

BETTER TOGETHER

COURTNEY MILAN

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A short story in the Turner Series universe
Set sometime after *Unlocked* and *Unclaimed*, and sometime
before *Unraveled*.

Parford Manor, January 1841

The wine had been mulling for hours. The air was filled with the scent of apple and cinnamon and orange. The bread was in the oven, and the ham had been roasting since that morning. Margaret Turner, the Duchess of Parford, had acquitted herself admirably as hostess. It was time for her to have a little fun.

The house was warm and filled with close friends and family. It was almost everything that Margaret could have wished for, and she had learned not to think too carefully on that *almost*.

Here in the side parlor, she could see out the window. It had been cold for weeks running. Snow glittered in lovely drifts, and the pond had iced up. Skating weather.

A cold draft of wind came to her as the front door opened. She heard shouts of laughter before it closed again. It was going to be a grand afternoon.

All Margaret had to do was convince her friend to come along.

Elaine had stationed herself in a window seat in the parlor. She was looking longingly at the gathering on the front porch. Her friend's long, blond hair was swept up into an economical bun, precisely the thing to keep errant strands out of one's face while skating. She was wearing a skirt that allowed for movement. And Margaret knew from past experience—a winter house party eight years ago—that Elaine loved to skate.

Margaret made a point of letting her boots click on the wooden floor, marking her approach.

Her friend turned, a wistful expression in her eyes. "Oh, Margaret." Her gaze lurched to the skates in Margaret's hands, then up to her face. "Do go on without me. I shan't mind. Not one bit."

Over the past years, Margaret and Elaine had become close friends, brought together by adversity. Margaret had once been cast out of polite society because it was revealed that her father was a bigamist, and she was therefore a bastard. Elaine had never really belonged, despite her birth; she'd been teased mercilessly.

They'd always been friends, but their shared experiences had deepened that friendship. While matters had turned around for them both, Margaret had never again been able to trust those who had claimed to care for her, and yet turned their backs on her in her direst need.

Elaine had been there for her. Perhaps that was why, if Margaret had made a list of the things she had most wanted that winter, Elaine's continued happiness would have come in second. First... It hurt too much to think of what came first. Margaret couldn't control that, any more than she could have made the pond ice over by thinking freezing thoughts. But *this*? She could do something about this.

There were times her friend was still shy in company,

still unsure of her welcome. Margaret had vowed that Elaine would feel safe here. It was only family here, family and a few dear friends, and if anyone was giving Elaine a hard time, she wanted to know about it.

“What is it?”

She came to stand by her friend. Out the window she could see her husband. Ash Turner was large—tall, with muscular shoulders, and a smile that warmed her even when she saw it from this distance. He was presently engaged in the important business of pelting his youngest brother with snowballs. Someone really ought to warn him about the attack coming from behind... But it wouldn't be Margaret. She bit her lip, hiding a smile, and turned back to Elaine.

Elaine didn't look perturbed. She often retreated into too-broad smiles when she was upset, but this time, her amusement seemed genuine.

“Oh, I won't be skating,” Elaine said. “You know how clumsy I am.”

“Bah.” She was no clumsier than anyone else on ice. “This is what husbands are for. If you're on the verge of falling, grab hold of Evan's arm. If he can't steady you, the least he can do is break your fall.”

Elaine frowned and looked away. “I'm too loud.”

She *was* loud. Some people just had loud voices, and Elaine had been twitted about hers long enough. If anyone was ridiculing her about it...

Margaret's hands crept to her hips. “Who told you that? Tell me now, and I'll—”

“Oh, no.” Elaine looked horrified. “No, everyone's been most welcoming. I wouldn't want you to think...” She trailed off, and then sighed. “No. Please don't imagine that.”

“Elaine.” Margaret took her friend's hand. “I love you.

You have been my dearest friend, the one who stood by me through my darkest time. If anyone even *looks* at you funny, I shall fetch a penknife and geld him. Do you understand?"

Elaine didn't look amused. She didn't look heartened. If anything she looked even more uncomfortable. "I'm too old," she essayed. "And someone has to oversee the preparation of hot drinks afterward—"

"Oh, get on with you and your excuses. Hot drinks?" Margaret exhaled in exasperation. "Too *old*? What balderdash is that? You've just married. Now I know you're being ridiculous. What's the real reason?"

