

CHAPTER TEN

As she walked home from school that evening she did glance behind her a number of times to ensure that no-one was following. She wondered how far she could go before her husband might be provoked into taking action against her, but it was not much of a deterrent. Just think what she could say if she was called into court! And what was the point of having a deterrent if you used it? No, there was no reason why Mr Hiller should take any interest in what she did and every reason why he should turn a blind eye. As for Mr Pennington, she had not been liberal in what she had told him and his concern was understandable given the little he did know. Then again, he might have other motives in seeking to keep her wings fully clipped whilst the divorce proceedings were going through.

It was not only that she missed the presence of her daughter and husband, she soon missed having a man about the house. There were the odd jobs that did not get done at the appropriate time. She could learn to change light bulbs and repair fuses. Her attempts to push the vintage lawn mower across the meadow that was taking over the back garden were less successful. As the summer progressed the problem became worse and less capable of solution. Mr Pennington advised her that she should take action to prevent the grass becoming yellow at its base and suggested that she should follow his practice of having someone come in and do the work on a regular basis. "Even the small amount of grass I have is too much for me at my age," he said. "And I would begrudge the time, anyway. It is so much easier to pay someone. They want the money. I want the job done. Everyone is satisfied. Put an advert in a shop window. You'll soon find someone." Mr Pennington then described the formula he used for calculating how much should be paid dependent on the size of lawn. Joyce thanked him and went off to her newsagent's.

"I've come about the grass," said the young man who presented himself on her doorstep the following evening. "It's about the postcard in the newsagent's window. Or has someone already been to see you?"

"No," said Joyce, looking at him closely. There was something familiar about his face and she felt that she should know him except she could not precisely place him. "It is in a bit of a state, but I will pay you extra to get it under control. I've only got a hand mower, I'm afraid, but my husband used to keep it sharp and well oiled. At least he said he did." It all sounded a little pathetic and apologetic and she did not tell him that the three youths who, one after the other, had preceded him had also declined on the spot.

"That's no problem," said the young man. "Can I see the mower?" Joyce stood and watched with surprise and satisfaction from the kitchen window as this God-send tackled her back lawn without a single complaint or question as to why she had let it get into the state it was in. She plied him regularly with soft drinks and on each occasion he apologised for the appearance of the grass that had been cut. "It will recover in time," he explained, "but it will look a little unsightly until it does."

"I know," she said. "It's something to do with the lack of light. Would you be prepared to come and cut it regularly?"

"Of course," he said brightly. "I think at this time of year once a week would suffice. You might need to look at doing it twice a week in the Spring and early summer to keep it looking tip-top."

"That's fine," she said, looking around for her purse.

"Are there any other odd jobs you need doing?" he asked. "I would have to charge I'm afraid as I am saving up for the deposit on a house, but I can do all manner of things. I can turn my hand to almost anything."

"I will think about it," she said defensively, wondering what might be said of having this young man running all over the house. She knew her neighbours would have seen him in the garden and she would go out of her way to tell them that she was paying him and that he had responded to an advert she'd placed in the newsagent's window. If the truth was known they would have seen her card.

“Can I come around then next Saturday? I mean tomorrow week? The days will soon be too short and damp to cut it in the evening.” She agreed and watched him cycle away. Once he had gone she returned to the quest of trying to remember where she had seen him. He was dark, probably in his late teens, not unhandsome, and appeared to have an open, generous, nature. She had never talked to him before, she was sure of that, but she was sure she had seen him. However, when he cycled up and rang the doorbell on the following Saturday afternoon she was no nearer identifying where or when it was.

“Don't think I am being funny,” she said, “but I have seen you somewhere before. I can't place it, but I am sure of it.”

“Have you?” he said, smiling.

“Where could it have been?”

“I work for Wick's, the builder. I am apprenticed there. And I know your daughter.” Joyce started to feel uncomfortable as he was saying all the wrong things. Surely they had not put him up to coming to work for her? To what end?

