narrowed eye at Mr. Westfield:

'But I sincerely hope that my dear brother and his many strictures have got nothing to do with Margaret's current distress.'

Mr. Westfield stared at his sister in utter astonishment.

‘Good Gracious, Anne, I declare you think ill of me! But I will tell you this – the wretched girl needs no outside help when it comes to conflicts with her conscience. She is quite adapt at creating them all on her own.’

‘However it all came about,’ said Mrs. Westfield in a commanding voice that put a stop to Anne’s further accusations and James’s indignant replies, ‘Margaret’s state of being is our concern and as such it is our duty to unveil the source of her troubled state and discharge it. Her maid informed me that her appetite had been very poor and that she hadn’t been out. We cannot possibly allow her to continue in such a way.’

‘But what do you suppose we should do, mama?’ asked Anne.

‘I believe that a walk to the village will do her some good for it always does when one suffers from nerves. I, for one, do not quite feel myself unless I take a long stroll early in the morning. Hence, I suggest you invite Margaret to accompany you on an errand to Fordman’s. The road there will supply you with a fine opportunity for an unobtrusive investigation of her feelings and Margaret with enough time to communicate them to you. I believe I am not at all mistaken when I say that she is more than ready for a heart-to-heart conversation.’

‘But what errand are you talking about, mother?’ asked Anne with a frown. ‘I do not recall having an errand to run and in that part of Northbrook too.’

‘If it were up to you, Anne, you would not leave the grounds unless driven away by force. As your mother I took it upon myself to supply you with an option to do otherwise. It so happens that I find myself shockingly short of fabric needed for little James’s play clothes. He claims that he cannot perform the duties of an Admiral unless he is dressed accordingly.’

Anne shared a smile with her brother. It was impossible to do so with her mother for she never took her eyes from the newspaper in front of her. Her countenance remained unmoved throughout her speech, but the constant movement of her formidable brows was enough of an indication that she was concerned.

‘I am honoured that you entrust me with such a task, mother, but I am not at all acquainted with what befits an Admiral to do it full justice.’ said Anne with another smile, wondering if her mother would look up in flare of annoyance.

‘Nevertheless, I am of high hopes that between Margaret and yourself you will come up with something appropriate.’ replied Mrs. Westfield without lifting her eyes.

Smiling despite her disappointment, Anne quit the room. However, her disappointment would have been infinitely greater had she stayed long enough to see her mother put the paper aside and address her brother.

‘Though I never thought that you had anything to do with Margaret’s odd conduct, I must speak with you on the subject of your treatment of her.’

It was Mr. Westfield's turn to contract his brows and though not as eloquent as his mother's they still managed to convey his dismay.

'I see that you have fallen under the power of her charm too.' he pronounced.

'You seem unpleasantly surprised by such an occurrence.' remarked Mrs. Westfield.

'Indeed, I am vastly surprised to find you so taken by her... to find you so accepting of her... I must admit that I expected you to be thoroughly displeased by her for she is so utterly deficient in the matters that are close to your heart.'

Mr. Westfield meant to sound light-hearted but try as he might he could not quite keep a bitter note from entering his voice.

'You're forgetting, James, that I had to content myself with the severity of this fault in my own children. I would think that I can expect much less from someone not related to me by blood.'

Mr. Westfield said nothing. With a sigh Mrs. Westfield went on.

'I am well aware of your opinion when it comes to your sister-in-law, but for the life of me I cannot agree with you on her account. I find her a very fine girl. She is genteel and amiable and a very good companion for Anne and little James. I know that in the past you had disagreements, but I would think that they would be forgotten by now. I was not at all pleased to learn how hard a time you gave her on several occasions.'

‘On those occasions I believed it my duty as her brother to instruct Miss Margaret on matters pertaining to propriety of conduct, especially when it comes to the company she keeps, since her education appears woefully insufficient in this particular areas.’ replied Mr. Westfield coldly.

‘I commend your intentions, James, but I must ask you to lessen the zeal with which you address the issue of her conduct – do not forget that she is our guest and as such must be treated with utmost graciousness. I would never think that I would have to explain this to you. You have always been excessively fond of rules.’

‘I am merely following my common sense and those are my senses that guide me when I speak myself to Miss Fairfax. Her senses, I’m afraid, are too ungoverned to keep her to the path of goodness.’

Mrs. Westfield shook her head.

‘I would also impose upon you the necessity to make certain allowances for Margaret’s disposition to be rather different from that of her most excellent sister in that she rather prefers the company of men to that of wonders of nature and abstract notions. If you consider her time of life, her beauty, her youthful ardour, her upbringing and her immediate society, you cannot help being surprised to note that she turned out as well as she did.’

‘That is an accomplishment indeed!’ commented Mr. Westfield sarcastically.

‘I believe it is and I wholly put it to the consistency of her character.’ was his mother’s earnest reply. ‘From

what I observed of her notions and ideas, I trust it to be of a rather strong nature.'

'Forgive me, madam, but I do not know what you mean. Her obstinacy and impertinence aside, I do not find her character so strong as to resist outward influence. The instance of that is her continuing friendship with the Stockleys. Their situation and lack of proper breeding alone should have alarmed her against any sort of association with them. The sister uses her most shamelessly in order to gain access into the best society. And as for the brother – well, no one, who had the dubious honour of seeing them together, could doubt his single-minded intent.'

Mr. Westfield stood up. High colour rose in his face and, upon concluding his speech, he felt heartily ashamed of himself for losing his temper. When discerning his mother's eye, alight with amusement, his expression turned dark.

He bowed stiffly to her and, so as not to appear as if he was fleeing the room, spoke:

'I understand your meaning perfectly well now, mother. You do not have to alarm yourself anymore: I promise most whole-heartedly to refrain from exercising my privilege of a brother-in-law quite so adamantly in future for, as you have been so kind as to point out, there is no real necessity for it in the first place.'

He bowed again and left the room; his face pained and his fists clenching at his sides.

Chapter Eleven

With due amount of hesitation Anne put off announcing her entrance to Margaret's room until such a time when she could be sure that it wouldn't be denied. However, any qualms that she might have had on the account of forcing herself on her friend were instantly overcome by her resolution to assist Margaret in struggling through her uncharacteristic depression that was depriving her of all worldly joys.

She found Margaret sitting on the window-seat with her forehead pressed against the window in Isabella's old chamber. Unable to stand so complete a dejection of spirits in front of her, Anne rushed into the room and placed her arms around her friend in silent comfort. But not prone to melancholy moods she was not in the habit of keeping solemn countenance for long and finding the silence rather oppressive she was soon overcome by an urge to speak.

'You must realise that there is a number of better and more productive ways of obtaining fresh air apart from trying to sniff it through the cracks in the panes.' she began in her usual vivacious manner that resulted in Margaret's instant smile. Satisfied with the result thus far, Anne continued –

'Mind, you are not going to find any cracks in these panes for they are quite new – mama had them changed only this autumn and it was such a pricy endeavour that I dare not name its cost in fear of appearing vulgar. Hence, I propose that we take a stroll

and have all the supply of fresh air that we need. You might not be aware, but we've been having some lovely days and I am of opinion that no one can prefer their refreshing novelty to that of staying indoors.'

Margaret, it seemed, was convinced long before Anne meant to conclude her speech, but for the most selfish of reasons – that of her friend's cheerful comfort and lively company – she didn't wish her chatter to stop.

'Besides, I'm in dire need of your help.' continued Anne with a very important air. 'Mother has sent me on an errand to the village. Our dearest nephew has trouble facing his Admiral duties without appropriate uniform – and as I am most hopeless when it comes to Navy Officers of any rank and their attire I have come to enlist your help. And if you oblige me in this trifling thing you will be most prodigiously rewarded by having a share in our local gossip – highly entertaining thing, I assure you.'

Margaret looked both eager and doubtful.

'But how can it be of any interest or, indeed, significance to me when I hardly know anyone around here?' she asked.

'I believe that your curiosity will be fully engaged.' replied Anne confidently.

Thus intrigued Margaret gave her ready consent:

'I will of course join you; but I must warn you that I will be a rather dull companion and of little use on your errand.'

‘Well then, Miss Margaret,’ stated Anne in her most solemn voice yet. ‘We will just have to do by what we can and be scolded most dreadfully by Mrs. Westfield.’

The two young ladies shared a laugh. Margaret squeezed Anne’s hand in gratitude and for the time it was all the expression of her feelings that she was capable of.

‘I know that I owe you an explanation.’ she began at last but was interrupted by Anne –

‘Indeed you don’t. But I am vastly concerned on your account. It pains me to see you so wretched, unaware as I am of the cause and unable to be of any assistance. And I wish for your sake alone that you confided in me.’

‘You are too good and I do not know that I deserve a friend such as yourself.’ replied Margaret emotionally.

‘Well, I’m sure that whatever gave you such an impression can be easily dealt with on our way.’ said Anne with a warm smile.

The walk was a notable success for no sooner had they left the grounds of Northbrook then Margaret confided in Anne all that had been on her mind: reflexions on her character, her painful observations on the life that she had led, her failed expectations of herself and that which troubled her the most – her friendship with Catherine and its consequences.

‘...and then to be met with such kindness in you, your mother and even your brother! No – I couldn’t face it without being excessively ashamed of myself.’ she went on. ‘I am not the person my sister wished me

to be and I am now convinced that Mr. Westfield was correct in assuming the worst of me. All the censure that he had ever bestowed upon me, be it by look or word – didn't I deserve it? He might be the most stubborn person I've had the misfortune to know – said I to myself – But he is quite right. Quite right indeed.'

'And this is what had you confined to this solitary spell of yours?' cried Anne in disbelief. 'Upon my word, you leave me quite speechless with such a report! I do not at all believe that you have anything to be ashamed of and as for my brother and his high moral standards – I do find them rather tedious and not suited for the better part of the world. In fact, just the other day I've been thinking how your presence alone sheds light on many of his own faults.'

Margaret's cheeks pinked.

'I did not mean – you must forgive me! It was very thoughtless of me to presume that I have a right to talk of Mr. Westfield in such a manner.'

'An open manner, do you mean?'

Margaret shook her head.

'A disrespectful one.'

'Well, it is clear to me now that your voluntary confinement robbed you of your sense and you plainly forgot that I derive infinite pleasure in teasing my brother and finding whatever his faults that can be found – for generally he keeps them a secret, you know.'

Anne laughed but Margaret, uncomfortable with the topic (Mr. Westfield was not someone she could talk of

or even think of lightly) and unsure as to what to say, soon hastened to change the subject to another Miss Stockley-related problem – a reply to her letter. She carried it with her in hopes of chancing upon the post-office and just now required Anne's offices of a judge. Margaret herself thought the letter rather fine, but there was still a matter of proper etiquette that she could no longer trust herself with.

The letter contained a detailed and glorious account of her stay at Northbrook, praised everyone and everything and was sure to annoy Catherine to no end; it also reprimanded Catherine for making assumptions and warned her against making wrong conclusions, and to irritate her even further not once mentioned the gentleman on whose account Margaret had to spare quite a few blushes.

Anne's opinion soon followed and was very encouraging.

'I do not find any faults with this letter. It is beautifully written and though I believe that the person you address it to does not deserve the warmth of sentiment that you express, the letter does you justice and shows that whatever doubts you have had on the account of your goodness are completely groundless.'

Her spirits thus revived and her heart set at ease, Margaret needed no other encouragement to enjoy her walk and as soon as the letter was posted banished all thoughts of Catherine from her mind. Her joy upon having disposed of the heavy burden of thoughts on self-worth and esteem was too great to describe in

words and for the longest of time she knew nothing around her but the pleasure one contrived from such a simple yet extraordinary thing as taking a stroll.

However, had Margaret but paid attention to the population of the village she would have become aware that she had inspired the most vivid stirrings of attention among the people of Northbrook supplied by many an avid look and a good deal of gossip. The storms of April weather and her own intention of staying out of the public eye had kept Margaret within the Northbrook Hall grounds ever since her arrival and but for a few neighbouring families that merited entrance into the Westfield household she had yet to make any other acquaintances.

Naturally, the arrival of a young and reportedly very handsome lady to the most prominent family of the village could not proceed without raising considerable amount of interest, all things considered. One of those things was the fact that she was to come and stay indefinitely with the Westfields – thus the conclusion that followed this report and was confirmed upon her sighting was not at all surprising to anyone but Margaret herself who was soon to be faced with a rather shocking revelation.

She reached the Fordman's successfully ignorant of the world around her and was roused into action only when she perceived the level of Anne's vexation over which ribbons to choose to have reached an alarming point– for she had no idea whatsoever if Admirals wore them white, blue, red or at all. The young boy at the

counter instead of being helpful suggested Anne to apply for advice to Mrs. Westfield, which earned him a glare from Margaret who was looking around the shop with an unimpressed air and a patient sigh from Anne herself.

‘I would have done so gladly, William,’ replied the latter. ‘but as my mother is not available at the moment my errand will be considered rather a waste of time if I do not complete it with a set of ribbons before getting back home.’

The youth blushed and stammered an apology and then looking significantly between the two ladies as if trying to communicate something of utmost importance with his bulging eyes finally amended his speech of before with the following –

‘I must have been misinformed. However, with all due respect, Miss Anne, I was referring to the future Mrs. James Westfield, seeing as how she is close by and could be of some material assistance to you in the matter.’

The sudden shock of his words produced a certain shortage of air within Margaret’s bosom and excusing herself with barely intelligible words, she made her way for the street. There, finding herself a shadowy corner beneath the generous chestnut-tree she decided not to stand in the way of her astonishment.

‘Mr Westfield! To be married! What nonsense was that?’ were her first agitated thoughts. ‘But if this is the case then how come I have no knowledge of that?’ was the second. It was closely followed by complete

certainly that such an important piece of news would never be kept from her and by the time Anne joined her, with a parcel in her hands, Margaret's thoughts had already taken a highly indignant turn. The walk back was a rather silent affair.

Upon reflexion, though, Margaret conceded that there could very well be a lady to take the place of her sister and that she was residing at a convenient distance for a call. After all, she had no idea as to where and with whom Mr. Westfield spent his time while away from home on what she always assumed was business. But surely a gentleman could not be busy all the time! Though feeling rightfully offended on her part it was nothing at all to how she felt on behalf of her slighted sister; and when turning to Anne for an explanation she was unable to hide the hurt and accusations from showing on her face. Anne, looking troubled and uncertain and without a single trace of her usual humour, was the first to speak:

'I feel that I must apologize for not telling you sooner. However, I had no idea that you would be affected by it in such a way. To tell you the truth, I was expecting an entirely different reaction.'

'I must admit to being astonished – I had not the slightest idea that your brother was getting married. May I ask who is the lady? However, this is not my business, but I wish now that I would have stayed in London – the least I would want to do is to impose upon the new Mrs. James Westfield; if I am ever to merit an introduction, that is.'

‘James! Married! Good God, Margaret, what nonsense is that?’ exclaimed Anne.

‘That was my first thought as well. But I do not see how you of all people should act so surprised. After all, it was me who was kept in the dark as to the happy occasion.’ replied Margaret in an injured voice.

‘But there is no notion of James’s marrying anyone! However did you come by such a conclusion?’

‘I fail to know what you mean when that boy in the shop spoke quite plainly on the subject.’

At that comprehension finally caught up with Anne and she laughed for the longest of time, leaving Margaret speechless. At last, looking almost pityingly at her friend, Anne spoke –

‘You do know how to turn everything upside down, don’t you?’ and putting an arm around Margaret, continued. ‘I could never have presumed that this would be the conclusion you’d reach or I would have told you straight away. However, that would spoil the whole thing and I so wanted you to have a bit of laugh after all the crying that you have done in the days that you’ve spent playing a recluse. Oh well,’ with a shake of her head. ‘I suppose your sensitivity is not to be trifled with when it comes to my brother.’

Margaret, trying to figure out what was meant, was surprised to realise that they had by now reached Northbrook Hall and Anne was steering them in the direction of the shrubbery. It called for the question of how much time she had actually spent pondering Mr. Westfield’s impending marriage. Speaking of which –

‘Anne, you make no sense whatsoever.’ she said. ‘Is your brother getting married or not? If you don’t tell me now I swear I will stop speaking with you.’

‘Don’t worry; I will take pity on you. After all, one can no longer be sure as to what you will manage to conjure up in that head of yours next. I declare, this is the funniest thing ever. You should have seen yourself – you were going so fast I was prepared to assume that we were chased by gypsies.’

‘Your mother and brother are correct – you do talk entirely too much.’

Anne laughed.

‘What can I say? This is the only pleasure in life that I get. Before your arrival I mostly talked to myself. As you must know by now, my mother cannot stand my talking for more than five minutes straight and my brother is never really around to talk to. I suppose, little James was all right listening to me, but then he is a great talker himself and I could never out-talk him.’

‘You don’t say!’ was Margaret’s retort.

‘Oh don’t look at me like that! I am quite astonished that you haven’t figured it out yet; so you must be prepared for the most rigorous teasing on my part!’ and dropping her smile. ‘If you must know, it is in fact a simple matter of too little excitement and too much idleness that our neighbourhood is in constant danger of enjoying. Once it became known that my brother was going to town to fetch ‘another Fairfax girl’ it didn’t take much pondering on anyone’s part to decide that he was getting married for the second time.’

‘Oh!’ was Margaret’s eloquent reply.

They had just come upon a bench and Margaret feeling weary all of a sudden sat down in order to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. After a lengthy silence she unlocked the reserves of her good humour and resumed the conversation on a much lighter note:

‘It never occurred to me that I had your neighbourhood to blame for the particular nature of suspicion that your brother is most prone to entertain on my account.’

‘Indeed, whatever do you mean?’ asked Anne startled.

‘Well, believe it or not, but Mr. Westfield is quite of an opinion that every gentleman who has his eyes on me more than once or takes me down the set more than twice is of a notion to marry me, and plainly refuses to believe when I tell him otherwise.’

Anne laughed alongside Margaret, until a thought entered her head that made her ask.

‘I do not mean to pry, Margaret, but would the news of my brother’s second marriage vastly displease you? Your reaction was pretty violent there.’

‘I must admit that it would and greatly so. I know that Isabella would want Mr. Westfield to find happiness, but we have long ago established that I do not possess her goodness, thus I would be hard pressed to forgive him for turning his back on Isabella’s memory and marrying someone else. He will never encounter a woman as superior as Isabella and anyone

less will be but an insult to her memory. I would not trust myself to bear it with composure.'

'I wish my brother could hear you now. I would be very much surprised if it didn't change his opinion in your favour.' said Anne musingly.

'Nay!' exclaimed Margaret with fervour. 'You are quite mistaken. Your brother is determined to dislike me no matter what. I believe that he set his mind and thinks ill of me by choice.'

'Merely by the choices that you've made, madam.' replied Mr. Westfield, appearing from behind a particularly lush rose bush and startling both ladies into gasps of surprise and, in Margaret's case, into vivid blush. 'How long did he stand there? How much did he hear? What would he think of her now?' raced through her mind.

He looked at her gravely and Margaret lowered her eyes.

'However, I would not commit myself to ill-thinking where there are obvious signs of improvement.'

He spoke with solemn air and Margaret, having missed the expression of his eyes, had trouble deciding whether it was a commendation of her conduct or general observation. Anne bristled beside her, but before she or anyone else could say another word they were interrupted once again, though not as dramatically – this time by the appearance of Margaret's maid who, having seen her mistress entering the shrubbery from the window, came to announce the arrival of a gentleman.

Chapter Twelve

‘There is a Mr. Stockley for you, Miss.’ announced the maid. ‘He says that he would gladly leave his card and wait for you to call on him, but,’ with a glow of embarrassment, ‘he is adamant that it will absolutely break his heart.’ she recited dutifully, producing a distinct effect on Margaret’s cheeks that have not yet overcome the high colour brought on by the conversation with Mr. Westfield.

‘How extraordinary melodramatic of him!’ pronounced the said gentleman with a healthy amount of derision, his face also acquiring some of that colour though for an entirely different reason. ‘Pray can you tell us exactly why he insists upon such a thing occurring to him? I trust he shared this piece of information with you too – for he seems to be a very verbose kind of fellow.’

Anne, who had appointed herself as Margaret’s greatest defender and by association that of her friends, regarded it as her duty to glare at her brother. Margaret though hardly heard him; instead she fervently wished that her maid would never have come to find her and put her in such a situation that would be inevitably mortifying. She also believed it to be highly unfair, considering that Mr. Westfield had just come as close to regarding her without his usual reproachful manner as she could ever hope to. And now it was all ruined and his approbation (perhaps imagined in his voice by her untrained ear) was swept away and replaced by

sentiments of less than flattering affect. Truly, the Stockleys had the worst timing ever and Margaret it seemed would be forever its victim.

