

PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

Stephanie could remember the day, as clearly as it had been yesterday, on which she first saw Owen. No, that was not the right way to put it. It was the day when she first really noticed him and took an interest in him. Of course she had seen him plenty of times before. He was just another boy, one who never had any money, one who appeared to take little interest in her, certainly not one to attract her attention. He did not associate with the same youths as did she. In fact she did not recall him as much as ever speaking to her. She would see him at school, in the playground, sometimes with boys of his own age, sometimes alone, rarely with any of the girls. He would pass by alone when they were in the park, never stopping, always finding some excuse to avoid responding to the appeals from Dave Henry or one of his friends to join them on the bandstand. He was just another boy, and not a very interesting one at that.

He was not the only one from her school who passed by on the way home. Most days, head lowered as if in some religious contemplation, Eileen Norris would walk slowly by. Occasionally one of the boys would shout something at her, something obscene if no-one else was around. She seemed to be unaffected by it and Stephanie would wonder whether this was because she was so engrossed in what she appeared to be thinking of, or whether she heard but simply did not understand. Then came an afternoon when they both passed by in close proximity to each other, Eileen tripping lightly in the van. A few days later, or so it seemed to Stephanie, Owen was carrying this girl's satchel and talking to her. The following day it was the same, and the day after that. It was clear to Stephanie that Owen was taking more than a passing interest in this dull, unattractive, girl, and not her.

What did they find to talk about? They always appeared to be engrossed in conversation, but what about? What could they possibly have so much to talk about, these two who seemed so unsuited to each other? It could surely not be school work? Owen had a reputation for being good with his hands which was a pseudonym for a total lack of academic prowess. It could not be about doing it as Eileen was not that sort of girl and Stephanie did not have Owen marked down as that kind of boy. No, Mavis was right for once in describing her as being tight-legged, not that she would ever have uttered the turn of phrase Mavis used.

She could remember the brilliance of that afternoon, how the sun light polished and honed the edges of the deep shadows that engulfed the bushes. She could remember how the air hung still, filled with the expectant stench of the group of boys there on the grandstand. She could recall being pestered by Dave Henry who she regarded as Mavis's boyfriend although he did not always act as such. She had brushed him aside as Eileen and Owen came out of the shadows by the wrought iron gates and started the gentle descent to the lakeside. He had still been bothering her when they drew closer. They were engaged in their customary conversation but for the first time to her knowledge she could see that they were holding hands. She watched them slowly pass, ignoring what was called after them, and disappear as the path wound its way behind the bushes.

There was more, much more. For her it was only a small step, but it was such a significant step and that was what made it all the more memorable. It was almost a trifling occurrence, one which would have gone unnoticed and un-chronicled in her life of being alluring, appearing condescending, accommodating and submitting to men. She had said "no" It was not directly to a man, that was true. It had been to Mavis and she had relied upon her to convey the decision to the expectant youths. But the effect was the same, both on those who were refused and she who refused. It was a power she had barely recognised that she had, leave alone exercised. All those years of being nice, of doing what men wanted, of being told what was expected of her and being told to do it, and suddenly there was this hidden weapon, one which she had never dared use before. How many years had she told her mother it had been going on? Long enough for sure.

Stephanie made limited use of her newly discovered power. At first she thought that it would deter, but she slowly discovered that the opposite was true. But it had fallen to perhaps the most unlikely of people in the form of Owen Cross to reinforce it. "You can always say "no"," he would say and never tired of saying it until the day she said it to him. However, that occasion was still some distance in the future when she took her first steps down the path of denial.

"I could say "no"," she would say, "but then I would have no bread to put on my plate, would I?" If he had a stock saying, she had this stock answer and used it on anyone who raised the question of her morality; anyone except her mother, that is. She would say it lightly to Owen, no matter how serious and grave he appeared at the time. It always forced him to smile, protest that he was being serious, and smile all the more. Then they would both laugh and the subject would be dropped for the time being. That was how it was.

