

CHAPTER TWO

It was strange to sit in the warmth and comfort of her office and think about that night. She had refused to go and see her former friend or even write to her. And now, by some quirk of fate, Moira's son was on his way to see her. Well, not her specifically, but he would ask for her should he encounter a pupil or a master before he reached the School Secretary's office. What would Moira think if she knew? What did she think about her son taking up teaching? No doubt she saw it as an honourable profession, one she would approve of. But he was not following in his father's footsteps, was he, assuming that Arthur still had the business. "I am not going to say a word to him," she told herself. "Not even the slightest of hints. Of course, if I start that way it will be difficult not to carry on in that way. But there is nothing to lose by it. I don't want to make contact with Moira and if he knew he would only tell her and one thing would lead to another. No, I am quite right. I will remain silent." But he was coming. He was on his way. At any moment he might walk through the door.

"Did I startle you?" asked Mr Pennington.

"No, no," she murmured, nervously turning the bracelet. I just wasn't expecting you back here so soon.

"I just wanted to check something in the register," the Senior Mathematics teacher said, taking the proffered book from her. "You are looking very thoughtful."

"I was just thinking of something that happened a long time ago," she said. If they did meet how would Moira greet her? She would probably be friendly, but she would also remember and that would influence her attitude. Moira was the sort who had a very long memory and might well bear a grudge against her. But she would be friendly, polite, interested, outwardly at least. Then she would ask about Stephanie. Goodness, that would never do! There was a reason if ever she need one why she should not make contact with her former friend. Joyce felt that she would not want to confess some of the things she did from time to time now that she was, for the present at least, single, leave alone admit what her daughter got up to. "I bet Sandra is a perfect little saint," she said, almost to herself.

"Pardon?" said Mr Pennington.

"Nothing," said Joyce, moving the bracelet again. "I was just thinking out loud."

"I see you are still wearing that bracelet," said her sister. "It must be quite valuable." Joyce looked down at the two snakes which entwined themselves around her wrist.

"I always wear it," she said. "It is the only present that Michael gave me. It was that Christmas, *the* Christmas, and I would not be without it."

"But it must be valuable. If it is gold, it must be."

"It certainly is valuable to me. I wouldn't put a price on it. I think Michael said that it was gold but it could be brass for all I care. I have never had it checked and in a way I would prefer not to know."

"I was just thinking of the risk of it being lost or stolen. There are a lot of strange people around now-a-days. Some of them would take the clothes off your back."

"You may be right," said Joyce. "But you have not told me what you are doing now that you are not giving ballet lessons. How do you get by?"

"I have a job, care-taking. It doesn't pay much but there's enough to just make ends meet. I still live here rent free. I used to quietly thank Moira for that, thinking that it was her house. It seems that I have to thank your Michael. I am not sure that I really like that."

"Oh, Debbie! I didn't think. Here I am eating your food and burning your gas and electricity. I must give you something."

"Phoebe, please!" said her sister hotly. "It isn't that bad and I would never deny my sister food and shelter any more than I trust she would always offer me a temporary roof if things came to the worst."

"Which they will not do! I will speak to Michael to make sure he knows who you are."

"I wouldn't count our chickens, Phoebe. You do not know what he wants or how he feels about you."

"Debbie, you must not worry about such things, but I do not understand how Michael came to be your landlord."

"Nor do I. It is a mystery as the all of Angus's houses were transferred to a separate company when he went bankrupt and I thought it was owned by Moira. I do recall that a small, unpleasant, man with a very strange name used to come down here occasionally and check on the agent who collected the rent. But as I was never charged I assumed Moira was involved and that she had continued what Angus had started, allowing me to live here rent free. I trust that no-one is going to appear now and demand ten years back rent!"

"Oh, Michael would not do anything like that! I told you that he is different to his father. This is evidence of that were it needed. But it must be nice to live somewhere rent-free."

"Just so long as it lasts."

"It will."

Later, as the clock started to chime midnight Joyce climbed the familiar stairs and opened the door to her room. It was in darkness but for a deep orange glow from the grate. "Oh Debbie!" she exclaimed. "You have lit a fire! When on earth did you manage to do that?"

