Pins & Needles

Rosie Harris

Chapter 1

Tanwen and Donna stood stiffly side by side, staring at their reflection in the big cheval mirror that dominated the front room of their terraced house in Rhymney Street.

Tanwen; tall and slim, breathtakingly lovely with her shoulder-length blonde hair, vivid blue eyes and smooth translucent peaches and cream skin. Donna; shorter, a nondescript shadow with frizzy light brown hair and dark brown eyes.

Tanwen smiled with a mixture of arrogance and disdain as she studied the neat black dress with its white Peter Pan collar and white piping on the cuffs that her mother had made, and which she was wearing for the first time. Although it accentuated her budding figure and made her feel grown up, she hated its uniformity and the fact that Donna was wearing an identical dress.

No one, except their mother, Gwyneth Evans, who was at this moment regarding them proudly, would have thought that the two fourteen-year-old girls were twins.

Not only in looks but also in every other aspect were they as different as chalk and cheese. Tanwen sparkled, attracted attention, and melted hearts when she smiled. Donna's quiet, sweet nature was easily overlooked. Tanwen had verve and vivacity. Donna was caring and reliable. Tanwen was outgoing and gregarious; Donna was shy and withdrawn. Tanwen bubbled over with confidence; Donna was timid, unsure of herself.

Yet most of the time they appeared to be inseparable. Tanwen was prone to landing herself in scrapes; situations brought about by her sheer vivaciousness. When charm and seduction failed to extricate her then Donna was always there to smooth out any problems. She was even ready to take the blame or responsibility for whatever had gone wrong.

Gwyneth was fully aware of all of this, and ever since they'd been toddlers she had always relied on Donna, because she was so sensible, to take care of her sister. Tanwen not only accepted this as the natural order of things, but took advantage of the situation, knowing she was her mother's favourite.

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'There you are then, girls, all dressed and ready for your first day at The Cardiff Drapers,' Gwyneth said proudly as she surveyed her handiwork. 'Off you go, then!'

'Mam, it's only half past seven. It takes fifteen minutes to get to St Mary Street and we don't have to be there until eight o'clock,' Tanwen pouted.

'Better to be fifteen minutes early than one minute late, especially on your first day,' her mother told her firmly. 'Run along now both of you or you'll miss the tram, and if you have to wait for the next one then you really will be late.'

Tanwen pulled a face, but Donna merely smiled and nodded in agreement with her mother's wishes.

'Now remember,' Gwyneth Evans told them as she kissed them both goodbye, 'you are to ask for Miss Price. She knows you are starting work today and she will be expecting you.'

'Will there be any other apprentices starting today as well, Mam?' Donna asked nervously.

'No, not today,' her mother said. 'As a special favour Miss Price is giving you a week's trial first to see if you shape up. If you do then she will keep you on. If you don't . . . '

She left the sentence unfinished and Donna felt a shiver run through her. She wished her mother was going to be with them when they met Carina Price. They had heard so much about her over the years that she had become something of an icon in Donna's mind. They had only met her a few times, though, and that had been when she had come to the house to see their mother when they were very small. Donna had a hazy memory of a tall woman with a large hat.

Carina Price and her mother had both started as apprentices at James Howell's fashionable emporium, The Cardiff Drapers, over twenty years ago, back in 1904, when they'd both been fourteen years old.

In those days apprentices had to live in, and the two girls had chummed up together. It was a friendship that had remained unbroken even though it was now almost fifteen years since Gwyneth had left the store.

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Carina Price had never married, but had made working at The Cardiff Drapers her career. Over the years she had risen to be head of the extensive workrooms and responsible for taking on all the new apprentices each year. From time to time she invited Gwyneth to call in and see her, and Carina would take her into the staff canteen where they would enjoy a meal together and reminisce about the old days.

It had been Carina Price who had suggested, after Silas Evans's boat went down in 1916 and along with everyone else on board he was reported missing, that it would be better for Gwyneth to earn a living at home doing dressmaking and millinery.

