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BILSDEN: DECEMBER 1848

A man tramping across the moors paused to wipe the rain from his forehead and stare down at the smoky valley in the distance. He spat and stood for a moment, scowling at the town in which he had grown up and cursing under his breath. He had never intended to return to bloody Bilسدin. Never! But now - well, where else should he go to die but the place he'd been born? That seemed right, somehow. Though he wasn't going to die for a while yet. Years, probably.

"Is that it, Dad?" The boy beside him was thin, though tall for his eight years. He stood shivering in the bitter wind that promised more rain before long. Both he and the man were soaked to the skin, in spite of the sacks tied around their shoulders to keep off the worst of the weather.

"Aye. That's Bilسدin, son." The man squinted down at the huge square bulk of Hallam's, the largest mill in town, and the rows of mean terraced dwellings huddled around it. The only greenery was in the streets near the park. And even that had been given to the town in memory of Thomas Hallam. "Bloody Hallams!" he said automatically. If they hadn't sacked him, he wouldn't have had to leave.

"It's not as big as Bolton, is it, Dad?"

"It's big enough to hide us, Jim, and that's all that matters." For as usual, the man had left a trail of debts and resentment behind him. Head on one side, he calculated how long it would take to get into town and sighed. He was bone tired now and it had been a while since either of them had eaten. Nor had they found anyone to give them a lift across the tops, as they'd hoped.

The last carrier who'd passed them had flourished his whip at them when asked for a ride. The

man on foot had cursed the driver, who had turned round to yell, "Go an' earn your bread like the rest of us do, you thieving rascals. Then you can afford to pay for your rides. My loads have to earn their way!"

The boy waited, but the man still did not move. "Ain't we goin' to move on?"

Spitting another gob of phlegm into the vegetation at the side of the road, his father nodded and picked up his bundle. Once he would have made nothing of a walk like this, but recently his great strength had faded and he had started to cough blood. He knew what that meant. No need to pay a sodding doctor to tell him. But he'd cheat death for a while yet, just as he'd cheated those who sought him. He snorted with bitter amusement. The very illness that threatened his life had also saved it, for he was a gaunt figure nowadays and his once luxuriant hair had fallen out, leaving only a dirty grey fringe around his bald pate. Even his own mother wouldn't recognise him.

"We'll change our names here, lad," he said as they tramped along.

"What to this time, Dad?"

The man narrowed his eyes and considered. For a moment inspiration eluded him, then he noticed the smears of black smoke rising from the tall chimneys below them. "Black," he decided with a grin. "We'll call ourselves Black. Frank, I'll be, an' you can be Jemmy."

The lad nodded, accepting this, as he accepted everything else his father did. The only thing in life that really frightened him was the thought of being put into the workhouse. But his Dad had saved him from that, turning up when his mother died and taking his only legitimate son away with him. The boy who would call himself Jemmy from now on shouldered his bundle and started walking doggedly on, pausing when his father stopped to cough, moving when his father moved on again.

The going grew easier as they began to move down the slopes into Bilsden and they both speeded up. The wind did not keen around them as shrilly here and there was the promise of food and warmth ahead. The man was not without money, for all his protestations of poverty. He just hated to spend it on anything but himself and his booze, the last pleasure left to him, or so he told the boy every night as he headed for the nearest public house.

If Annie Ashworth had known that this man was back in town she would not have slept at night, however soft her bed. The sight of him would have brought back memories of a night of horror it had taken her years to forget. If Annie's brother Tom had seen the man, he would have beaten him senseless, as he had longed to do years ago. But Annie didn't know. And although Tom saw the man several times, he didn't recognise him.

The newly-named Frank Black blended easily into the life of Claters End and it was to be quite a while before either Annie or Tom found out that he was back.

In the Bilsden Ladies' Salon, in the very best part of High Street, Annie Ashworth, born Annie Gibson, was standing staring out of the window at the people passing by. For once, the salon was empty. Most of the ladies who patronised it had already ordered their new gowns for the Christmas festivities and her workpeople upstairs were busier than they had ever been. A thriving business, her salon. But she would be leaving it soon, leaving it to marry Frederick.

At this moment he would be telling his daughter. Her own family already knew and accepted the fact that she would be marrying him. So why did she feel uneasy? Why could she not settle to anything today?