"I have lit a small fire in your bedroom every night between November and March since the day you left. I always knew one day you would come back and want to use the room again."

"Oh, Debbie!" Joyce sighed. Even later still she heard the clock strike one as she slipped between the newly spread sheets and looked out of the window at the sky. The clouds had cleared and she could see much the same stars as she had long ago. In some ways it felt as if she had never left; that the years that she had been away were no more than some temporary aberration in time that would soon be erased. She would walk across the road, to the fields, through the gap in the hedge assuming it was still there, and climb the hill to the Monastery. It would be just like old times, just like she had never left and was repeating what she had done yesterday or the day before. But it was not really like that. Guiltily she thought of the house in Bromley. They would be worried about her, concerned by her disappearance. He might even go to the police. She would have to write to Mr Hiller and post it first thing tomorrow. Or she could telephone Mr Wick's office where he worked. She would have to put their minds at rest. She thought of Michael and wondered where he was and what he was doing. Like her, like Stephanie, he would be tucked up in bed. Like her he might be making almost identical plans. "You know where I am, Michael," she said softly to the darkness. "You know exactly where I will be, where you will find me. I will be waiting."

She pictured herself sitting alongside him on the stone wall, watching the ships in the Channel, perhaps holding hands, perhaps with her head resting on his shoulder. Now they were on the bridge over the lake. Now they were walking amongst the ruins of the Monastery. The sky was clear. It was going to be a beautiful day, that day, and with that pleasant thought she dropped off to sleep.

Debbie was waiting for her next evening as she arrived home just before it became dark. She had been right. It had been a beautiful day. "Well?" demanded her sister. "Did he turn up? Did you see him? Oh, I can see from your face that he did!"

"I did not make it easy for him, I can tell you," said Joyce, taking off her coat. "But he found me. I knew he would."

"And what did he want? What did he say? Why does he want to see you after all these years? And how do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" said Joyce, sitting slowly at the kitchen table and shaking her head. "I don't know how to describe it. I feel joyously happy yet I feel bitterly unhappy, delirious and demoralised. I was overwhelmed by seeing him and devastated by having to part from him. It has been one of the best and one of the worst days of my life."

"And what did you say to him? What did he want you to do?"

"Oh, there's so much. I could write a book," Joyce sighed. "What did I tell him? I suppose I told him everything. What does he want me to do? Nothing!"

"And what does he want to do, then?"

"Nothing, also," said Joyce, shaking her head again.

"Nothing? You've spent all day with this man who suddenly turns up from your past and neither of you are going to do nothing? Isn't he going to help you in any way? He is after all responsible. I can just see him saying that it had nothing to do with him."

"Oh he would!" cried Joyce. "He really would help. I only have to say the word, but I would not let him."

"I don't understand, Phoebe," said Debbie sitting opposite her. "He would help you and you will not let him? What on earth did you say to him?"

"I told him how wonderful it is to see him after all this time. I asked him how he was and how his family was. They are all dead, Debbie. Isn't that terrible? His sister died in an accident in France and his father and step-mother were killed in the blitz. Lady Angela and her brother are dead too. Michael and his wife are the only survivors, apart from Lady Helen. And they have no children, no-one to take the line on."

"Stephanie is his child."

"I know, but I told him I did not want him suddenly appearing and interfering with our lives. It wouldn't be good for her and what would she think of me if I had to tell her that her father was not her real father?"

"She will have to know one day."

"That may be so, but that day has not arrived. Michael told me that his wife can be quite deranged and he is particularly anxious that she should not find out that he has a daughter."

"I would have thought she might welcome the news, her being unable to have children."

"It isn't like that. I think it is more about choice and something that may have happened to her long ago. Michael has a theory about it, but that's not relevant. It is important that Stephanie does not know anything as long as Christina is still alive. Michael has agreed that he will not do anything to contact her. He did see her, at the house and in the street next morning. Do you know he spent the whole night in his car outside our house! Poor thing! What an ordeal. You won't do anything to prejudice the position, will you, Debbie?"

"I won't, but it seems strange to me. Surely he could do something?"

"He could. He could do all manner of things but we parted ten years ago and went our separate ways. He is married. I am married, and we have to leave things like that, certainly until the circumstances change."

