

## CHAPTER 1

**'M**AN THAT IS BORN OF WOMAN hath but a short time to live – he cometh up and is cut down like a flower – in the midst of life we are in death.'

Fiona heard the vicar's voice drone on tonelessly at the head of the grave, without the words registering in her brain. She felt numb. She had felt numb ever since they'd told her of Michael's death. Even now, seeing his coffin lying there in front of her, she couldn't believe it, couldn't take in that he was dead. She felt as if she were a character in a play, not real, watching herself act out a part, something outside herself.

They'd called her brave, a stoic because she hadn't been able to cry. She wished she could cry, then they might leave her alone, stop fussing and worrying over her.

She looked across towards Eleanor, her best friend, standing beside Colin on the far side of the gaping hole. Really, Colin should be here, beside her, supporting his mother, comforting her, but Eleanor had been the one to break down at the service, sobbing heart-breakingly in the church. Fiona had pushed Colin away when he came up to take her arm to lead her towards the graveside. 'Look after Eleanor. She's very distressed,' she'd said, almost implying that she wasn't.

Colin had his arm round Eleanor's shoulders now, awkwardly, as if he felt uncomfortable in the situation, as well he might. Her eyes turned to the other people in this

small, select group, then paused. Who was that young woman standing behind and slightly to Colin's right? Fiona knew everyone else gathered here; mainly neighbours, local people, but she was quite sure she had never seen this young woman before. She was in her twenties, with light brown hair blowing loosely round a pretty, oval face; a dark suit, neat white blouse. She was probably a secretary from Michael's office, Fiona decided. They'd have sent a representative, she supposed. Nice of this girl to come. Perhaps she'd been Michael's secretary once, or he'd helped her in some way. She must speak to her, ask her name and thank her for coming, once this ordeal was over and the wretched vicar had ceased droning on about death and dust and ashes.

When the coffin was finally lowered and the group began to disperse, Fiona was caught up in conversation with neighbours, people she hadn't seen for some time, who all wanted to press her arm, kiss her cheek, express the trite sentiments that people fall back on who don't know what to say in these circumstances. She forgot about the girl until she was in the car with Colin, driving back to Little Paddocks.

'Colin, there was someone at the graveside I hadn't seen before. She was standing just behind you and Eleanor. Did you know who she was?'

'If she was standing behind me I wouldn't have seen her.' Colin was in his logical mode.

'I thought you might have noticed her earlier. You'd have remembered her if you'd seen her, she was rather attractive and about your age.'

Colin sighed. Fiona recognised the unspoken 'match-making mother – even at a funeral!'

'There's no reason why we should know all the people who came today – Dad must have known a great many people through his work.'

'But only local people and a few close friends came to the graveside.'

'Maybe she didn't realise that. Or maybe she had a reason to be grateful to Dad for something.'

'All the same, I'd liked to have asked her name, spoken to her before we left. So many people mobbed me as soon as the vicar stopped, and when I looked round, she'd gone.'

'Curious local. You get them; people who cluster round the church gates for a wedding. There must be those who do the same at a funeral.' Colin's tone was dismissive. Fiona wondered if the funeral had been more of a strain for him than he would admit; he had never been particularly close to Michael but the young took things to heart sometimes.

Mrs Burdett was waiting in the hall by the open front door when their car drew up outside.

'Food's laid out in the dining room, Mrs Latimer.' She thrust a glass of sherry into Fiona's hands. 'I've put drinks in the drawing room. About two dozen coming back, you thought? There's plenty more of everything in the kitchen if need be.'

'Thank you, Mrs Burdett, you're a treasure.' Fiona said, with genuine gratitude. Mrs Burdett came up from the village three times a week as cleaner, but as a widow with

children long left home she was available and willing to be called on to come and help out in an emergency. Michael's funeral, following his sudden and unexpected death, had been just such an emergency.

'Take your hat and coat off before they start arriving, Madam. I'll take them upstairs for you.'

Mrs Burdett's motherly helpfulness was comforting. Fiona obediently took off her coat and handed it, with her hat and handbag, to Mrs Burdett. She paused a moment in front of the mirror, fluffing out her hair and checking her make up. No sign of tears, but there wouldn't be; she hadn't cried. Her hair was immaculate in its elegant chignon, no grey hairs yet among the honey blonde colour, and her skin was smooth and unlined. Not too bad for a fifty-year-old, she thought, turning away and taking a sip of sherry. As she did so, the first of the cars swept up the drive with its cargo of mourners.

