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Forever Yours

Written by Rita Bradshaw

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Forever Yours

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Love that is constant knows no boundaries,
It is the dew in the morning and the night's breeze.
Its melody can be heard in a child's laughter,
Its warmth in a mother's smile.
It gives and gives without measure
And when it is spent, it gives again.
It sees the worst and the best in the beloved
And it is not shaken.
It believes all, endures all, trusts all.
It is constant; it is love.

ANON

Prologue

Sacriston, Durham, 1880

'Where are you off to, this time of night?'

'Out.'

'Aye, I can see that – I'm not stupid. I didn't think you were going to park your backside in front of the fire wearing your coat and muffler, now did I?'

Vincent McKenzie cast a cold glance at his mother but didn't reply. He reached for his cap, pulling it over his thick brown hair. He then waited for her voice to come at him again, and as he opened the front door her nasal tones followed him as he had known they would.

'Well? I'm waiting for an answer, m'lad. Are you off sniffing after a lass? Is that it? 'Cos I won't have some little baggage back here, so think on. This is my house and I say who comes in and out.'

Knowing his silence would rile her more than any retort, he stepped outside, shutting the cottage door behind him and walking down the garden path to the gate. He'd just opened this when his mother wrenched open the front door and let loose a tirade worthy of any dockside fishwife.

The night was as black as pitch and bitterly cold but to the tall, well-built man striding away from the cottage it wasn't overly dark. It was the same with any miner. They'd say to anyone who'd listen that you didn't know what darkness was until you'd been down the pit. That blackness was consuming, a living entity so thick and heavy you felt you could touch it.

But Vincent wasn't thinking of the pit, nor of his mother. His thoughts were concentrated on the news he'd heard that morning. Hannah had had a baby. His Hannah. His beautiful, pure Hannah had had Stephen Shelton's bairn. She'd lain with Shelton, let him kiss and fondle her and impregnate her with his seed.

He made a sound deep in his throat that could have come from an animal in pain, the muscles in his face working. Why had she done it? Why had she married Shelton?

It was beginning to rain, icy droplets that carried sleet in the midst of them, but Vincent didn't feel anything besides the white-hot rage which had burned him up all day as he'd laboured down the pit. It had been bad enough this time last year when she'd married Shelton. Having to stand by and watch her on her wedding day, dressed in white and walking down the aisle to that nowt. That had been betrayal enough. But to bring forth living proof of what they got up to . . . His thin lips curled back from his teeth as though he was smelling something foul.

Hannah had been the one perfect, spotless thing in his life, a being apart. From a bairn he'd adored her, worshipped the ground she walked on, and she'd returned his love. He knew she had, although they'd never spoken of it. He'd made up his mind he was going to ask her to walk out

when she turned sixteen, but Shelton had got in first. However, he'd waited for her, knowing she'd come to her senses. What could Shelton offer her, after all? A two-up, two-down terrace in the village, whereas his mam's cottage—

No, his mind corrected him in the next moment. *Not* his mam's cottage. He'd been the man of the house since his da was killed down the mine the very week he himself had gone down as a lad of thirteen. The cottage was his – he paid the bills and put food on the table. And situated as it was just outside the village and with gardens front and back, it was a cut above the colliery housing typical of that provided by the mine-owners all along the Durham coalfield. His grandfather had built the cottage, brick by brick, and it was comfortable and roomy; three bedrooms upstairs and a separate scullery and kitchen and sitting room downstairs, with a wash-house and privy across the paved yard outside. Aye, most lasses'd give their eye-teeth to live there, even with his mam.

As always when he thought of his mother Vincent channelled his thoughts in a different direction. It was an art he'd perfected long ago as a young boy of seven years old, the first time she had come into his bedroom at night and told him that the things she'd done to him and made him do to her were what every mother and son did.

The cottage was on the edge of Fulforth Wood, and as Vincent came out of the narrow lane into the wider road which led to the colliery village a quarter of a mile away, his eyes scanned the darkness. It was gone eleven and he didn't expect to run into anyone, but you never could tell. One thing was for sure, he couldn't afford to be seen for what he'd got in mind. If he met someone he'd have to

abandon his plan and try again another night, but he was loath to do that. He didn't think he could endure another hour of knowing they were playing Happy Families while he was in hell. And it was hell, a hell more real than anything Father Duffy scared everyone with in his fire and brimstone sermons.