"But he's rich, Phoebe. Very, very rich. Indecently rich. Think of what he could do for the two of you."

"I have done. I wouldn't claim it is not tempting, but how could I change my life suddenly? I mean, I am used to working and Stephanie is just a child. He would do it. He offered, but it is me who refused."

"I don't understand you, Phoebe. How can you turn down an offer of help from a man in his position? I am certainly not going to turn down living in this house rent free if he continues to allow me."

"I think he will, and he may be able to help you in other ways."

"I don't want his help in any other ways!" said Debbie stubbornly. "Being rent free will suffice."

"Don't be silly."

"Don't be silly? Just which of us is being silly? And don't you forget, Felicity Lightfoot, that I am your elder sister."

"I know, I know, but I have to turn him down for a hundred and one reasons. I am married; he is married. And it would spoil Stephanie. But most of all, it is because I love him and I would never want him to think otherwise. If I accepted any form of assistance now it would look as if that was all I was after."

"But he came after you. And you still haven't told me why!"

“He did come after me, that's true, but that is no reason why I should take advantage of it. But with you, there is no reason why you shouldn't accept his help if he can give it. I explained the position you are in. He is going to try and help. No, it will not be charity. Michael isn't like that either, not that he doesn't give to charities. It will be a concrete form of help and you will have no sound reason why you should not accept it. None at all.”

“So you say. Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions here. He did offer to help you?”

“Of course he did,” said Joyce brightly. “I think he was as surprised to find me working at Woolworth's as I was surprised to find him waiting there outside. He does not approve, of course, not that it is for him to approve or disapprove. I told him so. But for all the reasons I have given you it would be impossible for him to help me and I think he accepts that. There are just too many risks. So we concluded that we would have to continue to go our separate ways and live our own lives. In many ways those lives have not turned out the way either of us would have anticipated, but that is the way things are. When we first met I was the one with the glowing future and he was just a lowly engineering pupil, but he has been the one who has had all the success, and I? Well, just look at me! I have none of it. And you ask why he wanted to see me? The simplest and most wonderful reason of all! He realised that he still loves me just as much as he did the day we parted. And I was able to tell him that I felt exactly the same way about him.”

“Yet you are not going to see him again?”

“Well, I wouldn't exactly say that. I can let you into a little secret, and it must be a secret from everyone you know or anyone you may meet. We have agreed an arrangement by which we can keep in touch, infrequently and very discreetly. Other than that we will just have to wait until we are both free to marry.”

“He would marry you, Phoebe? You are sure of it?”

“Absolutely! He said he would and I believe him.”

“It would be an easy thing to say, given the position the two of you are in.”

“It is not like that, Debbie. He was sincere, absolutely sincere.”

“Well I haven't forgotten the disgraceful way he carried on down here when you first met him. All that deceit! And the dreadful way he treated poor, poor, Angus. Moira never trusted him right from the beginning. I remember her telling me so. Not like her Arthur. He's as honest as the day is long.”

“Well,” said Joyce. “I do trust him, and that's that.” Deborah stood up slowly and wearily as if she had reached the end of some long, inconclusive, negotiation.

“I'd better see to the dinner,” she said. “I take it you will go back tomorrow?”

“I had better if I want to keep my job.”

“Will you tell Mr Hiller?”

“I will have to tell him something. Perhaps I will simply tell him the truth. I will just have to risk that his reaction will not be too drastic. I suppose the worst that could happen would be he could leave me, but somehow I don't think it will come to that.”

“And will you tell Stephanie?”

“Oh, no! Most emphatically, no! I will say that a relative of mine, a distant cousin, was taken ill and I was asked to go and see them. Something like that.”

“Well, don't ask me to tell you that you are doing the right thing, because I don't think you are.”

“Yes, Debbie,” said Joyce demurely. “But we all have to do what we think is right without knowing at the time whether it is or not.”

