

CHAPTER SEVEN

She did not forget what Owen had done, of course. It was one of the more vivid, pressing, memories that flashed into Stephanie's mind as she stood at her window and contemplated the worsening winter scene before her. She did not think that he forgot the incident either as he never, not even at the height of their troubles, asked her again. But she had kept her word. She had gone to the Bank next morning and, much to the concern of the manager, had drawn a cheque as directed by Owen. She had then walked along to Woolworth's, thinking how strange it was that there had been a time when if she had walked in as she was then doing she would have found her mother serving behind one of the counters. She bought a small cash-book in which she wrote the opening balance as soon as she was back in the flat. She showed it to Owen when she gave him the cheque. "I will expect you to return it should the sale fall through," she told him in a very business-like voice.

"Don't say such things!" he pleaded. "If it falls through I do not know what we will do! I doubt if I will find anything comparable." He clearly had not been aware of her aunt's views and advice as her added, "I am sorry about the other matter. I don't know what came over me. I should never have acted the way I did."

"Forget it," she said, tersely.

"You will forgive me?"

"Yes," she said, pulling a face. "Provided you don't mention or repeat it again." It occurred to her that she would probably have forgiven him in time without the prompting. She might not have been so willing to forgive had it been any other man.

"And you will still be Eileen's bridesmaid?"

"I suppose I have to," she said softly. There was an even bigger sin that she had to forgive him, marrying Eileen. "Have you told her yet?"

"Told her what?" he said with a note of alarm.

"About the house!"

"No. I will tell her when it has all gone through, not before."

"I still think you are making a mistake, Owen," she said, "but I suppose she will be like me and forgive you."

It was several days before Stephanie could bring herself to go and see Eileen for a second time. When she did so she found her in a distressed and anxious state. "Oh, thank goodness you've come!" Eileen exclaimed when she opened the door and beckoned her in. "I desperately need someone to talk to!"

"I really only called to return your skirt and to ask if you are any nearer fixing a date for the wedding," said Stephanie, feeling unsettled by the thought that Eileen was pleased to see her after what she had been saying about her. "I would like to make a note of it in my diary, the wedding."

"Wedding?" cried Eileen. "Wedding? I don't know that there is going to be any wedding! I think it is all over between us! All over and finished with!"

Stephanie did not know how to react. Eileen's attitude towards her suggested that she did not know about the arrangement or what passed between her and Owen. Something else had happened to upset matters and she did not know whether to feel pleased because it fitted her concept, or sorry. Perhaps had this been said to her before her first visit to meet Owen's fiancée or to see the house in Hayes Close, she would have undoubtedly responded with a hearty "good" and declared it to be the best thing that could happen. But over the last few days she fought to reconcile herself to their marriage and as she watched this small, dark-eyed, woman pace up and down she could only feel pity and concern. Unexpectedly, she found herself eager to support and console this person of whom she had, not a week before, been an outspoken critic.

"Do you know what he has done?" demanded Eileen. "Of course you don't, but can you imagine? How could he do something like this? How?" Stephanie said that she did not know nor could imagine what he had done, though she was beginning to suspect what had

happened. She would have to be careful not to suggest that she knew. "He has gone out all on his own without any reference to me and bought a house!" Eileen continued. "And it isn't any old house. It is the most dreadful house imaginable! I don't think he could have found a worse one had he gone out of his way to do so! Honestly, Stephanie, you have never seen anything like it! It is an out and out hovel. You would not even want to squat there! And he, Owen, the man I am supposed to be marrying, has bought it. He has put down a huge deposit when we have virtually no money. He has arranged a mortgage where I expect the outstanding debt will exceed the market value of the house for years to come. He has done all of this without a single word to me, without taking me to see the place or asking me whether I thought I might be happy there. Not a word! And it is falling down! I am surprised that the Council has not declared it unfit for human habitation. What does he think I am and what kind of way is this to carry on? If he will do something like this, what else is he capable of? If he is expecting me to start married life penniless and living in a hovel, well, you know what I mean!"