'You've got two little girls to bring up, and you don't want them to become latchkey kids, out running around the streets and getting into trouble because you have to leave them on their own,' she'd pointed out.

She had even gone so far as to make it possible for Gwyneth to buy a second-hand treadle sewing machine from the store, and arranged for her to pay for it in weekly instalments.

Gwyneth had found it hard work building up her business. Even when the orders had started coming in, many of her customers were slow in paying, so she had been deeply grateful when in those early days Carina Price had also managed to have some of The Cardiff Drapers' outwork passed on to her as well.

Gradually, though, as Gwyneth became well known for her clever designs and skilled workmanship she built up a faithful following of customers from the streets around where she lived, and outwork from The Cardiff Drapers was no longer necessary.

Shortages dominated in the years immediately following the end of the war. As news of Gwyneth's sewing skills became widely known, more and more women turned to her for help. Desperate for a new dress or coat, but unable to find anything that they could afford to buy, they would ask Gwyneth if she could turn their favourite garment and so give it a new lease of life. Or, they would ask her to cut down one of their dresses to fit a young daughter, or remake their husband's trousers to fit a boy who was about to start work.

They were so grateful when she accomplished this that they remained loyal even when supplies began to come back into the shops. They were happy to purchase a length of new cloth and bring it along to Gwyneth to be made up.

As the girls grew older, Gwyneth dragooned them into helping. Donna was brilliant at unpicking the tiniest of stitches. Tanwen, on the other hand, showed far less

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aptitude and was inclined to be slapdash. If she was asked to take out tacking stitches the work had to be checked afterwards to make sure it was done properly. Very often she merely pulled at the thread and either left the knot at one end or the double stitch at the other still there.

More often than not it was Donna who checked the work and removed them, knowing how frustrated it made her mother if she found them still there.

While Donna diligently unpicked seams, or helped to brush them and press them flat, Tanwen fooled around. She would drape a length of material over her head or around her shoulders and dance round the room pretending to be Clara Bow the 'It' girl, or some other film star.

However, it was Tanwen, with her long silky gold hair and angelic face, that the customers patted on the head or slipped a penny when they came for a fitting or to collect their finished garment. Donna seemed to fade into the background, even though she was the one who handed them their parcel and opened the door for them.

When people did notice Donna it was to comment on how different she was in every way from her sister. 'You'd hardly think they were sisters, let alone twins!' was the usual comment as they compared the two girls.

Tanwen would giggle and preen at such remarks, but Donna felt hurt no matter how hard she tried not to take any notice.

'Tanwen takes after her dad, and Donna is more like my side of the family,' Gwyneth would say quickly.

When the girls reached their teens, Gwyneth suggested to Carina Price that since Donna enjoyed sewing so much it might be a good idea for her to go and work at The Cardiff Drapers when she left school.

'Could you take Tanwen as well?' she had added quickly. 'I'd like them to be together so that Donna can keep an eye on her. She's not quite as keen as Donna on sewing, mind, but she loves clothes and has a good eye for what's fashionable.'

'If they start as apprentices in the workroom like we did then they will have a thorough grounding in dressmaking and millinery, no matter which department they decide to opt for later on,' Carina said noncommittally.

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Now, a year later, they were about to do just that. Gwyneth had gone along to see Carina the day after they had reached their fourteenth birthday on 10 June 1924.

'Tanwen and Donna will be leaving school in the middle of July, so is my idea still feasible, Carina?' she asked hopefully.

'There is a long waiting list of applicants and only eight vacancies,' Carina told her. 'I shall be interviewing them all on Friday the twentyfifth of July.' She looked thoughtful. 'I don't need to put your two through that ordeal as I know all about them, so send them along the Monday before that and I'll give them a trial. If they are suitable, and I'm sure they will be,' she added hurriedly, 'then of course I'll take them on permanently.'

Gwyneth was so anxious that the girls would be dressed right, even if they were only on trial, that she altered the two black dresses which had been her own uniforms when she'd worked at The Cardiff Drapers. Tears came into her eyes as she adjusted them to fit Tanwen and Donna and renewed the white trims which had yellowed with age, even though she'd kept them carefully wrapped up.