Joyce often wondered whether she had made the right choice on that day. At the time, at least to her recollection, Michael would have done almost anything she asked. As the years distanced her from this meeting she became ever more convinced that this was the case. Had she suggested that she went home, packed a few things, gathered up their daughter and that they should go to live somewhere abroad, somewhere picturesque with a comfortable climate, she was sure that Michael would have readily agreed. He would have paid for it all and set them up, not to live in luxury - goodness she would never have asked for that - but to live comfortably. Perhaps they could have found a villa, or even a country cottage. Not the one at

Newington. That would have been too obvious. And, knowing her luck, the weather would probably have been no better than Bromley. But had she decided other than she did, Stephanie might have been saved, and so might she. She recognised that as the years advanced she became more reckless in her life style; not wanton like her daughter, but certainly more adventurous. That was how she would put it, adventurous. She was no better or worse than the majority of masters at the school, or their wives for that matter, but she needed some form of stability in her life. Mr Pennington, much as he doted on her, would not be able to provide it. He would not have the will to impose the necessary self discipline upon her. Only Michael could do that. Until he was free, until they both were free, she would be a foot-loose mouse at play.

And what about her husband, the man she had praised for standing by her in her hour of need? Had she left him when Michael came and found her that would not be punishment enough, but she was not to know that then. Now she was more knowledgeable, and wiser.

“Did you tell me it is gold?” said Mr Pennington suddenly. “Your bracelet?”

“Yes,” Joyce murmured, looking down at her wrist. “I believe it is.”

“It must be very valuable then.”

“It is absolutely priceless as far as I am concerned,” she said softly.

They had met at night school. That was a direct result of Michael's re-entry into her life. Not that he had suggested it, but being told that he still loved her and had been loving her ever since the day they had parted made her feel dissatisfied with her position at Woolworth's. “I am going to improve myself,” she announced to her family. It was at night school that she, a slightly nervous and confused, but enthusiastic, mature student met Mr Pennington. He was lecturing on mathematics and book keeping which was one of the subjects she chose. Perhaps she stood out because of her interest which outstripped most of the other students. Perhaps it was her looks as well. She was under no illusion as to her appearance. But had it also been a mistake to go to night school and leave Stephanie alone in the house with her husband? She had acted in complete ignorance yet perhaps she should have suspected the truth. For a start, why had she never asked why he was prepared to marry her and then lie in bed beside her for all those years yet never done what husbands usually demand to do? He had never as much as touched her and if she was honest with herself, she was relieved by his abstinence. Perhaps that was why she never questioned his motives.

Yet had she not gone to night school she would never have been in a position to have assumed her independence when the time came for her to do so. She would never have come to be sat there in her neat, organised, office. That was all down to going to night school and to meeting Mr Pennington.

There were some who would say that it was not her but Stephanie who paid the price for it all. That was something Joyce would hotly repudiate and, what was more important, Michael had never held her to account. Stephanie did not have to do what she did. She could have done exactly what any other woman had to do, and that was say “no”. She could have come to her mother. Oh, there were difficulties between them! She was a difficult, contrary, ungrateful, ungracious daughter, but Joyce had not given up on her, not until she concluded that it was too late. She could have come and talked to her, but Stephanie was headstrong and self-opinionated, yet easily led by the wrong kind of people. She would have turned out the way she did no matter what had been done, no matter where they had gone. She could not influence her daughter's life and she was sure that Michael would not have been able to either. There would have been the same outcome regardless of the decisions Joyce took. That was just the way that Stephanie was made.

Joyce felt just a little uncomfortable when Mr Pennington singled her out from the others in the class. He was older. For all she knew he was married. She was married and innocent of the true nature of her relationship. And there was Michael. “You are so different to all the rest,” he said quietly one evening as she was about to pack up.

“I am sorry?” she said sharply, staring into his face thought she saw nothing there but kindness.

“I was just saying that you appear to be different to the rest of the people who come

here.”

“I am older for a start,” she said, waiting for him to tell her that she was also much prettier. It was not an uncommon line taken by male customers at Woolworth’s.

“I didn’t mean that at all. I suppose your maturity if I can use such a word might explain it, but most of your fellow students have no interest in the course at all. They only come because their employer gives them day release which means they can laze about providing they attend. It’s better than working; that’s the way they see it. You are looking at our future generation when you look at these layabouts.”

“I had no idea that employers sent their employees to night school,” said Joyce surprised.

“Indeed they do. But you are not like them. You have come here of your own accord and you appear to tackle the work with some purpose.”

“It is important to me,” Joyce said, looking down at her neatly written notes. “I need the training and the Certificate so that I can look for a better job.”

