

CHAPTER FIVE

When she went into the bathroom the next morning, Eileen had no doubt that something further had changed, something about her, something in the way she looked at Owen. It was as if she had been plunged back into the worst of her earlier periods of mistrust, and over such a trivial thing! But it was not trivial. It was potentially anything but trivial. As she contemplated the rolled-up tube of tooth-paste she resolved not to mention the sighting and hoped that Jonathan would have forgotten about it. If she mentioned it, she would alert Owen to the possibility of him being discovered, and that was not her aim, not this time. And she would not give him any other cause for suspicion or concern. She would endeavour to act perfectly normally towards him. She would not take less care in ironing his clothes or ensuring that the food was what he liked and was properly cooked. As far as he was concerned, everything would be normal.

When it came to it, she was probably a little off-hand with him regarding some personal commitment or expression of endearment. Perhaps she was a little more fractious, and to excuse herself she said she was feeling tired and not sleeping very well. Had he not noticed it? Surely she had kept him awake? Even if she could keep up appearances outwardly, inside her matters were deteriorating. Here they were, living in a half-finished house, trying to bring up a small, frail, child, and they were drifting apart. She could feel it happening, yet she could not reach out a hand to grasp his and draw them back together again. Gradually, as the invisible chasm opened between them, she became possessed with the idea that she should not seek reconciliation, but should seek proof of his infidelity. And what then, when she had this proof which was, undoubtedly, out there waiting to be discovered? Her thoughts did not extend that far. Her immediate preoccupation was simply to remove the doubt and put her mind at rest.

Eileen was hard on Jonathan and less tolerant of his whims and small caprices. On occasions, when she was at a temporary crisis, she would shout at him, or raise her hand. Always she felt overwhelmingly guilty and contrite afterwards. Always she blamed her husband's behaviour for driving her to this. And every time it happened it fuelled her desire to find the proof. It was no good raising it with Owen. If she told him about the van he would only say that it must have been an occasion when it had broken down. If she went further he would only deny it and having been put on guard would be more careful. Then she would never find the evidence.

Her first course of action was to start going out of her way to pass the Phoenix Tea Rooms and the spot where she had seen the parked van. It was in vain. She reproached herself for not having had her wits about her on that day and waited there as Jonathan had suggested. What a shock he would have had when he appeared from wherever he was and found her there! But she had been thinking of his welfare and intent on getting home to make sure his dinner was ready. She now felt she was like a character in a detective story. The location of the parked van was the only clue she had and criminals always returned to the scene of the crime. She had always thought the tea rooms looked most attractive and inviting. Why should she not, on occasions, take afternoon tea there and watch for the van at the same time?

Eileen knew exactly who lived in the block of flats opposite. At least that was where Owen said she lived, but she was determined not to jump to any unwarranted conclusion. He could have been visiting simply anyone there and if he was seeing someone, even Owen would not be so stupid as to leave his van outside and in full view. He did not have to be in her flat. He could have been in any one of the houses or even in the tea rooms and she had simply failed to see him. It might have been an isolated incident, but it was the only place she could start. So now, instead of just walking by and keeping her eyes open, for the first time she went into the tea rooms.

They were smaller than she imagined from the outside, dark and cramped, with miniature round tables covered with white, embroidered, cloths. The menu offered a selection of appetising cakes which were brought to the tables on a three-tiered stand, and tea served in little, pretty, delicate china pots decorated with roses and oak leaves. It would have made her

task simpler had she not had Jonathan with her. He was now at an age where he wanted to be in everything and Eileen toyed with the idea of asking Mrs Howard if she would look after him. But if she did there was always the risk that Owen might get to hear of it and then it would be her who had to do the explaining, not him. It was bad enough to be forced to spy on her husband. She did not want to encourage him to do the same to her.

Eileen picked a table near the window, not quite in the window as that might be too exposed and he might just see her. From where she was sat she could see a stretch of the road and the small car park in front of the flats. If he stopped there she would see him. She would probably see him even if he drove past. She ordered a pot of tea for herself and a strawberry ice cream for Jonathan which, much to his amusement and curiosity, arrived in a rectangular dish. After only a few daily visits she was being asked if she wanted her "usual", and she began to feel less self-conscious. After all, no-one there, not even her son, knew what she was really up to.

It was a popular time of day and she often had some difficulty finding a vacant table in a suitable position. She also had to withstand the glares from the more senior customers who expressed the view that children should not be seen there, leave alone heard. The trouble was that Jonathan was not the kind of child likely to comply with either of their wishes, especially when his little, thin, voice piped up and asked for another cake, if you please.

