

CHAPTER THREE

Joyce had often wondered why Mr Hiller did not act with jealous or possessiveness in the slightest degree. She had been aware of his indifference before Mr Pennington had asked her how he reacted to the prospect of her undertaking extra-curricula work. She had first become conscious of it on the day she returned from Dover and told him what had happened. "I rather thought he would get in contact with you again one day," he said. "Does he want his daughter?"

"No, and he is not having her," Joyce replied.

"So he doesn't want to interfere in our lives, take her away from us?"

"He said he would like to help."

"In what way? Did he offer financial support? We could always do with a little more money and I understand he has a lot."

"He did not say precisely. Anyway, I refused. I do not want him involved in our lives. We said when we parted that we would go our own ways and so we shall."

"But you are going to see him again?"

"I am, as I said, for just one day each year. Always the same day and always in the same place."

"I could cope if you wanted to see him for more than a day at a time. Perhaps you would like a week together? There must be so much to catch up on and I could easily look after Stephanie."

"No," said Joyce, firmly. "We agreed on one day and one day is all it can be. The last thing we want is for his wife to find out. She has caused her rivals injury in the past."

"So there have been others?"

"No! There have not been! I am the only one he cares for, but she has a jealous and suspicious mind. She nearly caught us together once and I do not want to tempt providence again."

"Very well," he said. "I will fit in with what ever your arrangements are."

Mr Hiller had been very accommodating then and she had been too relieved to question it. He was being accommodating now, and still she harboured not the slightest suspicion. He had acted in an identical way both when she broached night school and her visits to Rose Cottage. "Well," he said, "you want to get these qualifications. We will just have to do whatever is necessary to allow you."

"It is all fair and square and above board," she told him.

"I am sure it is," he replied. "I trust you implicitly as I always have. I was just glad that you came to me in your hour of need and that I could help."

"Is there anything I can do for you in return?" she asked.

"No, nothing, other than go and do what ever it takes to get all the qualifications you think you need. We can cope here, I am sure."

She felt guilty. She owed him so much. He had taken her in off the street in her hour of greatest need. He had offered to marry her when she told him she was carrying another man's child. He had made her respectable and given her daughter a father, provided a roof over her and bread on the table. And all of this was on the strength of a brief initial encounter at an office party when he had read her fortune in the tea leaves and immediately proffered assistance should ever she need it. Marrying him had given her more than a home; she had security and stability. Joyce was under no doubt that she owed him a debt and she was aware that other than housekeeping she was not called upon to repay it in any fashion. In some ways it increased her concept of indebtedness. In other ways it frustrated her, but all the time he was extracting payment in full in a manner that when she leant of it she found it abhorrent. But she thereafter treated him probably less harshly than many a wife would have done under similar circumstances. And even if there had been this poisonous worm burrowing its way into their marriage, it was not to say that they did not have happy times together.

"I have bought us a car!" Mr Hiller announced one evening shortly after Joyce had received her first examination results. "It is outside."

"A car?" she said. "Isn't that a bit of a luxury. Can we afford it?"

"A car?" said Stephanie. "Is it new? Does it have a radio? All decent cars have radios now-a-days." Her father shook his head.

"No it is not new and it does not have a radio. In fact it is pre-war and just about as old as you are, Stephanie."

"Huh!" she said. "That'll go down really well, a pre-war car!"

"It looks just the same as the post-war model," protested her father. "And it is in very good condition. It was owned by a doctor."

"But what do we need a car for?" asked Joyce. "You can walk to work and so can I. And I cannot drive."

"You could learn, and so could Stephanie when she is old enough. I could teach her."

"To drive as well!" muttered her daughter, but Joyce did not heed her.

"I don't think I want to learn to drive," she said.

"Well, apart from you learning or not learning, I thought it would be nice to have something to go out in at the weekends or evenings. A treat you might say. Do you want to come and see it, perhaps have a ride around the block?" The low, black, Rover was parked in front of the house in front of Mr Drew's Morris. It looked long and sleek.

"It looks nice," said Joyce.

"It's black!" said Stephanie. "How boring!"

"It is nice," said Mr Hiller, ignoring her. "The salesman said that the doctor owned it since before the War. And it has all sorts of curious extras on it, such as a free wheel and a self starter. You can get in, the two of you. it isn't locked."