“Where do you work at the moment?” asked Mr Pennington.

“In Woolworth’s, behind the counter.”

“Then I would say, if you will forgive me for saying so, that you are totally wasted in working there. You should be able to do much better than that. Are you doing a secretarial course as well as the book keeping?”

“I was considering one. I thought I would see how I progressed with this first.”

“I have no hesitation in recommending that you do one. It is a shame that you did not start at the beginning of this year. If you like I could speak to a colleague of mine who runs the secretarial course. I know this year is not full. I could see if he would be prepared to take you. It would mean a little extra work to catch up if you are prepared to do that. Can you type?”

“I am teaching myself,” she said. It was true. She had bought an ancient Royale typewriter and a book in W H Smith’s which covered shorthand as well as typing.

“Good, good,” said Mr Pennington in almost a fatherly way. “You should be able to do a lot better than Woolworth’s.”

“I shall certainly try to,” she replied.

It was strange how things started. It had been a chance encounter with Michael that had started her relationship with him. The first meeting with Mr Hiller, at an office Christmas Party that Michael had taken her to, was also unplanned and fleeting. And now there was this one with Mr Pennington. The way it developed so quickly with him assuming the role of mentor and almost, it seemed, guardian as he gradually took her under his wing. Perhaps there had always been something more than an academic interest in her, but he was slow to reveal it if that was so. Even now, as he commented upon her bracelet and she was sure that he would, possibly one day soon, ask her to marry him, there was nothing in his tone or mannerisms that would immediately lead anyone to believe that their relationship extended beyond platonic friendship. Not that it ever had extended far beyond that stage. Mr Pennington’s courtship, if it could be called that, was entirely intellectual. It was small wonder, she thought, that he was still single.

“I trust you won’t find it too hard doing two courses,” he said. “Working during the day and with a household to run as well as coming to night school two nights a week.”

“Some things will have to suffer,” Joyce said, smiling. “I am just glad that I was able to get on the secretarial course otherwise I might have had to wait a whole year.”

“Perhaps you should think about basic accountancy once you’ve completed the book-keeping course. It will build on what you’ve learnt. You might even go on to be an accountant.”

“What me? An accountant? Oh, I don’t think so. I find the book-keeping interesting but I have a leaning more towards the secretarial work.”

“Oh!” he said. She caught the note of disappointment in his voice and began to understand. There might have been a short period when she resented his patronage, but that

passed when she realised the true nature of his interest in her. It was good to have an admirer. It made her feel good when she thought about it. After all she received so little attention from her husband and Michael could never be there. So she never attempted to deter Mr Pennington although she never went out of her way to encourage him, either. "If you find it difficult to keep up with the course I could always give you private tuition," he added.

"What would my husband say?" she asked with a laugh. "And what would your wife think?"

"There is no Mrs Pennington," he said softly.

"Oh! Well that would only make matters worse!"

"Would you think about it?"

"I doubt that I could afford it."

"Oh, my charges would be very modest. Perhaps you could pay me in other ways?"

She gave a little squeal of delight as she knew he was thinking of darning socks or sewing back buttons, and had no idea of the more dubious meaning that could be attributed to his words. "To tell the truth," he added, "I much prefer teaching on a one to one basis than lecturing here or marking the work of the Lower Fifth. And I must admit to getting a little lonely at times at home on my own. There is a woman who comes in and cleans but I hardly ever see her, and when I do she is always complaining about her chilblains or something of the kind. I was thinking that if you were interested we could expand the work well beyond the syllabus of this course. You did say you wanted to improve yourself, get on."

"I don't know what my husband would say," she said.

"Would you at least think it over and ask him?"

"Yes," she said with a smile.

"I am glad that you found your way to the cottage all right," said Mr Pennington slowly closing the door behind her. "May I take your coat and were my instructions adequate?"

"Oh, yes," Joyce said, slipping her coat from her shoulders. "Perfectly so. I had no trouble. Oh, I do like this! This is fascinating!" she said, looking around her. "I must admit to having something of a penchant for cottages, especially if they are called Rose Cottage."

"That means something to you, the name?"

"Something very special indeed. Mark you, that Rose Cottage is not a patch on this one!"