Elaine looked down at the cushions on the window seat. She picked up one, held it in front of her belly, and glanced up at Margaret.

"I'm too pregnant," she said.

Margaret was not the sort of woman who was much given to jealousy. She'd never coveted another woman's gown. She had never seen the point. And to feel jealous of her own friend? Only a terrible person would react that way. But the stabbing spike of pain that shot through her at that moment was unmistakably that—jealousy. Hard, green, angry jealousy.

A *child* was her first wish, the one she hoped for but no longer dared think about. She'd made it frequently, kept hold of it in increasing desperation, attempted it often...and been denied for so long.

Her first, terrible reaction—*why not me?*—was so unworthy of her that she wished she could snatch it away. She wanted those awful, selfish words unthought. She wished she were not the sort of woman who wanted her friend's happiness for her own.

But she was. Oh, she was. For a bare second, she stared at Elaine and felt an angry, sullen tide rise within her.

"Margaret?" Elaine's eyebrows crinkled in confusion.

"I am so happy for you." The words came out as if she were reciting a lesson. "Really, I am."

She would be, as soon as she'd had an evening to cry into her pillow.

Elaine only looked more confused.

"It's wonderful. A baby, and so soon after your marriage." It had scarcely been six months since that event. "How far along are you?"

Margaret was recovering her good humor—or at least, her ability to fake it.

"Almost four months," Elaine said.

Oh, God. She'd caught pregnant almost immediately. That green tinge of jealousy returned in full force.

But it wasn't her friend she hated, nor even the baby she coveted. The situation was hard. None of this was Elaine's fault.

Margaret fixed her smile in place. "And did the doctor say you couldn't skate?"

"He said I should be careful."

Margaret couldn't trust her own mind. If she encouraged her friend to go outside, was it the jealousy whispering? Did some part of her secretly wish to encourage her friend to risk her child? Could she be *that* hateful? She could no longer tell.

"Margaret," Elaine asked. "Are you well?"

"Perfectly so." It wasn't a lie. And it was. There was nothing wrong with her, nothing at all. She'd seen a doctor. She'd been told that there was nothing wrong with her, nothing but too much worry.

It had just been three years since her marriage. They'd tried and tried and tried, and oh, she didn't mind trying. She just minded the failing.

Failing was how it felt now. Elaine was pregnant. Already.

"I'm happy for you," Margaret said. "Really. I am."

"Margaret?"

"I have to..." She pointed at the door.

Elaine stood, took the skates gently from Margaret's hands, and wrapped her arms around her.

"Dear," she said, "please don't. Please don't lie to me. Not you."

Margaret felt her jealousy, her want, choking her. She could scarcely speak.

"I am terribly sorry," her friend continued. "I hadn't realized it was so sensitive a subject."

"No." Margaret's voice was practically dissolving into tears. "No, no. We will not make the discussion of your first-born child about *me*. I may be that selfish on the inside, but I refuse to take this moment from you. You should be happy."

Her friend's arms tightened. "How can I ask you to share my joy if I won't share your sorrow? It's all right, Margaret. It's all right."

That opened the floodgates that Margaret had barely been holding shut. The tears Margaret hadn't wanted to acknowledge came out in a deluge of sobs that racked her chest. Elaine held her, rocking her back and forth.

"It's going to be all right," her friend said. "It's going to be all right."

She didn't say how. She didn't give reasons. Maybe that was what Margaret had needed. She'd needed to be held, to have someone smooth her hair and whisper kind platitudes over and over.

Her sobs lessened. She wiped her eyes with a handker-

chief and gave her friend a bleary smile. "Now don't I feel the fool."

"You shouldn't." Elaine squeezed her hand. "No woman should carry her fears alone. We're better together."



MUCH LATER THAT EVENING, Margaret was still considering that phrase, turning it over in her head like an unexpected gift.

They *were* better together. Friends. Family. *Husband*.

It had been years since her marriage—a little more than three, to be precise. She turned over in her marital bed, the one that she always shared with her husband, and never mind the duchess's quarters in the adjacent room.