To Joyce's surprise her daughter opened the rear door and sprawled herself across the width of the rear seat. "It'll do" she announced. Joyce sat in the front and looked down the long bonnet. For her the Rover went just as a car was expected to go. Mr Hiller praised its various technical virtues, none of which she understood, but it was capable of progressing in a straight line, going around corners when steered that way and stopping when asked. That sufficed for her.

"Do sit up, Stephanie," she said sharply as they turned into the High Street and passed Woolworth's.

"I don't want to be seen," said her daughter, but Joyce had her eyes on the store and was thinking that she would not be working there for much longer.

"Are you ready for school yet, Stephanie?" she called from the sink where the dishes were already nestling in the rack as the water dropped softly onto the draining board. "You will be late if you don't hurry!"

"I'm coming!" said a disembodied voice from somewhere upstairs. The water gurgled as having washed the last of the suds from her sight she turned to dry her hands. There was a commotion in the hall and her daughter appeared and stood awkwardly before her.

"Goodness me," Joyce said. "Just look at you! You look as if you have been up all night! What have you been up to?"

"Nothing," said her daughter sullenly and looking down at the floor. "I just didn't sleep very well. Something kept me awake."

"It's the pork. That's the last time I give you pork chops, young lady."

"I like pork chops. It wasn't them. I just couldn't get to sleep."

"Well you don't take after me," said Joyce, looking for her shoes. "As soon as my head hits the pillow I'm off. It would take something like the outbreak of World War Three to wake me. Your father quite often tells me he had to get out in the night and I know nothing about it. I tell him I never heard him. Does he wake you?"

"Some times," she mumbled. "Anyway, they said at school that if World War Three breaks out at night we will never know about it. Did you know that if a bomb explodes over London it will wipe out Maidstone? We don't stand much of a chance here in Bromley. We

ought to move!”

“Does it bother you, sweetheart?” asked Joyce from the foot of the stairs.

“No,” snapped her daughter.

Joyce did not respond but picked up an already opened envelope from the hall stand and took out the single sheet of paper it contained. It was worth checking, the time of the interview, but she had remembered it correctly. “Oh, Stephanie! Those boys are hanging around outside the gate again. They are much older than you, much too old. I don't like it. It looks so bad. And tell them to keep away from your father's car.”

“You are just worried about what the neighbours will say,” said Stephanie haughtily. “Anyway, I can't help it if they stand there. It's a free country.”

“So it may be,” said Joyce trying to control the vexation in her voice, “but you ask them to loiter somewhere else. If you don't, I shall.”

“Oh you can't do that Mother! That's Dave Henry! It would be so embarrassing. I would just die! I would never be able to show my face at school again.”

“Then you ask them, Stephanie. Better still, you tell them, today, right now! Off you go. I must get to work. I don't expect to see them there tomorrow. You understand?”

They were quite wild thoughts that stampeded through her mind as she watched her daughter amble down the path and be greeted by the two boys. They were both much older than her. They were almost young men and neither looked particularly respectable. Why did Stephanie not play or mix with youngsters of her own age? There was a nice girl called Jennifer only a couple of doors away but Stephanie just ignored her. Still feeling cross and uneasy she closed the door behind her and followed her daughter.

It was not the interview or her daughter or her disreputable followers who she found herself thinking about as she walked to work. Michael had not sought to make love to her the first three times they met, but this year, for the first time since that Christmas all those years ago, they had lain together on the soft mossy turf in each others arms. “Someone might come,” she had whispered as she had started to loosen her clothing.

“No-one will come along this way,” he said softly but confidently. “Not today. Even if someone did decide to come up here, they would not until the late afternoon. We have all of this entirely to ourselves until then.”

“Are you sure?” she breathed, conscious that she was beyond the point at which the answer was no longer relevant.

“Absolutely,” he whispered. She accepted his assurance. After all, he ought to know.

“Cannot we go to the cottage?” she asked.

“That would be taking a big risk. The workmen are still in and out of it.”

“Still?”

“Still. I had heavens own job convincing Christina that it should be renovated. I had to falsify holiday lettings and goodness knows what else before she would agree. She said she did not know why I was so attached to it - just because I once stayed there.”