"Poor Owen," said Stephanie, softly.

"Poor Owen?" cried Eileen. "Poor Owen? Are you taking his side? Why? You ought to see it. If you did you would be agreeing with me. It is an absolute hovel."

Stephanie felt uncomfortable. She fully understood what Eileen meant and would have reminded Owen that she had warned him that this was likely to happen, but she had to be careful what she said. "I expect he did it for you, for the best," she murmured.

"For me? If he did he has a funny idea of what he should do for me! Oh, you haven't seen it, Stephanie! You really cannot imagine what it is like! I dare say if I took you there you would refuse to go in. It is like that. What kind of husband is it who is prepared to do this kind of thing to his prospective wife?"

"What I mean is I am sure that his intentions were good," said Stephanie.

"Are you? I would hate to be around when his intentions were bad, then! You haven't seen it, I mean the whole thing, it is so thoughtless, so inconsiderate, so unreasonable! I could cry with frustration. You would understand if you saw it. We could go right now. It isn't all that far, only over in Hayes Close. I have the keys because he wants me to go round and measure up for the curtains. That's right, can you imagine it? It's more like a job of measuring up for the glass in the windows. You come and see it with me. It won't take long."

"I don't know whether I should," said Stephanie, hesitantly.

"Of course you can."

"But what will Owen say?"

"I don't give a fig for what he says. He can say what he likes. He says it is to be my house as much as his. Our house, he calls it. So I am as entitled as him to invite people to see it and I am inviting you to be the first that I invite."

"Has he been inviting people to look at it, then?" said Stephanie as her heart missed a beat.

"Not as far as I know. There was someone from the Estate Agents there with him. A woman. I noticed her footprints in the dust. Otherwise I am the only one who has had the doubtful privilege of being shown over it. Come along, we can go now!"

All the way to Hayes Close, Stephanie was almost rigid with fear. What if the next door neighbour was there and recognised her? What if she was standing in the front garden and said "Hello - you are the lady from the Estate Agent aren't you? You came the other day!" She could laugh and deny it, saying she must be mistaken and that this was her first visit. She would deny it. She had little option.

All the way to Hayes Close, Eileen elaborated on all the things she found wrong with Owen's high-handed actions and the house. All the way, Stephanie found herself cautiously defending him and attempting to justify what he had done, but she was not able to counter Eileen's frequent reminder that she had not seen the house. What did she know? To her relief, when they arrived in Hayes Close and Eileen pointed out the forest of a hedge that indicated the spot, there was no sign of any of the neighbours. There was just the hint of curtains moving as they went up the cracked, uneven, path to the front door.

"You didn't need three guesses to pick out which house Owen has bought, did you?" said Eileen. "Look at it! Look at the other houses in this road. Why didn't he go for one of the

others?"

"I suppose it stands out because it is the only one without curtains," said Stephanie.

"I am beginning to wonder if you *are* on his side," said Eileen, staring at her. "That is not the only reason why it stands out! Just look at it! Have you ever seen anything like it that was not condemned or being demolished? How on earth does he expect me to live there and still be able to hold my head up in public? I can hear them now - there goes Mrs Cross - she lives in the derelict house, you know, the one that lets the whole road down. I'd have to go out and come home in the dark. It's intolerable!"

"It will look better once the windows are cleaned and there are some curtains up," said Stephanie. "And cutting the hedge back will improve the appearance immeasurably."

"Putting curtains up? It will take more than putting up curtains to change the place. You are only looking at the outside. Come and see the inside and see if you think all it needs is curtains and hedge cutting, that is assuming that you are still prepared to come in."

"Of course I am," said Stephanie, thinking that she would feel less exposed once inside. "We have come this far."

"Can you smell it?" said Eileen when she opened the front door. "I don't know what it is, but isn't it dreadful?"

