

CHAPTER EIGHT

It had been late summer and some months after the wedding. It had gone smoothly. Stephanie thought Eileen had looked unexpectedly pretty, and later told Ursula so. Owen had looked smart and handsome and Stephanie thought she had shed just one small tear when the ring was slipped onto Eileen's finger. What ever hopes she might have had faded with that ring. Afterwards, she had avoided the bouquet which was dispatched in her direction but which fell into the hands of that pimply girl from the library. And she had managed to avoid responding positively to a number of invitations to visit the newly weds at Hayes Close. Stephanie could just see Eileen cornering her and saying "look at it - it is just as I said it would be, a complete shambles!" But she did wonder how they were getting on and just when Owen would first make contact about the repayment of her loan. How long should she leave it before she sought him out and reminded him? She could not come to a decision. She hoped she would not have to come to a decision. She did not want to come to a decision, not about that.

It was the buzz of the outside intercom that disturbed her from her late afternoon reverie. At first she thought it was an insect and was puzzled because she so rarely had any unscheduled visitors. There was nothing in the diary. She had not overlooked anyone. As she crossed the room she thought of who she would most like it to be, but it was Owen. "Can I come up?" he said.

For a moment she was taken aback and did not know how to respond. "Very well," she said, giving him the instructions. Almost immediately she regretted the decision, but it was too late to stop him. She could have gone down to see him or suggested they met somewhere else. And she was not suitably dressed to go out and intercept him. "What the hell?" she said aloud as she dragged a dressing gown over her shoulders and tried to straighten her hair.

Owen was bright eyed and excited. "I have been hoping to see you for weeks and talk to you in private," he gasped. "I have to thank you for the way you handled Eileen when she took you to see the house. I didn't know until after we were married when she told me. I think it was what you said that convinced her. But, you didn't say anything to her about our arrangement, did you? She has not mentioned it, but I need to know, to be certain."

"Don't you trust your new wife, Owen?" she asked mischievously. "Do you think she keeps secrets from you the way you do from her?"

"Of course I trust her!" he said. "I just need to be sure that she does not know that you put up the money for the deposit."

"So I did," she replied sharply. "Of course I didn't say anything to her about it. I said I wouldn't and I didn't."

"I am sorry, but I had to be sure," he said again. "Anyway, I've brought some money, the first repayment."

"You shouldn't have come here," she said bluntly, tightening the cord around her waist even more. "It's too risky."

"Risky? Why should it be risky? No-one knows who I am."

"That's not the point. People will assume that you are one of my clients and if Eileen finds out -."

"Eileen won't find out, for a start. And even if she did -."

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't see how she would find out. And I have brought you some money."

"We will have to make some different arrangements for handling the payments," said Stephanie going across to the window and looking down into the street.

"Well, I would have thought it more risky for me to be seen in the park or the post office handing money over to you, or anywhere else in public. Then people would talk!"

"You could try sending it to me, or paying it into my bank account."

"That would not leave any documentary evidence behind and, in any case, I wouldn't see what was written in the book and initial the entry."

"I am hardly likely to enter sums you have not paid," said Stephanie flatly.

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"I see. You don't trust me, either?"

"I didn't mean that. Of course I trust you. It's just that you said we would do it all properly and write it in the book and both sign for it. I have to trust you. You have the book. But I don't see any way of doing it without meeting."

"You still shouldn't come here," she said.

"Suggest somewhere else, then," he said heatedly. Stephanie toyed with the idea of suggesting they could meet in the restaurant, but that was a public place and there was always the risk that someone might see them together. In addition, Ursula did not know about the loan. If she knew there was always a chance she might mention it to Benjamin. He might tell his Mr Frobisher, who might tell Mr Wick. Before they knew it, the story would have reached Eileen. No, if they were going to meet it had to be in a private place. It clearly could not be in Hayes Close. Where else was there other than at her flat?

"Perhaps I could give the money to your mother?"

"My mother?" she cried. "Why my mother? She's about the last person on this Earth I would involve in this. Don't let her find out I have lent you money as she'd be bound to tell Eileen out of spite. That's the first thing she'd do!"

"Oh, I don't believe that. Why on earth would she want to tell Eileen?"

"Out of spite, I tell you. Jealousy, you name it. Of course she would say she felt it was her duty to tell her. Her duty! What about her duty as a mother to her daughter?"

"This is still about your real father?"

"Yes!" grunted Stephanie, stamping her foot and starting to pace up and down. "Why oh why won't she tell me the truth? It's so ridiculous. I have a right to know who my natural father is!"

"There must be ways of finding out. Couldn't you go to Somerset House?"

"Not if I don't know his name. He is not on my birth certificate. Mr Hiller is down as my father."

"Perhaps he knows? Couldn't you ask him?"

