

CHAPTER FOUR

"I am sorry you couldn't come to the Christening. It was such a nice day and so very pleasant and he was so good, just laying there all throughout the ceremony, looking sweet and contented."

"I am sorry too," said Stephanie brightly. "So, it went well, did it? Just look at it now!"

The rain which had started that morning as a half-hearted, fine drizzle, was now descending in torrents and forming a pool in the middle of the area of the garden at Hayes Close that was fondly called "the lawn". Soon they would not be able to witness its progress towards a small lake as the kitchen windows were rapidly misting over.

"You realise that you are to blame!" laughed Eileen. "It is like this every time you come to see me! Remember the first time at the flat?"

"How could I forget?" said Stephanie.

"And I must get Owen to do something about that gutter! Look at it! It overflows every time it rains and all the water comes down the wall. It can't be doing any good."

"Is it still not fixed?" said Stephanie. "It was like that when you moved in!"

"Was it?" asked Eileen, looking puzzled.

"Yes," said Stephanie quickly, feeling her heart rate rising. "You told me so when I came here with you. Don't you remember?"

"No," said Eileen, shaking her head. "I don't remember that in particular, but there were so many things to do. There still are." They sat in silence for a short while listening to the sound of the water cascading onto the path outside the kitchen window.

"At least I don't have this kind of problem at the flat," said Stephanie, hoping to gradually steer the conversation away from the gutters without raising Eileen's attention. "Not unless something goes wrong in the flat above me."

"You are going to face the problem going home," said Eileen. "You could be trapped here all afternoon if it doesn't let up."

"Oh, I will get a taxi," said Stephanie.

"Where from? We haven't a 'phone and the nearest box is a couple of roads away. Oh, I keep on at Owen to have one installed if only for the business. It's ridiculous trying to operate without one, but he says it will just mean more expense. But he has bought a van, at last. It's a small red one, second hand, of course. But it's all right for carrying his tools and some materials around, when it goes that is. He had some trouble starting it yesterday morning. Can you drive?"

"No," said Stephanie. "I've never felt the need to do so."

"Nor have I," said Eileen. "My father did all the driving and my mother did all the talking. Mark you he was a dreadful driver and I wouldn't think he has got any better out in Australia. He did offer to teach me, but I decided against it."

"My father," began Stephanie, then checked herself. It was the second slip of the visit. She had been thinking of Mr Hiller and the Rover, so she tried to picture the man who had come to the door that night and who she had seen sitting in his car the following morning. He was bound to be a good driver. Where was he now? Did he ever think about her? Clearly he was married and had other children. What were they like, her half-brothers and sisters? Did they know about her? "What makes it?" she asked almost subconsciously. "The van?"

"It's a Morris. I think it is just pre-war. We will get a better one when we can afford it, but that may be a little while yet. That's part of the reason why the house is still in something of a state. How long have we been living here? Over a year and a half and look how much progress we have achieved! At least we have got hot and cold running water, but I sometimes think it will go on for ever."

"Everything comes to those who wait," Stephanie said. "My mother liked to say that though if she said it, it probably is not true."

"I expect it is true," said Eileen. "You just have to have a great deal of patience. Around here you do, that's for sure. Listen! Did you hear something? Perhaps he is waking

up?"

"No," said Stephanie. "I didn't. You were going to tell me about the Christening."

"There's not much to tell. It went very smoothly and, as I said, Jonathan was a little angel. Owen's mother came, but she's not very well at the present. She keeps rambling and becoming confused, and she kept on asking where the other girl was. She said she had met her when she lived at Dover and it took us ages to work out that she was talking about you. Do you remember at the wedding when she claimed she had met you before?"

"I do, but she must be wrong. I've never been to Dover."

"Don't worry. She is wrong. She was talking about before the War, some thirty years ago, before either of us was born! We had some photographs taken by a mate of Owen's. Would you like to see them? They're not very exciting but we are going to put them in an album. It's a shame that you could not come."

"I did have a prior engagement of long standing," said Stephanie, getting to her feet and crossing to the window. "And I don't like going into Churches."

"Don't you? My parents were regular churchgoers but it didn't do me any good," said Eileen, leaving the door to the hall slightly ajar. "They went every Sunday and sent me to Sunday school. It was absolutely dreadful! It hasn't left me with any particular convictions, at least not with any positive ones."

"Oh, I think I inherited my distrust from my mother. She always claimed to be a Catholic. She may still do for all I know, but she never went to Church and didn't appear to have a good word to say about it. I know lots of people who do go to Church, but it doesn't appear to make them any the better for it."

"You could be like me and be cynical, and ask yourself what kind of people they would be if they didn't go to Church."

"That's something like what my mother used to say; that Church was only for the very wicked and as she wasn't very wicked, she didn't go. Well, I might express a view on that, I must say!"

"I don't think anyone is very wicked," said Eileen, softly. "I know I wouldn't count myself as very wicked."

"Nor would I about me," said Stephanie, watching Eileen closely to see if this provoked any reaction. It did not appear to. Eileen was not of a mind to be even mildly censorial.