Her maid, missing the awkwardness of the situation and taking Mr. Westfield's inquiry for genuine interest, thinking that she was in fact doing a favour, brought forth the following statement:

'Mr. Stockley laments the fact that he took up residence at a too inconvenient a distance for Miss Fairfax to be able to call on him regularly. Therefore, he asks if she would be so kind as to see him at present and thus arrange their next meeting.'

'Of course, I shall see him now!' exclaimed Margaret and off she flew, relieved to have an excuse to depart; but all the while keenly aware of Mr. Westfield's disapproving eye.

As soon as she and her maid were out of sight Mr. Westfield joined his sister on the bench and the following conversation took place.

'I cannot believe the nerve of him!' was Mr. Westfield indignant remark.

'Considering the level of your contempt towards him I expect to find him an excessively handsome young man.' was Miss Westfield's observation.

'I see no connection whatsoever between his looks and my contempt of him.'

'Why, to be sure, it is a general knowledge that we rather despise people we find handsome, more so, if we find them handsomer than we find our own selves.'

'I have never heard of such a thing.'

‘But it doesn’t make it less true, dear brother. The closer we get to know the person, the more grows our contempt,’ Mr. Westfield stared incredulously at his sister, ‘unless, of course, the tenderest of affection does not take its place. I am fortunate enough to know of one such example.’

She smiled and said after a short pause: ‘So, is he very handsome? Handsomer than you?’ she asked, catching her brother’s stormy eye.

‘I’m sure Miss Margaret,’ said Mr. Westfield with a nice touch of contempt for Anne’s benefit, ‘will be a much better source to answer such a foolish inquiry. However if I do, I do not despise him for being handsome or handsomer than myself – I am hardly that vain – but because I believe him to have in his possession a great many qualities, not pertaining to his appearance in any way, that I find rather distasteful. Naturally, if you ask your friend, I’m sure she will insist that it is the existence of those qualities precisely that make him so very attractive to a lady’s eye.’

He was silent for the briefest of moments and then added with a shake of his head:

‘In fact, I will not be surprised to hear that he has come in order to secure her hand and fortune in marriage. Why else would he require her to make such haste? And we can be all sure as to what the answer to that will be. Well, I just hope that his visit on present occasion will be of short duration and he will be most assuredly gone by the time I venture inside my own house.’

Anne hid a smile (how true were Margaret's words!), but would not hide the rebuke forming on her lips:

'How very insulting and astonishingly unfair of you to talk like that!'

'Am I not allowed to express my true feelings on the matter of unwelcome visitors? I believe that I never hid the depth of my dislike towards Miss Margaret and her friends.'

Anne, instantly sombre and angry, shook her head and replied –

'I am constantly astonished at you, James. The depth of your dislike! How can you talk so? Margaret is the tenderest, dearest, the most amiable creature in the world and all you can think of is finding fault with her and blaming her for being nothing but what Nature most generously supplied her to be: a handsome girl with good humour and abundance of suitors. I am sure that were you not so blinded by some misguided feeling of universal injustice you would be one of them. But instead you blame the poor girl for being alive while her sister is no more and in order to keep yourself on the safer side of any sort of affection towards her, keep coming up with the most ridiculous excuses for disliking her!'

She grasped her brother's hands to lessen the effect of her harsh words and though the astonished and pained expression of his eyes cut her heart, she was obliged to withhold her pity in favour of speaking the truth; softer this time –

‘For shame, James, no one will think less of you for liking Margaret and showing it. Look at your son – he adores her! And it says a lot, you know, for children are considered to be good judges of people.’

She gave a shaky smile, but her brother did not react – his face was set in a grim expression and his eyes were hardened against any further emotional onslaught. Feeling that she had greatly offended him, but reluctant to back down, Anne said –

‘I do not mean to appear either insensible or insensitive of your grief but I can no longer remain inactive as I watch how it affects your judgement. You are blind to anything good about your sister-in-law because of past offences and that impenetrable wall of anguish and anger that you’ve built around yourself. And while I do not blame you for being miserable, I do find your inability to see reason and what’s in front of you beyond worrying, for you have never before been prone to any sort of irrational behaviour.’

After another silent spell, Anne added:

‘You are silent now, but I can see that you are displeased. And you will be displeased still more when I tell you that I plan on inviting Mr. Stockley to stay for dinner.’

This at last roused his attention and promoted his participation in the conversation.

‘Why ever would you do such a thing?’ he cried, affronted.

‘Quite apart from wishing to get a good look at the man whose arrival has had my brother in such a fit?’

asked Anne. 'This is the least I can do for Margaret under the circumstances. Though I flatter myself to be a very good friend of hers, I can but imagine what a contrast Northbrook makes to London in terms of acquaintances. From what I've gathered Margaret and the Stockleys have been very close for these past years and the brother is by far her favourite. So, you know, I cannot possibly deny her the chance of reconnecting with one of her dear friends now that he is here and most assuredly available for the evening. It's not like she can invite him herself for fear of overstepping the moral line you've set for her and thus calling forth your disapprobation that, if you do not stop displaying quite so ostentatiously anytime soon, will soon give her nightmares.'

*

Meanwhile, after a rather energetic walk that left her breathless, Margaret came upon a much happier conference taking place in the drawing-room between Mrs. Westfield and Mr. Stockley. She stopped in the entryway to take off her bonnet and to make sure that her petticoat looked straight but forgot all about it when she caught the astonishing sight of Mr. Stockley walking with a delighted air around the room, praising its size, shape and space with an eye of an expert that she had never noticed about him before. Mrs. Westfield was just as delighted to point to him all the alterations of recent past as well as those of near future and from Margaret's perspective it was an altogether mutually-beneficial arrangement where Mrs. Westfield boasted

her talent for excellent room-fitting and Mr. Stockley ceaselessly and profusely admired it.

At that, a thought occurred to Margaret that Mr. Westfield would not live down the humiliation of seeing his own mother on so well terms with a young man and whose account he had so many issues and thus resolved to notify him of it at the very first opportunity. Feeling much better at having something up her sleeve to counteract his various dissatisfactions with her, she stepped into the room with a happy smile and a ready hand-shake. Once Mrs. Westfield was ready to give up the company of such a fine young man and a true connoisseur of rooms and their proportions as Mr. Stockley for the company of her grandson who was just now brought in and was quite impatient to be taken outside, Margaret could finally greet her friend.

Arranging the tea things brought by the maid and settling by the fire that chased off the slight chill that took over her on the walk, Margaret took a closer look at her friend, wondering if her first impression of him was not a mistaken one. She immediately noticed that though smiling, Stockley was not his usual cheerful self and that he was studiously trying to escape her detection by keeping up the commentary on the room which, as indifferent as Margaret was to such things and as much as she was used to this room, failed to either impress or distract her.

‘Pray, what is the matter?’ she inquired worriedly. ‘Are you not well? I have never seen you trying so hard to be cheerful before.’

‘I am well, thank you.’ he replied with a genuine smile that somewhat appeased Margaret’s worry. ‘And now that I am here and have the pleasure of holding your hand, my feelings on the whole are much improved. I have missed your company exceedingly and I might have a prolonged talk with Mr. Westfield about taking you away from me. I have already had one with your aunt about letting you go and she gave me leave to take you back.’

‘Stockley!’ laughed Margaret. ‘Does it mean that I am to expect Lady Theodora’s letter full of inquiries as to my soon-to-be arrival? What am I to tell her then?’

Mr. Stockley pretended to think.

‘Well, you can always tell her that Mr. Westfield proved to be more persuasive of the two of us or that you’ve chosen to stay in the country for the benefit of the fresh air that makes your skin look all aglow. But if I were in your place, I would definitely stick with the second option as your aunt has set her sights on Mr. Westfield herself.’

‘I will do just that.’ replied Margaret with laughter that was soon drowned by more pressing inquiries of hers. ‘But how have you been? Where are you staying and is it at as far a distance as my maid claimed you had said?’

‘I admit I might have added some hundred miles in case you wouldn’t make haste. I am staying with a good friend of mine Jones and his wife, lovely people.’ he stopped as if thinking over his next words and then added. ‘I trust my sister has informed you of my father’s

decision to see me make my own living with God's help?'

Margaret nodded her assent.

'She did mention it in her letter. However, I was under the impression that you were not limited to this option alone and could take another one.'

Mr. Stockley smiled, but it was a bitter kind of smile and Margaret was sorry to see it.

'The very one my dear sister would rather have me take. Unfortunately for her I never put much store by money and therefore I myself would rather prefer relative independence from my parents by means of acquiring a humble rectory to that of a fortune acquired by means of a loveless marriage that would just put me into a different sort of dependence and without any further relief in such a case. I know only of one material advantage of such an option that could make me more inclined to take it – in this way at least I will be quite safe from my sister.'

'Does she mean to keep your house once you are ordained and has come in possession of a living?'

'This is her intention, yes, and she has our parents' full support too.' he replied grimly.

'But is it a definite thing? Do you have a place already in mind?' inquired Margaret.

'Jones believes that he will have it for me by the end of the year and I can start my duties then.'

'Oh! But then it means that we are going to be neighbours!' exclaimed Margaret excitedly.

‘The dearest of all.’ replied Stockley with a twinkle in his eyes, wondering if Margaret realised that she sounded like she was intending to spend her whole life at Northbrook.

It was during the meditative silence that fell between them that an idea occurred to Margaret that she had as of yet failed to introduce Stockley to Anne Westfield and suggesting to do just that hastened to take them down to the shrubbery. In the course of the introduction both parties were immensely pleased with each other. Mr. Stockley readily received her invitation, which naturally produced a lot of irritation within Mr. Westfield and glee within Margaret, who couldn’t wait to see her brother-in-law’s reaction once they all gathered for dinner.

Chapter Thirteen

At six o'clock the ladies joined the gentlemen downstairs, who but for the little James's presence just then would have been left to the ungracious mercies of Mr. Westfield's stubborn silence, and proceeded to the dining-room, whence Margaret was somewhat taken aback by their sitting arrangements as she was appointed to a sit next to Mr. Westfield which put them on Mrs. Westfield's right and opposite Anne and Stockley. Margaret instantly concluded that such an arrangement was not at all beneficial for her social skills as she was sure that Mr. Westfield would not care to indulge her in a bit of a discourse. He never spoke during meals and least of all with her.

But despite such a gloomy prospect for herself Margaret couldn't help rejoicing in the fact that her two closest friends were getting on so well. Though in truth she expected nothing less from the both of them as their tempers were very much alike and nothing short of severe toothache would stop them from talking. But she found upon reflection that she did not consider it a wise decision on the whole to put Miss Anne and Mr. Stockley at such a spot that would give Mr. Westfield a permanently irritating view of their smiling faces and provide him with another dozen reasons to be cross with all of them. A very pronounced sullen air of his countenance and a great agitation of his movements clearly spoke that he was on the verge of losing his temper.

A display such as this did not surprise Margaret but she was startled to find her sentiments on the occasion not that of indignation on behalf of her friend, at whom all the dark looks and muttered words were aimed, but that of earnest commiseration on behalf of her brother-in-law! It was most unusual not to stop and reflect upon it and as Margaret was also excluded from the general conversation she decided to do just that. She very soon realised that she could well understand and relate to his feelings of anger and resentment when seeing the companionship of his sister once shared with him now bestowed upon another person; someone he would consider upon such a short acquaintance highly unworthy of the honour. And to have not one but two unwelcome visitors at his house would have naturally stretched his hospitality, unwillingly given in the first place, to a breaking point.

How could she not pity him at the moment? More so when she knew that were Isabella by his side he would have been an entirely different person: a happy one and in accord with everything and everyone. But her loss wrought such a complete change within him that he was gradually becoming an ill-humoured recluse, discontent with the minutest alterations taking place either in his house or his life. And despite her earlier assertion that she would not wish to see him married to anyone but her sister, within her heart Margaret knew that only another love just as strong would cure him. It was a notion so profound that once it entered her mind, Margaret could not deny it

anymore. She looked at Mr. Westfield with a new eye and wondered how to proceed now that she uncovered the source of his disagreeableness.

Her friend meanwhile did not need her support at all as he was engaged in a very animated conversation with the Westfield ladies that involved a lot of Stockley-related retellings that, as they were supplied with engaging manner of the narrator, were always exceedingly popular with women and never failed to attract a sympathetic look or a shocking gasp and were so adventurous that Margaret couldn't help suspecting them to be rather fiction than truth, but as almost a sister to him she was saved from the trouble of expressing her sentiments on the subject.

Margaret shook her head as her thoughts drifted back to Mr. Westfield and his predicament. She felt unaccountably at fault for supplying him with additional distress by bringing with her the person who so fully imposed upon his family's interest and time. Overruled, abandoned and subdued Mr. Westfield looked truly woeful and so shaken as if he had lost Isabella all over again. Such an image instantly inspired Margaret's feelings of justice and sympathy towards him and her eye softened and her smile grew warmer and her heart ached for him. It also struck her as odd that she had never seen it before but in fact should have known all along – that Mr. Westfield was one of those men who couldn't be happy unless in love with a deserving woman. It was so painfully obvious that Margaret could hide neither frustration at not stitching

all the evidence together sooner nor excitement at finally seeing it for what it was.

Margaret decided that their side of the table could use some enlivenment and resolved quite courageously to engage Mr. Westfield in a conversation of their own.

‘Forgive me for mentioning it, sir,’ she said with a very generous amount of teasing in her voice, ‘but your look suggests an uncharacteristic manner of brooding for a meal-time or on the subject of any meal-related item, considering the excellence of your cook. That is why I cannot suppose your thoughts to be encumbered by contemplation of anything unsavoury. Can it perhaps be attributed to the contemplation of human nature and its many vices in the face of your one and only sister-in-law?’

She smiled cheekily and hoped that Mr. Westfield would get the hint that anything expressed during the ensuing discourse shouldn’t be taken seriously by either party. Mr. Westfield, startled into the conversation, replied with a shake of his head and a wry smile and Margaret, not at all satisfied with his silent rejoinder, exclaimed, ‘But your thoughts must be affected by something unpleasant to warrant such a severe expression!’ thus startling her brother-in-law even further with her passionate address.

This time Mr. Westfield supplied the shake of his head with an actual verbal reply.

‘Miss Margaret, what is it that you want me to confess?’ he asked curiously, giving her his full attention now.

‘Oh, anything, that would constitute an interesting conversation on your part.’ replied Margaret archly, marvelling at Mr. Westfield’s unusual good humour and readiness to socialize with her of all people; though at this point he didn’t have much of a choice as she seemed to be the only creature around willing to take it upon herself to talk to him.

‘I wonder what would be to your satisfaction.’ said Mr. Westfield musingly at that. ‘I suppose I could admit that I have been busy contemplating the wrongness of my previous assumptions and conclusions regarding human nature, not limited to that of my estimable sister-in-law.’

He inclined his head and lifted the corner of his mouth in what Margaret identified as a smirk.

‘I confess,’ he continued with a sparkling eye, commanding her attention as he had never done before, ‘to have been unforgivably harsh in terms of my judgement of other people and their pursuits, and that led me to some unjustified accusations and unwarranted verbal abuse.’

Margaret, entranced by the novelty of his voice flowing so naturally in self-reproach rather than any another form of reproach, was recalled back to the conversation only by the arch of his eyebrows and an inquiry ‘Well, how did I do?’

‘Most admirably, sir.’ she replied with a fervent nod, covering up her moment of distraction and then, quickly gathering her thoughts, continued. ‘I am happy that you can treat the matter of your various

misconceptions with integrity and am excessively curious as to what circumstance produced such an enlightenment on your mind,' said she and then added with a mischievous look before Mr. Westfield had time to give her the answer, 'but I must beg you to delay the enactment of this blessed new attitude for now.'

Mr. Westfield stopped short and Margaret was happy to have wrong-footed him so easily. She was aware of the perils that she was facing in these untested waters when toying with him but she has already convinced herself that any reasonable man would understand that it was all in good fun to stop now.

'I am at a loss.' Mr. Westfield confessed. 'Pray, why? After all, you will be the first to benefit from my new and improved ways when dealing with morals and decorum.'

'There is much truth in what you're saying.' replied Margaret seriously, 'However, I must inform you that I have also benefited from your ways of before which, though injurious in general, did reap its fruit to my advantage in the end.'

'What possible advantage could you draw from my oftentimes unjust behaviour towards you?' asked Mr. Westfield genuinely perplexed, and Margaret faltered because all the playfulness had left his voice and his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

He was holding her gaze and Margaret felt herself blush from the earnestness of it. When she failed to respond Mr. Westfield said:

‘You must speak now, Miss Margaret. My curiosity is awoken and I find it a completely new development for I am not easily overcome by any sort of astonishment and in fact steer clear away from anything mildly curious on general principle.’

Too late did Margaret realise that she had set her own trap but, for whatever reason she could not quite fathom under the steadiness of his gaze, she found herself unable to refuse her brother’s-in-law request.

‘I am surprised that you haven’t spotted it yourself, sir.’ she said evasively, playing for time.

‘But I haven’t! As a matter of fact, I’ve been rather blind of late as I’ve been informed just today.’ he pronounced.

‘Well, if you insist I trust you are prepared to hear it for you most assuredly won’t like it.’ replied Margaret.

‘I am much obliged for your concern on my behalf but I believe myself to be as ready as I’ll ever be to hear whatever it is.’

‘Then I have no choice but to inform you that you are now officially the villain and I’m frankly surprised that your mother’s and sister’s attitudes did not alert you to your new status within this household.’

Mr. Westfield turned an astonished eye at her, but made no reply. Margaret nodded with conviction.

‘Indeed it is so. And I can tell you that I find it of great pity, considering that you have come to your senses at last and decided to repent so thoroughly. But that is how the matters stand now, I’m afraid.’

‘But what of your advantage in the situation?’ asked Mr. Westfield and Margaret did not know if he was playing along or genuinely confused. His face gave no indication to the change of his mood and his eyes held a far-away look of a person deep in thought and after a moment’s hesitation, Margaret thought it quite safe to continue.

‘Do not you see it, sir? – I can now enjoy the privilege of having been wronged by you on many occasions and thus abuse you in return as much as I wish. You, on the other hand, are left with no other alternative but to endure it and quite apart from being too much of a gentleman to complain about a lady’s choice of entertainment, were you to speak of it to anyone in an unrestrained fit of self-pity or rage no one would believe you – you have quite discredited yourself on that account.’

Margaret looked at him expectantly. Mr. Westfield cleared his throat and focused his wondering eye on her smug face.

‘This I have thought not of nor anticipated.’ he replied and then added after a thoughtful pause with a glint of wickedness that Margaret would never believe him to possess. ‘However, as the villain I presume I am entitled to commit my share of evil acts. So I wouldn’t pity myself if I were in your place just yet. Beware, Miss Margaret, for who knows what mode of revenge I would choose to exercise upon you when driven to it?’

‘You wouldn’t!’ exclaimed Margaret with an astonished look of her own. ‘Indeed, you wouldn’t, Mr. Westfield!’

‘May I inquire as to the possible safeguard you might have to vouch for me so presumptuously?’

‘Your honour of a gentleman.’ replied Margaret earnestly. ‘You are too dignified to take revenge for my little bit of innocent fun.’

‘Ah! But, you cannot expect the villain as myself not to use some of the privileges naturally suggested by this position, can you? Nay, I absolutely must exercise my evil tendencies at someone’s expense and as you have aggrieved me so much it must be you.’ he concluded with a charming smile that befitted a villain not at all.

Margaret laughed and shook her head.

‘I’m afraid I haven’t disclosed the whole of it yet, sir, and you have run ahead not knowing all the facts of the case.’

‘Oh? Is there more I should be aware of regarding my fall from grace?’ he asked in mock-horror. ‘I’m not sure I want to know the rest of it. I’m quite happy with what I’ve got so far.’

‘I’m sorry to say, now that you’ve embraced the part of the villain so wholly, that you are not really a villain.’

‘I fail to see your meaning!’ cried Mr. Westfield.

‘Well,’ said Margaret with a satisfied smile, ‘you are in fact some sort of tortured and highly misunderstood hero; who due to a series of unfortunate coincidences that were quite out of his power, was branded a villain.’

‘Hmm – I see.’ replied Mr. Westfield dubiously. ‘But are you sure that I am the right person to portray a hero however tortured and misunderstood he might be?’

‘I am convinced that with a touch of agreeableness and in the absence of that frown that often takes hold of your brows – though I am sure I can take full credit for its recurring appearance – you could be anyone’s hero.’ said Margaret with a sweet smile. ‘And while we’re still on the subject of heroes and villains, I have to ask you, or it won’t give me a moment’s peace, what sort of revenge did you have in mind for me?’

Mr. Westfield looked very pleased with the question and answered it without a moment’s pause as if he was expecting it all along.

‘Well, assuming your aversion to every thing serious I could perhaps plague you with a bit of dull reading after dinner.’

