

Prologue

In September 1857, Beatrice Barrence returned to London from a visit to Brighton with her maid, Mabel. She paid off the cab driver and left Mabel to carry the suitcases up the short flight of steps to the front door. Frowning, she waited for the maid to answer her knock: the frown deepened when there was no sound from inside the house. A second knock produced the same lack of result, so she muttered angrily and fumbled in her purse for the key.

When she pushed open the door, Beatrice gave a little screech of shock. The hallway was bare of furniture: no carpet, no hall stand, no pictures on the walls.

Behind her, there was a gasp and Mabel whispered, "Whatever's happened, Miss Beatrice?" They had neither of them been looking forward to coming home, but they had not expected to find anything like this.

Beatrice forced her stiff legs to move forward. What had he done now? "Reginald?" she called, her voice high with nervousness. "Reginald, I'm home!" But there was no answer. Dread sat heavily on her stomach, and for a moment she wanted to run away. Her husband had many ways of making her life miserable, some of them very ingenious. What had he thought of now?

She turned to hiss at Mabel: "Bring in the luggage and shut the door, you fool! We don't want the whole street to see this."

Mabel did as she was told, puffing as she carried the two heavy suitcases and the smaller portmanteau into the hall, and banging the door closed with one foot.

Only then did Beatrice move again. She took a deep breath, clasped Mabel's hand for comfort and together they pushed open the door of the front parlour. They had done many difficult things together, these two.

Both women stopped dead as they looked inside and Beatrice moaned aloud. The parlour was as bare as the hall. Not a stick of furniture was left, only bare dusty boards and a window gaping without curtains. Dust motes floated in the sunbeams that cut the room in half. Ash lay cold and grey in the hearth.

"What's happened, Miss Beatrice?" Mabel whispered, not daring to speak loudly.

Without a word, Beatrice let go of her maid's hand and moved out of the parlour, walking slowly, like a very old woman. Suspicion chilled her. If what she guessed was true, this was the worst thing he had done to her yet, the very worst.

Without a word, Mabel followed her mistress. From room to room they trod, their shoes thumping on the bare floorboards, their hushed voices echoing in the empty rooms.

"Why?" Beatrice whispered once, but Mabel didn't know how to answer her. She never could understand why Mr Barrence behaved as he did.

Only in Beatrice's bedroom was there anything to be found. A lingering scent and some shards of glass in the fireplace showed where the perfume bottles she had left behind had been smashed. Around the fireplace there was a broad semi-circle of splinters, as if the bottles had been thrown very forcefully into the grate.

In the middle of the floor was a pile of Beatrice's clothing and personal effects, tumbled one on top of the other, as if someone had just dragged them from the wardrobe, pulled them from the drawers and tossed them there. A few books and ornaments. A sketch of a house, torn into shreds. Beatrice picked up a piece of it and sniffed back a tear. She would *not* cry! She had sworn long ago not to weep at the things he did to her.

On the mantelpiece was propped a white envelope, with her name on it in flourishing script. Reginald's handwriting. She swallowed hard as she stood and looked at it. She did not want to touch it even. She knew it would contain hurtful news.

It was a moment before she could gather together enough strength to move forward and pick it up. Her fingers trembled as she tore it open, then she sobbed, just once, and passed the letter to Mabel, who read it through slowly, her thick lips mouthing the words and tears falling down her plump cheeks. "Oh, Miss Beatrice! Oh, he's a wicked man, he is! Whatever are we going to do now?"

Beatrice shook her head, and for a few moments the only sounds to be heard were the clop of a horse's hooves and the rumble of wheels passing in the street. It was a very quiet and respectable place. There were no hawkers, no children playing, nothing but quiet houses whose inmates

minded their own business and privacy quite ferociously. All she knew of her neighbours was their faces. They would merely nod to her in the street and pass on.

"We'll have to go to Mrs Jemmings," Mabel said, when her mistress did not speak. "She'll help us."

Beatrice drew in a long hoarse breath and shook her head, her fingers digging into her maid's arm. "No. No, I won't! You're not to let my sister know."

"But we can't stay here, miss."

Beatrice gave a croak of laughter. "Why not? The rent's paid until the end of the month."

"But there's no furniture. And - and we haven't much money left."

