

## CHAPTER FIVE

Owen had given her the address of the flat in which Eileen was living. It was not far from the school they had attended and was rented from Mr Wick which was no surprise given that Owen still worked for him. Stephanie wondered if Mr Wick would have let the flat had he know what Owen's plans were. She could have gone to see Eileen at the library, but there was nowhere to talk confidentially there, so it would have to be the flat. From one flat to another, she thought, and wondered if Eileen's was as attractive as hers. There was only one way to find out.

The sky looked dark and threatening when she looked out of the window so she took her umbrella with her. It looked even more ominous when she got outside and the first drops fell before she had reached the park. It was a foolish decision, to walk rather than take a taxi under the circumstances, but she had got so far and thought she might as well carry on into the park as turn back. Perhaps Benjamin would see her, if his telescope was able to pierce the mist and spray. If he did see her, she would be all he did see as when she looked around she appeared to be the only one silly enough to go out in that sort of weather. "I am not foolish," she told herself. "It is just unfortunate that I have been caught in this."

She still could have turned back, returned to the flat, dried off and then thought about calling a taxi. It would have been the sensible thing to do, but she had motivated herself into going and was not going to risk being diverted. In any case, if she did not go through with it now she might not have the courage to attempt it again. However, before she had got out of the park the Heavens had opened up and her umbrella had been tested well beyond its limitations. In seconds her shoes were full of water and she was soaked. "Oh, this is silly!" she told herself, but still she would not allow herself to turn back.

Eileen's was the upper of two semi-detached flats. It appeared to Stephanie, as she tried to avoid stepping in the deeper of the puddles and ruin further her already ruined shoes, that it could have been built that way, rather than be converted, possibly by Mr Wick Senior who, her mother had once told her, was also a builder. She squelched up the flight of dull green wooden stairs, paused outside the door, then knocked. "Hello," she said, "I'm Stephanie," as if Eileen did not know who she was. "Owen asked me to call around to see you."

"I know," said Eileen coldly. Then she looked down and her expression changed. "Goodness me!" she exclaimed. "You look absolutely soaked! Come in!"

"I don't want to make everything wet," said Stephanie. "I could come back another day."

"I wouldn't hear of it!" said Eileen, closing the door behind her. "Just stand and make a pool there for a moment and I will fetch a towel. Oh, don't worry too much about the things. Most of the furniture belongs to the flat and it is pretty old. How did you come? Don't say you have walked in this! Did you?"

Stephanie looked around her as Eileen bustled off in search of a warm, dry, towel. There was the famous piano, standing bolt upright, keyboard exposed, against a wall. "I see you have a piano," she called. "Do you play?"

"From time to time," replied Eileen from somewhere beyond the door, "When I feel I need cheering up. I have to pick my time as the neighbours are not above complaining. Mark you I never miss an episode of *The Archers* even though I don't have my wireless on. I can hear every single word."

"I wish I had been able to learn to play," said Stephanie, longingly.

"I can assure you it is really not much fun if you are forced to," said Eileen, handing her the towel. "Like so many other things, it quite takes the pleasure out of it. Now, what about your other things? If you would let me take your shoes I can pack them with newspaper. Obviously they won't dry completely, but it should help them keep their shape. I must say I rather like them although I don't think they would suit me."

"I bought them at Saxone's in the High Street. They were quite reasonable."

"You could always learn," said Eileen, balling up the newspaper.

“Learn what?”

“The piano. It is never too late to take lessons. Trouble is it requires a lot of practice and you have to start pretty young if you want to become a concert pianist, but I think it is like that in most things. If you have the time and application to practice, anyone can become proficient.”

“Oh, I don’t think there’s room in my flat for a piano, and my neighbours might complain about that as well. Imagine all those scales, day in, day out!”