When he came to the crossroads where Witton, Durham and Front Streets met Plawsworth Road, he stood looking down Front Street. The lines of housing called Cross Streets in the area to the north was in total darkness, but the inn to the left of the grid of streets showed a light in one of the bedrooms. Moving into deeper shadows, he stood and waited.

The village was growing fast. There was talk of the colliery owners partly funding a new Catholic school as they had with the Roman Catholic church presently being built at the far end of the village. He and Hannah and the other colliery children had had their lessons in two cottages on Front Street, used as a school on weekdays and a mission chapel on Sundays, but it looked as though that would soon be a thing of the past.

He hadn't enjoyed his schooldays. His brown eyes narrowed. Living as he did some distance from the village, he'd been the outsider – and the other lads had never let him forget it. It hadn't helped that his father was known as the village drunk; when his da wasn't down the pit he could normally be found propping up the bar in the Colliery Inn, and his mother had had to meet his da at the pit gates come pay day and wrestle enough money off him to buy food for the week. Many a night his father had slept in the sawdust and dirt on the inn's floor; sometimes three or four days had gone by before they saw him.

But his da had never missed a shift. He could say that about him.

Vincent flexed his big shoulders, his eyes unseeing as he looked back down the years. When his mother's night-time visits had become a regular occurrence he'd thought about running away, because even as a little lad he'd known that she was lying and other women didn't do that to their bairns. But there had been Hannah. Beautiful, golden-haired Hannah, his angel, his undefiled, perfect angel. For such a slender wisp of a thing she'd been like a small virago when she'd defended him from the other bairns' bullying, even though he'd been inches taller than her – an awkward, lanky lump of a boy who'd known he was dirty, filthy, inside. But she had liked him. She had been his friend.

Or so he'd thought. But it had all been lies. The sound came again from his throat. She was no better than the rest – worse, in fact, because she had made him believe she cared about him and let him dare to dream about a future where he would be like everyone else. That's all he'd ever wanted, to be like everyone else. But it couldn't happen now and he was done with pretending.

She had to pay. He breathed deeply, struggling for control. He had to be thinking calmly when he did this. There could be no mistakes. *Clear your mind. Focus, man.*

His fingers felt for the can of oil in his deep coat pocket and he straightened as the light in the inn was extinguished. He'd wait another minute or two before making his way to the Cross Streets, just to be sure.

'Leave her, Stephen. You'll wake her up and she'll want feeding again.'

Hannah's voice wasn't cross, on the contrary it conveyed

tenderness as she looked at her husband bent over the cradle at the foot of the bed. She knew that some miners, like Stephen's brother, Howard, would have been miffed if their first bairn wasn't a boy, but not her Stephen. All along he'd insisted he wanted a miniature version of herself and it was clear, once Constance was born, that he'd meant it. He was besotted by their daughter. Her mam had said she'd never seen a man so unashamedly thrilled with his child and it was true.

'She looks like you.' Stephen Shelton's voice reflected the wonder he felt as he stared down at his tiny daughter. 'Our Howard's little lad looked like a wrinkled prune for weeks, but she's as bonny as a summer's day.'

'You'd better not let your brother hear you call Daniel a wrinkled prune.' Hannah's voice carried a gurgle of laughter in its depths. She agreed with her husband; even now, at six months old, his brother's child couldn't be called handsome by even his nearest and dearest. And when Stephen still hovered by their daughter's cradle, she added, 'Come on, love. Come to bed.'

As he joined her in the iron bed that could hardly be called a double but which had been a good price in one of the second-hand shops in Sunderland, some fourteen or fifteen miles south-east of Sacriston, the bedsprings zinged their protest. Hannah immediately snuggled up to her husband, for in spite of the coal fire burning in the small grate, the room was cold and what warmth the fire gave out was soaked up by the baby's cradle directly in front of it. As Stephen put his arms round her, she murmured, 'Do you think she's warm enough?'

'She's as snug as a bug in a rug.' Stephen kissed her brow. 'How are you feeling?'