She stood there for a while longer, then shook her head and turned round. Enough of this. The decision had been made. For the second time in her twenty-eight years she was in love and longing to be married. Only this time nothing was going to go wrong. So she had better start designing her wedding gown and trousseau. She did not want to let Frederick down in any way. A smile softened her face as she thought of him, then she picked up a pencil and began sketching.

In a fine house near the top of Ridge Hill, Annie Ashworth was the subject of a bitter confrontation. Beatrice Hallam stared at her father in horror. "You can't mean that! Oh no, I don't believe it!"

"Why not?" Frederick managed to keep his expression calm, but he could feel the anger rising. His youngest child had always been difficult. Today it was particularly hard not to give her the good

shaking she deserved. He had known that she would not be pleased about Annie, but he had not expected quite that depth of revulsion in her voice when he told her the news.

"Father, you can't possibly *marry* a woman like that!" Beatrice moved towards him, her hand outstretched, then, when she saw him step backwards, she let the hand drop, buried her face in her handkerchief and began sobbing loudly.

He growled in his throat as he looked at her. She was more like a spoiled child than a young woman of twenty-one, as this theatrical performance proved. Christine's fault, that. His late wife had always been over-indulgent with Beatrice. They had been more like sisters than a mother and daughter. And he had to take some of the blame for the way Beatrice had turned out, because he had cared so little about the pair of them that he had not intervened.

In the three years since his wife's death, he had found a female relative to keep his daughter company. Jane Ramsby, a distant cousin of his wife's, had been living in genteel poverty since her father's death and was grateful to be given such a comfortable home. She was willing to put up with Beatrice's moods and spitefulness, as no one else would be.

"I mean exactly what I say, Beatrice. I'm going to marry Annie - and the sooner the better."

Beatrice gasped. "You mean - you mean you *have* to marry her. Oh, that's disgusting! And at your age, too. Could you not just buy her off, provide for the child? After all, women of her class are used to such arrangements."

With an effort, he kept his voice steady. "Let it be clearly understood, Beatrice, that my desire to marry Mrs Ashworth stems from my love for her, not from any sense of obligation." He had not loved his first wife. Christine had been rich and well connected in the cotton towns around Bilsden, a good match for the ambitious son of a rising mill owner. But she had not stopped whining and cringing away from him from the very first marriage night to the hour she breathed her last.

As Frederick saw the disbelief in his daughter's eyes, he added sharply, "If you need me to say it bluntly, then I will. Annie and I have not yet shared a bed. Annie is as respectable as you are, believe me, Beatrice."

His voice softened as he said Annie's name and his daughter sucked in an angry breath as she heard it. "Then make her your mistress!" she begged. "Other cotton masters take mistresses. With your reputation, that would cause little comment in the town. Cotton men are not known for their fidelity."

"The cotton industry which you so despise, miss, and the men who work in it, are what have given you a dowry large enough to buy the sort of effete gentleman whom you apparently desire for a husband."

"Reginald is *not* effete! He is a most truly a gentleman. Why, his grandfather was an earl."

"Barrence is a nothing sort of creature, fit only to spend the money others have earned for him!" Frederick had disliked Reginald Barrence on sight, and the feeling had clearly been mutual.

"Reginald is a poet. He cannot concern himself with such mundane considerations as money."

Her father bit back the comment that Reginald's poetry was as lifeless as Reginald's thin body, wispy dust-coloured hair and bony white hands. And for one who had his mind on higher things, the man had concerned himself very actively with the question of Beatrice's dowry and the marriage settlements, proving to be a shrewd bargainer.

Frederick walked over to stare out of the window at what Beatrice referred to grandly as 'the lake', but which he called, more accurately he felt, 'the lily pond'. How that annoyed her! He smiled at the thought, but the smile faded quickly. He despised her pretensions and the way she was ashamed of the mill her grandfather had built. After the first heat of his anger had passed, he turned round again, "The decision to marry Annie is mine and mine alone, Beatrice. I've already written to your brother and sister to inform them.'

"I'm sure they'll be as pleased about it as I am!"