"You like it? I am afraid you will not see it at its best in the dark. You must come and visit me in the Spring when all the blossom is out and the lighter evenings have started. Then you will see it for what it is. But let me show you around."

The cottage stood a little way out of the town centre in an area which still retained its centuries old rural characteristics. It was clearly of great age, with hung-tile elevations above brickwork, surmounted by picturesque leaded dormer windows nestling in a row in its low-pitched thatched roof. At the gable ends, ornate and in Elizabethan style, stacks rose high above the ridge. Across the tiled porch a rose or two attempted to compete with an ancient wisteria which smothered the facade. The front garden was small, snug, intensely colourful, with several steps leading down from the road to the threshold under the porch. On entering the front door one stepped directly into a large room, as room in which Joyce now found herself, far longer than it was broad, furnished with a three-piece suite, bookcases, several antique tables, and dominated by a huge open hearth which virtually filled one end wall, up to which were drawn two large armchairs. Two doors led from the opposite end, one situated under the long open staircase which rose along the rear flank wall and merged into the soffit of a short open gallery. At the rear two arms extended backwards into the garden, trapping between them a protected rectangle of grass and paving, in the centre of which was a substantial ornamental pond. One of these rearwards extensions housed the kitchen and a scullery. The other, Joyce was to learn, was devoted to Mr Pennington's study. Above the lounge was a long, narrow, master-bedroom, furnished with two single beds. Over the study was a small second bedroom, while the bathroom and toilet were situated above the kitchen. The garden, he informed her, was long and attractive, the upper third being formal, with

lawns and flower beds. Then came a short section of laurels and rhododendrons which shielded the neat, vegetable garden from the cottage. It terminated in a small orchard, thick with fruit.

"Oh, yes," said Joyce. "It is certainly different to the other Rose Cottage."

"I am glad that you like it. I think we'll work in my study if that is all right. It is quite cosy in there. I take it you had no problems with your husband?"

"With Mr Hiller? No!" she said lightly although she did not feel that pleased by her husband's apparent disinterest. "On the contrary, he seemed almost pleased when I said I was taking accountancy seriously. I think he wants to see me do well. He is a professional man himself."

Had she really had the nerve to say that? Was it wishful thinking or was she just being naive at the time? How could she have been so blind and insensitive to the true nature of his feelings towards her and her daughter. She could excuse herself; it had been hard, working behind a counter for five and a half days a week, then going to night school on two evenings, visiting Mr Pennington's cottage on another evening, and trying to run the household with a daughter who was more often than not out, goodness knew where, and of next to no assistance when she was in. Did she not have the tiniest of suspicions, not even when she thought about the steel box up there above her in the bedroom? She was not to know that it was being secretly fed throughout this period, but were there no clues, nothing that should have, or could have, alerted her?

Did she ever have trouble with her husband? She only had to think about his reaction when she returned from her first meeting with Michael. She had alarmed her sister by saying that she would tell him the truth, but she then sat on the train thinking about what she would say to him, wondering if he had received her letter in time to stop him going to the police. She thought she might tell him that Debbie had been taken ill; that she had received the news at work and had rushed straight to the station as there was a train she could just catch if she did not go home first. It sounded so plausible, but it was not true and it was not in her nature to attempt to live out a lie. That was exactly what she had said to Debbie.

"No, I didn't go to the police," he said. Joyce was both pleased and surprised. "I didn't think it was necessary. I felt glad that I didn't when I received your letter."

"You didn't worry about me, on the first evening?"

"No. Well I was a little concerned but I had this feeling that you had gone to see Debbie. It was Michael, then?"

"He has found out where we live," she said anxiously. "I did not want him coming here."

"Very understandable. We should keep him from Stephanie and her from him. He may want to take her. Did he threaten as much?"

"No, no. He did offer to help, but I refused. I do not want any assistance of any kind from him." That was not absolutely true, she knew, as she had made a plea in behalf of her sister, but that was different, wasn't it?

"Good, good. Are you seeing him again?"

"We have said that we will keep in touch," Joyce said softly. "We will just make contact but not more than once a year. Stephanie must not know."

"I quite agree," said her husband. "I certainly will not tell her."

