

CHAPTER THREE

Stephanie suddenly shivered as she looked out from the window of her flat over the whitened roofs. "Like freshly fallen snow." That had been what she had said. She wondered at the time whether it was intended as another reprimand. Even if it was not, it stuck in her mind as it was the first time she had experienced a profound feeling of ill-ease about the kind of life she led. She had nurtured the concern expressed by Owen simply to keep him in tow, otherwise she would have tossed aside all his advice. But on this occasion, the question that was posed, yet never asked, by this woman made her uncomfortable. As they approached the deserted bandstand Stephanie began to feel angry. Of course, Benjamin would be watching them. He would be there, at the telescope, tracing their every move. And, of course, he had seen everything she had done over the years. She did feel angry, but the anger was channelled towards her mother, the one who had allowed her daughter's life to drift in this dangerous way. Had it not been for her mother, had she been more protective and attentive to her daughter's needs, she would never have been there at the bandstand for someone to see, surrounded by her admirers, and watching Owen walk past with Eileen.

"Of course I cannot go out alone in the snow," Ursula said. "At least, not any further than into our garden. It entirely changes my perception of things. It changes the nature of the surface under my feet and the way things sound. In particular, it all but eliminates echoes. Send me out in the snow and I would be lost in no time, and that would never do, would it? It is an awful thing to be lost in this life and not know which way to go."

She remembered it all now. Owen had been there, some way off, walking with Eileen on his arm. No doubt they were talking and making plans for their marriage and their life together. Seeing them had been quite a shock, one which transmitted itself to her companion. "What is it my dear?" said Ursula with alarm. "Has something happened?"

"No," said Stephanie lowly. "I have just seen someone I know and who I would rather not meet, and he is heading in this direction. That's all."

"Is it your boyfriend? And is he with his young lady? I understand she is quite plain."

"Yes, he is with Eileen. How do you know about him?"

"I have told you," said Ursula, patting Stephanie's hand. "Benjamin is my eyes and as I see nothing he has to tell me everything. Everything, my dear. She is quite plain, this other girl, isn't she? Was Benjamin right, or is it a silly question to ask you?"

How was she to describe Eileen? It was not something she had ever put her mind to and how should she catalogue a person who she might see as her rival? How did one describe a rival, for now she had to accept that this was the way she should think about Eileen. It was not that she actually wanted Owen, or loved him or anything silly like that. No, that was not the way she felt then. It was just that this Eileen creature, who she could perhaps honestly call out and out plain had it not been for her dark, sorrowful, eyes, could have nothing said in favour of her small mean mouth, or that stub of a nose, or her mousy, unshapely, hair. If anything, it was the thought that this Eileen creature exercised more control over Owen than she did and, for his part, he seemed to exercise, or tried to exercise, a control over her, something for which she blamed Eileen. "She had quite beautiful eyes," she told Ursula, "but you have to get up close to her to see that. Oh, I'm sorry! Have I said something wrong?"

"No, no my dear, not at all," said Ursula. "I have beautiful eyes, but I wear them on the inside. I cannot be jealous of those who wear them on the outside. What are they doing now?" Owen must have seen her because he suddenly turned off down a tree-lined path that, Stephanie knew, led nowhere. She caught glimpses of him and Eileen through gaps in the bushes. Owen appeared to be glancing in her direction and she could see that Eileen was talking and gesticulating. In all probability she was the subject.

"They have gone a different way," she told Ursula. "They have gone their own way."

It was several days before Stephanie decided that she would visit the restaurant and then it was curiosity that took her there rather than hunger. She had dwelt upon the question of this strange couple who wished to adopt her. No, they had gone further than that; they had

adopted her. At least they thought as if they had. She had walked that evening with the sister right to the un-prepossessing door of the restaurant, perhaps more looking out for any further sighting of Owen rather than thinking about the request that she should consider herself adopted. When it was repeated as Ursula's assistant fumbled with the keys, Stephanie was non-committal. Back in the security of her flat she wondered what harm there would be in condescending, yet did she want any further complication in her life? She would have to go and visit and brave the restaurant, just once, as she had promised. Then she would see what, if anything, came of it.

