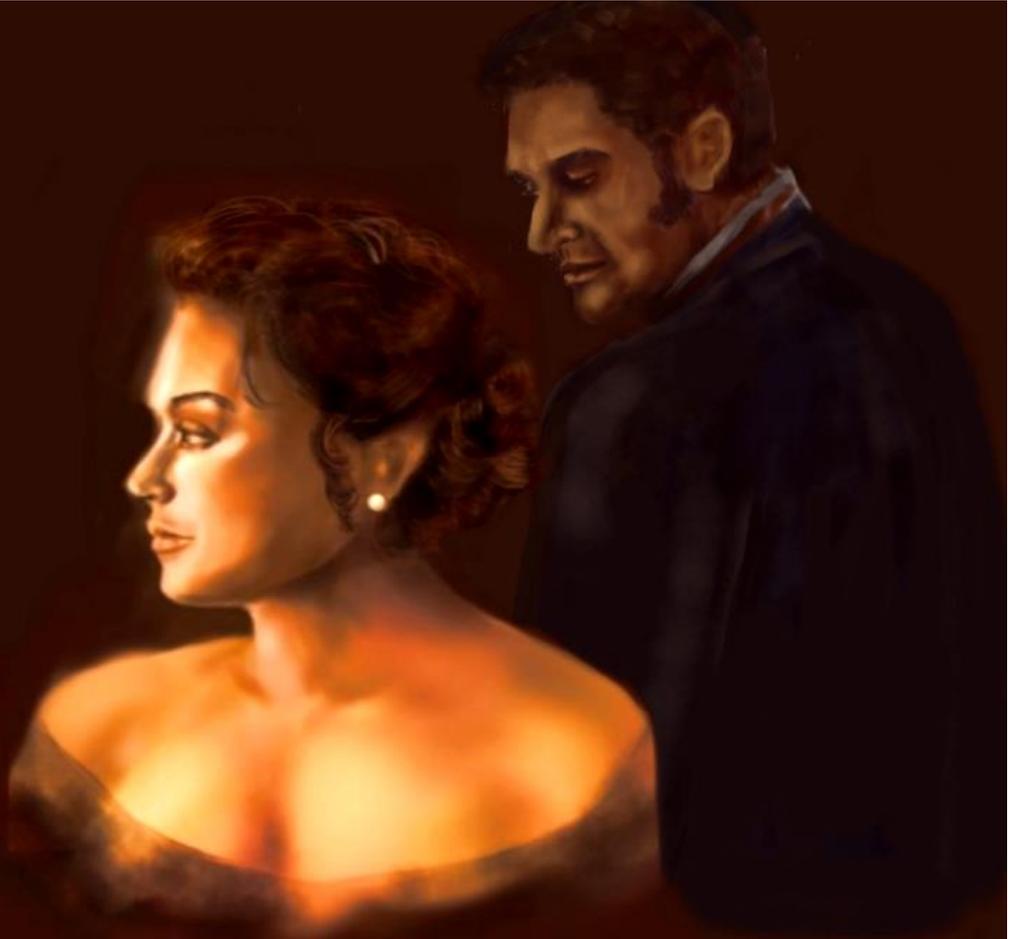


Margaret of the North



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Text and Art

E.Journey

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PREFACE

If you're expecting a sexy plot, you may be disappointed in this book. I was more concerned with character development than a thrilling climax. Conflicts and *tendresse* occur just as much within the psyches of characters as they do openly between them, and the story progresses in as natural a fashion as I could imagine life to happen.

Inner Voice. The main characters in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* are said to be "interior" oriented; that is, they often look inward, into their thoughts and feelings. I continue this approach in *Margaret of the North*, particularly with Margaret.

Gaskell's novel has been described as a romance against a backdrop of industrial upheavals and their occasionally violent strikes. I wrote *Margaret of the North* as a kind of Victorian feminist *bildungsroman* (coming-of-age novel) couched in romance. Yes, the romance is there. But equally stressed is Margaret's inner adventure as she fully realizes her womanhood and finds her place in a rapidly changing society.

