

CHAPTER SIX

The door bell rang “Jonathan!” she called quite sharply up the stairs as she went to open it, then corrected herself. “It’s all right. “It’s either Mrs Howard or Aunt Megan.” It was the former, wrapped up against the cold.

“I just popped ‘round to make sure everything is all right before I set off,” she said as Eileen ushered her into the hall.

“Set off?” asked Eileen.

“I thought I’d like to pay my last respects, you know,” said the neighbour. “Seems only right and proper.”

“Oh, if you are going to the funeral you must come with us!” exclaimed Eileen. “You can’t walk there in this weather. In fact I’ve been half expecting the undertaker to tell us that it’s been postponed. I thought that might be him then.”

“That’s all right, ducks. There’s nothing to worry about as far as I’m concerned! I’ve been out in far worse weather than this and expect I will again and you don’t want the likes of me along with you at such a time. My ‘arry would ‘ave come too but he’s working.”

“I would feel a lot happier if you agreed,” said Eileen, anxiously looking out of the front room window. “I don’t like to think of you having to walk. I’m expecting Owen’s sister as well but there will be plenty of room. She’s coming down from North Wales and I expect her train could have been held up. There’s always a chance that she will go straight to the cemetery. I let her know where it is, just in case of an emergency. I mean, you never know how things may turn out, do you?” She forced a smile. “You come with us. It will be quicker and safer. We don’t want another accident on our hands.”

“If you insist,” said Mrs Howard. “Who am I to refuse? But, ‘ow are you and, more important, will you be all right?”

“All right?” said Eileen, thinking that Mrs Howard was referring to the ceremony.

“Did ‘e leave you all right? Will you be able to get by? My ‘arry and me, we’re quite concerned.”

“Oh, I see,” said Eileen gathering her wits and weighing up the degree to which she knew the answer and how much of it she wanted to tell Mrs Howard. “I think we should be all right for a while at least. The house will become mine, if that means anything. And Owen had a life insurance policy.”

“Don’t talk about it now, ducks,” said Mrs Howard becoming alarmed. But Eileen did not appear to be listening to her, or even addressing her.

“Let’s see,” she continued. “There could be some assets from the business when everything is settled and I have a little set aside from my inheritance. Yes,” she added, turning to Mrs Howard, “I think we will be all right for a while. It may be a little tight in the short term but when the insurance money comes through - .”

“I ‘ope you don’t mind us asking, my ‘arry and me, but we’d like to know if we can be of assistance. If there’s any way in which we can help, any way, just say the word.”

“Thank you,” said Eileen, moving back into the bay and looking up and down the road. “I do wish Megan would come.”

“You will ask, won’t you,” repeated Mrs Howard.

“Yes, I will,” said Eileen. “They could be here any minute.”

“I expect they’re having difficulty with the roads. It’s as well the ground isn’t frozen, my ‘arry says. And young Jonathan? How’s he taking it? He’s all right too.”

“He doesn’t really understand, but he’s all right in himself except for his cough. We just cannot shift it. He’s up playing with his trains at the moment. At least it keeps him quiet until he remembers that Owen promised to build him a layout in the garage. That won’t happen now, but I don’t think Jonathan quite believes me when I tell him. There’s an awful long list of things that won’t happen now. It goes on and on. It’s almost endless when I think about it.” She sounded tearful, but she waved Mrs Howard aside. “It’s all right. I am not given to crying, at least not often. Perhaps if I could it would make things better, but it’s just the way I’m made.”

“Some folk are like that,” declared Mrs Howard. “You take my sister’s eldest, Susan. She only has to - .”

Eileen had not cried that night when she had, if she ever had, an excuse for crying. She had the same thought the following morning when she awoke with a jolt to find herself exactly where she had flung herself the night before. It was early and the house was silent. It was just becoming light, but she had no real idea of what the time was. “Oh God, what do I look like?” she asked herself when she caught sight of her pallid features in the mirror. What did it matter? What did any thing matter now? Soon Jonathan would be stirring and wanting his breakfast. Owen, if he was still in the house, would want his, but he could get his own as far as she was concerned.

He was there, downstairs, when she went down, clearly waiting for her to appear, looking as if he had suffered an uncomfortable night on the settee which would have been far too short for him. “Good,” she thought, when she saw him.