‘That would be shockingly vengeful on your part, I admit. Pray, what sort of book would you choose as your weapon of torture? I’ve heard that you have many a dull tome in your extensive library. What would it be then, sir?’ asked Margaret.

‘I had my mind on a sermon or two to start the evening with. What say you to that?’

‘I say that you have a truly villainous mind.’

They shared a laughing glance and Margaret said:

‘Indeed, I can almost see the whole thing in my mind – you have just the countenance and the temperament for reading sermons!’

‘You flatter me, madam.’ replied Mr. Westfield.

‘I do not think that I do.’ rejoined Margaret. ‘You or, should I say, your previous self for I do not quite know you now, loves nothing better than to preach and can be quite daunting and austere while performing the task; but at the same time your handsome features easily counteract any negative effect of it by providing a nice distraction from the dullness that anything moral brings on.’

Margaret was so happy with the success of their conversation and with its light-hearted tone that she completely forgot that it wasn’t Stockley she had so much fun conversing with. And when Mr. Westfield’s only reply to her honest and bold statement was to look oddly at her, the meaning and the implication of her words, her ecstatic expression while staring at him and the ‘him’ in question, finally caught up with her like a tidal wave. She blushed, dropped her gaze and spoke no more.

Chapter Fourteen

The rest of the party though, by all accounts, deeply engaged in a conference could not remain completely insensible to the changes taking place in front of their eyes. After all, it was too much of a shock to anyone familiar with the recent history of their relationship to behold Miss Margaret and Mr. Westfield in the middle of what appeared to be a friendly banter, complete with teasing smiles and sideways glances.

However, they possessed enough natural delicacy between the three of them not to point that out during the rest of the meal, while taking their coffee in the drawing-room and sitting down at cards later that night. Which doesn't imply, of course, that the event was not alluded to with the arrival of the morning – for it is only so long that one can stay ignorant of being discovered doing something as eccentric as completely changing one's attitude in a single sitting.

This particular knowledge it seemed firmly fixed with every member of the Westfield family and Mr. Westfield upon entering the breakfast-parlour the next day (and drawing the eye of every lady to his person) was prepared to be quizzed most thoroughly on the account of his most unaccountable change of conduct and just as determined to get away without so much as uttering a single word on the subject.

So far, with Miss Margaret in the room, his wish was granted and he was subjected to rather timid effusions of curiosity on his mother's and sister's part to what

could have been otherwise. Undaunted and amused to a great degree by their glowing approval of his behaviour towards his sister-in-law, Mr. Westfield proceeded to treat Miss Margaret with an open heart and most delightful generosity of spirit so unexpectedly discovered.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Westfield was not at all in a hurry to give into the enquiries that would undoubtedly befall him once Miss Margaret was out of sight (by which time, unbeknownst to anyone, he planned to be out of sight himself) as his experience taught him that talking about Miss Margaret was a dangerous endeavour and one that made his performance suffer and left his character at a distinct disadvantage. Hence, he decided to avoid taking chances that could very well lead to reawakening of his animosity towards her from its surprising but entirely fit slumber.

In any case, he had to admit that the idea of openly liking Miss Margaret had its merits for now he could appreciate, without the unfortunate mix of fury and resentment, that her features greatly resembled that of his son and that this alone had a potential to make her person very dear to his heart. He also became aware of the melodious texture to her voice and recalled with clarity Isabella's many words of commendation when mentioning her playing and singing. It was a shame, he thought, that his mother was averse to all forms of musical expression for he was suddenly overcome with a sense of loss at not having the pleasure of hearing

Miss Margaret sing. That is, apart from that incident of imprudence back at her aunt's house – but he was not at all at liberty to admire her genius back then.

He set his mind to ponder what was to be done about the situation for now that he was free to exercise his good humour with the lady he was induced to do so without reserve; whence it must be presumed that he resolved to like her despite many drawbacks of her character.

Her complexion, he noted – and now he was allowed to note such things – was fair, which made the bloom on her cheeks that much more pronounced. It gave her an appearance of having just taken a walk in the cold and in expressing his hope that she'd had an enjoyable time, Mr. Westfield observed the advantageous effect of cool morning air on her glowing skin. Margaret, soundly confused, replied that she had not been out and looked out of the window on the pouring rain outside.

Mr. Westfield cleared his throat and addressed his breakfast in mortification which seemed to be a safer subject all things considered. He was grateful that Anne, who pretended not to listen in on their conversation, could not tease him about it. However, if he but paid attention to Margaret's complexion now, he would not fail to notice that the colour in her cheeks intensified.

Margaret, meanwhile, remained unusually quiet as if the sight of Mr. Westfield smiling and addressing her every now and then rendered her speechless. She thus

concluded that she could be excused from taking a more active part at the breakfast-table until such a time when she was sufficiently comfortable with the novelty of his attentions.

It would not be a hardship had they spent the afternoon together but as soon as breakfast was over Mr. Westfield announced his departure on business of great importance, the matter of which he chose not to disclose, promising that he would not be back by dinner. The ladies were disappointed and cross – the lack of his company when it became a source of much speculation and amusement would be felt most keenly on any occasion, let alone on the present one: that of forced leisure induced by the weather and a complete conviction that none of their usual employments would be powerful enough to dispel the settling gloom of disappointment.

They begged him not to go. However, with that marked lack of spirit that failed to exercise the kind of address that would make him want to stay.

‘How can you leave in such weather I do not know, James.’ began his mother. ‘Do you like to see me in agony over your safety on the road?’

‘Indeed, I do not, madam.’ replied Mr. Westfield with an amused smile. He took her hand as if to support her where his words would fail to console.

‘And with a lame horse too!’ she continued with a dramatic air she rarely put to use. ‘Hasn’t she been in some sort of accident only last week? Well, I daresay,

such weather will most assuredly tamper with her recovery.'

'It will not. I can spare your fears on that account.' assured her Mr. Westfield.

'How can you say so? I would think you'd be more considerate of your property.' exclaimed Mrs. Westfield.

'Dear mother, I do take due care of my property and the reason I am convinced that my mare will come to no harm today is simply that – I am taking the carriage.'

'But why should you be going at all – that is what I do not understand.' said Anne with annoyance when her mother's line of persuasion failed to yield a positive result.

'It is a matter of some urgency, Anne, and I'd rather it not be delayed.' replied Mr. Westfield with matching annoyance.

'But what can be so urgent as to make you rush into this beastly storm?' continued Anne with sourness that, in Margaret's opinion, who was watching the scene with guilty sort of amusement, was as alien to her as Mr. Westfield's present merriment to him. 'I do not remember you mentioning anything of the kind.'

'Forgive me for not confiding in you every piece of thought that enters my mind at a whim, dear sister.'

'But if it is a thing of the moment; all you have to do is wait; it will pass as soon as it entered your head.' she persisted.

'I'd rather not.' said Mr. Westfield curtly and Anne pursed her lips.

‘But what is it? Give us a hint, James. Don’t be such a dreadful tease. It doesn’t suit you.’

‘I’m afraid I am not at liberty to discuss it at present.’

Anne scoffed and Mr. Westfield, not hiding his satisfaction at outwitting his sister at stubbornness addressed (to general startlement) Margaret next.

‘Miss Margaret, it would be hardly just on my part not to provide you with a fair chance to influence my decision.’ and taking his watch observed: ‘I can spare another minute before braving the storm for your sake. Would you like to have a say?’

Margaret, aware of everybody’s eyes on her and especially Anne’s outrageous look, checked her smile before it reached its blossoming point under the generous offering of his and shook her head at his saucy manner.

‘Really, sir, I would not attempt to stop you when you are so set on going. Nor would I be so presumptuous as to consider myself capable of succeeding where your mother and sister have failed.’

Thus Mr. Westfield was gone – as merry a fellow as ever lived – leaving the ladies in danger of falling prey to sentiments of utter despondence perpetuated by depressing clouds, persistent rain and thunder that shook the windows threateningly.

Were they to be left to the mercy of the weather they would find the day unbearably long, their daily toils uninspiring and each other’s company excessively dull. However, in the absence of one James, they found their rescue from dullness and discontent of the day in James

next in line and by the time he was sent off to bed (accompanied by sighs of relief from all quarters) the only kind of danger they were facing was that of aching limbs and a worry that they might not be able to leave their beds the following morning.

Mr. Westfield arrived as soon as coffee had been served to exclamations of great surprise and complaints of fatigue. His excellent mood prevailed despite the company of dirt and rain and he laughed heartily as they recounted their many and varied misfortunes at the hands of his son, bemoaned the weariness of their joints and proclaimed themselves to be all sad invalids. However, it did not inspire the return of confidences on his part and his trip remained as much of a mystery as before. The Westfield ladies were now convinced that the rest of the evening was spoiled completely and returned to their chosen tasks with an ill humour that they chose not to hide.

Margaret did not join them in their open display of displeasure for, although she was as curious as they on the subject of Mr. Westfield's sudden departure and thought him most disagreeable for not confiding in them, she was far too pleased with the way things progressed between the two of them in the matter of a single day, to defy her good fortune with an exhibition of petty discontent.

Mr. Westfield soon joined her at the bureau where she was penning a thank you letter to a friend in London for sending her the newest fashion prints and went as far as to agree on her choice of a dress

(remarking on the fetching colour but scolding the unsuitability of the texture and unreasonable price of the object) when his opinion was solicited and paying a compliment that was not a mere flattery but rather went in accord with his opinion.

‘It is a very pretty sort of dress if I ever saw one and I daresay you will be the envy of every girl in the neighbourhood when you wear it.’ he said to which Margaret’s reply was as follows:

‘I very much doubt it, sir.’

‘Surely you do not doubt your looks and figure. It will look even more striking with the advantages of the dress in question.’

‘Not at all, sir. I do not doubt that.’ said Margaret. ‘However, I am so rarely out and about that I am the one to envy every other lady in the neighbourhood with or without a dress.’

‘In this case, might I suggest taking a walk down the hill and into the village once the weather obliges us with a fine turn?’ asked Mr. Westfield and, before Margaret could overcome her astonishment, continued: ‘But I must warn you that Northbrook is but a small neighbourhood and the walk to any part of it might not offer the kind of gratification for one’s vanity that would justify such a costly purchase. And this I’m afraid will spoil the enjoyment that one can otherwise expect while walking in the woods and valleys full of bloom and fragrance that the country boasts so liberally of in spring. But I feel for you most deeply when I think that you cannot even benefit from general scrutiny every

Sunday morning now that we are out of ministers again.'

'You are very kind, sir. And your concern for the state of my vanity that has not seen a spotlight ever since I came here is exceedingly touching,' replied Margaret, her mouth twitching in a smile. 'But this is hardly a walking dress and were I to walk less than half a mile in it, it would come to irreparable damage and would not be fit for wear anymore.'

'This is rather unfortunate – I am sorry to hear that,' said Mr. Westfield with meditative air before exclaiming as if struck by a sudden thought of great importance. 'But pray what do you need such a dress for then? I am sure that you could have a plainer one made in its place that would look as fine as the fancy one and would be of no trouble when choosing the avenue to bedazzle.'

'Mr. Westfield – how droll you are! Not to have a fancy dress! But to have a plain one instead! For shame, do not let another lady hear you talk so – it will be of no service to you. I suppose I should inform you that a girl would rather have a fancy dress neatly folded in her closet and no occasion to wear it for, than not to have a fancy dress at all! And it was very insensitive of you to suggest otherwise. Monstrously dreadful.'

Mr. Westfield laughed.

'Dreadful, indeed,' he said once he composed himself. 'But I'm afraid I may be generally described insensitive in such matters – and I beg your forgiveness

for my abysmal lack of insight into a female's mind when it comes to fashion.'

'Forgive you, sir? Nay – I can only pity you!'

'Then do whatever pleases you most, madam. In my turn I fully admit to being at fault when suggesting that you should give up a dress when you obviously have no need for it. But there – I've been keeping you from your letter. I will be taking my leave now before I vex you any further with my ignorance.'

He was as good as his word. He rose, bowed, offered her a parting smile and swiftly moved across the room to engage Mrs. Westfield (who had taken a break from her nap just then and forgot her resolution not to speak with her son) in a conversation of some animation.

Margaret was so much astonished by the proceedings that she could hardly account for her sentiments: whether to be cross with Mr. Westfield for mocking her or be amazed at him for making jokes two nights together. She recalled with some delay that she was in the process of composing a letter and promptly bent over the parchment. However, it took her a while to resume her writing and when she finally did so her mind was in such state of distraction that it rendered her composition nearly unintelligible and by the time she put her name on it she quite detested letter-writing as it robbed her of much needed time to think about Mr. Westfield and his fancy moods.

The result of her meditations was very gratifying and she retired for the night in high spirits of joyous anticipation of the day to come and thus was met by

severe disappointment when, upon passing through the sitting-room on her way to breakfast, her eyes fell upon a darling spot of hers only to meet a devastating sight and to find the pianoforte gone.

Chapter Fifteen

Were Margaret's passion for playing of a more trifling nature, she would be very soon cured of its effects under the influence of enforced separation. Music sheets would be easily substituted by a library subscription, drawing paper or a working basket. But so much of Margaret's tender feelings and joyous recollections were dependent upon its keys that it struck a painful chord within her heart to see it no longer occupying its usual spot, that commanded her attention and affection even when not available for her use.

Taking a deep breath, Margaret sat down to compose herself; but torn between misery and indignation she had to exert herself most powerfully to appear calm and collected upon entering the breakfast parlour. To her credit she proceeded as far as the breakfast table before declaring with due amount of tragedy in her voice the pianoforte gone.

'Gone? Gone where?' asked Mrs. Westfield, startled, while Anne stared perplexed at her friend.

'But don't you know?' asked Margaret, frowning. She seated herself, but the next moment sprang to her feet in order to alleviate the excess of her feelings by walking around the table.

'Know? Well, to be sure.' replied Mrs. Westfield with a smile. 'We know that it has been moved. But we know nothing of it being gone. Where could it possibly

go? You do not imagine that it was gone out of its own volition, do you?' she asked.

'Oh!' exclaimed Margaret mortified, taking her seat. 'But moved where, Mrs. Westfield?'

'I assume to the spot where it will serve a much better purpose than in the drawing-room. At least, that's what I've been told.' replied Mrs. Westfield.

Margaret wondered if it was, perhaps, moved into the library.

'Dear me, no!' cried Mrs. Westfield. 'Imagine someone trying to read with all the noise! But you surprise me, Margaret. I would think that the sitting-room adjoining your apartment would be an excellent place to turn your thoughts to.'

Margaret stared. Mrs. Westfield looked kindly at her and spoke –

'I have meant to get rid of it for ages. We brought it for Anne, you know, but as it so often happens, she showed neither talent nor inclination for it and I'm sorry to say that it did not cross my mind to inquire after you. But, there, now I am aware of the mistake for I've been informed that you play excessively well and have a lovely voice.'

Margaret blushed, thanked Mrs. Westfield but voiced her doubts as to whether she deserved such high praise. Mrs. Westfield happily ignored her speech as she was in the habit of ignoring anything that did not meet with her liking.

'From now on you will have it all to yourself and I daresay you will play to your heart's content all days

long. But I warn you, Margaret that I won't have you so, Margaret.' she said. 'I do not consider this business of staying in your room at all beneficial for a young lady. You may spend some time upstairs, I grant you, but I absolutely insist on your taking regular exercise outside. This is something I always impress upon Anne. What is the use of being accomplished when you have sickly complexion, I ask? I know how fashion stands nowadays but believe me when I tell you that a gentleman will no more care for the number of stitches you make a day or the number of books you've read unless he is not taken in by your pretty face and your quick step first. And, indeed, if men so much as cared for an accomplished girl, Anne would have been married for years now. I dare you to find a more accomplished girl in the whole of the parish. I'm sure she could talk anyone to death with all the nonsense she's been stuffing her head with – though,' with a thoughtful pause, 'I suppose that this can hardly be considered as the most promising way of making a conquest.'

Margaret and Anne exchanged amused looks, before Margaret assured Mrs. Westfield that she was quite safe from any nonsense making its way into her head as she read no books and could be hardly considered an accomplished young lady for she neither embroidered cushions nor drew landscapes and her memory was so poor as to enable her to forget all the languages that she had ever had the misfortune of being taught in no time.

‘I promise not to attempt to lock myself up with the instrument for long and I will have as regular a walk as the weather allows.’

Appeased Mrs. Westfield continued thus –

‘Well, I’m glad that there are still some girls who show enough common sense to know what is right for them.’

She looked pointedly at Anne.

‘Mother!’ exclaimed the latter indignantly. ‘I do take regular walks and exercise. When did you see me depriving myself of their pleasure and their combined effect?’ she paused briefly and then said with a self-deprecating smile. ‘Really, mother, it only took me a number of fainting fits and some blood letting to see the truth of it.’

Mrs. Westfield shook her head admonishingly and addressed Margaret again, who looked shocked.

‘I hope this will be exactly the case, Margaret. I was on your account and I told James that he was doing you a major disservice by providing you with such an encouraging means of keeping to your room.’

Margaret was not entirely sure if it was her imagination or if Anne cried ‘Mother!’ once again as her whole attention was focused on one word only –

‘James?’ she asked, quite forgetting herself.

‘Indeed.’ replied Mrs. Westfield. ‘It was all his idea. He talked about it yesterday and was convinced that it should be done. It was all rushed, of course, but he so rarely wishes to move things around here that I was ever so pleased to give my consent.’

It was only then that she caught sight of Anne's face, though her daughter had been trying in vain to attract her attention ever since her brother's name was mentioned. Her agitation, however, was met by incomprehension on Mrs. Westfield's part.

'What is it, Anne?' she asked.

'Mother, I'm sure that James would dispute the claim you assign to him.' she said with a meaningful look.

'I don't see why he would as it was entirely his idea.'

'But surely the credit is not all his, mama!' insisted Anne, getting rather pink in the face.

'That would be very strange for I had nothing to do with it at all.'

Mrs. Westfield's revelation robbed Margaret of her part in the argument that ensued and she found it safe to recur to contemplation of her feelings on the matter, which were as decided as her conjectures – Mr. Westfield's share in the scheme was to remain a secret. She could not imagine why he would wish it to be so, but her excitement, gratitude and wonder were such as to render her curiosity in this instance below her notice.

Mr. Westfield's arrival immediately drew her attention to his person and confirmed a new subject to her ear. Margaret realised that she had missed quite a bit of the on-going discussion.

'Perhaps,' said Mr. Westfield to his mother before addressing Margaret with a gallant bow, 'another instrument so that Miss Margaret could play for us when we have company?'

Anne laughed.

‘Company, James? Pray, what company are you referring to? I, for one, had no idea that our family kept any company at all.’

‘It is my notion, Anne,’ he said, taking a seat across from his sister ‘that with introduction of a performer within our midst we can certainly entertain the idea of inviting a family or two for dinner once in a while.’

Anne raised her eyebrows.

‘How so?’

‘I believe that when there is a musical performance to be had, one finds oneself in a much better disposition to receive company and find one’s company much more tolerable on the occasion. There will be no dull talking or aimless wondering about the room and those who had the misfortune of losing a sum at cards will not be able to profit by way of engaging our sympathy to their self-inflicted woes.’

He then spoke to Margaret.

‘I trust you will be practising today?’

‘I will – that is, if we are not engaged elsewhere.’ replied Margaret, blushing.

‘But we are hardly ever engaged elsewhere!’ cried Anne. ‘I do not know what my brother is trying to prove at the moment but you have no need to worry on that account. There is always something or someone, like the weather or my own family, to stop us from dining out or making a party abroad – today it’s the former. But it is hard to say who is in the lead. Who wants to hazard a guess? I would not say no to extra

money – I've been rather excessive in my expenses this month.'

Margaret smiled before it occurred to her that she could not recall a single word of Anne's.

After breakfast Mr. Westfield accompanied Margaret to the small sitting-room upstairs and Margaret used this opportunity to express her deepest gratitude and thank him for his kindness.

'I'm glad you see it as such.' he told her gravely. 'But on my part I am convinced that I've been woefully – wilfully! – neglectful of your comforts and needs. When confinement of body is unavoidable, confinement of mind is insupportable. And you've been confined too long to one place, one sort of people and one kind of employment. On two of these occasions I have severely failed you. Our family's dislike of company deprived you of a larger acquaintance and though we cannot boast a great many families of consequence here we are not entirely without them.'

Margaret laughed.

'You have given it a great deal of thought, I see.'

Mr. Westfield shook his head and looked earnestly at her.

'Only what was your due, Miss Margaret, I assure you. In fact, I should have done it on your first coming here.'

They have now reached the room and Margaret, overpowered by her excitement, stood speechless in the doorway. Once her senses caught up with her she

rushed inside and sat behind the instrument all but forgetting that Mr. Westfield was right behind her.