'Tired.' It had been a long labour, thirty-six hours from start to finish, and the last few had verged on the unbearable. She hadn't expected it to be so awful but the midwife had assured her the first was always the worst and the next one would be better. She hadn't wanted to think about the next one; she still didn't. Lifting her head to look into Stephen's face, she smiled. 'All the pair of us have done today is eat and sleep – your mam and mine have seen to that.'

'Good.' He stroked a strand of hair from her forehead, marvelling – as he always did – that this beautiful woman was his. 'I told them when they arrived this morning that I didn't want you putting so much as a foot out of this room.'

'Well, they obeyed your instructions to the letter.' She had tried to persuade her mother and mother-in-law that she was perfectly capable of going to the privy in the backyard rather than having to use the chamber pot, but they wouldn't have it. Mind you, when she'd got out of bed to use the pot she'd felt so sick and giddy she'd thought she was going to pass out, so perhaps they were right. 'I've never been so cosseted in me life and Constance only has to squeak and they're whisking her up.'

'All the lads wanted to be remembered to you, by the way, and send their best to you and the bab.' Stephen pulled her closer into him. Constance had been born late on Saturday night and the next day being the Sabbath, Stephen hadn't gone into work until this morning. 'All except Vincent McKenzie, that is. Surly devil. I swear he gets more moronic with each passing day. Just stared at me, he did, when the lads were asking about the bab and didn't say a word.'

'Vincent's not moronic, Stephen. You know he isn't. He was considered bright at school.'

'Bright or not, he's got a side to him that's stranger than a nine-bob note. You'd know what I mean if you worked a shift or two with him. Never says a word to no one unless it's the deputy, and he's all over him. Got his eye on the main chance, sure enough.'

Hannah shifted slightly in his arms but said nothing now. She knew Stephen had a bee in his bonnet about Vincent. It dated back to when they'd been bairns and she'd used to stick up for Vincent when the other lads had a go at him, which was most of the time. But she'd felt sorry for him. She still did. It couldn't be much of a life for him; his mother like a millstone round his neck and her with a tongue on her like a knife. She'd said as much once to Stephen in the days when they were courting and asked him if he couldn't be nice to Vincent, make a pal of him, but it had caused such a row between them she hadn't mentioned it again. Stephen had got it into his head that Vincent liked her in *that* way and nothing would dissuade him otherwise, even though she knew Vincent thought of her as simply a friend. Probably his only friend, poor thing. Not that she'd seen hide nor hair of him since she'd got married apart from once or twice in the distance, and then he'd made no effort to pass the time of day even though she'd smiled and waved at him.

'Bob Hutton reckons Vincent's after being second in line to the deputy when old Walter goes, and that'll be the day I'll get meself set on elsewhere. I wouldn't work for that nowt if I got paid in gold nuggets.'

She wanted to ask him to stop talking about Vincent, but knowing that would provoke an argument, reached

up and kissed his stubbly jaw instead. 'I missed you today,' she said softly. 'It was lovely having a day to ourselves with Constance yesterday, wasn't it?'

Her reward for her tactfulness was his voice coming deep and warm when he murmured, 'Aye, my idea of heaven, lass. You hear some of the lads talk, ones who've been married less time than we have, and it makes me thank me lucky stars for what we have.'

Hannah nodded. Beryl and Molly, her two older sisters, seemed to *expect* their husbands would disappear on a Saturday afternoon to watch the footy and spend Sunday lunchtime – and more than one evening a week too – at the Colliery Inn with their pals. But Stephen had never been like that. From the first week they'd been married he'd been content to spend all of his time with her.

'I see more than enough of my mates down the pit, lass,' he'd stated, when she'd shyly brought the matter up one day. 'I might have the odd half with them afore I come home now and again, just to be sociable, but I'd rather look at your pretty face than their ugly mugs and I've told 'em so.'

Shocked, she'd asked him if they'd been offended and he'd roared with laughter. 'Any one of 'em would swap places with me like a shot, given half a chance,' he'd told her. 'They know it and I know it. I'm a lucky man.'

