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BILSDEN: JULY 1860

Frederick Hallam stared longingly out of the window. The gardens were magnificent with a summer's wealth of flowers - and for the past two weeks, he had not even been able to walk outside to smell them without help.

'We could get you a bath-chair,' Annie suggested, knowing how much her husband longed to go out into the fresh air.

'No!' His voice was harsh, but it softened as he added, 'I'm weakening fast, love, but I won't be wheeled around in an invalid chair.' He knew it was foolish, but he could not bear the thought of her seeing him like that. It would be the ultimate indignity. He held up one hand to still the protest he knew she would make. She had been so brave about his long illness, his lass had. 'Don't say you haven't noticed how quickly I tire now, how I pant for breath if I walk even a few paces. We agreed not to lie to one another.'

She could only nod. All Frederick's family and friends had noticed, of course they had, and worried to one another, but Jeremy Lewis said nothing more could be done to help her husband and Jeremy was the best doctor in town, as well as a close friend. Frederick's heart was failing fast. One day soon it would simply stop beating. Riches couldn't buy you health.

'As far as I'm concerned,' Frederick went on, his voice steady, 'I'd prefer to die now, while you can still remember me as a man, not a helpless wreck.' For a moment, on that last phrase, his voice was bitter, then he fought and regained control of it, as he had kept control of himself all through his long illness.

'Don't say such things!' Annie walked slowly across the room to the sofa and sat down as close to him as she could.

He put his arm round her shoulders. At forty, she was still young and vibrant, her glorious auburn hair only lightly threaded with silver and her skin fresh and unlined, except for a few faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. He could not imagine her old, somehow. But he was old. At sixty-two, he looked a decade more than his years. And he hated it! Hated most of all not being able to pleasure his younger second wife, and also hated the new indignity of having to be carried upstairs at night.

'When I'm gone,' he said in her ear, 'don't waste your time grieving for me, Annie-girl. Get on with living!'

'Don't say - '

'Shh! I mean it. Our marriage has been the best thing in my whole life. I've never loved anyone as I love you, never been so happy. But because I care so much about you, I don't want you moping around for years in widow's weeds and I don't want Tamsin and Edgar wasting their childhood grieving for me, either. Promise me that you'll get on with living afterwards! *Promise!*'

She nodded, frightened by the urgency in his voice. 'I promise, love.'

His arm tightened for a moment, then he leaned his head back and said quietly, 'It's time to tell the children. I want to do it myself, one at a time. Will you send Tamsin down?'

'But Frederick - '

He gave her a wry smile. 'No buts. Do this for me, please.'

Annie went upstairs, but had to stop briefly in their bedroom to pull herself together and wipe away the tears that would fall. At the schoolroom door, she took a deep breath and walked in. Elizabeth MacNaughton, more a friend than a governess by now, looked up and smiled, then the smile faded as she saw Annie's expression.

'Can I see Tamsin for a few minutes?'

Tamsin bounded to her feet, always eager to leave her studies. She was too active and wilful to sit still for long, and only a clever woman like Elizabeth could have persuaded her to attend to her lessons.

Annie led the way back to her bedroom. 'Your father wants to see you in the library, Tamsin. Wait!' She tried to find the words to prepare her daughter, but could only say, 'Listen to him carefully and think before you speak, love. It's not good news. He's not at all well. But if he can bear what is to come, so must you, or you'll make it worse for him.'

The child looked puzzled, but when her mother said nothing else, walked slowly downstairs. After a moment's hesitation, Annie followed, to wait quietly in the hall, ready to offer comfort or to restrain this difficult daughter of hers if she flew into a rage. Annie would not have ventured to predict which it would be. She tried hard, but she had trouble understanding her only daughter.

In the event, Frederick did this job as well as he had done everything else in his life and the children emerged one after the other, white and shaken, but quiet. Edgar hugged his mother, then rushed upstairs to weep in his governess's arms, but Tamsin said not a word, just went and shut herself in her room. She refused to come down to dinner or to open the door to anyone until the following morning. And Frederick gave orders that no one was to disturb her.

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At dawn the next day, Annie woke and slid out of bed quietly so as not to waken her husband. She turned to look at him, seeing how shallowly he was breathing, his chest barely lifting beneath the covers. He had been so tired yesterday after his interviews with the children. His complexion had been grey-tinged, though his mouth had still been drawn into that thin determined line that was so much a part of him. And she had heard him tossing and turning during the night. Let him sleep as long as he wished this morning.

