

CHAPTER THREE

Richard was not the only one to have detected a change in Eileen. First Mrs Brown noticed it and mentioned it to her husband. Then Sandra noticed it and mentioned it to her mother. No-one thought to mention it to Richard, or raise it with Eileen, but very soon a triumvirate began to meet in discreet locations to discuss the latest sign or idiosyncrasy that had been noticed, and try to agree whether the problem was getting worse. It was not long before Eileen became aware of the unusual and, in her view, unwarranted amount of scrutiny to which she was being subjected. The knowledge added to her mental and physical pain she found herself experiencing. For the latter she slipped off secretly to visit a local doctor who, after a short course of drugs, referred her to a specialist at the hospital. Eileen congratulated herself on having intercepted the letter confirming her appointment before its arrival became common knowledge and provoked a further meeting of the inner three, as she thought of them, yet she knew she could not keep it a secret forever.

The mental anguish could not be treated in the same way. She had not been fully able to diagnose its cause, but it was there when she would awake at the end of a long and restless night and would descend upon her at unguarded moments of the day. As a guest in her in-laws' house and having little to do or occupy herself, Eileen had taken to walking when the weather permitted. Sometimes Sandra could be persuaded to go with her, but mostly she found herself walking alone. She soon adopted favourite walks and one was along the top of the chalk cliffs where she had found a pleasant, sheltered and secluded spot where the undercliff had slipped to form a grassy ledge. Once on the ledge, she was sheltered from both the off-shore and on-shore winds, and could sit there, out of sight of, and undisturbed by, passers by on the path, and look out to sea. She had walked the same path with Richard on occasions and her heart had always quickened as they approached her spot, but he had disregarded the ledge, almost as if he was unaware that it was there. Now when she wanted to escape the attentions of the Browns, or needed somewhere to sit at peace and simply think about the things that bothered her, she would make her way there and enjoy its peace and solitude.

She was aware that she shared the ledge with others. They were unseen and the only evidence of their presence was the area of flattened grass they left behind them. Perhaps courting couples came there, or people like her, seeking a haven, but she was sure the majority of walkers passed by, oblivious of the secret. It did occasionally cross her mind that there might be some danger in sitting there. The cliff had slipped once; it could slip again. Richard was always talking about the rate of erosion and the damage caused during what he called the Great Storm. If it slipped again, at the worst she could be trapped, but someone would surely come along and hear her calls above the shrieks of the seagulls. She would have little chance if it fell outwards due to the undermining that Richard talked about, but the risk was, she thought, remote. More likely to be knocked down by a bus, she told herself. Anyway, it might be providential and solve a great number of problems if the cliff did collapse, tumbling her into the dark receptive waters of the sea, not that this was connected to the reason why she liked to sit there.

When she did escape from the house and the silent inquisition, and sit there, as now, and watch the tankers creep from one edge of the horizon to the other, or follow the flight or the seagulls as they soared and plunged before her, she would try to get her thoughts in order. It was not easy. Even trying to think about some things was painful and she never succeeded fully. She would ask herself what it was that caused her so much anguish; what it was that made her hold her breath when her heart raced; that caused that sinking, demoralising, ache in the pit of her stomach. If only she could write it all down in the debit column as she had once the figures for Owen's business. There, she had touched a raw nerve. This sense of betrayal, of him and his son. She had not been faithful to his memory, but when she thought this a voice always reminded her that he had not been faithful to her in his lifetime. It was Richard's voice, or the voice she attributed to Richard. It was the voice, sometimes persuasive, sometimes authoritative, he had spoken with in North Wales. She tried to dismiss it. She had

never seriously harboured any intention of seeking a separation or a divorce, no matter what he did whilst he was alive. And now, how was it she could suddenly decide to put him aside once he was dead and suddenly remarry? I was not a subject that they had ever discussed whilst he was alive, but perhaps he would have wanted her to remarry?

There had been a time when she looked back and examined her memories and she could think only of the instances they had been happy together, despite the difficulties, despite his obsession with that other woman. That was the way she had to describe it, his relationship with her, an obsession. It was not love, not love in the way he loved her or she loved him. It was some fatal madness which had started whilst they were still at school and out of which he had never grown. Yet she considered that she had triumphed in the end. Both times she had triumphed, but there was this nagging doubt that she had really married Richard simply to prevent him from marrying someone else. Did she really love him in the manner she had loved Owen? Had she been true to Owen's memory? Hardly! She had not as much as been to his grave since she had left Bromley and that fact was awful to have to admit to herself. She could imagine it, overgrown, unkempt, and this vision saddened her all the more. It was now a long way away. If she made the trip to visit it would she feel better, or worse?

Two seagulls called loudly, hovering above her head and then swooped down before her and disappeared below the cliff edge. Did they really contain the souls of those who drowned at sea? Had she once read that sailors believe this, or was it albatrosses? Would she end up as a seagull in the next life if the cliff were to collapse and she were to tumble into the sea? And where was Owen's soul now? Was he watching her as she sat there in her misery? How edifying to think that the dead might be able to see everything the living did! She would have to go to his grave. She meandered through a comparison of the two men who were so prominent in her life. When she thought about it, there were similarities, but also marked differences. Both had said they loved her yet both had become possessed with this infatuation for the other woman. There were differences. Owen had been exciting and life with him was eventful, but then he had been the first. Richard had been slower, methodical, and persistent. Could she call him ruthless? Both were, or had been, ruthless in their ways, she thought. And it was odd that both had a connection with the building industry.

