

The Loner

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PART ONE



Blackburn, 1955

The Road to Ruin

CHAPTER ONE

SHE MADE A ghostly figure as she silently wended her way through the dark, shadowy streets.

Late again, she thought. But there was little regret as she recalled the fun-filled evening, with good company and a man's arms about her. Why should she feel guilty? What was so wrong about her having a good time? She was still relatively young and vibrant. The men liked her and she liked them, and there was more to life than sitting at home and being a good little wife. Life was too short for that.

As she turned into Derwent Street, she thought of young Davie. Only then did she feel ashamed. She hoped he wasn't waiting up. She didn't want to see the sadness in his eyes when he saw her arrive home at this late hour, giddy with booze and caring for nothing or no one, except him, her darling son.

'You're a bad woman, Rita Adams,' she told herself. 'You should have been home hours ago.' She

JOSEPHINE COX

gave a small, nervous laugh. 'There'll be sparks flying, you'll see.'

Her unsteady footsteps echoed eerily against the pavement as she continued her way past the row of terraced houses. At this hour, most people were in bed and only one house was lit up. This was her home. This was where her family would be waiting and watching. She thought of her child again, and the guilt was cutting, 'Davie's a good boy. He doesn't deserve a mother like you.' There were times when she hated herself.

Shivering in the cold night air, she clutched the lapels of her coat and drew it tighter about her. 'Remember now,' she muttered, 'you've spent the evening with your old friend, Edna.' Such lies, she thought. Such badness. She reached her gaze towards the twitching curtains and saw the shadowy figure of a man. 'He's waiting for you,' she whispered nervously. 'Best not let him guess what you've been up to.' She giggled. 'Best have your story good and ready.'

Each time she had a different excuse, and each time she became a better liar. Tormented, she thought of her long-suffering husband, and her ageing father whose house they lived in. But it was her son she mostly feared for: Davie was a fine and loving boy who did not deserve a mother like her. These three wonderful people were her family and she loved them with a passion, and God help them, they loved her too; more than she deserved.

THE LONER

After an evening of laughter and drink she remembered how it had been, in the back alley, the thrill of being in the arms of a stranger. She didn't know his name, nor did she want to. They simply met, talked and laughed, shared a moment of frantic excitement, and then he went on his way.

No money ever changed hands on such occasions. It was the excitement, that was all she craved. Brief and sordid, the encounters meant nothing to her. She adored her husband; she cherished her family. But sometimes, for some mysterious reason that she didn't understand but was powerless to resist, Rita Adams followed the urge to abandon her responsibilities and lash out at life.

If she lost control, it wasn't her fault she told herself – *it was not her fault*. Life was wonderful, and then it became too mundane, and then she began to wander. But it was wicked. *She* was wicked; a loose and shameful woman. And afterwards, she was always sorry. But 'sorry' was never enough. She knew that.

Having searched for a plausible excuse for coming home so late, Rita had hit on the idea of Edna Sedgwick. She had been meaning to go and see the old dear for some long time now, and what was more, Don knew that. He was aware that her old friend had been poorly. She'd tell him that she'd rushed round there when she heard that

JOSEPHINE COX

Edna had worsened . . . and had spent more time with her than she should have.

Plain and outspoken, with a mop of bleached hair, Edna had been a good neighbour, and when she moved away, the whole family had missed her. It was the most natural thing in the world for Rita to go and see the sick woman.

Surely her Donny wouldn't argue with that?

Rita felt a pang of guilt at using Edna as an alibi to lie her way through this night – not only because she had promised not to lose touch, but somehow, two long years had passed since Edna and Fred had left the street, and Rita had never found the time to pay her old friends a visit.

Her part-time job at Michelle's Hair Salon, doing all the perms and the rest of it, kept her occupied. It was murder on the feet though, she thought, fishing for a cigarette in her handbag. Somehow, she managed to strike a match and light it. Taking a deep drag, then stumbling on, she said loudly, 'I will come and see you soon, Edna mate, I really will. I'll be on your doorstep tomorrow, an' that's a promise.' A hollow promise, she knew.

