

# *To the End of Her Days*

## *Chapter 1*

**E**MOTIONS AT A FUNERAL. Do they run especially high at such a time? Jessica wondered. Or are they always bubbling away inside us, masked by the dull pressures of ordinary life? Ian's death had been so long coming that its arrival had been as much of a relief as a sorrow. It had certainly been a blessing to him: His last words had been, "Thank God for ...!" She remembered how his head had sunk into the pillow, denting it more than gravity alone could have managed, as if Death itself were pressing him down with unseen hands.

Thank God for what? How would he have concluded his little prayer?

"... for you, my darling"? It would be nice to think so.

A cold eddy of wind stirred the newly fallen leaves, showering them into the open grave. Flecks of russet on the pine.

She found it hard to grieve now, perhaps because she had grieved so much over the past two years — watching him slowly, slowly die. How could anyone grieve for a death that had finally come as such a mercy?

*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust ...* She knew the words from other funerals. She did not want to hear them now, not as individual words that made sense. All she desired was the comforting murmur of Reverend Meecher's rich, done-it-all-before cadences; his was a drone you could lean on.

God, how she longed for someone to lean on again!

There was a sudden, startling pressure against the inside of her thigh. She looked down in surprise and saw it was only young Toby, drawing to her side, clutching her tightly, leaning his tousled head against her hip. Guy, now the man of the family — as Ian had warned him he would be — glanced up at her. "Shall I make that brat behave himself?" his eyes asked.

Sarah, two years his senior, became aware of this unspoken dialogue and took a step nearer her mother — enough to get her elbow just in front of Guy's.

Jessica managed a feeble smile and shook her head at both of them. Then she slipped her hand around Toby's shoulder and held him tight against her.

It was not enough. How could she ever do enough for her three young children at a time like this? She squatted and murmured in his ear: "It's all right to cry, darling."

Ben Calloway cleared his throat; he clearly did not approve. Always a stickler for good form. She could imagine the talk over the bar at the Mouse

Hole that evening: “She bent down and kissed him — forced the poor little cooze to blub. She’ll molly-coddle those boys till they’re spoiled — you’ll see.” On the other hand, they would approve of Guy’s stoical coolness; they would see it as a good augury for his future. Sarah’s fate would not concern them for a few years yet awhile.

Toby did not oblige Ben Calloway, nor his customers; indeed, he pulled himself away and stood alone, between her and his older siblings, head down in a brooding, almost Napoleonic stance. Often the best way to stop him from doing something was to encourage him to do it.

The moment she had dreaded most of all arrived, when the first shovelful of shale hit the coffin; but she had dreaded it so much as to rob it of its power to grieve her. Muscles she had not realized were stiff now relaxed all down her spine. Friends’ eyes were surreptitiously upon her. She acquitted herself well. Brave little woman.

Why was she suddenly so sensitive to the opinions of others? Because she was now alone — without Ian’s reputation to hide behind?

And what would Ian’s reputation be when people knew how little money he had left them?

Her heart beat now to the rhythm of questions about things she had never had to ponder before — things that would now rule her life entirely.

David Carne touched her elbow gently. Time to go.

She did not like this modern custom of leaving the grave side after the sexton had tipped a few symbolic shovels of clay on the coffin; it had come in — understandably enough, she supposed — during the Great War. But to her it still seemed a discourtesy, not least to the departed. “You go.” She smiled at him and inclined her head toward the children.

“You’re sure?” His gaze was full of concern. From the look of her he must be thinking the sleeping draught he’d prescribed for her hadn’t worked; if he asked, she’d confess she hadn’t touched it. But only if he asked.

“Sure. Listen, children, you can go to the car with Uncle David if you like. I’m going to stay on here for a while. I shan’t be long.”

People took it as permission to leave. Some bowed gravely; some spoke the commonplaces of an impossible solace and pressed her hand. Alone at last she gestured to the sexton that he was to continue. Two gravediggers appeared from the lee of nearby gravestones; one took out a packet of Woodbines but put it back when he realized she intended to stay.

There were certain memories she had stored against this moment — a swift review, as it were, of all that was now being interred in this Cornish hillside (appropriately named Mount Misery). There was her first meeting with Ian, back in 1908, on the Curnows’ tennis court ... the wedding at St Mary’s when she said “... take you, Ian Philip” instead of “Ian Patrick” ... the honeymoon at Tintagel when it rained non-stop and her friends had grinned and said, “Still, I don’t suppose you noticed!” ... and the birth of Sarah, when she had nearly

died ... and the time when ...

It didn't work. These moments, which she had hoarded like gold to offer him at this most symbolic moment of their parting, simply refused to come alive for her. The images were there all right, but it was as if they recalled events she had forgotten — as when she turned over the pages of an old diary and read about who did what on some long-ago occasion.

Also the motion of the gravediggers distracted her — men in their fifties who had wielded the long-handled Cornish shovel all their lives. They knew how to make it almost effortless, not simply in appearance but in fact, as well. Their elbows hardly ever left their sides; their knees were behind their wrists at every dig and thrust; their backs were never unsupported. If there was ever a ballet in which the dancers used shovels (and watching them Jessica thought there ought to be), these men could teach Nijinsky himself to perform it.

The pleasure of observing their unconscious show intruded on her grieving. As soon as the coffin was decently covered, she turned and left them. And then, as she picked her way carefully down toward the gate, it was as if the floodgates opened and all those golden memories began to return without effort — and without that eerie feeling they had happened to someone else, or in a forgotten time. They flickered past her mind's eye too fast to catch in words — but it was all there, the whole of their brief time together. Twelve years of a marriage — two of idiotic bliss, four of comfortable happiness, four of war, and two of a lingering death-in-life whose sands had finally run out last Wednesday.