There were at least two dozen of them, more, Fiona thought, than she had estimated to have been at the graveside. People can never resist a free drink and some food! She passed among the guests with a plate of Mrs Burdett's dainty canapés in each hand, accepting sympathy, condolences and trite phrases in equal measure. Thank goodness the vicar had declined the invitation to come!

When she wasn't nearby, she had the distinct impression people were treating the event more in the nature of a cocktail party; no one actually mentioned Michael by name, it was merely that her presence seemed to remind some of them that they needed to lower their voices as though

conversing near the bed of someone terminally ill. Fiona found it at first amusing, then irritating.

She went out into the hall, then into the kitchen in the hope of being able to help Mrs Burdett. Perhaps serving coffee might remind some of them that they had stayed long enough. She wanted her home to herself again.

'You've provided too much delicious food,' she told Mrs Burdett. 'They're staying too long. They won't go until it's all finished.'

'I'll start collecting up a few plates. Always works at the village institute dos,' Mrs Burdett smiled. 'You stay here and watch the kettle. Need a bit of peace and quiet at a time like this.'

Fiona heard the sound of the front door opening and wondered if her hopes had been answered and they were beginning to leave. She went out to the hall and saw someone already on the steps outside. It was the stranger from the graveside.

'Oh! I say! Just a moment!' She hurried forward but the door opened wider again and a man came in, blocking her way. He clasped both her hands in his own, smiling down at her.

'Fiona my dear! Can you forgive me? Only just arrived – lost my way and missed the church service altogether.'

She stared up into a face that she hadn't seen for more years than she wanted to admit.

'Simon?'

He drew her towards him, kissing her on each cheek. 'My dear, I had to come. It's been so long – I should have come to see you earlier, but I didn't know if that would have been what you wanted –'

'I'd always be glad to see you, Simon.'

The words sounded conventional but she meant them. As she stood there, her hands still clasped ridiculously in his, as if they were about to begin some movement in a country dance, the years were rolling back. Simon Neville, an old sweetheart from the years before she'd met Michael! Simon Neville, her mind said before she could suppress the thought, the man she should have married instead of Michael.

Fiona looked up at him, his still-handsome face strong featured and healthily tanned. His thick hair was lightly sprinkled with grey but his body had not increased in girth since she'd last seen him. Yes, Simon had worn well.

Over his shoulder she saw the stranger walking down the drive and realised that her last chance of finding out who the girl was, was about to be lost forever.

'A moment, Simon, please.' She withdrew her hands and quickly stepped into the drawing room. To her relief, Colin was standing near the door.

'Colin! That girl – she was here! She's just this moment gone. Run after her and find out who she is, please. We have another guest just arrived – I can't go myself.'

Colin put down his plate, wiped a handkerchief across his lips and strode towards the front door. He barely noticed the

tall, middle-aged man who was standing beside his mother with a look of tender affection on his face.

The girl was already some way down the drive and as Colin hurried after her she paused beside a dark green, open-topped sports car, parked facing the gates.

'Er – excuse me!' For once, his mother had been right. She was a most attractive girl, a real stunner. He felt a little shy, asking her who she was, almost as if challenging her right to have come.

She glanced back at the sound of his voice, but then opened the car door and slipped into the driver's seat. Colin rested his hands on the top of the door to prevent her driving off.

'My mother wanted to thank you for coming,' he said. 'It was much appreciated.'

'That's all right.' She fitted the key into the ignition and Colin realised he was going to have to be quick if he was to discover her name before she drove off.

'I'm sorry – ' he blurted out. 'I – we – I don't know your name. This is embarrassing – '

'It's Anthea.' She smiled at him, a quick, amused glance which might have been sympathy towards his embarrassment or amusement at his awkwardness. Then the key was turned in the ignition, the car sputtered into life and she shot forward down the drive. Colin had time only to take his hands off the door and step back quickly and she was gone.