The premises did not look inviting from the outside. She studied a faded menu which was stuck inside the window with yellow, peeling, sello-tape, before going inside. It was dark, with rows of high-backed bench seats and long, stained, wooden tables. Although it was nearly empty, Stephanie felt uncomfortably self-conscious, but she found a secluded table towards the rear and sat down.

"You'll 'ave to come up to the counter, luv," said a shrill voice from somewhere behind her. "Up 'ere, and I can give you a number." A head, which Stephanie recognised as belonging to the young woman who had been waiting outside the restaurant when she arrived with Ursula, had appeared in a hole in the rear wall. Stephanie took this to be the counter. "You give me your order and I give you a number. Then when it's ready I call out the number and you come and collect your tray. All right? It's very easy when you know how!"

Stephanie selected something from the menu and soon forgot what she had ordered. When her number was called she went up and collected a small meal that was not exactly appetising, but which she resolved to eat if only to be able to tell this pseudo-aunt of hers how bad the food really was. As she ate she watched a slow, unenthusiastic, procession of customers make their ways to the counter and go through the same procedure as she had. And then, quite suddenly, she heard Ursula's voice. "I can smell lilacs!" she exclaimed. "Can't you?" A few seconds later she appeared and headed straight towards the table at which Stephanie was sitting. "It is you, Stephanie, isn't it?" she said, sitting opposite her. "It is your perfume! I could smell it in the kitchen. That's how I know whether things have been cooked properly or too much, but there it was, waft after waft, and it led me straight to you! What a lovely thought, to wear a lilac perfume, and I am so very glad that you decided to come. How have you found your meal?"

"Wholesome," whispered Stephanie, feeling this was the most she could say.

"How very well put, my dear. It is all right. I know exactly what I serve up. I open the cans. But you will remember me saying that I cater for, shall I say, the lower end of the market, for those who cannot really afford to eat out but who cannot equally, or do not want to, eat in. I hope you think it is a touch better than a soup kitchen. Now I know you do not fall into that category, Stephanie, not judging from the clothes I understand you wear."

"I like to keep up appearances," she said defensively.

"And so you should! Benjamin always said you looked a cut above all the other girls he saw."

"I suppose you are about to tell me that I should do more with my life," said Stephanie, more sharply than she intended. "That is what Owen keeps telling me."

"Owen?" said Ursula. "So that is your young man's name?"

"He isn't my young man!"

"But, you would like him to be? I can hear it in your voice, my dear."

"No," protested Stephanie. "It is nothing like that. I do not want a boyfriend. I don't want any attachment!"

"Not even a teeny-weeny aunt? I know, you just want to be free. Isn't that what they sing, these crooners? So you want to have influence over this Owen of yours without being tied to him. Power without responsibility? But, then, I suspect he does not pay you the same degree of adulation that the others do, does he?"

"He never has," said Stephanie darkly, feeling slightly bewildered. "Or to be absolutely truthful, the kind of attention he does pay me is entirely different to all the rest."

"I thought as much," said Ursula soothingly. "Now, would you like some coffee?"

Stephanie had described the meal as wholesome, but she did not find it appetising. It was inexpensive, but she had no need to be frugal. Yet she went back and ate there the following night, and the night after that. It was not long before she was able to describe herself as one of her adopted aunt's regular customers. She would always sit in the same place and Ursula would always come out and sit with her. They would always talk, sometimes about general matters, but sometimes Ursula would raise topics which for Stephanie had more than a little edge to them.

"I do hope that none of this is fattening," she said one evening. "I should watch my figure. I don't want to start losing my allure."

"I am sure that you are not one who has to watch every calorie," said Ursula. "Benjamin tells me that your mother is slim in all the right places and that you take after her."

"I don't take after my mother in any respect," said Stephanie, darkly.

"Daughters do take after their mothers. There's an old saying that bridegrooms should look at their prospective mother-in-laws if they want to know what their wives will look like in twenty years time. Your mother is small and slender. You take after her."

"I suppose so," said Stephanie, pursuing some peas that were trying to make a bid for freedom, "but only in that respect."

"Did your mother ever dance? Benjamin says she has the figure and the posture of a dancer. Perhaps she was taught ballet?"