“Oh?” she said, hiding her misgivings concerning his admission he had come from the enemy's camp. “How long have you worked for Mr Wick?” She did not associate his face with either the office or the builder's yard. “I cannot recall seeing you there.”

“Only a few weeks. I've had a number of jobs since I left school, you know one thing after the other. But this one looks promising as I can learn a trade.”

“You knew my daughter at school?” she asked, wondering how much he did know.

“I suppose I could say that. I was a couple of years above her but, then, everyone knew Stephanie.”

“I suppose they did,” said Joyce, feeling resentment at his choice of phrase even if it was not intentional. “Have you seen her recently?” This question was something of a trap and Joyce knew it, but she was suspicious of every man she encountered, old or young.

“I have kept in touch with her,” he said. “If I may say so, she really needs someone to look after her.” That was a reproach if ever Joyce had heard one, but she was prepared to let it pass as it was not the kind of thing she expected from a fellow conspirator. After all, this young “treasure” was cutting her lawn, something no-one else had been prepared to do.

“Look after her?” she asked casually. “I was under the impression that my daughter could well look after herself.”

“So she might, but she needs someone to guide her, perhaps change the course of her life.”

“You are Owen Cross, aren't you?” Joyce asked suddenly, triumphant.

“Yes,” he said, surprised. “How do you know that?” She could have told him that she had once known his mother, at least that was what she thought, but that would have left a clue as to her own background. He said he knew Stephanie and she could just imagine him telling her daughter. And knowing how cheating, conniving and deceitful she could be, Joyce was sure she would do her best to extract as much information out of Mrs Cross as she could. At the very least she would uncover the Newington connection, and Joyce could not risk that.

“Stephanie mentioned you a number of times. She even once pointed you out to me. You were with a girl at the time.”

“Eileen!” he exclaimed. “We are now engaged and we are going to get married. That's why I am saving up for the deposit on a house. But, fancy Stephanie mentioning me! There were times when I didn't think she even knew I existed.” He seemed pleased, perhaps a little more than pleased, and Joyce wondered if she had said the right thing.

“Well,” she said, “clearly she did. You must tell me about yourself. What does your father do?” She could hardly forgive herself for asking the question, but it was just what one would ask under the circumstances, providing you did not already know the answer. And there was the possibility that Mrs Cross might have married again, although that seemed unlikely.

“My father died before the War,” he said. “When I was very small. My mother works at the Newington Refuge. Do you know it?” Joyce could not help the small leap that her heart gave at the mention of the name. For a moment she thought of the house at Dover and wondered if she would ever set foot in it. Then she thought of Christina visiting the premises

in Bromley, coming that close to her! This boy had probably seen her, even met her! She had told Debbie what a small world it was.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I know of it. Wasn't it set up by a Lady Newington as a refuge for homeless young women?” She could not admit that the thought of her daughter ending up there crossed her mind. That would be the supreme irony! Michael's daughter residing in a home presided over and visited by his wife, even possibly him, and none of them being aware of the truth! Goodness, it could come to that! “Does Lady Newington ever visit it?” She could not say that if Lady Newington did, her sister would accompany her. How much there was to keep from this young man!

“No,” he said, eyeing the unfinished lawn.

“But her daughter does?”

“Not very often,” he said.

“And her husband?”

“I've never seen him.” Joyce dropped the line of questioning. If she went on he would only become suspicious as to why she was asking him more about the Home than about him. And he probably wanted to get back to his work. For all she knew he could have another job lined up after he finished the lawn.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?” she asked. She would make it her final question, but it would return his thoughts to the safer area of himself and his family rather than Newington.

“I have a sister,” he said, smiling wistfully, “but she lives in North Wales. She was fostered there with my Aunt at the outbreak of the War and has lived there ever since. I've only met her a couple of times. You couldn't describe us as being close. But we send each other birthday presents and Christmas Cards. It's a bit odd, really.” Joyce wanted to tell him that she had a sister who she rarely saw or talked about, but she could not even share that confidence with him for fear of it reaching her daughter. “I'd better get back to the grass before it's tea time.”

