

CHAPTER EIGHT

Owen came to see her a few days later. It was mid-evening, just as the sun was setting and the shadows were gathering and deepening under the trees and behind the hedge. Eileen did not hear him knock but when she opened the door to put out a couple of milk bottles she found him standing there. "Owen!" she exclaimed as the bottles dropped and clattered down the path. Fortunately neither broke.

"I was just going to knock," he explained, but she had the impression that he had been standing on the doorstep for quite some time.

"You had better come in," she hissed, looking around, "before the neighbours have something else to talk about."

"They know?" he said as she closed the door and held a finger to her lips.

"Jonathan's in bed," she said in a low voice. "I don't want him disturbed."

"How is he?" said Owen but stopped when he saw the flash of anger in his wife's eyes.

"Come into the kitchen and we can shut the door," she said. "Of course they know, the neighbours!"

"And Jonathan?"

"There has been things said at school but he doesn't know for certain, not yet. He still believes you are working away. Perhaps we can keep it that way?"

"Oh," he said dully and sat at the table. Under the light she could see how pale and drawn his face had become. She thought he looked thinner. Clearly Stephanie was not looking after him as well as she had.

"Well?" she said sharply, putting up the ironing board. "You want to talk to me?"

"Could I have a warm drink?" he asked. "It was chilly standing out there."

"It will have to be coffee or tea. I threw the cocoa out as you were the only one who drank it."

"Tea then, please," he said softly. "I want to come home, Eileen, to you and Jonathan."

"Do you, indeed?" she said, placing the kettle on the stove with more force than was normal.

"Yes," he said. "I do. Will you let me?"

"I don't know, Owen," she said. "I really do not know."

"Mrs Hiller said that you would."

"Well Mrs Hiller was mistaken or you misunderstood her. What I said was that I would talk to you. That is all I said and that is what I am doing."

"How is Jonathan?" he said after a reflective pause.

"Why are you suddenly asking about Jonathan after all this time?"

"I just wondered how he is and how he getting on at school."

"He is all right and he is doing quite well, no thanks to you! He is quite a bright boy. He clearly does not take after his father."

"I am sorry Eileen," said Owen, intently studying the top of the table as if what he wanted to say was written there. "I miss you and him. I miss all this, living here. I want to come home. Can't we start again?"

"What? And pretend none of this happened? That's what they say in films, isn't it? Well, I don't know. I don't see how I can forget what has happened and what you did."

"What I did," he repeated thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said vehemently. "What you did to me. All the lies you told me. All the promises you made and never kept. I cannot see how I can forget them."

"This may sound silly," he said, "but neither can I."

"So what is the position, Owen?" she asked tersely. "What is the situation between you and her?"

"There isn't any situation between me and her," he said sullenly.

"Tell me the truth, Owen," she demanded. He did not respond. "The truth!" she

repeated. "Are you really in love with her?"

"The truth?"

"Yes," she said, leaving the ironing and going to sit opposite him. "I want to know the truth."

"Yes," he said slowly. "I am in love with her."

"No, I mean really in love, not infatuation."

"No, Eileen, I know what you mean," he said sadly. "I really do love her, sometimes to distraction, but it is only now that I have to face up to the prospect of living without her that I realise it."

"I see," said Eileen, grimly.

"I know it sounds awful. I don't know how to describe it. I suppose I have felt this way for a very long time, but I haven't been prepared to acknowledge it. I do love her and that's the truth of it."

"Then I don't understand for one moment why you are here now and telling me this!"

"Oh, for a hundred and one reasons. No, make that a thousand and one. I cannot live with her. I don't believe any man could. She is quite impossible. She won't give. She won't yield, not in the least."

"But I will?" said Eileen softly. "Is that it?"

"She's fiercely independent almost to the point of it being an obsession. She does exactly what she pleases and when she pleases. No man could trust her. No, that's not the right word. No man could commit himself to her and expect her to reciprocate."

"So you come home to me now that you've found that your fancy woman will not play? I am to have you because she does not want you?"

"No, Eileen. It really isn't like that. I know must look that way, but it isn't that simple. I made a mistake. I made an awful miscalculation, but that had nothing to do with me loving her. And remember it wasn't me who left. It was you who chucked me out."

"With good reason," said Eileen firmly. "Nothing that you have said so far has suggested that I was wrong. I'd do exactly the same again!"

"I know this sounds crazy, but I do love you, Eileen. I love both you and Jonathan. I realise that this is my home, here with the two of you. Stephanie is just a fantasy. This is where I belong."

"Did you sleep with her?" said Eileen brazenly.

"No!"

"The truth, please, Owen."

"No, Eileen. That is the truth. I have never slept with Stephanie. I have never been unfaithful to you. I am not pretending that I would not have done had I the opportunity. I am a man and she is just about the most desirable thing on the face of the Earth, but I have never slept with her. She would never let me."