She knew she was lucky too, she counted her blessings every day. Cosy and snug now Stephen's body warmth was enveloping her, Hannah knew a moment of pure joy. She had the best husband in the world and God had given them Constance: she couldn't ask for more. And they'd never had to live with in-laws as so many young couples did. The occupants of Sacriston had doubled in her lifetime,

and although the mine owners were constructing more housing, it was a slow business; however, just two weeks before they'd wed last year, old Mr and Mrs Atkinson had gone to live with their married daughter in Sunderland. Mr Atkinson being a close pal of Stephen's da, he'd tipped him the wink and Stephen had been first in the colliery office. She'd never forget the look on Stephen's face when he'd come to tell her.

'Good night, lass.' Stephen's voice was slurred with sleep as they lay close, breathing almost the same breath. 'And I'll bring the little 'un to you when she wakes up; don't you go getting out of bed.'

''Night, love.' Oh aye, she was lucky all right. In this tiny world that was hers, she had everything she wanted. With careful managing they paid the rent each week, and if towards pay day the stew held more dumplings and less scrag ends, Stephen never complained. Not that it'd been like that over the weekend though; her mam had brought a ham-and-egg pie and a basin of sheep's-head broth, and Stephen's mam had been determined they didn't starve too, bless them.

The baby was fast asleep, just the odd little snort or snuffle disturbing the silence, and the glow from the banked-down fire took the edge off the blackness. Hannah's eyelids closed and she drifted off too, her last conscious thought of her daughter and how long it would be before she woke them for a feed.

Vincent knew exactly which house he was making for in the ten rows of terraced streets which made up the Cross Streets and stretched in regimented lines from Front Street. For months on end after Hannah had married Shelton

he'd left the cottage in the middle of the night and come to stand across the road from where she lived, hidden in the darkness as he'd stared for hours without moving. Nothing was violent enough or deep enough to describe the hatred he'd felt towards Stephen Shelton, a hatred and rage which had stretched to include Hannah when he'd first heard she was expecting Shelton's child. He'd prayed with a passion that Shelton would be killed in one of the numerous accidents that occurred weekly down the pit, and that the shock would cause Hannah to miscarry. Only then would he be able to sleep at night. He had pictured it in his mind so often he had been stunned when he'd heard the baby had been born alive and healthy.

The terrace of eight houses was in darkness as he had expected, since there were no street lamps in the Cross Streets. He stood, his hands deep in his pockets and the fingers of his right hand stroking the can of oil as the sleet fell, melting on contact with the ground. He would be best going round the back – it was more feasible a fire would start in the kitchen. His mind was giving him instructions almost independently and he obeyed it, making his way to the back of the terrace and walking along the dirt lane which bordered the tiny backyards and shared privies, one to each two houses. When he reached Hannah's backyard he again became still, waiting.

What exactly are you waiting *for*? his mind asked him derisively. You've been waiting long enough, haven't you? Get on with it. You've either got the guts to go through with this or you haven't.

He'd got the guts. His body jerked as though a puppeteer was pulling the strings. From the day he'd walked away unscathed from the rockfall which had taken his father

and six other miners, and told his mother he'd kill her if she ever touched him again, he'd known he could do anything. Twenty-four hours trapped in the bowels of the earth before the rescue team had got them out had taught him a lot. The terror he'd felt in that pitch blackness as he'd waited to die hadn't been as bad as the numbing fear and shame he'd lived with for six long years. He had vowed then that if he got out alive, she wouldn't lay another finger on him. It had been a baptism of fire, that first day down the pit, but it had saved him. That was the way he looked at it. The pit – and his mother – had never held the same fear for him again.

He made no sound as he entered the backyard which was shared with the house on the left to Hannah's, passing the lavatory and the communal tap which was the sole means of water for the residents. His heart thudding fit to burst, he tried the latch on the back door and it opened immediately. No one ever locked their doors in the tight-knit mining community.

He stepped first into a tiny scullery just big enough to hold the tin bath which was hung on the wall by a long wooden peg. On another wall there were more pegs and Stephen's working clothes hung there with his boots beneath on the stone flags.

