

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The subject might have ceased to be discussed by Sandra and Eileen. However, nothing that Sandra had said removed it from its position of prime importance at the forefront of Eileen's mind as she planned for the Dinner-Dance. If anything, some of Sandra's revelations tended to make matters worse and demanded radical action. This was going to be no ordinary occasion, Eileen decided. She would set out to show Richard and Sandra, and anyone else who might be prepared to take note, that Stephanie was not the only woman who could look "stupendous". Perhaps that was her failing in Richard's eyes. She did not look "stupendous" often enough? Her preparations were interrupted by yet another secret visit to see the Specialist. Should she have felt guilty at not having told Richard, yet sitting there and telling his sister that she had doubts that he was being honest with her? No, she thought, she should not. It was not fair to tell him half a story and possibly cause him to worry about her when he had so many things at work to worry about. It had been right to wait until she was certain, even if he was seeing that woman. Perhaps even more so if that was the case.

This visit looked as if it might be the last of the investigatory stage, and the news was as bad as it could possibly be. The Specialist prefaced it with a standard set of platitudes and apologies, as if what was happening inside her was due to a failing in medical science. At any other time, Eileen might have found what she was told to be absolutely devastating, but she was only half listening. "You do understand, Mrs Brown, exactly what I am saying?" said the woman, turning from her small desk and peering over her spectacles. Eileen raised her gaze from the floor in one of the corners of the room and stared at the speaker, wondering how one woman could say that to another so coldly and without genuine feeling or compassion.

"That I cannot have any more children?" said Eileen, flatly.

"We will have to open you up to remove the growth," the woman continued. "It is not exactly critical, but I would rather we take steps to alleviate the pain other than keep prescribing you pain killers. I will be trying to get you a bed in the near future."

She meant the physical pain, of course. No-one could prescribe anything for the mental pain; for that growing dreadful feeling that she was now only half a woman. How ridiculous it was turning out! Here she was, being told that she would be barren, that she could live as licentious a life as she wanted without fear of one of the things she wanted the most, and there was Stephanie, perhaps, living in fear of pregnancy. If only she could exchange it with her, her operation for her husband! It was such a forlorn dream as defeat was now closing in on her on every front. One major battle might be lost, but she would not succumb without some kind of fight. The Dance would be her battleground!

"I really think I should now speak to your husband as well as you," continued the Specialist.

"He does not know," whispered Eileen. "I have not told him. I did not want to, until I was certain."

"It may come as a dreadful shock to him. Does he want children? Most men do."

"And women," thought Eileen. "I think he does," she said.

"There is always adoption." Eileen waited for the lecture on the morality of being barren and the responsibility of then adopting children who were not wanted or had been orphaned, but it did not come. The hospital would be in contact with her about the operation and that, the Specialist said sharply, was not something she would be able to easily hide from her husband.

Eileen's thoughts were directed back to the Dance. She had to face the possibility that Stephanie might turn up, which meant that she would have to fight her with her own weapons. If Stephanie was there, the men would fly to her flame with a moth-like singularity of purpose, and Richard would be amongst them. She would have to light a lamp of her own, close to him; close enough to keep him from flying away again and being caught in another's net. Let other men end up as trophies, but not her husband. In the quiet privacy of their bedroom, whilst Richard was, she hoped, at work, she tried on the dress again. It was close fitting which meant she would be able to wear a minimal amount below it, and it was far

lower cut than she had realised. What was it her mother used to say about plunging necklines? Was she a desperate woman? Of course she was! And how little she now cared about it!

For this occasion Eileen planned her appearance with immense care, pondering over the jewellery and scent to wear and the tints to be used in her make up, and making more than one visit to the cosmetics counter. She had no intention of appearing as disguised mutton, but she had to ensure that Richard saw her as he had never seen her before, alluring, and desirable. She had to look better than she had on her wedding day.

“Oh, Owen,” she said as she stood, sideways on before the full length of the mirror and arched her back. “What have I come to? When we started out we were so happy! All those plans we had and cherished, little ones and big, grand ones, all those and endeavours and hopes! Where did they get us? Where were they meant to lead us? Not to here, surely? Not this?” At that point her courage nearly deserted her and she was ready to capitulate, even tell Richard she would not go, but there was something inside her that drove her on. She would turn out, and she would not tell him about the hospital until she had secured her victory.

“I will need a couple of hours,” she told Richard on the morning of the day. “A couple of hours, alone, undisturbed - to get ready.”

“A couple of hours?” he said with incredulity. “Surely not as long as that?”

“A couple of hours,” she said firmly, waiting for him to tell her that she could really go just as she was. “And alone!”