"There!" she said. "Neither of us has any need to go to Church!"

"And how are things with Owen?" said Stephanie feeling that she would like to see the conversation on safer ground if she could find some. Eileen's reaction immediately informed her that this was not it.

"They're all right, I suppose," said Eileen in a tone that suggested the contrary.

"All right?" repeated Stephanie, allowing some doubt to creep into her voice.

"He's very busy at work, very, very busy."

"Good," said Stephanie.

"But it makes him somewhat inattentive," Eileen added. She knew she should not be saying such things to Stephanie. She might have said them to her mother, but even that would have been imprudent, and she was now in Australia, in the sun, enjoying herself and probably not giving her daughter left on the other side of the World a moment's thought. And even if she did, she would only say, "I told you so!" It was not the kind of thing she could confide to Mrs Howard. Yet, despite her guilt, she so felt the pressure she had to unburden herself to someone.

"Inattentive?"

"Inattentive," said Eileen. "Things are not the same as they were. They've changed. He has changed!"

"In what way?" said Stephanie softly.

"I don't know. It is hard to put my finger on it. Oh, I've got to admit it. I don't think he loves me anymore."

"Oh, surely that cannot be true. Why would he stop loving you? And you've said he adores Jonathan. You can't be right. Perhaps he's transferred all his affection to him? Things

will return to normal in time.”

“I don’t think it is like that. I think he’s seeing another woman.”

“What?” exclaimed Stephanie. “Owen? I don’t believe it!”

“Well, I am sure of it. You are a woman of the World, Stephanie, if you will pardon me saying so. What are the signs? How does a wife recognise the fact?”

“I don’t believe that wives are supposed to recognise it. They are supposed to be the last to know.”

“Oh, don’t say that! Please don’t say that!”

“But I cannot believe it of Owen,” Stephanie continued. “Not Owen. I haven’t heard so much as a hint concerning him.”

“But what would you look for?” persisted Eileen. “What are the signs?”

“I don’t know,” said Stephanie. “I am not a married woman and never likely to be. I would have thought it would have to be more than in-attentiveness. Yes, I’d look for far more than that.”

“Such as?”

“Oh dear. You are putting me on some kind of spot. What shall I say? Hours unaccounted for? He might be slipping off and seeing her during the day.”

“Which would lead him to give the impression of being very busy,” declared Eileen.

“Or he might be spending money on her, buying her presents or taking her out to dinner. That sort of thing.”

“We are always short of money! I often say to him that I don’t know where it goes. It doesn’t reach me, that’s for sure.”

“How about more tangible signs? Lipstick on his collar?”

“No.”

“Scent on his clothes?”

“No,” said Eileen. “I’ve never found anything like that.”

“No long blond hairs?”

“No.”

“No unexplained, hand-addressed, letters in the post?”

“No.”

“No strange telephone calls where the caller hangs up when you answer?”

“We haven’t got a telephone.”

“Oh, yes, you said. Any names in his sleep?”

“Only yours.”

“What?” cried Stephanie.

“I think it was something to do with the wedding, with you acting as my bridesmaid. He seemed to be re-living it, well, re-dreaming it, all over again. Apart from that, no, no names in his sleep.”

“I don’t know what to suggest,” said Stephanie. “How is he in - how is his libido?”

“Oh, that,” said Eileen looking a little uncomfortable. “I have had to deny him once or twice. It’s the way I feel. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so,” said Stephanie. “Contrary to what may be popular belief, I say “no” to men more often than most.”

“But I don’t think it can be that. I mean Owen was never that way minded, right through our courtship. He wasn’t like some of the boys who could think of nothing else. No, something has changed but I don’t think it is on account of that,” said Eileen going to the door again and listening. “You will tell me, Stephanie? If you hear anything? Just the slightest thing? There can be nothing worse than suspecting your husband. Nothing!”

“All right, I will,” said Stephanie. “I will tell you if I hear anything, but I do not expect to.”

Owen was anything but inattentive that evening when Eileen told him of Stephanie’s visit earlier in the day. His reaction was one she quite unexpected. “She came here?” he said rather too loudly for her understanding of the threshold for not disturbing Jonathan.

“Yes. Why not? She has been here before.”

“Before?” cried Owen, choking. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I was here, silly!”

“Well, I don’t think it is at all a good idea,” he said forcibly.

“What isn’t?” she said, being deliberately awkward.

“Inviting Stephanie to come her.”

“Why ever not?” asked Eileen, one ear cocked for the telltale sound that must inevitably come.

“She is not the right kind of person to invite to our house, not given the people she associates with.”

“Oh, Owen! That’s a ridiculous thing to say. You’d be delighted if you mixed with the class of people she mixes with! Goodness me, you probably work for some of them!”

“That’s different,” he growled.

“I don’t see how it is different,” said Eileen, not feeling inclined to let the matter rest. “And I don’t understand you. One minute you are telling me how you wish she would reform her life and now you are trying to tell me she is not a suitable person to be with. Once upon a time I heard nothing but Stephanie this and Stephanie that! Why all of a sudden should she be treated as an outcast?”

