

PART ONE

Chapter One

For the first time ever, Kenneth felt truly desperate. Always the rational thinker who could reach solution or compromise when others had given up, he didn't know what to do, how to feel. His mind felt scattered as dust on the wind, whisking into its eddies, curling up and away in all directions, coming to ground unreachably far into the distance. As though it were filled with hornets instead of flesh and bone, his body buzzed; an awful sensation of being in his skin yet out of it. Like it belonged to someone else and he was just passing through. Not remotely violent, right now he was twitching to punch the expression of passive acceptance off his father's face.

Numb due to the cruel truth he had just learned, the younger man paced the length of the room wringing his hands. Herbert sat stiffly in the leather wing chair sipping nerve-settling brandy from a crystal balloon.

"There is nothing you can do to change it." Herbert's voice uncharacteristically timid. "It is as it is."

"If this gets out it will ruin me." His face weighted with shock and disbelief, Kenneth bent forward and rested his fists on the arms of Herbert's chair. "I will lose everything."

And he was right. The most revered politician's career would crumble like chalk in a storm at the slightest hint of scandal, even if it were buried deep among the roots of his family tree. Kenneth had seen it happen.

"How are they going to find out? I'm not going to scream it from the balcony." Nor would he need to. Those prepared to do the screaming would be queued at the door.

"Didn't you love mother?" Kenneth tried to think of a time when his parents demonstrated their love. He'd never seen them kiss or embrace or even utter endearments. The closest Kenneth could describe their relationship was a professional partnership.

"Of course I did." The brief flush of guilt, the downward roll of his eyes, expressed Herbert's uncertainty.

"Then why bed the cook, of all people." Kenneth punched a fist into his palm so hard it stung.

"You need to understand how things were. Your mother had been...ill."

"Drunk, you mean."

"Her dependence increased over time."

"You drove her to it with your faithlessness."

"No, it began with the stillbirths." Herbert's belly clenched as he dredged the aged quagmire of private memory. "After the third she stopped going out and having friends in. Said everyone was sneering at her; calling her unfit to be a mother." He stood and went to the hearth, hoping the fire could warm that cold, bleak place inside him. "I swear, son, they weren't." Tapped his head. "It was all in her mind, but she convinced herself God had turned against her. It was then she started taking drink." Herbert wanted to explain how she would have to be half drunk to let him near her. But she was dead and the past couldn't be altered. There would be no benefit to telling Kenneth how he'd been forced to wheedle and beg for his right. "She medicated herself into oblivion with gin and pills. I wanted her to go to a convalescent home, but she wouldn't admit she had a problem. Deep down I think she knew, and was frightened that once she went in they wouldn't let her out again." Herbert crossed his arms on the mantelpiece and rested his forehead. "She drank to ease her heartache; to sleep; to face each day. There was always an excuse. Talking to her mostly ended in argument, or threatening to kill herself. You can't know what it is like with that hanging over your head. Not knowing whether you will wake one day to a corpse." Herbert turned to face Kenneth, the look in his eyes describing a long, lonely sadness. "She told me to sleep in another room and had a lock fitted to her door."

"You might have told me this sooner."

"Nothing could be changed by doing that."

“So you just let it slip into the past to be forgotten?”

“That was her decision. By exiling herself she bore the burden alone.”

“And you left her to it and started fucking the cook.”

“I know you’re angry, but please don’t speak to me that way.”

“However you put it, you were unfaithful. Admit it.”

“I was...satisfying a need. I never loved the girl like I loved your mother. Nobody was supposed to get hurt. Nobody was ever supposed to know.”

“But now I do. I know I’ve you to thank that I’m a...bastard.” The awful word a burr in his throat. “The son of a cook. A whore!”

“She was no whore. She was a dear young thing.”

“Just how young was she when you...?”

Burning with shame, Herbert looked down at his slippers. “Fourteen.” Only a child.

“Superb! Mother throws you out of the bedroom so you take satisfaction with a child, who has your bastard son, whom you don’t have the decency to tell until now?”

“It was what your mother wanted. She couldn’t bear to live with your pain if you found out before she was...gone.”

Herbert shook with exhausted grief as he remembered that awful day...

Something he rarely did, he’d taken her brunch upstairs. She never rose early enough for breakfast, let alone having the stomach for fried egg and blood sausage. Hands full, he tapped on the closed door with the toe of a shoe, bothered that he had to beg permission to enter a room in his own house, annoyed that she didn’t answer. He screwed his nose at the vile odour tainting the darkness inside. Putting the tray on the bedside table he pulled back the black velvet curtains.

Streaming across the room the mid-morning sun lit her face. From the window he could see her skin frosty white. Purple-black ringed her creamy eyes, which seemed to stare an accusation at him. Caked with froth and vomit, her lips were drawn in a tight grimace. Barely able to catch his breath, it was the most heart-rending sight Herbert had ever seen.