"It is not very pleasant," said Stephanie, nodding. "The whole place needs airing. It will smell better once some windows are opened."

"I don't even know whether they will open," said Eileen. "Or whether the glass will stay in place when we try."

"Oh, I wouldn't have thought they are that bad," said Stephanie. "Do you know how long the house has been empty?" She looked nervously up the stairs. She had tried to put the incident with Owen out of her mind, but now she was dangerously close to the exact spot and in the company of his wife to be. It was like returning to the scene of the crime except, even though it felt otherwise, there had been no crime, she reminded herself.

"I don't know. It feels to me like it has been empty since the day it was built, but I suppose someone lived here once. It doesn't have a pleasant atmosphere, does it? It doesn't feel lived in. And you should see the kitchen! Come and see if you believe your eyes! Look! Have you ever seen anything like this? It is like something out of a Victorian slum or the set for some kitchen-sink drama! How could anyone in this day and age be expected to cook and wash under such conditions? There's not even any hot water!"

"I see what you mean," said Stephanie, carefully, "but it wouldn't take a lot of work to modernise it. You could put in a Sadia heater on the wall which should be enough to start with. Surely Owen could do something before the time comes for you to move in?"

"Do something?" exclaimed Eileen, looking around her. "Do everything is more like it. I am not setting foot inside this house until it is entirely to my satisfaction. Just look at the decor! I cannot believe it has been decorated since before the War. And there's damp in the front room around the chimney. Just come and see if you don't believe me. I am sure I can smell dry rot and I bet the loft is riddled with wood-worm and that the water tanks need replacement. And there's not a single fifteen amp socket in the house! The whole place needs re-wiring. It really is too much! How could he expect all this of me? How could he do such a thing? You tell me!"

Stephanie breathed deeply and looked out into the garden which appeared more overgrown and wild since the rain. At least that had stopped. "I am sure that what Owen has done is for the best," she said steadily. "I must agree that the house looks as if it is in a poor state, but that is only superficial."

"Superficial? You should see the cracks on the stairs," said Eileen. "Oh, I won't take you upstairs. It's just the same as down here and I am not confident they would bear the weight of both of us together."

"I think all houses have cracks," said Stephanie. "Even new ones. But almost all of this can be remedied fairly easily. And, looking at it, it isn't a bad house. The kitchen's a fair size and there's a nice garden, or it could be made to be nice. All it needs is a little work."

"A little work?" cried Eileen. "You are joking! It needs a lot of work and the rest, not to mention the cost. And we are not likely to have all that much money what with the

mortgage and setting up the business. Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't be talking to you about our finances, but you know what I mean. What I should say is that it is likely that Owen will have to work quite long hours when he starts working for himself, and so will I, at the library during the day and for Mr Wick on some evenings. There isn't going to be all that much time available to do all that had to be done. I can see the house never being finished. And look at the garden! What on earth can the neighbours think?"

Stephanie did not answer. She was not anxious to get into a discussion as to what the neighbours might think, especially as they represented a potential threat to her. She was beginning to wonder whether she should suggest to Owen that they should suspend the repayment of the debt until he and Eileen were at least settled in the house and all the major work had been completed, but she could not suggest such a thing to Eileen. It would have brought her little comfort to know that her husband did not have to pay off immediately a debt of which she actually had no knowledge. If the worst came to the worst, she could suggest that they still married, but delayed going to live in the house until it was ready. "There is one thing," she said after a period of brooding silence. "You have at least got a foothold in the property market. That's important."

"What?" said Eileen, "to have a twenty-five year mortgage around your neck? How long is the mortgage on your flat?"

"There isn't one," said Stephanie. "It is paid for, but then it is only a teeny weeny flat. I think it is smaller than yours." She wondered if this comment would be taken the wrong way, but Eileen did not appear to react.