“I’m sure you would like a cup of tea,” said Eileen. “Oh dear, your skirt is wet! Would you like to borrow one of mine. I think we are nearly the same size.” Stephanie looked down at the dark, damp, stain that had spread from the hem up towards her waist. The idea of putting on even one item of Eileen’s clothing did not appeal to her, but she was going to be uncomfortable when she came to sit if she did not accept her hostess’s offer. “Let me see what I can find,” added Eileen, settling the matter. “Something for you to wear just whilst you are here. We can hang yours above the stove and hope it dries out enough for you to wear it home. Do you want to hang up your stockings as well? Let me see what I can find. I won’t be a jiffy.”

She returned with a dull, slightly faded, tartan skirt which she handed to Stephanie telling her to go into the bedroom and change whilst she made the tea. As far as Stephanie was concerned, had she owned it, it was the first thing she would have put straight out for the jumble and the last thing she would have worn, but under the circumstances, she could hardly refuse. It did cross her mind that Eileen might have gone out of her way to find the least suitable thing for her. On the other hand, perhaps it was the best she had. Yes, she would think that. “How do I look?” she asked, appearing and twirling in the doorway.

“I wouldn’t say that it suits you,” said Eileen, “but it will have to do for the present. Now do come and sit down.”

“You know why I have come to see you,” said Stephanie, complying by sitting at the small, round, table and ignoring the cold damp of her slip as it clung to her bare legs. “Owen has asked me to be your bridesmaid. Before you say anything I must confess it is not something I would have volunteered to do and I won’t be at all put out if you now tell me that it is a crazy idea and you don’t want me to do it. I really do not understand why he asked me, especially seeing who and what I am. I think he is trying to reform me though I’m well past any hope of that!”

“He mentions you quite a lot,” said Eileen, tentatively.

“Does he?”

“More than enough.”

“Then I ought to explain right from the outset that there is nothing between Owen and me. You know what I mean. I think I look upon him as a kind of brother and he thinks of me as a substitute sister who is treading the wrong path.”

“He has one, did you know?” said Eileen, reacting to the impatient hiss of the kettle and producing some crockery from a wall cupboard.

“Yes, I know, but he never sees her. He told me once that he could hardly remember what she looked like. It is strange to have a close relative like that who you never see,” Stephanie said, thinking about her real father.

“I suppose so. I am an only child and my father and mother have gone to Australia. They decided they would emigrate, but I stayed behind because of the wedding. And you are right. He does want to save you. I don’t think it’s like a religious fanatic. It’s more like Gladstone, was it? He saved fallen women. Oh, I’m sorry. Please don’t be offended. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Stephanie found herself smiling. “That’s all right. I am not at all sensitive about the issue. I don’t consider myself as fallen but I know others do. However, about the present problem, the one that I have come to see you about, me being your bridesmaid. Why didn’t he ask his sister.?”

“I don’t know,” said Eileen, pouring the tea out of a small brown pot hidden within an ill-fitting, pink, cosy.

“And do you really need a bridesmaid?” pressed Stephanie.

“Not really,” said Eileen, nonchalantly. “There won’t be many people there. Perhaps what we really need is witnesses, people to swell the numbers.”

“Are you parents coming over?”

“Coming over? Goodness me, no! They don’t approve of Owen, not in the least. In fact, I don’t believe they would ever approve of any man I found for myself. Owen’s mother will be there and perhaps a couple of his work-mates. Did you know that I am working part-time for Mr Wick at present, doing book keeping?”

“No?” said Stephanie. “You realise my mother used to work there?” she added, guardedly.

“Yes,” said Eileen brightly. “He quite often mentions her and all the good work she did. He is still using the systems she put it, you know.”

“Does he mention me?”

“No?” said Eileen. “Should he?”

“Perhaps not.”

“Anyway, there may be a couple of girls from the library as well. So we won’t be entirely all on our own. I don’t think his sister is planning to come down, though. It might have been nice for him to see her.”

“Isn’t it strange,” said Stephanie, pressing the welcomed cup to her lips, “but it looks as if we are in the same boat as far as parents are concerned. My step-father has disappeared off the face of the Earth. I have fallen out with my mother and we do not speak to each other any more, and I have no idea where my real father is.”