"Oh, Owen!" she breathed as she looked down from her flat into the snowy streets. "Perhaps if you had walked with me through the park instead of with her it would all have turned out differently for both of us. I wouldn't be stood here now looking down on this scene and you wouldn't be -" It was not a suitable day for a funeral if any day was. It was possible that it might be called off although if they did, she would not know until she reached the cemetery. But surely the ground must be frozen? How could they possibly think of back-filling the hole? And if they did postpone it, she would have to find out the day on which it was going to be re-arranged. She could only find that out by going. It was possible that one postponement would be followed by another. It would be some kind of judgment on her if that did happen, but she would have to go come what may. She owed that to him and herself.

He had been slow to approach her and it had never been in her mind to approach any man who would not want to use her. Consequently a number of weeks passed by after that afternoon, weeks in which his relationship with Eileen became firmly cemented, before he did. Stephanie noticed him at times looking across at her in the playground, or in the park when he passed with his girlfriend. On occasions they would come in close proximity and she would see that his eyes were fixed on her although he never spoke. She was accustomed to being scrutinised and she would smile alluringly, look away, and when she looked back he would still be staring at her. So she would smile again and go on her way. Stephanie knew exactly what she was doing. She knew he was serious on Eileen although she could not understand why. She knew that she did not want him as a boyfriend or not even as a permanent admirer. She thought she might just loosen slightly the ties that held him. It would annoy, even upset, Eileen but at the time Stephanie derived some pleasure from shaking what appeared to be a solid relationship. Looking back she felt slightly ashamed by what she attempted to do, but he was in most ways just another man to be captured, another trophy. Her mistake was to have done only enough to have weakened the bonds. She should have set out to have broken them asunder, or not attempted to do anything at all.

But such a thing was never in her mind. She had, from the start, no more than the thought to make a little playful mischief, just entice him, unsettle the relationship, remind him that she was there and was very real. Life had been so much simpler then. She could not claim that it was an age of innocence and discovery, not for her in matters carnal, but she was innocent when it came to relationships and that silly thing those around her referred to as love. She might not have been innocent in one respect, but she was of the world of pain, anguish and despair that Owen opened up and revealed to her.

What had happened to the letter? There had been no mention of it at the Inquest, not one word. Stephanie had sat at the back and waited for it to be produced in evidence. She dreaded that she might be called to explain its contents and the circumstances under which it was written. But nothing was said. Eileen did not refer to it, nor did the Coroner. Stephanie left the court wondering if it had ever reached Owen. There was a possibility that he had destroyed it. There was a stronger possibility that Eileen had intercepted it. Then, if that was so, what would she have done with it? She might have confronted her husband on that last morning. There would have been a row and he would have gone to work in a disturbed frame of mind. But Eileen had said that he was quite normal, or reasonably so. She might have intercepted it and destroyed it herself. Stephanie still had his letter. She had taken it to the

inquest in case it was required, but there seemed to be no point in producing it if her reply was not read out. She had it still, but perhaps now she should burn it?

She had wanted to meet him, not at school and not with the others around. Certainly not in the presence of Eileen. Passing him by and smiling was not enough. She wanted to talk to him, to learn things about him. That was a part of the problem. Had she been less inclined to flirt with him and had been as hostile as she could be, and knew how to be, to men who made advances towards her, matters might have taken a completely different course. She had to be that way, she told herself. Once she had discovered her secret weapon, she had to be prepared to repulse any unsolicited advance. And, although she might flirt, she never solicited. She was not like, and had no intention of becoming like, Mavis or her dreadful mother before her. That was undoubtedly part of the problem because it soon became known that those she did favour were all able to enjoy her fruits, and those she did not, did not. There was nothing in between these two extremes, no man who she received favourably but with whom she did not sleep. It was inevitable that Owen, once she had shown him that she was not prepared to reject him, assumed that he fell into the same category as all the others.

But Owen was different. He was different from the men who sat her on their knees and pressed their half-a-crowns into her small hands, or the boys who handed her their pocket money and were so clumsy in the bushes. There was something indefinable about him, something that seemed to pressure her to meet him, not as a customer, more as a friend. Yet she hung back, uncertain, perhaps even fearful. And as she had not felt this way about him, or anyone else for that matter, until he started going with Eileen Norris, she had no doubt that was the reason. If only she had continued to hang back and treated Owen with the disdain she later measured out in large, generous, doses to those who pestered her! If only, but life was like that, was it not, full of "if only's"? Hers appeared to have been one long series of "if's" and "perhap's" and "may be's." She would tell herself these things: if she had only not done this, or gone there, or been with him. If only her mother had not run away that dark, wet, night her real father appeared large on the doorstep and left her to the mercy of her step-father. If only she had know at the time who he was when she opened the door, but she, in her innocence, thought he was just another of the strange men who visited her father from time to time.