"Ash," she said into the darkness, "what if I never have a child?"

Spoken out loud, the words seemed harsh. Stark. All too likely.

He turned in bed to face her. She caught a glimpse of his cheek in the waning glow of the coals. A hint of orange reflected in his eyes. His hands found hers under the covers.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's been years." Elaine was right. She could pour out her fears and her worries to him. So far, he had taken them all. "I'm not sure it will ever happen."

Ash's hands compressed hers. The room was dark around them, the blankets a comforting heap on top of her. He was warm and solid and close, a foundation that could withstand the highest winds. Surely, he could withstand her fears.

She went on. "What if I never do my duty? What if there's no heir, no nothing?"

"Duty? Bugger duty. Smite's children will inherit the dukedom." She could feel his broad shoulders contract in a devil-may-care shrug. "We'll be dead by then. I hardly think it will signify with us."

She did not sigh reproachfully.

"But I don't think it's an heir you're worried about," Ash said.

It was like him to cut to the heart of her fears. Her wish. Her first wish. The one she closed her eyes at night hoping for.

Margaret's own mother had passed away shortly before Ash had come into her life. Margaret had never stopped missing her. She'd adored her mother. Now, every part of the estate reminded her of those early years. Riding with her mother. Gathering flowers. Jumping on a pile of leaves in autumn. Yes, even skating.

She wanted to do all those things with her own child. She didn't care about her *duty*.

She exhaled. "You're right. I just want...children."

The word echoed in the darkness of the room, her secret wants flooding back at her. *Children*? She'd settle for a child, any child, one she could hold and pour love into the way her mother had loved her. Someone who might plant roses with her on the estate one day.

"I do, too," Ash said.

Unlike her father, Ash would be an excellent parent. Loving, attentive. He'd focus all his immense energy on his child. If she ever gave him one.

"Margaret." He pulled her closer. "The doctor said that it wasn't unusual for pregnancies to take years coming. These years have not been easy for you."

"Don't be ridiculous. How could my life *not* be easy when you are at my side?"

He snorted. "Well. I suppose there is no good way to say this, because... Never mind. I might as well do it the bad way. Your father was terrible, and while he was alive, he did his best to make your life miserable."

"He could not do so, not with you at my side."

Ash kissed her forehead. "From experience, love, there is never an easy time to be hated by the one who should love you best. You know that cows go off their milk when they've had the slightest upset. Why should you expect to be any different?"

She laughed, as she suspected he had intended, and lightly punched his shoulder. "I'm hardly a cow."

"You're not really all that different, you know. Food and water are not the only requirements that we have. The doctor said that times of upset might make it harder to conceive, and so..." She could almost see him frown in the darkness, working this out. "So clearly I need to make you happier."

She punched him again, this time with a shake of her head. "Now you're just being ridiculous. Make me happier? How could I possibly be any *happier* than I already am?"

There was a long pause, and Margaret realized that she should never have asked the question. Her husband was the man who had thought his way into a dukedom. He'd gone forward, inch by inch, plan by plan, never hesitating until he'd achieved his objective. He wasn't the sort to give up on an idea easily.

In fact, he wasn't the sort to give up at all.

"You see?" His voice was low. "Now that I've said it aloud, I see that it's right. Here you are, thinking that having a child is *your* duty, that not having one is *your* burden. That's utter balderdash. It is *ours*. If you want it, I want it. If it hurts you, it hurts me. I can't promise anything, but I will promise you

this. I love you. I'm here for you. And yes, I will make you happier."

"Ash."

"You cannot dissuade me." His arm crept around her, pulling her closer. "I can hear it in your voice, you know. I can hear how this has upset you, and I won't have that. I can't promise you a child. I can promise you that no matter what happens, I shall do my best to make you believe that what you have done is enough. That you are more than a duty. That you *are* enough, precisely the way you are."

He had hit so closely to her secret shame, the one she hadn't even truly shared with herself. She had feared that she wasn't good enough. That she wasn't strong enough. That it was some failing in her that had caused this, something she had done wrong. She felt herself choking up, her eyes stinging.