In that moment, between three and four a.m., she felt as though she was the only person in the whole world. But then suddenly, it was as if this world was awakening; house lights were going on as people got ready for early shifts, and dogs were let out to relieve themselves against the lamp-posts. Best get home, Rita thought, quickening

THE LONER

her steps. Falling this way and that, she found it highly amusing. 'Yer drunken beggar, our Reet,' she giggled. 'Stand up straight, will yer.'

Squaring her shoulders, she pushed on, one hand steadying herself against the walls of the houses and the other keeping her coat tight about her.

In the distance, she could hear the faint clatter of horses' hooves against the cobbles. That would be Tom Makepeace, on his way to the Co-op Dairy depot to deliver his milk churns from the farm and to collect the crates of bottles for his round. Tom knew all and sundry hereabouts, and everyone liked the man, Rita included. Her son and Tom's daughter Judy were the best of pals.

The clattering grew louder until he was right there beside her. 'Good God, Rita love, what are *you* doing, wandering the streets at this time o' the morning?' he asked, reining the big horse to a halt. With a gruff manner and his homely face worn by the elements, Tom was in his mid-forties and as decent a man as could be found anywhere. Like most folks he had heard the rumours that circulated about Rita, though he had learned never to make hasty judgment. All the same, he suspected she would have a plausible lie in answer to his question.

'I've been to see Edna Sedgwick,' she fibbed. 'Got talking – you know how it is.'

'Oh, aye, I know how it is, and I heard she'd not

JOSEPHINE COX

been well. Has she improved at all?' Tom knew something about Edna that Rita obviously didn't, but he played along with her lies.

Anxious to get home, Rita cut short the conversation. 'Oh, yes, she's a lot better, thank God . . . only I spent more time with her than I should've. Got to be getting home now.' Moving on, she made every effort to walk with dignity, but her head was whirling inside and her feet seemed to go every way but forwards. Instead of sobering up, she felt worse than ever, and what's more, her hangover was kicking in now. Rita Adams, you're a born liar! she thought. One o' these days it'll be the death of you.

Feigning a smile, she called after him, 'Bye then, Tom. Stay well now.'

Turning his head, Tom noted how she swayed from side to side. 'Drunk as a skunk and a liar into the bargain!' He clicked the old horse on, and shook his head forlornly. 'Some folks never learn.'

He thought of his own family, and felt like a millionaire. Although his wife Beth was neither flamboyant nor striking in her looks, like Rita, she owned the prettiest eyes and a smile that could light up a room. An admirable cook, despite all the rationing they'd had to get used to, during and straight after the war, she thought nothing of cracking him over the head with the mixing spoon whenever he got under her feet. He chuckled out loud. Many were the times she'd chased him down

THE LONER

the path after catching him with his finger in the mixing bowl or pinching some crust off a newly-baked loaf.

Their daughter Judy was an added blessing. Deeply thoughtful and gentle in her manner, her laughter was like music to his ears. But she could also be outspoken and strong-minded. When championing any particular cause, she possessed a temper that could shake the foundations of the earth. Her friendship with Davie Adams was deep and abiding; he was the brother she had never had, the apple of her eye. It was a good job the young 'un took after his father, Don, and not his mother, Tom thought.

Beth and Judy. These two were the pivot of Tom's existence. And he thanked the Good Lord for them, every day of his life.

Glancing after Rita, Tom recalled the heartache she had caused her family. What a foolish woman she was. She had a loving husband, a fine son, and a generous father who had taken them in after she and Don had lost everything in a failed business venture. Yet time and time again, she put them all through the mill.

He flicked the reins to gee up the horse. 'God knows how they put up with her,' he grumbled. 'Cause I'm buggered if I would!'

CHAPTER TWO

FROM HIS BEDROOM window, young Davie Adams watched his mother come stumbling down the street. Her beautiful dark hair was wild and dishevelled; he heard the raucous laughter and her quick defiant shouts, and his heart sank. ‘Drunk again,’ he murmured. ‘Oh, Mam! Why do you do it?’