'Have we got to wear these awful old dresses?' Tanwen complained. 'They smell musty!'

'No they don't,' Donna argued. 'Mam's had lavender bags in with them to keep the moths away, that's what you can smell.'

'Can't we have new dresses?' Tanwen persisted. 'These old things look as if they came out of the ark!'

'No, cariad, I can't afford new ones! I'm afraid this is the best I can do,' Gwyneth told her. 'If you get taken on then you'll be issued with a uniform.'

She felt inordinately proud of the two girls as she stood on the doorstep watching them walk down the street towards Crwys Road to catch a tram into the city centre.

She was aware of curtains twitching and neighbours coming to their front doors to watch the girls setting off. She felt her own eyes prickling with tears as Blodwyn Hughes, who lived next door to them and who'd joined her on the doorstep, started wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

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'They do you proud, cariad,' Blodwyn snuffled, her double chins wobbling with suppressed emotion.

It had not been easy earning a living and bringing them up single-handed. In the early days, after she had heard that Silas was missing, there had been times when she wasn't even sure if she was going to be able to keep a roof over their heads and feed them.

Fortunately, both girls, who were six years old at the time, had already accepted that their dada had gone off to the war, because so had the fathers of most of the other children they knew. When she'd first told them that he was reported missing they'd asked for news daily. Then other things had happened in their lives and with childlike acceptance of the present they'd pushed all thoughts of their father to the back of their minds. When the time came to tell them that he would never be coming home again they were sad but not heartbroken.

The memory of the big tall blond man, whom they only saw every few months when he was home from sea, soon became a misty, faded figure in their minds. They were more concerned with the fact that their mother wasn't able to afford special treats any more, or buy them sweets and biscuits.

'Think yourself lucky that you have food on the table and a fire when it's cold,' she'd told them sharply whenever they'd complained. 'There's plenty of children around here that have no shoes on their feet even to go to school in, and who go to bed hungry.'

Nevertheless, Gwyneth usually followed up her reprimand by making Tanwen a new bow for her hair from some of the offcuts from her sewing, or finding a scrap of lace or ribbon to trim one of her shabby little dresses and give it a different look.

Donna accepted this in silence. She didn't crave something new all the time. She didn't mind that her mother favoured Tanwen over her in such matters because she knew it stopped her sister sulking and that made life easier for all of them.

Gwyneth, too, found that the hardships and traumas of everyday living gradually eroded her husband's memory.

Silas had been an only child. His father, Bryn Evans, a slightly built, dark-haired, dark-eyed Welshman, had fallen in love with Zelda, a statuesque Swedish blonde. Against both their family's wishes he'd married her and brought her back to Cardiff. Her family had refused to even write to her after that.

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Bryn Evans's own family had been miners from the Blaenavon region and none of them had been able to accept the foreigner, as they termed her, so Silas had never known any of his grandparents. His own parents had both died shortly before he met Gwyneth.

Gwyneth's father had also been a miner, and had been killed in a pit explosion in Aberfan when she was in her teens. Her mother had died shortly afterwards. By that time she was an apprentice at The Cardiff Drapers, living in the staff hostel along with Carina Price and some forty other apprentices. From then on that had been the only home she'd known until she'd married Silas.

Therefore, with no family at all to turn to for help she was grateful to Carina for her interest after Silas was declared missing, presumed dead.

Neighbours were kindly, especially Blodwyn Hughes, but all of them were struggling to make ends meet and in no way did they feel responsible for the welfare of the young widow and her two children.

Most of them had also suffered losses. Many were nursing injured menfolk of their own and some even thought she was one of the lucky ones. She was fit and healthy and so were her children. Many of them were burdened with a husband who was either crippled in some way or whose lungs were so badly affected by mustard gas that he'd never be able to work again.

Gwyneth knew a few of them envied her, but none of them knew the relief she felt. That was her secret. Silas had been tall, blond and very handsome, but he'd also been arrogant, dominant and cruel.

