

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the next morning before the full enormity of what she had done struck her. It was the shock of finding the kitchen empty when she came down. There was no kettle boiling, no-one in the way, no smell of carbolic, no sandwiches to cut and wrap, no-one to say "goodbye" to. Eileen told Jonathan that his father had gone away to work for a short while. That would tie her over and give her time to sort out matters. There was so much to think about. She might sell the house and look for somewhere smaller, a place that was just large enough for just her and her son, somewhere else, maybe somewhere new. On the way to school she realised that her action the previous night and what she had said could have forced Owen back to Her. It was really the last thing she should have done. In one way it rewarded him. In another it destroyed all hope of reconciliation. After leaving Jonathan in the playground, she had to detour and pass the tea rooms and the entrance to the flats. Her worst fears were confirmed. There, in the car park, was the familiar red van. Owen had taken her at her word and had moved in with Stephanie.

She paused just past the tea rooms. They might have seen her passing. In time they would notice her absence. The woman who served would say "I haven't seen Mrs Cross for quite some time. I wonder what has happened to her." Someone else would say, "perhaps she moved away?" That was the answer. She would move away and start a new life somewhere. That would mean selling the house which would require Owen's consent, but that was something the solicitor could sort out. To whom should she go? Anyway, before she saw a solicitor she had to visit a locksmith.

Mrs Howard was there, waiting for her, leaving the gleaming door-knocker she had been so assiduously cleaning, and coming down her path to greet her. "Are you all right, ducks?" she asked. "Only my 'arry and me saw there was some sort of fracas yesterday. We didn't want to interfere. Is it your 'ubby?"

"That was Owen," said Eileen curtly, "going!"

"Going?" said Mrs Howard.

"I've thrown him out," she said bluntly. The neighbours had to know sooner or later because his absence, or that of the van, would soon be noted and become the subject of speculation. She might as well propagate the truth.

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Mrs Howard. "I would never 'ave believed it! Look, I tell you what. You come on in along with me and I'll make us both a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me all about it." Eileen was half minded to decline, but she would only have gone into her own house and brooded. She thought she might as well do that in Mrs Howard's.

"He has been unfaithful to me," she said once they were sat below the flying ducks in the best room. "He's been unfaithful with another woman."

"Not that woman from the Estate Agents'?" said Mrs Howard eagerly. "The moment my 'arry and me set our eyes on her we knew there would be trouble!"

"No," said Eileen weakly. "It wasn't anyone from the Estate Agents'. Far worse than that."

"Only she'd got the kind of looks and figure that men go for. My 'arry said e'd been tempted if 'e'd been twenty years younger. Not the kind of girl to forget in an 'urry."

"No," repeated Eileen. "It wasn't anyone from the Estate Agents'. You wouldn't remember her. It was the girl who was my bridesmaid."

"That's right!" said Mrs Howard triumphantly, "the girl from the Estate Agents'"

"She doesn't work for the Estate Agents'," said Eileen flatly.

"Well, that's not what your 'usband said. Maybe I'm speaking out of turn but I feel it's best to get these things out in the open. He brought her 'ere, in broad daylight, and it was before I saw 'im 'ere with you, it was. They spent a long time in the 'ouse. I knows. I was making the bed and I could 'ear them."

Eileen did not respond. A new, cold, reality gradually seeped into her body and mind, contaminating her soul. So, Stephanie had been there, in the house, before she had been to see it, perhaps even before she had known about it. What had they done whilst they had been

there? Perhaps Owen had even proposed marriage to her, suggesting that they would live in the house, not she. Even at that early stage he was preparing to abandon her! But Stephanie, having more sense than she, had taken one look and turned him down, so he had turned to his reserve. That was all she was. That was all she had ever been in the whole of the affair, someone on whom he could fall back when Stephanie said “no”. “That was a long time ago,” she said at length.

“I know, but as I said, she ‘as the kind of face you don’t forget easily. And ‘er ‘air! I bet it came out of a bottle.”

“Oh, no,” said Eileen dismally, “it’s always been that colour. We went to the same school. That’s where I met Owen. That’s where she met Owen. She had a gang of followers then and I don’t know how he ever got involved with her because he wasn’t amongst them. I doubt if that Dave Henry would ever have allowed him to.”