She toyed with the memories of her days at school and vividly recalled the sight of the girls who loitered by the bandstand in the park. Owen had been attracted to her then, following her home, defying her parents and asking her out, asking her home. She had gone, but still he heard and responded to the call of the sirens. If that was painful, so too were her memories of Jonathan's illness and of that fateful day she went with Richard to the school Sports Day. Why could she now only remember nothing but the bad things? There must, surely, have been good times, then? Then Richard had suddenly appeared in Rhyl, at Megan's house! She had been amazed, annoyed and confused. She had never expected him to follow her after what had happened, leave alone turn up there. She had never expected to see him again. She was not sure that she ever wanted to see him again. Just when she thought she was recovering and getting over the loss of her son, he appeared. Of course she refused absolutely to see him or talk to him. She shut herself in the little bedroom at the back of the house and wept. Megan went down and asked him to go away, but he did not. Why did he not? On the third day Megan had said that she should go down and either talk to him and ask him in, or call the police. The threat of the latter did not appear to influence him, so she asked him in. No matter how badly she might have felt, about Jonathan or about him and his duplicity, she could not bring herself to set the police upon him, or allow Megan to do so.

They sat in Megan's front room, the room she kept for best and occasions such as this. Just the two of them, provided with a tray of tea and Megan's home-made cakes which were described as "very nice even if I say so myself". After an uncomfortable silence he had spoken quietly. She listened, or half listened, watched but failed to see, this man who had been following so close in her husband's footsteps. His words were soft and calming. It did not seem to matter what he was saying. She could not even recall much of what he had said. A sense of the inevitable, a sense that fate had decreed that history should repeat itself, was overwhelming and defeating her. A period of reconciliation was followed by a brief era of bliss which had acted as morphine to her pain. Perhaps that was what she had been searching

for; someone who could come along and administer to her needs and distract her from the dark, brooding, thoughts that sprung like thorns from her memories. Slowly, under his influence, the pain had subsided and he showed her that she could begin to look forwards rather than backwards. When she was with him, the pain was forgotten, but it had been like that the day he had first taken her out, to the school Sports Day. She had only to think of it and the suffering became even more intense.

Still, he persevered and she started to limp forward on the crutches he provided. Then she could walk, aided at first, then almost without his support. She needed his attention and treatment longer, that was it. Another six months more, maybe a year, and she would have recovered fully, she told herself, but now his attention was gone, diverted elsewhere, consumed by the demands of his father's business and his family who, no doubt, looked upon her as something of an oddity. Perhaps they saw her for what she was, a mental cripple who was being condemned to spend the rest of her life, however long that might be, lame. Yes, she did feel neglected and jealous, but these were superficial wounds. There were still his words; given sparsely at breakfast and after dinner, distributed occasionally at night, more liberal when she could persuade him to walk with her, but what had happened to the feeling and support they had once given her and on which she had come to rely? Did he really love her? Did she, for that matter, really love him, with such fire and passion that Owen had aroused in her. Then, when she considered it, Owen had been unfaithful to her. He had directed his passion and fire to burn elsewhere, to sate another's appetite. Richard would not be unfaithful to her, she knew that. And, maybe, in that the two men were fundamentally different.

Would anything change when they moved into the new house? Her pulse quickened when she thought of it and visualised herself standing in the kitchen, wiping the stainless steel sink with its double draining boards, looking out on the lawn and the flower beds. What a difference to what she faced when she had first married! There would be things to do there, things to occupy her hands and mind without her having to worry about there being no means of heating water, or the electricity not being connected. Perhaps, if the specialist was happy with her examination, they would even be able to start a new family. This was a precious thought, to have another child, one she cherished, one that was clear and fragile, one that, like the best china, she did not get out too often. When she did allow herself to think about the possibility of having children, it gave her great comfort and she was even able to dispel all the negative thoughts she had about Jonathan.

She stood, brushing the grass from her skirt. "This is a precious spot," she thought. "It is one of the few places where I can come and sit and think without being disturbed." Yet, as she started to take the few steps that led her up towards the path, she realised a middle aged, thick-set, man was standing, watching her closely. She was startled by his presence and she stopped, looking anxiously in both directions to see if anyone else was in sight.

"There is no need to be alarmed, madam," he said in a deep, smooth, voice. "I am a policeman."

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, thinking that he might well be a policeman, but he was also a man.

"Nothing. Not a thing. I happened to be passing and I saw you there. You are Mrs Brown, aren't you?"

"Yes?" she said, confused. "How do you come to know my name?" He chuckled.

"The Browns are a relatively prominent family in these parts and we make it our business to know who is who. It saves any misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings?"

"Misunderstandings," he repeated, knowingly. "We wouldn't want to find ourselves arresting the wrong people, not that there's any arresting to be carried out at the present time. But this is a lonely spot, especially for an attractive woman. Are you walking back? May I accompany you?" She thought it was said in the voice he reserved for accompanying people to the station. She would have liked to say "no", as she had not exhausted the range of matters she wanted to think about, but she sensed that she had little choice.

"And you are?" she said, bravely.

"Detective Sergeant Oxer, Ma'am," he said, producing a supercilious grin and a

warrant card which he held briefly under her nose, so close that the image was blurred. “Shall we go?” Later Eileen meditated on her walk back along the path. It had been uncomfortable but uneventful. They had talked or, to be more accurate, she had been asked a series of questions on a wide range of topics; did she like it there; what her plans were; what she thought of the weather; crime in the area; Mr Brown's business; and so on. Looking back it all seemed casual and innocent, but there was something elusive, something she could not quite put her finger on, that made her feel at ease. Perhaps it was that the meeting took place at all!

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