How it made her blood boil, even now as she thought about it! How it infuriated her! It was not just that he had been there on the doorstep and outside in the car all night for her to find in the morning, but she had actually talked to him! There was a time when she would strain her memory to try and picture just what he looked like. She had the two images, of him large and lit by the hall light, and of him seemingly small, unshaven, bleary-eyed, peering through the open window of his car. Neither image was ever particularly strong or well defined and as the years progressed they became weaker, blurred, less distinct until they faded and were replaced by images that were closer to her ideal. She knew these new images were false, but she would lie in bed, alone, and conjure him up there again on the doorstep. She would invite him in and he would ask her who she was. When she replied he would proclaim he was her true father and had come to take her away to a life of happiness. Sometimes this conversation would not take place until the next morning when she found him in the car, but she did not like this version because she felt sullied by then. She would let the dream run on and allow him to denounce her mother for the way she had been treated. He would gain custody after a court battle in which she gave evidence standing on a stool in the witness box. Then she would be whisked away in a flurry of cars and trains to his large house somewhere in the depths of the country, set amongst a forest of trees, but never far from the sea. Yes, it had to be near the sea! There she would be treated like Royalty, wanting for nothing and having no demands to satisfy. All this her mother had denied her, and even now she would not say who her real father was!

It was possible that none of this would have happened had her mother told her the truth. There! Her mother was responsible for everything that had happened, to her and to Owen. If she had been taken by her father she would never have known Owen. He would have met Eileen and married her and they would have lived happily never dreaming how close they had come to tragedy. Had her mother told her later, possibly when she learned the

truth, events still might have taken a different course. It was clearly her mother's fault. And it was so frustrating to have a father somewhere out there in the snow not knowing who he was, where he was, and having no means of finding out. What on earth stopped her mother from telling her? Perhaps her was a criminal or a spy? He might be in prison and the reason for her mother's silence was to protect them both. No, if that were the case, the reason was to protect her mother's job and to hell with the daughter! Who would employ the wife of a master-criminal, maybe a great swindler or even a mass-murderer? On the other hand he might be rich, titled, with a position in society to be protected. Then the large country house with its avenue of servants became a real possibility and Stephanie by far preferred this explanation to the one in which she saw her father and mother meeting in a drab, bare, room separated by a wire fence. And she did meet him, did she not? At least, her mother had admitted to keeping in touch with her father. Surely now, at her age, at an age where she could be relied upon to act responsibly, she could have told her? But not one word, not as much as a hint from the vile woman. How she hated and despised her!

Now that she looked back, it seemed that it was a long time before Owen and she did meet. Days were longer then, and progressed more slowly than now when they seemed to proceed in a stampede, never giving her time to relax or contemplate. Except this morning, this very special, sad, morning on which she had cancelled all engagements, leaving herself alone in the flat with no-one but herself. Despite all those meetings of eyes and her very best alluring smiles, they remained apart. It was not his doing, she was sure of that. He did not appear to be the uncommunicative sort. No, it was the work of Eileen Norris and there were days when she hated the girl and heaped upon her responsibility for all the World's ailments, for keeping Owen from her. In time a more wicked witch was to appear, but before that unhappy revelation it was poor Eileen who bore the brunt of Stephanie's unspoken displeasure.

And then, one wet Saturday afternoon, when she was least expecting anything of the kind to happen, it did happen. Quite by chance, as she was passing outside the Post Office, clutching a folded umbrella but holding a romantic magazine over her head to shelter her from the increasingly persistent large drops of rain that were escaping from the dark clouds filling her sky, he was there, coming out. He stopped dead in his tracks, half-smiled and looked slightly uncomfortable. She stopped too, searching the shadows behind him for Eileen, but she did not appear to be there. So she stepped into the entrance beside him, looked upwards and smiled at him. "I think the Heavens are about to open up," she said. "You are going to get absolutely soaked if they do. I haven't put it up yet as they are such a pain to get dry and my mother doesn't like them being opened in the house, but would you like to shelter under my umbrella?"