“Dave ‘enry?” exclaimed Mrs Howard. “Now there’s a name to come out with. My ‘arry says ‘e wants locking away, he does.” But Eileen was not listening.

“I can see what he saw in her,” she whispered, almost to herself. “I can clearly see what he saw in her, but what did he see in me? Why me? If he was after her all along, why did he court me? Why did he propose to me? Why did he make my life miserable?”

Eileen repeated the same questions to herself when later she sat at the end of her bed and stared at her haggard image in the dressing mirror table mirror. She would never rival Stephanie in looks, no matter what she did to her face. She had put on a little weight since carrying Jonathan, and that was visible to her if no-one else. But she had always been prone to appear just a little on the plump side. And, heavens knows, she had always had a tendency towards appearing plain. Some might have termed her pretty on one of her better days, but she was never going to be in a position to compete with her greatest rival. So why did Owen follow her and risk her parents’ wrath? Why did he court her, ply her with endearments, and induce her to stay behind when she could have gone to University and her parents would then have taken her to Australia with them? Why did he propose to her, buy the house in their joint names, marry her and start a family, whilst all the time he wanted Stephanie? That was it, was it not? All those years he had yearned after her. Even when they first met he had yearned after her. Why had she not realised it from the outset? After all, there were times when he seemed to talk of nothing other than Stephanie and the thought of reforming her. The simple truth was that he had always been more interested in Her.

Yet Eileen could not reconcile this explanation. No matter how much she thought about it, she could not logically explain his actions other than come to the conclusion he wanted both of them and could only marry one. In which case he had married the only one that was foolish enough to say “yes”. He could not marry Stephanie because, by her own admission, she would not. She had said it often enough but it was only now that Eileen concluded it had been a coded message. Yet it was all so stupid. What did Owen think would happen when it all came out into the open as one day it must? The thought of it happening like that was so preposterous Eileen could barely bring herself to believe it.

She asked herself whether, if she supposed it to be true, she could share him with Stephanie and join the clan of wives for whom that woman carried out some of their marital duties. Did it really matter to her if he did go somewhere else for the services that she could or would not any longer provide? Was it really any different to him having a lunch out rather than taking the sandwiches she cut and so carefully wrapped? Did it really matter?

Oh, it did matter! It mattered a great deal if only because this woman was sucking them dry when she consumed all their spare money and her husband’s love. It did matter!

As the afternoon wore on and she reminded herself that she would have to rally and collect Jonathan, her thoughts drifted from concentrating on herself to an examination of Stephanie’s rôle in the affair. No matter how Eileen looked at it, she came out badly if only because she could have said “no”. Stephanie had prided herself on her exclusivity. What would have been more professional and reasonable to deny the husband of the woman who you had led to believe you were a friend? But, no, she had taken him to her bed whilst maintaining this outwards appearance of friendship. She had visited her flat and told her there was nothing between her and Owen. She had visited the house and taken Owen’s line. She

had subsequently been a visitor in their home. No wonder this upset and worried Owen! It was all becoming clear now that she thought about it, but surely Stephanie could not have done it just for the money? What other reason was there, other than spite?

Eileen argued with herself all the way to school, all the way home, and well into the evening. She repeatedly went over the same ground without advancing any further. She could not imagine any explanation for Stephanie having acted to spite her other than that she had chased after Owen in the first place and she had frustrated her aims. Perhaps that was it; she had things completely the wrong way around? Owen was not the guilty party but was as much a victim as she was, well nearly so? Stephanie could have had her eyes on him from the beginning, jealous because he chose not to associate with her but went out with someone else. Then she came around to the flat and said all those things simply to put her off the scent. She would have got herself invited to the house and no doubt Owen had to fight off her advances. It was probably she who put the idea of being a bridesmaid into his head and then pretended otherwise. She would have realised that buying a run-down house was likely to put an intolerable strain on the marriage. And then, all she had to do was capitalise on the problems that affected their relationship after Jonathan was born. That was it. Stephanie had set a whole series of traps and one by one they had stumbled into them. All the facts seemed to fit this scenario and what was worse, Eileen had now given her exactly what she wanted. She had driven Owen out of their house and straight into her arms. That was the final trap. Stephanie had sprung it long ago. It was subtle, clever, and she had walked right into it.

