

CHAPTER TWO

Not a mile away the snow fell in the High Street, coating the heads of the few shoppers that struggled forth. From the vantage of her flat, Stephanie looked down on the scene and studied the entrance to the Phoenix Tea Rooms across the street below her. It was normally a popular venue at that time of the morning but today no-one appeared to be about to give it his or her custom. It was fortunate in a way that the restaurant that she frequented in the evening did not open in the day, otherwise her friend, the proprietress, would be worrying in much the same way as, she imagined, was the manageress of the tea rooms. Stephanie was hoping against the odds that the snow would stop falling and that it would all clear up before the time came for her to go out for her evening meal. If it did not, the pavements would be very slippery and there were already stories of broken ankles and arms circulating. She had seen at least two people fall over in the street that morning. That was one thing she could not afford - a broken bone. Imagine the effect on her business that would have!

Apart from the matter of whether she would have to face the snow that evening, she had to answer the question of whether she was going out that morning. Imagine having to go out twice in this weather when she could just snuggle up in her flat and keep dry and warm! Of course, had it not been for the weather, she would not have thought twice about the decision. Had it not been for the weather she might not have had to consider whether to go out at all that morning!

An era, a long passage in her life, had come to an end in the past month. It was an era that stretched back to her school days. It was an era in which she had made a friend of her enemy only for her to revert to being an enemy again. It was an era in which she had made a friend only to lose him for ever. No, he was more than a friend. No matter how she fought the thought, he was more than a friend to her. That word would not adequately define the bond that had grown up between them. She had once likened it to being brother and sister, although she now wondered if this had been the whole truth. Then he had acted in blatant disregard of this description. She has now to accept that she thought of him as more than a brother. She would have liked to have thought of him as a lover, in a non-physical sense, although she had little doubt he never saw their relationship in those terms.

It was all at an end now. She had terminated the relationship. He had placed it beyond reinstatement. No, she was not bitter. Eileen might be bitter, but she was just saddened. In so many ways so much of their time and effort had been wasted. There were so many aims and aspirations that had come to nothing, not of hers, but his. Yet she felt the loss of them as if they were her own. All those failures and shortcomings that Eileen could probably catalogue in great detail. So much promised, so many things hoped for, and so little achieved! She felt the pain of every one. He had placed the crown of thorns on her head and she would wear for years to come.

She was not bitter at the thought that she might have changed the course of it all. Had she pushed a little harder at times, or yielded at others, she might have been where Eileen was now, or where she had been. But it was not in her nature to act in ways other than the ways she had done. And she knew that what ever dreams and fancies she might have nurtured, the final decision she had made was the right one. She could never have married Owen and lived with him as wife and husband. She could not live with any man as his wife. There was no future in their relationship and she was right to end it when she did, though she could not help wonder whether she should feel guilty or responsible in some way for what had happened.

Stephanie had no difficulty in believing that Eileen was suffering as a result of all that had happened, and that she would continue to suffer. She doubted that Eileen would realise that the same could quite rightly be said of her. Maybe not in exactly the same way or not necessarily to the same degree. Although it was the choice she had made, she would miss Owen and whereas there was always the prospect that Eileen, a young widow with a house and, Stephanie assumed, a fat nest egg from her husband's life insurance, would re-marry and soothe, even cure, her wounds, she would not. She would carry the un-dispelled memory of Owen with her for many years to come, possibly right to her grave. Eileen would not. She

would meet a pleasant young man, an educated young man, possibly a professional man of some kind. She would marry him and all thoughts of Owen would gradually slip away into dull, dead, lifeless history. That might well happen to Eileen. It would not be her fate.

And with Owen gone, although he did not ever have what could be called a regular place in her life, she felt very alone. There was still Ursula, but she was of another generation, her aunt-elect. Ursula understood when Stephanie had said how lonely she now felt. She said what a shock it would have been to her, any way, to learn that someone of your own age, more or less, someone with whom you had gone to school, had died in an accident. And he seemed such a nice young man, she said, pointing out it supported the adage about the longevity of the wicked. But Stephanie did not have to look at poor Owen to find support for that saying. Her mother, whose behaviour became increasingly outrageous with every advancing year, was example enough!