"Never?" said Eileen, frowning and wondering if she could believe this unexpected statement.

"Never!" he said emphatically. "I am not going to claim that I understand it, but she quite simply refused to let me."

"But I thought you have been living with her, at her flat?"

"Oh yes," he said with a sigh, "I've been living at her flat because I had nowhere else to go and I persuaded her to take me in. It has been an absolute nightmare. I hadn't realised how small a flat it is and I had to sleep on her sofa in the living room. It is like our settee, only just long enough for two to sit on so I've had to spend my nights all screwed up in a little ball, trying not to fall off onto the floor and upset the woman living in the flat below. Whenever she had a client I had to keep out of the way. That meant sitting in the van some evenings until she could give me the signal that the coast was clear. Thank goodness she didn't have any all-nighters! Stephanie said it would look bad if any of her men realised I was there so I had to hide all my belongings. Some evenings I just wandered around the streets. Sometimes I sat in those tea rooms opposite the flat and waited until it was safe to go back. I almost got myself locked in the park one night. And she has some strange, unchangeable, habits. She would always go out to eat at a weird, very run-down, restaurant just off the High Street, I

expect you know the place, but she would never let me go with her. Nor would she let me take her out. I tried to talk to her about changing her life but that was no use. First she would laugh, then grow angry and say it was none of my business. I have had a really miserable time, what with all that and being away from my home. If you wanted to punish me, Eileen, you did the right thing.”

Eileen felt uneasy at the thought that he might have walked into the tea rooms whilst she was there. Imagine the two of them sat there, each watching the entrance to the flats but for entirely different reasons! It was as well that she had virtually stopped going! “Are you really trying to tell me that you have not been having an affair with Stephanie?” she demanded.

“No,” he said softly. “It was all a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding,” repeated Eileen, allowing the words to sink in. She had not expected to find herself believing a word he said to her, but now she was not certain whether she did believe him. It sounded so frank and plausible. Why should he tell her he was in love with Stephanie? Why tell her that if it was not the truth? And if it was true, why make out that nothing had happened between them. Could she believe that? It was all bizarre unless he was deliberately trying to hurt and humiliate her. “I don’t believe you, Owen,” she said, standing. “I don’t believe you because you have lied to me before. I don’t see why I should believe you now.”

“It is true,” he protested. “Every word of it. Stephanie would never allow me to have anything to do with her, not for love, not even for money. She said she would take me in out of kindness although she thought I should return to you. I said you wouldn’t allow me in the house and that you had the locks changed, so she let me stay. It wasn’t any easier for her than it was for me, but she is the innocent party in all this.”

“Stephanie is?” cried Eileen, “and I am not?”

“I didn’t mean that,” he said with desperation. “I didn’t mean that at all. Oh, this is all going wrong. I can’t find the right words to explain what happened and how I feel. I feel so wretched.”

“How do you think I felt, Owen? Or how do you think I feel right now? Have you thought about that?”

“I have thought about it, and about all the other things too. I know I was wrong. When I say she is innocent I mean I chased after her whilst she did everything to discourage me. She only took me in out of pity and because I had nowhere to go. You can see that, surely? It was a great sacrifice for her and extremely inconvenient. Otherwise it would have been another night in the van. Honestly, Eileen, it is all true, every word of it. Do you really think I would lie to you over something this important?”

“So you would lie to me about some things, then?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You certainly inferred it!”

“Well, I suppose I might have told the occasional white lie over little, unimportant, things.”

“Like saying you would never see Stephanie again, for example?”

“Oh, that,” he said, lowering his head. Eileen looked out of the window. It was quite dark now, no stars, so moon. She faced a paradox of her own making. Was she telling the truth when she told him that she did not believe him? Did it really matter to her whether she believed him or not?

“And you are telling me,” she said slowly, “that you love her passionately? How do you think that makes me feel, Owen?” He shook his head and looked so sad that she started to feel that it would break her heart. Yet there was something inside her that was preventing her from yielding.

“You asked me to tell you the truth,” he said. “I do love her. I can’t imagine any man who wouldn’t if he knew her. She is that sort of woman. But I love you as well. I know that sounds crazy, but I do.”

“Then you should have married her,” Eileen said forcibly. “You should have married her and brought her to live here instead of me.”

“Stephanie would never have married me. I don’t think she will ever marry anyone.”

“But you did bring her here, didn’t you? Before you brought me, you brought her!” He looked even more wretched. It must have crossed Owen’s mind to ask her how she knew, but he did not.

“Yes,” he said. “I brought her here to see what she thought of it.”

“And what did she think of it?”

“Much the same as you. I can’t remember her exact words, but she thought it was a dump. She couldn’t see the potential in it any more than you did. Can you see it now, now that it is beginning to take shape?”

