

CHAPTER FIVE

Unexpectedly Joyce did not fall straight asleep that night. She found herself thinking about what Mr Pennington had said and trying to imagine the kind of man that Stephanie might find attractive when she was older. What if she were to come to her when she was sixteen and say that she wanted to get married? Could she possibly consent to it even if she thought the boy was suitable? Could she possibly consent to it without discussing it with Michael? He would say that sixteen was far too young for any daughter of his to get married. He would be right, of course. And at least she had the satisfaction of knowing that her daughter could not marry without her consent. But what would she do when she left school? Perhaps this was a topic that ought to be discussed with Michael. Much as it was against the principles she had assumed when they parted, she thought she might be prepared to ask him for his help, his anonymous help, in finding Stephanie a worthwhile job. The trouble was, what on earth could she do, this daughter of hers, other than make boys eye her?

Mr Hiller was stirring in the bed beside her. She did not move when he suddenly got out of bed and headed, she assumed, towards the bathroom. Was she wrong not to rely on him more; not to allow him some kind of role in Stephanie's upbringing? He did show an interest. He had even offered to help, but it was a little late now to start changing things. She knew Stephanie. She would take as much notice of him as she did of her mother. And one smile from her and he was wrapped around her daughter's little finger. Yet Stephanie had positive attributes. She had her good looks. She even had a pleasant, attractive, character when she was prepared to reveal it. She was like her father in that respect. There had to be something in life she could do and do well. When she thought of the way his career had started and the changed person who had sought her out that wet, dark, windy evening. That evening! He had met Stephanie. They had come face to face and neither had known! Of course, she had been too young then to have sensed anything. Would it be the same now should they meet? It was comforting to think about that evening and the day that followed. It was not quite so nice to think of the day after that. Joyce still harboured doubts, even fears, about what Mr Hiller really felt about her running off and meeting her former lover. No, not former. Just her lover.

"What will you say to your husband when you get home?" asked Deborah as they sat together in the kitchen the morning after she and Michael had met.

"I have not really thought all that much about it," said Joyce. For the most part this was true. Meeting Michael and reliving the moments of their meeting as she lay in her bed that night had eclipsed all thought of the household in Bromley. Well, nearly all thought. Some did seep in at the edges and threaten to spoil the images. But for the present she wondered whether she had said the right things rather than wonder what were the right things now to say. Was he thinking the same things as he faced the creature that was his wife? There were moments when she wondered if he had told her the truth, but why should he not? Could there be more to it than he had told her. He had been slightly economic with the truth once before. Perhaps Christina was seeking a separation or a divorce? Oh, how much she hoped that was not the case. He could have sought her out just to see if she was still single and having found that she was not, he might just disappear again. No, Michael would not do something like that. Not to her. Whatever the position, she was married and likely to remain so. She would not say she was happily married but they had arrived at some kind of accommodation, her and Mr Hiller. Perhaps she was more like a housekeeper rather than a wife, but only the two of them were aware of that fact. Perhaps that was why she did not feel all that concerned about what she would say when she arrived home.

"You are going home, aren't you?" continued Debbie. "You are not thinking of doing anything silly like running away together, are you?"

"Of course I am going home."

"Then you had better think of something plausible. In my limited experience, husbands do not take kindly to their wives absconding without reason."

"I will think of something," said Joyce.

"I don't know how you can be so cavalier, Phoebe. He is your husband after all is said and done. Or have you forgotten that?"

"I know, I know. I will think of something. I mean, there isn't much that I can do about what has happened. I ran away, but it wasn't from him. On balance, I will probably tell him the truth."

"Oh Phoebe! You can't do that!"

"I don't see why not. After all he knew about Michael from the very beginning."

"But how is he going to feel? If you tell him that you had just run away to meet another man, where does that leave him? I really can't think of anything worse you could tell him. What will he think of you? How could he possibly trust you?"

"I don't see any of that being a problem," said Joyce. "The real problem is what I tell Stephanie. She must not find out what really happened. If I have to invent a story it is for her consumption, not Mr Hiller's."

"Well I think you are completely wrong. You are gambling with your relationship. He could even seek to divorce you. You cannot tell him the truth. You really cannot!"