This is my bias: I think introspection (self-analysis, soul-searching) is essential to a journey of discovery and growth.

Writing Style. Doing art—whether it is painting or writing—commits the creator to a series of decisions. How big a canvas should I use? Or, should this story swirling in my head be a short story or an epic? How should I apply my brushstrokes—with a brush of a certain size or a palette knife? With what colors? Or, what kind of viewpoint would make my story more intriguing? And how should I express the themes of the story? On and on. Many times, we may not be conscious that as we create, we are making decisions or even problem solving.

With this novel, I chose to write in a style as close as I could get to that of 19th-century writers. I suppose I thought it would fit the story better. Besides, I wanted to see if I was up to the task. I had read enough Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and the Bronte sisters that I thought I could pull it off. So, in fact, it was a dare I posed myself. I know this approach has its problems: It can seem antiquated, stilted, daunting at the very least, and most

E.Journey

likely, impossible. Still, I had some trouble imagining the characters talking like my niece or my son and using currently popular forms of expression.

I have attempted to pay homage to Elizabeth Gaskell and Jane Austen and show my admiration and indebtedness to them. Like these writers, I use an omniscient viewpoint throughout the novel. I was also conscious of trodding in their footsteps when I wrote the second to the last chapter. Gaskell opened *North and South*, with scenes typical of an Austenian novel of manners. In the penultimate chapter, I borrow a frequent theme in Austen—the vagaries of courtship among young people of the period.

The prologue of *Margaret of the North* borrows liberally from the last scene of the BBC adaptation of Gaskell's novel, mostly because Gaskell's ending, to me, seemed not fully realized.

I don't think the decisions we make when we create can be judged either right or wrong; such is true as well for reading preferences. I made choices when I wrote this novel that may appeal to some and repulse others. And that's all right.

I. PROLOGUE

The train chugged out of the station in a shroud of grayish white smoke and as it gained speed, the shroud swirled away, up into the hazy May sunshine. Slowly, the countryside unveiled itself. The vibrant young greens of fresh growth, sprinkled with a luscious spectrum of yellows and reds, glistened on meadows dewy from the lingering moisture of winter.

Margaret distractedly watched the lush landscape. In about an hour, it would give way to more smoke, diffused but pervasive, billowing not from the train but from ever-churning machines in cotton mills that meant life for the denizens of the modernizing city of Milton.

At that dense city as different as it could be from the hamlet where she grew up, a city of stale, particulate-laden air and of somber shades of gray—from its atmosphere to its buildings to the mood of its inhabitants—Margaret had chosen, on this fateful day and at the age of 22, to make her home. There, she would marry, raise a family, and fashion a future for herself that she hoped to look back on with some measure of fondness as well as gratitude.

She smiled at her reflection on the glass window and, with some amazement, gazed at the image behind hers, a bit blurrier but unmistakable—strong profile, tan complexion, dark hair, and aquiline nose. John Thornton was deep in thought, an arm resting on her shoulders, his head slightly bowed, and a smile playing on his lips.

Margaret studied his reflection for some moments, incredulous at how quickly her fate changed, how the aching emptiness of resigning herself to the loss of his regard was supplanted by a wondrous, unbelievable happiness at regaining it. What sweeter bliss was there than getting what one's heart desired—after that desire had seemed so impossible that, just a short hour ago, one dared not hope at all?

Margaret had made a choice, a clear and inevitable one, in her mind, that she arrived at by yielding to sentiments which could not be tamed any longer. The choice might seem unusual for her who hardly ever made momentous decisions impulsively.

She was inclined to brood and mull carefully over her choices, encouraged by an intellectual clergyman father whose collection of

E.Journey

books she explored at will, in a small country hamlet free of distractions from competing pursuits and compelling company. To her, returning to live permanently in Milton was not a question of the right or wrong choice. After nearly two years of sorrow and mourning, she simply seized happiness when it was right there before her. This happy choice was taking Margaret back to Milton for the second time on this day.