“You aren't proposing to let it are you?” she cried, astonished. “Not Rose Cottage, our cottage?”

“No I am not!” he said. “The thought never crossed my mind, but I have told you what Christina is like when it comes to spending on the Estate. She is almost paranoiac about that, as well as other things. Her mother is always complaining about the state of the house and that its maintenance is being skimped.”

“You once asked me if I would like to live here,” she said, looking into his eyes. He did not look away and a slight reassuring smile crept across his features.

“That is not beyond the bounds of possibility as far as I am concerned. No-one lives for ever!”

“Michael! I wish you would not talk like that. We are all mortal and it makes me feel uncomfortable at the best of times. At the moment I want to relax.”

“I'm sorry but I was only stating a fact of life, or death depending how you want to look at it. How is Mr Hiller? Is he still as odd as he used to be? Is he still working?”

“Of course he's still working, and so am I. Anyway, he isn't *that* odd.”

“Not much hope for us there, then,” he said, the smiling broadening. “Perhaps I could

drop a hint to Christina. She knows how to deal with impediments of that kind.”

“Michael!” She pushed him away and sat up, looking anxiously around and pulling her skirt down over her knees.

“There's no-one here apart from us,” he said soothingly. “No-one within half a mile of us. And I know that you don't wish him dead anymore than I would wish Christina dead. But people do die.”

“No,” she said, looking straight in front of her. “I don't wish him dead. I don't wish anyone dead, but there are times - .”

“Times? Times when what?”

“I don't know. Perhaps I'm being silly but I feel that there is something going on, Michael. I don't know what, but there's something wrong.”

“Wrong? With whom, and in what way? Not with us, surely? Not because of this?”

“No, no, nothing to do with us. It was some weeks ago, I found this box. I was dusting the bedroom at the time and I thought I'd look on top of the wardrobe to see how dusty that was. It has this pelmet thing around it so you can't wipe the top easily. It was there, the box, tucked away out of sight. I had no idea it was there, nor how long it had been there.”

“What type of box? What was in it?”

“It was a long metal box, the sort you keep deeds in, and it was locked.”

“Well, there you are. It's a deed box. It probably contains the deeds of your house.”

“No it doesn't. They're lodged with the building society.”

“Mr Hiller's Will, then?”

“No, not that either. I know where that is. And what it says.”

“So you don't know what was in the box? Did you ask him?”

“He said it contained personal papers.”

“Well, what's wrong with that?”

“I don't know, but what kind of papers does a husband keep secret from his wife?”

“I am sure I don't know, but I'm not a good one to ask as I keep our little annual rendezvous secret from my wife.”

“Exactly!” she said sharply.

“You don't think he's seeing another woman, do you?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, but what would the papers be?”

“Love letters!”

“No,” she said reflectively. “Not love letters. There was something about the way he answered when I asked him about it, as if he was embarrassed and felt guilty.”

“So he would be if you had found a box of love letters.”

“No he wouldn't. Our marriage is not like that. It was a marriage of convenience; you know that. I have the feeling that there is some kind of unpleasant secret in there, something he does not want anyone to know about.”

“And you haven't opened the box?”

“No. It is locked and unlike Bluebeard's wife, I am not in possession of the keys.”

“Well, you must tell me when you do find out. I am full of curiosity.”

The box remained on the wardrobe. Although she could not see it she could sense its presence and this she found provocative. She had little doubt that Stephanie, too, knew that it was there. After all, someone had been through her papers, rummaging. She was sure that it had been Stephanie and Joyce had felt herself compelled to hide certain documents in a place where her daughter was less likely to find them. If she had been looking where they were originally kept she would have also discovered the box on the wardrobe. But that was locked and she could not rummage inside it. It became a regular habit for Joyce to drag the dressing table stool across to the wardrobe and stand on it just to ensure that the box was still there, and still locked. It remained locked but she did notice that it changed position, as its outline in the thin layer of dust that she allowed to accumulate there evidenced. Clearly he went to look at its contents from time to time, but only when she was not there.