Dressing quickly without her maid's help, she went along to her studio, intending to work on some dress designs for the ladies' dress salon she still owned, though she had not worked there since she got married, of course.

But today the ideas would not come. She could only sit and stare out of the window as the dawn colour faded from the sky above the moors. In the end, she took a piece of art paper and bent her head over it, sketching the lake and the gardener's boy who was carefully watering the

flower beds nearby. It had been such a beautiful summer! But after a while, she screwed up the piece of paper and put the pencil down. She could not draw, only sit remembering the conversation with Frederick the evening before. Not long now. They both knew it.

As the hall clock chimed seven-thirty, she went quietly back to the bedroom to check whether he was awake yet. It was not like him to stay in bed so long. He needed little sleep nowadays and was usually awake before she was.

Something about the stillness of the figure in the bed alerted her before she got to his side. There was no movement of the covers now, no rise and fall of his chest. She could not speak, only drop to her knees by the side of her beloved husband and stroke his cheek. 'I'm glad,' she said fiercely, 'glad you got your wish, glad you died before you got worse.'

And she was. So she used that feeling to keep the grief at bay. It felt as if there was a bottomless well ready to open up inside her, but she would not allow herself to fall into it. Not yet, anyway. For now she had to carry out his last wishes, see him laid to rest in peace, see that everything else was done as he had planned.

But how would she cope afterwards? He had been her best friend, as well as her husband. She could not think how she would face life without him.

Summer rain fell softly on the little Lancashire mill town as Frederick Hallam's funeral cortege wound its way down Ridge Hill towards the church. Even heaven was weeping, one woman said fancifully, to see such a good man pass away. And no one contradicted her. The streets were lined with his workpeople, mourning a good master, standing silently in the rain to pay him their last respects in the only way they could.

'We s'all not find another like him,' one man said to another.

'No. He weren't soft, but he were a fair master, an' he paid a fair wage, too - well, as fair as a master will ever pay. Unlike some on 'em. I've been a Hallam's man all my life, an' proud of it.'

'What'll happen t'mill now, do you think?'

'I don't know. That little lad of his is too young to take over, an' his other son lives over Leeds way. He hasn't set foot in the mill since he were a lad, that James hasn't. He's a starched-up sort, an' allus were. Takes after his mother. Looks down his nose at common folk. The Mester never did that. No, never in his life.'

'D'you think the family will sell the mill now?'

'Eh, I hope not. It wouldn't be Bilsden without Hallam's. It were the first of the mills, an' it's still the biggest.'

Annie Hallam, born Annie Gibson, was sitting in the first carriage with her children. All four people were clad in unrelieved black. She looked across at her eldest child, William, who was now twenty-two, and managed a brief twist of the lips that some might have called a smile.

He nodded back, wishing his mother would let go and weep. She hadn't - well, not that anyone had seen - since she'd discovered three days ago that Frederick had died in his sleep. She had just set about organising things, looking grim, tense, and somehow smaller than usual. Her eyes had not been red-rimmed, just burning with a fierce green glow that said, to him who knew her so well at least, that his mother was living on her nerves.

Annie was thinking of the afternoon to come. There would be another confrontation with James Hallam, she was sure. He had arrived with his wife and children the day Frederick died, in response to Annie's telegram, and he had immediately tried to take over at Ridge House. He was only two years younger than she was, but he looked years older. And he acted it, too.

She scowled, remembering how he had tried to treat her as he treated his own wife, as if she were a lesser being, incapable of understanding anything more than her house and children. When Judith married him, she had been a determined confident woman, but that had gradually changed. Now, she only voiced opinions approved by her husband, obeyed his orders in all things and exerted no authority except over her home and three children. And they were quiet docile creatures, too, in Annie's opinion, seeming afraid to open their mouths in front of their parents.

Well, she thought, I soon put James straight about the fact that I'm still in charge here. He must have guessed that Frederick's left Ridge House to me, for the children's sake. James will be a bit more careful how he acts with me next time, I think.

Frederick's daughter, Mildred, had been nearly as troublesome as her brother, though for different reasons. She had arrived from London the day after Frederick's death, with her husband, Peter Jemmings, and her younger daughter, Phillippa. The older daughter, Rosemary, had married recently and was already in an 'interesting condition', so had not attended.