What was there that she could do now? There was no doubt in her mind that Stephanie would not be about to let Owen go. It would not be easy for her to go and see him, say that she was wrong and ask him to return home. Perhaps she would not go to see a solicitor, but she would wait and hope that something might lift the spell, change his perception of that woman, and bring his to his senses. It was something she would hope for though she had no grounds for believing there was a chance of it happening.

On the following Friday Eileen was surprised to find a small brown envelope with her name written on it on the front door mat when she returned from taking Jonathan to school in the morning. It had been delivered by hand and inside were six one pound notes, the amount that Owen normally gave her each week for the house-keeping. "Oh yes," she told an empty house, "he is going to come home." But the day passed, and the weekend that followed, and the days of the ensuing week, and he did not return despite her constant anticipation that any minute he would be there at the door. Even the notes she pinned to the front door every time she went out did not provoke him into making an appearance. At least, he did not come to see her, but the following Friday she found another six pounds on the door mat. He must have seen the note she had addressed to him. Perhaps he had misunderstood it. At worst he had just ignored it. Her heart fell. Perhaps he had no intention of ever returning home.

A new despair descended upon her that weekend and rendered the days that followed as dark and featureless, as if a number of blank pages had been inserted into her black book of life. On the following Friday it was the postman, who had appeared to be boycotting the house in Hayes Close, who brought a letter which fell softly onto the door mat. Eileen picked it up and viewed it with intense displeasure. It was from Australia, not from Owen. It would be from her mother, because her father never wrote, and its receipt put her in an even worse mood as Jonathan was to discover on the way to school that morning. As for the letter, she stuffed it into her handbag, resolving to deal with it later.

It was so annoying! Her mother would be writing about how good the life was out there and how foolish she had been not to go but to marry that man. She was probably saying how great the demand was for young people out there with degrees, even young women! Her mother did so in nearly every letter she wrote. She would have to reply and would have to decide what she was going to tell them about what had happened. None of the infrequent letters she had received from Australia had even the slightest hint that her parents had forgiven her for marrying against their advice. They barely acknowledged that they had a grandson. And now, when she wrote in reply, she would have to tell them what had happened. She knew she must even though it would inevitably provoke a triumphant response saying

they had been right all along. Perhaps if the worse really did come, she could sell up and emigrate, starting her new life down there. Certainly if they were feeling magnanimous there would be a suggestion that she should join them. Oh yes, they would even say that she could bring the boy with her. That would put the whole of the World between her and Owen and eliminate any chance of a reconciliation. That was not what Eileen wanted.

Almost without thinking she made her way from the school playground to the Phoenix Tea Rooms and went in. The woman who served greeted her with some surprise and ushered her to a table near the window. "I remember that you liked to sit here," she announced. It was ironic. She could see the entrance to the flats so clearly. It seemed so near that she could almost reach out and touch it. There was no sign of the van in the car park, but that did not have to mean that he was not there. He could easily be there, so close. Perhaps she should cross the road and ask to see him? No, that would be silly if she did that. She could not be certain that he was there. She could not even be certain that he had been staying there, and he ought to be at work by now. If she went over to the flats it would be Stephanie who confronted her and that was about the last thing she wanted.

Eileen took out the envelope which had arrived, unwelcomed, that morning. She might as well read what her parents had to say whilst she sipped her tea. When she did open and read it she let escape a clearly audible gasp.

"Is something wrong?" asked the woman who served, who was standing close by. "Is it bad news?" It was bad news, Eileen admitted. The letter was from her uncle to tell her that both of her parents were dead.

She slowly drained the cup as if in a trance. Her uncle had been economic with the details of the accident and the contents of the letter were largely an account of her parents' estate and the seemingly endless deductions her uncle had been obliged to make from it in order to settle their affairs. The result was an inheritance, but one that was smaller than she might reasonable have expected had she ever thought about it. It was, however, the best he could do for her under the circumstances.

Eileen stared vacantly out of the window and felt overwhelmed by loneliness. This appeared to be the location in which all bad things happened. She had previously said that she would not visit the tea rooms again, and broken her vow. This was her punishment. This would be her last visit. Yet she sat there, staring out into the street, then down at the words on the paper before her, but seeing nothing, letting the morning drift by until it fused into the afternoon. People in the shop came and went, oblivious of her. The lady woman that served asked her several times if she was all right and whether they should call for a taxi to take her home. The truth was that she seemed to feel nothing, absolutely nothing, no grief, no sorrow, no feeling or emotion. What was wrong with her? Almost without thinking she looked again at the letter and the envelope in which it had come. It had been sent surface mail and had taken some time to reach her. The events her uncle described had occurred weeks ago, yet she had sensed nothing, no inkling, no premonition.