‘You will play for us, won’t you?’ he asked after what he contemplated was a sufficient pause. ‘When you are ready, of course.’ he added at the startled look on Margaret’s face. ‘We are expecting a new minister and his wife soon and I intend to invite them to dine with us. But they are not coming for another few months.’ he hastened to reassure her.

‘It will be an honour to perform for you.’ replied Margaret softly.

‘It will be an infinite pleasure to hear you play and sing.’

Margaret laughed nervously.

‘Then I hope that you will not find yourself disappointed in either.’

‘Disappointed!’ exclaimed Mr. Westfield warmly. ‘No, indeed! I heard you praised from the source whose authority I am disinclined to doubt. Therefore, I have no doubt that you will perform admirably. But I see that you are impatient to begin and so I shall not disturb you any longer.’

‘You don’t mind, do you, Mr. Westfield?’ asked Margaret. ‘I am sure I can put off my exercise for later.’

‘No indeed! I would not wish to put off your pleasure any longer on my account! I have taken enough of your time as it is.’

But contrary to his words, he did not attempt to leave. He stood in silence, watching Margaret reacquainting herself with the keys and then, as if

performing a magic trick, produced a stack of music sheets from behind his back.

‘How extraordinary!’ exclaimed Margaret, ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying this but I am beyond surprised to find any here.’

‘I can hardly wonder at that.’ replied Mr. Westfield. ‘However, as difficult as it is now to believe, our house was not always deprived of music and these concertos will certainly attest to that. I’m afraid they are woefully out-of-date and fashion and might appear dull at present, but,’ he paused and looking distinctly embarrassed added – ‘they are my favourite and I was wondering if you could be prevailed upon to play them.’

‘I shall gladly play them, Mr. Westfield.’ said Margaret brightly. ‘By the bye, I believe that with equal share of patience on our parts I could even be prevailed upon to teach you to play them yourself.’

Mr. Westfield shook his head.

‘I’d rather spare us both many painful hours of fruitless labour that would only result in crossness on your part at having such a disgraceful pupil and agony on mine for finding myself a rather stupid fellow.’ he said not entirely in earnest, perceiving Margaret’s motive to be a joke.

He soon left her to her pursuits but ran into Anne in the doorway and though Margaret in her exhilaration was only half-aware of their presence, she was glad to note Anne’s return of good-humour with her brother.

‘I see that you and Mr. Westfield are on good terms again.’ she commented teasingly to her when she joined her. ‘I’d wager that he had finally informed you of his secret commission the other day.’

Anne stopped on her way to the window-seat and looked strangely at Margaret as if trying to detect a trace of mockery on her part.

‘In a matter of speaking – yes.’ she replied at last.

‘Well, I’m glad. Very much so. It was rather distressing to see you so cross with him and hardly on speaking terms! And just when he’s become so agreeable. I have never known him to be so amiable before!’

‘I daresay it does come as a great deal of shock to witness such a complete alteration of manner. I am all astonishment myself and I hope – in due course – to account for it to my satisfaction.’

She watched with mild concern as Margaret’s countenance glowed at the mention of her brother. Margaret’s spirits were elated to the point of giddiness at Mr. Westfield’s display of attention to her needs and eagerness to promote her comfort. Anne herself could hardly wonder at that – to alarm the whole household into action for the sole purpose of securing her pleasure – well, what sort of mind could overlook it? What kind of heart could dismiss it? What sensible girl could resist it when Mr. Westfield put himself out of his way to grant her a favour? Naturally, it was all too flattering not to get into Margaret’s head and supply her with sweet images of triumph and some such notions that a

girl of her age would waste no time in entertaining when supplied with such a generous offering of undivided attention on a gentleman's part.

But while she was amused to watch her brother pay Margaret compliments and long overdue respect, Anne found the abruptness of his altered manner and the single-minded determination to please and praise rather alarming. What was the meaning behind all this? Was it atonement for wrongs done? Did his object lie in securing her forgiveness? Or was it her affection that he courted? She longed to know Margaret's thoughts and feelings on the matter. Out of the two, her attitude was the least changed. She arrived at Northbrook determined to like her brother-in-law and to be liked in return and however disagreeable his previous conduct had been, hers didn't suffer any material change under its lasting effect.

Of course, there was no knowing for sure without addressing the issue at its source – but here Anne's situation was to be pitied for as a sister of one and a friend of another she was excluded from her share in the confidences of each. Therefore she would not hasten to form an opinion regarding their intentions (if there were any to speak of) but would keep a sharp eye on both of them in case she had to step in to moderate the advances of one (if they went beyond common courtesy without anything to support them) and interest of the other.

Meanwhile the weather was improving prodigiously and while the object that had stirred the idea of a walk

was long abandoned the walk itself was decided upon most resolutely. The route was discussed, determined and agreed upon every evening only to be found lacking in something or other in the morning and thus providing another evening of conversation about the state of the weather and fervent wishes for its rapid improvement. Naturally, it could not stay forever deaf to their pleas and one morning Mrs. Westfield and little James returned from their walk with a very favourable account. It appeared that though wet the roads were not without an advantage for a walking trip; the air was soft and fresh; the wind mild. Nothing more needed to be heard to convince their party that the day had finally arrived and so as soon as the breakfast was concluded Margaret, Anne, Mr. Westfield and Mr. Stockley, who had come to spend the day at Northbrook, set off down the hill and into the village that lay comfortably in the valley.

The day so unexpectedly warm and sunny attracted many a family outside; and walking along the High Street Mr. Westfield was rather shocked to find the village so densely populated. He was excessively displeased by the fact that the greatest part of the neighbourhood was comprised of busy-bodies and gossip-mongers. He soon expressed an ardent wish to head back home for he had no wish to be subjected to all of the unwanted attention and speculation their party produced, but the ladies were not about to let him have his way. Their trip would not be curtailed and their enjoyment would not be spoiled. But the change

of the route was unavoidable and proposing an alternative they took a sharp turn and soon were making their way into a wooded part of Northbrook.

They went along the bramble-covered paths and crossed the sunlit meadows and every pretty spot of wild bush or blossoming tree was a wonder to Margaret's eye and her love for nature was awakening under Mr. Westfield's commentary on its lushness and richness combined with the dizzying fragrance of trees and flowers and a fleeting sight of a deer swiftly disappearing amidst the boughs already covered in thick leaves hanging low above the ground. Margaret was not a great walker and could not match Anne's and Stockley's quick and easy step. They soon overtook them and were out of sight, leaving only a feeble echo of chatter and laughter in their wake.

'Oh! If only we were in the ballroom, I would easily outmatch them by the quickness and gracefulness of my step!' cried Margaret. 'But I'm afraid I am not much of a walker.'

The road dipped and Mr. Westfield offered Margaret his hand to lean on. They proceeded in comfortable silence, forming a closer acquaintance with the woods around them, sealing their companionship under the generous canopy of its leaves.

The walk was a notable success and the schemes for a similar trip (perhaps, some miles away) were in full motion by the time they separated for the night. As the next day brought no alteration in the weather their plan to visit the sight of some old ruins was in effect

until they were joined by Stockley – on the present occasion he was accompanied by a young woman whose arrival was neither wanted nor anticipated and whose coming in such an unexpected fashion put an end to what had promised to be a very fine day.

Chapter Sixteen

Catherine Stockley smiled warmly and shook Margaret's hands. Margaret was struck speechless by how much she disliked the woman. Her posture was stiff; her address – ungracious, for she was robbed of anything civil to say. She remained unmoved by Catherine's profusions of joy at their meeting and communicated nothing back. Her enjoyment was spoilt; her afternoon's amusement ruined. She was vexed by Catherine's way of paying a visit and bore with ill-humour her exaltations. Therefore, she resolved to put a stop to them by inquiring after her parents.

'I trust you left them well. Your mother, I understand, has been suffering some form of ill health. I do hope she is better.'

As expected, Catherine's eloquence ran low and she was immediately put out of humour at the mention of her parents. She made an impatient movement with her head.

'Oh, she is well enough, I suppose. My aunt keeps her company. The doctor's constant visits, on the other hand, keep her vastly entertained – but do not look so alarmed – I can assure you that it is a matter of fancy rather than bad health on my mother's part.'

'How peculiar.' proclaimed Margaret with little emotion in her voice.

'But let us not waste time talking about the lot of them. I am happy to have finally found the means of escaping their dull company. For months now my

fondest wish was to reunite with you and pursue simple pleasures of country life – your letters were full of their merits and I cannot wait to taste them myself. But, I flatter myself to know you well enough to presume that you must miss the more sophisticated delights of London. Is it not so?’ she asked slyly.

‘I feel their deprivation most acutely.’ replied Margaret crossly, watching with dread the effect of Catherine’s words on Mr. Westfield. ‘However, I am striving under the hardship as well as can be expected from someone who possesses my amenable disposition to all sorts of changes.’

‘And yet I find you rather out of spirits.’ observed Catherine. ‘I wonder what can be the matter. Is it the country air? Perhaps, your account is not all truthful after all. Or, perhaps, you are simply ill-disposed to receive guests?’ she asked.

‘No, indeed!’ cried Margaret in agitation. ‘I am sorry to have appeared so. I’m afraid I am a bit under the weather.’ she replied and instantly blushed at the falsehood of her assertion. Indeed, no one looking at Margaret at that moment could presume her to be in any way ill; unless you didn’t take into account the effect of Catherine’s company on her.

In the tense silence that ensued Stockley stepped in and introduced his sister to Mrs and Miss Westfield. Mr. Westfield who had already had the displeasure of making Miss Stockley’s acquaintance turned rather sour upon her entrance. Margaret watched helplessly the return of his bad-temper and was aggrieved to lose the

superiority of his companionship to that of Catherine's. But as it was unavoidable now, she resigned herself to her fate and, addressing herself mainly to Mr. Westfield, excused herself from the walk.

Mrs. Westfield, now that the walking expedition was one participant short and would have to be put off, pronounced that she had been plagued by a severe headache since the early morning.

'I will have to stay in my room until it passes; but someone has to take care of James and his studies. I'm afraid that if he wants to become an Admiral, he might want to be more diligent when it comes to maps and geography.'

Thus Anne's afternoon was decided. By the dark look on Mr. Westfield's face Margaret knew that she had to remove Catherine from his line of vision and hastily invited her to the little drawing-room upstairs.

The sun flickered in the tall windows of the gallery and as the ladies ascended the stairs it dove out of sight. From the window of her room Margaret caught a glimpse of Mr. Westfield and Stockley, making their way across the grounds, with rifles in their hands and a pack of over-excited spaniels at their feet. The wind started ruffling the tops of the trees and the first drops of rain knocked gently on the window-panes outside.

*

A week after Catherine's arrival, Margaret burst into Anne's room like an impetuous gust of wind finally breaking free of its invisible bonds. Anne, after the initial startlement and turn of her head, resumed her

employment without uttering a word, which prompted Margaret in explosion of feelings beyond expression to fling herself on the bed with a sigh so heavy as if it was torn out of her by way of some wicked torture.

‘If I didn’t know better, I would assume that you have spent an eternity doing your own sewing and not having a pleasant chat with a friend.’ said Anne.

‘A pleasant chat you say!’ exclaimed Margaret. ‘Oh, I wish you knew! If only you knew!’

She stood up and approached Anne, who was bent over her drawing-table.

‘You cannot imagine what I am suffering now. My eyes are open to Catherine’s true character and I exert myself to endure with composure what is unbearable to me. Her speculations are insupportable, her words offensive, her presence is odious and her motives are repulsive. She has no sense of propriety; she cares only for her pleasure and procures it at any cost and now she has come here to ruin mine! She insists on being included into all our parties and outings and the worst of all is that I cannot drop her acquaintance!’

Margaret drew her arms around Anne’s neck.

‘Is there anything to be done? I am convinced that unless her brother leaves, Catherine will remain with the Jones, and I am sure that none of us want *him* away.’ she said with a quick glance at Anne.

Anne laughed.

‘I know what it is that you are trying to elicit from me – a confession of my true feelings towards Mr. Stockley. Very well, I am not going to act all coy and

shy as befits a young lady on such an occasion – I am not that young, I'm sure, and there must be some advantage of age over youth. I do find him a very fine sort of man; handsome, full of spirit, amusing, well-informed, a great conversationalist. In other words, he is all that I consider a young man ought to be and I would not wish for our acquaintance to come to an end.'

'It is a wonder that he and Catherine are related. I tempt to think that one of them is not a natural child of Mr. and Mrs. Stockley.' commented Margaret.

They both laughed and, letting Anne finish her landscape, Margaret cast a longing look out of the window, her eyes searching in vain the expanse of the grounds for a familiar sight of two sportsmen making their way up the hill.

'I wonder where they can be. It's almost dinner time and I am yet to see them or their dogs.'

Anne did not reply; she too was looking out of the window, but her eyes were fastened far above the grounds. The spectacular glow of the setting sun burst forth on the horizon and though it was gone in a blink of an eye, Anne's landscape was very soon stretching under the bright yellow canopy of colour.

'We've been having some truly remarkable sunsets this year.' said Anne, regarding her painting with a critical eye. 'I've been meaning to capture them for ever so long now, but this is the first time that I find myself fairly pleased with the result. Of course, there is still a lot to be done about the exact shading of it and, well,

the brush strokes could use a little less force next time, but on the whole – ’

‘I find nothing wanting.’ supplied Margaret fervently with an admiring eye of her own. ‘I might know nothing of shading and how forceful one should be when yielding a brush, but one thing I know for sure – I have never seen anything more beautiful in my life. I have been to a fair number exhibitions myself, but I was never taken in by a painting to such a degree as to wish to claim it for my room. Therefore, I must entreat you most urgently to oblige me now and let me have it.’

Nothing could be more agreeable to Anne or, indeed, a higher praise of her art and she readily gave her consent. ‘You can have it as soon as it is put into a frame. I shall speak to James at once. He must go to London and get the best frame there is. Meanwhile, I’d like to solicit your promise to sit for me one of these days.’

‘I had no idea that you drew portraits too!’ exclaimed Margaret now completely in awe of her friend’s genius.

‘Well, I have only a vague idea of it myself.’ replied Anne. ‘But, I have been contemplating making a series of family portraits for a while now. I am dreadfully tired of drawing silhouettes and miniatures and, by heavens, I’ve done enough of those to set up trade in Bond Street and make a fortune!’

‘I’m afraid your brother will not approve of your time and talent being disposed of in such a fashion.’

said Margaret lightly, colouring just a little. However, Anne, with her keen eye for the exact shading, had no trouble detecting the blush even in the relative darkness of the room.

It was not unusual for Margaret's thoughts to turn to Mr. Westfield whenever there was something of censure to be found either in speech or conduct of those around her.

'Upon my word, it is rather hard to judge what he would or would not approve of, taking into account his shocking tendency for changing his mind.' replied Anne.

Margaret frowned and presently said -

'And yet, I am sure you cannot blame such a tendency on the inconstancy of his character, for, on the whole, I believe, Mr. Westfield is very constant. And, perhaps, for some opinions not to be fixed forever is as good thing as can be expected. That is, if it so happens that circumstances under which they were originally formed were not entirely accurate. And, I believe, that as long as such a change does not harm anyone it must be considered as a positive thing all around.'

Anne could only smile at that.

'To be sure, my dear, we none of us would wish for James to have permanently fixed views. What a dull creature he would be then! I positively shudder to think about it! I would not wish to have such a brother for the kingdom!'

‘Oh, Anne! – what a dreadful creature you are to laugh at me like that!’ exclaimed Margaret, turning away to hide her face from scrutiny.

Anne put her arms around Margaret and replied.

‘Indeed, I am not! I can assure you, dearest, that I am quite of your opinion on the matter. I have often observed that whenever James changes his mind it is always for the better. After all if James didn’t change his mind I would not have such a friend as yourself and he would have not found such a timely companion in Mr. Stockley. Though, I am still not sure how that came about.’

Thus they entered the subject that Margaret was most impatient to pursue and pursue it she did with great eagerness and many conjectures until the ladies were obliged to separate before dinner.

When Margaret and Anne arrived in the dining-room that evening they were pleasantly surprised to note that their party was larger than usual and that it was achieved by an addition of gentlemen to their number rather than ladies. Nothing could put them in better mood. And Margaret’s gratefulness to Mrs. Jones for engaging Catherine for the evening could not be greater. It seemed that Stockley’s standing invitation to dine with them was extended to include Mr. Jones – in the absence of his wife – and his neighbour – recently released from the army and fully enjoying his regimental-free life – lieutenant Richard Davenport. Like any lieutenant worth noticing he was young and handsome, vastly fond of female company, paying

them compliments in abundance and drinking wine in excess.

Naturally, when such company is to be had, the thoughts of each will inevitably turn upon the subject of entertainment, for their acquaintance must be further promoted and their high spirits must be maintained. The young ladies were particularly interested in the subject as they had been so unfortunate as to be excluded from all its forms and proposed having a dancing party. Their sharp eyes instantly calculated that with the Joneses and Mr. Davenport they made up four couples that would fit most comfortably in the drawing-room. The gentlemen, however, disagreed.

They were adamant that such good weather could not keep them inside for anything and as their views were pretty much fixed upon their respective ladies, apart from Mr. Davenport, who was inclined to dance with every one of them, they saw no reason to ascertain their claim by an hour or two of dancing when they could go shooting or fishing instead. This was met by strong opposition from the ladies as they objected to being left out any more than they had to be and thus an idea of a picnic was introduced. The grounds of Northbrook were declared ideal for such a venture.

‘Though the summer this year is rather disobliging – I don’t know it from winter half the time – we are just now having a nice spell.’ said Mr. Westfield. ‘And the next week is said to be warm and sunny – just what we

need. And while we are fishing by the lake, the ladies can go berry-picking.'

'Berry-hunting you mean.' said Anne. 'I will be very much surprised to find berries that have not yet been scared off by the frost.'

'The point is, Anne, that we can all enjoy a lovely day outside rather than restrict ourselves to the stuffiness of the room.'

'Stuffiness of the room! Did you hear that mother?' cried Anne in mock-horror. 'James has no consideration at all for all the efforts that you've made in order to make it the most spacious and airy drawing-room in the neighbourhood!'

However, the idea of a dancing party was not abandoned completely. Mr. Davenport, who was rather pleased with all the attention bestowed upon him by the ladies and Margaret in particular, who was happy to obtain a partner for Catherine whose presence would ensure that she would not set her sights on Mr. Westfield, could not help obliging them.

'Dear ladies, rest assured, that once frost is back and rain pours on us from all sides we shall have a dance! And I give you my word to dance with each of you at least four sets!'

'I do hope that you will allow me to distribute the invitations then.' said Stockley. 'I will make absolute sure that yours will be lost on its way.'

It was said in jest and everybody laughed, but Davenport was met with such graciousness and approval on the ladies' part so as to make Stockley fear

that he himself might be quite out of favour of at least one of them by the end of the evening. Margaret could not help teasing him about it as she linked her hand in his on their way to the drawing-room.

‘Poor Stockley, I pity you so! I do believe that you should have secured Miss Anne’s regard more firmly to your side. Mr. Jones was so good as to tell me just now all about Mr. Davenport’s financial independence, an estate – Handsome Lodge is it? – that he is about to inherit and his reputation among women. He does look most fetching in a red coat! By the bye, he is also single, but quite willing to get attached to a pretty female.’

‘In this case, he will not have much of a choice but to attach himself to you.’ replied Stockley gravely.

‘How so?’ enquired Margaret. ‘I trust you do not consider Anne not included into that category, for I will take serious offence if you do.’

‘I do not deny Miss Anne’s many charms and she is as handsome as any young lady that I know. However, I would assume that Davenport can easily detect an unattached lady from an attached one.’

Margaret looked at him with incredulity plainly etched on her face.

‘I’m afraid I do not comprehend your meaning.’

‘It is quite simple, Margaret.’ said Stockley in the same grave voice that startled Margaret out of her playful mood. He drew her aside, while drinks were being poured, and lowering his voice with some difficulty, so as their conversation remained secret, said

—

‘You will find that a woman who has already decided where her affection belongs will devote most of her attention and conversation to the object of her fancy rather than let her unreserve go unchecked and flirt with a gentleman on whose person she has no claim but that of an easy conquest and whose acquaintance has just been formed.’

‘Dear God! Stockley – this is one of Mr. Westfield’s speeches, I declare!’ cried Margaret in dismay. ‘But you are mistaken if you think that I have been making an easy conquest. And if my attentions have seemed beyond common courtesy which one exhibits when receiving a guest – I am sorry to have appeared to show more than I feel. However, I am neither engaged nor attached to anyone at the moment and if there was but an understanding – ’ here she stopped, took a deep breath and shortly continued.

‘I was merely trying to be solicitous to the very person who made it possible for me not to worry about your sister’s occupying any more of my time or dancing with my designed partner when occasion arises. I will not see her attempt to sabotage my efforts anymore – she has stopped me from spending time with Mr. Westfield just when we have reached common ground, but she will not stop me from dancing with him!’