“I never intended that you should become friends with her,” he snapped. “After all, you didn’t have a single good word to say about her.”

“But you insisted on her being my bridesmaid. Why, Owen? Why if she was some kind of untouchable?”

“That was different. I hoped it might give her an insight into marriage and spur her towards a stable relationship of her own. It didn’t. She is as bad as ever.”

“Well I don’t find her bad,” said Eileen defensively. “I think she’s quite a nice person. She’s a little aloof, reserved, but very good mannered and quite cultured. As I get to know her I find she is nothing like the way I used to imagine her. She is most pleasant, and I like her.”

“Of course she is pleasant. That’s her stock in trade. That’s one of the reasons why she is so popular.”

“Really?” said Eileen sarcastically. “I thought it was something else but, then, I am a woman and I may have the wrong impression as to what attracts men to women.”

“And we have to think of Jonathan.”

“Think of Jonathan? In what way? He is not going to catch something off of her.”

“What other children will make of it when he starts going to school. You must know how cruel children are. Word will get around that his mother consorts with a known prostitute. That is what she is, Eileen. It doesn’t matter how you or she try to dress it up. That is all she is.”

“Are you telling me that children of four or five run around talking of prostitutes? That’s absurd, Owen. I wouldn’t believe that for one moment.”

“Well, what ever, she is not a suitable person to invite to our house and I think you should stop seeing her.”

“Well, I like her and enjoy her company,” said Eileen, determined to have any last word there might be. As it was the subject was dropped and not raised at the dinner table, but Eileen was left brooding as she washed the dishes, wondering what had brought about the abrupt change in her husband’s attitude. She was thankful that she had given no indication of what they had talked about during the visit, but she was beginning to wonder whether there was any connection, some remote yet un-revealed link, between her perception of a change in Owen and his stated opposition to his former cause. Perhaps it was that Stephanie knew something? On reflection, she had seemed a little coy, a little embarrassed, when the subject had been raised. Eileen could not think why Stephanie would defend or protect Owen, other than it was not in her nature, in Eileen’s opinion, to cause harm to others. And perhaps she felt she owed Owen something after he had defended her for years? Yet now he was taking her side no longer. Did Stephanie know that he did not appear to have a good word to say for her? Yes, it had to be that Owen thought Stephanie knew something and that she would tell her. So he was seeing another woman!

A plate slipped from her grasp and fell harmlessly back into the sink. That was it! That was the only possible construction she could place on it, the only conclusion she could come to. It was the only conclusion she came to.

Whatever might have been the position with Owen, it was she who had changed when she went down next morning to prepare breakfast. Although she had no intention of doing so, she treated him with disdain, coldly, as if he were a lodger who was tolerated for the rent he paid and no more. Owen showed no sign that he had sensed the difference in her attitude towards him but after he had left for work she, on reflection, hoped he had. He deserved it! If he was philandering, she wanted him to be aware of her suspicions without the necessity for her to actually voice them. "I think my wife knows," she could hear him saying to whoever the woman was. "If she doesn't know, she certainly suspects. I think we had better stop seeing each other."

Her strategy appeared to work because their life settled into its normal pattern for many months thereafter without so much as a hiccup. Eileen would not have described it as blissful, but she caught a glimpse of something like the old Owen, the intense, devoted, follower who had thought it a privilege to carry her school books. Perhaps it lasted years, rather than months. She would have been happy for it to last years, content in washing their clothes, cooking their meals, cleaning, making the beds, scrimping, saving what little she could, taking Jonathan to the clinic, watching him slowly grow, fretting over his cough, yet waiting for something amiss to happen. Nothing did, although whenever she asked Stephanie if she would like to visit Hayes Close again, she would say she was very busy that particular morning or afternoon and would not be drawn into agreeing an alternative time. It was plain that Stephanie would not, or could not, come to see her and Eileen was sure that Owen was at the back of it. There were days when she became very angry about it. Who was he to dictate which friends she should have? Why should she allow him to go behind her back like that? But when Owen came home on those days, she did not have the conviction to raise the matter with him. She had married him for better or for worse. There was a sort of equilibrium in their lives, and she was not about to upset it.

Then something did happen. It was nothing momentous. It was nothing significant, nor she did not see it that way at the time. As she was walking back from the shops in the High Street one afternoon, propelling the push-chair but with Jonathan in tow, she saw the van parked in the street outside the Phoenix Tea Rooms. At first she almost walked by it without realising it was theirs, but a closer examination confirmed that it was. She looked into the darkened interior of the tea rooms but could not see him. Nor was there any sign of him working on any of the visible roofs. He was not to be seen anywhere.

"It's Daddy's van," she told Jonathan. "And I didn't know he had any work around here."

"Can we wait for him, Mummy?" said the child, running a finger along the dusty side.

"No dear," she said, catching his wrist. "If he is working he might be a long time yet and we must get home to start dinner. We'll see him when he comes home at his normal time."

As she walked home she found herself looking upwards at roof after roof, chimney after chimney, hoping she would see him. Of course she did not. A vague suspicion was beginning to take shape in her mind but that was all it was, vague, indistinct, and just a suspicion.