Beatrice looked down at her hand and gave a mirthless chuckle. She pulled off the diamond engagement ring and closed the other woman's fingers around it. "Go and pawn this, Mabel. It meant nothing, anyway. You should get quite a bit of money for it. Then you can buy us a couple of blankets for tonight." She brushed her hair impatiently out of her eyes and blinked at her maid. "If you still want to stay with me, that is?"

Mabel immediately hugged her mistress. "Of course I want to stay with you, lovie! You know I'd never leave you."

Beatrice reached up one hand and patted her maid's cheek. "Yes. You're a faithful creature. And I do need you." She lowered her voice and glanced around before she spoke, as if to check that no one was listening. "I know who did it. I know who gave him the idea."

"Pardon, miss?"

"*She* did it."

Mabel knew exactly who *she* was, and she had no more love for the woman than her mistress did, but this accusation made no sense. "No, miss. How could she have? She's still in Bilsden." She cast an anxious look sideways. Whenever poor Miss Beatrice got to talking about her father's second wife, she came over funny. The rest of the time she was as nice a mistress as you could hope to find anywhere. But just occasionally she had these funny turns. It wasn't her fault, poor thing. She'd been badly treated. Badly. But you had to tread a bit carefully when she had one of her turns.

Beatrice shook her head, hatred twisting her face, making it even uglier. "I know she did it, Mabel. She's always hated me. But now I'm going to make her pay. I've waited too long already, let her get away with it. Now the time has come to get my revenge." She crossed to the window and stared blindly out, swaying to and fro and muttering to herself.

After a few moments, she started, as if something had surprised her, and turned to her maid. "Haven't you gone yet? Go and pawn that ring. Buy us some blankets. And get yourself some food. I'm not hungry. Tomorrow we'll go and look for lodgings." Then she turned back to the window and resumed her muttering and swaying.

Mabel shook her head, clicked her tongue softly and went to obey her instructions. They'd had to pawn things before, when Mr Barrence ran out of money, and she was well enough known at the shop. There would be no trouble, no accusations of theft. And they'd always redeemed the things before, so Mr Bithe wouldn't sell the ring.

She sighed as she walked along the street. When her mistress got one of these funny turns, there was no doing anything with her. All you could do was humour her and wait for the mood to pass.

But even though Mabel also hated Annie Gibson, if truth be told, this wasn't anyone's fault but Mr Barrence's. *She* hadn't done this. He was a wicked man, Reginald Barrence was, and should never have been allowed to marry her poor mistress, Beatrice Hallam as was. But Mabel was still there to look after her, though how they were to manage without money or home, she didn't know.

But Miss Beatrice was clever. She'd think of something.

Chapter 1

Bilsden: January 1858

Winnie knocked on the door of the small parlour. "Excuse me, ma'am, but Miss Hibley says to tell you she can't find Miss Tamsin or Master Edgar anywhere."

Annie looked up, her thoughts still miles away. "What? Oh, Tamsin's probably hiding somewhere. It's very naughty of her." Winnie always made such a drama of things.

Winnie drew herself up. She knew when someone wasn't taking her seriously. "Well, they're not in the house, ma'am. And their outdoor clothes are missing." Now she had her mistress's full attention. "We've looked everywhere. Miss Hibley is that worried. She's sitting crying her eyes out in the schoolroom." And Miss Tamsin was more than naughty, thought Winnie. She was a wilful young madam and that silly fool of a governess couldn't control her at all!

Annie sighed and stood up. "Does Mr Hallam know?"

"He's still at the mill, ma'am."

Annie led the way downstairs. "Call Mr Jervis in, will you, please, Winnie? We'll get the outdoor staff to search the grounds." Then she went to see Miss Hibley, who promptly tendered her resignation.

"I'm too old for someone as . . ." the governess hesitated, seeking a word that would not prejudice her chances of getting a reference ". . . as *lively* as Tamsin."

Annie sighed. Miss Hibley had been a disaster from the start. "Very well. I accept your resignation. I'll make sure you have good references to help you to your next position."

Miss Hibley shed some more tears. "Thank you! Thank you so much. So kind. So very kind."

Annie left her to it.

