

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Did you have a nice weekend Mrs Hiller?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Joyce. “A pleasant quiet one. Stephanie went off to stay with a girl friend and we had the house to ourselves for much of the time. You cannot imagine what a difference it makes.”

“You really should have come to the party on Saturday night, Mrs Hiller! It was an absolute rave up! Talk about swinging! There were some who let it all hang out, if you will pardon the expression.”

“I will on this occasion, Mr Holt,” said Joyce looking up from her desk at the speaker. The young, dark-haired, Mathematics teacher was looking a little pale but was clearly ebullient. “I am a little to old for parties,” she added coolly and resumed adding up the columns of milk money in the register.

“That's rubbish! There were lots of people there older than you.”

“Thank you!” she said coldly.

“And there was this young girl who was absolutely stunning. You cannot imagine how she looked; just as if she had stepped off a film set.”

“I'm sure,” muttered Joyce, wondering whether to dismiss him but also entertaining a degree of curiosity about this party Mr Holt had gone to.

“She came with a friend who wasn't half as good, but she, well, I don't know what to say.”

“I think “cor” is the usually expression, Mr Holt. You really shouldn't talk about young women like that.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs Hiller. You really should have been there.”

“I can't go to things like that,” she murmured. “I am a married woman.”

“Come on now, there were lots of married women there with their husbands although they didn't stay together for long I can tell you. You know what I mean?”

“It all sounds very improper to me and certainly not the place for a school secretary.”

“I don't know,” said Mr Holt eagerly. “When you think that - well I had better not say who was there.”

Had Mr Pennington not come in at that point Joyce might have gently extracted more about Mr Holt's party, but the Mathematics teacher rapidly excused himself and left them alone. “Remember, Mrs Hiller,” he said as he went out, “you must come next time!”

“Come?” said Mr Pennington as the heavy door clicked shut. “What was that all about?”

“Just Mr Holt being immature, indiscreet, and extolling the vices of a party he went to on Saturday night.”

“Ah ha!” exclaimed the Senior Mathematics teacher. “So he had an invitation, did he? I bet he was just on probation, that is if it was the party I think it was. I take it you were not asked?”

“No, “ said Joyce, sitting up. “Should I feel offended?”

“I don't think so. You might have felt offended had you gone.”

“Did you go, then?” she asked.

“Good gracious, no! They wouldn't ask me. I am not considered to be the right sort.”

“How do you mean, the right sort?”

“I am not considered to be, well, as they put it, liberated. You might say uninhibited.”

“What ever kind of party was it?”

“I have heard of them described as wild. Don't you remember me telling you about them and the inner circles in society here? I think the idea is to let one's hair down.”

“And a lot more besides if I understood Mr Holt correctly.”

“I would rather stay at home with a nice open fire and a good book, or a few mathematical problems.”

“So, how does one get invited to these parties?” asked Joyce, thinking that she might prefer a party, even if it were wild, to mathematical problems.

“You just do,” said Mr Pennington, clearly dismayed at her expression of interest. “They are not canvassed or advertised. In fact I think they are somewhat secret with code words to prevent gate crashers. You are probably right in describing Mr Holt as indiscreet.”

“Now you are making me nervous,” she said brightly. “What will they do to him? Break a few bones? Or will his body be found under a bush in the park?”

“Oh, nothing like that,” said Mr Pennington, taking her seriously. “I just think he won't be invited again.”

“Well, well! To think that such things go on in dreary suburbia right under our noses and we are not aware of them! Apart from what you said, I really had no idea!”

“And you work for Mr Wick?”

“Is he involved?” she said, surprised. “I have never had the slightest indication that he might be up to something improper.”

“Perhaps I am getting like Mr Holt and saying too much,” said Mr Pennington.

“Oh, you are not,” she said softly. “Not in the least. I like to know what is going on around me.” Joyce let the subject drop as far as their conversation was concerned but it slipped back or, to be more accurate, it was brought back into her thoughts many times during the day. By the time evening had come what had started as mild curiosity triggered by a casual question was now progressing towards an obsession. She would have to go to one of these parties if only to see who was there and what went on. She would be an observer, a wallflower, and nothing more.

“I hear it was quite a party on Saturday,” she said. Mr Wick paled and looked uncomfortable. “Did you go?”, she added, looking down at the books so that he was not the victim of her stare.

“Why, er, yes,” he said hesitantly. “I was there, called in, for a short while. How did you find out about it? Who told you? How much do you know?”

“Oh, not very much really,” said Joyce lightly. She had no intention of telling him about the Mathematics teacher's indiscretion. “Just enough to know some of the people who were there and what went on.”

“So who told you?”

“I shouldn't say,” she replied.

“Was it Stephanie?”

“Stephanie? How would she know about it?”

“She overheard me talking about it on the 'phone one evening last week. I told her that I was going, just to a party, you understand?”

“Well, no, it was not my daughter. How does one go about getting invited?”

“Get invited?” he said, looking at his watch. “It is not at all easy.”

“Could I, for example, get an invitation? I note that certain other people do.”

“You?” he said with alarm. “I don't think that would be a good idea at all! Far from it, Joyce.”

