

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Joyce returned to Bromley full of good intentions but several weeks slipped by and still her dilemma whether to approach Owen remained. She could sense her neighbours watching her and whispering. "Have you heard?" they would be saying. "Her daughter goes from bad to worse. She's now got a married man living with her, and him with a small son left at home as well! Can you imagine that! Not only sinful but living in sin! And she, the mother, is no better from what we hear!"

There were times when she would sit before her dressing table alone in the house and contemplate her image. Everything seemed to stem from that one small mistake, yet when she looked back on that magical night with Michael, she had no regrets. What they did then was natural and the right thing to do. She never had any doubts about that. What was wrong was the decision they both made to go their separate ways but, then, she could blame herself for that, not Michael who made his choice in complete ignorance of her pregnancy. That also seemed the right thing to do at the time. Perhaps her real mistake was to leave home and marry Mr Hiller, but what choice did she have in that? "It is all fate," she told herself.

Was she really no better than her daughter as the neighbours might say? Well, she was not having an affair with a married man for a start. She was not even having an affair unless she counted Michael. She did have her moments of weakness, but how could anyone rightly compare her with her despicable daughter? She would think about Owen Cross and his wife and wonder whether she should approach him. If she did, why would she be doing it? For her own sense of morality? To preserve a marriage of two people she hardly knew? Or as some belated parental gesture? It had been easy to build up some enthusiasm when she had been with Michael but now, weeks and miles away, that had dissipated. Surely it was not because she was jealous of her daughter? Was that the root of it all, not just Owen, but the going to parties and with the occasional man?

"I am not jealous!" she told the mirror. "It is all wrong. She should not live the way she does and he should not be living with her! He should be home with his wife and family and I should be free to live my life without having to concern myself with either of them!"

There was also a slight logistical difficulty to overcome should she decide to take matters into her hands and act. She could hardly go to Stephanie's flat. For a start she could not be sure that he would be there and even if he were, her daughter would hardly let her speak to him alone. If she needed an indication she only had to recall the way Stephanie had talked to her when Owen was coming round the house to cut the grass, accusing her of carrying on with him! No, if she was to talk to Owen it would have to be on neutral ground somewhere. She knew he started work early. It would have been relatively simple to slip around to the yard before breakfast one day, but that was hardly the place to talk about such an intimate subject, and he would be wanting to get to work and probably would not listen to her properly. It was hardly a suitable subject to talk about at seven o'clock in the morning.

So, she convinced herself, it would have to be after work. That was more difficult because he did not always return to the builder's yard and she would have no idea where he was nor what time he would stop working. There was a chance she could wait for him outside the flat, but what if her daughter saw him or, worst than that, saw the two of them together? Joyce did wonder if that happened Stephanie would evict him, but she concluded that given the way her daughter reacted that would be only likely to make her even more possessive.

Then, whilst Joyce was continuing to torment herself over the matter, fortune acted in a way she least expected and played into her hands. One Monday morning, as she smartly passed by on her way to school, she saw a Wick's board leaning against a red van parked outside a house at the end of the road around which two men were erecting some flimsy looking scaffolding. And there, standing in the garden looking up at the roof, was Owen Cross. She paused by the gate hoping perhaps he would turn and see her. Perhaps he had, but he did not turn at first. Perhaps he did not want to talk to her, but when he did turn and openly caught sight of her for the first time he seemed genuine surprised. "Why, hello Mrs Hiller," he said sheepishly, crossing to where she stood.

“Are you working here, Owen?” she asked softly, conscious that the whole street was probably watching her.

“For the next couple of days,” he said.

“Good! I can't really stop now. What time will you be finishing tonight?”

“Oh, not until late,” he said, looking most uncomfortable. “It's about your daughter, isn't it?”

“In a way, but now is not the time to talk,” she said.

“Here?” he asked. Joyce looked at the weed fringed path leading to Mrs Wrightman's door. She was almost deaf and would be unlikely to be able to hear a word. Joyce could not ask him to come to her house. Although this was out in the open in full view of everyone, it appeared to be the best place. After all, what could there possibly be wrong with them talking in full public view?

“Yes,” she said. “This is as good a place as any other. I will see you on my way home from the school.”

He was on the roof when she returned. He probably saw her some way off as he went straight to the ladder and descended as soon as she was at the gate. “How is Stephanie?” she asked as he approached.

“Stephanie? She's fine,” he said, forcing a smile.

“And you?”

“I'm fine too.”

“And your wife and son? I hear you have a little boy.” She saw the look of pain in his eyes before he looked away and felt she might be on promising ground.