“Eileen!” he said pleadingly. She waved her hands dismissively and looked away.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said firmly, but in a strained tone. “I don’t want to talk about it ever again. Not one word. I have my future and Jonathan’s future to think about. So we will put all of this behind us and never speak of it again. But if you see her again, ever, or if I so much as get a hint that you are seeing her, I will leave you Owen, and take Jonathan with me. Don’t think for one moment I am joking or this is some kind of idle threat. I mean every word of it. I don’t care what it takes, if you take up with her again it will be all over between us. It’s Jonathan and me or her. You can make your choice.”

“Eileen,” he repeated. “If you would let me explain. If you would only listen.”

“Owen!” she snapped. “I said I didn’t want to talk about it. I mean that too! Now, have you had breakfast?”

“I’m going to work,” he said abruptly. “I don’t want any breakfast.”

“Very well,” she said curtly. “You understand where we stand?”

“I think so,” he said. “Will you be here when I come home?”

“That depends to a degree on you, but as things stand I will be.”

She was very sharp with poor Jonathan that morning. She felt guilty about it as he had done nothing to earn her displeasure, but it was the way she felt and there was no cat in the family. It was only later that she realised how spontaneous her reaction to Owen had been. She had not really thought during the night of what she should say or do when she saw him next morning. And when she got up her mind was numbed and blank. When she did confront him in the kitchen the words had just presented themselves. Now, looking back, she wondered if she had been too lenient, yet what else could she have said? It would have been foolish to have stood on her pride and dignity and left him. Where would that have got her and her son? Yet on reflection she realised that she was fully prepared to carry out the action she had threatened should she discover that he had transgressed again. What she did not realise until later was that having said what she said, it was now beholden upon her to monitor him and ensure that he did not.

It was another step down this staircase that they had embarked upon when the first troubles appeared. Eileen knew that they had descended at least one step into the unfathomable darkness that lay below them, and wondered whether they would ever rise back to the light that had bathed their marriage at the outset. She found that she watched him carefully. She watched his every move, every look, every nuance. She listened to everything he said, every emphasis and every tone he used. She ensured that he knew she was watching him. That was fine. She wanted him to know that she was watching him and would continue to watch him throughout this indeterminate period of probation. It probably made him feel uncomfortable but he never said anything. That confirmed his guilt as far as she was concerned and she wanted him to feel uncomfortable. That was the very least he should be made to do! Their married life together returned something approaching stability but Eileen could not bring herself to show her husband any warmth. She catered for and looked after him in every other respect, but her withholding of all intimacy was the only way she could think of physically punishing him. She did not have any plan as to how long she was prepared to

keep it up. She would let it last as long as it did.

Jonathan, of course, continued to press for ice cream and the afternoon cakes which had been abruptly terminated. He was not to understand why they stopped going to the tea rooms or why his mother was less than enthusiastic about returning and he persisted in his requests. At first Eileen made excuses and procrastinated. It was a mistake to say they would go tomorrow as in Jonathan's world tomorrow did come and Eileen had to find another excuse why the ice cream and cakes did not accompany it. Of course there were other places they could have visited to fulfil his easily satisfied desires, but she inexplicably felt that if they were to go anywhere, it would be to the Phoenix Tea Rooms. Yet it was not the place she would have chosen to go regularly as she knew no matter where she sat, she could, even if she had to turn, see the flats and the entrance. Even if she was watching her husband the very last thing she wanted to do was to catch him out.

Eventually her spirit weakened and her son prevailed. When she opened the door and went in to the gloomy interior she felt like a lone and lonely, Chekovian, woman with her child. And because it was there in full view, she watched the entrance to the flats obsessively, noting everyone who went in and came out. Owen was not amongst them and gradually the fear that he might be, subsided.

Perhaps against her better judgement, Eileen continued to frequent the Phoenix Tea Rooms even after Jonathan started school. By then the woman who served would greet her by her name, an action that appealed to her vanities and gave her a small sense of importance and belonging in a world where she seemed to know so very few people and count for so little. There were times when she would allow herself the luxury of fantasising, of imagining she was a character in a film waiting any moment for Robert Donate to come in and sit beside her, or that she was in a novel waiting for a complete stranger to strike up a full and lasting relationship with her. But she rarely read any more, and they never went to the cinema, and these things did not happen in real life.