He sneaked out to the landing and looked down. In the light from the parlour, his father’s anxious figure threw a shadow over the carpet as he paced up and down, waiting for her, obviously worried about her. The boy knew that his dad loved his mam, and forgave her every time. But what if this was one time too many? His young heart thudded with fear and misgiving.

‘Go back to bed, lad. Don’t be out here when she comes in.’

The boy almost leaped out of his skin. ‘Grandad!’ Turning, he saw the old man standing behind him. Once tall and straight, with looks that

THE LONER

could entrance any woman, Joseph Davies was now slightly stooped, his dark hair marbled with grey, and a look of desolation in his blue eyes. 'Will she never learn,' he asked gruffly. 'God forgive me, what kind of daughter have I raised?'

'Don't get upset, Grandad,' Davie whispered. 'You'll see, it'll be all right. It always is.'

Smiling fondly, the old man laid his hand on the boy's head. 'You're a good lad, Davie. An example to us all.' He nodded. 'Happen you're right. Happen the both of us should get back to our beds.' He gave a stifled little cough. 'Afore we catch our death o' cold, eh?'

He paused at the sound of someone fumbling with a key in the front door lock, then the banging of fists against wood, and then her voice, loud and angry. 'What the devil are you lot playing at in there? Thought you'd lock me out?' There was a crude laugh and then she was yelling, 'OPEN THIS DOOR, YOU BASTARDS! IT'S BLOODY FREEZING OUT HERE!'

Joseph's face crumpled with disgust. 'Drunk and shameless . . . cares for nothing and nobody, least of all us.' He had long heard the gossip, and for a while he had chosen to ignore it. But little by little, the truth had hit home: his daughter, little more than a streetwoman.

Suddenly she burst in, muttering and swearing when she lost her balance as she turned to slam shut the door. 'You buggers locked me out – left

JOSEPHINE COX

me in the cold like some mangy old dog.’ Groveling about on her knees, she continued to moan and curse, ‘Thought you’d keep me out, did you? Unfeeling, miserable bastards . . .’

‘Stop that racket – you’ll wake the boy! Nobody locked you out.’ Don was unaware that his son was already out of bed, a witness to everything.

Startled that he was so near, Rita scrambled to her feet and looked up. Standing before her was a man of some stature, his handsome features set hard and his dark Irish eyes tinged with sadness. Where he had once been proud and content, there was lately a nervousness to him, a sense of despair had gradually etched itself into his heart and soul, and it showed – in the eyes and the deepening lines on his face, and in the way he held his shoulders, bowed down as though he had the weight of the world on them.

Everyone knew how it was between him and his wife. His workmates knew more than most. Some had even bragged of bedding her. They goaded and tormented him, until he was forced to defend both himself and his wife. Twice he’d been involved in fierce fighting, and each time it was he who took the blame and got sent on his way.

After a time he had learned to keep his head down and get on with his work. There seemed no point in trying to defend her any more, and though he evaded the jokes and innuendos, the shame was crippling, but he was a man trapped in

THE LONER

the wonderful memories of how it used to be. Even now he loved her with a passion that frightened him. But now, at long last, his love for her was overwhelmed by another more powerful feeling; a feeling of utter, crippling revulsion.

'Hello, Donny, my big, handsome man.' Unsteady, unashamed, she opened her arms and went to him, her clumsy fingers tousling his brown hair. 'You needn't have waited up. I meant to be home earlier, only I went to see Edna Sedgwick. We got talking – you know how it is . . .'

He pushed her away. 'Don't lie to me, Rita.'

'I'm not lying.' She could look him in the eye without the slightest compunction. 'I'm telling you the truth! Why do you never believe me?'

He smiled then – a slow, sad smile that made her feel guilty. 'Because I'm not the fool you take me for,' he answered in his soft Irish lilt. 'I've learned the hard way so I have.'

When again she prepared to lie, he bristled with anger. 'For God's sake, Rita, look at the state of you. You've been out on the town . . . again! Booze and men, that's what you've been up to! Who was it this time, eh? One of the men from the factory, was it? One of my new workmates, is that the way of it, eh? Will I go into work on the morrow and have 'em all staring at me, . . . sniggering behind my back and pitying me? Is *that* how it'll be?'