She'd discovered this last trait of his on her wedding night. All the charm and tenderness that had swept her off her feet had vanished once she'd signed her name and he had their marriage certificate in his pocket.

Silas had lost no time in letting her know that she was now his, body and soul. He had forcibly asserted his marital rights from their very first night together.

In the early days of their marriage Gwyneth had lived in fear and dread of his volatile mood swings. She discovered he was not only a ruthless bully, but selfish and possessive. In the years that followed she'd looked forward to his spells at sea as a well-earned reprieve, and when it appeared he was gone for good she felt sadness but also relief.

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Standing there on the doorstep as the two girls disappeared out of sight, Gwyneth's heart filled with pride. Bringing them up single-handed had not been easy, but she was more than content with what she had achieved.

Tanwen was headstrong and frivolous, but she had the sort of looks and personality that made these things attributes rather than disadvantages. She could carry off almost any situation enthusiastically. Gwyneth felt confident that she would, in time, prove herself to be an excellent worker, one who would make her mark at The Cardiff Drapers.

So, too, would Donna, but in a very different way. Donna was so quiet and thoughtful. She worried unnecessarily over what sort of impression she was making. She was always eager to help and Gwyneth knew she could always rely on her to do the right thing.

She sighed as she went back indoors and put the kettle on to make herself a cup of tea. Donna hadn't really wanted to go and work at The Cardiff Drapers. She wanted to be a teacher, or at least work with children in some capacity or other. It had taken a fair bit of cajoling to persuade her to change her mind.

'I need you to be there, cariad, to keep an eye on Tanwen and make sure that her impetuous ways don't land her in trouble,' Gwyneth had insisted.

She wondered what Carina Price would make of them both. It was strange, she reflected, as she poured hot water into the teapot and reached down a cup and saucer from the sideboard, that Carina knew so little about them.

She was so supportive in those long ago days when I was first widowed, Gwyneth thought. Yet, since then, Carina had rarely come to see them. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd paid them a visit.

Perhaps she thinks she's too grand to come here now, Gwyneth thought, looking round her shabby living room at the faded curtains and rag rugs she'd made herself from scraps left over from her sewing.

She'd managed to keep her head above water, though, which was more than many in Rhymney Street had been able to do. She'd never had the means-test man walking in and telling her what she'd have to sell before they'd give her a few shillings to buy food.

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Carina had kept in touch, but she never invited Gwyneth to her flat in Pen-y-lan Place, only to meet up in the canteen of The Cardiff Drapers, where Carina always paid for their meal.

As she sipped her tea, Gwyneth found herself wondering about what sort of life Carina Price had been leading all these years. She knew from when they were both apprentices and had shared a dormitory at the hostel that originally she came from Pontypridd.

Even in those days Carina had never talked much about her background. The only thing she'd ever told Gwyneth was that she was the youngest of a large family.

The two of them had lived for their work. Highlights had been the jaunts in spring and summer to Swansea or Barry Island organised by James Howell for all his staff.

They'd worked long hours, from eight in the morning until nine or ten at night. What little spare time they had was spent sleeping because they were so tired, or doing their own personal laundry.

On Sundays, after the compulsory attendance at church or chapel, they would go to Roath Park or Victoria Park and walk round the lake, watching children paddling and enjoying the antics of Sammy the seal as he splashed around and jumped almost out of the water, his silvery pelt glistening in the sunlight.

They'd never bothered with boys. The curfew at the hostel was so strict that it was pointless making arrangements to go out during the week.

Now Gwyneth wondered if there had ever been any romance in Carina's life since those days. She'd never mentioned anyone. She had said very little when Gwyneth had told her she was marrying Silas. Possibly that had been because she didn't like him. She thought him arrogant and had said so. Gwyneth had never confided in her or told her how right she was.

Yet Carina had always been there for her. She had been the only one who had offered any sort of positive help. And now she was doing it once again by giving the girls a good start in life, Gwyneth mused. She was grateful for that and she hoped that they'd both enjoy being at The Cardiff Drapers and make a future there for themselves.

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