

## PART FIVE

### CHAPTER ONE

The door to the meeting room suddenly opened and the Vicar's head appeared, beaming. "Is he here yet, Mrs Hiller?" he said in his sing-song voice he normally reserved for the pulpit. Joyce looked around the room and shook her head. "Have I time then to pop out to the little boys' room?" he added.

"I would have thought so," she said, looking up at the clock and wondering if it had stopped. "If that clock is right he isn't due for another five more minutes and he will have done very well if he arrives on time on a day like today."

The Vicar paused, giving Joyce the impression that his mission was not as urgent as she first thought. "Yes," he said, "it is perfectly dreadful. And I see you are reading a novel, Mrs Hiller. Goodness me, it's one by Marguerita Eliza Gascoigne! I remember preaching one of my first ever sermons against that woman or, at least, against her books. There were thought to be quite scandalous in their day. It is a sign of the time that they are no longer considered so. It's competition, my dear Mrs Hiller. Someone always has to be that little bit better, go that little bit further. Most un-Christian. She was an American, wasn't she?"

"No," said Joyce, taking the novel out of her bag and holding it out although the Vicar did not appear inclined to take it from her. "She is, because she is still alive, as English as you or I. And she is titled and has local connections. Her mother founded the Newington Homes."

"Of course," beamed the Vicar, and took the book from her, turning it over to look at the back. "I expect I can predict the plot. Now, don't tell me. There's this beautiful young girl who is extremely poor and is, shall we say, put upon by men; taken advantage of. Then, quite out of the blue she inherits a fortune and a large, derelict, country house. Need I go on?"

"No," said Joyce. "I wouldn't want you to spoil it for me, but I must say you do appear to be remarkably familiar with it. Don't tell me Vicar that you are a man who does not practice what he preaches?"

"We all have to have our little escapes, Mrs Hiller. We men of the Church are but men. Of course, it's so fanciful, the book. Nothing like that ever happens in real life. Am I right?"

"In every respect," said Joyce, returning the novel to its place in her bag. She could have told him that she knew the Author's husband. She could have said so much, but she retained her secrets. It was one of her attributes that made Mr Pennington describe her as "elusive and fascinating".

It was a few minutes after the Vicar had gone off on his mission that a knock on the office door heralded the arrival of the long-awaited visitor. He was younger and better looking than she expected, but then her friend, Moira, had been handsome. No, he did not want something to drink having had one in the station buffet. She indicated a chair and he sat nervously.

"Ah!" said the Vicar on his return and catching her informative nod as he entered the office, "you must be Brown. Did you have a difficult journey getting here?"

"I have known worse," the candidate said. "On balance, I think I did pretty well."

"To get here at all?" said the Vicar. "Yes, indeed. Well I had better not talk to you now as that isn't the form. I'll save that for the interview. I can tell the others that Mr Brown has arrived, can I Mrs Hiller? I won't be upsetting any protocol, will I?"

"No," said Joyce. "None at all. If you would let us know when you are all ready for the first candidate." The young man's eyes turned anxiously towards her. "Oh, yes," she thought. "You are definitely Moira's boy. I can see it in your eyes although I cannot see her defiance. No, there's more of your father about your attitude, but there's no doubt about it. However, I am not going to say anything, not to you, not to Mr Pennington, not even to Michael. I will add you to my little list of secrets."

For a brief moment a wild, crazy, thought flashed through her mind. What would have been the outcome if they had kept in touch with Moira and Arthur, and Stephanie had grown up with this young man? Was it not strange to think they might have come to love each other and married? She would not have minded having Moira's son as a son-in-law although she had no doubt that Moira would have objected. Love would have won through! How different things would have turned out. For a start, there would not have been a funeral that day, although some things, for example her relationship with Michael, would have been the same. "There, young man," she thought, "I might have ended up as your mother-in-law." There was no chance of that happening now.

"Would you like another five minutes to compose yourself?" she asked sweetly. "Travelling can be so stressful, especially on a day like today."