There was a monster who had caused her pain, a pain that would not go away of its own accord, or be cured. Yet it was within her mother's gift to remove it or largely moderate it, except she would not. And as every day passed, and the two of them became ever more alienated, the chance of her mother administering comfort receded. That thought in itself pained her. That the situation was becoming worse and that the chances of her learning what she so desperately wanted to know were diminishing as each day slipped away, sickened her. Ursula said the two of them should be reconciled and was for ever nagging her to make an approach extending a hand of friendship. How little she understood either her mother or the deep unbridgeable chasm that had opened up between them! It so angered Stephanie that there had been times when she thought she could no longer live in the same town as her mother, but why should she, the one who had been so appallingly ill-treated, abandon the few friends that she had, give up her hand-picked clientele, and move from her nice, cosy, little flat? Had she not suffered enough, made sufficient sacrifices? Yet the woman was there, not necessarily wherever she went, but confronting her occasionally when misfortune brought them together. She could never forget when her mother was always there ready to lay bare her wounds simply by her presence.

There was no hope of them being reconciled. Her mother did not wish it and whereas there might have been a time when Stephanie would have been prepared to have met her halfway, subject to being told all she wanted to know, it was long past. It was another hopeless situation, one which could go on until her mother died and took her secret to the grave, for that was what she would do. Stephanie was certain of it. It was so hopeless, yet her life could have been so pleasant but for her mother.

There was no-one else, she told herself as she looked out onto the snow-carpeted roofs. There were the men she knew, but they were all business acquaintances who she kept firmly at arm's length, if she could describe it that way. In losing Owen she had lost a third of all the people she knew, she really knew or really wanted to know. A second third had been lost years ago. Only Ursula was left.

She would have to go to the funeral. She could take a taxi to the gates, wrap up warm, stand there, perhaps a little distance off, and watch the brief ceremony before the coffin was lowered. Perhaps Eileen would extend a hand of friendship towards her, as there had been that time when they were friends rather than enemies. Perhaps she would not and she would be left, alone, to mourn the passing of one of the few men in the World, possibly the only man in the World, who had meant anything to her.

So what did it entail? She would walk to the vicinity of the graveside, stand in the snow and get cold, and then walk back to the road again! There would seem little chance of getting a taxi back from there so she might have to walk home in that weather. Was it really worth it? Or would it be better to wait until the weather improved and then go privately to the grave and pay her respects? Was she likely to upset Eileen even more by attending today? Oh, on that point she was clear! Eileen might have been married to Owen, but she did not have a monopoly of him. If she wanted to go, she would go!

There was Ursula's reaction to consider, too. If she did not go, should would have to explain why it was she had remained in her flat, secure and warm. It was not as if she was contemplating only going to the shops. And Ursula would say if she could make the effort to

come to the restaurant, she could have made the effort to go to the funeral. But what if she caught a cold? She had read once a short story about someone going to a funeral and subsequently finding it was the preface to going to his. She could not afford to be sick. She would have quite a number of disappointed customers if she were.

There was also the possibility that her mother might go to the service. It seemed a remote possibility, she reassured herself, but her mother had known Owen and she would have met Eileen through the school. She could see her there. Her mother would be greeted with open arms by the widow and invited back to the house in Hayes Close, whereas she, if she went, would be shunned. Where was the justice in that? Had it not been for her they might not have had a home. Nor might they have been married. All these things she had done for Owen, not for Eileen, but Eileen had been the beneficiary. What a poor reward she had received! Her mother had once said that virtue was its own reward. The trouble was, she had no virtue, nor was she virtuous. Oh, she hoped that her mother might not go! That would really spoil the day!

The news of his death had come as a terrible shock. Stephanie had found it very difficult to tell her aunt on that evening. She had found it very difficult initially not to feel guilt as well as sorrow, though she did not admit that to Ursula. She had dreaded the holding of the inquest, fearful of what might be said, but she had attended, sitting at the very back, hoping that Eileen would not see her, though one venomous look informed her that she was aware of her presence. Yet nothing had been said that implicated her and Eileen had not leapt to her feet and denounced her. It had all passed off without incident, dry and business like, an official sanction of his death. Stephanie had returned to her flat with one weight lifted from her heart. That initial fear and guilt was replaced by sorrow, but she did not feel as deeply as she thought she might. Ursula told her it was shock and that she would go into mourning in time. Stephanie wondered if that was so. She would miss Owen and feel sorrow at his passing, but she did not think she would be inclined to mourn him. Black was for the widow and it suited her. She, she would go to the graveside and say "goodbye" and that would be that. That was exactly what she had told Ursula.

Except she had to decide when to go. "Oh!" she said aloud. "I am sure it is getting worse and it is only a quarter to ten. What on earth will I be like at eleven? It would be absolutely stupid to go out in weather like this. Even Ursula would not expect it of me if she knew what it was like. It is impossible!" Yet she could not make a decision. She did not have to make a decision yet. She could wait until at least ten o'clock, or later if she was taking a taxi. She made her decision. She would wait and see what the weather was like then. But that meant filling a quarter of an hour on a morning when every minute appeared to last an eternity.