Mildred, too, had started giving orders to the servants within an hour of arriving, orders that contradicted those of their mistress. Mildred had never forgotten how the house had been run in her mother's day, apparently, and believed she had a right to change things, now that her father was dead. Annie's lips curled into a sneer at the memory their short sharp quarrel about that. Her servants were too loyal to obey anyone else and the housekeeper had referred the contradictory orders to her, to Mildred's fury.

Annie had not deigned to argue with her step-daughter, but had simply stated her intention of continuing to run her own home as she always had. 'And if you don't like it, then you can leave!' she had wound up, before walking out of the room and leaving the Mildred to exchange very uncomplimentary views with her husband about her father's second wife.

The complaints continued, however, every time Annie was with her visitors. It was as if they were deliberately trying to make life difficult for her.

When Mildred sat down for dinner, she glared at her step-mother and fired another salvo. 'My dear Annie, your brother tells me that you intend to allow some of the workpeople to sit inside the church with their betters at the funeral!'

Annie clutched her knife and fork tightly in case she gave way to the impulse to hurl them at her step-daughter. 'It was your father's express wish,' she said, articulating each word carefully.

From the other side of the table, William frowned at Mildred and then looked at his mother. His loving expression was nearly Annie's undoing.

'Pah!' James Hallam got everyone's attention, but it was Annie he was looking at, making no attempt to hide his scorn. 'That's bad enough, though it's typical of Father - but to let one of the operatives act as pall bearer in unconscionable! Isn't it enough to have the Manager of the mill as one pall bearer? Matt Peters can perfectly well represent the workpeople, if that's what you're trying to do.'

Mildred nodded vigorously. 'And it's my husband's right to act as pall bearer.'

Beside her, Peter Jemmings stirred uneasily. He didn't care if he wasn't involved, but his wife had wept and raged about the insult. On and on. Heavens, why did men need wives? Life would be so much easier without them.

'It's an insult to my Father's memory.' Mildred continued the attack, colour high, head nodding vigorously in support of her statement. 'I can't believe that you're doing this to us, Annie.'

But Frederick himself had chosen the pall bearers and Annie was following his wishes. Only they would not believe that. She stood up, pushing her chair back so abruptly that it fell over. 'I'll be back in a minute.' She marched out, fumbled in the desk in the library and came back with a piece of paper, which she slapped down in front of James. 'These are the notes your father made about his wishes.'

He read it, then breathed deeply and read it again. 'I see.' His voice was chill and curt.

'I hope you do.'

Mildred stretched out one hand imperatively and James passed the piece of paper to her. She tsk-tsked under her breath as she studied it. 'Whatever can he have been thinking of?'

'Father was thinking of the people who have made this family's wealth, the people who have toiled and sometimes given their lives in service to the Hallams!' William snapped, unable to keep quiet a moment longer. 'And I, for one, honour him for that.' He had loved and respected his step-father.

Even Annie was surprised when her quiet elder son joined in the argument so emphatically.

But grateful for his support. Very grateful. He had grown into a solid dependable sort of man, her William had.

Now, sitting in the carriage, trying to find the strength to face the funeral itself, she looked across at Tamsin and then down at Edgar, sitting close by her side. They were both fighting against tears. She saw William squeeze Tamsin's hand and felt Edgar's hand creep into hers. There was nothing she could do to make it easier for them. Everyone had to learn that life was uncertain. In this world, at least. Unlike her father and William, who were devoted Methodists, Annie was not sure about the next world, not at all sure if there was a life after death.

After the funeral, Annie lingered by the grave, not wanting to leave Frederick alone there in the large plot his father had had laid out many years previously.

She was aware that people were standing staring at her, but she wanted a little more time with her husband. As a shadow fell across her, she sighed and looked up. Why could they not leave her alone?

'You should come away now, Step-mother.' James offered her his arm with a little imperative shake.

She needed a minute or two on her own, needed it quite desperately. 'No. I'll stay here for a while, I think.'

'But there will be people to receive up at the house! Your duty is there.'

'I'm sure Mildred will be more than happy to greet them in my place.'

He spoke with weary patience, certain that his time to take charge had come, that she was now about to betray the normal weakness of her sex. 'And we have arranged to have the will read, don't forget, Step-mother.'

'I'll be home within the hour. The will-reading can wait until then. Send the carriage back for me.' She saw William looking across at her and made a shooping gesture with her hand, looking meaningfully at Tamsin and Edgar. William nodded and led his half-brother and sister away,

speaking to them gently, one arm around each child's shoulders.

James muttered something beneath his breath, but left.