Now it was Stockley’s turn to look incredulous, for the passion of Margaret’s address shocked him exceedingly. He looked carefully at her now and found her rather pale and her hands shaking violently. He promptly took her hands in his for comfort.

‘I’m afraid my sister’s company imbued you with excessive bitterness. However, your triumph at my supposed failure is more understandable now. But, come, Margaret, you must not worry on her account. You should know that Catherine is no competition of yours. Not when it comes to men. They shall always prefer your company to hers. You shall always have all the staves and all the dances while she shall be left to sit all by herself. I am surprised at you. I do not remember you ever caring, let alone, chasing a single man’s attention.’

Margaret would not speak. Stockley assumed that she could not for fear of giving herself further away.

‘Mr. Westfield was not best pleased with your expression of gratitude towards Mr. Davenport,’ he told her confidentially. ‘Perhaps, you should offer him consolation?’

Margaret looked across the room at Mr. Westfield, who was leaning on the mantelpiece with a deep-etched frown on his face and a glass of wine in his hand.

‘I do not know what you mean.’ she replied softly, her eyes overly bright.

‘I have heard from Miss Anne that Mr. Westfield has moved the pianoforte into the drawing-room adjoining your chambers.’ said Stockley, producing a rise of Margaret’s eyebrows. ‘I have also heard that you’ve been learning to perform his favourite melodies. There, I’m sure you can attempt something with that and, by

the bye, how fortunate it is that there is no Catherine to stop you.'

Chapter Seventeen

There was some concern about the shade. Mrs. Westfield predicted that there would be hardly any of it and proposed arranging the picnic in the massive shade of the chestnut-trees, while Margaret and Anne were prepared to expect the worst in the form of heavy clouds all over the place and suggested the lawn in front of the house – they would have no trouble relocating inside at the first drop of rain. However, their expectations did not come to pass and the mist – though pretty from an artistic point of view hovering like a gauzy veil of tenderest grey, violet and pink – that settled in the downs early in the morning and added to their worry was long gone by the time they gathered in the grounds – in the neighbourhood of the chestnut grove but without the assistance of its spreading grace above their heads – with baskets of refreshments, chairs and parasols.

The air was fresh and fragrant, the wind but little, the sky a clear blue without a cloud in sight and the sun in all of its benevolent glory. It was a lazy sort of day and everybody felt idle, lounging about and consuming fresh fruit and cold meat at a leisurely pace. And even Margaret felt that nothing – not even the prospect of dancing with Mr. Westfield – could on present occasion prevail upon her to leave her spot. However such happy musings could be easily attributed to the fact that Mr. Westfield was seated by her side, which was all that she could wish for at the moment.

Margaret could not help congratulating herself on their sitting arrangements – but she did a fine job of not only finding herself in Mr. Westfield's immediate proximity but of making sure that Davenport sat quite apart – just in case either Davenport or Mr. Westfield got any ideas on her account. In such a way, her other neighbour was Mr. Jones and it was an excellent choice for he was happily married and rather advanced in age and Margaret could not be found guilty of having any designs on him. Their party was now complete with Mrs. Jones and Catherine. Margaret was prepared to take some pains in getting to know her and took her time to have a better look at the lady. However, to her disappointment – for she found Mr. Jones a very agreeable and amusing sort of fellow – Mrs. Jones lacked all of her husband's warmth of address, unaffected manner and cheerful disposition.

She was many years his younger and her features were regular to such an extent that Margaret was quite convinced that she would not know her in the street. She was of slight stature and small height, hardly any beauty and possessed a pair of small, cold eyes. She did not smile, barely spoke to anyone, seemed to be entirely dependent on Catherine's assistance and was generally interested in no one but her husband. Her eyes followed his every move and frowned whenever his attention was addressed elsewhere. All of this could not endear her to Margaret in any way and in return the fact that Margaret dared to engage Mr. Jones in a rather prolonged conversation served to put Mrs. Jones

on her guard and instantly dismiss Margaret out of her favour.

Margaret's interest in Mr. Jones was increased even before she made his acquaintance due to the fact that he was the man who would be providing Stockley with a rectory upon his ordination. It only grew since his future became closely connected with that of her other friend and she had to ascertain that Anne would not suffer a material loss upon becoming a Mrs. Stockley, for even the acquisition of an excellent husband could not always keep one safe from domestic troubles and too short an income to live on. Stockley had not a single penny to his name and while Anne was set most advantageously in all the money matters, once accepting Stockley she would inevitably find herself in the circumstances inferior to those which she was born into.

Naturally, Anne's disposition would not let her think too seriously about it and as she never cared about how much money she spent she believed herself capable of striving upon the smallest of incomes, though Margaret rather believed that such conviction was the natural result of growing in easy circumstances than anything else. It fell upon her to warn her as to certain deprivations that she might suffer if married to a man of no fortune. However, when appealed to, Anne made light of the situation in her characteristic cheerful manner:

'I am convinced that I will make a very preserving sort of wife and while duly economizing my husband

will find no domestic comfort lacking. I will have quite a laugh doing my wifely duty. But if worst comes to worst then I shall make by what I can and shall be selling miniatures and portraits. People are such vain creatures that they cannot live without their likeness being taken and one must make what one can when chancing upon such an irredeemable but quite useful for one's pocket weakness. I can also do landscapes as you very well know and I can produce tolerably good results when applying my brush to children and pets.'

Not entirely convinced that such a course of action would be an advisable one under any circumstances and regarding the benefits of comfortable income and home somewhat higher than her friend, Margaret enquired most extensively into all the particulars of the living, its prospect, the number of rooms, the cellars and attics, the possibility of any additional rooms and outhouses being built to admit an extended family and how much it fetched. Every fear on her part was appeased and every hope was answered for Mr. Jones was most impatient to be of use to Stockley and most eager in his account, which Margaret found to her satisfaction, at least as far as the house, its situation and grounds were concerned. It was to such effect:

'The house is not very big – to be sure – but it will serve nicely for a young man, none the least for a young family once it is to be had. The building is modern, the cellars and attics are in excellent condition and the number of rooms is as such that can easily admit an addition to the family. There is a moderate

drawing-room downstairs with a view of the garden. The house faces the road but it is sheltered from view by a row of tall trees on one side and a shrubbery on the other. The rooms upstairs are not large, but well-furnished and airy. There are plans for the building of a hot-house. As for how much it fetches – I'm afraid no more than 250 per annum. Though, Stockley assures me that he will do splendidly under these conditions: he will have but one housemaid and a cook; will not want the carriage of his own – for I can always supply him with one – and intends to hunt on my grounds whenever the season is right. And as for going to London, Bath or Brighton he will be most obliged for an invitation of one of his more fortunate friends.'

Margaret smiled at his good nature and assured Mr. Jones that whenever it was in her power to invite Stockley to either city she would do so with great pleasure. She was about to enquire next as to the circumstances under which their acquaintance was formed, but just then Mr. Jones was recollected to his wife's side by her insistence that he should arrange her shawl about her so as to ward off the excess of chill that now crept into her very bones. Margaret found the request an odd one, for she felt pleasantly warm in the absence of the shawl over her thinnest dress of spotted muslin yet and the only thing that was infused with chill as far as she was concerned was Mrs. Jones's voice. Margaret's expression of open joy transformed into the look of utmost dislike – she could not suppose that with time Mrs. Jones's temper would change for the

better, for she knew plenty of instances to the contrary – and she pitied Mr. Jones exceedingly on having such a disagreeable wife.

Sparing another cold look at Mrs. Jones, Margaret surveyed the rest of the party, hoping to derive more pleasure from her further observations but faced another disappointing sight. Mr. Davenport, on closer acquaintance proved to be more interested in his wine than the ladies or any form of conversation and was dozing off on the lawn in the most ungentleman-like attitude. Turning back, Margaret saw that Mrs. Jones, now that she was comfortably settled in her shawl, was once again engrossed with Catherine, her eyes drifting all the time to Mr. Jones and insisting in an agitated whisper – when he was about to rejoin Margaret and resume their conversation – that he should not leave her side in case she was taken suddenly and violently ill.

‘I do think that fresh air is not at all beneficial for my health. Aye, it is getting on my nerves. I feel headache coming and there are tremblings in my limbs.’ she complained loudly to Catherine with a look of intense suffering as if she was a moment away from succumbing into a fit. ‘I wonder at some people who prefer to spend their time outside, boasting the good effect of fresh air on their disposition – what nonsense! I see little use in it. If anything, I find it quite harmful.’

‘I do believe you are right, Selene.’ exclaimed Stockley, promptly rising to his feet and addressing everyone’s attention.

To her inner satisfaction Margaret noted that Mrs. Jones looked cross and startled out of her bad health by such an intervention as it deprived her of the pleasure of giving full account of her dislike of the fresh air and its ill-effects.

‘Fresh air!’ thundered Stockley as if addressing a congregation, drawing his hand upward and looking quite formidable. ‘Fresh air, I declare, is the evil of all things. It is the air of idleness and dissipation. I have often heard London compared to the cradle of sin and dissipation, but I have never been prone to either while in town. No, it is here, in the country where I met my downfall. This is where I let my guard down and this is where my fancy was taken in by beauty of its surroundings, assisted by the freshness of the air, the clear line of the horizon and the melodious chatter of the trees outside my window. I have not been here for more than a week when I felt its effects on me. I suffered cruelly and by now it has settled firmly in my bones and you see, before your eyes, the most idle, lazy and dissipated fellow on Earth!’

At that he fell to the ground in veritable display of agony and spoke no more, eliciting laughter from all quarters but one.

‘As droll as you no doubt find your little display, Stockley, any more of such appalling behaviour might make you look unsuitable for your future profession.’ said Mrs. Jones icily, wrapping her shawl tighter around herself.

‘Come now, Selene, love.’ spoke Mr. Jones soothingly, taking her hand for a kiss. ‘There is no harm in a bit of a joke. I’m sure, Stockley meant nothing by it. All in good fun, I say.’

Mrs. Jones did not look convinced that the display of the kind was in any way acceptable, but before she could sufficiently argue the point with her husband, Catherine exclaimed as if suddenly struck by an important recollection.

‘Selene, dear, did you not perceive that Miss Carter looked exceedingly ill last night? I do hope she is all right, the poor dear. But I fear that it can ruin her chances completely.’

‘I am sure there was nothing wrong with her but the colour of her gown.’ replied Mrs. Jones mercilessly. ‘Did you ever see anything quite so monstrous? I do not wonder at Mr. Bramble taking off in such a hurry. I could hardly keep my countenance when she walked in.’

They soon were discussing the whole of Miss Carter’s wardrobe in every unfortunate detail and wondering if perhaps her ill looks were also affected by the introduction of her mother’s new cook.

Margaret turned away from the sickening sight and interested herself in the affairs of those who were dear to her heart. Anne was making a group sketch and Stockley has started up a rapid commentary of her every move on the paper, turning the process of finding faults into a delightful experience. The comic effect of his criticisms was such that Margaret half expected

Anne to give up the whole thing and let Stockley take the pencil instead. Mrs. Jones's ill will did not persuade him out of his good humour, at least.

'Upon my word, we all look like dull ducks.' he exclaimed inspecting the sketch again.

'Perhaps, we will look less dull duck-like when I add colour?' asked Anne.

Stockley shook his head regretfully.

'I fear that then we will look like dull ducks in colour.'

'But what do you suggest then? Is there any way to lessen such an unflattering likeness?'

Stockley took his time to think it over.

'After extensively pondering the matter, I have come to conclusion that there is only one way. However, it will involve major changes in our present location. Indeed (with another look at the sketch) I have now determined what makes us all look so dull and I am happy to announce that it is not the blame of the artist.'

Anne expressed her deepest relief at being acquitted of any.

'Therefore I must inform you what has captured my eye – the abysmal lack of ornaments on your bonnets, dear ladies! It struck me as peculiar the moment I put my mind to it, for generally they are adorned with feathers and ribbons and beads and I don't know what else, some of them as broad as tea-trays, others towering like fruit bowls. Or turbans! I love turbans! How peculiar does a turban make one look? I can never

be sure if the woman is pretty or not when she wears one. But today – today – you wear nothing but straw bonnets and the only thing that seem to decorate them are wide brims and hardly a feather in sight! Quite shocking!’

‘But what do you propose, Stockley?’ asked Mr. Westfield highly diverted.

‘Wreathes! We must all wear wreathes! We are going to be called ‘Wreathed Party’. Miss Anne, do you take commissions?’

‘I will definitely take this one.’ replied Anne in between laughing.

‘Stockley, be reasonable,’ said Margaret. ‘We do not have any wreathes about us – it is hardly Christmas.’

‘Margaret, do you not have a spark of fancy about you? Picnic!’ he began dramatically and Margaret knew that another rendition of a sermon was to follow next. ‘Is not only eating out of doors with your family and friends. One can consume food and enjoy it all the better without making fuss about moving furniture and oneself from the comforts of one’s drawing-room.’

‘Very true.’ said Mrs. Jones.

Stockley extended her a bow of reconciliation that she graciously accepted.

‘Picnic – is an important process of getting closer to Nature. We further our acquaintance with It and promote our understanding of its many wonders. Just cast your eye around and consume them like you would food. But casting one’s eye and finding something to admire should not be enough.’

‘I’m afraid I still don’t see the connection. Where do wreathes come in?’ asked Margaret. She was weary of conversations she was no part of and she had no patience with men who used so many words to get to the point.

‘It is quite simple, Margaret. What I propose is to get still closer to Nature – perhaps even become one with it – we must gather flowers and make wreathes!’

‘Make wreathes!’ was the general outcry of astonishment.

‘As I was coming hither this morning I had to stop in order to examine my horse on the matter of one of its horseshoes – I must say that there was something untrustworthy about the blacksmith in the village and it put me on my guard – I was suddenly struck by fear that I should not make it up the hill – and as I looked around what should encounter my wandering eye but a lovely field of clover? Westfield, I appeal to you as the patron of the party –we must go thither this instant! We cannot spend the whole afternoon sitting like ducks!’

‘Clifford, you have lost your mind.’ said Catherine. ‘And if you say another word about ducks I shall not answer for myself. Is there nothing but ducks and clover to catch your fancy in the country?’

But Stockley’s idea had its merits and supporters and as the tension grew it was decided that Anne, Margaret, Stockley and Westfield should go. However, Mr. Westfield was concerned about a series of things: ‘Shall you attempt it? Is not the distance too great for you?’

We are going up that hill. Let me bring you something warm to put on.' were his solicitations on Margaret's behalf.

'I am much obliged for your concern, sir, but, indeed, I am perfectly capable of walking the distance even if it involves going up and down the hill. I am neither cold nor in any danger of being so. The sun is plenty and I feel like I could do with some breeze. A walk is a perfect solution, I find.' replied Margaret stoutly, taking his proffered arm.

Chapter Eighteen

The change of scene, that afforded favourable removal from the offensive presence of Mrs. Jones and Catherine, revived Margaret's spirits like a breath of fresh air. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure rather than crossness and her walking companion was perfectly charming. They set off briskly across the grounds of Northbrook and when, a quarter of an hour later, they reached the road and were well out of sight of the party left behind, they proceeded at an unhurried pace, pursuing pleasure and easy companionship that was so abruptly brought to a halt by Catherine's arrival.

'Shall not Mrs. Westfield and James join us today?' enquired Margaret some time later when her basket was full of fragrant flowers and her brow sweaty. 'I was under the impression that your mother was paying a morning call to an acquaintance recently returned to the country. I wonder what could keep them there so long, though. Perhaps, you should send the carriage for them?'

'There is no need, I am sure. I can very well guess at their being so late.' replied Mr. Westfield, studying her features with a frown of concern. 'Give my mother a house that has been refurbished and refitted to inspect and she will not leave until she has seen the last of it, noted down every alteration and decided upon her own. Meanwhile, James is treated to enough sweets to spoil his appetite until dinner-time the following day.'

But you look fatigued as I knew you would. The sun is blistering and the scent of clover is overwhelming.' He looked around and his eyes fell upon an overturned piece of rock not far away. 'Let us move thither,' he said. 'You must have rest before we make our way back.'

Margaret gratefully took his hand even though they had only a short distance to cover. On their way, Mr. Westfield entertained her with a detailed account of various trees and plants growing on the land with great enthusiasm; Margaret appreciated every beauty spot he pointed out or reminisced about, but was too weary to really care about her surroundings, unless, of course, Mr. Westfield found them fascinating. On such occasions, she would speak all that she could imagine Mr. Westfield would like to hear declared in its praise. Though she was not as ardent a lover of nature as her sister had been, Margaret believed that there was nothing more conducive to start liking it than Mr. Westfield fondness for it.

It occurred to her that this was the kind of opportunity that Catherine would consider foolish not to take advantage of. Indeed, if it was one of their schemes, Margaret would be expected to make her move, apply her considerable charm and secure him heart and all at her feet. Women of her circle in general were expected to employ any means available to them in order to ensure that the intentions of the other party corresponded to that of their heart or, in the absence of anything resembling emotions, to the will and wish of their esteemed parents. For how else could a single lady

rest secure in the knowledge that her sentiments or designs were answered and her future settled to the best of advantage?

With a trained eye of an expert, Margaret estimated the conditions to be perfect for a little scene to be set up. The aim of such a scene would be to acquire the information as to the possible extent of Mr. Westfield's feelings towards her as well as to test his willingness to proceed in forming closer relationship.

She could, perhaps, complain of heaviness that had settled in her limbs or aches in her back that so active an exercise had caused. Mr. Westfield, she imagined, would naturally take her in his arms and carry her all the way back into the house, while she would be making all sorts of dark predictions concerning her failing health. There he would spend the evening by her side, reading to her from his favourite volume and –

‘Is there any particular reason for your anxious enquiry?’ asked Mr. Westfield, effectively interrupting Margaret’s musings and recalling her to the present.

They have just now reached their destination and deposited their overflowing baskets on the grass floor. ‘Has my mother finally subdued your resistance and convinced you to refit your rooms? Is there a particularly fine piece of furniture that she has promised to acquire for you in the village?’

‘Indeed, no!’ laughed Margaret, taking a seat. ‘But James invited me to the lake to watch his fleet setting sail. He was quite excited about it and insisted on my presence.’

‘I trust you have put on your best gown for the occasion.’ asked Mr. Westfield.

‘My second best, I’m afraid, and I would be very much obliged if you didn’t mention it to James. But if you do so, by unintentional slip of the tongue, be sure to inform him that it is entirely your fault, for you have advised me against purchasing that lovely crimson gown, assuring me that I would have no occasion for wearing it in the country.’

Mr. Westfield inclined his head.

‘In this case allow me to issue my deepest and sincerest apologies. I will keep your secret safe, of course, for this is the least I can do under the circumstances.’

‘I knew you would, Mr. Westfield,’ replied Margaret cheerfully. ‘or I would not confess to it. I assume you have also been invited? I understand that this is a very formal occasion and admittance is limited to those on the list.’

Mr. Westfield shook his head with creditable expression of regret.

‘I’m afraid that I have not been granted the privilege. Alas, my background – that of a mere builder – does not allow me to attend such a formal occasion.’

‘That is rather unfortunate!’ cried Margaret. ‘However, after months of work you must come and behold your creation finally afloat! Will you not wish it?’

‘Indeed, I would, most ardently, Miss Margaret.’ replied Mr. Westfield with as as humble an air as a gentleman could be expected to produce.

‘Then it is settled.’ declared Margaret resolutely. ‘I must insist on your accompanying me to the lake. And in doing so you will ensure that I will not be exposed to any impertinent remarks. After all, it would be considered highly improper if I were to go there unaccompanied. Sailors, as we so often hear, have a reputation and such a moment of indiscretion could easily compromise me in the eyes of the world.’

Mr. Westfield agreed with a bow.

‘I shall of course accompany you. But, quite apart from not wishing to see your honour compromised in any way, nothing would please me more than escorting you.’ he replied earnestly, abandoning the teasing tone that so far prevailed throughout their conversation.

Margaret blushed and averted her eyes. His open manner, the intense look that accompanied his words, the confidential air of his address were interpreted by her as an admission that his heart was not unaffected and while it hardly constituted a marriage proposal she was rather shaken.

Mr. Westfield himself looked discomposed by his openness and under the pretext of dropping his cane occupied himself by retrieving it from the ground and ascertaining that both the wooden part and the handle were in perfect order.

They had not been left to ponder the importance of the moment long after for Anne and Stockley soon

rejoined them, looking thoroughly pleased with their expedition and talking so rapidly that Margaret doubted at their ability to hear each other properly, and proposed returning to the party.

‘I wager that Miss Carter has no more than a dozen hideous gowns in her possession worth mentioning to keep Mrs Jones and Catherine in tolerable spirits.’ said Stockley, laughing immoderately. ‘And if we do not hurry, they will start finding faults with each other’s dresses next and this cannot be allowed, when the ladies live under the same roof.’