“Not to forget that Owen’s father died whilst he was very young,” said Eileen. “We make a fine group of near-orphans, don’t we? I only hope I can be a better mother to my children than my mother was to me. Oh, I shouldn’t really say things like that! Would you like a biscuit or something else to eat?”

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t say things about that. None of us asked to be brought into this world. I know I won’t have any children.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Eileen, timidly.

“There are ways,” said Stephanie darkly, and initially misunderstanding Eileen’s question. “I wouldn’t want to have the responsibility.”

“I want a family! I want to be able to do properly what my parents did so abysmally. I’ve no doubts about it, but first Owen has to get his business up and running. It will help, me having been working for Mr Wick, because I can keep his books. Then we’ve got to find somewhere to live. That’s not proving at all straightforward but I wouldn’t want to bring children up somewhere like this. There’s barely room to swing a cat.”

Stephanie looked around her. “It’s funny, you know, but I have these strange, vague, early memories of living in a flat, somewhere dark. I can remember that much. It was before we moved here.”

“They say that as you get older you remember much more of your childhood.”

“I don’t think either of us is that old!” Stephanie laughed. “Anyway, back to the reason why I came. Is it still raining?”

“I think it may have eased a little,” said Eileen, turning to look out of the window, “but surely you are not planning on going yet? I get so very few visitors apart from Owen. And your skirt won’t be anything like dry.”

“Well, I suppose I could stay a little longer,” said Stephanie, draining her cup without thinking and then staring at the tea leaves in the bottom. “About this bridesmaid business.”

“Oh yes. It’s Owen’s idea that it might help to reform you. I can’t see why it should, but I would be happy for you to be my bridesmaid if I can call it that. I am not having a fancy Church wedding, white dress, and all that. We can’t afford it, and I don’t expect a penny from my parents towards it. So it is going to be a very mundane affair.”

“Good!” said Stephanie. “I wasn’t really looking forward to dressing up like a fairy, at least not in public!” Eileen laughed and Stephanie felt pleased.

“Even though, there is so much to be done, trying to find somewhere to live and working out every thing for the business. I have this little dream house, or to be exact, I have this little house that I dream about. It is nothing pretentious, no grand mansion set in acres of

grounds. Just a decent, clean, tidy, bright place with a garden for the children to play in and a nice modern kitchen for me to work in. It's got a nice comfortable lounge with carpet from wall to wall, some where that I can put the piano, a place where we can sit and listen to the wireless. There's no television. I don't agree with television. I think it affects your sight by giving off harmful rays. It has plain, emulsioned, walls with concealed lighting. I have always wanted concealed lighting. And a few selected paintings, a comfortable three-piece suite, central heating, perhaps a gas fire as well in the lounge. No open fires, mark you. I hear too many stories of children falling on to them and they can make such a mess. My father used to get up early every Sunday morning and go down and black the grate! I don't want any of that in my house. Perhaps we could have a small patio where we could sit in the summer on warm evenings. That means the back of the house would have to face south. Perhaps we could have French windows although they are a bit of a security risk, aren't they? Goodness me, I am going on, aren't I?"

"That's all right," said Stephanie. "I hope that you find the kind of place you are looking for."

"It is very difficult," said Eileen. "I don't want a big family. Two would do me. Three at a stretch. And I'm not sure that I want any boys. They can be so troublesome. No, two or three little girls would suit me. I can dress them so prettily!" Stephanie thought that girls could be every bit as troublesome as boys, but said nothing. "Oh dear!" said Eileen. "Am I still rambling on? I have such dreams for the future. Do you?"

Stephanie shook her head. "I tend to live each day as it comes," she said. "And certainly I have no romantic ideas or plans for families."

"But surely you have something that you look forward to or want? Something that you fantasise about?"