Joyce deduced from her husband's reaction that she was not supposed to know about this wretched, infuriating, box. Not as far as he was concerned, she was not. That was clear

when she asked what was in it but if he did not want her to know about it, leave alone know what was inside it, why did he not hide it elsewhere, somewhere where she would not stumble across it in the course of her housework, or have to lie in bed contemplating the dark outline of the wardrobe knowing it was there? She could think of dozens of places where he could have hidden it. He could have placed it up in the loft. She never went up there. Or he could have secreted it under a floorboard somewhere. That appeared to be a traditional hiding place for all manner of things and she certainly was not in the habit of going around lifting the floorboards. But, no! He had chosen to secrete it under her nose, teasing her. It was, as she had told Michael, just like Bluebird's wife. Except the wretched thing remained up there, unopened, and she had no key.

It was not that she had not looked. She had looked in her dressing table drawers, in the chest of drawers, in the bottom of the wardrobe, and under the edges of the bedroom carpet. She had quietly and guiltily searched her husbands pockets, not for undeclared wages but for this silly little elusive key. For all her searches she had not found it. Either he kept it on his person or it was hidden and if it was, given how small it must be, she had little chance of actually finding it. And if it was on his person what did he do with it at night? But it was she who was the heavy sleeper. It was even possible that he looked at the box's contents when she was asleep! That thought was the worst of all! There seemed little chance of her pretending to be asleep in the hope that he might reveal the location of the key and then doze off. No, it was too risky. He would hear her moving the stool or opening the lock. She could not bear the thought of being caught red-handed, even if it was by her own husband. She therefore could not adopt a strategy of seeking to open it at night even if she did gain access to the key.

At reckless moments of extreme frustration she thought of going out to the garden shed and returning with a hammer and chisel. But if she broke open the lid what would she do if the contents were important but innocuous? She could hardly suggest that a burglar would have broken into this box and touched nothing else. A similar problem arose with another thought she played with, that being to move the box and hide it elsewhere in the hope that he would reveal where the key was hidden. That might gain her access to the contents, but how would she effect restitution? So it remained there, crouching, perched black, out of side but always present. always taunting her in the evening when she went to bed and in the morning when she arose.

She had told Michael about the box. She had, of course, told him about the night school and the extra tuition, describing Mr Pennington as being old enough to be her father. He approved her aim to better herself. "But if you would only let me help," he told her, "there would be no need to improve yourself."

"We have been over all this before, Michael."

"I expect we will go over it again before we are through."

"I dare say, but the position will not change."

"It does worry me, Phoebe. I mean the life you have to lead. It is all a result of what I did. I feel responsible for you."

"Well, if that is the case, just give me your moral support. No more, no less. Tell me that you approve of what I am setting out to achieve."

"I do!" he insisted. "I have already told you that. You have my full moral support and any other support you may require."

"Your moral support will be enough, Michael," she said.

It sometimes seemed important to her that she should have Michael's approval of the fundamental things that she did, but there were many times when it was impossible to seek his views. This was one. The suggestion that she might go for an interview for a job with Mr Hiller's employer had come out of the blue. She was sure Michael would have told her to go for it, although he might have suggested she should aim for something better. But it was basic experience and something that might stand her in good stead when she came to look for something better. Mr Pennington, however, might well have reservations.

“So you are going to look for a better job now you have finished the course and passed your examinations?” he said. “I think that is eminently sensible and I must say that I am delighted at your results, not that I ever thought you would do other than well. And thank you for coming out especially to tell me. I would have enquired after you in any event. I like to know how my students are doing, especially my prize students.”

“Am I one of your prize students?” she said lightly, sitting on a wooden patio seat. “Whether I am or not, I felt so excited at the result I just had to come over and tell you. I feel wonderful!”

“I am very pleased. I feel that we have invested a great deal of time and energy and that it has been well spent. Well done!”

“Thank you,” she laughed.

“Now we have to find you a suitable position.”

“Oh,” Joyce said, frowning and shaking her head. “You don't have to do that.”

“Ah, but I feel I do,” he said mysteriously. “It may be that you may not wish to take it, but I would like to help you find a good position, something suited to your knowledge and talent, something with some status. I wouldn't want to think of you ending up in some mundane, run-of-the-mill, office, pouring over the books of some builder.”

“Builder?”

“I would like to see you do something better. I am sure that we can find something.”

“But I have no experience. Surely it would be better to do a mundane job, as you put it, just to get some experience in basic book-keeping.”

