

## CHAPTER NINE

Eileen never discovered what Owen's "business" with Stephanie, or that caused him to see her, was, and she never ventured to ask on the grounds that she might not feel comfortable with the answer. But when she thought about it on the good days she told herself there were so many people who knew Stephanie it would be hardly surprising if her found himself face to face with her due to a mutual acquaintance. He might have been working on a house and she was there. Even Stephanie's mother who had said that she spent most of her time avoiding her daughter admitted there were occasions when they found themselves together. There were days when she almost felt sorry for her husband, imagining how he must feel if circumstances brought him into contact with the woman he adored. There were other days when she was convinced that it was akin to exposure to some kind of deadly radiation and that he would be able to tolerate only a certain amount before succumbing.

"I wonder if we ought to move?" she said one Spring morning as the sky was bursting into life and Owen was about to leave. "You know, sell up and start afresh somewhere."

"Move?" he said, astonished. "Where? Why?"

"Yes, sell the house and move, to somewhere well away from here, somewhere like Salisbury or Bristol. We could make an entirely new start."

"A new start?" he said dismissively. "That's a stupid idea. After I've spent all these years building up contacts, client and my reputation. And there's Jonathan to consider. He appears to be settled at school and with the eleven-plus coming up and him having a good chance of getting to the Grammar school. And the house is still not in a fit state to sell it. We'd lose a fortune if we were to sell it now. No, it's a silly idea! Forget it!"

He went out without saying another word, leaving Eileen standing in the kitchen shocked and confused. Owen was not given to tantrums or outbursts of temper, even minor ones. He was normally ready to discuss anything she raised and she had a habit of getting her way in most. It was evident that she had struck upon a raw nerve, but had he stayed she would have pointed out the inconsistencies in his arguments. For example, she assured herself, if Jonathan was to change school he would inevitably be unsettled. It was true that some of his railway-loving friends might be expected to pass their eleven-plus as well, but there were larger issues to consider. As for the house, it was surely in better shape than when they had first bought it and they could always blitz the outstanding work that summer. As for the business, what was there to stop them starting again? It might be difficult but Eileen still had her inheritance and that could be used to tie them over whilst they became established although it was not a use to which she wanted to commit her savings. The peril they faced in staying there appeared to her to be far greater than any they might encounter in somewhere new.

She raised the subject again in the evening but Owen was not prepared to listen to her, leave alone discuss the matter. As far as he was concerned there was no question of them leaving Bromley, not then, nor at any time in the future. In any case, he announced, his mother was seriously ill and he needed to stay close to her. Eileen suggested that she should go and see her, but Owen dismissed the idea at the time. But his mother was ill and at Eileen's insistence she came to stay with them, sleeping in the large back bedroom which meant that Owen had to move back in with Eileen. "Just so long as you behave yourself," she told him.

"Eileen, you are my wife," he protested.

"Yes I am, and that is something you should have borne in mind in the past," she told him, still trying to establish his true reasons for not being willing to even discuss moving. "You would be well advised to remember it in the future."

Eileen nursed Mrs Cross through the months of the Summer but her condition deteriorated as the days started to draw in. She would wave a bony hand at her daughter-in-law as she entered and declare that she had seen her before. "You came with that other girl and that older woman. They were sisters," she would say. Eileen would always agree with her, but this never pacified the old woman who would ramble on in a confused fashion about the mines and drains, and her move to Bromley.

“It all happened in the thirties,” said Owen. “She is just confused. If you remember she said the same things to - at our wedding.”

“I think she is dying, Owen,” Eileen said one evening.

“What?” he cried, getting to his feet and looking up at the ceiling.

“Not now, not at this very minute. What I mean is I do not think she is going to pull through this time. It was something the doctor said. I don’t want her to stay here, not in that room. It has a strange atmosphere, something I do not like. Didn’t you feel it when you slept in there?”

“No,” he said shaking his head.

“I must admit that I have only noticed it recently,” Eileen confessed. “But there’s something wrong. It makes me feel very uncomfortable, very uncomfortable indeed.”

“Oh, you must be imagining it, Eileen,” he said. “What was it the doctor said.”

“He said that it would soon be time to move her to the hospital as they would be better equipped to make her comfortable. He didn’t say any more than that, but I had expected him to say they would make her better. But he didn’t. Instead he just talked about what they could do to make her comfortable.”

“I think you are putting too much emphasis on what he said. She will pull through. She has been ill before.”