There was nothing to be gained from arguing with her, so he added with the bluntness for which he had once been famous, but which had softened in the last few years, "I think I also need to remind you, Beatrice, that if you want the rather generous dowry that I've promised your dear Reginald for taking you off my hands, then you had better keep a civil tongue in your head when you

call upon Mrs Ashworth."

"One does not call upon one's inferiors."

Where did she get her silly pretensions? Annie was worth ten of her. "We'll be calling on her tomorrow."

Her eyes met his, she opened her mouth then closed it again.

"I insist, Beatrice."

She gave an angry sob. "A woman from the Rows! Why, her father was one of your own mill hands!"

"And a good one, too. It's men like John Gibson who make the money you spend so carelessly." A genuine smile lit Frederick's face for a moment as he thought of Annie's family. Tom, her brother, was as tenacious and hard-working as she was, running the family junk yard, expanding his provision supply business, and dipping his fingers into half a dozen other small schemes. Give Tom Gibson time and he would likely make a fortune.

Like brother, like sister. Annie was a sound businesswoman, shrewd and intelligent. It was one of the things he loved most about her, that eager questing brain of hers, though most of the men he knew would be amazed at that. Other men wanted a wife as housekeeper and mother to their children. Well, he'd had one of those and it had not suited him at all. Christine had bored him within a week, and he had come to despise her within a month.

The Gibsons were very different to his own family, full of warmth and vitality. John Gibson's second brood of children were shaping well, too, now that their fool of a mother was dead, for Annie had taken them and her father in hand, moving them out of the Rows to live with her. Though she had failed in one thing. A grin lifted the corners of Frederick's mouth briefly. Recently John Gibson had married for a third time, and married hurriedly, because he had fathered yet another child, his fourth living son. Well, Frederick hoped that he, too, would follow John's example and father more children, one or two, anyway. He realised that Beatrice had spoken and dragged his attention back to her. "Sorry. My thoughts wandered for a moment."

Her pale skin flushed to an unlovely shade of pink. "They always do when you're talking to me, Father. I said that if Mrs Ashworth is not compromised, surely there is no need for you to marry her in such haste? People are bound to talk about that."

"I don't give a damn what people say. And why should we wait? I'm not getting any younger."

She made a scornful noise in her throat. "No, you're not. That woman must be thirty years younger than you!"

"Nonsense! Twenty-two years younger, actually." He spoke wearily, wanting only to end the interview and the melodrama upon which Beatrice seemed to thrive. "I shall marry Mrs Ashworth as soon as it can be arranged, immediately after Christmas, if possible. And that is my final word."

Beatrice burst into genuine tears. When her father's expression merely shifted from irritation to boredom, she stumbled from the room, sobbing hysterically, pushing past her companion, Jane, on the stairs and locking herself in her bedroom. There she poured out her troubles to Mabel, her new lady's maid, who truly understood how her mistress felt about this coming marriage. Indeed, the maid's indignation nearly equalled that of her mistress. For Mabel had known Annie Gibson years ago, when they were both maidservants in Dr Lewis's house and it galled her to see how well Annie was doing for herself.

In the drawing room, Frederick was pacing to and fro, seething with anger. The family portrait on the wall caught his eye and he stopped in front of it. The painter had been skilled enough to catch the essence of them all. Christine's vapidness, his own cynicism - yes, he admitted that now. Mildred, his elder daughter, looked amiable enough, though her foolishness showed in her expression. She was off his hands now, thank goodness, living in London with a small son of her own and two stepdaughters.

The portrait had been Christine's pride and joy, but he would have it moved before Annie came to live here. He was sick of looking at the damned thing. His younger son's arrogance showed clearly on his face, even at the age of twenty. Like Beatrice, James was ashamed of the mill which had made the family fortune, but give him his due, he was making his own way in the world, doing quite

well for himself as a lawyer in Leeds, especially since he had married the only daughter of his senior partner.

And Oliver, Frederick's elder son. He sighed. The charm showed clearly, magically caught in a few smears of coloured oil. Oh yes, that fatal charm that had greased Oliver's path through life and made his mother and sisters adore him. Well, Oliver had made an utter mess of his life, marrying Adelaide, an extravagant woman with no fortune, and then getting himself killed in a riding accident before he could even father a child.