"I just simply despair," she continued angrily. "Look at it! The fittings, the services, the decor, the garden, all of it. It could take a life time to put right, and you know what will happen? It will never get done. I've seen it before. It will simply never get completed! We will start by living in a hovel and end our days living in a hovel. No, it's no use! I can't live like that. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do know exactly what you mean," said Stephanie, "but I would look at it a different way."

"Don't tell me it is a challenge," said Eileen. "That's just what Owen said."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I would think of it as a kind of opportunity because if you start with a house like this you can at least plan exactly what you want. It isn't as if you are having to undo what your predecessors did."

"No, we are having to do what they did not do!"

"Well I always think it is criminal when people move into a beautifully decorated house and then set about changing it. Here you've got the chance to start from scratch. It could be the house of your dreams."

"Hardly!" snapped Eileen. "Nightmares more like it."

"I think I would like an opportunity like that. To start with something derelict - no, not derelict - I am not suggesting this house is derelict. But to start with a run-down property, to plan exactly what you want, choose the papers, the colours, curtains and carpets, that sort of thing. It could be so exciting and rewarding. I would love to be able to do it, and think what you have at the end of it. Not a house, but your home, your own very special home."

"Fine! If you would like to do it so much, you do it!"

"No, I could not, even if you were serious which I know you are not. It is for you to do together, a sort of adventure. Something to be shared between the two of you. There would be no fun in it, or sense of achievement, if someone else was involved. You have to use your imagination. Can't you see how it could be?"

"I am using my imagination," said Eileen, "and all I see is a hovel."

"Oh, that really cannot be so," pleaded Stephanie. "You don't really mean that. Here is something for you and Owen to do together, something to plan and create, your own home. What better opportunity could you have?"

"I don't know. It wasn't how I saw our married life starting. I suppose I have been focusing on the problems of getting the business set up."

"But you do know what I say is true, don't you. Owen wouldn't have done this, taken all this on, but for you. In your heart, you know."

“But the house is a shambles, a wreck. Goodness knows what my mother would have said about it. You must agree that much.”

“Of course I agree that this house has been neglected,” said Stephanie, “but that’s the whole point. And I think it could have a very nice atmosphere once it is all finished. It’s something to look forward to, something you can do when you are young.”

“You think so?”

“I do think so. I think you could be very comfortable and happy here.”

Stephanie could not believe what she was saying. She had to admit to herself that she probably did not believe a word of what she had said, but it was what Owen would have said, what he probably had said. Her intellect was telling her that she should agree with every word that Eileen said, yet she felt compelled to take Owen’s side in the issue. No, she did not think the house had, or could ever have, a pleasant atmosphere. She much preferred the warmth and comfort of her small flat, but she could not forget that she also had her financial interests to protect. It was more than that. There was something deeper that made her say what she said, but for the present she could excuse herself on the grounds that if the marriage fell through she might find it difficult to get her loan back from Owen. The house had to be renovated and she had to promote that renovation. Yet, there she was now supporting a marriage that only days earlier she had opposed. Perhaps the plain truth was that she was emotionally afraid of Owen whilst he was single and would feel safer once he was tied down by marriage.

Now, as she stood in that warmth and surrounded by the objects that made her flat comfortable, waiting for her kettle to boil, she repeated the unpalatable thought that often crept into her mind and gnawed at her. She could well have had it within her power that day to have stopped their romance, caused the cancellation of the wedding and changed the course of history. What would have happened had she not been hypocritical and been truthful? What would Eileen have done had she taken her part against Owen and spoken out saying what she really felt? Would Eileen have acted on her word and broken off the engagement? And, having been released from the bondage of the spell cast by the not-so-fair Miss Norris, would Sir Owen have rode up and saved her, the fallen woman, carrying her off into their sunset and a new life? Oh, it was all such silly speculation, except she was sure that had she taken a truer stance that day in Hayes Close events would have followed a different course, and she would not be standing there now, woeful, mournful, undecided as she watched the imperceptible movement of the hands of the clock. To go or not to go, that was the question.