“She has never been this bad,” said Eileen, thinking it was poor taste to speculate whether the woman in the room above them was going to live or die. “We will see.”

Mrs Cross died in the Autumn, eight days after being moved to the hospital. Owen, who had never once asked after Eileen’s parents, was at her bedside when she stopped breathing and seemed to take it badly. “I can only keep thinking of all the things she wanted to do and never did,” he said. “She would often tell me when I was a child that she wanted to go back to this great house where some Lady lived, someone who my father worked for before he died. She always wanted to go back and thank her, the woman, for the kindness and help she had given her at that time. She was talking about it just before - and it was just like my mother of old talking, as if I were a child again, as if all these years had never happened and we were back in time. It was Lady Helen this and Lady Angela that. They were the two names she kept mentioning.”

“Lady Helen was the founder of the Home, wasn’t she?” said Eileen.

“She was. I think she visited it once, but my mother said that she liked to stay in her stately home and didn’t leave it very often. There was another woman who used to visit when I was a child, dark-haired and as stuck up as they come. They said she wrote books, but not under her own name. I kept out her way when she was there, I can tell you! Anyway she, my mother, was back there again, telling me how this Lady Helen would look after us and how we would be moving to Bromley to start a new life. Of course, that was us coming here and you have to bear in mind that I was a baby at the time. I can’t remember any of it, not clearly, but it did bring home one message to me; that we only live once and that we have to make the best of our lives when we can and take every opportunity that presents itself. I don’t want to end up regretting the things I never did!”

Eileen was tempted to mention moving and starting again. After all he was talking about just that, and she thought that might be what he had in mind when he talked about taking opportunities when they arose. But he did not mention it, and she thought it an inappropriate time to raise it. When she did, some weeks later, Owen remained implacably opposed to the idea. Eileen nursed her disappointment through the following Winter and into the Spring. She carried her own theories regarding his attitude but dared not voice them. She could not act alone as she did not have grounds to justify leaving him. Nor could she force a sale of the house because it was in their joint names. Yet increasingly, as each day followed another, she became obsessed with the thought that some disaster would engulf them should they not move. What had started as a feeling about the back bedroom, into which, and against her better judgement, Jonathan had now moved so that there was more room for him to lay out his trains, now had become an unshakeable conviction.

“We couldn’t possibly afford to move,” said Owen when she next expressed her views. “Just think of the cost! Not just the cost of selling the house, the removals, the cost of

finding and buying another, and any work that one will need, but there's the cost to the business, new cards, adverts, and so on. It goes on and on and you know better than I how much spare cash we have. Think of the loss of income whilst I'm going around trying to drum up some work and probably finding none. We could end up bankrupt."

"They do have roofs on houses in places like Salisbury, Bristol and Bath. We could even go up to North Wales. They have roofs there too and I wouldn't have thought they would be in any better condition than the ones around here."

"And they have different types of roof as well, or hadn't you noticed?" he snapped. "Stone roofs and thatched roofs, which are expensive to maintain, so people don't repair them. Apart from that I have no experience of working with those materials."

"You could learn," she suggested.

"Oh yes, I could learn! And whilst I'm learning as you put it, where is the money to come from for us to live on? Tell me that, Eileen!"

"We could use my legacy," she said.

"Legacy? What legacy? I didn't know you've had a legacy. Where did it come from?"

Eileen knew she had made a mistake. She should not have mentioned it, but in her desperation it had just slipped out. It was as if she had played the best card in her hand and she had the growing, awful, feeling that he was about to trump it. "It was when my parents died," she said weakly. "It is not very large."

"I didn't know that your parents were dead? Both of them? Why didn't you tell me? When did they die?"

"It was when you were away, working," she said, not wishing to mention that woman's name. "I just never got around to telling you once you were back."

"Yes," he said, "now I come to think of it I haven't seen a letter from them for a long time."

"Dead people don't write," she said bitterly.

"I suppose not. How much is not very large?" Eileen did not want to tell him how much it was, but she felt compelled to give him some indication.

"It is hundreds rather than thousands," she said.

"I know what we should do with it! We can buy a new van. The present one is on its last legs. In fact I'm scared to go further than the end of the street in case I can't get it back. Yes, it's a God-send. That's what we can do, buy a new van. Then I can travel a bit further a field."

Eileen's heart fell. The only positive element was he was enthusiastic about it, and she would have conceded that the business did need a better, reliable, van. "How much would a new van cost?" she asked cautiously.