“They're fine too. I ought to get back to work. I've got my own business now, you know, and there's a lot to do.”

“How old is your son, then?” she asked.

“What do you want, Mrs Hiller?” he said, turning back to her.

“Not a lot. I don't have much to say, but I must say it now that we are face to face if only for my own piece of mind. You left your wife and went to live with my daughter, and you are still living with her now?” She knew it was a blunt question and that there were many who would have been equally blunt in reply, and probably not limited themselves to the choicest language. She did not see Owen as being amongst those, unless Stephanie had changed him.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“You must go back to your wife and family, Owen. For your sake and for Stephanie's sake,” she said earnestly.

“But I love her, Mrs Hiller,” he blurted. “I love your daughter with all my heart. I worship the ground she walks on. I adore her. You cannot begin to imagine for one moment how I feel about her. No-one can.”

“I think I can,” said Joyce softly. “But I can also remember all the things you used to tell me when you used to come around to my house to cut the grass. All the plans you had for yourself and your wife. Have you forgotten all that?”

“No,” he said. “I haven't forgotten. Eileen has been to see you, hasn't she?”

“Eileen? Your wife? No, she has not been to see me, in fact I don't think I have ever met her.”

“Then why are you saying all this to me?”

“Why? Because I cannot stand by and see you young people go and ruin your lives. I've seen it happen too many times.” Even as she said it she began to doubt her words. Was this what she would have advocated for herself? She had advocated then that Michael should follow the path of duty and go off and marry. Look what had become of that decision! Was she now going to argue that these young people should do the same? What if he and Eileen did not get on together? How could she condemn them to years of misery? “You say you love my daughter,” she added. “What does she think of you?”

“I think she likes me.”

“She's never said that she loves you, Owen?”

“I don't need her love. I don't ask for her love. It is enough just to be able to live with

her," he said.

"That's nonsense, Owen," she said sharply, "and you know it. You cannot have a one-sided relationship. She'll just get tired of you and throw you out. Then where will you and your family be? After all, you met Eileen first and married her, not Stephanie. You cannot just abandon her, especially for someone like my daughter."

"It's not that simple. I love your daughter to the exclusion of everything else. I couldn't go on if she rejected me. Life would not be worth living without her."

"And that's nonsense, too, Owen," she said tersely, looking around as if everyone in the street was there standing behind her and listening. "Are you trying to tell me that you don't love your wife, or that you have never loved her? That's not what you used to say. Don't you love Eileen or your son at all?"

"Of course I do!" he protested. "I just love Stephanie more. And I have to be there to save her."

"Save her? Save her from what?"

"Save her from herself," he said. "Save her from what she is doing to herself, from what she may become if no-one does save her."

"That's all very fine, Owen," snapped Joyce. "Ignoring for one moment the question of whether she is worth saving, what about your wife and son? Who is there to save them?"

"I give Eileen money."

"Money? You are sounding just like my daughter. Dear Lord, Owen, don't you see your wife needs more than money? Don't you realise your son needs a father, his father?" Joyce found it hard to say these words with any conviction. She did not know what Stephanie had told him about her upbringing and the standard of fatherhood she had received. She was fully prepared for him to throw her words back in her face as Stephanie would have done, but he did not.

"I just feel that I cannot live without her," he said reflectively.

"I don't know how you can say that, Owen. Lots of people have to live apart from the one they love the most." That was something Joyce could say to him with authority. "If you loved my daughter so much why did you marry Eileen?"

"I don't know. I suppose I got to know her before Stephanie. I thought I loved Eileen at the time."

"And you think you are really in love with Stephanie? Given what she is and what she does. She still does, does she? She hasn't given it up?"

"No, she hasn't. She says she can't because there would not be enough money for us both to live on after I have given Eileen something. She says she has to go on working, as she puts it."

"There!" exclaimed Joyce, desperately looking for some way to gain a rapid victory. "Can't you see the mess you are making of your lives? You have left your wife and son when they need you most, and you are forcing Stephanie to continue the very kind of life you talk about saving her from. She couldn't give up even if she wanted to. Everyone is losing out, Owen. Surely you can see that?"

"I suppose so," he said sullenly.

"As I see it everything points to you going back to your family. Living with my daughter is doing no good to anyone, least of all her and Eileen."

"I know," he said desperately. "But she is so beautiful and I love her so. I would do anything for her, anything!"

"She is beautiful," said Joyce softly. "I only wish she could put her natural talents to better use, but she wouldn't be able to even consider doing it whilst you remain like a mill stone around her neck. You must leave her." She could have said that it was unlawful for him to live on immoral earnings and denounce her daughter's character and her wickedness in enticing this young man away from his family, but Owen was in no mood to listen to those kinds of arguments. Goodness, when she thought of all the trials she had been put through, never had she done anything like the things Stephanie had done!