It was not a sensible suggestion, she thought when she looked back on it. She had no idea where he was planning to go. He could even have been on his way to Eileen's although she thought that might be something of a coup, to walk with him right up to the Norris's front door sheltering him from the storm. She would have liked to have seen Eileen's face when she found the two of them together in the rain. What would she have said? "I am not sure that it wouldn't be wise to stay in here at least until this storm blows over," Owen did say.

"It sounds a very sensible idea to me," she said, "and I will join you." They both went inside and stood by an untidy cream rack stuffed with application forms for radio and car licenses. Stephanie leant her umbrella against a wall, saying that she must remember not to forget it. Curiously, not being house-trained, it produced its own little pool of water despite having remained furled all afternoon. "I don't think it will last all that long," she said.

Owen tried to look up to see the sky through the high-placed windows to see, but they had misted over. "I came in to get some stamps and pay some money into my Post Office account," he explained.

"And no Eileen?" she asked, nodding.

"No," said Owen, cautiously.

"She probably would not like it if she knew you were talking to me, would she?"

"I don't know," he said impetuously. "She might not, but I feel I want to talk to you. I suppose most boys do."

"I suppose so," she said demurely and lowered her eyes. Now she was teasing him, just a little, quite deliberately. "What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I don't like what you are doing to yourself," he blurted, "or what you allow others to do to you. The way you carry on, and going around with that Mavis Spencer and the Dave Henry gang."

"Well!" she said. "At least you are direct!" She was determined that nothing he said should upset her although the conversation had already taken a most unpromising line. "And you seem to know a lot about me," she added.

"I have been watching you closely for a long time. I can see what you are doing and I think it is such a waste!"

"A waste? A waste of what?"

"A waste of you and your potential." At this, Stephanie had to fight back a giggle, but she could see that he was in earnest and made no attempt to deter him from the course he was following. "You are a cut above the rest of them. You could do much, much, better."

"Am I being propositioned in some way?" she asked wickedly. "I mean, are you suggesting you want to manage me? I must warn you that I have a very independent streak in me."

"Oh, goodness me, no! Nothing was further from my mind. I just think you could do better."

"But, better at what?" she asked with a hollow laugh.

"I don't know. I wish I did. There must be something, after all you are by far the best looking girl in the school."

"I know that. And I am the least popular girl, with the girls. They all hate me, you know, partly because of my looks but mostly I have the courage to do things they only dream of doing. I suspect your Eileen is amongst my main detractors. She hates me as well, doesn't she?"

"I don't think she hates you. After all, she hardly knows you."

"Nor do you," Stephanie said forcibly.

"But she would not approve of what you do, the way you carry on."

"Well, I am not seeking hers, or anyone's approval," said Stephanie thinking that she would much prefer the conversation to be about him and her relationship with him, "and in any case she really has no idea about it. That makes it easy for her to say things. Little does she know!"

"But, you only have to say, 'no'," he asserted. "That's all."

Stephanie felt confused. Their conversation had not followed the kind of pattern that she would have imagined and had now taken a further unexpected path. She had expected firstly to be propositioned by this curious young man. At least, she thought of him as a young man although he was a couple of years older than her. Now here he was having the effrontery, the impertinence, to criticise her and her conduct. It was not the kind of thing she wanted to hear from his lips, but the fact that he said it made her listen. Anyone else and she would have closed her ears.

"You are not like that Mavis, not at all," he continued in earnest. "She is no more than a slut, just like her mother. At least, that's what my mother says. But you - just look at what you're doing to yourself. Do you want to end up like Mrs Spencer?"

Stephanie found herself in a quandary. There was a part of her that wanted to fight back and defeat him. After all who was he to criticise her? Yet there was something there, in his manner, in the way he spoke, the way he looked, that she found attractive and which made her hold back. It was more than that. She felt that she actually wanted to please him, to do something that would earn his approval, something within reason that was. "So," she said lightly, "you think that I am different to Mavis, do you? You mean you don't fancy her?" There was something cruel about saying this and she could see that it hurt him in a way she never intended, but how was she to know then exactly what his aspirations were and, as events were later to show, she was not that wide of the mark.

"I do not fancy Mavis Spencer," he said slowly. "And that does not exactly fit the way I feel about you." Yes, that was what he had said then, but he had not elaborated and she,

foolishly, had not asked him to.

