

CHAPTER FOUR

It must have been two or three months later when the one man in Stephanie's little world who she could not command came to see her with a proposition she found most extraordinary. They met in the park, sitting together on a bench that was not in full public view although she was sure it was within the range of Benjamin's telescope. "You must be kidding, Owen!" she cried when he had said his piece. "What has Eileen said about this?"

"She has agreed."

"Oh, I don't believe it!" Stephanie exclaimed. "I don't believe it for one moment! You are trying to tell me she has agreed knowing who I am and what I am?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "She has agreed it knowing exactly what you are. And she knows that I have come to see you about it so there is no need for any subterfuge. It is all above board."

"I do not know what to say," she said.

"That is very simple. You just say "yes". That's all."

"It is not that simple," she protested. "It is not at all simple. I will have to think it over before I give you a decision."

"Oh, Stephanie! There is nothing to it!" She could hear the disappointment in his voice, but she was determined to remain indifferent to his entreaties, no matter what he said.

"You really mean that Eileen has agreed to this?"

"Yes!"

"And whose idea was it?"

"It was mine, but she has agreed, I tell you."

"Without any trouble?"

"Yes!"

"I am sorry, Owen, but I still find this all very hard to believe," she said, standing up. "Both that you should have asked her such a thing and that she should have agreed. I find it very hard indeed!"

"One reason is that there is no-one else."

"Thank you!" she said flatly.

"Oh, you know what I mean," he continued, unabashed. "She has no other girl friends and her parents have gone to Australia. You were the only person we could think of."

"We?"

"All right, I could think of. But, do say that you will do it."

"I will think about it," she said firmly. "I will promise no more than that. How long have I got?"

"Oh, there's plenty of time. Plenty!" he said. Stephanie would not discuss the matter any further with him but she knew it would be raised at dinner that evening, certainly if their meeting had been recorded.

"I hear you saw your young man this afternoon," said Ursula even before she had sat down. "How is he? What did you talk about?"

"I have told you that you should not refer to him as my young man," said Stephanie lightly. "And there's no prospect of him becoming so. Not after what he told me, there isn't. In fact, it is a matter more of what he asked of me, rather than what he told me. The trouble is one of Owen's little faults is that he is not always completely truthful. He is not an out and out liar, but he is capable of lying when the occasion justifies it. That is why I approach anything he says with a degree of caution. What makes things worse, I am not always able to detect when he is not telling the truth. I mean there's no reason why he should lie to me, yet I just feel uneasy about the whole thing."

"Now you've said all that, perhaps I had better not ask any more about it."

"Oh, it was something very silly really. In fact the more I think about it the sillier it becomes. If he had not been so serious I would have sworn it was a wind up."

"A wind up?" asked her aunt with a tone of puzzlement.

"Do you know what he asked me to do?"

"I could not begin to guess," said Ursula.

"Well, he began by telling me that he had proposed to Eileen and that she had accepted him. They have not fixed a date, but they are getting married, there's no doubt about that."

"Oh? Should I say I am sorry or that I am pleased? How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know how I feel about it. I really haven't thought about it because then he asked me if I would be Eileen's bridesmaid."

"Her bridesmaid? Oh, that sounds nice!"

"No, it is not! It's ridiculous! Me, a bridesmaid? Me with my notoriety? What would people say?"

"Which people, Stephanie? Is this going to be a big society wedding with hundreds of guests?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, then," said her aunt, "which people is it that you are worried about?"

"Her people. People who know them or they know. Their acquaintances. Can you imagine what they will say when the town's biggest whore turns up as a bridesmaid? It is absolutely ridiculous!"

"I suppose you may have a point if there are people there who know you. Did he say why they have asked you?"

"Not really," said Stephanie. "There was something about it being a quiet wedding and that as her parents have emigrated to Australia there is no-one else."

"Well then, my dear, there's your answer. There won't be anyone there to recognise you!"

"But why ask me?"

"Perhaps it is just a nice gesture."

"From Eileen? A nice gesture? She's not the sort. No, I know why it is. She is just trying to get at me in some perverse way. She's parading him before me. She's telling me that she's got him and is going to keep him. I have been invited just to witness the execution. Look, I am marrying him, so there!"

"Oh, Stephanie!" cried Ursula. "I don't know how you can say that. You have told me that you barely know the girl."

"You don't know her," said Stephanie darkly.

"I know I don't know Eileen, but neither do you on your own admission."

"I don't need to know her. She is that type of person."

"How do you know?"

"You can see it by her looks that she is that type of person. You should see the way she used to clutch him when I was near."

"That's not something I am ever going to witness," said Ursula, "but I will take your word for it. It would seem to me natural for wives to hang on to their husbands, even prospective wives, when someone like you is nearby. Benjamin tells me that he would not trust any man in your presence."

"You could trust Owen," said Stephanie, defensively. "You could trust him each and every time, but she does not. She really cannot think all that much of him if she has to hang on to him all the time."