Stockley was right. As unaccountably pretty as the grounds of Northbrook were, the pleasure from their contemplation a few hours later without anything else to supply the minds and conversation of Mrs. Jones and Catherine at least, was greatly reduced. However, where the natural inclination to be entertained is not wanting, even a wreath-making scheme can become sufficiently amusing, especially as it could boast one distinctive feature – that of no added strain of conversation. And while no one had any clear idea how to go about making wreathes, everybody took up the employment with vigour and expediency.

Davenport, after staring at the content of the baskets in front of him with a bewildered look, finally suggested sticking the flowers as if they were feathers into the hats at which point the flowers wilted and the ladies complained that they would not have their bonnets spoiled.

Not long after they embarked upon what looked like an impossible task, they were joined by Mrs. Westfield and James. Margaret, who could not settle down to such earthly task after her undisturbed hour-long tête-à-tête with Mr. Westfield, upon quick reflection, regarded their arrival as the perfect opportunity to get away and reminded James of his promise to show her the fleet. And while little James ran to fetch it, Margaret and Mr. Westfield proceeded to the lake.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Westfield, who had a knack for all sorts of handiwork and who rather despaired at their making any progress due to their abysmal lack of skill, took it upon herself to supervise the whole thing before they had completely spoilt four basketfuls of flowers. And by providing careful instructions and interfering when her intervention was unavoidable, for instance when it looked like all of Mrs. Jones's flowers were doomed for beheading, Mrs. Westfield's group of wreath-makers managed to produce very handsome results that Anne was commissioned to paint.

*

The lake was slumbering in the shade of stripy willows, bending low as if looking into a mirror. Their long leafy branches were splayed on the surface and the flickering reflection of the sun gave it an impression of being encrusted with precious stones.

'It's so beautiful here. So peaceful.' said Margaret, her eyes following with interest the merry dance of sunlight on the water. 'I'd rather we did not have to disturb it just now. I must confess that I cannot wait to find

myself in the cool shade of my bed-chamber. It has been a long day and I feel the side-effects of walking and flower-picking and too much sun in every bone of my body. I am not saying this to alarm you,' she added when Mr. Westfield's countenance once again clouded with worry. 'I am saying – though you might find my idea a strange one – that I imagine the lake to be resting from a long day.' she laughed self-consciously when Mr. Westfield continued to stare at her as if not comprehending her meaning. 'Oh, you must think that I have been exposed to too much sun and now exhibit alarming signs of delirium.'

Margaret's cheeks feverish with fatigue, her languid movements and her eyes dull against the gold of the sun bore the testimony to her words. However, Mr. Westfield thought that she had never looked more beautiful than at present for his measure of beauty strongly depended on the lady's display of common sense and an enraptured eye.

'No, indeed!' he replied, recollecting himself. 'What you say – how you feel – I understand you perfectly. It's like the poet said: *Calm is all nature as a resting wheel*. I've never heard you speak of nature like this before. I imagined that you did not care for it. But your understanding is so much more profound than I have ever given you credit for.'

'I believe that you had no previous occasion to estimate how fond of nature I am or how deeply I feel; for my part, I have never expressed a single sentence that would have given you an idea. However, I do not

wish to mislead you. This is a rather recent discovery, though the one I've been enjoying since before my arrival. I'm sure I could tell you the exact moment my heart was set.'

Unfortunately, little James's first attempts to set his fleet afloat met unbending resistance of the water. Not a ripple stirred its surface and the breeze that only half an hour ago treated them with the most good-natured humour fled in the heat that descended. The birds stopped singing and there was no rustling in the trees. The sudden hush was filled with the forebodings of an approaching tempest and the lake – now deep heavy green – was frozen in anticipation.

But James, who inherited strong will from his father, had no intentions of giving up and when the fleet remained anchored at the shore like a newborn puppy at its mother's side, he decided that some inducement was in order to help it along and as soon as this illuminating thought struck him, James procured a long, thick stick to accomplish his endeavour. At which point, Margaret who had been keenly watching his features for the first signs of disappointment and vainly tried to engage her mind in some rapid thinking of ways to counteract them with another activity of its relevance, grew alarmed that the slope was too slippery for James to try anything other than keep utterly still without the danger of falling over.

Thus, before Mr. Westfield could stop her – distracted as he was by admiring her animated features – Margaret took a few quick steps and taking the stick

from James, proceeded to lean forward and, though all aflutter, managed to push the fleet along. Little James cheered and Margaret, emboldened by her success, made another step forward. However, instead of encountering firm land, her foot met with a pebble and the next moment, in the blink of an eye, Margaret broke the surface of the lake with a splash. And, creating commotion on the water, sent the fleet on its long and merry voyage.

A moment of confusion later was followed by mortification so severe that she would not raise her eyes to meet Mr. Westfield's gaze. She could not think about her looks without wishing to disappear completely underwater and was only vaguely aware that Mr. Westfield sent James after her maid and was ready to assist her out of water.

'Why, Miss Margaret,' he said, ascending the slope, carefully minding its treacherously pebbled path, and extending his hand with a smile. 'I had no idea that you were so fond of fishing or I would have supplied you with a fishing rod. Indeed, there is hardly any need to catch fish with your bare hands – some might consider it rather uncivilised and as you have no doubt discovered for yourself, it generally yields very poor results.'

When Margaret was safely out of water, she looked ready to faint and Mr. Westfield, in the absence of any other effective remedies, tirelessly worked on bringing her back to her senses with an inspired flow of his ridiculous conjectures.

‘But perhaps such a thorough study of the bottom of the lake was due to the fact that you did not believe it sufficiently supplied with fish and thus took it upon yourself to make a rough calculation? A commendable endeavour, I am sure, though highly unnecessary. If you did not trust me to know the content of my lake, you should have applied to my steward and he would have readily given you the exact number of fish we keep. I am convinced that it would be to your utmost satisfaction.’

Margaret laughed, vastly amused; her mortification swiftly retreating in the light of Mr. Westfield’s teasing.

‘Aye, here comes your maid.’ said Mr. Westfield, pleased. ‘It’s about time. We must hope that you shall not catch cold.’

‘Catch cold? In all the heat? I think not.’ replied Margaret, shaking her head.

‘You did take an almighty plunge.’

‘And it cured my fatigue most effectively.’

‘Still, we should not make light of the matter. Not when your health is at stake.’ said Mr. Westfield gravely.

If she dared, Margaret would have pointed out that his concern, comfort and encouragement were far more beneficial for her well-being than any other remedies known to mankind. However, upon pondering the matter further, she concluded that her health was an important factor in successful promotion of their uninterrupted communication and if she were to catch cold it would materially slow things down. She would

be inevitably confined to her bed-chamber, deprived of the sight of him, staying in the most aggrieved state of mind. And were the spirits are low the recovery of body can not be prompt.

Margaret's maid was properly horrified by the sight of her mistress and fussed a great deal about her appearance, her ruined hair and bonnet and the ghastly state of her dress. However, such trivial concerns did not touch Margaret's sensibilities since Mr. Westfield did not mind any of it. In fact, he rather admired her glowing complexion, her sparkling eye and her self-command. He approved the way she rose above the inconveniences of a fall and assumed a light-hearted view of the adventure rather than imagining herself to be in any danger. And where there was fortitude, good humour and vivacity ready to oppose the adversaries of a piece of slippery land, nothing else was wanted to convince Mr. Westfield of the lady's suitability.

Overcome by emotions, Mr. Westfield pressed Margaret's hand in his. The minutes went by unacknowledged by either. Their eyes were locked and their hearts in accord. However, when the pressing anxiety of her maid, by no means as gentle, became impossible to ignore, they both decided with startling clarity of mutual understanding, while no words were exchanged, that it was time for Margaret to go.

'I will make your excuses.' assured her Mr. Westfield, though Margaret secretly believed that he said it in order to prolong the moment before her departure.

‘I would prefer, however,’ replied Margaret, a tinge of embarrassment colouring her voice and cheeks, ‘for this incident to remain undisclosed to the rest of the party. For while, amusing in its own right, it is still an embarrassing episode and I would not wish to excite anyone’s less than cordial interest in the affair.’

Mr. Westfield bowed.

‘You have my solemn promise that not a soul shall find out.’

Rejoicing, Margaret walked off briskly towards the house, choosing a secluded shrubby lane lest someone see her. Despite all the evidence of excellent health, her maid was not at all reassured that such long walks, exposure to the sun and tumbling down into the lake was the best way to spend her mistress’s day and forced her under the covers as soon as Margaret was out of her clothes. June heat notwithstanding, she lit the fire and brought hot, nourishing broth from the kitchen. Blissfully unconcerned by her body’s needs, Margaret did as she was bid, though her mind was still engaged in a pleasant conversation with Mr. Westfield by the lake.

For a while, Margaret managed to keep still while her mind wandered off to whither her body could not. But sleep did not come to claim her and after some tossing and turning she had to give up and admit that she was residing under too much excitement to have rest. She sprang to her feet and moved to the window. She wondered if Mr. Westfield would be more amenable to an idea of an evening spent in the Assembly Rooms

now that he didn't have to worry about changing partners or escaping unattached from the clutches of a designing widow or an impoverished mother of three daughters under twenty with nothing but their mean talents to their names.

After all these months under the same roof, it was improbable that they had not shared a single dance yet. He and Isabella met at a ball and Margaret knew that while not fond of dancing, for it required him to be the centre of attention and bear gazes of many pairs of eyes upon him, Mr. Westfield was a very good dancer and they would undoubtedly cut a fine figure across the floor. Determined to obtain his promise to take her to the next gathering and confident in her success, Margaret reached the window just in time to witness the sight of the most shocking and devastating nature. Walking across the lawn, leading to the house, was Mr. Westfield and there in his arms, with her head resting on his shoulder, was Catherine!

'Good Gracious! What can this signify?' exclaimed Margaret as she sprang away from the window and took a nearby chair before her legs would no longer support her. 'What could have possibly induced Mr. Westfield to take Catherine in his arms?' she shook her head. 'Surely, he did not get rid of me in order to carry Catherine around. Something must have happened. A fainting fit. Or some sort of an accident, perhaps. But that hardly explains why Mr. Westfield should be the one to carry Catherine when both Stockley and

Davenport are stout enough to be of use on such an occasion! This is beyond anything, I declare!' she cried.

Unable to sustain the weight of curiosity and unaccountable agitation that gripped her, Margaret sent her maid to investigate the matter and remained in her room in a state of high dudgeon. The report very soon followed.

'Tis some unfortunate business what happened to Miss Catherine.' said the maid, gasping for breath. 'Quite shocking! The surgeon is sent for.'

'Surgeon!' exclaimed Margaret in great astonishment. 'But what happened?'

'Tis a wasp sting. Miss Stockley is quite out of her senses. Mr. Stockley went for the doctor. Mr. Davenport was sent to look for some dock leaves to provide help against inflammation. He's better hurry; her ankle looked awfully swollen to me. Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones departed because the lady was beside herself with worry that all the grounds were infested by wasps and she is mortally afraid of them. She made an awful fuss about it too.'

'Goodness!' cried Margaret in agitation. 'I must go to Catherine!'

But to that her maid opposed most vehemently, imposing on her the impossibility of her going downstairs and being seen in such a state.

'You should take some rest. 'Tis been a long day. I will bring you a glass of wine – it will calm you down and you shall be able to have some sleep before dinner. There is nothing you can do for Miss Stockley now

unless you're a surgeon and Mrs. Westfield, Mr. Westfield and Miss Westfield are all by her side.'

Resignedly Margaret complied and got under the covers again. The sun had disappeared from sight and she was suddenly grateful for the fire in the grate. Her thoughts took on a very gloomy turn now. Her repose was unsatisfactory and when she came downstairs, she was sporting a headache that would not pass for a very long time.

At dinner table, Margaret was informed that the swelling was too bad for Catherine to be moved for at least a few days and that she would be staying at Northbrook. But whether the prescribed treatment was wrong for Catherine's case or the swelling was too wilful to retreat so soon, Catherine continued to complain of it for a long time and, though the surgeon and the apothecary declared her to be out of danger, she remained under the roof of Northbrook for a whole fortnight.

Chapter Nineteen

'How is the invalid?' enquired Mr. Westfield one evening as he was leading Mrs. Westfield and Margaret across the hall to the drawing-room after dinner.

Though his enquiry was issued in a solemn voice it was presently betrayed by his teasing smile. Catherine's unnaturally long recovery from a wasp sting had long since become a standing joke with him and any mention of it invariably put him in good humour.

'Resisting the treatment most prodigiously, I'm afraid.' responded Margaret with an air of enforced gaiety. Unlike Mr. Westfield, the matter of Catherine's stay at Northbrook Hall thoroughly failed to amuse her and she found very little to smile about upon approaching the drawing-room.

In the past fortnight Margaret had had to wage a real battle with herself. She had little patience for Catherine and her imagined ailment but as the latter was staying on at Mr. Westfield's invitation, she was left with no other option but to endure her presence with the excellence of manners and high spirits of someone enjoying the happy mission of nursing her friend back to health, however differently her feelings were on the account of her friend's long over-stayed excuse that allowed her to trespass so shamelessly on Mr. Westfield's hospitality.

But Margaret's fortitude in the face of Catherine's accident, that rendered her with little choice but to take care of her, was compensated by the knowledge that

while Mr. Westfield displayed enough good will towards Catherine in order to make her feel welcome and ensure that she lacked no comfort, his good will did not stretch far enough to make her feel at home and thus satisfy her vanity and justify her remaining under Mr. Westfield's roof, perfectly aware as she could not fail to be, that while she was tolerated she was not wanted. It also proved that if Catherine intended to inspire Mr. Westfield's pity and sympathy by being an incurable invalid, she chose wrong tactic to engage either. Mr. Westfield liked indolence and weakness of mind that lay defeated at the feet of a weakened body no more than he liked pretence of any sort and Catherine therefore clearly showed that she was in possession of all that he so despised.

Upon entering the drawing-room, Margaret did not immediately join Catherine's side, but rather took a chair on the other side of the room near the row of bookshelves in hopes of engaging Mr. Westfield in a conversation of her choosing. However, before Mr. Westfield had the chance to reprise his favourite seat, Catherine had recalled Margaret to her side with such agonized supplication that one could be left in no doubt that her sufferings were so great that they made it impossible for her to proceed under their strain any longer and that she was about to pronounce her final wish before departing this world.

Margaret sighed, cast a look of deepest longing to an, as of yet, unoccupied chair, took her time walking the length of the room and finally rejoined Catherine for

what was to be another long evening comprised of dull talk and little thought. Like every other evening, Catherine would begin with quizzing Margaret on the latest gossip at home and abroad that Margaret cared little to produce in quantities that would be to Catherine's satisfaction, before lamenting her many misfortunes and complain about how she was ill-treated by Mrs. Jones who had not called upon her once since the accident.

However, as soon as she had sat down and Catherine took her hand with force that belied her weakened manner, Mr. Westfield brought his chair to the fireplace and sat opposite Margaret with a book in his hand, assuming an air of someone who could hardly contain their laughter and disappearing behind a heavy tome of some tremendously dull nature in order to succeed. Catherine looked momentarily startled by Mr. Westfield's change of place but swiftly taking herself under control she remembered to keep her eyes less focused on what was going on and in such a way providing herself with the dazed look of a person in pain.

'Dearest,' she began, squeezing Margaret's hand. 'you have been so good to me these past weeks. I declare, I could not wish for a better companion in such trying times or indeed such a capable nursemaid.'

Margaret stared at Catherine in amazement. Surely, she didn't expect to win favours with Mr. Westfield by paying her compliments. Moreover, compliments that held very little truth in them.

‘Pray, Catherine,’ she exclaimed, after catching Mr. Westfield’s eye. ‘I do believe that the strength of your friendship has blinded you to the fact that my assistance had caused more harm than good. For far from getting well whilst in my care, you have been getting progressively worse, constantly complaining of headaches and fevers and weakness that persists in your very joints.’

Margaret shook her head when Catherine, eyes wide, tried to interrupt her with false reassurances to the contrary.

‘As your friend, Catherine, I have only your best interests at heart, and as much as it must pain me to part with you for another long period of time – as I have no notion of travelling to London at present – I have concluded, after carefully meditating the point, that it would be more beneficial for your health to be removed to your parents’ house where you will find yourself in the care of your excellent aunt, whose extensive knowledge and experience will not fail. She has been so good as to help your mother to recover when she was unwell that I am perfectly convinced that she will do no less for you and will succeed in restoring you back to full health in no time.’

Margaret clasped Catherine’s hands in hers and looked her straight in the eye.

‘I perfectly dread the loss of your company after all this time but the knowledge that you will benefit from our separation will allow me to find strength to combat my own selfish sentiments.’

Such were Margaret's hopes, expressed kindly but with determination that even Catherine could not ignore or confuse for concern, however much she tried to appear insensible of her words or their exact meaning. She looked angry, her eyes shrewd and calculating, once again losing the dreamy look, as she contemplated her next move. She was aware that while Mr. Westfield was the perfect image of a person absorbed in his reading, he was following their interaction most avidly.

'Dearest, you have been nothing but a perfect friend and nurse and I forbid you to take any blame for the slow nature of my recovery.' said Catherine. 'I do not look any better but I can assure you that I am growing stronger and each new day puts me in better health. However, the process is exceedingly slow and so painful that it keeps me confined in one attitude and in a rather unhappy frame of mind longer than we could have expected at first. I know that I am a dreadful burden to the rest of you and I am beyond grateful for your patience and assistance. And you have been so good as to provide me with every possible entertainment that I could have wished for under the circumstances – your dancing in particular was marvellous,' she continued, referring to their dancing party that took place the previous evening in this very drawing-room.

It had been Stockley who insisted on having the dance, even if the number of the couples was shockingly small. However, one might say, that it could

not be any more shocking than the fact that while Stockley was on the point of obtaining Mr. Westfield's blessing and consent while applying for Miss Westfield's hand, he had yet to share a single set with his future bride. Naturally, such nuisance had to be dealt with so as not to stand in the way of his and Anne's future felicity.

'I have long been deprived of an opportunity of watching you lead the set and what with the excellence of your partner on present occasion my only concern was whether you were sufficiently invested into performing up to your usual standards without an army of suitors following your every step, waiting impatiently for their turn.'

'I thank you most heartily for your concern,' replied Margaret with ill concealed contempt. 'but I must entreat you to give me your word that you will not take upon yourself any additional strain by worrying over me, for your poor nerves have already suffered materially under the stress of your prolonged ailment to allow it.'

'I am more than willing to give you such a promise as I feel that the weakness of my body has effected my mind.' replied Catherine with a heavy sigh. She shifted her form so as to appear even more incapacitated and resumed her speech. 'I wish I was not so exhausted from my inner battle with the pangs of pain I am constantly under as to endeavour to take a turn about the room. However, at present, I should satisfy my thirst for wandering about with something less

straining. Perhaps, if you are not otherwise engaged, you could spend an hour or two, reading to me something light and entertaining. I have heard that novels have become vastly popular. In fact, reading and composing novels is quite a fashionable pastime nowadays. So much so that more than one lady has taken a pen to draft one.'

For a moment Margaret's astonishment was so severe that she remained speechless, which was all that Catherine needed in order to make her next pronouncement.

'But how silly of me, I have completely forgotten how strong your objection to reading is.'

Thus, her mission accomplished, she elapsed into silence that rang loudly with her glee, producing the desired effect on Mr. Westfield, who closed his book, put it on the small round table nearby and looked questioningly at Margaret.

'An objection I must confess I fail to understand.' he said after a while. 'I have always regarded reading as a nourishing task for the soul and an invigorating one for the mind when the choice of book is right and when its subject is deserving of one's notice and further contemplation.'

Margaret smiled at the look that crossed Catherine's face while having her notion of a worthy book dismissed.

'I'm afraid that Miss Stockley has mistakenly misunderstood the motive behind my reluctance to take up a novel.' replied Margaret with a significant

look at Catherine. 'I do not mind books – indeed, I have the highest regard for them as my sister used to read them to me all the time – however, I happen to mind the actual process as I find it rather constricting.'

Mr. Westfield frowned.

'How so?'

'I have discovered that my mind cannot stay confined to words, lines and pages for long. It wanders off easily, following its own unseen paths, carrying me far beyond what is written. I believe that is why I am so fond of playing and singing. My mind remains free to wander then. My fingers are engaged, but my eyes and thoughts are free to pursue their own objects. I do not concern myself with what had been told by someone else – what is it to me when I do not think and feel the same?'

Margaret smiled self-deprecatingly.