“I like your beginning. I would like to see some finishing.”

“You might think it was worthwhile taking me back just to get the house in order,” he said, hopefully. “If you insisted, I could sleep in one of the other bedrooms.”

“Oh, if only I could rely on the house being completed if I took you back!” she said. “But how could I? I still have to apologise to anyone who calls. Just look at it! How long have we lived here and look at how has been done?”

“Quite a lot.”

“And how much remains to be done?”

“Quite a lot.”

“Well then,” she said flatly. Owen did not answer and they lapsed into an uneasy silence. She was sure she had exhausted all his arguments whilst maintaining her position. She would now have to be cautious to ensure that she did not push him too far and convince him of the superiority of her case.

“I suppose that is that,” he said sullenly. “I do not know what else I can say.”

“That’s not that by any means,” she said. “Don’t get up, not yet at least.” He stared at her and she stared back. It was Owen who averted his gaze. “What do you propose to do if I do not decide to take you back?”

“I really do not know,” he said, breathing deeply. “There’s no question of going back to live with Stephanie. We have agreed that the arrangement won’t work, but that isn’t the reason why I came back to see you. As I said, the relationship won’t work. There isn’t a relationship there to work. I don’t think there could ever be a relationship that would work, not whilst she lives the life she leads. It would be hopeless for me to go on striving and seeking one.”

“We all have things we want that we can never achieve, Owen,” she said.

“I know,” he said in earnest, “but we can have a relationship that works, you and I.”

“Do you really think so, Owen?” Eileen asked, opening wide her dark eyes. “You and I, after all that has passed?”

“I know so. It did before. It would be dreadful if all these years we spent together were now wasted. If I chase after Stephanie, I realise I am crying after the Moon. If I live with you and Jonathan, I should be able to provide for you and make us all happy instead of being miserable.”

“What makes you think I have been miserable?”

“I don’t know. I suppose it was because I felt miserable with her and at being away from home, I assumed you must be miserable too.”

“And what makes you think you can make me happy?” she asked abstractly.

“I don’t know,” he said reflectively. “I thought I made you happy in the past. I mean, our life together wasn’t all bad, was it?”

“Wasn’t all bad, Owen? Is that the way you are describing our married life?” He shook his head and looked even more miserable and dejected, if that was at all possible. The clock on the mantelpiece in the back room chimed twice. It was half past ten.

“I have told you the truth, Eileen,” he said, looking anxiously into the darkness of the garden. “I have to admit I do love her. Sometimes it rises up and consumes me and I become desperate just to see her or hear her voice. But there’s no future in it, not for either of us, least of all for me. I am in a dreadful position. I love you, too, Eileen, and I love my son. I am not looking for you to be second best to Stephanie. I want you as an alternative, a different solution, on equal terms. I cannot change the way I feel about the two of you. I have to live

with it, but you can help me. Only you can help me. If you won't, if you refuse, I don't know what I will do."

"I am not going to refuse you, Owen," she said softly. But there was no reaction as he did not understand her words. Perhaps he did not even hear them.

"I had better be going," he said, suddenly pushing the chair back and standing. Eileen instinctively moved towards the door. She felt a stab of alarm. She had said what he wanted to hear and what she wanted to say, yet he had not heard it or was disregarding it. It would be so difficult for her to say it again.

"I have not asked you to go," she said softly. "I am not asking you to go."

"I don't understand," he said.

"I am saying that you can stay," she said flatly. "At least for tonight whilst we get things sorted out."

"You are taking me back?"

"You can stay. I will make up a bed for you in the back bedroom and we can take matters from there. I don't want you sleeping with me, not yet. Let us start cautiously and see how we go on. Some things have changed, Owen. We had better take each day as it comes to begin with."

"Eileen!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what to say!"

"Say nothing," she whispered as the doubts were already creeping across the horizon. "Are your things in the van? You had better go and fetch them."

If Eileen needed a justification, even if it might be short term, for her decision she was presented it on the following morning when Owen was still in the kitchen, waiting, when Jonathan came noisily down for his breakfast. She could not prevent them encountering each other, so she thought they might as well get it over with as soon as possible. Jonathan was, of course, innocent of Owen's transgressions and the wrong her had done them both. His joy was completely understandable. She felt less comfortable with Owen when he played up and elaborated the story about him having been working away. He must have been thinking about it over night to come out with that much detail and although she did not challenge or interrupt her husband, her eyes relayed her disapproval.