"My mother, dance?" laughed Stephanie. "I can't imagine my mother as a ballet dancer. She has never shown any inclination that way. She never suggested that I should have lessons like some of the other girls did. But, then, my mother has always kept her past something of a secret. It is not something she will talk about."

"A dark secret?" asked Ursula with curiosity.

"I wouldn't know if it is dark," said Stephanie, thinking that her mother's past must be dark given the position regarding her father and her mother's refusal to identify him. "She just would not talk about it or answer questions, that sort of thing."

"So, your mother is a woman with a past," breathed Ursula. "How fascinating! People live such interesting lives, don't they? If only you can get to know about them."

"I suppose so," murmured Stephanie. "There's certainly a few things I would like to know about my mother's life. And what about me? Do you think I live an interesting life?"

"I think you lead an unusual life, Stephanie. There are not many women who have the courage to do what you do."

"Courage? I have never thought of me having courage. There are plenty of women who revile me, but what I do I do out of necessity. It is simply the only thing I am really good at. One might say that given my looks and figure and temperament, I was born for it."

"Oh, I don't believe that for one moment my dear," said Ursula intensely. "I do believe that our bodies, women's bodies, are ours and that we should be free to do with them as we will, including giving them over to men on occasions, but I am sure that is not the only thing any one of us is good at. Do I surprise you?"

"No," said Stephanie, hesitantly, uncertain of the direction the conversation was taking.

"Not that I have anything against a conventional life, that is marriage, having babies, raising families and that sort of thing. All I would maintain is that women who chose to do these things should do so out of choice and not because society demands it of them and is prepared to treat those who do not conform as pariahs. I am not one who ever will conform, my dear."

"Nor will I," said Stephanie lowly. She could picture Eileen in their house in all manner of domestic settings, ironing, sore-handed at the sink, preparing vegetables, immersed in steam, washing clothes, pegging them out in the biting easterly wind, looking into the pram. What should she give her? Twins? Yes, there they are, both crying! One has been sick, the other urgently needs changing. And there is a persistent insurance salesman at the door who just will not take "no" for an answer. Oh, it was not the life for her!

"Oh, come now, my dear," said Ursula. "I am sure that you will, one day, meet a nice young man, fall in love, and marry him. I am sure of it."

“Well, *I* am not. For a start I don’t think that domestic life would suit me.”

“A rich young man, then?”

“And I cannot see me meeting any nice young men, certainly not one who would be willing to marry me once he knew what I am.”

“There is an old saying that love conquers all, and as for meeting him, you might meet him anywhere. You might even meet him here. And given your looks - .”

“I sometimes think that my looks do no more than frighten off all the nice young men. I am sure that they attract the wrong kinds of men and, in any case, I have no intention of ever getting married, none at all.”

“No?” said Ursula, raising her voice. “I am sure that is not true.”

“Oh but it is!” exclaimed Stephanie. “I will die an old maid, made you could say, but not a maiden. I will never marry. I know it. For a start I cannot imagine me ever falling in love with any man. I can’t imagine me respecting any man enough for me to fall in love with him. It is almost unthinkable.”

She had said that then. Did she really believe it now as she watched the snow become heavier. A long, red, single-deck bus had come to a halt at the stop across the road outside the tea rooms and now seemed to be trapped there, its rear wheels spinning hopelessly. Had she really been in love with Owen? There was a saying about a woman spurned. Did she see herself as rejected? “No,” she said to the empty room. “I do not.” He had left her, it was true. He had left her and returned to his wife and son. That was something she had agreed to. It was the only sensible thing to do under all the circumstances, but if those circumstances had been different? It had pained her at the time, and still did so even now when she thought about it. Was that love?

He had wanted to come back to her. He had called around at the flat, but she would not see him. Then he had written to her, imploring her to take him back. Was his life with Eileen really that miserable? She had held the letter in her trembling hands and read it several times before she had sat down to answer it. Oh, God, it had been so painful! It had been so very painful, but it still remained the only thing that could be done under the circumstances. There was nothing new. Nothing had changed. They had agreed it was the right thing to do the first time around. It had to be the right thing to do then. It still was, and Ursula agreed.

