

Impromptu Picnic

Jessica Willowby & Peyton Reese

Book 0.90 of The Marguerite Series



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A prelude to The Marguerite Series

by Jessica Willowby and Peyton Reese

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Central Europe, 1883

Marguerite, housekeeper to Lord Wilhelmsberg, sat down to a simple mid-day meal with Cook. They were having left-overs from yesterday evening's roast beef and vegetables.

On days when His Lordship was not out on the estate, she would join him for meals. She knew he liked her companionship, and she enjoyed his. He and she, and Cook – and the whole manor house itself, it seemed – missed Her Ladyship's warmth and happiness since she passed away over two years ago.

But he was out riding today. At breakfast he had said he would be checking the salt lick on the north side of the mountain. The recent storm had downed a lot of trees, and he wanted to make sure the deer still had access to the minerals the lick provided.

It was noon now. Marguerite imagined him sitting down on one of the fallen tree trunks, unwrapping the sandwich she had packed for him. And perhaps he would pull an apple out of his pocket – an apple he might have picked from the orchard between the house and the barn.

Marguerite bowed her head for a brief, silent prayer. Cook, she knew, would bow her head as well, but Marguerite did not know the content of Cook's prayers.

Holy God, we thank Thee for this food, and we thank Thee for Thy many

blessings: For Wilhelmsaue, my master's estate and my refuge, and for the bounty it provides. Please bless my master and keep him safe ...

And then a voice seemed to speak to her: *Go to him.*

Marguerite sat bolt upright, eyes wide open. Hearing voices was not new to her. There was Her Ladyship's voice, which Marguerite imagined she heard sometimes just before falling asleep. And there was a darker voice which had guided her for the last, oh, nine years or so – a voice she had named The Knife. But The Knife had never interrupted her during a prayer. The Knife did not get along well with the Heavenly Father, and kept its distance from Him.

Cook, eyeing Marguerite intently, asked only, "What?"

"I must go to William." She rose and started to turn, then glanced down at her roast beef sandwich. She wrapped it up in her napkin. As she completed her turn, she wondered, *was that the voice of God, or was it the Knife?*

Or could it be William's voice? She often knew, or thought she knew, what he wanted or needed, but no, his voice would have been kinder.

Bring water, said the voice.

She had sent him off with water for his meal. Did he need more? She pulled a flagon from the peg, filled it from the tap, and pulled a clean dish towel from the stack. As she hurried toward the back door, she glanced down and saw her outdoor boots. *No time ...*

Ned looked up as she burst into the stable. He had been forking hay for the horses. Marguerite said only, "Saddle, please, Ned." Then she scanned the remaining horses. He had taken Stolzi, the chestnut Haflinger. *Of course. Stolzi would be the best choice on the rocky north slope.*

Marguerite stuffed the sandwich and dish cloth into her saddle

bag, then picked up her saddle and lifted it onto the blanket which Ned was straightening on Abendstern's back. She cinched the belt, hiked up her long skirt to swing her leg up, and ducked low as she rode out the stable door.

She headed Abendstern northward on the cart-track that led up the mountainside. As she passed one of the volunteer apple trees along the way, she leaned and plucked a ripe fruit from its laden branches. She didn't know if he needed or wanted one, but he needed *something*, and she didn't want to arrive empty-handed.

Or was this all just a fool's errand? Perhaps she was imagining all of these signs, these urgings. *Perhaps I simply miss him. Perhaps I just want an excuse to visit him. Perhaps ... No, I must go. I could never forgive myself if he called for me and I did not come.*

As the path to the north field branched off from the cart track, she spurred – actually, *heeled*, since her indoor shoes bore no spurs – her horse up a slope, then they headed into the dense pine forest.

As they emerged into a lea, she spied him up ahead, riding toward her. Her heart leapt – *he lives!* – and a wave of relief coursed through her. He saw her too, now, and waved.

Again she urged Abendstern forward. As they neared, he smiled at her, but his smile seemed strained. “How good to see you, Marguerite. Were you looking for me?” His voice came tightly, through clenched teeth.

“Yes, my lord.” *What else would I be doing out here?* “I thought you might need more water.” She reached for the flagon hanging from her saddle bag.

“Ah. Just the thing.” He reached for the flagon. His words seemed

so kind, so appreciative, and yet they came haltingly.

He pulled off the stopper and drank eagerly, then handed it back to her. “Er, pardon me while I dismount.”

She tugged on Abendstern’s reins to give him a little room. He seemed to have trouble lifting his right leg over his horse’s croup. As he alit, she saw why: his right trouser leg was ripped, and the edges of the fabric were soaked in blood. *Master ...*

She pulled Abendstern a little farther away, then dismounted and pulled off her saddle bag. He turned the injured leg toward her. Now she squatted before him, reached into the ragged gap, and ripped his trouser leg wide. She swallowed hard at the sight of his bloody leg and torn flesh.

“Had a bit of trouble with a dead tree branch,” he explained. “We crossed paths with a boar and Stolzi spooked, and I’m afraid my landing was rather inelegant.”

“Pull down your trousers.”

He looked around nervously. “Er, ...”

There’s no one for miles around, William! “Pull down your trousers!”

He began to unbutton. *I could help*, she thought, but he didn’t seem to need it. As he undid the last button, she noticed, *blue silk ... my favorite*. But she managed to turn her mind back to the task at hand. Indicating a grassy bank next to the trail, she said. “Lie down there.”

He held on to her with one hand and held his trousers with the other as she helped him to the soft grass. Now, in the better light and *sans fabric*, she inspected the wound again.

She pulled the stopper from the flagon and rinsed some of the blood away.

He said, "I rinsed it too, which I wish I'm out of water. If there's any left, I'd like another drink."

She handed him the flagon, then pulled her sandwich out of the bag. She unwrapped it and handed it to him. "Here, for you." As he bit into the sandwich and began to chew, she used the napkin to wipe up most of the stray blood.

Why did I not bring some alcohol to clean the wound?

She pulled the dish cloth from her saddle bag and began to wrap it around his leg. When she had tied it as best she could, she turned her attention to him.

He offered her the remaining half of the sandwich. She took a bite and handed it back to him, then she remembered the apple. She pulled it from the pocket of her dress and offered it to him.

"No, you have it. I had one this morning."

She took a big bite and sucked the sweet, tart juice which oozed out. Then she handed the rest to him and stretched out on her side next to him, propping herself up on one elbow.

No longer in a hurry now, they finished the sandwich and apple and water as he told her the story from beginning to end, up until she had found him. Then he suggested they go on back to the manor.

"Yes, of course." She got up and pulled him to his feet, then helped him pull up his trousers.

They both whistled for their horses. She held Stolzi's reins and thought, *Mounting will hurt his leg. If only I had brought some brandy for the pain.*

He was already leaning on her shoulder in preparation for lifting his left foot into the stirrup. She thought, *The best I can do is to distract him ...*

put his mind on something else. So she turned and rose on her toes and kissed him, full on the mouth. For an instant it seemed he would pull away, but he did not, so she kissed him fuller and harder and wetter. Just before she released him, she ran her tongue along his upper lip for good measure. Then she said, “Mount now.”

He rose and lifted his leg over, without too much discomfort, it seemed. He said, somewhat sheepishly, “Thank you, Marguerite, for your, er, able assistance.”

She smiled and lowered her eyes. *My pleasure, my lord.* Then she followed him back to the stables.

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