

CHAPTER FOUR

It was the following Sunday when Mr Hiller took them out in the new or, as Stephanie referred to it, not so new, car to the seaside for the day. The suggestion had been made mid-week, subject to the weather being fine. He did not fancy driving all that way in the rain, he said. In any case the windscreen wipers were temperamental and he was sure Joyce would not wish to spend the entire journey reaching up and twiddling them by hand. And there was the question of where to go.

"How about Eastgate? We could go to the Amusement Park, walk along the sands and out along the pier."

"No!" said Joyce more forcibly than she intended. Debbie had said, she thought, that Moira and Arthur had moved to Eastgate. It would just be her luck to go there for one day and bump into them. But would either of them remember her? It did not matter. She would not be able to enjoy herself and spend the whole day on edge, examining every person as they approached just in case it was one of them. It was not worth taking the chance.

Mr Hiller must have sensed the reasoning behind her reaction. "I suppose either Westgate or Birchington would be too close?" he asked.

"And Broadstairs or Ramsgate," Joyce added.

Stephanie was bemused but she did not appear to have much enthusiasm for the excursion to begin with. "That's the whole of Thanet removed at a stroke," she complained. "And there might be some decent boys there!"

"Oh, Stephanie!" cried her mother. "We are not going to the seaside just for you to sit and ogle boys."

"But I am not going to ogle them," said her daughter defiantly. "They are going to ogle me. Anyway, what is wrong with Thanet?"

"Nothing is wrong with Thanet," said Joyce. "It's just that it is a long way."

"But you have just said that some of the places are too close," said Stephanie.

"We could always go to Canterbury," suggested Mr Hiller. "We could look around the Cathedral."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Stephanie. "That is not my idea of the way I want to spend a Sunday."

"You will do what we say you will do, young lady," said Joyce sharply. "I don't think I want to go to Canterbury. Too many memories."

"Memories of what?" said her daughter, looking curious.

"I suppose we can rule out Dover or Folkestone for the same reasons," said Mr Hiller. "Distance."

"And Deal," said Joyce. "There's Hastings and Eastbourne."

"Or Brighton," said Stephanie. "That's the place to go! Imagine what the boys would say if I told them I'd been to Brighton for the weekend."

"We are not going to Brighton and we are not going anywhere for the weekend," said Joyce.

Mr Hiller was studying an ancient AA book. "I think Hastings is too far and the road doesn't look all that good. Eastbourne is even further."

"That doesn't appear to leave very much," said Joyce.

"We could go to Southend. They've got a terrific roller-coaster. And ever such a long pier."

"How come you know so much about Southend, Stephanie?" said Joyce.

"Some bloke took Mavis there for the day. She told me all about it."

"That would mean crossing London and going under the Blackwall tunnel or using the ferry," said Mr Hiller, disapprovingly. "That would be a bit of a trek. How about Herne Bay?"

"Oh that's a perfectly dreadful place," cried Stephanie. "One of the boys went there with his parents and was bored stiff. Apparently there's not even a decent amusement arcade."

“There is a pier that we can walk along and if the tide is out we can walk for miles on the sands. And we are not going for the amusement arcades, Stephanie. Herne Bay it is.”

So that Sunday Joyce cut sandwiches, filled a pair of thermos flasks, and they went to Herne Bay and walked on the sand as the tide was just about as far out as it possibly could get. Stephanie traipsed behind them, digging a sullen toe into the wet sand, complaining about the effect the salt would have on her complexion and about the boredom and solitude, but they ignored her.

“You didn't tell me that Wick's are advertising for a part time book keeper,” said Joyce suddenly. “I would never had know myself if it had not been for a hint dropped by Mr Pennington. It was then that I saw the advertisement.”

Her husband looked abashed and uncomfortable. “I didn't think you'd be that interested,” he said, “it being part time. Are you?”

“I might be,” said Joyce firmly. “Mr Pennington says there is also the chance of a part time job at Rochester House as assistant school secretary.”

“Oh, not at the Grammar School!” cried Stephanie, being close enough at that point to hear what was being said. “You can't go and work at the Grammar School with all those snobbish boys. I'd never live the shame of it down.”

“I cannot see how it could possibly affect you, Stephanie,” said Joyce over her shoulder.

“Of course it would. Their all a load of stuck up snobs thinking they're so much better than everyone else and with not a penny to rub together between them. I'd be ostracised if it got out that my mother was working there.”

“I am sure you would,” snapped Joyce. “Well, I can assure you I am not going to let that influence my decision. I think that the two opportunities would suit me very well if I can match times and days.”