Absorbed in reverie, John and Margaret were startled to find themselves at another train stop, bustling with people getting off the train and rushing through the platform.

The train inspector opened the door to their compartment. "Good afternoon, Mr. Thornton, madam. May I see your ticket ma'am?"

Still distracted, Margaret straightened, absentmindedly reached into her bag and handed the inspector her ticket.

"This is for London, ma'am. You're on the train to Milton."

Before she could reply, John said, his tone calm but firm, assured that he would not be contradicted, "Inspector, Miss Hale is my fiancée. I am taking her back to Milton to marry. Her ticket is for the opposite direction but it costs the same, doesn't it? What's the harm? Are we not almost there?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Thornton. I suppose it will do. I'm sorry Miss Hale. I was just doing my duty."

"It's quite all right, Inspector. In fact, I thank you for being so accommodating."

The inspector bowed, scanned the length of the train, and stepped away. He blew his whistle and the train was soon speeding to Milton.

Margaret smiled gratefully as John drew her closer. "You shall meet my mother again. I hope that turns out all right."

"I did see her this morning at the mill."

"You went to Marlborough Mills?"

"Yes. How else would I find you so we could discuss business?" Margaret glanced at him, amused.

"Was Henry Lennox with you?"

"No, he went for some breakfast. We left London quite early." Margaret paused thoughtfully. "Your mother is a formidable woman. I admire her for being frank and sincere. But I think she does not find it easy to like me."

"She will probably find fault in anyone I marry but particularly you, I'm afraid."

Margaret of the North

Margaret was not surprised, aware that Mrs. Thornton thought her, a Southerner with strange ideas, unworthy of her son. She turned away, hiding the momentary apprehension in her eyes.

But John did catch it, as fleeting as it was. "You are unlike the other women my mother meets in Milton. She may find you more daunting to deal with. I suppose mothers are anxious about being replaced in the affections of their sons when they marry. Mine is no exception."

Margaret remained silent. What could she say? She knew only too well how strongly attached Mrs. Thornton was to her son, how her life revolved around him and his work. Mrs. Thornton would be unhappier than most mothers at her son's marriage to any woman, but most profoundly so if she was that woman.

Margaret stared at the now wilting rose on her lap, unwilling, just then, for her happiness to be disturbed by concerns about Mrs. Thornton's distress. She turned her attention back to the scenery where greenery was metamorphosing into structures on the outlying areas of a big industrial city.

Earlier that morning, she had been in Milton with Henry Lennox, her adviser on the handling of her newly acquired wealth. She convinced herself that they came on important matters of business—to present John Thornton a proposition to restore the operation of Marlborough Mills.

But John was nowhere in Milton and they left barely two hours later. She was certain yet again—as she had been when she moved back to London a year ago—that she would never return to Milton. She left with a leaden heart, her spirits sinking to depths almost as low as when she lost her parents. She thought herself prepared for Mr. Thornton's indifference, even rejection, and yet, his mere absence plunged her into inexplicable gloom.

But fate, God, or luck intervened. At a train station midway to London, Margaret's future took a blissful turn. Now she was on her way back to Milton. This time, she was going to stay.

For those in the habit of brooding, the new and unexpected invites reflection. It is a way to relive an experience, to relish happy moments all over again, and to convince themselves of the reality of incredible events. Dazed and bewilderingly happy, John and Margaret affirmed—with each recollection of events of the past hour or two and the plethora of emotions they elicited—that they were indeed together, in the train back to Milton.

E.Journey

Margaret first came to Milton when her family had taken up residence there, for a relatively short 18 months. They were months packed with turmoil and sorrow, unknown to her at 19, until then. Her father, in a matter of conscience, had given up his life in the clergy and moved his family to this rapidly growing city to find both meaning and gainful employment.