The sum of money would be useful, she told herself. Although it was not enough to live on. She would not spend it, not would she tell anyone, including Owen, about it, not yet at least. How foolish of her to think the final qualification! Of course she would not tell Owen! She might never see him again. Her eyes lifted to look at the entrance to the flats. Her mother and father were dead and buried, but she was alive and so was he although she might as well be on the other side of the Earth. If it did come about that they saw each other again, she would not tell him about it. That was what she resolved.

A further number of days slipped past and other than the re-used, brown, envelope that was slipped through the letter box on each Friday, no word came from Owen. How could she ever forgive him for not contacting her, for not pleading with her to let him back? Perhaps he was no longer working in the district as she had not caught sight of the van since the day she saw it outside the flats. Perhaps he returned only to leave the envelopes she found on the door mat. Perhaps he had left for good.

Then one afternoon, just after she had arrived back home after collecting her son from school and had despatched him upstairs to play in his bedroom, Eileen heard someone at the front door. "It must be Owen!" she told herself excitedly as she bustled from the kitchen to

greet him. She found herself confronted by a complete stranger. "Yes?" Eileen said cautiously, looking to see whether the woman had anything from the Jehovah's Witnesses to hand her.

"I am sorry," the woman began. "Are you Mrs Cross? Eileen Cross? I am Mrs Hiller." For a moment it did not sink in. The woman saw Eileen's puzzled expression. "Joyce Hiller," she added.

"Stephanie's mother?" asked Eileen, staring intently at her. She was short, petite, middle-aged and very well dressed, but now she looked closely she could see more than an resemblance in the woman's face to her daughter.

"Stephanie's mother," the woman asserted with a note of dejection. "For my sins I might add, but I am here as an envoy for your husband. Could I come in and talk with you?"

"I'm sorry," said Eileen, confused, beckoning her into the hall and showing her into the back room. "I didn't expect anything like this. Do excuse the state of everything but things used to get started and never finished. As for now, well, nothing gets done."

"I know the problem," said Mrs Hiller. "I divorced my husband some years ago so I know what life can be like without a man around the place, but I am not going to say for one moment that I want one. I don't miss him in the least, only the useful things he did about the house."

"And in the garden," said Eileen, indicating towards a chair.

"Yes! Your husband used to come and cut my grass for me before you were married, but I expect you know that."

"So he did," said Eileen, trying to sound enthusiastic about the connection, but not feeling it. "Can I get you something to drink or eat?"

"No, not yet, anyway," said the woman, sitting. "Perhaps we might have a coffee later if that's all right, but not just yet." Eileen sat herself and looked closely at her visitor.

"So you are Stephanie's mother," she said. "I can see the likeness."

"Well, I am not sure whether that is at all flattering," said Mrs Hiller. "I can assure you that the resemblance is only skin deep. I have given up on Stephanie. I have tried and tried to get her to change her ways, but she always was headstrong and it's impossible now for us to even meet without having a dreadful row. If it helps you to understand my position, I positively disown her and her activities, including the way she has involved herself with Owen."

"Have you seen him, Mrs Hiller?" said Eileen, trying not to sound too eager. "I haven't since the day he left me."

"Would you like to call me Joyce? As for Owen, it is more a case of him seeing me. But to cut a long story short, the gist of it is that he wants to come home to you, if you will have him. I am here solely to plead his case. It was his idea, not mine."

"So he wants to come home?" Eileen said with growing confidence.

"Yes," said Joyce, "he wants to come back and live with you."

"And he's afraid to come and face me himself?"

"I don't think it is a case of him being afraid. I think he is concerned that either you won't see him or if you did you would still be so angry that you would not listen to what he had to say."

"I am angry with him!" Eileen exclaimed.

"That's perfectly understandable. It is the natural reaction and there would be something amiss if you didn't feel that way."

"I am very angry with him! Of course I am angry with him! What kind of wife and mother would I be if I was not angry with him?"

"That was what I was trying to say."