“You and Eileen Norris?” she said. “It is serious, is it?”

“Yes,” he said, again looking up at the windows, causing her to wonder if Eileen was waiting for him somewhere. “It is serious as far as I am concerned, although her parents do not approve. They do not consider me as a suitable companion for her, but then I don’t think they are the kind who would find anyone fully acceptable.”

“And Eileen? How does she feel?”

“I think she is serious, too.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t be seen talking to me then,” she said, swirling her skirt. “It might get back to her or her parents.”

“Perhaps not, but I feel I have to talk to you. I hope you don’t mind, but I am concerned for you.”

“I don’t mind,” she said softly, “but it does sound strange coming from someone who is virtually the same age as me. Does Eileen know of your concern?”

“No,” he said abruptly.

“So, you are not concerned enough to tell her?”

“I am. I will tell her if you think I should.”

“No,” said Stephanie, feeling that although this was a great opportunity to make trouble between them, it was something that had to be passed over. “I don’t think you should. Not if you are serious about her.”

“But, you don’t mind me talking to you like this? Nothing else, only talking, that’s all I want to do.”

“That is all you want to do?” she repeated, not expecting a different answer. “No, I don’t mind. You can talk to me any time you want, when Eileen permits it, of course, and when I am not otherwise engaged. I don’t exactly encourage voyeurism.”

“You shouldn’t talk like that, Stephanie,” he scolded. “It demeans you. You are undervaluing yourself.”

It was all so unexpected, his attitude and his line of argument. Stephanie wondered whether he was secretly following a course in psychology, but did not ask him. It seemed rather unlikely as, to her knowledge, Owen had not been singled out at school as a budding scholar. On the other hand, he was not categorised as a complete dunce. She could have placed him more towards the artisan end of the spectrum rather than the academic. And where did she place herself? She did not have a view on that but left it to others to decide and make their prejudiced judgements. Owen had talked to her, not like a prospective lover, more like her idea of how a father would to his daughter. She had been happy to listen, to take some of his advice and happy to give him the credit for having suggested it. And there was also this elusive quality about him that attracted her, something she could not isolate or define despite lying in bed at home, night after night, thinking about it.

“Exactly how do you feel about me?” she asked him one day when they met by chance in the park and agreed to walk together through the flower beds and rose garden. He was, he was quick to explain, on his way across to meet Eileen at the library as they were not permitted by her parents to meet at her house.

“Feel about you?” he asked. “How do you mean?”

“I was going back to what you said when we met in the Post Office. Yes, I do remember. I remember nearly every word. You said that you felt differently towards me than you do towards Eileen, or words to that effect. How is she, anyway? And you also said that you didn’t feel the same way towards me as you did towards Mavis. On my reckoning that puts me somewhere between being loved and being detested.”

“I didn’t say that, did I?” he protested. “I don’t have a feeling in any way towards Mavis. I don’t know her but I think she is despicable.”

“There! You do have a feeling towards my friend. You think she’s despicable. Don’t worry. I am not about to tell her.

“You shouldn’t call her your friend,” he said boldly. “If I had my way you wouldn’t associate with her at all. What do your parents think of her?”

“My parents? I don’t think they know her, at least I am sure that my mother doesn’t. And I doubt that she would care very much if she did. They let me do very much as I please.”

“Some parents!” he muttered. Stephanie could again feel a degree of anger rising within her in reaction to his impertinence. He was saying things that she would not have normally tolerated from anyone, yet she was prepared to allow him to get away with it.

“You still have not answered my question,” she said coldly. “How do you feel about me?”

“Feel about you?”

“Yes! Feel about me. Feel towards me? You?” The truth was she assumed that he was in love with her and her body, and felt confused about it. He would have not been human and male were he not enamoured by her appearance. But he had Eileen to consider and that would always colour the frankness of his answer.

“I suppose I feel towards you much as a brother would feel towards his sister. I do have a sister, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know,” she said sharply. She did not want to be talking about Owen’s sister or anyone else’s for that matter. “Where do you keep her?” She had no doubt in her mind that she felt no need for a brother. One would have just been another man in the house and one who would probably always be short of pocket money when it was most needed. And if Owen had a sister tucked away somewhere as he was saying, why did he not direct his brotherly feelings towards her?