He walked slowly back towards the house but did not go back inside. Little Paddocks was a large house, set in its own

grounds of some ten acres or so, an elegant gentleman's house that Michael had bought for them some five years ago. Colin didn't care for it much, beautiful as it was. He'd been at university when his parents had moved in, not one of the older foundations that Michael had wanted, but one of the newer, less well-thought-of but more practical establishments. He'd have disliked Oxford or Cambridge, Colin decided, just as he disliked the upper class aura that went with living at Little Paddocks. He wondered if his mother felt the same way.

It had all been Michael's idea to live as though they were upper class county people. Michael had been a snob. Colin had always known that and it had always riled him. They weren't county people, not upper class, not even, probably, truly upper middle class. He knew his mother had come from a quite humble background and suspected that his father had, too, though Michael's background had always been a bit of a mystery. There were no living relatives on that side, and none ever mentioned. Colin had always assumed that his grandparents had died years ago and Michael had been an only child, but now he reflected that he didn't actually know anything about Michael's early life. Certainly, there hadn't been any of Michael's side of the family at the funeral today, but perhaps this Anthea was some sort of cousin they'd never heard of? His spirits rose a little. She certainly had been a stunner. He wouldn't mind seeing her again.

Back in the hall Fiona was getting her breath back after the shock of seeing Simon again after so many years.

'I should have telephoned you first – it was stupid of me to think I could come barging in like this, without warning,' Simon was saying apologetically.

She was suddenly afraid that he might decide he shouldn't have come, and go away at once.

'I saw the death notice in the *Times*,' he continued. 'And I thought – that's Fiona's chap. Then I thought I'd go to the church and afterwards slip away. I didn't know whether you'd want to see me, I mean, so soon. But these damned country lanes –'

'Of course I would have wanted to see you. I'd have been terribly disappointed if you'd gone to the church and not come on here. It's wonderful to see you again after all this time,' Fiona said warmly. 'Won't you come into the drawing room and have a drink, and something to eat?' As she spoke, she was aware that she didn't want to bring him in amongst all those people, having to introduce him, having to explain him. How did one say at one's husband's funeral 'and this is Simon Neville, my first love, the man I really should have married?'

When Simon hesitated, she seized her opportunity, touching him lightly on the arm. 'Come into the kitchen. There's plenty of extra food and drink there and we can talk undisturbed. I think the party will be breaking up soon, anyway.'

'Party?' Simon raised his eyebrows. He followed Fiona into the kitchen. 'Who came to the funeral, then?'

‘Mostly neighbours and local people that I hardly know. One or two friends of mine from the village but mainly, I suspect, they came out of curiosity. We never entertained the locals much and there must be a good many people who would love to see inside the house.’

The long kitchen table was half covered with plates of sandwiches and canapés. Beyond, in the scullery, Fiona could hear Mrs Burdett washing up.

‘Sit down.’ She pulled out one of the wooden kitchen chairs at the bare end of the table, for Simon, and sat down opposite him. She reached for one of the half-empty wine bottles next to her but he shook his head.

‘I’d prefer coffee, if it’s not too much trouble. But these sandwiches – they look delicious. Did you –?’

‘Mrs Burdett, my daily, did all this. She’s a treasure. She’s just made coffee for everyone so I’ll fetch you a cup.’ Fiona went into the scullery, where two large percolators were bubbling on the stove.

‘I’ll take them in coffee ready poured. Easier and quicker.’ Mrs Burdett wiped her hands on a roller towel hanging against the door. ‘Have you had anything to eat yourself, Mrs Latimer? Now, don’t you go neglecting yourself. You need to keep your strength up.’

‘I’m going to eat something in a moment. How could I resist any of your delicious sandwiches? I’ve an old friend, come unexpectedly, so I’m entertaining him in the kitchen. I’ll take two cups of coffee and we’ll have some of the spare food laid out there.’

Mrs Burdett pursed her lips at the idea of Fiona entertaining one of her guests in the kitchen but she was of the old school who knew her place, so made no comment, except to acknowledge Simon's presence with a deferential 'afternoon, Sir' when she brought the tray of coffee cups through the kitchen on her way to the drawing room. She was surprised and touched when he leapt to his feet to open the door into the hall for her, and even glanced ahead to make sure the drawing room door was open as well.

'Wonderful spread, Mrs Burdett,' he murmured as she passed, giving her a glow of pride as she swept into the drawing room. None of the other guests had commented on her catering, even though she could see they'd made considerable inroads into it.