"I am not sure that I want to ask him anything," said Stephanie with a shudder. "I haven't the faintest idea where he is in any case."

"You could try and find him."

"He might not know," said Stephanie. "It is my mother or nothing!"

"I told you I never knew my father, didn't I?"

"Yes, Owen, you did, but at least you knew who he was and that your mother was married to him and what he did for a living. That's more than I can say about mine."

"Yes, I do. He worked down a mine in Kent."

"In East Kent?"

"That's where the coal mines are."

"And I was born in Canterbury. Isn't that strange?"

"You are not suggesting that we are related in some way, are you?"

"No," she said scornfully. "It is just one of those coincidences that you read about in Women's magazines. Now, you want me to find the cash-book, don't you?" She wanted to ask him how his married life was working out and whether he thought he was starting the repayments too soon and before his financial affairs were strong enough to support them. However, if she did there was the risk that he might assume she was in no hurry to have her money back. If he did not get into a routine of making regular payments, even if they were small, she might never get it all back. And who was she to interfere in the way in which he organised his financial affairs?

"Yes," he said, clearly relieved that they had returned to the object of his visit. "I've brought you ten pounds."

She bit back the question of whether he could afford it and the comment that it was a trivial amount. "Good!" she said. "But we will have to try and think of a better arrangement than this."

After Owen had left and she was relaxing once more, she wondered whether he had hoped that she would ask him whether he could afford to make the payment. Had she asked,

he could have said that it was difficult, but it was a matter of pride, of honour; that a loan was a loan and had to be repaid whatever the consequences. So, faced with this she would have accepted only half, or none at all. Perhaps that was what he was hoping for, yet it was such a small sum in relation to the principal. If those really were his aims it would have been better to have taken the risk and presented her with a sum that really would appear to cause hardship.

But she had to be firm, she told herself. After all, it was he who approached her and asked to borrow the money. And she had not threatened him or sent around any of her admirers or, more like it, any of Mavis's friends, to collect a repayment. He had come voluntarily and she would let him determine the amount and rate at which he could clear the debt. And, she resolved, she would accept every one of his offerings without question. And no matter how much she thought about it, the question of the method of effecting the repayments remained. It was something they never solved.

Despite all her misgivings which she harboured for a number of years, Owen had repaid the debt. He had repaid it in full with the interest calculated in the exact manner they had agreed. He had repaid it in irregular amounts and at irregular intervals. And every time there was money to be handed over and entered in the cashbook he had come to the flat. In that much the arrangement was flawed. It was fatal. Stephanie had tender and fond memories of him and his visits. She had other memories of him which were bad, of times she would rather forget if she would only allow herself to do so. Yet in a way it would be to do him a disservice were she to remember only the good things. There was more than that, far more.

But the bad memories were the ones that kept returning to prey upon her vulnerability as she studied the worsening weather. If only she could exclude them and expel them from her mind. No doubt Eileen had similar thoughts and wishes, but some of Eileen's worst would be directed towards her, unjustly so for she was free of guilt for the charges that were no doubt being levelled at her even as she stood there. She had been innocent in all that happened, in everything, except she had written the letter. That letter! It seemed to be such a sensible, reasonable, action to take under the circumstances. He had written because once the debt was cleared she had told him she was no longer prepared to meet with him. There was no reason for them to do so and how could she, after the other things that had happened? Yet when she came to it, it almost broke her heart to have to write it. She had no option. She had come close to breaching her own rules on personal involvement. Sometimes she admitted to herself that she had breached her rules. For that reason, she had to end it and, having done so, she vowed she would never allow such a set of circumstances to develop again, never!

There was no escape. She was thinking about the letter again, wondering what had happened to it, whether it was simply lost or in Eileen's possession. If only she knew! She could not ask Eileen. She would go to the funeral but would remain in the background. There would be no clue from Eileen's conduct. Much as she might wish to offer her condolences to the widow, Eileen would not be prepared to talk or listen to her. That would be the case whether she had seen the letter or not. There was a remote possibility that Eileen might confront her at the graveside, even produce it there in front of her. That was unlikely. Eileen had never struck her as the kind of person who would make a scene.

The Coroner had not mentioned it or anything to do with Owen's relationship with her. Stephanie was not sure whether she had Eileen to thank for the fact it was not made public. The Coroner had observed that Owen was in debt and faced business worries, but there had been no reference to the repayment of the loan. She suspected that was something else that Eileen was still unaware of. She should remain so. And the Coroner had stressed the extreme weather conditions and Owen's failure to take full account of their severity. The financial and business problems had forced him to work when he should have stayed at home. The weather had caused him to fall and the Coroner recorded an accidental death. That was what the Coroner had said. That was possibly the best outcome for all. She had been, by implication, exonerated. Eileen could not reasonably hold her responsible. She would go to the funeral.

© Paul S A Redmond 2007