There was a step up into the kitchen, and he could see dimly by the glow coming from the banked-down fire in the open black range. In front of the range was a steel fender, three feet long, and positioned by this was a clothes horse on which various articles were drying. A scrubbed kitchen table with four chairs tucked beneath it, a high-backed wooden chair with faded flock cushions, another much smaller table holding a tin dish for washing dishes

and pans, and an enormous clippy mat in front of the range made up the sum total of the furniture, and all the items looked well-worn. There were no cupboards on the bare whitewashed walls, merely four shelves on the wall opposite the range, and these held a conglomeration of crockery and cutlery, along with items of food and other bits and pieces.

Vincent's lip curled as his gaze swept round the room. And she'd settled for this rather than what he could have given her? In the last few years he'd taken any extra shifts that were going and seen to it that the cottage looked real bonny, but what was the use of that now? All his striving had been for one thing and one thing only – and that was finished with. He wouldn't have her now if someone paid him to. He couldn't begin to explain, even to himself, why the birth of the child had affected him the way it had, but something in him – something elemental and primitive – was repelled and enraged by it to the point of madness.

He shook his head as though the action could clear his mind. The night was quiet and still, the only sound was the ticking of the wooden clock on the mantelpiece over the range.

No more hesitating. He fetched the can out of his jacket pocket along with a box of matches. He doused the clippy mat, the flock cushions on the chair and the clothes horse with the oil, before tipping an oil lamp standing in the middle of the kitchen table on its side and letting the oil spread out in a thick flow. Then he lit the first match.

Matthew Heath had the stomach-ache. He had been holding his belly and wriggling in pain for over an hour in the bed

he shared with his two older brothers. As the cramps intensified, he knew he'd have to pay a visit to the privy in the backyard. He also knew what the problem was. He had filched a couple of the big cooking apples his mam had left from the sack he and his brothers had brought back home in the summer. The apples were stored on brown paper under the eaves in the roof and were forbidden fruit: his mam had issued dire warnings as to what would befall anyone who had the temerity to pilfer one.

He had worked hard for them apples though, he thought to himself in justification of the crime. Not like his brothers who'd messed about something rotten. Farmer Todd had said he'd done the work of a man that weekend, and he wasn't one for buttering you up, not Farmer Todd. And yet whenever his mam baked one of her apple pies or crumbles, his brothers got the same portion as him. It wasn't fair. And so he'd decided to level things up, that was all.

Another cramping pain made him squirm. Stifling a groan, he slid out of bed and fumbled in the darkness for his jumper and trousers laid ready for morning on the back of a chair, pulling them over his undershirt and drawers. It'd be freezing outside. The day had been biting cold and their mam had said she could smell snow in the air and she was never wrong.

Picking up his heavy hobnail boots, Matthew crept silently on to the small square landing separating the brothers' room from that of their parents. He didn't want to wake his mam. She had a nose on her like one of his da's ferrets for smelling things out, did his mam, and even though he'd moved the other apples along to disguise the fact that two were missing, she'd know somehow.

He stopped in the hall to feel for his coat on the row of hooks attached to the wall, but didn't pause to put it on, such was the urgency in his bowels. It was only when he was sitting on the wooden seat with the hole in the middle that he pulled it on, his teeth chattering.

The power of the fermenting apples in his system ensured it was over half an hour before he left the privy, and his only thought was to get back to the warmth of his bed. He was frozen, inside and out. But halfway across the yard he paused. There was a light brighter than he'd seen before shining from the house next door where the Sheltons lived. He liked the Sheltons. Mrs Shelton was bonny and Mr Shelton hadn't told on him when he'd accidentally kicked a can full of pebbles he and some of the other bairns had been having a game of footy with, straight through their kitchen window. Mr Shelton had been mad, but he'd said the fact that he hadn't run away with the others but had stayed to face the music made them square. Aye, the Sheltons were all right.

It was only when a curl of black smoke dimmed the light for a second that he realised he was seeing leaping flames. He stared transfixed as the kitchen curtains blazed, the material eaten up so quickly he barely had time to blink before they were gone. And then he was galvanised into action. Wrenching open his own back door, he yelled for his parents at the top of his voice before again running into the yard, and as he did so the sash window in the bedroom above the kitchen next door was pushed up. He could hear the sound of coughing and choking, but when Mr Shelton leaned out, he was holding what looked like a tightly wrapped bundle of clothing in his arms.

'You down there. Can you catch her?'