"I promise you," he said. "No matter what happens, I'll make you believe it's enough. Just watch."

Two years later

The bench at the edge of the iced-over pond was cold, and the wind was colder, but that didn't stop Margaret from laughing as her friend tugged on her skates.

"The wonderful thing about having a small child," Elaine said, "is that I'm *never* going to think I'm clumsy again, not by comparison."

Elaine's son was walking. Talking. Picking up things and grinning at the world. He was the first child to arrive in their little gathering, and he had been roundly, soundly spoiled as a result.

"He makes all of us look graceful as dancers," Margaret said.

Benjamin was out on the ice, his chubby feet wedged in tiny skates. His father held his hands, keeping him upright.

Margaret adored her godson. She had loved him from the moment she held him at his christening, had thrilled

when he'd called her *Me-gah* at nine months of age. Jealousy hadn't outlasted love. It hadn't even made a dent in it.

Elaine looked at Margaret. "I suppose it will be obvious enough soon, but I'm pregnant again."

Margaret gazed back at her friend. She waited for that deep lightning-stab of jealousy to strike. She waited for that dark voice that would whisper to herself that she was unworthy, that it had been *five* years since her marriage, and still she hadn't produced.

She still felt a twinge of want. A hint of sadness. But in the last years, Ash had done precisely as he'd promised.

He had made her happy.

Kittens were no substitute for children, but he'd obtained one for her. When she'd told him how much it had meant to her to putter around the garden with her mother, he'd arranged for her to lead the botanical lessons for the local school. He'd filled her life with love and love and more love.

It wasn't quite correct for Margaret to say that she was at peace. But... Ash had been right. She had *enough*. She'd found happiness, and it was enough for one lifetime.

"Good for you," she said, and this time, she meant it. "What's it like, being with child? From all accounts, it sounds dreadful. Are you always casting up your accounts and so forth?"

Elaine laughed her long, loud merry laugh. "No. That's why I'm going skating now. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully robust. I don't feel ill. I stay the picture of health. I don't get my courses, and those always made me feel like *death* warmed over. I actually prefer being pregnant. It's not so bad, not until I get large enough that the only way to move is to waddle. Then I feel like..." She paused, searching for a metaphor. "A whale beached on the sand,

trying to move by wriggling. There's only one part that's a little uncomfortable, and it's rather indecent, so I shall not mention it."

Margaret laughed. "Well, there you are. My courses have always been inconsistent. I skip entire months—it used to cause me no end of concern when I was first married." She'd once used to call for a doctor every single time, had used to wait for him to deliver his verdict scarcely daring to feel her heart beat.

Not pregnant. It had been *not pregnant* every single time. Eventually, she had stopped asking him to see her—and her courses had always come on their own lackadaisical and yet inexorable schedule.

"Do you?" Elaine looked at her. "How long has it been since the last one?"

She had stopped counting, honestly. It did no good to count. One's hopes rose if one did, and rising hopes led to sure disappointment. She searched back in time, wondering...

"November," she finally said. "Early November."

That was a long time, even for her. She couldn't tell herself not to hope; she did it automatically, her feelings rising within her.

This time. This time.

No, not this time. It wasn't happening this time. She had enough now; she didn't need more. She was afraid to think of more.

"And have you been casting up your accounts?" Elaine asked quietly.

"No," Margaret said firmly. "I'm done jumping at shadows. I used to ask for a doctor every time I was off by so much as a week. I'll have no more of that."

"If you insist."

"But I'm sure my courses are coming on. My breasts are more than a little tender, and that's surely a sign."

Elaine just looked at her. She looked at the laces on her skates, and then at her boots. "Margaret," she finally said. "The thing I thought was too indelicate to say? The second-worst part of being pregnant?"

"Hmm?"

"It's when my breasts get sore. They get so tender. Evan can't even touch them, and normally..." Her friend blushed and fell silent.

Margaret's heart gave a heavy thump, and then another. Then it was beating fast, beating with a hope she could not bury.

"Margaret?" Elaine asked.

"Don't." The word choked out of her. "Don't say it. I don't want to hope. I don't want to think something might happen when it...won't."

"If that is what you want..." Elaine glanced at Margaret's own skates.