Unhappily uprooted from a sheltered life in the idyllic south, Margaret found Milton strange, harsh, the lives of too many inhabitants beset by perpetual need and suffering that she could not help ease with the baskets of food and the few coins she could offer. Those months showed her how helpless she was in the face of pervasive poverty.

Those 18 months also claimed the lives of her parents, a friend she had made from among the workers, and the parents of six children, whose mother wasted away from grief after the father committed suicide. Amidst all these, she had fallen in love, though unknowingly at first.

John Thornton had proposed to her, professing love so strong, so new in her limited experience that she could not comprehend it. In retrospect, she believed the proposal had been ill-timed, coming on the heels of the strikers' riot, her mother's illness, and his sister's irksome remark that she had designs on John to elevate herself and her family from poverty. Margaret was hurt and offended to hear Fanny echo his mother's scornful notion.

Margaret dwelled upon her initial dislike of Mr. Thornton, fueling it with contempt for the Thorntons' disapproving and uncompromising disdain for workers. She bluntly rejected Mr. Thornton's proposal although she had begun to take an interest in him, as each contentious encounter revealed his real character.

Ruled by her mind and unwitting of her heart, that interest blossomed into love, guarded from her awareness. But such sentiments could not be repressed for too long. She realized soon enough that she valued his regard. By then, it was too late. He had already caught her at a flagrant lie—she denied being at the train station the night of an unfortunate accident in which a man died. She assumed the lie cost her his high regard.

When her father passed away, Margaret had no choice but to return to London. There, with no demands on her help and compassion, she had time for reflection, for looking inward and searching her soul, for acquiring wisdom and growing. She had to accept that she could not have changed much of what had happened

Margaret of the North

and that she could only grieve and let the course of healing take whatever time it needed.

Her heart was a slightly different matter. True, she gained a clearer understanding of her desires, but with it came regrets at losing the person who had become dearest to her and she could only resign herself to it. This disconcerting, sobering insight taught her to be wary of her own arrogance and less complacent about assuming she knew herself well.

Not everything concluded sadly in Margaret's soul-searching. She was of age and free to take control of her future. The prospect of securing employment—if the small allowance she inherited was insufficient—never intimidated her. In working, she believed she could find more satisfaction than she did, whiling away her hours in her cousin's endless dinner parties and card games, as pleasant as they were. Then, a considerable, unforeseen legacy from Mr. Bell made the prospect of being free more intoxicating.

Becoming a woman of means multiplied her choices. She could do exactly as she pleased, ruled only by her conscience. She could choose a life of independence, even solitude, or move to Spain to be near her brother. Who knew, she thought with a mischievous smile, if in that more permissive country, she might meet some tall ardent Latin lover?

A few months into living within that new level of serenity and a mere couple days before her life took its present turn, Margaret heard from Henry of the financial troubles at Marlborough Mills. That night, she paced her room, agonizing over how she could help. By morning, she was persuaded the best way was a loan to reopen Marlborough Mills so workers could return to work. She could not yet admit to herself that it was Mr. Thornton's misfortune she was most anxious to relieve.

She consulted with Henry, who thought the investment a wise move and certain to earn her a higher interest than the bank could give. Sensitive of Mr. Thornton's pride and painfully aware that he could refuse to have any extensive dealings with her, she persuaded Henry to present the offer. By early morning the following day, they were on a train to Milton.

Back in Milton, Margaret also secretly wished for a proper moment to casually mention Frederick—how he came to Milton before their mother died, his presence concealed because his life was in danger. She told herself regaining Mr. Thornton's good opinion would give her peace of mind. If she had hoped for anything more, she dared not articulate it.

E.Journey

But she did wonder whether he still harbored a lingering regard for her. Having accepted that she could only regret the past, did her heart hope to rekindle that regard?