Joyce did not reply but sat brooding, staring out of the kitchen window. Was there any truth in what her sister was saying? Even if there was, she had compacted to meet Michael again. She could not keep on finding excuses even if it was only once a year. She had been frank with Mr Hiller when she had gone to see him at Canterbury. He knew everything before he proposed. Why should she hide things from him now?

"Do you always call him Mr Hiller?" asked her sister, taking her plate and walking to the sink.

"Invariably."

"What? Even to his face?"

"Yes. I have always done. He is quite use to it."

Deborah shook her head and started buttering some more toast. "What time are you thinking of leaving?"

"I don't know. There are a couple of things I'd like to mention before I do go. I touched on the first last night, that is whether Michael can help you. Have you thought any more about it?"

"No," said Debbie coldly.

"I would beg you to consider it. He does so desperately want to help even if it is only in a small way. And I will not allow him to help me."

"I do not want charity from him," said Debbie heatedly. "Not from him. That's the last thing I want. I am only prepared to go on living here rent free as that is what Angus would have wished, God rest his soul. If it wasn't for that thought I would up and move."

"Oh, Debbie," said Joyce imploringly. "He is not going to offer you charity. He does not make many charitable contributions although when he does, it is for a good cause and exceedingly generous. Do you know he paid for the restoration of a whole church somewhere in Norfolk?"

"I am impressed."

"But he appreciates as well as anyone the need for people to feel they've achieved something rather than been given it all. That was his credo. He will not offer you charity."

"What then?" said Deborah sharply, sitting down again and pushing a plate of buttered toast towards her younger sister. "What is he proposing to do with me, or has he not said? Not sell me into the white slave business. That's what they use to say about Lady Newington's Home in Bromley; that it was just a front for white slavery."

"Oh, that's absolute nonsense!"

"What then? Or is this one of those promises that is never kept. They are all the same these people, these rich people, making vague promises and never keeping them. I should know."

"I don't know what grounds you have for saying such things, Debbie, certainly about Michael. He does have something in mind and I did say that I would raise it with you though I am now not sure that you are in any fit state to consider it!"

"Phoebe! I would remind you who you are talking to!"

“Yes, I know! You have said it already - my elder sister,” cried Joyce. “How could I possibly forget?”

“What was the other matter?”

“I haven't finished with the first yet.”

“You said I was in no fit state to consider it at present. You might be right. Tell me about the second and I may calm down whilst you are doing that. But only tell me if it is something that will not upset me.”

Joyce took a slice of toast and carefully cut it across a diagonal. “I don't think it will upset you. It's rather curious and, now I come to think of it, there's two things. And what is even more odd, you have already touched on them when you mentioned the Home at Bromley.”

“What? The white slavers?”

“No white slavers, Debbie. Nothing to do with white slavers, nothing at all. Do you remember years ago when Moira came to see us having been sent by her father to collect the rent? She took us to see that poor woman who had a baby and was expecting another? Can you remember what her name was?”

“What a strange question! It was a strange name. Let me see. I think it might have been Cross. Yes, that's it, Cross! Why do you ask?”

“I am positive that the boy goes to the same school as Stephanie. He's a couple of years older than her.”

“That fits, but why do you think it is him?”

“I am not really sure, but his mother went to work at the Bromley Home and I think she is still there. His name is Cross. I asked Stephanie. It does fit, doesn't it?”

“How strange,” said Debbie, pleasing her sister by appearing to calm down. “Do you think she would remember you?”

“I dearly hope not.”

“You have remembered her.”

“That's true,” said Joyce with a sigh. “But I think that's different. She will probably remember no more than that three young women visited her and arranged for a doctor to come, if she remembers anything.”

“I would have thought she would remember that. What was the second matter?”

“Well, it is back to it being a small world,” said Joyce. “I don't know how you are going to take this.”

“Try me,” said her sister firmly. “What else have you done?”

“It isn't anything I have done. It is something that Michael told me.”

“Oh! Michael!”

“He told me that at the end of the War he met Kurt in Germany.”