“Let me get this straight,” said Mr Hiller, stopping for a moment. “You are thinking of going to work some of the time at Rochester House and some of the time for Mr Wick?”

“Assuming that I can get the jobs, yes. Would that bother you?”

“I don't know. It seems to pose an awful lot of questions and I am not sure that Mr Wick would want us both working there. He is none too keen on that kind of thing.”

“I can't see why he should be,” said Joyce, feeling a little desperate. “I don't understand the two of you. There's this young lady objecting to me working at the Grammar School and you objecting to me working at Wick's.”

“I wasn't objecting,” he protested.

“You were as good as. I can't see any reason why we shouldn't both work there so long as it had no effect on our work.”

“I can't see why it should do that,” he said, be she could still detect a note of concern, possibly alarm, in his voice. “What would you do if they both asked you to work on the same days?”

“I understand that the school would be flexible about the days and times I went in so long as I was there for the requisite number of hours and the work was done. In that respect I could fit in with whatever Mr Wick might want.”

“And do you think you could cope with both jobs?”

“I don't see why not. I think I would enjoy the variety and at least it would not be as mind-numbing as Woolworth's. If the worst came to the worst I could do some of the work in the evening. Bring it home with me. Would that concern you if that happened occasionally?”

“No,” he said, “not at all. We could always go out for a drive if we were in the way, couldn't we, Stephanie?”

“I suppose so,” muttered Stephanie, not sounding over enthusiastic. “If it was worth my while.”

“Worth your while?” asked Joyce. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Just that I ought to have a treat if I am going to be bundled around Bromley like that.”

“One thought,” interrupted Mr Hiller. “What about school holidays?”

“I don't think they have any effect on things. The secretarial work continues right

through them although I believe there is something of an increase before each new term. I think it would continue just as normal, what ever normal turns out to be.”

“That's a relief,” he said unguardedly.

“What?” she said sharply.

“Well, I was thinking of your pay. You could have been short if you had to take off the same amount of time as the children in the summer.”

Joyce stared at him then at her daughter who was giggling for no apparent reason. “None of it is settled as yet. I have sent in an application to Mr Wick and Mr Pennington will let me know if the school job comes to anything.”

“You've applied to work for Mr Wick without letting me know? What if he had asked me about it? I would have looked a prize idiot if I didn't know that my wife had applied for a job where I worked.”

“Well, you didn't tell me, so I saw no reason to tell you,” said Joyce, scowling. “In fact I didn't put the letter in the post until yesterday and I am telling you now so there should be no embarrassing moments.”

The fact was that she had received a note from Mr Pennington telling her that the school position looked good and that she had but to say “yes” and go through the formalities and the post was hers. He assured her not to have any last minute misgivings - how little he knew her! He went on to say that if she needed assistance or guidance he was there and would be close at hand at the school. The note ended with an appeal for her to accept the job. She had to admit to herself that she found his communication reassuring and touching. It only remained for her to dovetail the job at Wick's in with it, and what did it matter that her husband worked there in the drawing office? She would tell Mr Wick that if she was allowed an interview with him.

They had walked far enough and turned to retrace their steps towards the pier with Stephanie still in tow and in near silence. “We can all have an ice cream when we get there,” announced Joyce, feeling that she had somewhat dampened the little enthusiasm that the party was showing for the seaside. “And I would like a nice pot of tea.”

“Ice cream is fattening, isn't it?” said Stephanie. “If it is I won't have one. You can give me the money instead.”

“Oh Stephanie!” said Joyce. “You shouldn't be worrying about your figure at your age. And what do you want the money for?”

“I have to remain alluring and desirable, otherwise the ogling factor falls off the bottom of the scale and I'll end up like Eileen Norris. And I'm saving.”

“Rubbish!” said Joyce. “I never heard such nonsense.”

“What's wrong with saving?” whined Stephanie.

“I'm not talking about saving. I am talking about the other things you said.”

“You can have an ice cream if you want one,” said Mr Hiller. “I am sure that just one would not affect your figure.”

“No,” said Stephanie, contrary, now dragging her foot through the sand.

“Well, I do not see why we should not have one,” said Joyce, “even if madam her does not.”

“But can I have the money instead?”

“I don't know what you do with all this money,” said Joyce crossly.

“I save it,” said her daughter smugly.

“I know. So you said, but save it for what?”

“The future,” Stephanie said precociously. “Just the future.”