'NO!' The guilt was written all over her face, and still she defied him. 'You don't know what

JOSEPHINE COX

you're saying. I would never do a thing like that.'

'Liar!' He looked down on her face and adored every inch of it. But if he didn't stand up to her this time, he never would. 'I know what you've been up to. You'll not squirm out of it this time. I've had enough of being the town laughing-stock. It's all over now, so it is. You've played the dirty on me once too often.'

'I already told you, I was with Edna.' She had learned to lie handsomely. 'We were in her house all night.'

When she came closer, reaching up, he got another waft of her tainted breath, and it sickened him. 'I want the truth.' He pushed her away.

'I already told you – I went to see Edna.' Rita yawned. 'She was right glad to see me, Donny – she asked after you and the boy, and —'

'For God's sake, Rita, will ye stop!' Suddenly he had her gripped by the shoulders. For what seemed an age he looked her deep in the eyes, and what he had to say next shook her to the core. 'So, you went to see Edna, did you? And what would you say if I told you that *Edna Sedgwick died two days ago.*'

Throwing her aside, he looked at her with contempt. 'Fred called here earlier to tell us the news.' The bitterness in his voice was cutting. 'Poor Edna's been at death's door this past week, and you didn't even know, or care. In the two years since she moved away, you couldn't find the time

THE LONER

to go and see her once – not even when you knew she'd been ill. So I'll ask you again: who were you *really* with tonight?'

Genuinely shocked to hear the news about Edna, Rita knew her lies had found her out. A sob rose in her throat as she looked pleadingly at her husband.

He hardened his heart. 'I don't suppose you even know who you were with. Lifting your skirts to some stranger you might never see again. I dare say he thought you were a woman off the streets. And where did ye go this time, eh?' The big Irish man could have wept as he said the ugly words to his beautiful wife, who degraded them all with her actions. 'Down the alley, was it?' he persisted. 'Or did you find some filthy room at the back of a pub?'

When the awful truth of his words hit home, Rita's heart sank. So Edna had died and she didn't even know. She and Edie, as she had always called her, had been the best of friends, shared many a giggle as Rita did her neighbour's hair of an evening, accepting one of her homemade sponges in return. Innocent days, simple pleasures. Remorse settled on Rita like a cloud. What was she doing – to herself, to her family?

'Don't talk like that, Donny,' she pleaded. 'You know it's you I love.' She couldn't help what she did, but she *was* sorry. She was always sorry. 'I won't do it again, I prom—'

'No more promises!' Don Adams came to a

JOSEPHINE COX

decision that had been months, if not years, in the making. 'You're not the woman I married,' he told Rita. 'Sure, I don't know you any more. I don't want you anywhere near me. I don't want you in my bed, and I don't need you in my life.' Suddenly, though his heart ached with love for her, he felt as if a great weight had fallen from him. The endless torment was over. He strode towards the door.

There was something about his manner that frightened Rita; a kind of finality in his threat she had never heard before. He was talking of not wanting her, not needing her. Oh, but he'd said that before during their rows, many times. But this time he seemed different and she was afraid. He was her life, her one and only true love. She could never survive without him.

'First thing in the morning,' he went on, 'I'm away . . . me and the boy. As for you . . .' He turned, just for a moment, staring at her, seeing a stranger. 'It's finished, Rita. I've had enough. From now on, you can do what you like, because I don't give a sod!' Ignoring her wailing and her excuses, he left the room.

He was halfway up the stairs when he heard her scurrying after him. 'Don't leave me, Donny. I'll be good . . . Don't stop loving me!' She grabbed him by the trouser leg, pulling him back.

Frustrated, he swung round and snatched her to him. 'How can I ever let myself love you again?' he said, on a shuddering breath. 'Dear God, Rita!

THE LONER

There was a time when I would have willingly died for you, I would have fought the world for you – and I *have*. But not any more.'