'I can see you've done well for yourself, these last twenty-five years.' Simon spoke sincerely, looking round at the high-ceilinged kitchen, out of the window at the garden, stretching away to woods in the distance. 'This is a beautiful house.'

'Yes. Michael saw that we never lacked for any material comforts.' Fiona's voice was flat and Simon wondered if there had been a slight emphasis on the word 'material'.

'How long have you lived here?'

'Five years. We had a flat in London so this was quite a change. Michael kept a small pied-à-terre there for when he stayed overnight on business. I think he thought the country would be better for Colin than London, not that Colin's been here all that much. Colin's my son. He was hurrying out of the door when you arrived.'

'I did wonder if he was yours. A good-looking chap, same fair colouring as you.'

Fiona felt a flush of pleasure at the thought that Colin resembled her, rather than Michael. She should have wanted him to look like her dead husband, a constant reminder of the man she'd loved and married, but part of her had always been relieved that Colin didn't look at all like Michael or have any of his personality traits.

'Was Michael, er, ill, before – ?' Simon asked delicately, helping himself to several of the sandwiches beside him.

'No. It was all very sudden. That's the odd thing, really. He was always very fit; kept himself in good shape. He built a gym in one of the stables and he used to work out regularly. And he was relatively young, not yet fifty-five. His death was totally unexpected. It seems he had a heart attack in the night and apparently – just went, just like that.' She snapped her fingers.

'My poor dear. It must have been awful, a terrible shock for you.' Simon's outstretched hand covered Fiona's, resting on the table. 'Were you there when – ? Forgive me, you don't want to talk about it.' Simon picked up his coffee cup.

'No, I don't mind talking about it. In fact, it's rather a relief. There hasn't been anyone I could talk to; only Colin, and I couldn't burden him by going on about it. Michael was at his London flat, so I was spared the messiness of finding him dead. I believe someone – a hall porter or concierge, someone like that, broke in and found him, after one of his clients became concerned when he hadn't turned up for a meeting. It was all handled very discreetly. Michael's flat is in

an area where they don't like the thought of anyone lying dead in one of the apartments. They organised an undertaker and took him away before they even telephoned to tell me he'd died. There was a post-mortem, of course, but the result was clear. Doctor seemed to think he might have been pushing himself too far, too fast. Michael always was something of a workaholic, though I'd always thought he could cope.'

Simon smiled fondly across the table at her. 'He wanted you to have the best. And you have. This is far more than I could ever have aspired to; more than I could ever have offered you.'

'If he worked himself to death to provide this, then I ought to feel guilty, but I can't,' Fiona said. 'I didn't want all this, lovely as the house is. Michael's first and only love was money, and what he could buy with it.' She dropped her eyes and said quietly 'I don't think he ever forgave me for the fact that he couldn't buy me.' She looked directly at Simon and added 'though, judging by what I seem to have ended up with, anyone might be forgiven for thinking it had been just that.'

'No! Not you!' Simon took her hands in his. 'You could never have been persuaded against your nature.'

'I was, though.'

'Look, my dear. I ought not to keep you from your guests any longer. I ought to be getting back now, anyway. But don't let's leave it so long next time.' Simon stood up. 'I may see you again, mayn't I? In a week or so, when you've had time – when all this has settled a bit.'

'Yes! I'd like that very much.' He bent to kiss her cheek, a quick, almost boyishly shy kiss. Fiona was touched.

'Simon keep in touch, please,' she begged as she saw him to the door. 'I don't want to lose you again.'

'No fear of that my dear. Not now.' He uttered the last words under his breath, but Fiona heard them.

She watched him walk down the drive, noting his upright figure and long, easy strides. Simon had always been an attractive man and now, in late middle age, he still was, to her at least. She wondered why she had let Michael sweep her off her feet all those years ago, rejecting Simon for him. To be fair, and Fiona wanted to be fair, her marriage had been happy enough, at least in the early years, and Michael had provided for her generously. He had given her Colin, a son she adored, and, even if there had never been the daughter she would have longed to have, Colin was enough. Some people couldn't have children at all, or, if they did, the children turned out a disappointment. She must never forget that, in spite of everything, she had been blessed with a great deal more than most. Fiona sighed and turned back into the hall, shutting the front door. She had no right to wish for more. No one had everything. But sometimes it had seemed that she had too much of the wrong things.

