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The Winter Bride

ZAFFRE

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This one is for Janet and Geoff Hancocks, who have been on this journey with me from the very beginning, with love and thanks for all the years of friendship and for your never-failing belief in me xxx

Chapter One

February 1922

After saying goodnight, Annie stood at the window watching Monty as he walked away, the frost on the pavement glistening in the lamplight. As she turned, the diamond ring he had just placed on her finger caught the light, throwing rainbows onto the wall, and she smiled.

She had just agreed to be his wife. Perhaps this was always where she had been meant to be, she mused. Monty could offer her love, security and a family of her own – the one thing she had always yearned for – and she was sure they would be happy together.

Just for a moment images of the time she had spent with Alex a couple of days before popped into her mind, but she resolutely pushed them away. It was no good wasting her life longing for something that could never be.

She didn't fancy being in Monty's shoes when he broke the news to his mother, though. Mrs Taylor-Lloyd had never made a secret of the fact she didn't think Annie was good enough for her son. Still, she was sure Monty could handle her. She smiled again. Very soon now she would be a married woman.

'I think I ought to tell you, Mother, that I've asked Annie to be my wife, and she has agreed,' Montgomery Taylor-Lloyd told his mother early the next morning. They were sitting in her elegant dining room in Swan Lane having breakfast. He had bided his time and waited until his father had left for work before he told her.

The colour rose in her cheeks and she dabbed at her lips. 'You have done *what*?' She couldn't have looked more horrified if he had told her he was marrying the devil himself, but then Monty had expected this.

'Tell me this is some sick sort of a joke,' she growled. 'You can't marry that . . . that . . . *maid*!'

'Annie isn't a maid,' he said calmly. 'She's a perfectly respectable and decent young woman with her own business.'

'*Respectable!*' His mother glared at him. 'She's a guttersnipe from the workhouse! A bastard! How could you even consider marrying such a girl? And when is this ridiculous marriage supposed to take place?'

'Just as soon as we can get the banns read.' Monty looked at her levelly. 'There doesn't seem any point in waiting so we're seeing the vicar this morning.'

'Oh, *now* I see . . .' she sneered. 'Like that is it? A shotgun wedding!'

'No, Mother, you don't see.' Monty was doing his best to stay calm, but it was getting more difficult by the minute. 'Annie isn't that sort of girl. We're getting married simply because we love each other.'

'Huh! What do *you* know about *love*?' she spat. 'You've only ever had eyes for that girl, even though with your breeding and education you could have the pick of anyone you wanted. I was hoping we'd seen the last of her when that riff-raff family she lived with next door left the street.'

'But I don't want anyone else, and Levi and his family are far from riff-raff,' he pointed out as he rose from his seat. His mother was so red in the face with rage that he feared she might have a heart attack.

'When and where is this *ridiculous* wedding to take place?'

'As I told you, we're going to see the vicar this morning and then we'll be getting wed as soon as possible.'

'You're telling me that she wants to get wed in a *church*?'

'Yes, Chilvers Coton. It's the church she used to attend each Sunday with the other children from the workhouse. But it's only going to be a very small affair, with our families and close friends attending. That's what Annie wants,'

Her lip curled as she tossed her head. 'Well, you can forget *that*. I can assure you there'll be no one from *this* family there to see you make a fool of yourself! You'll make a laughing stock of us.'

'I'm sorry you feel that way,' he said quietly. 'But if that's what you decide then so be it.'

As he made towards the door, she put her hand up to stay him and her voice became sickly sweet. 'Oh darling, *I beg you* to think of what you're doing. Don't forget you are a sick man. That piece of shrapnel in your chest could move towards your heart at any time, and then she would be left a young widow.'

'It could also move the other way,' he pointed out. 'In which case I've no doubt Annie and I will have a long and happy life together.'

Her hands clenched into fists as she glared at him. 'I'm sorry but I *forbid you* to do this!'

He laughed. 'Mother, I think you're forgetting I'm a grown man. I can do as I want, and what I want is to marry Annie. Whether you choose to attend is up to you, but with or without you this marriage will take place. And now, if you will excuse me, I have to go.' He left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

On his way to Annie's new shop in Bridge Street, he sighed as he thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets. His mother had never liked or accepted the Lilburn family. She thought that because Levi Lilburn had a rag-and-bone business, they were beneath her. Things had gone from bad to worse when Maggie, Levi's late wife, had taken Annie from the workhouse as a child. But now Annie

owned her own shop, and Monty had no doubt she would make a success of it. She was hard-working and kind, and over the years he had fallen in love with her.

Monty was so lost in thought that he didn't spot his brother Reggie until he was almost on top of him.

'Where are you off to this early in the morning? I just popped to the corner shop to get some cigarettes.'