Annie sighed in relief. How could her Frederick have fathered a son like James?

When everyone had gone, Annie found a bench and nodded to the grave diggers to continue filling in the hole. She sat quietly with her hands clasped in her lap, watching them. Beside that mass of disturbed earth was Thomas Hallam's grave, the marble monument still the largest in the church yard of St Mark's. Frederick wanted nothing but a simple headstone and that was what she had ordered, causing yet another quarrel with James and Mildred.

'All the memorial I need will be in the memories of those who have loved me,' Frederick had said quietly one day. 'And in the square they named after me. I'm so pleased about that.'

She nodded now. Hallam Square. How happy it had made Frederick when the Town Council named the new square after him! What a glorious day that had been.

She sat on, feeling the quietness with relief, feeling her tiredness, too. There was only the sound of the grave diggers shovelling the earth and the pattering of light rain on her umbrella. It was not cold, not even very wet. When the will was read, James and Mildred would be even more furious. Frederick had explained to her exactly how he had left things, and she was dreading the moment when his wishes were revealed.

Annie wasn't even sure if she was happy about it herself. Frederick had placed a heavy burden of responsibility on her shoulders. She sometimes thought she'd had more than her share of responsibility in her forty years.

She suddenly became aware of a figure standing beside her and turned, sighing in relief to see her father.

'Are you all right, lass?' John Gibson had been watching for a few minutes.

'Yes.' She gestured to the seat beside her and he sat down, as unconcerned about the rain as she was herself.

'It's hard to lose a spouse,' he said in his slow quiet voice.

She nodded. He should know. He had lost two wives. Her mother had died when she was ten, and her stepmother when she was twenty-five. And his third wife, Kathy, was younger than she was. But now, Annie realised with surprise, she had lost two husbands. Her first, Charlie Ashworth, had been a slow-witted man, incapable of fathering a child or being a true husband. He had married her to give her child a name after she had been raped at the age of seventeen. And so William bore Charlie's surname and remembered him fondly, too, for Charlie had been a kindly man. Though of course William knew the truth about himself now.

She realised that her father was waiting patiently for her to finish her thoughts and gave him a half-smile.

'Are you all right, lass? Really?'

'Yes. I was just needing a bit of quiet, Dad. The house seems to be so full of Hallams.'

'Aye. And they're a pushy pair, those two.'

Not until the grave diggers had finished did she stand up, then she plucked a white rose from those cascading over the side wall of the churchyard and dropped it on the grave. 'I'll be back, she promised Frederick silently. Often.

She turned to her father. 'Will you come up to the house with me for the will-reading, Dad?'

John nodded. 'Kathy's taken the two lads home, but when I saw you stopping behind, I thought you might need me.'

'Oh, I do!'

'An' the others have gone up to Ridge House already.' He was speaking now of the children of Emily, his second wife. 'Mester Pennybody said they were wanted, that they were mentioned in the will. Our Luke went with William, an' Rebecca was with Simon, of course. Joanie went with them.' It had taken John Gibson a while to get used to calling Simon, Lord Darrington, by his first name, but since his future son-in-law was not one to play off the airs and graces, John had gradually grown accustomed to him, as he had once had to grow accustomed to Annie marrying the master he had worked for most of his life.

'I wonder what Mark is doing now?' Annie said.

'Eh, if I could just hear that he's safe, I'd not care what he were doing,' said John. For Mark had run away the previous year, rather than marry Nelly Burns, the girl he had got pregnant, and John had blamed himself ever since for threatening to disown his son if he did not marry her. John still felt that a man should give his name to his childer, but at least Mark had made provision for the babby. They had heard nothing of the lad since the night he left and the anxiety was preying on his father's mind. And by now even John, who never judged anyone else harshly, felt that Nelly was a spiteful fool of a wench. Not worthy of his Mark. Not worthy at all.

Annie and her father sat together in silence as the carriage horses, still wearing their black ribbons and plumes, clopped slowly up the hill to Ridge House. Groups of people were lingering on the streets, in spite of the dampness of the day, for the mill had been closed out of respect. Some of the men raised their hats to the carriage as it passed and the women nodded their heads.

Annie knew them all by name, for she had been working in the mill for a while now, acting for Frederick. 'They won't like the will, James and Mildred won't,' she said abruptly. 'They'll cause a fuss.'

'They mun just fuss, then. If it's what Frederick wanted, that's good enough for me an' it should be good enough for them, too. A man has a right to leave his possessions as he wishes.'