Joyce stood at the kitchen window and watched him finish the lawn. He must have known that she was standing there and watching him. It might have made him feel uncomfortable but she found herself intrigued by this young man who had so many connections to her family. In a way he might be useful should she ever need to make contact with her daughter. She would never go to her direct, but if the need arose, she might make use of him.

Her thoughts drifted back to Newington House and she pictured Christina sat dominant on her horse in the snow outside the cottage. There was a photograph of her on the back of each of her books, but it must have been taken when she was comparatively young. She would not look like that now. If only she would find some reason to come down to visit the Home and if only Michael would come with her! Then, if that happened, supposing she just came to be there at the same time and, by chance of course, Michael saw her. If they could have a moment together that would be ecstasy, except it was all impossible in the first place. And in the second place he would be bound to ask about Stephanie and she did not want to tell him about their daughter. Not yet.

By the following Saturday Joyce had all but forgotten the question she had asked and the answer her lawn cutter had given. “You said that you are going to get married and are saving up for the deposit on a house when you came last week,” she said to Owen the following Saturday. “Is it the same girl as you were with when Stephanie pointed you out to me? She mentioned her name at the time.”

“Eileen? Eileen Norris?”

“Yes, that's the name,” said Joyce. “Eileen Norris.”

“Yes,” said Owen, “it is the same girl, only she doesn't know.”

“Doesn't know? Doesn't know what?”

“Doesn't know about me saving for a deposit. I haven't actually proposed to her yet.”

“How do you know that she will accept you?”

“I know she will. We've been going out together, sort of, for a long time now.”

“Sort of? That sounds like a rather odd arrangement, Owen.”

"It's her parents," he said. "They don't approve of me. I don't think they approve of any boy, but Eileen likes me. But they are emigrating to Australia this Autumn and Eileen does not want to go. She wants to stay here with me, but she has nowhere to live. So I thought I ought to get on with providing somewhere for us both to live. But it's a long process and I won't have enough money in time, not for when her parents go."

"Perhaps you could rent somewhere? What does Eileen do? Has she a job?"

"She's got a job at the library, but I don't want her to have to work. Any way, we are going to have a family and she won't be able to work, not with young children and all that."

"But you haven't actually asked her to marry you?"

"No," he said. "Not yet."

"But you think she will agree when you do?"

"Most certainly."

Once again she found herself standing at the kitchen window watching him, bemused by his attitude towards the girl he was proposing to marry and for whom he was planning to buy a house, yet did not appear to be prepared to tell her. She wanted to ask him what his intended, this Eileen, thought of his association with her notorious daughter. Perhaps she did not mind. Perhaps none of the younger generation minded about things like that. Perhaps no-one other than her minded?

"You appear to be the subject of rumours again," warned Mr Pennington. "I ought to warn you that people are talking about you and a young man."

"What?" said Joyce sharply. It was a warm early Autumn evening and she was making one of her rare visits to Rose Cottage to sample a glass of his home-made wine and watch the sun ease itself slowly to rest on the horizon from the patio.

"It is something I felt I could not fairly raise at school," he continued. "It is a matter of this young man you are seeing."

"Young man I am seeing? What on earth do you mean? I am not seeing anyone, leave alone a young man."

"Aren't you?" he said hopefully. "Everyone is saying that you are."

"Then everyone is wrong, whoever everyone may be!"

"Now I have made you angry and that was never my intention," he said soothingly. "But I thought I ought to tell you what people are saying. You should know."

"I don't give a fig for what people say or think. Or I would not but for the divorce and I don't think it is all that important in that respect. And I am not angry! I just think it is so unfair."

"Unfair?" he asked. "How so?"

"Just unfair," she muttered. And it was. There she was, a model of virtue who everyone was talking about whilst her daughter was free to walk the streets without so much as a murmur of censure. Perhaps it was because Stephanie performed an unofficial social service in the surrogate duties she undertook for many of the wives in the town? Any way, it was unfair!