Frederick reached up to unhook the picture and dumped it on the floor. He had no doubt that James and Judith would make some pretence of welcoming Annie into the family, in public at least, as would Mildred and her husband. And Adelaide would do as she was told, for fear of losing her allowance. It was his younger daughter who was going to give them trouble.

Well, he would just have to protect Annie from Beatrice's spitefulness as best he could. "Ah, Annie, love," he muttered as he turned to leave the room. "I don't want to wait, not a single day."

The next morning Beatrice, her eyes still puffy from weeping, accompanied her father to make a formal call upon Mrs Ashworth. As Mabel had said, "Best get it over with, miss, for your father's not a man to be denied."

Annie, forewarned by a note from Frederick, stayed home from the salon and sat waiting for her visitors in the parlour of Netherleigh Cottage. She could not sit still, but moved over to stare at her reflection in the mirror, twirling one auburn curl absently round her finger. Yes, this dress really suited her, showing off her slender waist and neat curves. Its full skirt fell elegantly down over six frilled and starched petticoats, the weight of which was dragging at her five feet two inch frame. She sometimes wondered how wide and heavy skirts would get.

Fiddling with ornaments that needed no straightening, she moved aimlessly round the room. She was not used to sitting idly with her hands unoccupied, but she had no doubt that Beatrice was making this visit under sufferance and she did not intend to be caught with a piece of common

mending in her hands. She gazed out of the window for the umpteenth time. "Ah! At last!"

As the carriage drew up in front of the house, Lally, the new maid of all work, pattered along the hallway, standing ready to open the door the minute the knocker sounded.

Annie smiled. Lally, aged thirteen and scrawny as an underfed fowl, was rapidly learning the ways of the gentry, and was clearly determined to make a success of her new position. Already her accent was changing, becoming more genteel, and her face was filling out with Kathy's good food.

"Mr Hallam and Miss Beatrice Hallam to see you, ma'am," Lally announced at the parlour door, then hurried back to the kitchen to confide in Kathy, "Miss Hallam looks as sour as a lemon and she's got that many spots on her face, you'd never believe she's a lady. *And* she's been crying. Her eyes are all puffy. Mr Hallam smiled at me as nice as you please, though. It fair does your heart good to see how he looks at Mrs Ashworth, doesn't it?"

"Yes, well, you just stay here and make sure everything's ready, in case Annie wants to serve them tea. I've got the tray ready." Kathy fussed around the kitchen, preparing the day's meals. She felt guilty that she was hiding away here like this, but she had begged Annie not to make her join them in the parlour.

She went across to peer fondly into the cradle in the corner, where her first-born, Master Samuel John Gibson, was sleeping soundly, then she went to give the stew a stir. She was no fine lady and never would be, she thought, glancing at her reddened hands. The prospect of entertaining someone like Miss Beatrice Hallam made her shudder. Mr Hallam was not nearly as terrifying as Kathy had expected, but she could never see herself calling him Frederick, as he had said she must. Just let him make their Annie happy, Kathy prayed every night. Their Annie had had enough trouble in her life. She deserved to be happy now.

In the parlour, Annie greeted Beatrice with composure, her heart warmed by the loving glance Frederick exchanged with her from behind his daughter's rigid back. "How kind of you to come and visit me, Miss Hallam."

"Oh, do call her Beatrice," murmured Frederick. "After all, you're going to be her stepmother soon,

aren't you?"

"Beatrice," repeated Annie.

The girl said nothing, just inclined her head, but the gesture of greeting was contradicted by the angry glance she threw at her father.

"Won't you sit down?" Annie asked. "The sofa by the fire is very comfortable."

Beatrice went to sit on the edge of the nearest armchair.

Frederick came forward to clasp Annie's hand in his and draw her close enough to kiss each cheek in turn. "You grow lovelier by the day, my dear." He did not attempt to lower his voice.

Beatrice stared across into the flames of the blazing fire. Tears welled into her eyes at the thought of this woman taking her dear mother's place. She blinked several times in an attempt to clear them.

Annie had not missed the tears and she stifled a sigh as she sat down. Frederick had probably had to coerce the girl into making this duty visit. Thank goodness Beatrice was getting married herself in the spring! "And have you made all your preparations for Christmas, Beatrice? There's so much to do at this time of year, is there not?"