From the train station, Margaret visited the mill alone. It was quiet and empty, more desolate than she remembered during the workers' strike nearly two years ago. Cobwebs and dust were already taking over the place although it had only been a few days since the machines stopped running, perhaps for a long time. How strange to see this mill so still. How unnatural, disturbing, and so different its stillness was from the peacefulness that wrapped itself around her when bruised, restless, and numb, she sat on the beach, soothed by the rhythmic splashing of a gentle, undulating ocean.

Deep in thought, Margaret was jolted by a voice, familiar, distant, and more disapproving than she could remember. Mrs. Thornton glared, chin held high and eyes narrowed as she spat out bitter words at her. Unfazed and conciliatory, Margaret responded by lamenting the fate of the mill, mollifying a deeply worried and helpless Mrs. Thornton.

John was nowhere in Milton, his mother said. She had not seen him since the night before. That morning, Margaret saw a vulnerable side to the strong steely matriarch who, however, remained too proud or too angry to accept kindness from someone she blamed bitterly for her son's unhappiness.

Margaret and Henry boarded the train back to London, having accomplished nothing. Dejected, Margaret sat silent and brooding, summoning that resignation she thought she had already achieved these last few months.

When the southbound London train stopped to wait for a train to Milton, she descended for some moments of respite from Henry, his head buried in a Milton newspaper to disguise his irritation at losing precious time on the trip. She watched without much interest as the northbound train pulled in, clanging, squealing, and hissing smoke.

Then, she saw John Thornton, lost in thought, deaf to the clattering and rattling of metal and heedless to the purposeful rushing of bodies on the platform. His compartment stopped directly across from where she stood, mesmerized, unable to take her eyes off him.

Margaret felt her spirit soar out of a void. Her heart was light, broken free of many months of self-imposed shackles. She embraced her sentiments, her secret wishes since leaving Milton a year ago. The likelihood that Mr. Thornton no longer loved her did not occur to her then. The excitement of seeing him again and the full acceptance of

Margaret of the North

her own desires prevailed. She approached his train, cheeks flushed, heart racing, willing him to look up, to see her standing on the platform.

Still pensive, unaware of her presence, John reached for the door. But he stopped, perhaps finally drawn by her intent gaze to raise his head slowly, deliberately. He was met with glistening eyes, a wistful half-smile on slightly parted lips and a face radiant with joy. For a moment or two, he stared without moving a muscle, a mixture of disbelief and hope in his eyes. Then, he broke slowly into a smile and stepped off the train. He approached her, in what seemed like measured steps.

Margaret could not hide from him how she felt even if she wanted to. Her face was burning, her breathing coming almost in gasps from the pleasant agitation that threatened to burst out of her bosom. He did not take his eyes off her and the tender smile lingered in his eyes and on his lips. She wondered if he was relishing the truth he saw on her countenance.

Her eyes cast downward, Margaret muttered breathlessly that she was in Milton that morning. He responded with the wonderful, surprising confession that he had just been to Helstone. He pulled, out of a vest pocket, a yellow rose she recognized so well. She was trembling inside when he handed it to her—an offering, bearer of the deep feelings written in his eyes and his smile. She looked up briefly, hiding her luminous eyes. He still loved her, she thought, incredulous.

She was confused. She found herself explaining her business proposition, but she doubted he heard much of what she said. He gazed at her—with amused fascination, she thought—while she flustered, blushed and rushed, through the plan she had rehearsed in her mind.

Then, his lips alighted on hers, like a delicate wisp of down, but warm and sweet. She was amazed that this man, fierce in anger and cutting with his words when provoked, had such a gentle side to him. He kissed her again, more ardently, and she had instinctively lifted her face, parted her lips and returned each kiss, oblivious that they were on the platform of a very busy train station.

The announcement of the departing London train intruded into their world. She sprang to her feet. Surprised, he watched as she hurried away from him and towards Henry Lennox. His spirits sank. But she had formed her resolve by then.