“My sister lives in North Wales. She was evacuated there during the War and has never come back. The couple who took her in wanted to adopt her, I think, but my mother would not agree, so they have remained her foster parents right to this day. I expect you know that my father died when I was very small.”

“How very pleasant,” she said acidly. “I suppose you want me as a sister-substitute?” Had she know then what she was later to learn they might have been able to strike common ground regarding absent or lost fathers.

“No!” he protested. “That is not it at all. That is not the way I feel about you. I just care about you, worry about you. I don’t want to see you come to harm.”

“So you have said,” she said, still feeling vexed at not receiving an answer that satisfied her. She knew she wanted something from him but even had he asked, she would not have exactly been able to shape the words for his reply. Perhaps she was clearer about what she did not want from him. “You had better go and meet your Eileen,” she added. “Otherwise she might become concerned and come looking for you. It would never do for us to be found together, would it?”

“Oh, Stephanie,” he said, “what could be more innocent than us just walking and talking together?”

“Oh Owen,” she said tersely, stopping and staring him full in the face. “It is what we might have just done, or might be talking about doing, that will cause offence. You must be aware of that.”

“I’m sorry” he said. “I only wanted to talk to you.”

“And so you have. Now, go and find your beloved before something happens that you and she might regret. Go along, now.” She stood still and watched him go, passing under the shade of a large, drooping, conifer, until he disappeared from sight around a bend between some Azalea bushes. She would have liked to have gone with him, walking arm in arm, all the way to the library, and presented him to Eileen saying “here he is, your young man, delivered to you still as pure and innocent as the moment he met me.” Even if she did not go that far, she would have been happy just to be seen walking with him. But he preferred Eileen, she told herself. He would rather be with her despite the fact her parents did not approve of him. There was the irony. He should have been with her, not Eileen. And her own mother thought that he looked like a nice young man.

All that time they never met by any pre-arrangement. It was always by chance, by a fate which decreed that they should be in the same place at the same time on some blessed days. All that time he showed no weakening of his feelings towards Eileen and Stephanie gradually accepted the frustration and reconciled herself to the thought that he was going to

marry this girl and probably spend the whole of his life with her. Did she worry about this in the same way that he worried about her? Was there ever a time when she thought that the dull, staid, unexciting, conventional, Eileen Norris was really the girl he should marry? On the other hand, there was no prospect of him marrying her and even had he asked, and it was plain that it was not in his mind at any time then. Had he asked she was sure she would have refused him. Yet the thought and his blatant omission it annoyed her.

"I do not know what you see in her," she told him. "Your Eileen."

"I am in love with her and we are going to be married," he said. "What could be simpler than that?"

"If her parents permit."

"Ah, I think that impediment may be about to be removed."

"What?" she exclaimed. "How?"

"It looks as if they are going to emigrate to Australia to join relatives over there."

"Won't they take Eileen with them?" she asked hopefully, and then realised that where Eileen went, Owen might follow.

"I don't think so. She is getting a job at the library and plans to stay here with me. It has not been finally settled but that is the way things are at present."

"Stay with you?" Stephanie repeated under her breath. She could not help feeling disappointed. There had been a little ray of hope there, momentarily, and now it was cruelly extinguished. It was always possible that if they went soon and took Eileen with them, Owen would not be able to follow for a couple of years because of his age. It might also cost him a lot to go out. She might be able to deflect his attention in that order of period.

"I don't know," he said. "There's such a lot of things to organise. They will have to sell up virtually everything and Eileen's father has some business matters to tie up."

"They are going to sell their house?"

"It is already on the market."

"So, where will Eileen live if they go and she stays?" she said triumphantly.

"Oh, she will rent a flat, but long term we are going to buy a house of our own," he said. "I have been saving up money for the deposit for months and months."

"Buy your own house?" she said, rolling the idea around in her mind.

"Yes. You don't approve?"

"Oh, I approve," she said slowly. She did not, of course, but it was an idea that she immediately embraced. She would not buy a house because one would be far too expensive and well beyond her needs. But why should she not think of buying her own flat? That would not be too expensive or ambitious. Mavis had talked about having a flat, but she was looking to someone else to provide it for her. No, the answer was to buy one of her own. Then she would be truly independent, of her mother, her father, of everyone.