Richard sat in the lounge, watching a game show on the television, waiting, wondering whether his wife would ever be ready on time. He had taken no more than twenty minutes to change and prepare himself. He could not begin to imagine what Eileen could do, other than read a novel, to occupy herself for two hours, and he was absolutely unprepared for what she did, in fact, do. “Good God!” he exclaimed when, pink and scarlet, she eventually stood, framed in the lounge doorway. “You look absolutely stupendous!”

“Thank you,” she said coldly, pulling the shawl up around her bare shoulders. “Am I late?”

“No, no,” Richard said, feeling confused by the transformation and wondering what his mother and father would say, “the car hasn't arrived yet. It should be here any minute. But Eileen, what can I say? I have never seen you looking like this!”

“I thought I would take the trouble,” she said, thinking that he might never again see her looking like that, “as it is a special occasion. After all, we do not go out together all that often.” Richard was slightly stung by the reproach but he failed to notice the pain. His thoughts were elsewhere having headed in what would have been for Eileen the most undesirable direction possibly. Had she known he would be standing there and making comparisons, she might have thought twice about matters. But, then, she was taking on the woman on her own ground, so perhaps it was inevitable.

“If only we had a couple of hours to spare,” he said suddenly. “Make that three,” he added, thinking that she would want at least another hour after he had finished with her.

“Well, we haven't,” she said curtly. “I think that is the car now. Shall we go?”

“Oh Eileen, you look wonderful!” said Mrs Brown when they met at the table.

“Ravishing!” said her husband, getting slowly to his feet, having watched the new Eileen cross the floor on the arm of his son and found himself quite unable to take his eyes off her.

“It is quite a transformation, sister-in-law,” said Gwilym.

“You do look marvellous, Eileen,” said Sandra, hanging on his arm.

“What do you think about Eileen?” Arthur Brown asked his wife, later, when they were sat alone at the table and the younger couples had taken to the dance floor.

“Think? In what way?”

“About her appearance. This extraordinary transformation. I never imagined that she could look like that. Do you think that she has been to a beautician?”

“I don't know where she has been. I think it is a bit too much for one who is over the hill, isn't it? Is she out to make some kind of point? Perhaps it is a last fling?”

“Moir! Are you jealous?”

“Well! When I see the way you greeted her. It is a long time since you looked at me like that!”

He laughed. “I think I would have to triple my current medication if you started looking like that, but how else should I look at a pretty young woman who has set out to look her very best. Richard is beside himself, and she is my daughter-in-law. She is *our* daughter-in-law. I think it is great to see her looking good and it is nice to pay her the compliment, don't you think?”

“It depends on her motives. It is not like Eileen. It is so much out of character. For a start I would have expected her to wear something a little less revealing.”

“Oh, Moira! You must stop trying to make a mystery out of everything that happens. Eileen clearly felt that this is a special occasion and worth dressing up for. Look at Sandra!”

“Sandra is not married.”

“What has marriage got to do with it? Are you suggesting that women should suddenly become dowdy as soon as they are married? I don't recall you feeling like that when we were young. I don't know what has got into you!”

“I don't know what has got into Eileen,” she said disdainfully.

“You do look absolutely superb,” said Gwilym as he danced with Eileen. “I am glad that Megan isn't here after all.”

“Why?”

“She has always been a bit worried about the similarity between me and Owen.”

“And she thinks that I could - oh, that's ridiculous! No offence meant to you, Gwilym!”

“No offence taken,” he said. “And she could not hold a candle to you. I think you have even upstaged the fair Sandra who is probably complaining to your husband about it at this very moment. Are you looking for someone?”

“Me?” she said, guiltily.

“You keep looking around the room as if you were expecting someone to be here.”

“I was just seeing if that former boyfriend of Sandra's was here,” she said, blushing slightly. “What was his name?”

“Ken? So you are not looking for a secret admirer? That is not what all this is about?”

“You must be joking! I just felt that I would let my hair down for once.”

“Have a fling?”

“A little one,” she whispered. “I wanted to look good and feel good; to boost the inner woman.”

“And do you feel good? You have attracted a fair amount of attention and comment. I am sure that half of the men here are wondering just who that attractive woman in the red dress is and whether they could manoeuvre themselves into getting a dance with you. I am sure that none of them recognise you are the plain Mrs Brown.”

“Plain, Gwilym?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I suppose I do. I will be plain Mrs Brown again tomorrow, but tonight I am a Cinderella and I shall not change back this side of midnight.”

“And is there to be a Prince Charming?”

“Not in my life, there won't be.”

“Eileen looks great, don't you think?” It was not the most tactful of questions for Richard to ask his sister who was becoming peeved at all the attention her brother's wife was getting at, she assumed, her expense. Even Richard had not complimented her on her appearance.