While the search was taking place, the two children were walking across the moors. Tamsin kept breathing in deeply, enjoying the wind and the bracing air. She loved it out here, but Miss Hibley would never go anywhere except into town when they went out for walks. A sunny day was so rare in the middle of winter that she easily persuaded Edgar to come "just a little further" and just to "walk to the top of one more hill".

When five-year-old Edgar eventually started to complain about feeling tired, Tamsin heaved a sigh. "I suppose we'd better go back, then. Honestly, you are a baby!" At seven, she enjoyed feeling superior to him.

"Which way is back, Tamsin?"

It was then that she realised she had gone further than ever before. "Oh. Well, I'm not quite sure. Don't you have any idea?"

He shook his head.

"Well, we'll try this way, then. It looks like the right direction."

By that time, the short winter afternoon was drawing in and the wind was starting to turn chilly. Edgar clung to his sister's hand. After a while, seeing her look round, seeing the worry on her face, he said, "We're lost, aren't we?"

"Shut up!"

"But we are, aren't we?"

"Yes."

He began to cry, so she relented and gave him a rare cuddle. "It's all right. We'll find a farm and ask them to send for Robert. He'll come for us in the carriage with hot bricks for our feet and take us home, you'll see."

That thought kept them both cheerful for another five minutes, then Edgar said, "Mother will be very cross with us, though."

Tamsin shrugged. Her mother was often cross with her. A sniff made her look round. Edgar was trying hard not to cry. She was supposed to look after her little brother, so she put an arm round him and began to sing one of his favourite songs. That helped a little. Singing at the tops of their thin childish voices, they walked on for another ten minutes.

When it began to rain, Edgar's voice faltered to a halt and he began to cry in earnest. "I'm frightened. And I'm cold."

"Let's just sit down for a minute behind this rock. It'll keep the wind and rain off us a bit."

Half an hour later, every inch of Ridge House and its gardens had been searched and no one had found the slightest sign of the two children. When the carriage turned into the driveway, Annie rushed to the door. Perhaps the children had gone down the hill to waylay their father. But Frederick got out on his own.

"Don't put the carriage away yet, Robert!" she called. "Frederick, have you seen the children anywhere?"

"No. Is something wrong?" He came and put his arm round her.

"They're missing. And Miss Hibley has given notice." Her voice faltered as she explained the situation. When you lived so close to the moors, you knew better than to go wandering across them, especially near dusk. Or at least, adults knew better.

Frederick turned back to the coachman. "Robert, go and check that the children are not at their grandfather's or their Uncle Tom's. As quickly as you can, if you please." When he went inside, Frederick himself helped search all the rooms and cupboards again. In vain.

Robert returned to say that no one in the Gibson family had seen the children, but Mr Mark and Mr Luke wanted to know if they should come and help search for them. Mr Hallam had only to send word.

Annie turned and clutched Frederick. "Do we need them?"

"No. We have enough people here." He tried to speak soothingly, for he could see the fear in her eyes, but in fact he was more worried than he cared to show. "It's fully dark now. Let's hope they've found shelter somewhere."

"It gets so cold at night," she whispered.

"I'll go with them," Frederick decided. "With Nat. No one knows the moors better than he does."

"I'll come, too," Annie said at once.

Frederick shook his head. "No, love, you stay here. Someone has to be here, just in case . . ."

No need to put it into words.

The outdoor servants were provided with lanterns and made ready to go out and search the moors along the three tracks that passed Ridge House. "But keep to the paths!" Nat Jervis told them. "You can't go a-wandering 'cross the moors in the dark, or we'll be losing you, too. Keep to

the paths and shout them children's names every now and then." With nods and murmurs the gardeners and stable staff set off.

Annie watched the lanterns bob away into the vast darkness of the moors. It was hard to stay behind and wait. She would, she decided grimly, deal very firmly with Tamsin if - *when* - the children came back. For she knew that Edgar would never have left the grounds on his own. It was always Tamsin who led the two of them into mischief. And she would make sure that Miss Hibley left as soon as possible. She would be glad to see the back of that lachrymose and ineffectual woman.

Nat Jervis stopped as soon as they reached the moors and looked at his master. "Children allus take the easiest path, sir. That's why I said we'd come this way." He led his master across the moors on a rambling route, stopping every now and then to think where he was and what there was nearby to appeal to a child. Even in the darkness, he knew every path, every hump of ground.