"No, no," he said nervously. "I think I am as composed as I am likely to be. I'd like to get it over and done with." There was so much she could have asked him, so many things she would have liked to have known. Did his mother ever talk about the days before the War when they lived at Dover? Did she ever mention her or Michael? But all those questions would have to wait, and it was quite possible that she might never ask them.

He was conscious of her close scrutiny and growing unsettled. "Very well," she said, rising and exposing her full profile. "I will see if they are ready for you." They were. A few seconds later the door clicked shut behind him and Joyce was left alone with her thoughts once again.

Stephanie went to the window again and sighed. At least it was not snowing any harder but it had not slackened as she hoped it might. It looked as if she would have to call for a taxi and it was more than likely that they were in demand. She could end up having to walk after all and, if that was to be the case, she had better start out straight away. Was it really worth going? That was such a difficult question to answer, but she reminded herself that if she did not go she would regret it. She might get cold if she went, but she was less likely to regret that, no matter who turned up.

The question of the letter continued to play on her mind. What else could she have done but to write it? What else could she have said? How else could she have said what had to be said other than in the way she had? Had she been more condescending, more emotive and less firm, she would not have conveyed her true feelings to him. Oh, that was not it! She had not conveyed her true feelings to him, that was the problem! But the debt was paid and so was the interest right down to the last penny. How surprised and delighted she had been when he had suddenly presented her with a large amount in cash, saying that he had come into some money. With the final repayment there was now no need for him to visit her and she could not allow him to continue. Had she shown the slightest weakness, he would have found a reason, not that he really needed a reason.

She had told him on the occasion of his last visit and noted the disappointment in his face and voice. She had used all the well-worn arguments and extracted a half-hearted acquiescence. She suspected he would not keep to his word. It came as no surprise when he called again at the flat, but she ignored his pleas and refused to see him. When he waited for her outside the entrance she ignored his entreaties and told him it was over. And then he had written to her. Just one letter. She debated what to do with this unwelcomed communication and concluded that there was no point in ignoring it as he would only write again. She had to reply and be firm and forthright although her heart called upon her to be as gentle as she could be.

"It was an accident," she whispered to herself as she wrapped a scarf around her head. "It had to be an accident. That was how the Coroner described it. That is the only possible cause. Owen would never have done anything silly, and it had nothing to do with my letter, nothing at all."

Stephanie knew there was no doubt that Eileen would always think badly of her and not welcome her presence at the funeral. She could relieve any tension by not attending the service but by just going to the graveside. She did not fancy going inside a church in any case, not even for Owen. Ursula had suggested that she should wait a while then go and see Eileen

to see if she could make some amends by explaining everything, but what was there to explain? If Eileen had read the letter she knew all there was to know. If she had not read it, she would not be best served by being told that her husband was seeking to run away with another woman. No, on reflection, it would not be sensible to go and see Eileen. She would go to the funeral and that would be that.

As for men, she resolved that all her future relationships would be solely on a business footing. She would do everything she could to avoid any romantic entanglements by avoiding all contact outside of her regular clients. Well, all except those she met at parties, and those she would restrict to the night of the function. She could allow herself a little latitude, but no more.

The clock struck the half hour. If she was going to go it had to be now. If she delayed any more she would be late. She owed this one thing to Owen. She hesitated for just a moment before crossing the room to fetch her coat. A few seconds later, wrapped as much as she could and enough to render her anonymous to all except those who knew her intimately, she let herself out of the flat and went to look for a taxi.

“They should be here any minute now,” said Eileen, looking anxiously up and down the road from the bay window. A car came into view and for a moment she was ready to announce their arrival, but it crept past.

“Are you sure that it’s all right for me to come with you?” said Mrs Howard, also looking.

“Of course it is. You’ve been very good to me over these last three days. I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

“Don’t you worry about that ducks,” said Mrs Howard. “Now I must just pop back next door and do a couple of things. If they come, just knock on the door. I won’t be a jiffy.”