The cloying reek of unburned motor spirit from overchoked engines hung on the autumnal air as the mourners clattered off down the winding lane toward Penzance. The hearse led the way, for other coffins were waiting in other houses of sorrow, down there in the town. Other graves lay open here, other griefs tarried in other hearts, awaiting the same quietus. Only the children's "Uncle" David remained, dear kind man that he was — and a far better uncle to them than Ian's brother-in-law had proved to be. He stood behind them, one hand on Sarah's shoulder, the other on Guy's, with Toby in between, leaning against him. The boys could accept from him the tangible comfort they were now too manly to take from her. A pang of jealousy twisted inside her but she swiftly quelled it. They needed a man's influence now, and Uncle David, childless himself, would be only too eager to supply it.

She tried to feel ashamed that, with Ian's grave not yet filled, she could think in such calculating terms. *But if not me, then who?* she asked herself. *I am all they have now.*

"Get in the car," she called out. "You'll catch your deaths out there."

She saw David's eyebrows rise at her use of that particular idiom at this particular moment. He ushered the three of them into the back and turned to wait for her as she walked the last thirty-odd paces to the gate.

"I wheeled him up here in August," she said as she came within easy

speaking distance. “He picked that spot.”

She remembered then that she had already explained all that to David.

“Really?” he responded, as if it were news to him. He turned and stared over the roof of the car at the unusually tranquil waters of Mount’s Bay.

He still had his back to her when she reached the gate. She leaned her forehead against it, welcoming the chill touch of the iron. She closed her eyes and murmured, “Those cliffs!”

“Permanence,” he said. He had an uncanny way of knowing what she meant, even when she merely hinted at what was on her mind. “It’s an illusion,” he added. “Bits of them are falling into the sea all the time.” After a pause he went on, “You didn’t take your sleeping draught last night, did you.” It was not a question.

She opened the gate and came out of the graveyard. “I fully intended to. But it seemed like treachery — with Ian down there in the drawing room.”

“You sat up all night.”

“Not for the first time by any means.” She slipped her arm in his, as if she needed steadying over the two or three paces to the car. She was determined not to look over her shoulder; how Ian had hated lingering farewells. “We must hurry now. They’ll all be waiting for their tea. The funeral tea!” She made it sound ominous. “I only hope Daisy remembered to slip out for some mustard.”

The moment she was in the car, while David was going round to the driver’s side, she turned to the children and, deliberately using Ian’s vocabulary, said, “Well, brats! Your father would have been proud of you, the way you’ve acquitted yourselves today. Actually, I don’t know why I say ‘would have been.’ I’m sure he *is* proud of you, wherever he might be at this moment.” She smiled and added, “Free of his pain at last.”

They smiled back, dutifully accepting her attempt to comfort them, which, in their immature selfishness, they probably did not need. What *did* they need? she wondered. They would never dream of telling her, but God help her if she failed to give it!

“The bay’s as calm as I’ve ever seen it,” David said as he let off the brake. They started to freewheel down the slope.

The mechanism protested as he engaged gear. She remembered how Ian had always winced whenever he’d seen David get into the car — which, in his case, had been a more-than-daily sight, since their two back gardens marched side-by-side and David was a busy doctor with a large rural practice between Penzance and Land’s End.

He let out the clutch and they came to a juddering halt. The youngsters were thrown against the front-seat backs; their mother, half ready for some such occurrence, had braced her feet against the valance and her elbow on the dash.

David sat frowning at the steering wheel. “It’s only just been serviced,” he said. “That idiot Jones at the garage!” His gloved fingertip ran a gauntlet of

checks on the remote chance that the fault might be his — the clock, the oil gauge, the ignition key, the reserve-tank tap; it came to rest on the lever that released the sprag designed to prevent the car from rolling backward on a hill climb. He was about to give it an experimental tweak when he saw Jessica shaking her head.

“No?” he asked.

“No, David.” She pointed at the gear handle. “You’re in reverse.”

He cleared his throat and pulled a face at the two boys. “It keeps moving about,” he complained as he engaged it uncertainly in a new position. “Is that it?”

She nodded.

“There so much *leash* in these gearboxes.” He produced the technical term with pride.

Jessica heard Guy draw breath to say “lash.” She turned and shook her head at him, unseen by David.

This time the engine “caught the spark,” as he put it, and they settled down for the brief ride home — insofar as anyone could settle at all when David was at the wheel.

“I should hire you as my driver,” he said ruefully.

After a pause she replied, “Well, I’ll have to do *something* now. There’s no doubt about that. The house is just about all we have.”

He glanced sharply at her.

She arched her eyebrows and nodded.

He gave his head a barely perceptible tilt in the direction of the children.

“We must put on our thinking caps,” he said. “After the funeral tea.”

“Oh, David!” She reached out impulsively and squeezed his arm. “You’ve been so good to us — but you’ve got your own practice to run. You can’t afford ...”

“I can afford a locum — which is what I’ve done for this one day, at least. Make the most of it.”

“But what about Estelle? Surely she won’t be ...”

“It’s not one of her brightest days,” he said offhandedly. But his casual tone was belied by the way he gripped the steering wheel and stared fixedly at the road ahead.

A sense of foreboding settled on Jessica’s spirit. Precisely what perturbed her, though, she could not say. It had something to do with invalid husbands, like Ian, and invalid wives, like Estelle, and the fact that they posed different sorts of constraint upon their respective spouses.

Also, of course, the restraint imposed by an invalid husband — in her particular case — had now gone.