'I know that it is a heavy shortcoming in your eyes –

'Indeed, you mistake me, for I do not at all think of it as a shortcoming. I have wrongly believed it to be a form of ignorance on your part and thus reprehensible. However, what you have revealed is an entirely different matter.' spoke Mr. Westfield passionately in Margaret's defense as if determined to acquit her of any guilt he had previously assigned to her person. 'But I wonder if, perhaps, there might be a way to make reading more agreeable to you?' he asked.

'Indeed, there is.' readily replied Margaret. 'I am convinced that my pleasure in reading entirely depends

on another person. I do not mind when someone else is reading to me for then I do not feel as confined and my mind happily follows the narration, free to conjure pictures of my own imaginings.'

Such reply was to Mr. Westfield's satisfaction.

'In this case I will make it my object to introduce you to a number of authors and their worthy volumes that you will find of merit and that, I hope, will engage your interest and fancy.'

A lively discussion ensued in which Mr. Westfield spoke of his favourite authors and recommended a number of them for Margaret's benefit and enjoyment. They shortly decided on a list of selected works and Margaret, taking up some paper and a quill, dutifully wrote them down after Mr. Westfield's dictation.

This left Catherine with dangerously little to do other than come up with another scheme the aim of which would be to disrupt the general peace of the otherwise happy gathering by another ill-meant remark. And imprudently left out of their conversation Catherine's mind, by no means as weak as it was alluded to by its owner, began conjuring up a new plan.

Stockley's boisterous presence, immoderate laughter, constant chatter and his good fortune at being considered a close family friend and Miss Westfield's approved suitor, had long been a matter of great distress to her. Spiteful by nature, Catherine became vengeful by necessity. So when Stockley had the bad luck of walking a short distance from her, allowing

Catherine to speak without raising her voice and thus maintain a weary quality to it, she promptly said –

‘Clifford, dear, have you been getting in touch with any of your old friends of late?’

Stockley stopped mid-stride and looked curiously at his sister.

‘Why, Catherine, I have been getting in touch with all of my friends.’ he replied and continued with his customary goodwill. ‘By Jove, I’ve got so many of them! And they all insist on communicating to me every detail of their lives so that I receive letters with every post! I wish I had the capacity to reply to them all but I am such a disorganized fellow that I barely get through reading them unless I am reasonably bored or the weather is such a shame that I’d prefer reading to riding or shooting. I wish I could boast that I am an excellent correspondent and that my hand and style are all wit and elegance, but that description rather belongs to Margaret than to myself. I rather envy those who have an occasion to be on the receiving end of her letters for she is an excellent letter-writer if I ever saw one!’

Mr. Westfield’s attention was instantly engaged by that piece of information.

‘Indeed, sir, I was not aware that *you* had any particular occasion to be of the lucky number.’ he said.

Stockley stopped short and looked momentarily befuddled. Catherine coughed delicately into her handkerchief and, realizing his blunder and his sister’s intention at once, he shook his head and laughed.

‘Nay, I have never been of that particular lucky number, Westfield. However, Margaret was so good as to often lend me a helping hand with answering my mail. I would always look over her shoulder and admire the way she was transforming my wild ramblings into neat and precise passages full of elegance of thought and a great many witticisms that I’d spent eternity conjuring up on my own.’

‘I have meant to enquire after your particularly close friend,’ said Catherine, when her brother was on the point of fleeing their part of the room. ‘Have you, by any chance, heard from Mr. Linton? As I recall he was in a spot of trouble a while back, is it not so? There was some scandal and he was sent off to the army. Some shocking business, I believe. Did he not end an engagement with a worthy young lady so that he could elope with – ’

‘Dear old Ben is doing splendidly, Catherine.’ interrupted Stockley. He looked worriedly at Margaret, who had her eyes fixed upon Catherine with a look of horror and intense dislike. ‘In fact, he has related some great news to me. His letter was so short that I felt it my duty to get myself acquainted with its content for I knew that no letter of this length could contain anything but important news. As it happened, I was right – Linton’s father as he found himself on his deathbed wished to see his son and upon his hasty arrival pronounced him the sole heir to a handsome fortune and an estate that I understand brings in considerable profit. He is staying in town at present but

will soon be on his way to Yorkshire and his country seat.'

'What an excellent piece of news this is.' replied Catherine, looking quite astonished and thus forgetting to look at Margaret and Mr. Westfield to see how the mention of Linton had effected them.

'I am most happy to oblige you, sister.' said Stockley crossly and stalked across the room to join Anne at her drawing-table, thus putting an end to Catherine's further enquiries.

However, Catherine was soon deep within her own thoughts. Though if she had paid any attention to Mr. Westfield and Margaret she would have been exceedingly disappointed to find that Mr. Westfield was supremely unconcerned by Stockley's account of Linton's letter, and instead was busy picking up the book that would provide Margaret with both good moral guidance and ample entertainment. On her part, Margaret proposed with passionate sincerity that she was ready to find even the dullest of narrations entertaining as long as it saved her from Catherine's company and remarks.

The next few days were marked by Catherine's keeping to her rooms and out of everyone else's business. Such behaviour was highly unusual and suspicious in itself and instead of providing Margaret with long-sought relief at being finally left alone put her on her guard. It also prompted her to seek Catherine out in order to extract the true nature of her seclusion by some gentle friendly probing that, when

completed, utterly failed to produce any results. Catherine might have as well sworn a vow of silence, so little information did she volunteer on the subject and what she did communicate upon Margaret's insistence was of no consequence whatsoever, leaving Margaret in no doubt of it being another falsehood.

'You see, my dear brother drew my attention to what can be regarded as a family trait: an abysmal lack of discipline and organization when dealing with our correspondence.' said Catherine with an insipid laugh. 'I realized that I had not answered any of my letters since I came here and to add to this my pervading sickness I was quite shocked to find some of the letters still unopened! Well, my dear, you can just imagine my welcome back to town if I do not take time and pen satisfactory replies to all of them. And by the time I frank all of my letters I declare I will be quite broke!'

Catherine shook her head. Margaret tried to form a reply that would not betray her eagerness to see Catherine gone but in vain –

'When do you plan to depart then?' she asked and hastily added. 'But how sudden this is! It was only two days ago that you couldn't take your meals with the rest of us in the dining-room and now you are leaving for town and quite on your own!'

'Don't be silly, Margaret.' snapped Catherine as if such a suggestion was beyond her to endure with a friendly smile and honeyed tones. 'Of course I am not departing on my own – I do not have the means to arrange such matter as you very well know. If I had a

carriage – or if someone could take me to town - but it is all so very complicated!’

‘What about Stockley?’ asked Margaret, trying with all her might to be helpful. For there must have been a simple but effective way to precipitate such a desirable event. ‘Perhaps he could ask Mr. Jones to allow him the use of his carriage and take you to town himself? If you make an early start, he will be back here by dinner-time.’

Catherine shook her head.

‘I’m afraid that’s impossible. Mrs. Jones expressed a wish to visit her sisters and they are setting off on the morrow.’

Margaret walked to the window, thinking hard. She could not miss an opportunity to get rid of Catherine, but unless she came up with its successful resolution, Catherine would remain at Northbrook Hall until an available carriage miraculously presented itself. Margaret was just wondering whether Davenport had a carriage at his disposal, when Catherine broke the silence –

‘I have been thinking this matter over, Margaret, and I see no other choice but for you to apply to Mr. Westfield and ask him to grant me permission to use his carriage.’

Margaret looked aghast at the suggestion.

‘What are you saying, Catherine! I could never ask Mr. Westfield for a carriage! It would be hardly prudent of me to presume that I could! I have very little right to make such requests of him. Indeed, I cannot!’

'Is it so, Margaret?' asked Catherine. 'Well, I am rather astonished to hear that. I thought that you and Mr. Westfield had reached an understanding that gave you enough power over him to expect the fulfillment of your requests. Have I been mistaken in believing that you are engaged to him? Has he not spoken to you yet? But I would assume! How peculiar! Pray, I do not know what to say.'

Catherine shook her head, rather pleased with the way the conversation was going, while Margaret blushed, furious and mortified by her former friend's apparent delight at her failure to secure the man she had so obviously cared for.

'No, Catherine, there is no understanding between Mr. Westfield and myself as of yet.' said Margaret when she could force herself to speak calmly on the subject, though her humiliation at having to confess to it was so severe that she could not keep her voice entirely devoid of trembling. 'However, I do feel – quite strongly – that Mr. Westfield will speak to me as soon as he thinks that the time and circumstances are right. I have no reason to doubt the veracity or the constancy of his affection.'

Catherine raised her eyebrows as if surprised by Margaret's naiveté.

'But, dearest, how can you talk of his *affection*,' she stressed the word as if doubting its true value, 'when he had not opened his heart to you? Trust me that there is no knowing what his true feelings are until he tells you

so and gives you the proof of his – what was it – ah, affection.’

Margaret frowned but firmly kept her ground.

‘I have plenty of reasons to believe that Mr. Westfield is attached to me.’ she repeated stubbornly. She was determined not to allow Catherine to make her wretched when she herself had no proof to the contrary.

‘Then why has he not proposed yet? There is nothing that can possibly stop *him* from taking you as his wife but – ‘

‘What?’ snapped Margaret.

‘The lack of *affection* for you.’ said Catherine with so much authority one would think Mr. Westfield himself confided in her.

Taken aback, Margaret wondered how to reply to Catherine’s statement with dignity and matching authority. She could not, of course, produce the proof of Mr. Westfield’s affection that would satisfy Catherine’s eye and render her smile bitter. And that made Margaret think about the real reason lurking behind Catherine’s open defiance of her words that Mr. Westfield could easily counteract if applied to. Suddenly Margaret smiled, taking Catherine completely by surprise, good-humour returning to her as swiftly as it was leaving Catherine.

‘You can save your breath, dearest,’ she said imitating Catherine’s way of pronouncing the endearment.

‘Whatever do you mean?’ asked Catherine, discomposed and disturbed by Margaret’s complaisant look.

Margaret shook her head and laughed. She walked to the door all but ignoring Catherine’s enquiry, leaving her to follow her steps, mute and astonished, and spoke only when her hand was on the door-handle as if she was quite safe from any retribution on Catherine’s part while relating her next words.

‘It is quite simple. But as my skills of observation and penetration have never been formidable and never seemed to work properly when met with the craftiness of your mind, it took me some time to figure it out.’

Catherine spread her hands as if inviting Margaret to share a funny joke rather than an important discovery.

‘I am all attention.’ she said condescendingly, which earned her another smile from Margaret and the subsequent irritation that it produced.

‘You thought that by challenging my confidence, you would provoke me into demanding Mr. Westfield to grant me a favour to let you have the use of his carriage. You would then assure me that this was the likeliest way to test whether he was interested in me or not, for as an interested party he would naturally hasten to oblige me. However, in reality, it would be quite presumptuous on my part to demand anything of him and not at all to his liking, which, in its turn, would put myself and him under considerable strain and would thus prove, according to you, that Mr. Westfield does not intend to address me any time soon

as the level of his interest in me is so low that he does not care for fulfillment of my wishes. There, I do believe I got it right.'

Margaret laughed at Catherine's rigid expression.

'But do not look so surprised. I have been a party to many of your schemes, Catherine, or have you forgotten? I was exceedingly stupid once to believe that I found a friend in you. It took me a while to see your true character and to stop letting you manipulate me into doing things that I find objectionable and wrong and I confess that there was a time when I thought that it was too late. Who knows what would have happened, had not Mr. Westfield invited me to Northbrook Hall, thus ensuring my complete removal from town and you.

'You must know that I left London for two reasons. I feared that becoming involved in the Edgcombe-Linton scandal could successfully ruin me unless I married Stockley, as was your design all along. And although such a marriage would materially improve your situation as it had never been of much consequence and could only be elevated, it would not be enough to establish me as a respectable lady, seeing as how my would-be husband was just then involved in some heavy card debts – something that you kept hidden from me.

'And then, of course, I wished to put an end to our acquaintance. I truly believed that by distancing myself from you and settling in the country I was out of your reach. Not to mention, that our parting should have

made you aware that I would not wish to greet you as a friend again. You made sure of that by being your most disagreeable self. And yet you wrote to me and contrived, somehow, to come hither unannounced, pretending to be my friend and completely engrossing my life. And upon finding out that Mr. Westfield's attitude towards me was quite favourable and – dare I say – promising, started concocting plan after plan that would discredit me in his eyes once and for all.

‘I see now that I should have spoken more plainly and expressed in words what I have been so unsuccessfully trying to communicate by other means. Therefore, I must inform you that I wish to cease all possible interaction between ourselves and I insist on your never addressing me in public or in private, in a letter or in person ever again. Farewell.’

Taking a deep breath and preserving Catherine's shell-shocked expression forever in her memory, Margaret left the room and, feeling quite lightheaded with triumph, decided to take a stroll to the lake – a dear spot of unrivalled beauty to her eye and the most precious to her heart.

Chapter Twenty

Happy and at liberty to pursue her own amusement, Margaret followed at a merry pace the curved, overgrown path that led to the lake. The weather was lovely, the breeze obliging and a bejewelled surface of the lake lay rippling in its wake. Nearby trees and bushes shook with the restless, chattering crowd of birds, their voices creating a melodious rainbow of sound. Looking around with a radiant eye, Margaret took herself to a bench that was snugly hidden in the archway formed by two willows. The bench had been there since Margaret had shown a particular predilection for the spot and so as to make it more convenient for her to spend time there and to provide the lake with company, Mr. Westfield, employing his mother's help in choosing the bench that would suit the lady and the purpose, gave orders to fix it under the trees, allowing a nice haunt for Margaret and a perfect view of the lake.

Sitting down, Margaret gazed across the water, losing herself in its shimmering glory and thinking back on her conversation with Catherine; her last conversation with Catherine. She reflected on the possibility of her leaving before the end of the week, but regarded it as highly improbable for she couldn't go back to the Joneses for at least another two days. But once they were back, she would relocate to their place, for there was no reason for her to linger at Northbrook Hall any longer thereafter. From whence Mr. Jones could take

her to London in his carriage or Catherine could even go in a stagecoach, sitting and winning at cards two evenings together to pay the fair.

The felicity of the thought and the sweetness of the day were so powerful that, cradled by the willows and lulled by the comforting murmur of the lake, Margaret fell asleep. She was shaken awake by Anne and was as shocked as her friend to find herself thus occupied.

‘Gracious, Margaret, we have been so worried about you!’ said Miss Westfield, taking a seat by her side. ‘I saw you taking a walk and guessed at your destination. However, you have been gone for such a long time that we became dreadfully alarmed on your account. I was quite sure that you fainted from heat, while mother was convinced that you had fallen into the lake.’

Margaret hid her smile at that. Her little accident by the lake had remained a well-guarded secret.

‘I am fine, Anne, thank you.’ replied Margaret, highly embarrassed to which her face bore glaring testimony. ‘I am sorry if I have caused you any worry. I do not know what possessed me to fall asleep here of all places! Have I missed anything of consequence? Is Mrs. Westfield very much angry with me?’

‘Pshaw!’ exclaimed Anne. ‘Why would mama be angry with you for staying out of her way? Have you not learnt by now that the less people around the happier she is? You have missed nothing of consequence but tea – a truly delicious course with biscuits and crumpets and cakes. So you can imagine that I was quite happy that you were not around to

share them with. Mama and James were enough of a threat. I'm sure that Mary will not mind laying the tray for you and you can be sure that I won't mind making your company and tasting the cake again. I was in such a hurry to come out the victor of the tea-race that I cannot quite recollect now if there were any raisins in the cake or not. Oh and Miss Stockley took her leave, but you know that already.' she added cheerfully.

Margaret's laughter, that flowed unimpeded throughout Anne's recount, came to a halt and she stared at Anne in bewildered astonishment.

'Whatever do you mean? Has Catherine moved in back with the Joneses?'

It was Anne's turn to look bewildered.

'The Joneses?' she asked. 'No, indeed. What gave you that idea? Catherine left for London. But I do not comprehend why you look so shocked at hearing the news?' asked Anne. 'She told us that you had said your good-byes earlier today.'

'But this cannot be! She had no means of travelling there by herself!' exclaimed Margaret.

'Well, she certainly didn't go by herself. She went with James.' explained Miss Westfield, casting a curious look at her friend.

'Mr. Westfield!' gasped Margaret.

She sprang to her feet and started walking back and forth.

'James left for London shortly after lunch,' said Anne as she watched Margaret with apprehension. 'And as he was taking the carriage rather than going on horseback

he agreed to deliver Catherine to her parents' house. But isn't it excellent news? I assumed that you have been celebrating down here by yourself so I chose not to disturb you in case you were in the middle of a ritual dance.'

But Margaret didn't hear Anne as she was furiously muttering to herself.

'But what is to be done now? What can repair the damage that their going together might produce? I should have known that Catherine would not be pleased! I should have foreseen that she would make her move next! But oh!' sobbed Margaret greatly agitated. 'Gone! Together! To London!' she whispered under her breath. 'Now I am truly wretched!' she cried bitterly and, as if suddenly recollecting Anne's presence, rushed to her side and flopping on the thick grass at her feet grasped her hands –

'But what possessed Mr. Westfield to go to town so unexpectedly?' she asked urgently.

'Pray, Margaret, are you in earnest? Have you really forgotten? I do believe I mentioned that I asked James to fetch a nice frame for that painting of mine that you wanted to hang in your rooms. You confuse me greatly. Have you not parted with Catherine?'

'Oh Anne!' exclaimed Margaret miserably. 'We did part. Or – rather – I parted with her by putting an end to our acquaintance once and for all. And if that constitutes saying our good-byes then so we did. But I had no idea that she would jump into carriage with Mr. Westfield and be off the next moment!'

‘I rather thought the news would put you into better disposition.’

‘Oh, it would, Anne! It would! Had Catherine not left with Mr. Westfield!’

This Anne could not bear without a smile.

‘Margaret, for shame, you have nothing to fear on that account. My brother has his eyes and heart firmly set and certainly not on Catherine.’

‘It is very kind of you to say so, but you do not know the lengths Catherine can go to in order to exert revenge! I have been extremely reckless this morning, but then I always act on impulse and when rational thought catches up with me it is too late! And Catherine – she must be vastly angry to have been snubbed!’ said Margaret despondently.

Anne looked at Margaret with tenderness and concern of a sister. If she had known that the news of Catherine’s departure in her brother’s carriage would have such an effect on Margaret, she would have been more prudent in disclosing it. She pressed Margaret’s hands and exclaimed –

‘Heavens! Your hands – how cold they are! And yet your face – the colour in your cheeks – quite feverish! You must be burning up. Let me accompany you upstairs. You can take your tea in your bedchamber and have a nice lie-in in your own bed – I daresay you shall find it more agreeable than a bench.’

Margaret shook her head and exerted enough strength to produce a feeble smile for Anne’s sake.

‘I am fine, Anne. Do not alarm yourself on my account. It is nothing. Truly, nothing is wrong with me. I will gladly take my tea downstairs with Mrs. Westfield, you and little James for company. I do not know what came over me. I must have been under the dream spell. But it has passed now and I am better.’

Margaret was heartily ashamed for causing such an unseemly display and took another moment to compose herself.

Anne decided to take this opportunity and change the subject.

‘Our nephew shall be vastly pleased to get hold of you. I believe you are the only person who has not yet seen his new puppy. Would you not like that?’

‘I might as well.’ replied Margaret, getting to her feet. ‘After all, I shall have precious little but puppies to comfort me if Catherine succeeds.’ she whispered fiercely but so that Anne would not hear her.

Anne, however, did not trust Margaret to walk unaided after such a dramatic scene and wrapping her arm around her waist supported her all the way to the house.

The puppy was lovely and it fell upon Margaret to name it. To give Margaret credit, the puppy was quite happy to be christened Penny, short for Penelope.

‘I think it is quite fetching,’ declared Margaret holding the wriggling puppy in front of her nose for closer examination. ‘She has got the loveliest brown curls I have ever seen.’ The puppy squealed delightfully at the praise. ‘Upon my bonnet, are they not the pride

of the kingdom?’ demanded Margaret playfully, having been just licked enthusiastically for her efforts.

James giggled and as Penny wiggled out of Margaret’s hands and leapt across the drawing-room’s carpeted floor he bounded after her.

While such tableau proved to be quite entertaining, especially as the ladies betted on whether and when Penny’s rapidly wagging tail would fall off, and Margaret was given the important task of supervising that every article of furniture and Mrs. Westfield’s working-basket remained out of Penny’s reach, which required a lot of concentration and speedy reflexes on her part, her thoughts remained in turmoil for the rest of the evening.

At dinner she ate little and went to bed early. She slept badly, waking up every hour to check the clock for the time and then the sky for the first rays of light, each time unable to believe that so little time had passed. At daybreak, finally exhausted from her night-time ramblings, she fell asleep. She came downstairs late in the afternoon, pale and suffering a headache, and when the footman handed her the letter that proved to be from Catherine she nearly fainted.

‘I shall read it in my room.’ she gasped and departed.