“Kurt?” cried Debbie becoming excited. “I always thought he must have died in the fighting! What happened?”

“Michael said it was a matter of days before the surrender. He was confronted by a German in the dark and he shot him. It was Kurt.”

“Shot him? Oh Lord!”

“It isn't as bad as it sounds. Oh, I should have told you about this last night but I was so full of my meeting with Michael it quite slipped my mind.”

“But what happened, Phoebe?”

“As I said. Michael shot him and Kurt was taken prisoner. It was only a flesh wound, nothing to worry about. Michael realised who he was when he saw the cigarette case we gave him as a present. You remember it?”

“Of course I do. I can't believe it, that Kurt is alive. What else did Michael say?”

“That he was very German.”

“He's Austrian actually. He must have told you more than that, Phoebe.”

“He did and not all of it was good news. In fact some of it was rather sad. Kurt told him that he was aiming to return to his father's estate in Austria. Michael did not know whether he made it.”

“His father,” said Debbie softly. “Did he mention him?”

“He did. That's part of the sad news. I am sorry, Debbie. He was executed by the Nazis for being implicated in a plot against Hitler. His wife was sent to a concentration camp where she died early in 1945.”

“He is dead? And Lady Angela? How awful.”

“I am sorry, Debbie, really. I should have told you all this last night.”

“He was a bad, wicked, man,” said Deborah standing up. “I should never have married him but I was young and very foolish and he was so handsome. I was swept totally off my feet which wasn't hard for a dancer, I suppose. If he really was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler that was probably the one good thing he did in his life. Perhaps he was trying to make amends. But I am sorry about Lady Angela. Angus would say that she was not the most pleasant person he had met, but she did not deserve that. But you are sure Kurt is alive still?”

“He was at the end of the War. Perhaps he will get in touch one day?”

“Kurt? No, I doubt he would. He wouldn't readily forgive us for winning the War. Don't you recall how he hated this country and everything it stood for?”

“All I remember is that he used to come to my bedroom at night. Not at my invitation, you understand.”

“What? Kurt? Never, Phoebe. You must have been dreaming.”

“I wasn't dreaming. That is why I used to have to bolt my door.”

“I didn't know you bolted your door. I don't believe it. You must have been dreaming.”

“I certainly was not dreaming. It seems such a long time ago.”

“He never did anything did he, Phoebe?” said her sister looking at her strangely.

“No, Debbie. He never touched me. I would have screamed and woken half of Dover if he had, but he never did. And I wasn't like that, regardless of what Moira and Angus might have thought.”

“Angus never thought of you like that. He just said he thought the whole thing was rather sad and that Michael let you down badly. As for Moira, I never knew exactly what she thought.”

“That I was a bad lot. But talking of making amends brings me back to my first point.”

“Which was?”

“What Michael would like to do for you.”

“You want me to let him help me yet you refuse his help?”

“I have my reasons,” said Joyce shaking her head. “I have very good sound reasons whereas you have none.”

“You don't think what he did to Angus isn't a sound reason?”

“Michael didn't do anything to Angus, Debbie. It was all a dreadful misfortune. We have all suffered dreadful misfortunes, haven't we? Had matters been different I would have married him and he would be your brother-in-law. Think of him that way. If you do you could accept his help without there being any complication. And he does have something in mind.”

“Which is?” asked Debbie suspiciously.

“Would you like to be Lady Newington's companion? Her maid - he did mention her name but I have forgotten - died a few months ago and she is very lonely. It would involve looking after her and the house but not as a servant. Her maid was far more than that.”

“What? Me look after Newington House?”

“Yes. Ironic isn't it? But there isn't much to look after by all accounts. Michael says it is badly in need of repair but his wife who owns half of it will not allow any money to be spent on it. Michael stressed it is more the role of a companion than anything else.”

“I don't know. I would have to think about it.”

“Lady Newington is very kind and pleasant.”

“How would you feel if I accepted his offer? I mean with regards to your involvement with him?”

“Me?” said Joyce reflectively. “I assumed that you would not mention me or my relationship with Michael or Stephanie.”

"It would be rather strange. Me living with the Lady of the Estate whilst my sister is sneaking down to meet her son-in-law."