Eileen followed her into the hallway which was bathed in reddish glow reflected from Owen’s van which was standing in the drive. It would have to go back as when she came to check the papers she found that it was not fully paid for. She had explained to the finance company what had happened and they had made some sounds about her getting some of the money back. They said they would arrange for someone to come and collect it, but that had been three days ago and it was still there. There was no explanation as how it came about that the van was being largely bought on hire purchase or what had happened to the balance of the sum she had drawn from her savings and given to Owen. With all that was going on she had not found the capacity to worry about it. She would try and find out in time and she wondered whether there were many more unpleasant surprises awaiting for her.

When she went into the kitchen she found her handbag open on the table. Clearly she had opened it to find something but she could not remember what. As she was closing it, she saw the letter that had come on that morning and that she had placed there. She had almost forgotten its existence but, her hands trembling, she took it out and opened it. As a small tear formed in the corner of one eye, she read:

Dear Owen,

I have your latest letter but I have to tell you that my position is as it always has been. I do believe you when you say you love me. I have no doubt of your sincerity and I can appreciate that it is with passion and as intense as you describe it. I do have some idea of the torment you must be going through. I am not insensitive to these emotions although there may be times when I appear to be. I am fond, very fond, of you. It might be the case that I even love you, really love you, but I cannot live with you or go away with you. I have my life to lead which is set on a course I cannot readily change and not one I would want you to follow. I have no doubt that your place lies with your wife and son. That is where your future lies and you should remain with them and give them your love, not me. Now that our business is at an end I do not think that we should continue to see or communicate with each other. I know it will be hard for you and please don’t do anything foolish. You will forget me in time. This

is my one and only letter to you. Please do not write to me again as I will not answer. Although I will never forget you, what ever there was between us is now at an end. I am sorry to have to write this letter. Please think kindly of me and forgive me.

Stephanie.

Eileen stood fixed to the spot in the kitchen and stared at the words. It seemed to her to be such a hard, business-like, unsympathetic and cruel letter. There was no term of genuine endearment in it, nothing she thought that would afford the recipient any comfort. How could that woman have been so heartless to write her Owen such a letter? How would she have felt had she received such a letter from someone who adored her? Eileen concluded she must despise her all the more for it.

There was no privacy in death. She had stumbled on a small secret, his secret. Owen had been seeking to leave her and Jonathan and had wanted Stephanie to go with him, to run away somewhere. But it would never have worked out even had she agreed. She was wicked and completely heartless, and it would have ended like this. For a moment she wondered if he was driven by his desire, or a wish to escape the life at Hayes Close. She had not been as kind to him as she might have been and they had quarrelled frequently over her wish to move away. Perhaps that was what had put the idea into his head? No, his life there had not been that bad. She had regrets, she felt sorrow and loss, but she did not feel guilt. If anyone was to feel guilt, it should be Stephanie.

A noise upstairs made her start. It was Jonathan. He probably had dropped something, but it was not that but the realisation that any moment Mrs Howard would be knocking on the front door to tell her the undertaker had arrived. She went over to the gas stove and held the letter over the pilot light, watching the edge curl and the flame take hold as it consumed the poisonous words. As the flame reached her fingers she moved to the sink and released it. It burnt her hand but she did not flinch. She no longer felt pain.

Mrs Howard was at the front door. "I think they're here ducks!" she exclaimed. Two black long cars had stopped outside and a black clad man was diligently making his way up the path towards the door. "Mrs Cross!" he said in a deep, resonant, voice.

Eileen went in search of and found her son. "Now, Jonathan," she said softly. "We are both going to be very brave, aren't we? You are now the man of the house and I am relying on you. You understand?" He gave a cough and nodded. Eileen only half-listened as the undertaker explained the procedure that would be followed during and after the service. She was looking out at the front door at the box that contained all that was left on Earth of the man who used to be her husband. Her most repeated wish had been granted. He had broken with Stephanie forever. She took Jonathan's hand and whispered. "Come along, Jonathan. We are going to bury your father." The front door swung and clicked shut behind her, echoing softly in the hall, and she stepped out into a new, cold, harsh and unfriendly world.

THE END