John scanned the passing landscape, growing grayer from smoke spewing out of factories farther into the city. Stone buildings were clustering closer. They were less than half an hour away from the

E.Journey

Milton terminal. He was nearly home and, amazingly, Margaret was with him. Was it only the day before that Nicholas Higgins told him about her brother? Astute, sympathetic Higgins had seen through him and informed him casually that the brother visited ailing Mrs. Hale, in secret.

Her brother—that handsome, well-bred young gentleman she embraced at the train station. He had not allowed himself any further curiosity when he saw them, his pride stung by rejection and his heart tormented with jealousy. The revelation lifted his spirits, lightened the burden of losing the mill, and renewed his desire to see Margaret again.

In the stillness of his room that night, he mulled over a suspicion, obscure until then, that before Margaret left Milton, her regard for him had grown. Earlier in their acquaintance, she had never shrunk from his direct gaze, returning it frankly when they talked; and even defiantly, when she disagreed with him. But he began to see in her an uncharacteristic shyness, a habit of averting her eyes or bowing her head that he attributed to her shame at having been caught at an indiscretion in a public place.

He wondered if Margaret's downcast eyes meant a new self-consciousness about her feelings for him. Regardless of how others might perceive her conduct, Margaret would never avert her eyes in shame if she knew she had done nothing wrong. Incredulous but hopeful; he paced his room and tossed restlessly in bed. In the morning before anyone was up, he quietly left and boarded a train going south.

By mid-morning, he reached Helstone. Tranquil and luxuriantly green, it basked in mellow sunlight, the sort swallowed in the dense, dingy atmosphere of Milton. He saw the parish and a large cottage nearby, probably the Hales' old home. Along a well-trodden path, he passed a hedgerow of fragrant yellow roses that would have struggled to survive in Milton.

He picked a newly opened blossom, its fragrance not entirely new to him and reminiscent of pleasing citrus. As he stared at it, he imagined Margaret in this unspoiled, lush and placid setting, blossoming into an intrepid, yet sensitive spirit. He frowned, annoyed at himself. How could he have allowed hurt pride and jealousy to preclude that Margaret had a defensible reason to be with a young man at the train station late at night? Could his resentment forever deprive him of happiness with the one woman he ever loved?

But he was not one who gave up easily. He only hoped he was not too late.

Margaret of the North

He would visit Margaret on the pretext of discussing Marlborough Mills, but his real purpose was to ascertain whether his suspicions were correct. With more care and attention, he would show her in many little ways how much he loved her, how he regretted the arrogant manner in which he proposed to her the first time. He knew she had not married and he hoped she had not become engaged to Henry Lennox, a thought that made him uneasy, impatient to go as soon as he could. But first, he must reassure his mother: He was ready to face the challenge of starting all over again.

On the train halfway back to Milton, what had merely been hope turned to utter happiness, what he had wished for became reality. Margaret's love was already his. The audacity of her quick decision to return to Milton with him enthralled him. Only deeply felt sentiments could have prompted such an act. Any other woman, less true to her feelings and more concerned about malicious gossip ruining her reputation, would not have dared undertake it. The decision was of a piece with Margaret, when she stood between him and a rioting crowd.

His eyes shining, John said, "Margaret, my love, you must know that I never stopped loving you regardless of what I had said to the contrary. That night at the train station, I was devastated with jealousy of that dashing young man, so refined and handsome."

Margaret was flabbergasted. "Jealous of Frederick?"

She thought all along she had lost his esteem because she lied and had breached proper conduct, when she denied she was out alone, surreptitiously with a strange man. Mrs. Thornton had told her in no uncertain terms that her conduct had been improper, making insinuations that offended Margaret. It never occurred to her to attribute jealousy to John, particularly after she rejected him.

"Is that your brother's name, Frederick?"

"You knew about Frederick. But how and for how long? Did Mr. Bell tell you?"

"No, but he tried. It was Nicholas Higgins I must thank, just recently, really. When he told me, I felt relieved of this great burden of losing you, losing the mill. And I dared to hope again."