"I wouldn't be sneaking down. Surely you can see that there would be no cause to mention me or Stephanie. It could be quite harmful if you did."

"Why would I want to do anything that would harm either my little sister or my niece? Of course you can rely on me saying nothing for just as long as I have to remain silent."

"Just the same, something might slip out at an unguarded moment," said Joyce, concerned. "I know just how difficult it can be not to say the wrong thing."

"Are you now hinting that I should not go to work at Newington House?"

"Oh, no, Debbie! Nothing of the sort. I know I can rely on you. It is just that you have to be so careful in what you say."

"Indeed," said her sister sharply. "And I trust you will be the same when you get home and explain to your husband where you have been and why. For goodness sakes don't tell him the truth. It will poison your relationship no matter what you think. Tell him anything other than you've seen Michael. If you tell him that you will be playing with fire."

Those words, almost her sister's parting words, had stayed with her. Even as she lay in bed, half asleep, she could hear Debbie saying them. Had things changed between her and her husband after she had told him? True, she had returned to Bromley with a feeling of trepidation. There would be much to say, much to answer for, not just to him or to her daughter, but also at work. "I won't say I wasn't concerned for you," said Mr Hiller. "Even after I received your note this morning. I had to tell Stephanie something so I told her you had been called away from work to the bedside of an old friend who was dangerously ill following a road accident. It was the only thing I could think of. I phoned Woolworth's as well. I don't think they were all that pleased but I think you will keep your job."

"It was Michael," she confirmed in a low voice. "He came here. Did you realise? He called at the house and then waited for me outside Woolworth's. When I saw him there I panicked. I knew he would only follow me if I came home and that would cause all manner of complications. I had to draw him away so I went to Deborah's, my sister's. I knew he would follow."

"I bet she was surprised by you turning up after all this time."

"She was but she let me stay. I owe a lot to Debbie. I have really treated her very shabbily."

"And Michael? He doesn't want Stephanie does he?"

"I do not think he would attempt to take her from me."

"Good," he said.

"But he does want to help."

"Help? In what way?"

"I don't know. He wasn't specific and I didn't ask. I simply told him that he is to have nothing to do with her, not to see her or attempt to contact her."

"Good! I think that is for the best. It would be very unsettling for her to learn that she had another father."

"That is exactly what I think," she said. "Where is she any way?"

"At school. I kept her home yesterday but when I got your note I sent her back. Once I knew you were all right there was no point in keeping her home. She wasn't all that pleased, but she went. You had better get your story straight because you are bound to be interrogated when she comes home. And Michael? What did he want?"

"He said he simply wanted to see me. He is still married to Christina."

"He didn't suggest I should divorce you? I do remember the arrangement we agreed all that time ago, you see."

"No," said Joyce wearily. "He didn't ask anything like that of me. I don't know that I would have agreed even if he had. He cannot divorce Christina and even if he could, I owe too much to you to ask for a divorce."

"But you are still in love with him?"

“Yes,” she said, studying the pattern on the rug in front of the gas fire and thinking of the one at Rose Cottage in front of the log fire.

“I would let you go, and Stephanie,” he said suddenly. “If that is what you really want. I promised I would, not that I want to see either of you leave. I will even give you the grounds.”

“No,” she said softly. “That is not what I want and it is not something Michael asked for. All I have done is to agree to meet him at Newington once a year, just so that we can keep in touch. We will be together for just a whole day, no more.”

“But you think you will marry him one day?”

“Who knows? Were we both free we would probably marry but that may never happen. We are both married and neither of us can gain our freedom. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to sound reproachful. It is just that it seems just as hopeless now as it did all those years ago.”

“I will make you a strong cup of tea,” he said as her tears started to flow unchecked down her cheeks. “You will feel a little better afterwards.” For Joyce the room seemed to be cloaked in darkness and she did not sense even a chink of light until he came back. “I took the liberty just then to phone your supervisor. I told her your friend had died and that you were still very distressed. She said you need not go in until tomorrow.”

“Oh dear,” Joyce sighed. “Another lie to live except I do feel as if someone close has died. I feel so empty.”