"Perhaps now that she looked back she should have suspected that there was more to his indifference. When she returned from Dover she was just relieved that he had not created a row or done anything to alert her daughter to what had happened. Perhaps in some ways it was as well that she had not had her suspicions or discovered what really was happening as it would undoubtedly have changed her life completely. She would not be where she was today and she would not have achieved the ability to be independent and the power that came with it. Would she be sacrificing something if Mr Pennington asked her and she accepted? No, she would only accept on her terms; terms that were not negotiable; terms that he would have to accept; terms that he would accept.

She wondered what she would have done if she had discovered the truth earlier.

Probably she would have gone straight to see Michael and asked for his help. Of all the people she knew at the time he was the only one who would have been able to help her. Debbie could not be expected to although she certainly could have been relied upon to provide a roof over their heads. She could not have gone to Moira's. It would have been too early to seek Mr Pennington's advice and support. It would have had to have been Michael and at a time when she was still weak and intoxicated by their first reunion. Under the circumstances she probably would have agreed to anything he said. Later, once her resistance had developed and she was able to be independent, his help would not be required and could have been refused. And, indeed, it was refused. It was a trade-off of sorts. Her studying and qualifications against, well, against what eventually happened.

Mr Pennington's cottage: it could never replace the atmosphere and significance of the cottage at Newington, but she had pleasure recalling those early evenings spent together in a new age of innocence. It was worth it. She tackled new fields far beyond the syllabus, far beyond anything she was likely to need in the kind of employment she was likely to find in the Bromley area. "You could always think of going up to work in the City," Mr Pennington told her when she said that some of what they did would be wasted on her.

"Me? Work in the City?"

"A lot of people do from here. It doesn't take all that long. You could go to London Bridge or Cannon Street."

"Oh, I can't see me doing anything like that," she said.

"People do."

She had no doubt that those evenings paved the way for her to pass the examinations which she did with distinction, but she never pursued the professional qualifications that Mr Pennington talked of and shaped her for. That did not disappoint her then, neither did she regret it now. It might have disappointed Mr Pennington at the time but in a way, silently and without ever discussing matters, they mutually agreed that her career should take a different course.

He would of course ask her to marry him and go to live with him at Rose Cottage, his Rose Cottage. Given his freedom, Michael would do the same thing. But Mr Pennington would ask her first, may be not now, not today, not even tomorrow, but one day soon. There would be no need for her to manipulate him or manoeuvre to create the opportunity. He would find the occasion which his mathematical brain told him was, given probability, the right time. He might even use calculus and binomials for all she knew. And what would she say in reply?

She was a free agent. That was what being independent was all about. Stephanie was off her hands and Michael was unlikely to be free for a number of years. But poor Mr Pennington who had supported and guided her through those difficult times was undoubtedly in his decline. Why not reward him for his kindness? If he did ask he - when he asked her, why not simply say "yes" and go and live in that beautiful Rose Cottage rather than the one tucked away in the woods at Newington? Why not, as long as it was on her terms? He was bound to agree.

She would have to tell him about Michael. They had discussed countless things both during those evenings and subsequently, subjects which had ranged far beyond the syllabus, but she had never mentioned her lover or that she went and met him on that one, single, magic day every year, the day that she reserved for herself. It was something that above all else she could not give up. Yes, before she accepted him, she would have to tell him about Michael.

"I am going to have to save you from becoming a fallen woman," he said on one occasion. It was a late summer afternoon, well after it had all happened, an afternoon when the fragrance of the garden was overpowering and the warmth out on the patio at Rose Cottage seemed to sap her strength.

"A fallen woman?" she smiled. "Aren't you confusing me with my daughter?"

"No, Joyce, I am not. I do hear a little about the wild parties that you go to."

"Well, you are not supposed to! And I am not the only one. There are some very

respectable people there!"

"Acting very disrespectfully I understand. I am concerned for your reputation."

"Do I have a reputation?"

"You could earn one. And it could affect your position. Just think of the gossip and tittle tattle the boys would spread."

"Why should it be any different for me than anyone else in the school? Or their wives for that matter?"

"I am not concerned with them, only I am concerned about you."