"Not really," said Stephanie, shrugging her shoulders. "I sometimes think I would like a small cottage in the country one day. Or live in a big house. Or meet my real father, but they are no more than dreams." There was more that she could have said. She did have her other dreams, her aspirations, not as well defined and catalogued as Eileen's, but there just the same. There was her primary aim to escape from the kind of life she was living, but she would not have felt comfortable admitting that to Eileen. She would also have to have admitted that she did not see her achieving that by doing something decent and respectable, such as getting married, but by simply amassing enough money to allow her to cease trading. How could she tell Owen's fiancée that? But she did see herself in a cottage in the country, or by the sea, leading a life of relative leisure. What would she do with herself all day when she no longer had a queue of men to satisfy? It was such a long way off and it was likely that these questions would settle themselves in time. Perhaps she could paint, or do good works? What did single women with private means do other than repulse would-be suitors? Embroidery?

"Oh dear!" said Eileen. "Have I said something to upset you?"

"No, no. I don't know why, but suddenly I was miles away."

"It happens," said Eileen. "Would you like another cup of tea? I did mention that Owen is always talking about you, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, and I am sorry about it. If I knew how to stop him, I would. I trust you believe me when I say that there is nothing between us. Regardless what you may have heard about me or think about me, I am not given to having affairs or taking lovers. I am not like that, not at all."

"Thank you for saying that," said Eileen softly. "I don't know what I felt. It just seemed so strange at times, the way he seemed to have this obsession about you. I didn't know if there was something there I had to worry about."

"I can assure you that there is not," said Stephanie. "He is a very nice person and I like him, but he is all yours. You do believe me?"

"Yes," said Eileen, "I believe you."

Stephanie was forced to confess to her aunt that she and Eileen had "hit it off" that afternoon. She had left the flat stocking-less but still wearing the tartan skirt, promising not

only to return it, but to pay another visit to the flat for another general natter, as Eileen put it. Not only was this an unexpected outcome but, in the heat of the moment, Stephanie found herself agreeing to it. However, as she walked through the park and thought more about it, wiser counsel took hold. Eileen was only asking her back so that she could keep tabs on her. She clearly was doing that because she still did not trust either her or Owen. By the time she had reached her flat, Stephanie had convinced herself, albeit on the most flimsy of evidence, that Eileen was not the right wife for Owen and that she should tell him so.

“There!” said her aunt, smiling. “I did tell you so. I always said that I didn’t think there could be any problem between the two of you and that you would get along famously.”

“I don’t think it is that simple,” said Stephanie, smiling also, “and I don’t recall you saying anything like that. Not to me at least.”

“Perhaps it was to Benjamin? No, my dear, I am sure that it was to you. Of course I did! And you are wrong to contradict me. Aunts, even adopted ones, are invariably right in all things.”

Stephanie was in no mood to argue. She was not worried about her damp clothes or sodden shoes. In some ways she felt elated by the outcome of the visit. She just felt that Eileen’s aspirations and the kind of life she was expecting were not going to be matched by Owen’s. He should not marry her, not because she felt that she wanted him, but because Eileen would not be the right kind of wife for him. Nor could she be, if it came to that.

“So, will you go and see her again?”

“I will have to,” said Stephanie. “I’ve got her skirt to take back and there will be the final arrangements to make about the wedding. Fortunately it isn’t going to be a Church wedding, just something small and simple.”

“Oh, that’s a shame!” said Ursula. “No bride in white, as white as snow?”

“No,” said Stephanie, “no bride in white and no bridesmaid draped in pink or lilac. And don’t jump to the wrong conclusion. If my assessment of Miss Norris is correct, she is as pure as the fallen snow and could legitimately deck herself out in white, which is something I could never do. But then, I will never have to get married.”

“Oh, Stephanie! I don’t like it when you say things like that! I think it is a pity it is not going to be a Church wedding. I think those affairs in Registry Offices are sad and sordid. The weddings never last because the participants have not taken a sacred vow before God. That’s why so many marriages with Americans end in failure!”