“She asked me about your Stephanie,” Sandra said suddenly.

“She what?” exclaimed Richard, looking around with a mixture of excitement and horror. “She's not here, surely?”

“Of course not, silly! It was a few days ago. She just mentioned her name. I had no idea she knew her.”

“I told her about Stephanie. I felt that she should know about her, but why would she suddenly mention her? What would make her do that?”

“Perhaps she thinks you've been seeing her?”

“Me? See Stephanie?” he choked. He checked himself before he added the words “if only”, but he conjured up the picture of Eileen standing in the threshold of the lounge and scanned the dance floor for the red dress. The vision excited him, but then he found himself comparing it with the one of Stephanie on the landing and he started to feel an empty yearning for his former love. Not for the first time, he felt confused.

“Are you seeing her?” demanded Sandra, emboldened by the confusion she read in her brother's face and the several glasses of table wine she had already consumed. The answer was simple, and simple to give, but he fought a compulsion to confess to his sister that he had been thinking of, and lusting after, Stephanie, and that try as he might, he could not expunge her memory from his mind.

“No I am not,” he said.

“Oh?” She sounded disappointed. In a way he had to admit to himself that he was disappointed to have to admit it. If only he was permitted to have two wives. “Has she been in touch with you, written or anything like that?”

“No she has not,” he said emphatically. “Why do you ask? I haven't seen her or heard from or about her for something like two years. I have no idea where she is. She seemed to travel around a lot. In fact I have been trying to forget her, but people keep mentioning her name and reminding me!”

“Someone was asking about her.”

“Asking about Stephanie?”

“At the office.”

“What do you mean, at the office? Why should anyone ask about Stephanie at the office? How do you know?”

“Eileen overheard them?”

“Who?” he asked sharply.

“The person who was asking.” Richard stopped dead, mid step, in the middle of the dance floor with the result that his sister, anticipating his lead, almost fell over. She giggled as he took her hand and led her away from the band. “Now, Sandra, tell me everything you know,” he said as soon as they were far enough away to manage a normal conversation. Sandra, swaying slightly unsteadily, repeated all of what Eileen had told her, adding a few of her own embellishments.

“It is very odd,” he said when she had finished. “Eileen said nothing to me about it!”

“She hardly would, would she?”

“Nor did Miss Logan mention that it was raised during the interview.”

“Would she? To you?”

“She may have told father, but I'm sure that he would have mentioned it had she told him. I can always ask him. In fact, I'll have it out with him right now!”

“Oh, Richard! I want to dance,” she complained as she was led by the arm, protesting to anyone who would listen, around the perimeter of the dance floor until they arrived back at the Browns' table.

“No,” said Arthur Brown, a little perturbed by his son's excitability, “Miss Logan did not say anything about being asked about Stephanie.”

“Perhaps she forgot about it, Richard,” said his mother.

“It is not the kind of thing you would forget,” said Richard loudly. “It is not the kind of thing you expect to be asked during an interview to do with the restoration of stately homes. How could she possibly forget it?”

“Eileen said that she was sure that Stephanie was mentioned by name,” said Sandra, fanning the flames. “Oh, Lord! Look who is coming this way. Quick, Richard, take me onto the dance floor.” But Richard was not listening. He was brooding, deep in thought.

“Do you want to dance, Sandra?” asked Ken.

“Go on,” said Richard, feeling he had completely exhausted that month's quota of brotherly love, “you said that you wanted to dance.”

“I think Sandra has had a little too much to drink,” said Mrs Brown as she watched her daughter disappear on to the dance floor. “You had better keep a watch on her, Richard.”

“Me? On Sandra? Who's keeping an eye on Eileen?” he said hoarsely.

“Why won't you go out with me?” said Ken as he clumsily propelled his beloved towards the centre of the dance floor.

“Why don't you learn to dance?” she said, dodging his feet.

“I did, but I wasn't very good at it,” he said.

“What? Can't count to four?”

“I'll try again if you'd go out with me.” Sandra would have replied but she suddenly felt another hand on her back and an arm was thrust between them.

“I believe this is a gentleman's excuse me and even if it is not, I am declaring it to be so. I wish to dance with the elusive Miss Brown.” If Sandra could have, at that moment she would have promised Ken almost anything if he had been prepared to continue to dance with her, but he deferred to the Detective Sergeant and disappeared from sight. She found herself pressed tightly against the body of the last man in the World she wanted to meet. “You are looking very attractive this evening,” he said in her ear. “And so is the younger Mrs Brown. Something of a transformation in her case, I'd say.”

“You know her?”

“I make it my business to know everyone connected to the leading families. But now I want to be connected to you.”