“So you either cannot arrange for me to go to one, or you won't?”

“It's not like that. I don't think your husband would thank me if I did,” said Mr Wick, looking at his watch again.

“Why on earth would that be the case?” she asked coyly. “Quite a number of the women there were married.”

“That's not the point,” he said anxiously. “I simply do not think it would be a good idea. And I must go. I am already late for an appointment and I have some urgent things to arrange.”

She let him go. The exchange did little other to leave her more curious. To think that there was this sub-culture going on there, right under her nose, with nearly everyone involved, except her!

“I want to leave home,” Stephanie suddenly announced as they were sitting down to dinner two evenings later. In truth, Joyce had to admit that the dinner was little more than a light salad with some cold meat as the weather had been quite warm and everyone's appetite appeared to be on the wane. Certainly those of her husband and daughter were.

"I am sorry?" said Joyce. "What did you say?"

"I want to leave home," her daughter repeated, looking down at the dark brown table mat which was set before her in anticipation of a plate.

"Leave home?" cried Joyce. "Don't be silly. Has this got something to do with the weekend?" Her husband choked and she went to the sink to fetch him a glass of water. "Be reasonable, Stephanie, how could you leave home? You are barely sixteen!"

"I can pass for being a lot older. Some people think I am over twenty-one."

"So that might be," said Joyce, looking to her red-faced husband for support but receiving none. "It doesn't alter the fact that you are sixteen."

"Girls of sixteen leave home," protested Stephanie. "Some times they are much younger."

"Don't be silly, Stephanie. Think about it. What would you do? Where would you live? What about your schooling? Oh, this is utter nonsense. I don't know why I am even talking about it. Eat up your dinner and we'll have no more silly talk like that!"

Joyce watched Stephanie's head fall as she picked at the food but seemed to eat none. The truth was she was alarmed and felt close to panic at her daughter's announcement. She did not know what to say. She could not guess what had prompted her to say she wanted to leave home other than it must have been something concocted with her friend over the weekend. "Is your friend behind this?" she asked suddenly.

"No," said Stephanie, sullenly. "She is not. It is my idea. It is something I want to do."

"Well, it is something you cannot do, so we will have no further talk about it."

"You didn't give me much support back there with Stephanie," Joyce said to her husband later when they were alone in their bedroom. "What a preposterous idea!"

"I didn't think you needed it," he said quietly.

"But you do agree with me?" she demanded.

"She is your daughter," he said cautiously.

"You don't agree with me?"

"She is very mature and knows how to take care of herself. I am sure that she is capable of making up her mind and coming to a decision that suits her best."

"I am not sure I understand what you are saying," said Joyce.

"She is mature," he replied.

"She is too mature. That's half the trouble!"

"Trouble?"

"You know what I mean!" She sat on the end of the bed and sighed. "Why on earth would she want to leave home? Doesn't she enjoy living here anymore? I can understand it with children who are beaten or ill-treated, but why Stephanie? It cannot be that bad."

"If I may say so, it may not be a question of it being bad," said Mr Hiller. "She may simply want to set up on her own, live her own life."

"But she is only sixteen and she can't do it without our permission. I could maybe understand it if she was twenty-one, but she is not. And she would need our consent and I am not about to give it!"

"You don't want her to run away from home. I mean you might not know where she was then or what was happening to her." Joyce stared at her husband in astonishment.

"You don't think she is capable of doing that do you?" she said.

"Stephanie can be very headstrong and determined. She is like you in that respect."

"Oh, Lord!" Joyce breathed. "You don't think she has got into trouble do you?"

"No, I don't. I think she is simply asking to be allowed to leave home and set up on her own."

"That's ridiculous. She has no job, no income. You are not telling me that I should let my sixteen year old daughter pack her bags and just waltz off to goodness knows where? I, her mother? It is really absurd and you are every bit as bad as her if you think otherwise."

When she was to look back on these words she realised they were prophetic. She wondered what her husband had been thinking when she had said them, whether terror had

struck at his heart as well it should have. Or had he been quietly, secretly, laughing at her all the time? However, it was not his reaction that concerned her as she lay in bed. It was how to deal with the problem her daughter had created. It was true to say they were not close. She had admitted as much to Michael. But there was no hostility between her and Stephanie. They rarely rowed, not any more. There seemed to be no reason at all why she should suddenly want to leave home.

Nothing further was said at breakfast next morning. Stephanie went off to school and Joyce went off to work, assuming that the subject had been dropped. She did mention it to Mr Pennington who raised his eyebrows. "She finishes school this year, I assume," he said.

"Of, yes, she will have to leave. I cannot see her getting decent exam results. If only she would work or apply her self. She is very bright. It seems to be such a waste."

"Just so," said Mr Pennington. Nothing further was said for over two weeks which made Joyce assume that her daughter had seen sense and completely abandoned the idea. She began to concern herself more with what Stephanie would do once the summer term was over. She thought of asking Mr Wick if there was any chance of her getting a clerical job at the builder's office. If the worse came to the worse, Stephanie could always go and work behind a counter as she had once.