So, she had written the letter. It had seemed the only reasonable way in which to reply. She did not want to see him or talk to him on the telephone. What other way was there but to write to him? If only she could remember exactly what she had said in the letter, what words she used. And there was still the question of what had happened to that letter. She kept returning to it in her thoughts. Why had it not been produced at the Inquest? Why could she not think logically about it? If Owen had received it and had it with him, the police would have found it. Was it possible that he had received it, yet left it at home for Eileen to find? Could he have even shown it to her? Or did the post arrive after he had left for work, delivering it into Eileen’s hands? She might have recognised the handwriting. She would have seen that it bore a local postmark. She would have guessed where it came from.

How Eileen would have hated her when she read the contents! There was no justice in her feeling that way. Really, in her letter she had taken side with Eileen, but it would not appear that way to the person who believed she was the one injured. Well, they were both injured, perhaps she the most because she had told Owen that he must remain with his wife and child. What more could Eileen demand of her?

That was what had happened to her letter. It *was* in Eileen’s hands. It had not, as she sometimes dreamed, slipped from Owen’s frozen grip as he scrambled on the roof, being carried off, high above the chimneys, by the wind. She would picture him holding it to his lips and breathing his farewell, finally accepting that fate had decreed that they were to live separate lives. Perhaps as the letter was torn from his grasp he lunged out, trying to retrieve it, the last precious link he had with her. In her worst nightmares she could see his feet slipping, the tiles and slates scattering and falling, and the awful thud which penetrated deep into her soul as he hit the ground. She would then wake, suppressing a scream. No, she did not want to think she was responsible for his death. It did not happen that way. Eileen had the letter and

should thank her for the clear and unambiguous message it contained. She had told the truth. She had admitted that, perhaps, she had fallen in love with Owen, but that she would never marry him, not him, nor anyone else. She would never marry any man. It was her choice, and her destiny.

Ursula had asked her a great number of questions over the months that followed her first meal in the restaurant. Some were very personal, almost stripping her bare, but she went back, not for the food, nor to be seen in public because it appeared to be one of the least public places in the town. At first she resented and evaded some of the more intrusive personal matters, although gradually she came to realise that they were not asked out of morbid curiosity, but Ursula was probing to see whether she had recognised and addressed those particular problems. Her adopted aunt talked to her in a way in which her mother never had, about subjects that her mother would never broach, always thoughtful and considerate of her feelings, and never once critical of her actions or attitude.

"It worries me sometimes," said Ursula, "the question of what we will be doing in twenty to twenty-five years time."

"Much the same thing, I would have thought," said Stephanie, wasting one of her best smiles. "I expect we will still be sat here, talking away and never getting very far."

"Oh, it's not that bad, is it, my dear?"

"No!" stressed Stephanie.

"I don't expect to be sat here when that day comes," said Ursula. "I expect I will be in an old people's home somewhere. I hope it will be with Benjamin; that we will be able to stay together. I don't really know what I would do without him, but none of us knows where fate will take us."

"I might be retired," said Stephanie, lightly. "I don't expect to go on satisfying men's needs for the rest of my life. I may well have lost my looks by then and find that I cannot be as choosy then as I am now. That will be the time to get out!"

"I doubt that you are likely to lose your looks to that extent, my dear," said Ursula, extending her hand across the table. "Not if you look after yourself and take after your mother."

"I have no intention of taking after my mother! That is about the last thing I want to do!"

"You may have no choice in the matter. And I'm not sure that even you would cut off your pretty little nose to spite your beautiful face. That seems to be a rather apt metaphor, doesn't it?"

"You may be right," said Stephanie. "I would just prefer not to be compared with my mother. It is a very sore point."

"I know, my dear. It is a thorn, but it is one that one day we will have to see if we can pluck out."

"Never!" grunted Stephanie. "In any case, if all goes well I will have enough saved up to retire and buy a small house somewhere in the country, somewhere where no-one knows who I am or what I have been. Perhaps I can have a little garden. I don't know anything about it, gardening, but I think I would like one. I miss things like that, living in the flat."

"I will add that to the list of things to teach you," said Ursula. "But cooking must come first. Can you come around again tomorrow afternoon?"

"Of course," said Stephanie. "People will think it strange if I tell them I was taught to cook by someone who was blind."

"So they might," said Ursula. "But the test of the pudding is in the eating and this is another string to your bow. And you value your independence, don't you?"