"Perhaps I need a man who will make an honest woman of me," she said, and regretted the words the moment she had uttered them, but Mr Pennington never took advantage of her moments of indiscretion. He never took advantage of her at all.

"Does that mean that you might consider re-marrying?" he asked after a few moments' pause. Joyce recognised the danger but she had sown the seed and it was too late to try and root out the plant that had germinated.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I value my freedom and independence. I would never want to be beholden to a any man, not again." She knew it was not true, what she said, but she had not yet told him about Michael.

"I have some concern at how you have changed since the trouble with your daughter."

"I changed? I don't think I have, really."

"You have, in a number of ways."

"Oh, am I less attractive?" There she was, doing it again! She could be coquettish with other men, but should not be with him.

"On the contrary," he said moving closer to be under the sun shade. "But you are different. You are, if I may say so, in my view, in danger of losing your self control. And I think it is all down to your daughter. Are you still feeling jealous of her?"

Joyce looked down at the table for a moment. She had taken great care not to analyse her motives for the way she had lived since it happened. She had just lived. "I don't know," she said reflectively, lifting her head and looking him straight in the eyes. "I did feel jealous, angry and guilty. I felt guilty because of what had happened and because I felt jealous. Perhaps I am trying to catch up on all the lost years."

"This is very interesting," he said suddenly. "Especially for a man who never married. I have observed all these things in others and wondered if it could all be reduced to some mathematical theorem, perhaps applying quantum theory."

"Your concern for me, then, is purely academic?" she laughed.

"No, no, not at all. Not in the least."

"And what is the mathematical reason for the fact that you have never married?"

"Pure chance and probability. The right woman never came along. Perhaps teaching has always been my mistress. Any woman might be jealous of that."

She could have said "I wouldn't" but that would have been misleading. She was not ready to contemplate marriage then. "Other teachers appear to manage."

"So they might appear to. Some have very attractive wives. But think how restrictive it can all become. I mean, could we be sat here now discussing this, talking and enjoying each other's company the way we do, if I had a wife. And there's the matter of one's independence that you mention so often. Couples lose it entirely when they marry and I would never want to enter into a relationship with someone if it appeared to trap them. In that much concerning this subject, if little else, I suppose we are of one mind."

The "little else" was a reference to the manner in which she lived her independent life. She knew that.

Of course, had she not gone to night school she would never have met this man who had never said a single improper thing to her. Not one word out of place. This man who would one day ask her to marry her. It was strange how things worked out. Then again, things could have developed differently had she not decided to start her regular visits to Rose Cottage and had he not found some way in which to maintain contact with her once her examinations were over and she had the results in her hands.

“Is it good news?” asked her husband as he was about to leave for work.

“Oh, yes!” she exclaimed, holding up the letter of notification. “I have passed and they are all good passes.” She noticed the contemptuous toss of the head from her daughter before she bent back over the mirror and continued the maintenance of her eyebrows. “It’s a shame that we cannot say similar things about you, young lady! And don’t do that at the table, Stephanie! I keep having to tell you!”

“What will you do now?” asked Mr Hiller, picking up his briefcase.

“Do? For a start I will look for another job; one in which I can make some use of what I have learned. I won’t be able to do that at Woolworth’s. That was the whole purpose of me going to night school.”

“So you don’t think that you’ll do another course?” asked her husband anxiously.

“No!” Joyce said lightly. “I don’t think I want to go on much as Mr Pennington thinks I should.”

“So you won’t be going out to see your fancy man?” said her daughter without looking up. “That will be a shame.”

“Stephanie! He is not my fancy man and you are not to refer to him in that way.”

“No,” said Mr Hiller softly, “but just the same, will you be going to his place for extra tuition one or two nights a week?”

“No. I don’t think I will be going out to Rose Cottage anymore.” She could see this disappointed her husband although Joyce did not understand why. Nor could she understand why her daughter then acted as if the decision was one which was likely to ruin her life, but she did. “I do not understand you two,” she said. “I thought you would be pleased, both of you, to have me at home instead of being out nearly every evening.”

“And so we are,” said her husband smoothly. “But we have grown accustomed to you not being here and we could cope if you did decide to go on and further your studies. You should think about it whilst the opportunity presents itself. But if you have decided against it we will have to adjust. That’s all there is to it.”