“I know, but you will feel better in time. And can I assume that our mini-crisis is over for the present at least?”

“Yes,” said Joyce, wiping her face. “For the present it is.”

But things had changed she told herself as she lay there, waiting for him to come back to bed. She had changed. That was it. She had changed since the first meeting with Michael. That was what had happened. Mr Hiller had not changed, but she had. He was still the same, slightly odd, man that she, in desperation, had turned to in what she saw as her hour of greatest need. He was just the same as he had been when she had turned up, unannounced on his doorstep in Canterbury.

“I knew you would come,” was the first thing he said when he opened the door and saw her standing on the step. She put her small suitcase into which she had packed her few, miserable, belongings, down in the hallway and followed him into the front room of the Victorian terraced house. It was clean, neat, sparsely furnished and spartan. That it lacked a woman's touch was her first thought.

“How could you possibly say that?” she asked nervously as she watched him close the door. “I didn't even know myself that I would come until yesterday.”

“Some things are written in the stars or in the sand on the seashore. I knew immediately I saw you at the Halloween party. I told you then, didn't I, that if you ever needed help you could come to me, and here you are. What has happened? Has he deserted you or has your sister evicted you?”

“Oh, no! Debbie would never do anything like that. On the contrary.” She fell into silence as she gathered her thoughts. What could she tell this strange man? What could she tell him that would not have him showing her the door? “May I be quite blunt?” she asked levelly.

“Please do. I suggest that you are perfectly frank and open with me. It is the only way if I am to be able to assist you.”

“It's Michael,” she blurted. “He is going to marry someone else. It's not how it seems. It is an arranged marriage, arranged by his father. It is not something he can get out of without having to sacrifice everything and I could not let him do that.”

“So you are prepared to sacrifice yourself?”

“I have no option, no choice at all.”

“I knew he had gone back to London, of course. I hadn't realised he had finished with you.”

“He didn't finish with me,” she protested. “At least, not the way you make it sound. But we had to part some weeks ago. We agreed that it was the only thing we could do under

the circumstances. I told him that I would pursue my dancing career whilst he should go and marry Lady Newington's daughter. The wedding is in a few weeks. There seemed no other course that we could follow. I hoped he would change his mind and come back to me, but of course he did not. He could not."

"He has probably forgotten you by now."

"No!" she cried. "He wouldn't. It wasn't like that. He's not like that."

"All right," said Mr Hiller, leaning forward. "We'll agree that he's not like that although he acted rather strangely in coming down here and pretending he was a nobody when he really was a somebody. But there's more, isn't there? You didn't come to me simply because your relationship has come to an end, did you?"

"No," said Joyce softly. "There is more. No-one knows it but I am pregnant."

"Ah," said Mr Hiller, knowingly. "I take it he is the father?"

"Of course."

"And he does not know?"

"Of course not!"

"And you do not know what to do?"

"I don't," said Joyce shaking her head. "I've been at my wits end, not able to tell Debbie, not able to confide in my best friend, not able to go to church to confess although I must admit that's for a different reason. But I'm getting to the stage where it is beginning to affect me and it will start to show if it hasn't already. I cannot possibly go on dancing. I can't hide it. I simply do not know what to do!"

"Did you come to me for advice, or more?" said Mr Hiller, standing and walking to the fireplace. "I notice that you have a suitcase with you."

"I don't know," she said wretchedly. "I cannot stay at Debbie's any more. I couldn't face her or Moira or Angus, her father. I am not sure that Debbie isn't getting suspicious. She made one or two comments like saying I was putting on weight, or that I had suddenly developed a healthy appetite. I don't know what effect the ballet exercises might have on the baby, any way. I must find somewhere to live, at least until it is born. Perhaps a small, cheap boarding house?"

"They would never take you. Who would want to take in a single, pregnant, young girl?"

"But I must find somewhere. I can't go home."

"You are sure of that?"

"Oh, yes. I couldn't face Debbie. I couldn't bring all the disgrace on her. I can't go back."

"Then I will have to ask you a very direct question. Do you want the baby?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"You haven't come to see me in the hope that I know someone who could get rid of it for you?"