She realised that if she was unable to persuade Owen to act, she might have to actually go and see her daughter. It was not a prospect she relished, but she had already

prepared her line of argument. She would tell her everything except Michael's identity. She would tell her daughter how the two of them had met, how they had fallen in love, how they were still in love, how he was forced to marry the girl arranged for him by his father, how she had let him go knowing that she was expecting Stephanie. She would explain why she married Mr Hiller and how she had no idea what kind of man he was. She would say how difficult it was at times to make ends meet, how she was compelled to go out to work, and how Michael had come back into her life. But she would not reveal Michael's identity. Perhaps when Stephanie heard the whole story she would feel more sympathetic towards her mother and be more prepared to consider her suggestion. This was all in reserve in case Owen was obstinate.

"Go home, Owen," she said softly. "Go back to your wife and to your home. There is no future for any of you in what you are doing." His head dropped. "She will take you back, won't she?"

"I suppose so," he said reluctantly.

"Well, you think about Eileen and how she feels, not about yourself. It is hardly flattering for her to know that you left her for another woman. I hope the damage is not irreversible. It really is a dreadful thing for a man to do, leave his wife for another woman." She could say that. There was no chance that Michael would ever leave Christina whatever the circumstances.

"But I do love this other woman," he protested. "I don't see how I can live without her."

"Then you will have to learn," said Joyce firmly. "As we all have to. And you love your wife and son as well, don't you?"

"I do," he said reflectively, "but not in the same way. No-one makes me feel the way I do when I'm with Stephanie."

"Well, I've said all I'm prepared to say," said Joyce lamely, feeling that she had played her hand to its limits and still not won the round. She had one possibly last play. "How long do you think you will keep Stephanie?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How long do you think she will put up with your presence and your attempts to confine her and change the kind of life she leads? There will come a day when she will no longer tolerate you, there will. I know my daughter. I know her better than anyone. She likes to have her admirers. I dare say she likes having you around at present as part of the furniture. But it won't last, especially if you try and change her or her ways. She will turn on you and you will lose her and everything. Eileen might take you back now, but how long will it be before she considers a divorce? Can't you see the gamble you are taking, Owen? If you can't, you don't deserve either of them!"

Joyce turned on her heel and started to walk away. She knew she had not succeeded. All she could do was hope that she had sown enough in the way of doubts to make him reconsider and she had to concede that if Stephanie told him to stay, he would do so. Yet she was sure that a day would come when Stephanie would tell him to go. If only Owen could see that her daughter was just playing with him, but she could only go so far. In the end it was up to these young people to sort out their lives. She had her own to live. As she walked along the road she realised that she might have placed the wrong interpretation on the situation. She had assumed all along that it had been Stephanie who had enticed Owen away from his family. From what he said it was just possible that this was not the case and that he had acted on his own initiative. Why, if that was so, should she have taken him in?

"Mrs Hiller," called a voice from behind her. She stopped and waited for Owen to catch up with her. Everyone would be looking from behind their curtains or from the darkened depths of their front rooms. "Mrs Hiller," he repeated, coming up to her. "Would you go and talk to Eileen?"

"Me?" she said surprised. "I don't even know your wife."

"I know," he said anxiously. "I know it's a lot to ask of you, but I need to know if she will have me back. I need someone to go and ask her. Will you?"

"You should do that," said Joyce firmly, turning and continuing towards the house.

“Goodness, how the neighbours must be loving this!” she thought.

“I can't,” he said, sheepishly following her. “I cannot face the prospect of telling Stephanie that I am leaving her and then finding that Eileen will not take me back.”

“I am sure that she will,” said Joyce, wondering why she said it because she had no grounds for thinking this was so.

“So she might, but someone has to ask her to make sure. Would you do that, for all of us?”

“What would I say?”

“You could tell her you saw me. Even better, tell her I came to see you and told you that I want to return home. Tell her I've made the biggest mistake of my life.”

“I really don't know,” said Joyce, feeling herself drawn into a whirlpool of someone else's creation and wondering why he had changed his stance so quickly. “Are you now saying that you want to go back and that if Eileen will allow that, you will? That wasn't what you were saying a few minutes ago. I could hardly go and talk to her unless that is what you are saying. It wouldn't be fair; not to her nor to me.”

“I don't know,” he said, stepping back a pace. “I will have to think about it.”

“So you haven't changed your position,” said Joyce sharply. “Well, when you have thought about it, let me know. You know where I live, It is your decision, Owen.”