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Two people had stood by the churchyard gates to watch the funeral and had stayed on afterwards when they saw that Annie Hallam and John Gibson had not left with the others. Harry Pickering, a heavy-featured young man, who worked in the office at the Bilsden Gas Company, turned to his sister, Maddie. 'Didn't make old bones, did he, for all his money?'

She sighed. 'I don't know why you wanted to come today. Funerals always make me feel down!'

'I wanted to show respect. And I wanted us to be seen showing respect.'

She gave a cackle of laughter, not as loud as her usual shrieks of mirth, but loud enough that he put a hand across her mouth and hissed, 'Shush, you fool!'

When he had removed the hand, she hunched her shoulders against the cold. 'Didn't Joanie look funny? I don't think black suits her.'

'It doesn't matter whether black suits her or not. It's a sign of respect.' He had waved at just the right moment to catch Joanie's attention and her expression had brightened briefly at the sight of her two friends - which was the main reason he'd come here today. But to his delight, John Gibson had noticed him and Maddie as well, and had nodded his head to them.

'We can go now,' Harry said. 'We've done as I wanted.' Better than he had hoped, for John Gibson had acknowledged him. He wanted the old man to think well of them. Harry had every intention of worming his way into John Gibson's good books over the next few months.

When she got back to the house, Annie gave her cloak to a tear-stained maid, then moved among the guests, accepting their condolences and murmuring responses which were as polite-sounding as they were meaningless.

Her children, together with James's, had retired to the schoolroom in Elizabeth MacNaughton's charge. Tamsin was under strict orders not to quarrel with the other children and had declared scornfully that she'd be happy not even to speak to them, so silly were they.

Edgar had said nothing. After his first outburst, the boy had held his grief about his father too tightly inside himself and that was worrying his mother.

After a while, James bustled up to Annie, looking swollen with importance, as if he had grown taller and plumper on the drive up the hill. 'The family needs to move towards the library now, step-mother.' He opened his mouth to give the order.

'No!' Annie's voice came out sharply. To her, it didn't even sound like her own voice.

He stared at her, surprised by her white face, the burning unhappy light in her eyes. At least she had truly loved his father, he thought. But then another thought followed. Well, she's been

well paid to love him. I've never been able to understand his marrying a woman like her, a woman from the Rows. James intended to see as little as possible of her, now that his father was dead. His half-brother and sister seemed more her children than his father's, anyway. Gibsons, rather than Hallams.

'I'm still capable of managing my own household, James, as I told you when you arrived,' Annie's words were quieter now, but her eyes were flaring a challenge at him.

He did not reply for a minute or two, not wanting to lose control of himself on such an important day, the day he came into his inheritance as eldest son. He didn't approve of women like her, he thought, not for the first time, scowling at his step-mother. A line from a poem which he had read once had stuck in his mind: *Man to command and woman to obey; All else confusion.* Tennyson. And so true.

His eyes flickered to his own wife. Even Judith had needed moulding to his ways after they married. Women should not even try to think for themselves. Their brains were not capable of logic. His stepmother, with her businesses and the opinions she didn't hesitate to express, was an embarrassment to him, an outrage against nature. 'I was merely trying to save you the tr - ' he began.

She cut him off sharply, her voice carrying all too clearly and making him hiss in annoyance. 'Then don't. Don't try to save me anything, James. This is my house and I'm still mistress of it.'

'Ah.' He nodded as if what she had said confirmed a suspicion. 'Father has left you the house, then. We were afraid he might.'

'Father's in his dotage,' Mildred had commented, and she'd been right.

Annie turned away abruptly, hating the cupidity in James's eyes, hating most of all his blurred resemblance to Frederick. Around her were people who really mourned her husband, who deeply regretted his passing. She left her step-son without a word of apology and went to speak to them instead, for it soothed something inside her to hear the genuine regret in their voices.

Nearly an hour passed before Annie had found time to speak to everyone who had been

invited to the funeral. After his encounter with her, James retired to the bay window, with his wife, sister and brother-in-law in attendance, and made no further attempt to talk to the other guests.

But she was conscious of his eyes on her all the time. The expression in them was cold and disapproving, and Judith, beside him, kept eyeing her husband anxiously, as if a little afraid of his temper.

Well, let him stare, Annie thought. What do I care about him? Carrying out Frederick's wishes is all I care about now. And she would do that whatever it cost her. Whatever!