

1

STEPHANIE



Gordon Edgley's sudden death came as a shock to everyone – not least himself. One moment he was in his study, seven words into the twenty-fifth sentence of the final chapter of his new book *And The Darkness Rained Upon Them*, and the next he was dead. *A tragic loss*, his mind echoed numbly as he slipped away.

The funeral was attended by family and acquaintances but not many friends. Gordon hadn't been a well-liked figure in the publishing world, for although the books he wrote – tales of horror and magic and wonder – regularly reared their heads in

the bestseller lists, he had the disquieting habit of insulting people without realising it, then laughing at their shock. It was at Gordon's funeral, however, that Stephanie Edgley first caught sight of the gentleman in the tan overcoat.

He was standing under the shade of a large tree, away from the crowd, the coat buttoned up all the way despite the warmth of the afternoon. A scarf was wrapped around the lower half of his face and even from her position on the far side of the grave, Stephanie could make out the wild and frizzy hair that escaped from the wide brimmed hat he wore low over his gigantic sunglasses. She watched him, intrigued by his appearance. And then, like he knew he was being observed, he turned and walked back through the rows of headstones, and disappeared from sight.

After the service, Stephanie and her parents travelled back to her dead uncle's house, over a humpbacked bridge and along a narrow road that carved its way through thick woodland. The gates were heavy and grand and stood open, welcoming them into the estate. The grounds were vast and the old house itself was ridiculously big.

There was an extra door in the living room, a door disguised as a bookcase, and when she was younger Stephanie liked to think that no one else knew about this door, not even Gordon

himself. It was a secret passageway, like in the stories she'd read, and she'd make up adventures about haunted houses and smuggled treasure. This secret passageway would always be her escape route, and the imaginary villains in these adventures would be dumbfounded by her sudden and mysterious disappearance. But now this door, this secret passageway, stood open, and there was a steady stream of people through it, and she was saddened that this little piece of magic had been taken from her.

Tea was served and drinks were poured and little sandwiches were passed around on silver trays, and Stephanie watched the mourners casually appraise their surroundings. The major topic of hushed conversation was the will. Gordon wasn't a man who inspired, or even demonstrated, any great affection, so no one could predict who would inherit his substantial fortune. Stephanie could see the greed seep into the watery eyes of her father's other brother, a horrible little man called Fergus, as he nodded sadly and spoke sombrely and pocketed the silverware when he thought no one was looking.

Fergus's wife was a thoroughly dislikeable, sharp-featured woman named Beryl. She drifted through the crowd, deep in unconvincing grief, prying for gossip and digging for scandal. Her daughters did their best to ignore Stephanie. Carol and

Crystal were twins, fifteen years old, and as sour and vindictive as their parents. Whereas Stephanie was dark-haired, tall, slim and strong, they were bottle-blonde, stumpy and dressed in clothes that made them bulge in all the wrong places. Apart from their brown eyes, no one would guess that the twins were related to her. She liked that. It was the only thing about them she liked. She left them to their petty glares and snide whispers, and went for a walk.

The corridors of her uncle's house were long and lined with paintings. The floor beneath Stephanie's feet was wooden, polished to a gleam, and the house smelled of age. Not musty exactly but... experienced. These walls and these floors had seen a lot in their time, and Stephanie was nothing but a faint whisper to them. Here one instant, gone the next.

Gordon had been a good uncle. Arrogant and irresponsible, yes, but also childish and enormous fun, with a light in his eyes, a glint of mischief. When everyone else was taking him seriously, Stephanie was privy to the winks and the nods and the half-smiles that he would shoot her way when they weren't looking. Even as a child she felt she understood him better than most. She liked his intelligence and his wit, and the way he didn't care what people thought of him. He'd been a good uncle to have. He'd taught her a lot.

She knew that her mother and Gordon had briefly dated (“courted”, her mother had called it), but when Gordon had introduced her to his younger brother, it was love at first sight. Gordon liked to grumble that he had never got more than a peck on the cheek, but he had stepped aside graciously, and had quite happily gone on to have numerous torrid affairs with numerous beautiful women. He used to say that it had almost been a fair trade, but that he suspected he had lost out.

Stephanie climbed the staircase, pushed open the door to Gordon’s study and stepped inside. The walls were filled with the framed covers from his bestsellers and shared space with all manner of awards. One entire wall was made up of shelves, jammed with books. There were biographies and historical novels and science texts and psychology tomes, and there were battered little paperbacks stuck in between. A lower shelf had magazines, literary reviews and quarterlies.

Stephanie passed the shelves which housed the first editions of Gordon’s novels and approached the desk. She looked at the chair where he’d died, trying to imagine him there, how he must have slumped. And then, a voice so smooth it could have been made of velvet:

“At least he died doing what he loved.”

She turned, surprised, to see the man from the funeral in the

overcoat and hat standing in the doorway. The scarf was still wrapped, the sunglasses still on, the fuzzy hair still poking out. His hands were gloved.

“Yes,” Stephanie said, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. “At least there’s that.”

“You’re one of his nieces then?” the man asked. “You’re not stealing anything, you’re not breaking anything, so I’d guess you’re Stephanie.” She nodded and took the opportunity to look at him more closely. She couldn’t see even the tiniest bit of his face beneath the scarf and sunglasses.

“Were you a friend of his?” she asked. He was tall, this man, tall and thin, though his coat made it difficult to judge.

“I was,” he answered with a move of his head. This slight movement made her realise that the rest of his body was unnaturally still. “I’ve known him for years, met him outside a bar in New York when I was over there, back when he had just published his first novel.”

Stephanie couldn’t see anything behind the sunglasses – they were black as pitch. “Are you a writer too?”

“Me? No, I wouldn’t know where to start. But I got to live out my writer fantasies through Gordon.”

“You had writer fantasies?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Oh. Then that would make me seem kind of odd, wouldn’t it?”

“Well,” Stephanie answered. “It would *help*.”

“Gordon used to talk about you all the time, boast about his little niece. He was an individual of character, your uncle. It seems that you are too.”

“You say that like you know me.”

“Strong-willed, intelligent, sharp-tongued, doesn’t suffer fools gladly... remind you of anyone?”

“Yes. Gordon.”

“Interesting,” said the man. “Because those are the exact words he used to describe you.” His gloved fingers dipped into his waistcoat and brought out an ornate pocket watch on a delicate gold chain.

“Good luck in whatever you decide to do with your life.”

“Thank you,” Stephanie said, a little dumbly. “You too.”

She felt the man smile, though she could see no mouth, and he turned from the doorway and left her there. Stephanie found she couldn’t take her eyes off where he had been. Who was he? She hadn’t even got his name.

She crossed over to the door and stepped out, wondering how he had vanished from sight so quickly. She hurried down

the stairs and reached the large hall without seeing him. She opened the front door just as a big black car turned out on to the road. She watched him drive away, stayed there for a few moments, then reluctantly rejoined her extended family in the living room, just in time to see Fergus slip a silver ashtray into his breast pocket.