'Don't say that.' She saw her life ending right there. 'Please, Donny, don't forsake me.'

'What – you mean in the same way you've forsaken me?' There was a break in his voice. 'You've shamed us all. You've shamed me and the boy, and your father – the only one who would take us in when I lost my business and couldn't pay the rent.' He despaired. 'Time and again, I gave you a second chance. Like a fool, I thought you might come to your senses.'

Thrusting her away, he said harshly, 'Why do you need to be with these other men? Aren't I man enough for you? Don't I treat you well – provide for you, love you as much as any man *can* love his woman?'

He thought back to the time when their love was young. Oh, but it had been so wonderful – exciting and fulfilling for both of them. They had met fifteen years ago, when Joseph had come into the firm of carpenters where young Don, waiting for his call-up papers, was working. It was Rita's half-day off from her apprenticeship at the hair-dresser's so her daddy had brought her along for a bit of company. The young Irishman and the seventeen-year-old girl had fallen for each other at first sight.

Don sighed deeply, all these thoughts rushing

JOSEPHINE COX

through his brain while he held his wife's body close to his, feeling her heart beating wildly against his own.

When had it all started to go wrong? he asked himself. Maybe if they had had more children . . . but it wasn't to be. More likely, it was when he'd gone overseas with the Army in 1942. A lot of people had changed during the war – and not for the better. Good marriages had gone bad all the time. He knew that Rita resented being stuck at home with baby Davie, and that bitch of a mother of hers, Marie, had encouraged her to go out drinking and dancing and doing God knows what.

It had all led up to this. And he couldn't take it any longer.

'What is it with you?' he asked brokenly. 'You're fortunate to have three people in your life who give you all the love they can, and yet time and again you throw it all back at us.'

Supporting her by the shoulders he looked at her sorry face, now swollen with the drink, her once pretty eyes drugged and empty, and the tears rolling down her face. And his heart broke. She looked so vulnerable, so sad, he wanted to press her to him, to hold her so tight and love her so much that she would never stray again, and for a moment, for one aching moment, he almost forgave her.

If only she would mend her ways, he thought. If only she could be a proper wife and mother,

THE LONER

like she used to be. But she couldn't. That woman had left them all behind long ago. 'No, Rita.' The sadness hardened to a kind of loathing. 'Sure, I can't forgive you any more.'

In that moment, when he turned from her, he felt incredibly lonely, and more lost, than he had ever been in his whole life. And yet he still loved her. He always would.



From the top of the stairs, Davie and his grandad saw and heard everything. 'Come away, boy.' The old man slid an arm round his grandson's shoulders. 'You don't need to listen to this.'

As his father walked up the stairs, a broken man, Davie looked into his eyes. 'You won't really leave, will you, Dad?' he asked. 'You can't leave us.'

'I'm not leaving *you*, son.' Davie was his pride and joy. The boy was conceived before Rita went bad, so he had no doubts about being the boy's real father. Moreover, Davie had a way with him that reminded Don of his own boyhood, in his manner and his thinking, and in that certain, determined look in his eyes. Yes, this boy was his own flesh and blood, and through the bad times when Rita neglected them both, it was Davie's strength and nearness that kept him sane.

He looked at the boy, with his shock of brown hair and his quiet dark eyes and he saw a man in the making.

JOSEPHINE COX

Taking him by the shoulders, Don told him, 'You must go back to bed now. In the morning, you and me are away from these parts.' He glanced up at his father-in-law. 'I'm sorry, Dad. I've tried my best. She's your daughter. I hope to God you can talk some sense into her.'

The old man nodded. 'And if I can . . . will you come back?'

Don thought for a moment, before shaking his head. 'No.'

Through his anguish, the older man understood, though he did not underestimate the ordeal ahead of himself.

'No, Dad!' Davie had never been so afraid. 'She needs us. I'll talk to her . . . I'll make her see. She won't do it again, I promise.' He tried so hard to hold back the tears, but he was just a child and right then, in that moment, his whole world was falling apart.