"I am sure that you are exaggerating a little, my dear. This is a girl who is asking you to be her bridesmaid."

"Only so that she can keep her eye on me!"

"Stephanie! I am sure it is not like that at all. Are they planning to get married in Church?"

"Goodness, no!" exclaimed Stephanie. "I would have turned it down immediately if they were proposing that the ceremony would be in Church. I don't want to have anything to do with that sort of thing."

"What? Church and religion?"

"Yes! Church and religion."

"I go to Church every Sunday," said Ursula.

Stephanie did not reply immediately, but after a lengthy pause said, "So, you think I ought to accept?"

"Yes, I do. I think you should take the invitation at face value and accept. There won't be much for you to do anyway if it is to be in a Registry Office. It is not as if it will be an ordeal."

"Oh, all right," said Stephanie, slowly, "but it is against my better judgement. I can't help feeling uncomfortable about it, that it is wrong."

"Well, tell me one thing, truthfully."

"I am always truthful," protested Stephanie. "I might do other things, but I never lie."

"I know, my dear," said Ursula softly, "but there are truths and truths, and I want you to be especially truthful and honest in your reply. Do you really have designs on this young man of yours?"

"On Owen?"

"On Owen!"

"No," said Stephanie, without hesitation.

"Then you can go to their wedding honestly, can't you? You don't have to worry whether there are any hidden motives or not. And if Eileen has offered you a hand in friendship, why not reach out and take it? If she has any misgivings, your gesture will dispel them. It seems very straightforward to me."

"I suppose it is," said Stephanie, softly.

Stephanie thought at the time that she had answered honestly. Perhaps if she had been asked exactly the same question today, she would have given the same answer. That did not mean that she had no feelings towards Owen, only that she had no intention ever of becoming romantically involved with him. And if she felt like that about Owen, she could be justified in maintaining her position that she would never marry. However, Ursula's questions proved to be less easily digested than some of the food served up in her restaurant. In particular, Stephanie found herself in the spare moments she had in the day when her full attention was not required elsewhere, re-evaluating her relationship, if that was what it could be called, with Owen. She had intended to be truthful when she told Ursula that she had no intention of possessing him, yet why had it pained her so when she learned he was cutting her mother's grass? Why did it bother and hurt her now that he had finally confirmed that he was going to marry Eileen?

"It certainly is not that I have any wish to marry him myself," she said aloud several times. "I have no intention of marrying anyone," she informed her furniture and the small, brown, bear that occupied one of the arm chairs in the flat. Perhaps it was no more than her belief that they were not suited, him and Eileen, but that would not explain why she felt the way she did over him working for her mother. No doubt the concern there was caused by the fear that more went on than gardening and that he was doing something he ought not to be doing. There! That was it! It was that her mother was not a suitable person for him to associate with. She was not a suitable person for anyone to be associated with! That was why it had concerned her at the time. It was a similar reaction to that concerning Eileen.

Still, the question would not go away. It did not matter how many times she told herself and the contents of her flat that Owen was no more to her than a friend, and that she could live without him with as much equanimity as she could live with him. After all, it had been he who had chased her in the first place. Perhaps she had made one or two eyes at him, but it was Owen who expressed concern for her, not she for him. It was Owen who said that he thought she should change her life and showed concern when she did not. She could not recall ever telling him that he should not marry this Eileen, even if she thought it often enough. He had made the running and although she was indebted to him for some of his suggestions, or for the ideas he had put into her mind, she was certain that she did not love him. She was not even sure that she could reciprocate and feel for him in the way that a sister would feel for her brother.

Owen was clearly anxious for an answer for although he had told her she had plenty of time in which to make up her mind, he appeared to go out of his way to ask her at the

earliest opportunity whether she had done so. "No, I have not," she told him. "It needs a good deal of thought. In any case, you have other things you ought to be thinking about, like whether it is right for you to marry Eileen."

"Who else should I marry?" he asked, jokingly.

"I don't have anyone else in mind," she replied. "I just wondered if you are entirely sure that Eileen is your sort."

"What on earth has brought this on?" he asked. "After all this time? If she is not my sort, who do you think is?"

"I don't know," said Stephanie, racking her brain for examples from the girls in his year and thinking only of ones who appeared to be less suitable than the choice he had made.

"So, why do you ask the question, Stephanie?" he said, becoming serious.

"I don't know," she repeated, looking away. "I suppose I care about you in a way I wouldn't like to define. You are always telling me that you would like to see me change my life. I suppose I don't want to see you rushing off and making a terrible mistake."

"I am hardly rushing! Anyway, it is all settled with the exception of one little detail. I couldn't back out now, not now her parents have gone to Australia and left her behind. She would have gone with them if I hadn't proposed."

"You could back out at any time," she said stubbornly.

"Back out, Stephanie? Are you serious, really serious?"

"No," she said, biting her lip.