It was a time consuming diversion to go to the tea rooms as the Infants' School lay in the opposite direction from Hayes Close, but on those pleasant mornings when the sky was blue and the air was fresh, and she felt uplifted by the sight of the trees heavy with leaf and blossom, she would walk back through the still-dewy park and stop for a mid-morning tea. Gradually she weaned herself from the habit of watching the flats. People came and went. She knew, or thought she knew, where all the men were going. But Owen was not amongst them, and Owen would not be amongst them. He was cured of this malaise that had afflicted him all those years before. It had been some kind of disease that he had caught before they had first met, and it had taken all this time to eliminate it. But at last it was gone, it was over.

She was never certain how or when this realisation reached her. There was a day when it felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her mind, when she felt carefree and almost loving towards him. The next day she found she felt the same. She concluded that she had at last found it in her heart to trust and forgive him. It was as if the sun had suddenly come out in her life, bright and warming, reassuring. Even so, she was very cautious in improving and expanding the intimacy of her life with her husband, taking one step at a time, climbing up out of the black pit they had shared for so long, up towards the light.

Then it happened. It was one late September morning, one of which she could remember every vivid detail. It was not long after the schools had gone back and Jonathan was starting his third year. Goodness, how small he was compared to some of the other boys in his year! And already, although the Winter was still several months before them, he had that cough. She remembered that because she had taken him to the doctor before taking him in to school on that particular day. He had given her a prescription which she had taken to a chemists in the High Street. It was from there, and at much later in the day than normal, that she had walked to the tea rooms. It was a fine day, a sunny day, a day on which everything appeared to be good and normal. A day that should be no different to the day before.

What was it? She had been sat at the table, at her normal table which was set a little way back from the window. She had been looking in her handbag for something and she just happened to look up. She was sure it was something she did casually. It was not that she would claim that something forced her to look up, or out of the window, or see her husband

there, crossing the road. But when she did look, there he was, crossing the car park, now outside the door, now disappearing into the lobby of the flats.

For a moment she did not know what to do as the room darkened and her world fell in around her. There was no question of it. It was not a dream. It was not an error on her part. It was Owen and he had gone into the flats. He had gone into the flats to see Her. Trying to appear normal and calm she left her customary small tip for the woman who served, paid her bill, and left the tea rooms. She doubted that she would ever set foot in there again. Her eyes fixed on the door to the flats and completely oblivious of whether a number ninety-four bus was coming or not, she crossed the road. This time she would not alert him to her presence. She would wait and confront him. It was the next best thing to catching him in flagrante delicto.

Feeling slightly breathless, she sat on the low brick wall that separated the car park from the footway. She felt very self conscious and that she must look a pathetic figure perched there. No doubt the customers in the tea room were watching her, wondering what she was up to. There was even the risk that either She or Owen might look out of the window and be able to see her. That was a risk she was prepared to take. He had to come out some time and she was sat in front of the doors. When he did come out, she could not fail to miss him.

As she sat there she wondered just what she would say. Her anger mounted with every successive thought as the line grew harder. "How dare he?" she said aloud. "How could he?" She wanted to know how long it had been going on and whether it had, as she had supposed, ever actually ceased. Perhaps all this time he had been sneaking in to see Her whenever the fancy took him and he thought the coast was clear. Surely he realised that she would catch him one day? To think he could have been doing this all the time after the ultimatum she had given him and the promises and assurances he had given her! And having given him an ultimatum, she faced the dreadful thought that she would have to go through with it now.

Then a new thought presented itself to her. Why could she not just walk away and pretend it had never happened and that she had seen nothing? That was it. She had not seen him go in and he was not up there right now, doing what ever it was they did and enjoying all the carnal pleasures in life that she found it so difficult to provide. It had all been in her imagination, a trick of the light, a mirage. She could just stand up, go home, and act as if everything was normal. He would come home at his usual time, have his dinner, watch the television, complain about the quality of modern timber trusses as he was apt to do once a week. And they would then go to bed, just as if nothing had happened. After all, if he had been seeing Stephanie yesterday and the day before, what difference did the fact that she now knew make? But She could not bring herself to do this. How could she face him across the kitchen table or lie beside him in bed without seeing the vision of him going through the door she was now facing? How could she maintain the pretence that everything was normal and all right when she knew it was not? How long would it be before she could no longer contain her anger and outrage at his deceit and betrayal? No, if she went home now she was only delaying the inevitable. She had to remain and have it out with him now.