"He's been secretly seeing her for years and living this life of deceit. He even promised me the first time I found out that he would never see her again, but it made no difference and he went back to her. This isn't the first time, you know!"

"I didn't know," said Mrs Hiller. "He didn't tell me that, but it doesn't surprise me in the least. Once my daughter gets her hooks into a man she never lets go. The trouble is, if you don't mind me saying so, you have pushed them together which only makes matters worse."

"I know," said Eileen. "It is my fault. It was something I said to him in the heat of the moment. I didn't mean him to take me literally."

"Well, what has happened is the exact opposite of what you want, isn't it? I am right there, am I? You do wish to keep them apart?"

"I am not so sure," said Eileen, growing in confidence. "If it was the wrong thing to do it appears to be paying dividends in that you are here and he wants to come back."

"You will take him back?" said Mrs Hiller, eagerly.

"I didn't say that. I don't know what I want to do. When he drove off in the van I felt I would never see him again, nor at the time did I want to."

"And now? Now that you've had time to reflect on matters?"

"I need to think about it," said Eileen, marvelling at her boldness. "Shall I make you that coffee now?"

Mrs Hiller looked puzzled, as if the conversation had not gone exactly the way she had expected, nor reached the conclusion she sought. "That would be nice," she said.

Once out in the kitchen and alone Eileen could hardly contain her elation. This was exactly what she wanted! She could hardly have prayed for anything better, but there was a note of caution creeping into her thoughts, counselling her not to appear too eager. It was easy to come to a decision. She wanted him back, she knew that. It was more a question of the terms she should demand. Yet even now, with the prize within her grasp, there were scattered, vague, doubts. She was not sure whether they arose from her unwillingness to believe that her un-channelled prayers had been answered. They could have arisen from more substantive questions, such as whether she should accept someone who was one of Stephanie's cast-offs. Clearly she had no further interest in him. She had given him his marching orders and he was asking to come home for no reason other than it was the only other place to go. And there was the issue of whether they really could live together after all that had happened.

Mrs Hiller was standing at the French window, looking out into the garden when Eileen returned with the tray. "Yes," she said as she put it down on the coffee table. "The grass needs cutting. Oddly enough it is something I have never been able to get Owen to do regularly. I normally have to do it."

"You do it?" said Mrs Hiller.

"Most of the time. Milk? Sugar? Of course he knew your daughter even back in the days when he used to cut your lawn."

"I expect he did," said Mrs Hiller reflectively. "I doubt whether there was a man within a ten mile radius who didn't. I wouldn't single your husband out for special punishment."

"Why not?" said Eileen, looking up from where she was crouched. "He is my husband. He is the man who said he would be faithful to me until death. I have kept my side of the bargain throughout. I don't see why I should spare him, I really don't. I cannot see what he could possibly say to me to justify what he has done or that would make me feel differently. I don't know how I could possibly trust him or believe anything that he says after all that has happened. Why should I have a man who is second-hand? Why should I have him back now just because your daughter has decided she has grown tired of him and no longer wants him?"

"I am not so sure that it is a case of her having grown tired of him."

"You don't mean to tell me that he has grown tired of her?"

"I don't know what the situation there is," said Joyce. "I do know that he wants to come back. And I suppose that all men are second or third hand when they come to us in the first place. If they are not, they may not be worth having. Most of them go astray at sometime during their married life. I think it is up to the woman to try and maintain the stability in the family through all this. There would be very few whole families left intact if every wife expelled her husband every time he committed an indiscretion."

"There might eventually be a lot more stable families if every wife did so in the first place," exclaimed Eileen. "And it isn't just one indiscretion. It's been going on for years!"

"It is very understandable," said Joyce shaking her head. "You should not underestimate the effect my daughter has on men. I have seen her at work in that respect. I've

seen them throw themselves at her feet to be trampled on, or rush to her to be dashed at her hands. She is the Lorelie, the archetypal siren. Few men if any can resist her charms. You should not blame your husband for being no stronger than the rest. You should feel pity for him.”

“I don’t know,” said Eileen.

“Will you at least agree to see him and to listen to what he has to say? Why don’t you at least give him a chance to clear the air. The two of you have your lives in front of you. It would seem a shame to let this opportunity slip by. It is something you could regret for the rest of your life if you don’t take it. You owe him that much.”

“I owe him nothing,” said Eileen, “but I will at least see him.”

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