Monty glanced up at Reggie's horrifically disfigured face. He had been badly burnt during the war and was now almost unrecognisable from the handsome young man he had once been.

'I'm getting out of Mother's way and giving her some time to cool off,' Monty responded. 'I've just told her I'm marrying Annie, and she's not thrilled with the idea.'

Reggie's eyes narrowed. '*Married?* Are you *mad*, man? You don't *marry* girls like her, you love them and leave them. She's . . . she's . . .'

'Beautiful?' Monty grinned. He'd known that Reggie would be no happier with the idea than his mother, especially as he had always wanted Annie for himself. 'Anyway, can't stop, old chap. We have an appointment with the vicar.' He hurried on before Reggie could say more. 'See you later.'

Luckily, when Monty and Annie shared the news with Peggy and Levi after they had visited the vicar, they got a much more positive response. Peggy had been a lifelong friend of Maggie, Levi's late wife, and now shared a cottage with Levi in the courtyards in Abbey Street.

'And about bloody time too,' Peggy laughed as she clapped Monty on the back and hugged Annie.

'Yes, that's wonderful news.' Levi shook Monty's hand until he was sure it would drop off. 'Just make sure you look after my girl, young man, or you'll have me to answer to!'

'So, when is the big day to be?' Peggy asked, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

'The middle of March,' Annie told her with a smile, flicking her coal-black hair over her shoulder.

'The middle of March!' Peggy looked alarmed. 'Oh crikey! That don't gi' us much time to prepare.'

'It's only going to be a very quiet do,' Annie explained. 'We don't want any fuss.'

'Well, whether yer do or don't, yer goin' to get it!' Peggy said. 'We need to sort out what yer goin' to wear first, an' what flowers we can get in March. Then there's where we're goin' to hold the reception. There ain't room to swing a cat around in 'ere so this place is out o' the question.'

'We'll hold it at the Bull Hotel in town – my treat,' Levi chipped in.

Annie started to look worried. 'But like I just said, we only want a very small do.'

Peggy laughed again. 'Oh, get away wi' yer, yer can't spoil it fer us,' she snorted. 'This is a special occasion. It's about time we 'ad somethin' to celebrate. I just 'appened to spot a length o' lovely white satin in the material shop in town the other day. If it's still there, I could make yer a gown.'

Levi had recently treated her to a Singer treadle sewing machine that now stood in the corner of the room. Peggy loved it and was becoming quite the expert on it.

Annie and Monty exchanged a glance.

'Well . . . just so long as we don't have to invite too many people,' Monty said cautiously. 'We were thinking just very close friends and family, although after telling my mother the news this morning, I doubt very much if any of my family will be there.'

Peggy smiled. 'Let 'em stay away then, lad. It'll be their loss. You only want folks there as care about yer an' wish yer well. Now, where did I put that pattern fer a weddin' dress I 'ad me hands on the other day?' She hurried off to try and find it, much to everyone's amusement. It was nice to see her looking so chirpy after all the sad things they had gone through the year before. She had lost

Maggie to suicide, as well as one of her sons in the war, so it was good to see her smiling again.

'And where will you be livin' after the weddin'?' Levi asked.

'I did suggest I buy us a little house somewhere,' Monty answered, smiling at Annie. 'But the bride-to-be is saying she'd prefer to stay above the shop for now while she gets it up and running.'

'I dare say that makes sense.' Levi nodded. He knew how keen Annie was to make a success of her new business venture, and he had no doubt she would succeed. She could be a very determined young woman when she set her mind to it. She had certainly done wonders with his business.

Peggy bustled back in waving a sewing pattern in the air, and Levi turned to her. 'Right, woman, I know it's a bit early but I think we should drink a toast. Get the sherry out, eh?' he said, rubbing his hands together.

'Good idea!' Peggy rummaged for the bottle in the bottom of the dresser and once their glasses were filled Levi raised his in the air.

'To the newly engaged couple,' he said with a smile at Annie. 'May they never know anything but happiness and success.'

Annie dutifully sipped her drink, but she was keen to get back to the shop. She had the shop-fitters coming back that afternoon to do the final touches. She was also planning to go and buy some stock the following week. And now she had a wedding to plan – she was beginning to wonder how she was going to fit everything in.

Still, she didn't regret her decision. Alex's face came into her mind again, and she shook her head slightly, ignoring the small ache in her heart. She had fallen in love with Alex when working in the field hospitals in France during the war and had met him again purely by chance in London just a few days before. One thing had led to another and somehow, their feelings had got the

better of them, and she had given herself to him. She had known he was married and they could never be together. But at least she would always have the memory of that one glorious night. And she did love Monty, she reminded herself. So it was time she forgot about Alex and concentrated on the man who had loved her for so many years.