With her father's eyes upon her, Beatrice had to force out a response. "I daresay Jane will attend to that sort of thing for us. She usually does. I had expected to spend Christmas with my sister, Mildred. In London, you know. The people in London are so much more cultured than those in Bilsden."

"Instead of which, Mildred and her family have agreed to come and spend Christmas with us here in the wilds of Bilsden," Frederick bared his teeth at Beatrice in a smile like that of a tiger waiting to pounce the minute his prey moved. "My son James and his wife Judith will be joining us as well, so I'm hoping to persuade you to marry me early in the New Year, Annie, my dear, while we have all my family gathered together."

Beatrice's lips curled. Persuade her, indeed. As if a woman like that would need persuading to marry her father. But to her astonishment she heard Annie demur.

"Don't you think we should wait a little, Frederick?"

"No. I don't."

The look he gave his intended could only have been described as 'hungry'. Beatrice flushed scarlet. It was shocking to see a man as old as her father looking at a woman like that.

Frederick's attention was all on Annie. "There's no reason whatsoever for us to wait, love. Can't I persuade you to marry me next month?"

Annie's breath caught in her throat as she looked at him. She had still not grown used to the warmth that welled up in her whenever she saw him. Or to the way he made her feel when he kissed her. How could she have thought for so long that what lay between them was merely friendship? Or that she could marry Daniel Connor just because he had been courting her for years and she had grown used to him? For a moment, she forgot Beatrice, forgot everything, as she said, "I suppose there's no real reason why we shouldn't - "

His face lit up. He had an almost uncontrollable urge to swing Annie into his arms and dance round the parlour, but with Beatrice sitting there like a sour-faced spinster aunt, he confined himself to catching hold of Annie's hands, raising them to his lips, one after the other, and kissing them lingeringly. "My dear, I know it's a trite thing to say, but that really will make me the happiest man on earth."

There was silence for a moment, then Annie moved away from him and sat down.

"We must invite Annie over to Ridge House, must we not, Beatrice?" Frederick prompted, going over to stand by the fire. "Show her her new home, let her choose a sitting room for herself."

"Yes."

Frederick glared at his daughter.

Beatrice added in a toneless voice, "I shall look forward to you coming to call upon me, Mrs Ashworth."

"Tomorrow afternoon?" Frederick prompted.

Beatrice forced the words out. "I hope that will be convenient, Mrs Ashworth?"

Annie nodded.

Frederick took over the conversation again. "I'll send the carriage for you, Annie love."

"Thank you." Annie would rather have walked up the hill to Ridge House, but she did not want to arrive at Frederick's house looking rosy and windswept.

"Good. And now we must settle on our Christmas festivities. Would you and your family come and dine, then spend the evening with us at Ridge House - shall we say the Saturday after Christmas?"

Annie hesitated. Her family would be awkward and uncomfortable in his grand house.

He could read her thoughts. "We don't want people to say that I'm ashamed of your family, Annie, or that I shan't welcome them into my home after we're married. I'm sure Beatrice agrees with me about that, do you not, my dear?"

"Yes, father."

He sighed and moved away from the fire. "We must go now, I'm afraid, Annie." He allowed Beatrice to precede him out of the house, then pulled his intended back into the hallway for a moment and took her into his arms. "The girl's as mumpish and spiteful as her mother. Don't let her upset you, my love."

Annie raised one hand to caress his cheek. "It's only to be expected that she would resent anyone who replaced her mother. Treat her gently, Frederick."

"I'll do what's needed to protect *you*, my dear. You've no need to worry about Beatrice. She always manages to look after herself."

Annie smiled up at him. "I'm not exactly helpless, either. I've been fending for myself ever since I was twelve."

But in spite of her brave words, her smile vanished the moment the carriage had pulled away, and when she went back into the house, it was not to go and tell Kathy how the visit had passed; it was to return to the parlour and sit staring thoughtfully into the fire.

In spite of her own reassurances to Frederick, Annie was not looking forward to the visit to Ridge House, or to living there with Frederick's daughter. Even one month of Beatrice would be too long.

How they would go on together for three months, she did not like to think. Still, if that was the price she had to pay for marrying Frederick, then she would pay it gladly, for there was nothing she wanted more than to be his wife. Nothing. And what could Beatrice do to her, anyway, except make the atmosphere uncomfortable?