“So, here is the beautiful bridesmaid!” exclaimed Ursula. “How did it all go, then? Did you catch the bride’s bouquet? Come along, tell me all about it!”

“There is not much to tell,” said Stephanie, pausing to search for evidence of meat amongst the pastry of that night’s steak and kidney pie. “It all went very well considering all the traumas we have had in the run up to it. Eileen did her best to get me to catch her bouquet but ended up throwing her bouquet to a girl that she works with. I made sure I wasn’t within catching range although I am sure she had me in mind. And I thought the bride was supposed to throw it over her shoulder so that it was a matter of chance, not pass it like a rugby ball.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” said her aunt, “but there must be more to it. Benjamin tells me that weddings are great affairs and that all manner of things happen at them.”

“This was not a great affair. It never set out to be one. It was a very small, intimate, modest wedding, much the sort I would - .”

“You would,” asked her aunt, “what?”

“I was going to say,” said Stephanie, colouring but knowing that her aunt could not see her, “much the sort I would approve of.”

“You were going to say that? Much the sort of wedding I would approve of? I don’t believe that, Stephanie. No-one uses words like that. You were going to say that it was much the sort of wedding that you would like, weren’t you?”

“No!” stressed Stephanie, wondering why that phrase had slipped into her mind and almost out into the outside world. Why should she even be nursing the concept of marriage?

Perhaps it was a sympathetic reaction to the afternoon's event? "I don't approve of big weddings with brides in white, bridesmaids dressed up like powder-puffs, drunken grooms, leg-less best men, surly speakers, smutty innuendoes, all those kinds of things. There was nothing like that, just a small, quiet, comfortable wedding, the kind I approve."

Even so, she was not being entirely honest with Ursula. She had stood behind Eileen with nothing to do except sign the register and avoid the bouquet and had thought that it was too plain, too bland, too straight forward. She would not have looked for fuss or ceremony for ceremony's sake, but she felt there should have been more for a couple who were entering a life-time's commitment. It seemed that the ceremony was little different and no longer than entering into a hire-purchase agreement. "You'll be next," whispered Eileen as she audaciously tried to hand the bouquet to her.

"I will not," said Stephanie. "And you are supposed to throw it, not hand it over!" Eileen stopped and her large dark eyes met Stephanie's.

"All right, I will throw it! But you should catch it, Stephanie," she said. "You will catch it one day. You will meet a man, fall in love, and marry him. I know it."

"Never!" laughed Stephanie. "I am like Groucho Marx. I would never marry any man who would be prepared to marry me!"

"Oh, I don't believe that's true," exclaimed Ursula, "and I'm sure you would make a lovely bride!"

"In any event, regardless of the type of ceremony, I will never get married," she told her aunt.

"I know, my dear. You have told me that before. And you are telling me now that this event which is so important in the lives of the individuals concerned passed off entirely without incident? How disappointing!"

"It did, honestly. It was over in a flash, or so it seemed. Nothing at all unusual happened unless you count Owen's mother who kept saying she knew me from the past."

"Knew you? When?"

"She didn't know. She just said she had met me before and remembered my face from a long time ago. I said it was impossible and that I wasn't around, at least I didn't look the way I am, a long time ago. I think she is one of those people who say those sorts of things. Owen said that she does get muddled easily."

"That must have been it," said Ursula.

"I expect so. I must admit, coming on top of what Eileen had said about my future, it did give me a strange feeling. I suppose it would give anyone a strange feeling when a complete stranger comes up and says they have met you before. Perhaps it was in another life? Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"No. Do you?"

"I don't believe in anything," said Stephanie. "Not even that meat pies contain meat."

"I am sorry?"

"I don't believe in this being a steak and kidney pie."

"Oh dear!" said her aunt. "Is it that bad? I can't see it, of course, but I will complain to the suppliers again."