"Oh Lord, no!" she exclaimed. "I could never do that, never! Nor would I want to have the baby adopted if there is a chance I can find a way to keep it. I want to have it and bring it up."

"You are sure? It does cost quite a bit, but you could sell your bracelet. I reckon that would fetch a tidy sum."

"I couldn't so that! I couldn't do either of the things you are suggesting!"

"Then you should go home."

"I can't," she whispered. "I simply can't."

"It will be very difficult for you as a single mother, without a job, looking for a roof over your head. There are Institutions that will take in young girls in distress. Otherwise you may find yourself on the street."

"I know," she said, close to leaving. "I just needed to go to someone who might give me advice. That is why I came to you. You have been very kind to listen to me -"

"It seems to me," Mr Hiller said, seeming to ignore what she was saying, "that you have only one other possible course. You will have to marry me."

"What?" she said, astonished. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound that way, but you

took me by surprise.”

“Logic dictates that this is the only sensible solution to your position. You are expecting a baby. You need a husband and father for respectability and security. You need a roof over your head and an environment in which you can raise your child. I can provide all that.”

“But,” she said, finding her ideas very confused, “I love Michael. And we hardly know each other.”

“I know. I don't see why that should matter. You said his is an arranged marriage. He is going to be married himself to a person he may not love.”

“He does not,” she said lowly.

“So where is the difference? His is a marriage of convenience. Let yours be a marriage of convenience. As for me, it has been lonely living here since my mother died. Solitude has its benefits but I have never had any intention to become a hermit. You are a fine looking woman, if I may say so. You would make any man a fine wife. I thought that when I first saw you. I would be honoured to be your husband. And, to make things paramourly clear, I am willing to accommodate you in, shall we say, what are delicate matters.”

“What do you mean?” she asked slowly.

“I would be prepared not to sleep with you unless you wanted it. You could have a separate room if you liked. This house is big enough. And as for consummation, that would be dependent upon you. We could let the relationship grow. If it did not, at least you would have a home and I would have some companionship and, I must admit, someone to look after me. It could be that simple. You come here to look after me and keep house. I keep you and we marry to preserve respectability and give your child a name. What do you think?”

“I don't know,” she said hesitantly. “I never expected anything like this. I have never considered the possibility of marrying anyone other than Michael.”

“Then I will give you a supplement to the offer. If it should happen that he becomes free and wishes to marry you I would give you your freedom if you wanted it.”

“Are you saying that you would let me go if I wanted to?”

“What I am saying is that our marriage can be what we make it; what ever you want it to be. It could be a full marriage on one hand, or it could be a marriage of convenience with no relationship on the other.”

“You are saying that you would marry me and have me living here as your wife and yet not touch me?”

“Here or wherever, if that was what you wanted, yes.”

“I see.”

“I will make no bounds about it. You are a very attractive woman. I am sure you would have no difficulty in finding a husband.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “With a baby on the way?”

“Well, that is of no concern to me, Felicity. I may call you Felicity, may I?”

“Call me Joyce. That is my second name and I prefer it to Felicity.”

“Well, Joyce, in fact I would welcome it. There you are. I don't think you could possibly get a better offer of marriage unless you found another millionaire, which I am not.”

“I am not sure that your proposal is entirely moral.”

“I am not sure how morality enters into it. You have to face the fact that people get married for all manner of reasons. Some get married for love, or think they do. Others for money, some for companionship, and some out of convenience. But you don't have to make up your mind straight away. Let me show you around the house for a start. Then we can make a pot of tea and I have some nice Dundee cake. There's a superb bakers only just around the corner. Do you know Canterbury all that well? Come along, let me show you my modest palace.”

She could still remember that house clearly as she lay in bed. She could see the gloomy, twisting, staircase, and those fearful, dark, openings that sprung from it at intervals. The rooms were dingy, the daylight being strangled by thick dusty curtains, with heavy cumbersome unforgiving furniture. The higher one went, the more intense the smell of damp

and decay which saturated the house on a wet day, and which never completely released its grip when the sun shone. She thought it could be her duty to try and bring some light into the house, but she never succeeded. It was so different here in Bromley!