Then, seeing how determined his father was, he clung to his grandad. 'Don't let him go!' he sobbed. 'Tell him, Grandad, tell him she'll be good and she won't hurt us any more. *Tell him, Grandad!*'

Suddenly Rita was there, shouting and yelling and going for Don with her claws outstretched. 'You cruel bastard! So you'd leave me, would you!' Wild-eyed and out of her mind, she went for him, hitting out, tearing into his flesh with her nails, and it was all he could do to defend himself and at

THE LONER

the same time keep the pair of them from toppling down the stairs.

‘ENOUGH!’ Enraged, the old man threw the boy to safety, before lashing out at her with the back of his hand. ‘To hell with you! You’re no daughter of mine!’

When she stumbled and slid down the steps in an oddly graceful fashion, the boy lurched forward and ran down the steps after her. At the bottom, when he went to help her up, she threw him off. ‘LEAVE ME!’ she screamed.

Then, seeing the agony on his young face she was crippled with guilt. ‘I’m sorry, son. It was my fault, all my fault.’

Struggling with her, he managed to sit her up. ‘Where are you hurt, Mam?’ His voice trembled with fear.

Composed now, she smiled resignedly. ‘I’m not hurt. Give me a minute to get my breath.’ She chucked him under the chin. ‘He can go if he wants to. You can make your mammy a cup of tea and the two of us will talk until the sun comes up – what d’you say to that, eh?’ She didn’t tell him how her back felt as though it was broken in two, nor that her arm had bent beneath her at a comical angle, and the pain was excruciating. She felt strange. Drunk, yes. But there was something else, a frightening thing, as though all the life and fight had gone out of her in an instant.

Horrified, and riddled with guilt, Don ran down

the stairs two at a time. 'For God's sake, Rita, are you mad?' He stretched out his arms to help her. 'What possessed you to start a fight at the top of the stairs like that? You could have been killed!'

Seeing her like that, he couldn't think straight. He loved her, hated her, needed to stay yet had to leave. The look on young Davie's face tore at his heart. Where did it all go wrong? Was it after Davie was born? Maybe she couldn't cope when money was tight and he found it difficult to get a job? Was the badness always in her? Or did he somehow cause it? But how could he blame himself? What did he do that was so wrong? And could he really stay here now and keep his sanity? Did he still love her enough?

'We don't need you!' Her spiteful voice pierced his thoughts. 'You bugger off!' She waved him away, angry with him, angry with herself. 'Go, if you like, and don't come back. Me and Davie can do well enough without you.'

For a long moment he looked at her, at the dark, lifeless hair that long ago shone like wet coal, and the eyes that were once alive and smiling but were now dull and empty. He recalled the years of happiness they had shared. But then he thought of the many times he had given in and gone another round and each time it ended in arguments. This time had been the worst, when her own father had lashed out and sent her hurtling down the stairs.

It was no good. He knew that their lives together

THE LONER

were over and, though it was a wicked shame and he would have done anything for it not to be so, it was time to realise that they had no future together.

‘I thought I told you to bugger off!’ She kicked out at him, gritting her teeth at the pain that shot through her.

‘All right, Rita.’ The sigh came from his boots. ‘But I’m taking the boy with me.’ He knew if he left Davie with her, their son would only be taking on a thankless responsibility, one, which even he himself could no longer cope.

‘I’m not coming with you! I’m staying with Mam!’ The boy looked up, his eyes hard and accusing. ‘If you won’t take care of her, I will’

‘No, son. She’ll only break your heart. Whatever you do, and however often you beg her to give up her bad ways, she’ll never change.’

‘She will!’ Tears stained his young face – angry, hopeless tears that tore his father’s heart wide open.

Don shook his head. ‘You’re wrong, son. She’ll carry on the same way, with the men, and the booze . . . and she’ll make all kinds of excuses. She’ll tell you lies until you start to believe them. She’ll shame you, make you lose all your friends, until in the end you can’t hold your head up. She’ll make you feel life isn’t worth living.’

‘NO!’ Seeking reassurance, Davie turned to his mammy. ‘You won’t, will you? You won’t tell me lies and make me ashamed?’