The funeral guests were on the point of leaving. Fiona apologised for neglecting them, but her words were brushed aside. They understood, or thought they understood. Some may have thought she had been overcome, needing time to herself alone; some thought the distinguished looking man

who arrived later but had not been at the service, must have been the family solicitor, requiring her attention. She let them think what they wanted. She thanked them all for coming, thanked them for their flowers, their good wishes, their support. In the end she was thanking them for going.

As the door closed behind the last of them, she turned to Colin. 'Thank God that's over. I thought they'd never go. You fed them too well, Mrs Burdett.'

Out of the shadows Eleanor stepped into the hall. 'I'm going too,' she said. 'Ring me when and if you need me. Right now, all you want is to put your feet up and have a large G and T.'

Fiona blushed. 'Nell – I wasn't including you among them. You know I –'

'Yes, you were. And if I'd done my stuff as a good friend I'd have steered them towards the door a lot sooner. Funerals are always stressful, almost as bad as weddings, always having to make small talk to people you never wanted around in the first place.'

Fiona giggled. 'I like the idea of comparing a funeral to a wedding. Some weddings you must have been to.'

'Well, they are similar. The main character, or characters in the case of a wedding, gets to escape early on, and the hostess is left having to cope with the guests, who invariably stay far too long. Goodbye, Fee dear, call me soon.' She clasped Fiona's shoulders and kissed her briefly, smiled at Colin and squeezed his arm. 'Look after her, Colin. She's all yours now.'

Eleanor opened the front door and slipped through it. They heard her high heels clattering down the steps to the gravel drive.

Almost on cue, Mrs Burdett appeared from the kitchen.

‘Pot of fresh tea for you, Mrs Latimer? Or would you prefer something stronger? Don’t worry about anything, I’ll soon have the place to rights again. Go and put your feet up in the study and I’ll bring a tray along straight away.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Burdett. Tea would be lovely. Come along, Colin, we’ll have a cup of tea and half an hour with our feet up before we even think of doing anything else.’

The study had a comfortable window seat where it was possible to stretch out full length if need be; and an adjustable reclining chair which Michael had bought years ago but rarely used. The room had been described as the study originally and did in fact contain a desk where Fiona wrote letters, and a bookcase full of leather-bound classics, but for years she’d used it as a retreat, a small room where she could escape by herself. The larger rooms sometimes seemed overpowering, especially when she was alone in the house, and in winter they were invariably cold.

Mrs Burdett brought in tea and a plate of buttered scones. She was wise enough not to proffer the remains of the funeral feast, delicious though they’d been. Mrs Latimer had said she would spend half an hour having tea with Master Colin, and by the end of that time all trace of the guests would have been wiped from the drawing room and dining room.

Mrs Burdett, fiercely loyal to her employer, understood Fiona better than anyone realised. She wanted, as far as it was possible, to forget this day ever happened. Not, Mrs Burdett knew, because the funeral had been a sad and poignant reminder of a happy life gone now forever, but because Mrs Latimer was the kind of person who disliked deceit in any form, and would not have cared to spend the best part of the day pretending to a sorrow she did not feel. Mrs Burdett did not count herself as a confidante of Mrs Latimer; it would not have been proper, given their different social positions, but she could read between the lines, pick up signals, understand what was in the air. Mrs Latimer was not distressed by her husband's death; shocked by the unexpectedness, perhaps, but, in the main, little moved.

In the study, Fiona reached for her second cup of tea that Colin poured for her. 'It went off all right, didn't it? Though the vicar was a bit over-enthusiastic, I suppose.'

'I think he'd have preferred it if you'd thrown a mild fit of the vapours and had to be taken to the vestry,' Colin said. 'Stoicism isn't what he's used to. Clearly, he didn't know how to handle it.'

'I couldn't cry,' Fiona said. 'Perhaps I may, eventually, but not yet. Oh, that girl! Did you find out who she was? She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her.'

'Not really. All she said was "I'm Anthea" as though she expected me to know her. Didn't like to admit I hadn't the foggiest who she was.'

'Anthea.' Fiona rolled the name thoughtfully round her tongue. 'No, doesn't mean a thing to me either. Oh, well, I

don't suppose it matters.' She dismissed the girl from her mind, but Colin did not.