“I'm sorry?” she said, trying to avoid having to look at him.

“I want you. You must know that.”

“Want me?” said Sandra, not grasping his meaning or intention. “Want me to do what?” The music had stopped and couples were making their ways back to the tables, but he was still holding her tightly. People were now sitting and for a moment she thought she might escape as they would be the only couple left on the floor, but suddenly the band swung into a fox-trot and, as the floor started to fill, she was in motion again. “At least you can dance,” she sighed.

“And you can lead one,” he said. “I am a man of many accomplishments, particularly in bed. Or we could go outside and down to the beach.”

“What for?”

“To make love, Miss Brown. Forget that Welshman of yours. Come and enjoy a real man. Come on, Miss Brown, how about it?”

“Don't be ridiculous!”

“You know you fancy me. You know that you want it.”

“Never! Not with you. Not with anyone!”

“You'll end up dying an old maid.”

“I'd rather do that than do something with you,” she said, thinking of what Gwilym had said to her. “Now, would you kindly take me back to my table?”

“No way,” said the Detective Sergeant. “I am not releasing you until you agree.” As the music ended Sandra raised her free hand to aim a slap at his face, but he caught her wrist and held her firm. “We do not want a bloody scene, do we?” he whispered. “Now, come along like a good girl.” As he started to edge her from the dance floor towards one of the exits, she started to weep. It was not credible. She was apparently being abducted from the midst of a crowd of people, yet she felt almost powerless to resist or call out. “Come along, now” he said. “Had a little too much to drink,” he said to the onlookers, who simply nodded and smiled. What on earth, she wondered, were they thinking?

“It looks like Sandra is in trouble,” said Eileen, catching hold of Gwilym's arm. “Look!”

“Who is the man?” he said, following her indication.

“I don't know,” she said. “His face is vaguely familiar, but I think we should intervene.”

“His face is familiar,” said the Welshman. “I cannot place it immediately, but I do agree. Come along.” Eileen followed him across the room until they stood by the exit. “Are you all right, Sandra?” Gwilym asked.

“Keep out of this,” said the policeman. “The young lady needs some air.”

“I do not,” sobbed Sandra. “I don't at all!”

“Just mind your own business,” said the Detective Sergeant, releasing one of Sandra's arms and pushing Gwilym away. The Welshman retaliated by aiming a swinging blow at the policeman's head. It was well wide of its mark and would not have connected unless the Detective Sergeant had lunged forward, which he did not. Instead he instinctively swayed backwards, losing his footing on the slippery floor, and pulling Sandra down with him. To compound matters, Gwilym, propelled by his own momentum, toppled and landed heavily on the two of them. In an instant Ken was there, calling upon them to break it up, although there was nothing to break up. Sandra was on her feet, apparently unharmed, pressing down her dress. Gwilym's brief moment of excitement had passed, and the Detective Sergeant was winded and not inclined to carry on, although he was not in a forgiving or forgetting mood. “Assault!” he wheezed as he struggled to his feet. “Assault on a police officer.”

“I saw nothing,” said Sandra, soberly.

“I thought I witnessed an attempted assault on a young lady,” said Eileen, raising her eyebrows, questioning, in her sister-in-law's direction.

“Come on, Jack,” said Ken. “We'd better go.” He was desperate to ask Sandra exactly what had happened and what had passed between them after he had left them on the dance floor, but he was also desperate to avoid a fracas which might alienate her all the more. He concluded that he could serve her best by removing a person whom she appeared to regard with more odium than she did him.

“You'll bloody pay for this!” snarled Detective Sergeant Oxer, waving a clenched fist in Owen's direction. “You'll bloody pay for this, all of you!”

“Why do you not go quietly and allow the ladies to enjoy the rest of their evening?” said Gwilym.

“I'll go, but I'll bloody get even with all of you. Especially you, my fine young lady!” Sandra's response was to weep all the more and cling tightly to Gwilym's arm as if it was the last object left afloat in a vast ocean.

“That was the man?” whispered Eileen as they made their way back to the table. “The one you think followed you?”

“Don't say anything,” sniffed Sandra, nodding. “Goodness knows what he will be like on Monday, but I am not going to give in. I won't!”

“That is the spirit!” said Eileen, thinking that Sandra was alluding to her job and being unaware of exactly what had passed between the couple out there on the dance floor. Later, when Sandra had been further comforted and calmed, and had been taken, cautiously, to the Ladies Room to have the remaining tears washed from her cheeks and her make up diligently repaired and replaced, Richard stood and proposed a toast to the small assembled group.

“To our success, in all things,” he said, “and to a prosperous and happy future.”

“To our success,” they echoed and drank, though each had a completely different object in mind when they did so.