Mrs. Westfield watched her leave with a heavy frown of concern.

‘If she gets like this every time she receives a letter from this lady, I shall forbid the correspondence.’ she said gravely.

‘There might be no need after this one.’ replied Anne, wondering how much time she had to give Margaret before following her.

Upstairs, Margaret stood motionless in the middle of the room, staring with revulsion at the letter clutched in her hand. She was half inclined to throw it into the fire unopened, but was held back by curiosity and prevailing fear of what it could contain within. She acknowledged that it was rather foolhardy on her part to remain ignorant of its content when its composition belonged to Catherine Stockley’s hand. Indeed, it was not in Margaret’s best interests to remain ignorant of what Catherine had to say so soon after their rupture took place, for it would give the latter a distinct advantage over Margaret as knowledge always does over ignorance.

Now that Catherine was back in town there was no knowing what course of actions she would pursue in order to provide herself with invitations to its dining-rooms, drawing-rooms, card-tables, music parties and ballrooms to keep her engaged every day of the year. And the question that had been plaguing Margaret the most was whether Catherine would try to ruin her reputation by ensuring a highly diverting, shocking and full of scandal conversation on her part. There was nothing as effective, in lieu of good lineage and fortune, as a penchant for spreading gossip and scandal in order to firmly establish oneself in the good graces of society and have unlimited access to all of its fashionable parlours.

Margaret could vividly picture Catherine calling on their mutual acquaintances, leaving her cards in hopes that they would be answered in due course. Then she would contrive to capture their interest and become a kind of a desirable person, whose company, due to her sharp tongue and that invaluable touch of scandal, would be thoroughly missed and thus in great demand. And while Margaret had no wish to move back to London and attend balls and parties and mix with people whose opinion she didn't care an ounce for, she was still obliged to make an occasional appearance there. Her aunt in particular was quite anxious to see her and insisted in her correspondence on Margaret's keeping her company during the winter season.

Margaret was outraged that Catherine wrote to her when she explicitly forbade her to, but conceded that it was just like Catherine to proceed according to her own wishes while disregarding everyone else's. Catherine would never let her have the last say and the letter that Margaret could not refuse would be the perfect way to impose upon her. Fully expecting the letter to be of an unpleasant and even taunting nature, Margaret could not bring herself to open it for a very long time. But open it she did.

'Dearest Margaret – You will find, upon receiving this letter, that I preserve my right to call you my dearest friend for you are as dear to me as ever. And even though you have been most unkind as to not give me a chance to have my say and prove to you how much I value your friendship, you will always remain

thus to me. I am truly sorry if I have done anything to warrant the loss of your friendship so highly esteemed by me. As it is, I am quite heart-broken at present. Just imagine what a horrid, cruel creature you have been to me and yet, here I am, still immensely fond of you, therefore, I find it in my heart to forgive you.

I hope my letter will find you in great health and excellent spirits so as not to be discarded for later or thrown into the fire in a fit of temper for I have quite a few things that I must share with you. As you can imagine I had the most delightful trip ever – Mr. Westfield is a jewel. He was as charming a companion as I could only hope for and I understand now why you dote on him so. He was in a right state for he entertained me the whole way with such amusing stories as I cannot recollect without falling about laughing.

I was disappointed when he declined mama's invitation to dine with us, but I know that it wasn't for the lack of either want or cordiality on his part. He looked tremendously sorry to take his leave but he must have heard countless of times from that brother of mine that we live in wretched conditions and did not wish to impose on us. He declined papa's invitation to make up a game of cards likewise – for the same noble reason I expect – as papa has got nothing to stake but his cravat and Mr. Westfield's are so much more expensive and fashionable than his. However, he promised to call on us on the morrow and I plan to proceed with him to the Gardens. It has been an

eternity since I last took my walk thither and I would be excessively happy to encounter old faces and hear all the news. But I daresay that with such a beau as Mr. Westfield I will make the news myself.

It is now time to confess what I am mainly writing to you about. How astonished you will be to know that I shall very soon change my name and residence. Indeed, I am quite determined to be married in a few months time and you cannot pretend not to guess the name of the man that I have chosen to become a spouse of. You have astutely guessed that I had been keeping a secret and I am dreadfully sorry to have kept it from you. How tempted I was to tell you! However, I do not have the tendency to speak without the evidence of certainty in my hands and I could not be prevailed upon to break the habit even on your account. But due to my timely trip to London everything was resolved to the best of advantage and I am now residing in the state of all imaginable bliss.

For should I not be proud of myself for having secured a country gentleman of excellent character and steady income in my circumstances and time of life? La, how many younger and prettier a female can boast to have set their cap on such a desirable man? But I must conclude now for it has been a long day and while exceedingly satisfying quite fatiguing too.

I am, always remaining,
Your true friend,
Catherine Stockley.

Such was the content of the letter. Margaret's reaction was swift and tempestuous: she threw herself in the arms of misery with complete abandon as soon as her fancy had conjured up the image of the only country gentleman of excellent character and steady income that she could think of – Mr. Westfield. And when Anne knocked on Margaret's door, Margaret was indulging in stormy tears by the foot of the bed that made it impossible for her to hear anything beyond the sound of her own grief. Alarmed by the sight, Anne implored Margaret to tell her what was in the letter so as to make her so wretched.

In response, without uttering anything but a series of successive sobs of different pitch, Margaret blindly thrust the letter in Anne's general direction. But after having read it, Anne stared at Margaret in disbelief.

'Margaret, you must take yourself under control.' she said sternly, startling her friend into a more sober frame of mind. Margaret had never heard Anne employ such a level of severity in her voice before. 'This girl has no shame. And the language she uses when talking about James is preposterous. But, Margaret, do not tell me that after reading Catherine's letter, you instantly decided that she was talking about none other than my brother.'

'But Anne who else could she be talking about when the only eligible bachelor – a country gentleman of excellent character and steady income, she quoted – she had mentioned in the letter was Mr. Westfield! And she

calls him a beau! And they are going to attend the Gardens!' cried Margaret with anguish.

'Well this is quite an insult to my brother.' said Anne, shaking her head. 'I do not believe it for one moment and besides, she writes about her conquest in another paragraph, which, to my mind, indicates that she means someone else. However, she would want you to think otherwise. Honestly, Margaret I would not pay attention to this wickedness of hers. Whatever James's feelings towards Miss Stockley are, they are entirely unflattering and could under no circumstances serve as the ground for marriage.'

Margaret, though no more weeping, was not entirely convinced.

'Think about it,' said Anne in mild exasperation. 'A single, relatively short trip cannot end in a marriage proposal when one of the individuals involved cannot tolerate the other and is not prone to making hasty, impulsive decisions. But if you are not ready to take my word for it, I can write to James so that he can dispute the claim himself.'

Margaret shook her head.

'Then I suggest you stop reacting like that to everything that Catherine writes or tells you. Upon my word, you lose every bit of rational thinking when it comes to Miss Stockley.'

Margaret smiled at that.

'Your brother would disagree with you – he would insist that I do not have any rational thinking to lose to

begin with. But do you think that it is a true account – the part about her impending marriage?’

‘I do not know. But I find it highly unlikely. How can it be accomplished in such a short time? Has she ever given you a hint of something like that going on?’

Margaret denied it. Her next words, however, prompted Anne to lose her patience completely.

‘But she writes that – ’

‘For goodness sake, Margaret! Do not let me hear you quote her letter again! She would write anything to pay you back for putting an end to your acquaintance and leaving her out of all the town’s pleasures!’

‘And this is what worries me now – Catherine will do anything to partake in its pleasures again and I fear that she fully intends to use my name as an invaluable tool of their promotion.’

While Margaret and Anne thus argued and contemplated Catherine’s intentions, Penny the spaniel, made its way into the room in order to, no doubt, be praised for her looks and admired for her locks. But how great was her shock when she found both young ladies so occupied with their insignificant chat that they did not so much as look at her and completely ignored her ringlets, ringlets that would put most females to shame. Hence, looking for a means of attracting their attention to herself, Penny’s eye caught a piece of paper trembling in Margaret’s hand.

Suffice it to say that by the time Penny had released Catherine’s letter it no longer resembled one and both

Margaret and Anne had a hearty laugh while gathering its shreds and throwing them into the fire.

However after two more days went by without reassuring reappearance of Mr. Westfield, Margaret's mind was seized by frantic tension caused by unbearable suspense. How long one needed to remain in London in order to obtain a frame for a painting, she wondered. Had Mr. Westfield accompanied Catherine to the Gardens yet or was it nothing more than a figment of her imagination? Surely, Mr. Westfield could not all of a sudden fancy spending time with someone as vulgar and pretentious as Catherine.

Margaret could not stand another day of it and yet there was nothing to be done but to wait. Finally, she resolved to wait one more day before urging Anne to write to her brother with an enquiry as to the intended date of his arrival. But before such a letter had the chance to be composed, Mr. Westfield returned.

At the time of his arrival Margaret was sitting by the lake with a book in her hands that she had taken in order to drive away the restlessness of her mind and thus applied herself to the task of reading with a vivacity that was very soon diminished by the poor choice of the text – it turned out that she had no appreciation for Scott's narrative unless Mr. Westfield was the one reading it and her own attempts to persuade her mind to remain fixed on it rather than wander off were met by resistance on the part of her aesthetic senses that rebelled against the dullness of the scripture.

She was thus saved from full-out mutiny by the arrival of her maid, who as she clutched her bosom with the effort of running, meaningfully informed her that Mr. Westfield was back. Margaret dropped the book but otherwise sat quite still, even though her heart went aquiver at the news.

A moment later her mind was set and her feet carried her towards the house, whence she found Mr. Westfield in his study dealing with some matters of urgency before dinner.

Chapter Twenty-One

Margaret had never hitherto ventured into Mr. Westfield's domain uninvited and was fairly fearful of the reception she might receive. But as she had never seen Mr. Westfield surrounded by important papers and immersed in calculations or some such before her curiosity was justifiably piqued. Hence she knocked on the door of his study applying as little force to the wood as possible in order to allow her a moment of unguarded observation and elicit a satisfying exclamation of surprise when he finally saw her. And before she had a chance to change her mind and retreat, Margaret moved forward with a bold step belied by the violent beating of her heart upon catching his transported gaze.

Swiftly rising to his feet, Mr. Westfield hastened to meet her and offer her a chair that Margaret declined with a shake of her head.

'I must express my astonishment at finding you here.' he said genially, bowing and kissing her hand. 'I have not expected to be so fortunate as to have the pleasure of your company before tea-time.'

Margaret frowned. She rather resented Mr. Westfield's present offering and was vexed that he hadn't simply professed his delight at seeing her instead.

'I have heard of your arrival and was called forth to discharge my greetings and express my hopes that you have accomplished a fine journey.' she replied coldly.

Mr. Westfield looked surprised, unaware that he had done anything to merit such a frosty reply, but soon proceeded with an amused smile as if realizing his mistake and ready to rectify it.

‘I heartily thank you on both accounts, Miss Margaret.’ he responded cordially. ‘I was surprised that you were not of the party that greeted me as far down as the lane and instantly enquired as to your whereabouts. I was informed that you were spending the afternoon by the lake and knowing how much you cherish the spot for your solitary ramblings and reflections I refrained from imposing myself on you. Instead I took myself hither to while the time with books and my steward’s latest report.’

This naturally prompted Margaret to smile at Mr. Westfield with all her customary warmth and candour.

‘I must say that there are indeed instances of imposition that I would not wish to suffer anywhere. However, for some impositions to occur – if the person and the time is right – then I should gladly welcome them. At any rate, it was quite rude of you to presume that I would not wish to be disturbed without asking me first. After all, I have just now been in ever great need of distraction. You see, while you were away, I tried to apply myself most assiduously to Scott, as I promised I would, but I found myself rather immune to his charms in the absence of your voice.’

Mr. Westfield nodded most sympathetically.

‘For fear of being remiss I believe I should enquire next as to whether there was anything else that made it impossible for you to enjoy Scott?’ he asked teasingly.

‘Well, quite apart from finding it easier not to enjoy Scott at all, I did have something on my mind that kept my spirits in restless agitation so as to render my efforts completely useless.’ replied Margaret earnestly and paused for greater effect.

An idea had just entered her head that would once and for all establish that Catherine’s implications held no connection to Mr. Westfield whatsoever. For despite the fact that the news of his arrival greatly contributed to Margaret’s peace of mind, she wanted Mr. Westfield’s account of it to put the matter completely behind her.

‘It has come to my attention that while in London you were in the habit of entertaining a certain young lady. I have received a most shocking letter from her where she recounted how jolly a time you spent on your way to town and how you intended to drive her to the Gardens for a stroll the following day. Not to mention other – more lasting – intentions of yours, concerning the lady.’

Mr. Westfield was understandably robbed of any means to form an adequate reply that would convey his shock, disbelief and indignation at being thus accused. And Margaret, keeping her amusement in-check, continued in the same grave manner, reminiscent of the times when Mr. Westfield would so often reproach her for her various indiscretions.

‘I cannot tell you how astonished I was to hear of your choice of a partner. Questionable at best. I have always heard you speak very highly of virtue and propriety in females, yet I fail to see how any of these qualities are relevant in case of Miss Stockley.’ she said. ‘You have once been so fortunate as to find the perfection of female goodness, kindness, beauty, elegance and everything that is there to admire and praise in one single woman and I can only hope that when you feel like bestowing your affections on another lady you will choose prudently and she will not be so inferior to your first choice of a wife as to desecrate her memory. Allow me to warn you against committing a grievous error by placing your heart and trust in one person whose sentiments will never match yours either in strength or in sincerity. And speaking frankly, I should say that I am convinced that my sister would approve of your second choice provided it lies in someone closer to home.’

Before Mr. Westfield had time to overcome his further shock and recover his use of speech that seemed to leave him throughout Margaret’s pronouncement, Margaret left the room as rapidly as the hem of her dress would allow her.

However, once his faculties returned, it is safe to assume that Mr. Westfield ran after Margaret – for it was not hard to imagine where her feet would carry her in time of distress – and he timely caught up with her before she could be in any danger of falling prey to a bit of uneven, slippery road.

Mr. Westfield found Margaret in agitation not entirely imagined for while Margaret's intention was to acquire the proof of Mr. Westfield's heart as belonging to her, the thought alone of it not being so was enough to rob her of composure and produce such an effect that by the time she had reached the lake tears sprang to her eyes. She gasped and was about to take a seat when Mr. Westfield seized her hands and, pressing them in his, spoke with much feeling and little pause –

‘What a fanciful creature you are! I do not know nor do I care what that Stockley woman wrote. Let the Devil take her! I can firmly state here and now that I paid her as much attention as was her due and no more and that should give you a fairly accurate idea of how little that was. I found her presence odious and her conversation insufferable throughout the journey even though she chose you as her main subject. But I could not let her remain here any longer – not when she caused you so much distress – that is why I agreed to take her down in my carriage – I would agree to take her to one of the far-off islands if only never to see her again! But pray I do not wish to talk of her! All of my reasons for going to London, and I confess I had more than one, were connected with you. I went to procure the frame for Anne's painting and I also wished to obtain – but, perhaps, you remember – one evening some months ago we had a lively discussion about a certain dress –.’

‘Mr. Westfield, you didn't!’ gasped Margaret, guessing his meaning but unable to believe it.

‘Indeed! I turned to your aunt for assistance and she was so good as to arrange everything without delay on such a short notice.’

Margaret laughed.

‘Now I am surprised that it took you only a week! I would assume that she would wish to keep you to herself indefinitely.’

‘I believe that was her original intention, but she changed her mind when I told her that – however – how would you like to have a ball at Northbrook?’

‘A ball?’ asked Margaret, trying to follow Mr. Westfield’s train of thought.

‘A ball! In your honour! I should have done it upon your arrival, but my follies and grudges and errors of judgment had all conspired against giving you the kind of welcome that you deserved. But I have long since gained freedom from every sentiment that stood in the way of my forming a favourable opinion of you – of promoting my felicity to degrees I have not believed myself capable or worthy of experiencing again – and I am now most happy to reveal my heart and soul to you.’

At this point it will come as no surprise to learn that Margaret most readily accepted Mr. Westfield’s generous offer of heart and soul and in return eagerly presented him with heart and soul of her own with an additional promise of her hand in every dance at the forthcoming ball.

But her worries were by no means over for when happily set in her own way she did not forget her

friends whose happy fate as of yet remained undecided and chiefly depended on Mr. Westfield. And as they were making their way back to the house by way of the longest and most winding path on the estate, she asked him whether he had any objections to Clifford Stockley's person and character and his marrying his sister.

'Upon my word, Stockley is the finest fellow that I have the pleasure of calling a friend.' was Mr. Westfield's merry reply. 'He is a man of great worth and valour and I know that he would do anything for a friend, even put his own honour at stake. I will be exceedingly pleased to call him brother.'

Such a proclamation was met by blank astonishment on Margaret's part and she wondered what Mr. Westfield meant by it.

'You will remember, of course, the time when I did not trust your word,' he said, kissing her hand. 'That is why I took it upon myself to follow your every step and investigate those rumours that cast an unsavoury shadow upon your name. The latest report that I had received and that prompted me to bring you here under my watchful eye, you will recall, mentioned your name in connection with Mr. Stockley, Mr. Linton and Miss Edgecombe, where Mr. Linton and Miss Edgecombe were represented as the victims of your and Stockley's masterfully played intrigue. As a result of which the lady was jilted and heart-broken and the gentleman cast off by his family and sent to the army; Stockley's character was further sunk by the knowledge of his

heavy debts due to gambling while your involvement in the affair went relatively unnoticed as it was overshadowed by the rest of the drama. What I had discovered much later was the fact that there was no card debt to speak of and that Stockley, feeling responsible for his sister's actions that brought about the rupture, was the one to buy Linton's commission so as to save him from censure of the world and complete dejection of spirits. But as he did not wish Miss Stockley to know of his act of kindness, he decided to come up with diversion that rather cost him his reputation.'

Margaret did not believe that she could be shocked by anything else after such an account but was proved wrong upon Stockley's arrival that finally gave her and Anne an insight into the mystery of Catherine's intended husband, who turned out to be none other than the very person whose life she had almost ruined - Mr. Benjamin Linton himself - and who had been saved by the chivalrous actions of her brother!

According to Stockley he had received another short letter from the man, where Linton addressed him as 'My dear brother' and rambled on about his mending heart and a saint of a woman with a healing touch. Margaret did not know what to think. She felt truly sorry for Linton, was not surprised that Catherine set her sights on him upon learning of his good fortune, wondered if there was still anything anyone could do to stop their alliance from forming without prompting Linton to break another engagement (but surely they were not yet engaged!) within twelvemonth and

resolved as soon as the next morning to write to her aunt and enlist her help in putting together the rest of the puzzle, for there was still the matter of how Catherine had managed to get in touch with Linton and how he could fall so swiftly under her power situated as they were miles apart.

Margaret dutifully informed Stockley of the reason behind Linton's address and urged him to press Linton to reconsider his intentions towards Catherine by disclosing to him her true nature and her involvement in the scheme that had almost led to his ruin and had lost him his sweetheart.

While Margaret's thoughts were preoccupied by painful reflections on the good prospects of one in exchange for the return of what was without a doubt to be misery of another, Mr. Westfield applied to his sister with an enquiry whether she herself was not in a hurry to accept the offer of marriage from the first man who proposed to her.

Anne put a soothing hand on her brother's and cheerfully rejoined –

'Not at all! But do not you think that I have waited long enough to be cautious rather than rash in my choice for fear of finding myself spending the rest of my life with someone disagreeable and not at all to my liking? However, I am sure that my second offer would never match my first as I rather consider myself most fortunate to receive my first one from the very person I had originally fixed my eyes and heart upon. I have always had a very specific image in my mind of a man I

could find lovable enough to marry and when Mr. Stockley came along I knew that he matched it perfectly. I am happy to conclude that I matched his ideal and we are exceedingly happy to be such a perfect match.'

When the state of general felicity was established both Margaret and Mr. Westfield turned to marvel at happiness of their own thus spending the chief part of the day in its wondrous contemplation. Whether reading a book or helping little James putting together the map of Europe, whether scolding Penny for ruining the lace on her dress with the sharp tug of her teeth or helping Mrs. Westfield decide on a knitting pattern, Margaret's and Mr. Westfield's thoughts and gazes were inevitably and invariably drawn to each other.

With their hearts now at ease and united, they achieved that perfect combination of graveness and sedateness on his part and lively humour and certain lack of tranquility on hers that would provide a nice balance to their relationship without allowing either to go to extremes. While Mr. Westfield possessed extensive knowledge and experience, Margaret was in possession of fancy and propensity for entertainment that was a sure sign of a harmonious living between the two with that constant delight of mutual discovery that would naturally ensue between people who enjoyed such different characters, interests and dispositions.