"You don't look like you approve," he said.

"Oh, I do," she told him. "It is just that you have given me an idea." The more she thought about it, the more attractive the prospect became and the more she wondered how it was she had never thought of it before! She felt grateful to Owen for placing this idea in her mind and almost forgave him for planning to buy his own house and set up home with Eileen.

"What kind of idea?" he asked.

"Never mind for the present," she said softly. "I need to think about it first. I will tell you when I am ready."

"I am going to going to buy my very own flat," she announced to him one day shortly before Mr Wick told her mother of her intentions.

"You are kidding!" Owen countered. "I don't believe you."

"Oh, but I am, and very soon," she maintained. His face darkened and she could see the opposition forming in his features. "It is just what I need. It will get me away from home and make me independent. Men will be able to come to me instead of me having to go to them. You don't approve, do you?"

"No, I don't," Owen replied flatly.

“Well, it was you who gave me the idea in the first place, when you told me of your intention to buy a house.”

“That’s entirely different! I’m getting married and, in any case, it could be years ahead. I am not making all that much progress with saving for the deposit so it could be ages before I can. I don’t see how you can afford it.”

“What makes you think you are the only one who can save, Owen? I have been saving for years, putting aside every penny that has been given me. I didn’t have this in mind, I must admit. I am not sure what I had in mind other than I had very little I wanted to spend it on and saving seemed a good idea. Now I have enough to purchase the leasehold of one of Mr Wick’s flats in the town and I am determined to do it.”

“You are telling me that you have earned enough doing what you do to buy a flat?”

“Yes. It’s only a small one,” she added. “Don’t start getting the wrong idea.”

“Do your parents know?”

“I haven’t said anything as yet. I wanted to be certain of everything first, but I will need their consent as I cannot hold the lease in my own name until I am twenty-one, or so Mr Wick says. Some sort of trust has to be established until then.”

“You really have gone into this, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have! Do I gather from your tone and demeanour that you do not think it is such a good idea? Why is that, Owen?”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “It is such a shock I don’t know what to say.”

“Of course,” she thought, “it must appear hard when there’s both him and Eileen struggling to find enough to put a deposit down on a house and here’s me talking about buying a flat.” Eileen would hardly take it lightly if he told her. She could imagine her talking about the wages of sin. “It is only a small one,” she repeated.

“I don’t know what Eileen will say.”

“Oh, she will revile me, I am sure,” said Stephanie, dismissively.

“She never reviles you,” he said defensively. “She agrees with me that you should change the way you live, change what you do.”

“You mean you do discuss me with her? My goodness, isn’t that risky, or do you just point out that dreadful girl over there and say that she will come to a bad end? That’s what everyone else says.”

“I do mention you occasionally.”

“And what does she say?”

“Nothing much,” he said quietly, but she could see in his eyes that there was more.

“And you don’t approve of the idea of the flat?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Perhaps you had better not tell her about it then. But it will have all manner of advantages and I will be able to be selective. That’s what you want isn’t it?”

“What I want is for you to give it up altogether!”

“And what will you do if I did? Don’t answer, Owen, because I know you haven’t an answer. In any case, it isn’t something I could contemplate.”

“I don’t know what I would do. Is there anything that I could do to make you stop?”

“Nothing,” she asserted. She knew it was an opportunity to set him difficult if not impossible terms, but she did not want to risk calling his bluff. If he suddenly renounced Eileen and demanded they married she would only refuse and where would that lead to? “There is nothing that any man could do or say that would make me stop doing what I do. I decided long ago that I would be my own person at the earliest opportunity and the flat is one step to that end. I am determined that I will never be dependent upon or beholden to any man no matter what I think of him!”

“But you prostitute yourself.”

“I do, and although it is out of need now, the day will come when I will do it out of choice, my choice, Owen. I will decide who, where, when and what, not someone else. I am not going to go the way that Mavis is going where some man takes her money in return for setting her up in a flat and finding her custom. I will control all of that myself. I will be independent and remain so. I am determined.”

“I suppose there’s some comfort in that,” he said quietly. She could see that he looked disappointed but could not understand why. Perhaps there was a degree of envy in his mind. He would go and tell Eileen, she was sure of that, and Eileen would denounce her and feel envious too. Stephanie could glean some satisfaction from that thought.

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