It was the prelude for a period that Eileen found particularly painful as Owen attempted to rebuild and re-establish his relationship with her. That with their son was instantaneous and not one that she could share in. She did not object to his fawning but she could not accept similar treatment or allow herself to be part of his treatment of Jonathan. She had "things to do" when there were ducks in the park to be seen and fed. She found herself compelled to advance excuses for staying at home when Owen proposed a trip to the seaside and was particularly hurt when she over-heard Owen telling Jonathan that they should try and persuade her to go as it might cheer her up. So she sat, silent and brooding, on the green and grey coach as it crawled through the Medway towns and on through the hop fields. When they eventually disembarked they found the tide out and a warning about quick sands, but Jonathan was able to paddle on the edge of a boating pool which was devoid of boats, and squeal with delight at the small, harmless, crabs and shrimps they found amongst the rocks. Owen plied him with tales of pirates and man-eating crabs, of tidal waves, and of sunken treasure ships. It was fun for them, and it should have been a good day out for her, but an invisible wall had descended between them and she never felt any more than being a disinterested spectator.

Eileen did try to join in, but every time she was tried to prepare to commit herself even in the smallest way towards Owen, she would think that here was a man who she inherently did not trust, whose word she did not believe. She made no attempts to check up on what he was doing. She did not return to sit in the window of the Phoenix Tea Rooms and sip tea. She did not ask him what he had been doing that day, or why he was home late. She was never certain at the time whether this was because she was frightened of finding out something she would rather not know, or because she simply no longer cared. Sooner or later he would answer the call of the siren and be gone. It was only a question of when, not if. And he knew, because she had told him, that when it happened, everything would be over between them. There were days when she asked herself whether she was being unjust, but why should

she have to tolerate a husband who was for ever running off to be with another woman? There were times when she thought she should make that sacrifice for her son's sake, but then she asked herself what kind of example did it set him when he saw his father acting the way he did, and his mother ignoring it? No, she thought her policy was right. Owen had enjoyed his chances. She would give him no more.

Yet another problem did re-emerge. As Owen grew closer and closer to Jonathan, Eileen grew more isolated from both of them. She was content for this to happen and for her to perform as their referee, but she did worry about her son's growing adulation of, and dependency on, his father. It would be a shattering blow for her if Owen did go astray. It could be a mortal blow for their son, and Eileen had this growing suspicion that Owen was creating this position simply to be able to rely on it should the worst happen. She could hear him turning around to her and asking her how she thought Jonathan would take it if she asked him to leave. That would leave her with only one alternative, that being to leave herself. Perhaps that was what he wanted, what he was working towards? She would leave and he would then persuade Stephanie that she should give up her evil ways and live with them at Hayes Close. He would have killed all the birds with a single stone.

As time went on, the problem seemed to grow greater in Eileen's mind rather than subside as she hoped it might. As time went on she was increasingly reluctant to say anything to her husband in case she placed an idea in his mind that was not already there, yet how foolish she would be if she assumed that by some miracle he would forget Stephanie! No, she assured herself that he would not forget her and that she was likely to be in, or close, to his thoughts every day. "I hope that you are keeping your word," she said one evening as she prepared their bedtime drinks.

"My word?" asked Owen.

"What you said to me that night, the night you came back. You haven't forgotten? About renouncing and not seeing Stephanie again."

"I haven't forgotten. Why do you mention it now?"

"It just crossed my mind. It seems to me something we should not forget."

"I wish I could forget," he said, "but that wasn't exactly what I said."

"Well, you did say that you had decided that we came first and that you would not run away to her again."

"I didn't run away to her in the first place!" he protested.

"Well, it was as good as," said Eileen defensively. "I trust you haven't forgotten what I said I'd do if you did see her again?"

"No," he said wearily, "I haven't."

"And have you? Have you been seeing her?" she demanded.

"Why do you ask?" he said, looking uneasy. "What makes you ask that question now?"

"I don't know," said Eileen, pouring the water and trying to stop her hand from trembling. "Have you?"

"Not in the way you mean. I have seen her in the course of some business, but nothing happened, nothing of that kind of thing."

"Course of business?" cried Eileen. "What do you mean, course of business? She doesn't need her roof re-tiling! She isn't one of our clients and we don't have a job to do any work on those flats. What kind of business could you have possibly had with her?"

"It's a bit complicated," he sighed. "I don't want to have to go through it all now. It's too late in the day, but it is nothing like the sort of thing you have in mind." Eileen did not know what to say in the face of his admission. She did not want the discomfort and pain of dragging him through a long confession. She thought she might be grateful that he had freely admitted it rather than leave her to be shocked when she discovered it. Could she accept what he said, that he had only met Stephanie in the course of business? Could she take comfort from the fact that he had and had not succumbed to her magnetism? After all, she was in her flat and Owen was here, in the kitchen, looking into a mug of his cocoa which was gradually becoming cold.

"Only I don't quite know how he would take it," she said, "badly, I think."

“He?” said Owen. “Who?”

“Jonathan, of course! I don’t think he could cope with you going away again.”

“I am not going away again. It is over, me and Stephanie,” he said unconvincingly.

“Good!” she said, sharper than intended. “If you do feel tempted, just remember what I said would happen.”

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