"I don't know. It wouldn't have to be brand spanking new. Perhaps a year old, repainted with our business name on the side? That would look smart and impress our customers!"

"They are more likely to think we're overcharging them," she said sullenly.

"And we could do with a new aluminium ladder and a few other things besides. Could we put it in the books as a loan to the business? You could repay it out of profits."

Eileen was never conscious that she actually said "yes" to the suggestion, not openly or specifically. But the van appeared in due course, red and shining in the sun, with the name "Cross (Roofers) & Co." painted in gold on the sides and across the rear doors, and with the new ladder strapped to a rack on the roof. Owen was happy, but she had advanced a sizeable proportion of her small nest egg and she wondered if she would ever get it back.

The euphoria over the new van was short lived. It was not the van that diminished it. It did everything that was asked of it, including starting every morning come rain or shine, come frost and snow. That was one of the ironies of it. It had started that particular morning, ready and eager to escape from the grip of the frost and shed the thin layer of snow that clung to it and obscured the company's name. The old van would never have started but would have stuck there outside the house and exhausted its battery.

Eileen was the first to see the letter on the doormat. "Oh, the postman's been!" she exclaimed as she knelt to pick it up. "He's early, especially on a day like this."

"Perhaps I am late?" said Owen from the kitchen. "Is this clock right?" Eileen did not answer. As she studied the envelope her curiosity changed to suspicion. She did not recognise the handwriting but was sure it was that of a female hand. The post mark was local and when she held it to her nose there was a faintly familiar smell. Was it the smell of lilac?

"It's addressed to you," she said, holding it above the hall table. "I don't think it's a bill. Shall I open it?"

"No!" said Owen brusquely, taking the envelope from her. "I'll deal with it." Eileen left him in the hall and went into the steamy kitchen to pour the warm milk on Jonathan's cereal. There were a few moments, perhaps minutes, silence before she heard the front door click shut. When she looked in the hall it was empty. When Eileen reached the bay window and looked out, the van had gone. With it went Owen, without saying or kissing her goodbye. As she returned to the kitchen she noticed that the letter was on the hall table, face down. She might have picked it up and read it then, but Jonathan was thumping down the stairs. It again tempted her as she wrapped him against the penetratingly sharp Easterly wind, but there was not time to read it.

"I'll walk with you today, Jonathan," she said, "as the weather is so bad. Have you had your medicine?"

"Awe, Mum," he complained. "Do you have to?"

"I won't hold your hand if that's what you are worried about, but I have to get some shopping so I might as well go your way. Come along, put on your cap."

A dark coloured car was standing outside the house when she returned. It might have been a Wolseley or a Riley, she was not sure. When she reached the gate a policewoman wound down one of the windows and called her name. Her heart leapt as she realised that there was another officer next door, talking to Mrs Howard who had seen her and was pointing. For a brief moment she did not know who they had come to see, but once she did she was tempted to turn around and walk away, walk anywhere, just walk into anonymity.

"Mrs Cross?" repeated the policewoman, opening the car door. "May we come in and talk to you?" Nervously Eileen looked across the hedge at Mrs Howard then opened the front door. It closed behind the two police officers with an ominous thud.

They took her in the car to see him. She stood for a short while contemplating his peaceful features, not knowing what to think, not knowing how long she would be allowed to stand there, not knowing what she should do next. "Oh Owen," she said softly. "What am I going to tell Jonathan?"

The house looked dark and empty when she returned home. The policewoman offered to stay with her, or fetch Mrs Howard, but Eileen refused. Before she reached her front door Mrs Howard was there, asking her to go into her house, but Eileen refused her also. When the door closed behind her, she leaned back against it and listened. The house was silent and brooding. This was the door through which he had passed so many times. That was the doorstep on which she had discovered him when he had come home that time. Perhaps it was all a mistake and he would still come home at his normal time? There were the stairs that he climbed and descended daily. And there, still lying face down, was the letter that had come that morning.

She picked it up and took it into the kitchen, dropping it on the table whilst she filled the kettle. Her heart leapt when she saw it was from Stephanie. She did not want to read it. She did not want to learn about his latest, his final, madness, not now, not now he was dead. She turned it over and looked at the blank back. The kettle threatened to boil dry before she arose and lifted it from the stove. The letter was still there when she came to the point where she would have to go to the school and collect Jonathan, if only to have him at home with her. Without any further thought she picked it up, folded it carefully in four, and placed it deep in her handbag.