"So, there is no young man?"

"There is a young man," she said coldly. "You know all about him. His name is Owen Cross and he cuts the grass once a week, or has been doing so up until recently. He has also done one or two other jobs around the house. He is engaged to a girl called Eileen Norris and is saving up to put a deposit on a house. This is as much of a young man that I am seeing, and you should remember him as he answered the card I put in the newsagent's window at your instigation." She was tempted to be indiscreet and to go on to say that she wished there *was* a young man, but she checked herself. It was an issue she had not addressed and not one to be suddenly trotted out and paraded, un-prepared. In any event, it was not the kind of inner thought that she wanted to confide in Mr Pennington.

"Is that all?" he asked. She could hear the note of relief in his voice, but she was very angry at the time and it was not until later that she realised that his interest might extend to more than just friendship and guidance now that she was being divorced. When she looked in the mirror she told herself it was quite understandable. She was still an attractive woman. She

could attract men every bit as much as her daughter. She could probably even go so far as to pick and chose. Now she thought more about it, her young man was quite good-looking and he must have stamina otherwise he would not have been so successful with the lawn mower!

“That is all,” she said sharply. “That is the entire extent of it. He cuts the grass, which is something I cannot manage myself. I suppose I could buy myself a motor mower but then I would have the trouble of trying to start it. I doubt if all that many woman cope with cutting the grass, certainly not when it got into the state that mine did!”

“No,” said Mr Pennington, reflectively. “Cutting grass is not really a job for a woman. Certainly not for you, Joyce.”

“I did try,” she said defiantly. “But I couldn't do it. I couldn't simply let it get overgrown. There seemed to be no other option, don't you agree?”

“Of course I do,” he said. “But we have to think of your reputation.” So, she had a reputation, did she? What kind of reputation would the mother of a prostitute, who lured young men to her house on the pretext of cutting her grass, really have?

“I don't know what I can do,” she said. “The grass has to be cut. If my reputation suffers, how can I help that? Any way, there won't be many more cuts this year so perhaps everyone will stop taking then.”

She brooded on what had been said as she walked home in the gathering dusk. With every step she took she grew more angry about the manner in which she was being treated and viewed by those around her. Here she was, innocent of any offence against this notional moral code to which everyone else paid lip service but did not observe, being pilloried. None of them knew about her meetings with Michael. No-one could talk about them. Here she was having acquired a reputation without having had the enjoyment and excitement to justify it. Oh, but that could be remedied! If it gave her a reputation equal to that of her daughter she could take comfort in fulfilling all that seemed to be expected of her. There was the question of her position at the school. No doubt Miss Higgins lived a completely blameless life and she would be expected to comply with this standard. In her present mood she was prepared to disregard this possibility whatever the risk or the consequences.

Owen Cross probably had quite a shock when she next opened the door to him. “Are you going out?” he stammered, eyeing her up and down.

“No,” she said brightly, allowing him into the hall. “Mark you, I sometimes wish I were.” He was standing there at the foot of the stairs, almost fixed to the floor. Wild thoughts ran through her head. “Is there something wrong?” she asked.

“No,” he said after a moment's hesitation. “I'd better get on.” She could have taken him up on that, but she gave him the garage key and watched him push the mower out onto the grass. It could well be the last time he visited her that year unless something went wrong in the house. She was thinking the kind of thoughts she had not entertained for years. She built fantasy upon fantasy, becoming intoxicated by a wild vision of how a Saturday afternoon might be spent. Yet there was still a soft, calming, voice that appealed to her to act soberly. It would not be fair to make use of this young boy even if he might have been one of those who did have the money to pay her daughter. What would he think of it afterwards? She might never be rid of him. And what would his intended think? “Oh God, Michael,” she said to the kitchen. “Look at me! Look at what I am in danger of becoming! And only a few months ago I was on a steady course, upwards, towards better things. Look at it all now! Why aren't you here, by my side, lending support and strength? Where are you, Michael? What are you doing? Why are you not here with me?”