"Oh, God," Margaret said. "What if I am? I can't go skating. Don't let me hope. Don't let me think."

But now she couldn't stop thinking. Now, every atom of her being was telling her that her complacency had all been a lie. A terrible, terrible lie.

Elaine took her hand. "Send for a doctor."

"But—"

"Send for a doctor *now*." Elaine squeezed her fingers. "I'll be here with you, no matter what he says. I promise."



A few hours later

THE POND WAS smooth as glass, glittering under Margaret's skates. Left, then right; right, then left. It didn't matter that it had been more than a year since she'd skated. Her body remembered what to do, even if her mind had no such recall.

Ash skated next to her, his hand in hers.

Strange, that she should have so little control over her own body.

She didn't have to think to skate. She couldn't even have said how she did it. She just did. The same way that she couldn't tell her hands to stop trembling or her heart to stop thundering.

"I'm sure you managed to fix that little to-do that sent you scurrying off earlier. Fixing is what you do best."

She could not look in his eyes. She could scarcely hold his hand. How had he not noticed?

"It wasn't a to-do. It was..." How was she to say it?

I did what I said I wouldn't do. I called a doctor in a panic of hope. I asked him if I could possibly be pregnant.

"Just a thing," she informed him, in what was likely the most uninformative information that any informer had ever informed.

They'd been married five years. She'd watched her father die with him.

He'd brought her to the ocean in November, to a little cabin by the shore where they could wake up hearing the waves crash in winter storms. Just the two of them, away from all their duties for a short weekend.

Her skate hit a bump in the ice. She wobbled; his hands tightened around her, steadying her.

As he always had. As he always would. They would always be better together, even—especially—with what was coming.

"You can't let me fall," she said.

He shook his head in amusement. "When have I ever let you fall?"

"Never." To her great chagrin, Margaret started crying. There, on the ice, in front of everyone. With her handkerchief stowed in her pocket and no good way to fetch it. Of all the dratted things to do.

He looked at her aghast. "Margaret. What's wrong? Can I fix it?"

"There's nothing to fix." She couldn't bring herself to look at him. His hands were on her waist now, supporting her as he had always done. "I'm pregnant."

He did not say anything. He didn't so much as breathe. He looked down at her, and then across the ice, and then back at her, almost as if he'd imagined her words.

She said them again. "I'm pregnant. Are you not happy?"

"On the contrary," he said slowly. "I am so happy that I am dumbstruck. Utterly, completely, totally dumbstruck."

"I want you to know," she said. "You are enough. My life before this was enough. I had just come to terms with it being enough, as it was. This now? This is...too much."

His hands gripped her waist harder. "So what should I be doing for you? What did the doctor say? What do you need?"

"You should be doing everything," Margaret said. "Everything, and then more everything. You should be you, now and always."

His hands clasped her waist. Their bodies came together. His lips found hers, and he kissed her long and hard.

She wasn't sure how they skated still—she never knew what her body was doing, how it did it—just that it *did*. It did.

NOTE

I have a pretty firm policy against magical baby epilogues for barren women where the woman's inability to conceive forms a part of the plot.

But I always had in mind when writing the Turner series that after *Unveiled*, Margaret would take a while to get pregnant. This was very common at the time—the doctors at the time had no sense of nutrition at all, and so a few slight imbalances could cause problems that left people scratching their head. Even today, stress interferes with conception, and after *Unveiled*, Margaret would have been very stressed. Her father was still alive, and her brothers were still somewhat at odds with her husband. It took years in the story for everything to come out right.

In fact, one of the incidents that comes right before *Unraveled*, the final book in the series, happened at the christening of Margaret's first child.

So if you enjoyed this short story, and you've read the rest of the Turner series, you might want to read *Out of the Frying Pan*, a story from the point of view of Margaret's older brother, about Margaret's first child.

You can find it on my website here: <http://www.courtneymilan.com/turner/outofthefryingpan.php>

And for those of you who haven't read the rest of the series? Read them now. They are:

Margaret and Ash's story: *Unveiled*

Mark and Jessica's story: *Unclaimed*

Smite and Miranda's story: *Unraveled*

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