"Because I think I may have found a house for us and we've started to get together all the things for it. You hardly know Eileen, anyway!"

"I know of her. That's enough," muttered Stephanie, not understanding why she felt so uncomfortable and contrary.

"You should meet her. You will have to before the wedding, anyway. I'll fix it up."

"No, no!" she protested. "Don't do anything like that. I have a very busy schedule."

"Oh, yes," he said meaningfully, "I should have thought of that."

"I have to live! In fact I do very well in comparison with some girls of my age if not most. I earn more than your Eileen will ever earn at the library. I probably earn more than you do or are ever likely to, for that matter!"

"That is probably true, Stephanie," he said patiently, "but it is nothing to be proud of. Anyway, I will let you into a little secret; not even Eileen knows this. Once I have secured the mortgage I plan to go freelance and set up my own business."

"What, leave Mr Wick?"

"Yep! I will have my own company and be my own master. I will work when I want to and for whom I want to. We will be very much alike then, you and I."

"Is there enough work around for you to do that, Owen?"

"No problem," he said confidently. "There's plenty of work about. Look at all the houses that need re-roofing! I'll have no problem finding the work, but I will have to get the mortgage sorted out first as that is based on my actual earnings. It's far more difficult to get one if you're self-employed."

"It sounds a bit risky to me," she said, thinking of her own circumstances. "And there's a lot to running a business. I know because of the things my mother used to have to sort out when she worked for Mr Wick."

"Eileen will be able to look after all those things for me," he said. "I think she knows quite a lot about book-keeping and tax. And I don't see why my position should be any more difficult than yours."

"Don't you?" she cried, laughing. "You are overlooking the fact that I receive all my payments in cash and on delivery which means I have no bad debt problems. And I don't pay tax. As far as the tax man is concerned I am unemployed and I am not even certain that he knows that I exist!"

"So, he's not on your books, then? Only joking!"

"Well, don't joke about things like that. I am very selective. Do you really think I would entertain someone from the Inland Revenue?"

"I suppose not, but you will go and see Eileen, won't you?"

“I will go and see her,” said Stephanie, reluctantly, “but at a time of my choosing.”

“Soon?”

“Soonish,” she promised.

It was a silly thing to promise on the spur of the moment. Back in her flat, Stephanie regretted it and sought ways to avoid what promised to be a very awkward meeting. “You are going to have to meet her some time,” said her aunt as Stephanie opened up the neat, cylindrical, steak and kidney pudding. “Have you found out why you have been asked to be a bridesmaid for a bride you say you hardly know?”

“No,” said Stephanie, lowly. “I should have asked him again but he was too full of telling me all his plans for the future, their future. It is all very silly. I am sure it is a mistake and I will tell Owen the next time I see him.”

“Or tell his young lady now that you have said you will go to see her. I am sure it is not a mistake and I am certain you will make a beautiful bridesmaid. If you tell me where and when it is to be, I will send Benjamin along to give me a full report.”

“But Eileen and I do not get on with each other.”

“Stephanie! I don’t know how you can sit there and say that when you have told me time after time that the two of you hardly know one-another. You must summon up your courage and go and see her. That is the only way. I am sure that when the two of you meet you will become the greatest of friends, especially if you can make her see that you are not a rival.”

“The greatest of friends, divided by a common man!”

“There you go again,” said Ursula. “You have assured me that you have no intentions as far as he is concerned; that he is just a friend. I am sure it is possible for boys and girls to be friends without - you know what I mean.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Stephanie, bitterly. “I know better than anyone else.” She was out-voted and out-manoeuvred. There was no-one else to turn to for support. She certainly could not talk to her mother, nor any of the men who kept their regular appointments at her flat.

“So, you will go?” demanded her aunt.

“This pastry is a bit thick,” Stephanie said.

“Don’t change the subject!”

“I suppose so,” said Stephanie, reluctantly.

“Good! It will all turn out fine if you are honest with her. Tell her everything, well, nearly everything. You will see. Oh, by the way, Mr Frobisher is holding an investment gathering at our house tomorrow evening. Benjamin asked if you would like to come along and hear what is said. There’s no obligation.”

“No,” said Stephanie, pushing her plate away from her. “I have something else on tomorrow evening and I have my own plans for investing my savings.” That was true. She was cautious about becoming involved in Benjamin’s little syndicate, but his suggestion that she should do had made her think about what to do with the nest-egg that was gathering in her bank account. She had sought advice from a bank manager who numbered amongst her clients. He had talked about Government Bonds and safe shares, looking for long term growth, rather than short term gain. In some ways, his objectives appeared to be the opposite of Benjamin’s syndicate. She explained that what she really wanted to do was amass enough capital to be able to live off the income by the time she was forty-five. Her bank manager said that was everyone’s aim though few would have any hope of achieving it. But on his next visit to her flat he brought her leaflets on investments, assurance policies and annuities, leaving her to study them once he was satisfied.