As she climbed the staircase and he pointed into one black aperture after another, she asked herself what she should do. There appeared to be no alternative other than to just say "yes". Wasn't it strange, that the whole of her life, and that of her child, could now depend on one single word? But here was a man who seemed prepared to give her everything and ask for very little in return, providing always that he was a man of his word. "So you would be happy if I came here as little more than a housekeeper?" she said nervously as he showed her into one of the bedrooms.

"Yes," said Mr Hiller, adjusting the turn-down. "I would not ask for any more than that."

"And I could bring up my child here?"

"Here, or where ever we may live. I should tell you that there is a possibility that the Canterbury office may close. We have had this hanging over us for quite some time. If it did I think we would have to move as I would have difficulty getting a comparable job around here. Anyway, that is all in the future and we are concerned with the present. Look, if you come here you can see the Cathedral from the window. See?"

The Cathedral was not something that Joyce necessarily wished to be reminded of. That was where Moira, unfettered by any circumstances, had accepted Arthur's proposal of marriage and then openly paraded the fact before her. Now here she was, considering a proposal of her own, but seeming to be restricted in every respect. She did not love this man. She was not even sure that she liked him, yet he seemed kind enough. She could not go home, not after having in effect run away. She could not live in disgrace, nor bring it upon Debbie. Oh they would rally round her, Debbie, Moira, and her father! They would sew and knit in anticipation of the event, but she would know exactly what they were thinking. And there was the question of money. She had thought about the Home to which that Lady Newington had sent poor Mrs Cross. How ironic it would have been if she ended up there! But that was her very last resort, last to wasting away on the streets. First she had to come to a decision.

"Would you take me to it?" she said suddenly. "Now?"

"What?"

"The Cathedral?"

"But? It hardly seems to be an appropriate time to go sight seeing!"

Joyce smiled. "I don't want to go around it. I just want to sit in the grounds. It will help me get my thoughts together. I would like you to come as well."

Her sad little case was left in the hall. To think that contained all her worldly possessions other than the clothes she stood up in! They walked through the narrow streets under grey skies until they entered the Cathedral precinct through a large arch. "Can we sit over there?" she said pointing to a seat.

"What ever you wish," he said, bemused. Joyce looked around her as she sat. There were other seats but from what Moira had said this was the most likely one.

"Now," she said firmly. "Let me understand you correctly. You are proposing to me?"

"I am asking you to marry me," said Mr Hiller. "With no preconditions, with no anticipations other than you keep house for which I will ensure you have funds ample for the modest living I expect and for yourself and your child."

"I wouldn't want Michael to get to know of it. I would want it to be a very quiet affair. I would not even want my sister to know, not until I am prepared to tell her."

"I can see no problem with that," said Mr Hiller, looking around as if there might be someone from his office there, watching them. "I think there are rules, procedures to be gone through, bans to be read. You might have to live here in the Parish for three weeks, or something like that before we can get a licence. I cannot imagine there is any thing that is insuperable and I can certainly find out. Are you saying that you will marry me?"

Joyce looked up at the cold Gothic pinnacles and arches. Perhaps it was not as romantic as sitting there in the moonlight even if it had been on a fine November evening.

And it would not be a sin to say “yes”, even if there was no immediate intention to consummate the marriage. She did harbour the concept that she might save herself for Michael, but it never had taken the shape of a commitment. As for sin, if there was sin she had already committed it. Michael would surely not expect her to remain single, although she had told him that she would. When she thought about him, Oh how part of her loved him to distraction whilst her other self cried out against the betrayal! Should she hang on in case he had a change of heart and decided not to marry the stuck up bitch she had seen astride her horse handing out instructions to her lover as if he was one of the servants? Mr Hiller said there were formalities to be gone through which would take a few weeks. Perhaps if she could lodge at his house there was still hope. Once Michael's wedding had taken place all would be lost. What ever she did, tomorrow she would wake up in a new bed, in an unfamiliar room, in a new town. It might as well be Mr Hiller's bed, or one of them. It might as well be in Canterbury as anywhere else.