At least Stephanie thought she had a future. Joyce had grown to despair of her daughter's prospects and dreaded the times of year when the school reports were due. She knew exactly what they would say. There was every chance that the teachers conspired and exchanged notes because from year to year there was little variation in the view expressed about Stephanie's prospects. And when she read the reports she found herself saying exactly the same things herself with the same absence of effect. She could have made a record and simply played that three times a year. Yet she knew there might come a time when she gave

up and grew indifferent to her daughter's fate.

"You cannot give up on her," Michael said. "Perhaps I should take a hand? What about Mr Hiller? Doesn't she respect him?"

"Oh, Michael," Joyce said shaking her head. "If you only knew what she can be like. Perhaps some of it is my fault but I have never allowed him to punish her. I have always taken responsibility for her discipline. I made it plain to him from the start that she was my child and not his."

"Wasn't that a little unfair on them both? I know it is not for me to say, but surely it would have been better if you had allowed him to act as a father to her as well as be one in name. What can she think of him?"

"What did you think of yours?" she asked sharply.

"Mine? He was an ogre, but that doesn't make all fathers into ogres. I wouldn't be an ogre, that I can assure you."

"Perhaps it was wrong of me. For a start I didn't want him to be burdened with my problem. Then I wasn't certain whether it was going to last. I mean he might have thrown me out at any time."

"You were married to him, Phoebe. He couldn't just chuck you out in the street."

"I know, but it was so hasty, so contrived. I never felt secure. I am not sure that I do now. Anyway, that was the way things started and he never seemed to object."

"So he does not discipline Stephanie at all?"

"Hardly. If anything he takes her side against me more often than not. The tragedy of it is she is such a bright girl. I mean, if she was thick I would accept it, but she is not. It seems to be such a waste. I have talked to her until I am blue in the face but I get nowhere. I have talked to her teachers who say the same things. She is inattentive in class, doesn't apply herself, could do much better, always day dreaming. And so it goes on."

"Well I am always prepared to help if you would let me. I could get her a place in one of the leading girls' schools. I am sure they would sort her out and get the best out of her. What do you think?"

"Oh, Michael," sighed Joyce. "You make it so difficult. This whole thing makes it so difficult. Don't think for one moment that I am not tempted on this occasion, but how could I possibly explain it all to her?"

"You could tell her the truth."

"Never!"

"What, never? Do you mean you are going to keep our relationship a secret from our daughter for ever? What happens if we both find ourselves free?"

"Yes, indeed," said Joyce lowly. "What does happen then?"

"I would ask you to marry me of course. In fact I could ask you now. Will you marry me, Phoebe?"

"Don't be silly, Michael. We are both married as it is."

"I didn't say when. I just asked you whether you would marry me."

"I suppose so."

"You don't appear to be very enthusiastic about it!"

"Well," said Joyce taking a deep breath, "it is something of a remote prospect at present, isn't it. The end of the Summer term is a bit more immediate."

"And you would not tell her? Ever?"

"I don't know. Perhaps one day the circumstances might be right, but not now, and not in the foreseeable future."

"And you do not think that she suspects?"

"Not in the least," said Joyce firmly. "Why should she? What on earth would make her think that Mr Hiller was not her natural father?"

This conversation was still reasonably fresh in her mind when Joyce confronted her daughter. "Honestly, Stephanie, I do not know what to do with you," she told her daughter. "It is always the same and I always find myself saying the same things. Look at it! Could do better. Does not try hard enough. Inattentive in class, and so on. What am I going to do with you? What will become of you? Surely you want to do something better with your life than

just to get married and become a housewife?"

"I don't intend to get married, or become a housewife," said her daughter, sulkily.

"What are you going to do then? Apart from get bad reports?"

"I could get much better reports from some of the teachers," said Stephanie darkly.

"Then why on earth don't you? I mean, you go to school to improve yourself, to prepare yourself for your adult life."

"I am prepared for it."

"Don't be silly! I know some people say that education is less important for girls than it is for boys, but I do not subscribe to that. Look at me for example. Look what I have had to do to improve my chances of getting a decent job. Surely you can see how much better it would have been for me had I done better at school?"

"So you didn't do all that well at school either?"

"I didn't say that," said Joyce feeling vexed. "I was just trying to illustrate the point that it is worthwhile you doing well at school."