“I thought you were more interested in the secretarial side?”

“So I am,” she said, “but I do not want to end up as a glorified typist so I am a little cautious about starting off in that direction.”

“Well I am not sure. Let us see what turns up.”

Joyce did not reply but looked at the neat rows of raspberry canes and wondered if he ever made jam with the fruit. Fanciful, she imagined herself standing in his kitchen, looking out on the patio where they were sat, perhaps calling out to him, asking him whether he would like a pot of tea. She had no idea why such an idea should cross her mind but when it did it left her with a strange unsettling feeling. “Do you have something in mind?” she asked cautiously.

“I may have. It may be too early to talk about it as yet.”

“Oh!” she said, disappointed. “You whet my appetite and then tell me it is something you cannot talk about!”

“Well, then, I will tell you, but this must be in the strictest confidence and with no promises. I will put it to you simply as I see it at present. How would you like the position of a school secretary?”

“What? Me? I don't know the first thing about the job.”

“Ah, that is where you are not entirely correct. It would be a job in which you could apply all of your learning and talents and it is a position of some prestige. Mark you, you could find yourself the only woman in a school of some six hundred boys.”

“What? No matron?”

“Not in day schools, Joyce. There are dinner ladies but we don't count them. And there's thirty odd masters.”

“How odd are they?”

“Odd in the way that I am not sure whether there is thirty or twenty-nine at present.”

“Oh, they would never take me, not without me having some experience and being able to produce very good references. Not in a month of Sundays.”

“I would not be too sure, and you are guaranteed of one good reference,” he said, beaming.

“This is your school you are talking about?”

“It is. Perhaps I had better tell you more about it, but in the strictest confidence. And I should add that I am not seeking to push you in any particular direction. The position is that our present school secretary is only a couple of years from retirement but is increasingly finding herself unable to cope with the demands of the job. Now, the Board of governors

would like to allow her to continue to work right up to her normal retirement age so that she can draw her full pension. On the other hand, they are anxious that the school should not suffer as a consequence and I have put forward the suggestion that they might approve the appointment of an assistant school secretary, perhaps initially on a part time basis, who would take over the full responsibilities when the present secretary retires. Nothing can be guaranteed. I cannot be certain that the governors will adopt the idea, nor as to when and how they will go about the recruitment. Less still could I guarantee that the person who took the part time job would get the permanent appointment at the end although that would undoubtedly be the intention. I must confess, however, that when I made the suggestion, I was thinking of you.”

“Of me?”

“Does the idea appeal to you?”

“To step into someone else's shoes, so as to speak?”

“Yes. Would that interest you? It isn't imperative that I know now, but it would be helpful to have an indication, just in case something happens quickly.”

“And it would be part time?”

“If my suggestion is adopted, yes, to begin with. Obviously when Miss Higgins retires the post would become full time. I am sure if you took it and liked it, the governors would have no hesitation in appointing you to the post. But it all depends on you.”

“It sounds most attractive, but I am not sure whether I can afford to work part time. I have to think of the reduction in wages that I would have. We are reliant on my earnings and Mr Hiller has just bought a car, so there will be the cost of running that.”

“Leaving aside problems like that, do you think you would be interested?”

“Oh, yes!” she said, without reservation. “I most certainly am.”

“Then I will be prepared to put your name forward if it comes to it. I can make no promises. It could happen tomorrow, except it won't because tomorrow is Saturday. But it could be soon, or not at all. But if it does go ahead I am sure that my recommendation will carry some weight.”

“Even if you are the one that made the recommendation in the first place?”

“There might be a little comment at first. People, some people, are like that. But if it all goes through and you come to work at the school and perform the way I believe you can, the critics will soon fall by the wayside.”

“And if it does all go through, I will end up even more indebted to you.”

“I wouldn't worry too much about that,” he said.

But she found it strange. Here she was becoming indebted to another man just as she was already indebted to Mr Hiller. Joyce could not see any way in which she could live her life without some reliance on one man or the other. It was as if she was being mortgaged and there seemed to be very little that she could do about it. At least she was not beholden to Michael. He had tried but she had been resolute and he had failed. It would hinder their love, she concluded. She would never allow Michael to put her in a position where she was indebted to him, not ever.