In the second week of her visits her nerve started to falter. For a start there was the cost of the daily pot of tea, the ice cream and cake. And, perhaps as important, she seemed to be getting nowhere. She had to consider again that there could have been an entirely innocent reason why the van had been parked there. She could be completely mistaken about the whole affair and putting herself through all this agony and expense for nothing, not that she found it an ordeal to visit the tea rooms. On the contrary, she assured herself. One afternoon she returned home determined to seek some kind of reconciliation with Owen by admitting that she had harboured misgivings. But when the moment came, her nerve failed her.

Next she decided she could not let the matter drift on indefinitely and that she would set herself a deadline. She would continue to pay her afternoon visits to the tea rooms for another two weeks. If nothing happened in that period she would abandon her quest and let matters rest as they were. When the last day of her self-imposed notice came, she sat in the tea rooms, sipping tea, supervising the direction followed by the strawberry ice cream, contemplating what to do next, and waiting.

Then, just as she was on the point of asking for her bill and leaving, he was there, on the pavement! Eileen could hardly believe her eyes and was immediately concerned less Jonathan saw him, but he was fortunately fully occupied with the sight of the contents of a cake stand on an adjacent table. Now Owen was crossing the road and the forecourt to the flats. And then she saw him admitted to the flats, the block of flats in which Stephanie lived.

Eileen could barely move from the seat. Her heart was pounding and she felt crushed and breathless. She thought at one point that she was going to faint, but she hung on and soon a feeling of elation, of satisfaction, possessed and saved her. She had been right all along! And she had to act right now! Seeing and confronting him later was not enough. She had to confront him right now and ensure that she was right. With an eye fixed firmly on the entrance to the flats she gathered up her belongings, took Jonathan by the hand, paid the bill and crossed the road. There was great purpose in her step which must have confused her son as he was not used to being hauled along at that order of speed. Once at the door she scanned the list of names and firmly pressed the button opposite Stephanie's.

"Yes?" crackled a woman's voice in response.

"Stephanie?" she said.

"Yes?" said the voice again.

"It's me, Eileen. Can I come up and see you?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," said Stephanie. "I've got a client and he has only just arrived so I could be quite some time. Can I call around to see you? Is it urgent?"

"No," said Eileen, looking down at her son and smiling reassuringly. "It's not urgent and don't worry about it. I'll call by next time I'm passing. It'll keep."

"All right, then," said Stephanie, then there was silence. Eileen paused for a moment

to gather her wits, then walked slowly back to the tea rooms and sat down again, surprising somewhat the woman who served. She amazed herself with her audacity when she explained that she was waiting to meet a friend and had just gone out to check whether the friend was still coming. This appeared to satisfy the woman who served, and Eileen was able to once again fix her eyes on the door. Perhaps they were up there, watching her? She did not know which was Stephanie's flat or whether it overlooked the road, but she was sure that her husband had to emerge eventually. The woman who waited asked her if she wanted another pot of tea, which prompted Jonathan to bid for another ice cream, but Eileen declined both. Jonathan fretted and asked to go home, but she pacified him by telling him they had to wait just a little longer.

They did not have to wait all that long. It could not have been more than five minutes after she had spoken to Stephanie when Owen appeared at the door, looking furtively about him before heading off towards the High Street. It was clear that he had not seen her. "We can go now, Darling," she said to Jonathan. "I can't wait any longer," she explained to the woman who served. And with that they walked slowly, determinedly, home.

Although the temptation to do otherwise was almost overwhelming, Eileen waited that evening until Jonathan had been put to bed, and she was satisfied that he was settled down, before she said anything to Owen. She thought he might suspect that she had seen him and that he would be prepared with some story cooked up between him and Stephanie. Yet, when she thought about it, he had emerged indecently quickly after she had spoken to Stephanie, far too quickly for it to be conceivable that they had actually done anything. That was not the issue, she told herself. The issue was what they had been doing in the past and for just how long this had been going on. She refused to entertain the thought that it was a coincidence that he was visiting the very flats where Stephanie lived. There was no doubt in her mind that he had gone to see her and had been there in the flat, when they spoke. So, he would be on his guard and it was not a subject he was likely to raise voluntarily.

She stood at the sink with her back to him. He was reading the paper, or trying to appear to read it. No pages were being turned. It gave her some satisfaction to think that the longer she went without saying anything, the more tense and anxious he would become up to the point at which he would begin to think he had got away with it. She would not wait that long.

"So Owen," she said suddenly turning. "What is going on?"

"Going on?" he asked. "What do you mean?" Eileen could see from his reaction and from the furtive look in his eyes that he knew exactly what she meant. He was clearly going to pretend and lie. How she hated that. Why could he not be honest and simply admit it? She might find it in her heart to forgive him if he was open, subject to certain conditions, but would never forgive him now if he attempted to insult her intelligence by denying the whole matter.

"I mean with you and Stephanie," she said coldly.

"Me and Stephanie?"