"Had you done well would you still have married my father?" said Stephanie suddenly. It sounded a perfectly innocent question but Joyce was immediately on her guard. She knew that someone had disturbed the papers she kept in one of the drawers in her dressing table. She remembered that their marriage certificate was amongst them. It had to be Stephanie. Mr Hiller had no cause to look through her personal papers. It had been foolish of her to have left them there, but where was she to keep them that was safe from her daughter's prying eyes. Certainly not in the box on top of the wardrobe. Her heart fell. If Stephanie had seen the marriage certificate she was probably on the brink of asking the question that she dreaded and forcing her to decide whether she should tell her the truth despite what she had said to Michael. This question could just be an oblique way of seeking out the truth. Stephanie was no fool. There was only one thing for it. She had to tackle her husband.

"My box?" he asked, looking uncomfortable when she posed the question. "Just some important papers to do with work and some personal ones. Nothing exciting."

"I have some personal papers which I would like to put beyond the reach of a certain pair of hands. Can I put them in there?"

"I don't think it would really be suitable," he said in a slightly strained tone. "I keep it locked."

"I need to keep these documents locked away," she maintained.

"I couldn't really give you unrestricted access to it," he said. "Because of the works papers."

"I could have a key, surely?"

"I have only one."

"We could have another cut," she protested.

"I don't want to do that," he said. "Security, you know. And what if the locksmith lost my key? Where would we be then?"

"Buying a new deeds box?"

"We don't want to have to do that, do we?"

"So you are saying that you do not want my documents in with yours?"

"It would not be all that sensible."

She was exasperated but was placated a few days later when her husband presented her with her very own lockable document box into which her personal papers, including Stephanie's birth certificate, were placed before it joined the other one on top of the wardrobe. She had misgivings about having them together. She knew exactly what was in hers but harboured unfounded and irrational doubts about the contents of Mr Hiller's. The more she thought about it the more she wished she could see the contents if only to know what it was that he was keeping from her. All her speculation however got her nowhere at the time.

"Why did you marry father?" asked Stephanie lazily.

"That's none of your business, young lady," replied Joyce firmly.

"Only I look at the parents of the kids I know at school and some of them suit each other. Others, you could say they deserve each other, but you and father - ."

"This conversation has gone far enough," protested Joyce.

"I don't intend ever to get married," persisted her daughter.

"Then I think you had better make a much bigger effort at school," said Joyce triumphantly. "Otherwise you will find that marriage is about all that is available to you. And it is a pretty poor option, to have to get married."

"What?" asked Stephanie, missing the point much to her mother's relief. "Not to get married for love? I don't believe in that either."

"You don't believe in what, Stephanie?"

"Love. I don't believe that people fall in love as they describe it. It's a load of rubbish."

"Oh yes they do," said Joyce, feeling she was in danger of revealing more than she should. "I can assure you that people do fall in love and I don't mean some youthful crush that lasts only a few months. Some fall in love simply for ever. There's no end to it. It is a love that lasts and will last what ever happens, whether the couple are together or miles apart."

"Well, I don't believe it. It won't ever happen to me and I won't ever get married. As for a career, I think that has already been carved out for me."

"What rubbish, Stephanie! You do talk some nonsense at times. Honestly, I wish you would apply yourself. You have the rest of your life in front of you and your schooling is only for a few years. You need to make the most of it."

"But it is so boring," said her daughter, unyielding. "Even talking about it bores me."

"Do you want me to talk to her?" asked Mr Hiller later when Joyce reported the essence of the conversation to her husband.

"No," said Joyce defiantly. "She is my daughter and I will deal with the matter."

"I am not at all surprised that you have a problem," said Mr Pennington when Joyce consulted him. "Secondary education is, I am afraid, a poor second to the grammar schools. It is geared to the lowest common denominator and I suspect that your daughter is bored simply because she is a bright child and the work does not in the least stretch her. It is a common enough problem, even in grammar schools as you will learn. We have to stream the brightest boys before they become bored, apathetic, disruptive or even worse. I assume she failed her eleven plus?"

"I am afraid that she did. I never understood why as she had been making very good progress in class. But when it came it was as if she had her mind on other things. I suspect it was boys. Boys, boys, boys! That's all she sometimes seems to think about. I know she is physically advanced for her age but it's like an obsession. I sometimes wonder what will become of her."

"I expect she'll get married, like any sensible woman."

"You think it is sensible for a woman to get married?"

"I didn't exactly say that," said Mr Pennington, smiling. "But to the right man and at the right time, yes. And you need not look at me quite like that. For me it was never the right time nor the right woman. Not up until now, at least."

"My Stephanie swears that she will never marry."

"Oh, I expect she will. She does not sound like the kind of girl who would remain single. I am sure that she will marry."

"I hope so," said Joyce.