"I've found folks as was lost afore, sir," he said once, when he saw by the flickering lantern light how worried Mr Hallam was. "Don't you fret. I know these moors like the back of my hand and I've got a gift for finding folk. It's a matter of thinking as they would, you see."

Once, when the wet tussocky grass made walking difficult, Nat stopped, shook his head and retraced his footsteps until he found an easier path. Once, when his master stumbled and fell, Nat set down the lantern and pulled him upright. He'd noticed how breathless Mr Hallam was getting. "Let's rest a little, sir, eh?"

Frederick Hallam was ashamed that he had so little stamina, but he did need a rest. He watched his head gardener walk round him in careful circles, holding the lantern high and calling to the children through the rain and darkness.

"What's that?" Frederick asked suddenly. "Nat! Can you hear something?"

They both stood still and listened. Far away, there was a thin shrill sound.

Nat handed the lantern to Frederick, cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled loudly.

When they listened, the faint cry was repeated.

"That way, sir!" said Nat. "I think we've found them." He set off again, lantern held high, leaving his master slipping and sliding behind him on the muddy path. "They're here!" he called suddenly.

"Thank God!" Worried as he was, Frederick had to stop again to catch his breath before he could join Nat.

Tamsin and Edgar were huddled in the lea of some rocks. Both children were soaked and shivering with cold. They burst into tears at the sight of their father. "We saw the light," Tamsin sobbed. "So we shouted as loudly as we could."

Edgar clung to his father, shivering. "I thought you hadn't heard us."

Angry as he was, Frederick hugged them both. "We heard you. Let's get you back home again." He swung Edgar into his arms and let Nat give Tamsin a piggy-back.

But to all of them it seemed a very long way back to Ridge House, and Frederick could not remember when he'd last felt so tired.

Annie took one look at their white, chilled faces and bit back the angry words that were boiling up. She took Tamsin's clammy hand in hers and jerked her rain-soaked daughter towards the stairs, looking up at Tess, who was leaning over the banisters. "Run a bath for the children. At once." Then she turned back to the hero of the hour. "We're all extremely grateful to you, Mr Jervis. I'm sure you could do with a brandy?"

Nat nodded.

"Please get Mr Jervis a brandy, Winnie."

"I'll just let the others know we've found them, first, ma'am." Nat went outside and a minute later there came the sound of two pistol shots. When he returned, Winnie was waiting for him, eager to hear what had happened.

"They'll have caught their death of cold, Mr Jervis," she muttered as she led the way across the hall to get some brandy, with her peculiar flat-footed gait. "Death of cold. And did you see how the master was shivering?"

Up in the nursery, Annie looked down at her daughter. For once, Tamsin had lost her air of defiance and bravado.

"Whose idea was this, Tamsin?"

"M-mine. I'm s-sorry. I didn't mean to go so far."

"You shouldn't have gone on the moors at all! I'm very angry with you both."

Edgar started sobbing again, so Annie stopped scolding. "Come over to the fire and take your wet clothes off. We'll deal with your naughtiness tomorrow." She turned to look at her husband, who was standing in the doorway, and was horrified to see how white Frederick was looking. "Are you all right, love?"

"Just soaked, chilled through and tired." He managed a wry smile. "Not so young as I was and it's a raw night out there." He turned to Tamsin. "I am very displeased with you, young woman!" Rarely was his voice so cutting when he spoke to this beloved child.

Tamsin, who had stopped crying, began to sob again.

Annie gave her husband a little push. "You'd better go and change out of your wet clothes. And get Jimson to bring you up a brandy. We'll deal with all this tomorrow."

She turned back to her shivering daughter. "Let Miss Hibley help you get your clothes off, Tamsin, then come to the bathroom as quickly as you can." She finished pulling Edgar's things off, wrapped him in a blanket and carried him along to the children's bathroom, where Tess was waiting beside a steaming tub. Annie waited to make sure Tamsin joined her brother in the hot water, then left them in the governess's charge. She wanted to see how Frederick was.

A frown creased her brow as she walked along the landing. She doubted that the children would take much harm from their adventure, but she could not get the memory of Frederick's white face out of her mind. In fact, he had not been looking well for a while now. A feeling of apprehension rippled through her. When you married an older man, you could not help being more concerned for his health than you would with a younger husband.