One hand held a bottle. There were three empty pill vials. A note pinned to the breast of her nightgown confirmed her suicide served one purpose. It simply said: ‘You can tell him now’.

That was eight weeks ago. Two long sleepless months that seemed like a millennium, of which he had lived every day in dread of telling Kenneth. Yet there was a second truth needing to be divulged as a result of the first. Herbert had agonised over how to deliver it. Hard enough confessing adultery. Such a disgusting word. And given how his son had just received this, Herbert knew the second would devastate.

Kenneth’s voice brought him back to the moment. “So, how did you hide the cook’s pregnancy?”

“I...we sent her away for a while. To stay in the country.”

“Mother approved?”

“It was your mother’s idea, and that she pretend to be with child. We used a pillow under her petticoats. When you were born, we paid the girl a lot of money.” Herbert believed their deal had been fair. “It was unpleasant at first; she didn’t want to give you up. But we had an agreement. We had already paid her and she had to honour her side. Eventually she saw that it was for the best. She knew she couldn’t raise a child alone. The money was far more practical.”

“Has she a name?”

“Molly.” The word he had moaned into her neck rolled off Herbert’s tongue like a well-rehearsed love-whisper.

Kenneth’s gut squirmed. “Molly!” A commoners’ name. “And what was the price on my head that convinced your Molly to sell me like a side of mutton?”

“We would have paid any price.” Herbert never told his wife how much Molly tried to extort for her baby, and her silence. What Herbert paid was enough to keep her comfortable for life. If she hadn’t taken it, he told her would disavow paternity and throw mother and baby out on the street.

He had to keep his philandering a secret from the exclusive society circle around which his family revolved. For that circle enjoyed the membership of the Stokes's bankers, who managed the money that kept the family so comfortably. What Kenneth didn't know about the family fortune was that Herbert's father had bound his will, all Stokes estates and monies, with a codicil. In the event of illegitimacy the bastard offspring and its parent would be disinherited and many millions of pounds would revert to the old man's favourite charities. Not even Herbert's wife knew about this. As Herbert questioned the correctness of this moment to tell Kenneth, the secret roiled inside him.

"I'm surprised mother let you bring your love child into the house let alone raise it as hers." Yet it did explain his parents' arms-length relationship. The baby was his mother's leverage.

"After so many failures she was desperate for a child and would have given anything, but settled on keeping the secret. She promised to love you like you had come from her own..." Unable to say the word, Herbert touched his belly.

"So, you did this noble thing just for her."

"I was hoping it would give her a reason to stop her drinking and become a wife again."

"You mean, start giving you sex again."

"That's unfair. I missed her companionship too."

"So you thought buying her a baby would bring her back?"

"We agreed to it. You're making this harder than it need be."

Grabbing Herbert by the lapels of his smoking jacket, Kenneth shook him... "I'm making it hard?" ...then shoved him away. "I'll tell you what's hard. When everyone finds out I'm a bastard. The son of a cook, for God's sake. You know how hard I've worked to get where I am? I'm respected in the House. That is, until they find out I'm a bastard. Then it won't just be hard. It will be downright impossible!"

"But they won't-"

"Don't be naïve! Of course they will!" Kenneth flung his hands. "I've seen them fall. Men of honour ruined by gossip. I guarantee one way or another it will get out. And what decent woman would want to marry a bastard." He moaned. "Or have my children. Your grandchildren?"

"I'm sorry, my son."

"At least I am your son." He pressed his fingertips against closed eyelids. "So, where is she, my real mother? Still alive?"

"I...ah...I...don't know."

"What?" Fire erupted in Kenneth's bowels.

"She went away. To Australia. Just after you were born. We paid her passage one way."

"You don't know where she is now?"

Looking down at his feet, Herbert shook his head.

Short of breath and feeling ill, Kenneth sat down.

"We...sort of...lost touch. She was practically illiterate. Her employer helped write her letters. She was homesick. She hated Australia and wanted to come back. We wrote telling her to stay there, offering more money. Her letters stopped, then we received a note saying she'd...left her employment and was coming back."

"So she's here somewhere, with this big ugly secret that will ruin my life?"

"And mine." Herbert's chest tightened as he imagined his friends the bankers dragging him out of his home and hurling him down the front steps.

"You ruined your own. I don't give a jot for yours now."

"Son, don't say that. Of course you do."

"Yes," Kenneth confessed quietly, then jabbed a finger at Herbert. "Because when you go down, and you will, so do I."

Herbert could almost hear the sniggers of derision.

"What shall we do?"

"We must find this cook, this...Molly."

"And..."

"And silence her, father. Silence her."