She suddenly felt an overwhelming conviction that this was the spot, the very seat on which Moira and Arthur had sat that night. “Yes,” she said.

“Yes, what?”

“I will marry you on your terms. Could I ask to lodge at your house but as your fiancée until the wedding can be held?”

“Of course you can!” he said beaming. “May I kiss my fiancée? Just lightly, on the cheek?”

“Yes,” she said hesitantly.

“And then we must go and buy your engagement ring. Nothing too elaborate, mark you.”

“Oh, yes!” Joyce said, suddenly feeling both relieved and excited. As they walked towards the exit she looked back, sadly, at the seat. It was the one. She was sure of it.

And then she started going to Church. She went to St Dunstan's daily, not to a service but to kneel before the Blessed Virgin and seek forgiveness. But her prayers were empty and barren. When she looked up into the gentle and loving face all she could think of doing was to ask her to intercede and send Michael to save her. They were both sinning, she now knew that. Both were entering into marriages in which there was no love, no feeling, no passion. Of course it was silly. It was futile even to think that way. The Catholic Church would not necessarily disapprove of such marriages. And God would simply tell her that she had sinned and should be prepared to pay the price for it. So she tried to pray for Michael, not to possess him. She tried to pray for her child to have a good father, but not that it should be Michael, yet she could not suppress the longing in her heart or the finality to the situation that faced her.

They married before a Registrar. It was a crude, simple, ceremony and over in a matter of minutes. She had never been to a church since that day.

It was meant to be a secret but she had to tell Debbie. She wrote the day after she arrived in Canterbury to tell her she was safe but did not tell her of her impending wedding just in case Michael turned up on the steps of the Registry Office. That sort of thing happened in the cinema, but not to her. If it was a secret it was well kept because no-one from the Canterbury office turned up. Mr Hiller had a day's leave, slipped off to get married, and turned up for work the next morning just as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Of course, she had to write to Debbie again, but she told her that no-one knew of her marriage and implored her to keep it an absolute secret. She had such good reasons for asking this, reasons that she could not go into in the letter, reasons that she would one day tell her sister, reasons that were not a matter of personal pride or shame, reasons that made it paramount that Moira, who still might have connections with Michael's new bride, should not know. It all came close to breaking her heart. Marriage was supposed to be a happy, joyous event, but as she wrote the letter which effectively said “goodbye” to her sister and all she stood for, Joyce could think only that her life had been torn apart. A few months before she had been young, pretty, with the World at her feet, and in love. Now she was being separated from her family, drawn into a loveless marriage, and ruined. The only thing that she had left was her love.

It seemed only a few weeks later that Mr Hiller had come home after his day at the office and announced that he had resigned. She was astonished but he was quick to pacify her. "I have another job, and one that pays better. There's no doubt the office is closing. All the engineers are being offered a transfer to an office in Maidstone where I understand the pay and conditions are worse. I thought that as I am married now the time had come for a change. I have go a job with a developer, designing and detailing houses and estates, processing planning applications, that sort of thing. It was sheer chance as I know Mr Wick, the Managing Director, he is also the principal shareholder, quite well as we have a number of mutual interests. He happened to mention that he had this vacancy coming up and I jumped at it. There is one snag. Although they do a lot of work in this area - they are building a small estate at Herne Bay, for example - their offices are in Bromley and we will have to eventually move and live there. I thought you might be pleased to move and put some distance between you and this area. Was I wrong?"

"Bromley?" said Joyce. "Bromley in East London or Bromley in Kent?"

"In Kent. Although they also have work in Luton and there is talk we might have to move there for a while.

"How strange. Had I not married you I might well have ended up in Bromley, Kent, at Lady Newington's Home for distressed young ladies."

"I am glad that you didn't. Do you know there have been rumours that it is a front for white slave traffic?"

"Never! I cannot believe that Lady Newington would be involved in anything like that. Not from what I have heard of her. I don't believe it."

"Nor do I," said Mr Hiller. "But about the job, are you happy to move?"

"From here? Of course I am," said Joyce. "Wherever and whenever. I have nothing here now to hold me. Perhaps I can leave some of the memories behind me as well."