“I don’t agree with that either,” said Stephanie between mouthfuls of carrots. “Not the bit about Americans, but about Church weddings. I don’t see why vows taken in a Registry office should not be as binding as those taken in Church. It depends on the people who take the vows, not where they are when they take them. This Church business is just a load of superstitious twaddle.”

“They say you shouldn’t talk like that about religion. There are some who would call it blasphemy. I think that we had better not, just to be on the safe side. You may well be right, but I wouldn’t want to see my little restaurant consumed in a bolt of lightning. And when is this wedding to be?”

“They are talking about this Summer,” said Stephanie, “although they haven’t fixed a date as yet. June maybe?”

“A June bride?” mused Ursula. “Yes, I like the sound of that.”

Owen appeared to go out his way to see her a few days after her visit to Eileen’s flat. She found him waiting for her in the car park outside her block of flats and had to be rather abrupt with him as she had little time to spare. She told him to wait in the same place that evening. He could walk with her to the restaurant and say what ever it was he was so anxious to speak to her about. She toyed with the idea of inviting him to meet Aunt Ursula, but by the time of late afternoon had decided that was too risky a strategy, especially if the conversation drifted around to the subject of telescopes. She might have become accustomed to being watched. She was not so sure that Owen would be so accommodating.

“I am sorry about this morning, but I had to see you fairly urgently,” he said as she opened the security door.

“That’s all right,” she said brusquely, “I had an appointment to keep and I was in danger of being late. What is it you want to talk about? I have been to see Eileen, if that is what is on your mind. Don’t tell me now that you didn’t want me to as it is all too late.”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” he said, trotting along at her side. She felt like walking quickly but eased her pace as it would make it easier for him to talk. “Thanks for going, anyway. I understand it was a great success.”

“Apart from the exchanges from our respective wardrobes, yes.”

“What I wanted to tell you is that I have found a house!” he said excitedly. “It is nothing special; an ordinary semi-detached three-up two-down, not unlike your mother’s, you know the sort of thing. It needs a lot of work doing on it, re-decorating, plumbing, re-wiring and so on. I’d like to put in central heating -.”

“That would be nice. That’s one of the things I like about my little flat. It is lovely and warm in the worst of the winter. I suppose it wouldn’t really do for it to be cold.”

“It’s got quite a large garden,” he continued, gasping for breath. “It is a bit overgrown but I can soon fix that. I’ve talked to the neighbours on the party wall side. I think they said their name is Howard; a cockney pair but very friendly and helpful. The point is, would you come and see it?”

“Me? Go to see your house? Why?”

“Just to give me your opinion of it.”

“Has Eileen seen it?”

“No, not yet. But she is very fussy and all she will do is find fault. She won’t see the real potential that’s there.”

“And you think that I will?”

“Yes. I think you would. I can’t think of anyone else. Will you come? It wouldn’t take long.”

“I don’t know,” said Stephanie hesitantly. “It doesn’t seem right. And what if your new neighbours saw me going in? What on earth would they say?”

“They wouldn’t know who you are even if they did see you.”

“But they would know that I am not your fiancée. What would they think about you showing another woman around your house?”

“It isn’t my house, yet. But time is not on my side. Prices are going up and property is selling very quickly so I am under pressure to make a decision. Will you come and see it with me? If anyone asks I will say you are from the Estate Agents. Will you, Stephanie, please?”

Was it just weakness that made her say “yes”? Or was there something more, the thought that she was in some way bettering Eileen. But why should she want to do that? Perhaps it was just curiosity, an urge to see this super house that Owen had found. “When do you want me to come with you?” she asked, thinking of her diary.

“How soon can you fit it in? I can probably make it almost any time.”

“Tomorrow morning?” she said. “About eleven?”

“Tomorrow morning it is!” he said enthusiastically. “Can I pick you up at the flat? That is if you don’t mind travelling in my van?”

“I suppose so,” she murmured.