Margaret placed soft hands on his cheeks, her eyes brimming with renewed wonder at how events had unfolded, and with gratitude that he continued to love her despite all that had passed. She felt humbled by his constancy and his deep love. In a tremulous voice, she said, "Don't you know that I have loved you for some time now?"

"Since before you left Milton?" He was consternated, regretting again the months of separation they could have been spared.

E.Journey

"Yes, I think so. I know so. But at the time, I was convinced you thought badly of me because I lied."

"No, not because you lied. It hurt that you could love another man but not me, and you loved him enough to protect him, lie for him. Were I not so jealous, I would have realized you had a reason to hide the truth."

"I was sorely tempted to tell you but I thought Fred was still in the country."

"Did you not think I would keep your brother's presence a secret if you had confided in me?"

"I feared greatly for his life and I already felt so indebted to you. I could not let you compromise your position further, on my account."

She turned to look at the hypnotic blur of green trees speeding by. After a few moments, her eyes on the yellow rose on her lap, she said, "I knew by then how wrong I was about you, just when you declared I was merely a foolish passion that was over, that you were looking to the future." She attempted to sound casual but her voice quivered a little.

He said, amusement in his voice, "Perhaps, I did mean to forget you. Fanny contrived situations to bring Miss Latimer and me together, with my mother's blessings, no doubt. Miss Latimer seemed quite interested so I did turn my attention towards her. But, alone in my room at night or in my office at the mill, I saw only your face. Miss Latimer is very pretty and very much the lady. She would make any other man happy."

He placed a hand under her chin and gently turned her face up but she kept her eyes hidden behind half-closed lids. "Me? I was haunted by this vibrant young woman with the skin of ivory and large expressive blue eyes"—he peered closer into her eyes—"or are they green? I have never seen a pair that can turn fiery with anger, but also serene and radiant with love. I am afraid I found every other young lady very dull."

Margaret met his gaze then but the intensity of his flustered her and she had to lower hers. Her cheeks burned and her heart raced once again.

John continued, his ardent voice just above a whisper, "When I first saw you on the train platform this afternoon, you looked at me with eyes glowing with promise and such a bewitching half-smile on your lips."

Margaret of the North

He bent over and kissed her. "I could hardly control myself from taking you in my arms, whisking you away with me right there and then."

Struggling for control of her own emotions was impossible for her then and, with eyes half-closed, she swayed against him and buried her face on his shoulder.

John murmured, his breath warm against her cheek, "When you left Milton, it became clearer to me that it was only your good opinion I cared about, yours the only face I wanted to gaze into, were I to wake up with someone in the morning."

She blushed deeply, threw her arms around his neck and snuggled her face against it. *This is where I belong. I could stay like this a long time.*

John laid his cheek on her hair and clasped her close. "If I had known then what I know now, do you think I would have let you go to London?"

Reluctant as Margaret was to leave that exquisite niche she just discovered in the hollow of his neck, she raised her head and gazed into his eyes. Then, she said, "I would have gratefully accepted your proposal had you renewed it then and things had been different. But the truth is I was incapable of any feeling but grief when I left Milton."

The anguish she suffered all those past months came flooding back, taking her by surprise. She thought she had been mostly in control of it, tucked it away where she could regard it with proper detachment. But face-to-face with John, the weariness and sorrow was nearly as vivid as it had been a year ago.

"I was drained, apathetic, my reserves of energy and compassion depleted. I needed time to mourn, to gain some perspective, to recover my strength." She sucked her breath in a few times to hold back tears.

He held her closer. "Oh my love, I am so sorry you had to endure such sorrow, but I would have patiently waited for as long as you needed to arrive at this moment."

She laid her face on his shoulder and clung to him.

A few minutes later, she whispered, "Maybe, your mother is right. I do not deserve you but my heart is yours fully and for as long as I live."

"My mother thought me too good for you but I did not think I was good enough and yet, what does it matter? You are finally home, my love—with me." He lifted her face to kiss her.