"I am sorry Owen," she said, wiping her hands. "It is no use you trying to act innocent or trying to lie your way out. I saw you go in. I was there, outside the flats. I know you were in there with her when I called. I even watched you come out a few minutes later and go off in the direction of the High Street. So it is no use pretending that it didn't happen because I saw you. Are you going to tell me about it or must I go around and confront her?"

Owen did not answer. She could see the colour draining from his face and his eyes became even more furtive as he sought a route by which to escape.

"Oh Owen!" she said, sitting down wearily. "I don't know what to say to you. I knew something was going on. I've known for months. I've suspected it for years and I can't continue to go on like this. Are you going to sit there and deny it when I've seen evidence of it with my own eyes? You have been seeing Stephanie, haven't you?"

"Seeing?" he said hoarsely. "What do you mean by seeing?" He was being deliberately evasive and it infuriated her.

"Have you been going to her flat? Have you been seeing her? Goodness me, that's a

plain enough question!" It was becoming more like the kind of examination she was accustomed to conducting with her son.

"Yes," he admitted cautiously. This was the answer she expected, the answer she knew she would eventually extract, but now it fell heavily like a hammer blow upon her.

"How long has it been going on?" she said lowly. "When did you start seeing her?"

"When did I start seeing her, as you put it?" he repeated slowly. "Just before we got married, but -."

Eileen was not prepared to listen to any more. She had, all the way home from the tea rooms and all through that evening, thought she could cope with it calmly and firmly, listen to his pathetic excuses with control and equanimity, and see it through. But now that the realisation that it was all true had descended upon her, she could not. Holding her hand over her mouth she leapt to her feet, waving him to be silent and escaping through the door into the darkness of the hall way. She heard him call her name as she stumbled on the stairs but she did not pause until she reached the bathroom where she bolted the only door inside the house which was lockable. After a few minutes she could hear him padding about on the landing outside the door. It seemed to her, in her confusion, that he was like some wild beast out there, trying to get in, and there she was trapped. And as she looked around her she could see no possible means of escape.

He tried the handle and put some of his weight against the door. He called her name, asking if she was all right. When she did not answer he threatened to break the door down so she implored him to go away and leave her alone. She told him, through the door, that she had no intention of sleeping in the same bed as him that night, or any other night. She did not want to discuss the matter any further that evening and begged him to be quiet as if he continued to make such a noise the least he would do was wake Jonathan, and the worst was disturb the Howards.

"But I want to come in and go to the loo," he protested. Eileen was half minded to tell him to go out into the garden.

"I will open the door," she hissed, "only if you go downstairs now and promise not to come into the bedroom or disturb me again in any way tonight. If you do I shall walk out, leave you. I will, Owen, I promise. Do you understand?"

"But, Eileen," he began.

"Do you understand, Owen?" she screeched. He said he did and she heard the stairs creak below him as he went slowly downstairs. When she opened the door, the landing was unoccupied and she escaped into their bedroom. She flung herself recklessly on the bed. What had she done? She tried to convince herself that it was better to have tried to have it all out in the open, but the seeds of doubt were sprouting. She thought that it would be better for each of them to know exactly where they stood, but she had been wrong. The plain fact was that she felt far worse now than she had before, when it had all been no more than an unexpressed suspicion. What was it her mother used to say about ignorance? And about curiosity? However, none of it could now be undone. And there were no half measures she could have adopted. She either had to remain silent or do what she had done. How could she continue to share a bed with him and look him in the eye when all the time she knew he was thinking of slipping away to bed Stephanie when ever the fancy took him? And she was willing to bet that Stephanie charged him! It would be just another business transaction and given the little she knew about the kinds of sums that Stephanie could demand and that men were apparently prepared to pay, it was small wonder they were always short of money! That woman had not only taken her husband, she had been bleeding them dry all these years!

This was the woman who had sat, butter hard in mouth, in her kitchen, sipping her tea, and listening to her outpourings of fear and concern about her husband, knowing all the time what was actually going on. How pathetically foolish she must have looked! How amusing it must have been for Stephanie. How the two of them must have laughed when she relayed the tale to Owen the next time she met! That poor, foolish, mouse-like, little wife, faithfully remaining at home, slaving, trying to make un-joinable ends meet, fretting and worrying, whilst her husband was away in the arms of another woman, and not any other woman at that! But that was Stephanie's stock in trade, was it not; making slaves out of

husbands and fools out of their wives?

She heard the stairs creak again and then the sound of Owen outside the bedroom door. "Eileen," he called softly. "I can explain everything if you'll let me in."

"Go away!" she called. "Just leave me alone. I don't want to discuss the matter any further."

He complied. She was still there, stretched out on the bed, fully clothed, when the first light of dawn picked out the outlines of the bedroom furniture and she awoke to face a new, stark, frightening reality that her life, as she saw it, in a new home with cut flowers, comfortable and pleasant furnishings, living in marital bliss, was still, and was likely now to always remain, a dream.

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