But should she do it there, in the open, in full view of the customers in the tea rooms and the woman who served, possibly in full view of Her? Oh, it was so tempting to actually catch him red-handed, so as to speak, but there were other ways to deal with problem, including one which had crystallised out of her earlier thoughts and which now appealed to her. Still with a wary eye on the door in case he suddenly emerged, although she thought this was unlikely given the marathons in which Stephanie, on her own admission, was accustomed to indulge, Eileen stood up, brushed herself down, and walked briskly and purposely home. It was no wonder they were so poor! He obviously never did any work! He spent all his time and their money there!

She watched the van draw up outside the house at the normal time and Owen getting out. She had already decided that she would not demean herself by confronting him in public, but she was still determined to humiliate him in public if she could. She was in the hall, quiet, when she heard his plaintiff call of her name as he reached the front door. Then he tried to

turn his key in the lock. It would not open because the catch was down and even had that failed, all the doors, were bolted against him. She heard him go around to the side and try the kitchen door, then he was in the garden, looking up at the windows. Eileen went back into the hall and sat on the stairs. There was no sound from Jonathan. He was deeply engrossed in his trains. She would have to explain matters later.

She heard him return to the front and push the letter box open. "Eileen?" he called. "Are you there?"

"Yes I am," she said tersely. "And I suggest you avoid making a scene because all the neighbours will be watching."

"But what's the meaning of this? Why won't you let me in? Why are our suitcases out here on the path?"

"I packed all your things for you, Owen. You are going to need them as I have chucked you out."

"Chucked me out? That's ridiculous Eileen! You can't do that!"

"Oh, can't I?" she retorted. "Just watch me!"

"But why?"

"Because, I saw you this morning. There's no point denying it. I know where you went. I saw you going in. I didn't want to. It just happened. I did warn you when this happened before. I told you exactly what I would do. It is over, Owen. I don't want to see you any more. I don't want you coming around here. And I want you to go now without making any kind of scene."

"Oh, come on now Eileen," he said through the letterbox. "Open the door and let me in."

"No," she said firmly. "Go away Owen and leave me alone."

"If you don't open the door I'll break it down," he threatened.

"If you attempt to do that, Owen, I will send for the police!"

"And how will you do that, Eileen?" he cried. "How will you send for the police when you haven't a 'phone?"

"Mrs Howard will do it," she said. "She's watching you and if you do anything either she or her husband will call them. If you look you may see her at her window now." There was a pause and he muttered something she did not understand. It had not crossed her mind before that he might be violent. She began to wish that she had alerted Mrs Howard to the situation.

"Come on, Eileen," he said. "Be reasonable."

"Reasonable?" she hissed, crossing the hall and standing by the door. "Me be reasonable, Owen? You are a fine one to talk. As far as I am concerned I've been as reasonable as I am prepared to be. It's over Owen. I don't want to ever see you again. I want you to leave me and Jonathan so that we can live our own lives free from your lies, your deceit and your treachery. I want you to go."

"Go? Go where?"

"I don't care. Anywhere just so long as it is not here."

"Where will I sleep?"

"Sleep in the van. Better still, go and sleep with her. You've been so anxious to see her and she's been so eager to get hold of you, why don't you go and live with her? You could even become her pimp, couldn't you? It would suit you down to the ground. I will see a solicitor tomorrow about divorce proceedings. I will expect you to keep up the mortgage and pay maintenance for Jonathan. But that's all I expect of you. Now, I am going upstairs to have a rest. I expect you to be gone when I come down."

She stood close to the window in their bedroom and watched with increasing sadness as he took the suitcases she had packed so carefully and placed them in the back of the van. She could, even then, have opened a window and called him back, if one of the bedroom windows had been capable of being opened, that is. But she had taken this stance and to back down now would be pure weakness and a ratification of the terrible thing he had done. She had to stand firm now, for herself and for Jonathan. She heard the engine of the van start and watched it creep away in the direction it was facing, leaving behind nothing more than a small

pool of oil in the road and a cloud of blue smoke which rapidly dissipated. Once it was gone, it was all over.

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