"Above everything!" said Stephanie, forcibly.

"You do appear to have quite a down on your mother. I cannot understand why you feel so badly about her. Benjamin has always said she seems a pleasant enough woman." Stephanie stopped eating and glared at her aunt, then relaxed. She would still forget

sometimes that she could not communicate her feelings through facial expressions and be lightly amused when she reminded herself. In a way it often seemed to defuse situations that otherwise could have become quite uncomfortable.

“If your brother were here now to describe my reaction you would begin to appreciate just how I do feel about her,” she said through a mouthful of what was claimed to be cabbage, although only within the walls of the restaurant. “I can put it no more succinctly than to say that I positively hate and detest that woman!”

“Oh, Stephanie!” said her aunt, shaking her head in disapproval in the manner that her brother had taught her. “You are such a lovely, beautiful creature and I know you have a kind heart. How can you bring yourself to say such things about or feel that way towards another person, especially your mother? How can you harbour such poison, such black feelings, in your heart?”

“It really is easy, Aunt,” said Stephanie, trying to appear flippant. “If she had done to you what she did to me, you would feel exactly the same. You would understand then!”

“I don’t think I understand now, not for one minute. I am not sure that anyone could treat me so badly that I could not forgive them. Perhaps you could tell me about it?”

“No!” said Stephanie, emphatically. “It is not something I want to talk about.”

“But it seems she is so pleasant and respectable. Benjamin tells me she has a very good job and is well thought of. I believe she is a school secretary?”

“More like school receptionist,” muttered Stephanie.

“Could it be that you are just a little jealous?”

“Me? Jealous? Of my mother?”

“Of her position?”

“In what way? Because I believe that sitting behind a desk and showing my suspenders every now and then is better than spending most of the working day horizontal? That’s ridiculous! The irony is, if it had not been for me she might never have got the job.”

“But for you, Stephanie? How can that be?”

“Well, don’t tell anyone,” said Stephanie, leaning across her plate and lowering her voice. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but the headmaster and a couple of the school governors are amongst my clients and have been for quite a number of years. He can be quite odd, Mr Larkins, but you must not tell anyone, not even Benjamin, that I have told you so.”

“Of course I will not, but you think that’s why she got the position? Due to your connections?”

“I’ve no doubt of it. He would never have risked turning her down given what I knew about him and, therefore, what he thought she knew about him. Because of that she now has great influence which she wields and does very much what she pleases, but no-one will say a word against her. It is all very clever really, when you think about it, how she used me to compromise a number of influential men. It got her both of her jobs but she still keeps up the pretence that she didn’t know anything about it at the time.”

“I had never thought of it in that way,” said Ursula reflectively. “That is unusual for me as I normally work out all the angles. That’s what they say in the movies, isn’t it? I expect that you have a very selective client list?”

“Very!” said Stephanie, “and not one that I let my mother find out about. I cannot take the risk of her even thinking of blackmailing any of them otherwise I would lose them. So I am very careful with those who come to the flat and I ask them to be equally cautious. At the parties, well that’s a different matter. Everything is open there and I don’t think my mother could attempt to capitalise on what I get up to any more than what anyone else is up to. In any case, she is not above dipping her feet in the pool or, I should say, going in right up to the waist. I’m sorry, that’s a bit crude. But generally I am careful and very selective. Knowing Mavis Spencer and her mother taught me how essential that is.”

“But, the risks?”

“I am very careful in everything I do or in what I permit others to do to me. That’s part of the selection process.”

“I am surprised that you have not become the mistress of one of them. That is an arrangement that would minimise the risks. Oh, if Benjamin should hear me now! He would

never believe that I of all people could talk about such earthy subjects.” Stephanie laughed, much to her aunt’s delight.

“Become a mistress? Of course I have been asked, by several of them. In fact there’s quite a long list, a queue, each quite prepared to take me on and support me. But to do such a thing would render me entirely dependent on the fortunate man. So although there might be a reduction in some risks in following such a course, it would introduce fresh problems, especially if he became tired of me, should such a thing be possible. No, I prefer to keep a small, controllable and controlled clientele. I can ensure that demand always exceeds supply. I think I like to be in demand in my own little world. And to that end, I do have the edge on my mother.”

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