"I need to talk to you, Joyce," said Mr Wick one evening. "It is a delicate matter concerning your daughter." Joyce's heart leapt. It was almost as if providence had heard her and was about to provide her with the solution she had sought. He was going to offer her daughter a job!

"Yes?" she said, in anticipation.

"She came to see me a few days ago," he continued. Joyce felt delighted. At least that showed that her daughter was at last taking some kind of initiative.

"And?" said Joyce.

"I think I should talk to you before you hear it from another quarter." Her heart started to fall. This did not sound like the offer of employment. It sounded far more serious. Perhaps there were things that she did not know?

"Hear what?" she said quite sharply. Could she be in trouble? Mr Hiller had said he did not think so, but how would he know? But if she was, why was Mr Wick talking to her about it? Her thoughts ran on, down wild lines into areas of increasing improbability. Perhaps she was in trouble. Perhaps Mr Wick was the culprit and was going to offer to marry her? The thought was repulsive. To think that this man could have violated her beautiful and innocent young daughter! She could not bear to think about it, but she would have to face it if it were so. He was unmarried. Stephanie was extremely attractive. She had to admit that. And there might have been the opportunity during one of those evening visits when her husband had taken her around to Mr Wick's house. Perhaps he had been otherwise occupied, or left them alone. It needed only one occasion. How well she knew that! But what about the age difference? Mr Wick was old enough to be Stephanie's father. Perhaps she should not think of him in that way. Perhaps she had better hear what he had to say as he might be proposing something else altogether.

"Your daughter, Stephanie, has been to see me," continued Mr Wick, seeing Joyce's face darken.

"Has she?"

"Oh, it's nothing like that," he said hastily. "It's nothing to worry about. It's pure business."

"Nothing like what?" cried Joyce. "What do you mean by business?"

"It is nothing that you need worry about. At least, what she came to see me about isn't something that you need worry about."

"So there is something that I should worry about?"

"I didn't mean that," said Mr Wick.

"What then? Why would Stephanie want to see you on business?"

"She wants to buy a flat."

"What?" Joyce screamed.

"She came to me and said she wished to purchase a flat. You know we have a couple

for sale in the block opposite the Phoenix Tea Rooms. She is interested in one of those. You know the ones I mean?"

"I don't believe you."

"Joyce," he said patiently, "is this the sort of thing I would make up?"

"Are you telling me that my sixteen year old daughter has been to see you and wants to buy one of your flats?"

"That I am," he said. "But there is a problem."

"A problem?" Joyce shrieked. "You bet there is a problem. Where is the money coming from for a start?"

"That is not the problem. The problem is she is a minor and as you know she cannot acquire the lease in her own name until she is of age. I am prepared to set up a trust in her favour which will own the flat until she can, but she will need her parents' consent. She was afraid to raise the matter with you, herself, so I am asking you if you will give it."

"I am sorry," said Joyce, sitting down and running her hand through her hair. "I really do not understand any of this. She must be making it up. Stephanie came to you and asked to buy a lease on a flat and said she could pay for it and you believed her?"

"Yes," he affirmed.

"It is ridiculous! It is absolutely ridiculous! I mean, she did say a couple of weeks ago that she wanted to leave home but I thought that was just a whim. It's absurd! Where does she think that the money is coming from? I mean, we still have a mortgage on the house and I don't want to see us getting into more debt. And no building society will lend money to a girl of sixteen. I wouldn't have thought it legal to do so. She hasn't asked you for some form of collateral, has she? What exactly has she asked you for?"

At that point Joyce's thoughts were running much faster than she could speak and had started to explore all manner of unsavoury and unpalatable scenarios. Perhaps she should be careful what she said now to Mr Wick. Perhaps there were thoughts that she should keep to herself because, if they were allowed to escape, they could be construed as slander and there was a law against that.

"She has simply asked to purchase the lease on one of the flats. No more, no less. There are two empty ones and as she has the money I could see no reason why I should not allow her to have it. Of course if you are not prepared to agree to the arrangement - ."

"I didn't say that I wouldn't," said Joyce slowly. "I simply do not understand. How can she possibly have the money?"

"You will have to ask her that."

"I will have to ask her that," she repeated. Then suddenly it was there, like an explosion in her head, the one word which held the key to everything. "Michael!" she cried.

"I am sorry?" said Mr Wick.

"Oh, nothing," said Joyce hastily. "I think, if it is all right, that I'd better go home and talk to my daughter. I think there's a few things to be sorted out with her."

"About the flat and the agreement?"

"Let me talk to Stephanie first," she said.

Joyce walked home in a very singular frame of mind. Of course, that was it! He had been in touch with her in some way. He had broken his word and made contact. No doubt they had met secretly, he had asked Stephanie what she wanted, she had said she wanted her own flat, and he had given her the money. It would have meant nothing to Michael. He could have bought out Mr Wick a hundred times over. But the treachery! How could he do this to her behind her back and in the face of all the promises he had given her? There was only one thing to do. She would have to have it out with her daughter.

"I want to speak to Stephanie," Joyce announced when she arrived home. "Alone!" Mr Hiller looked at her questioningly, then at Stephanie who looked up sullenly from her magazine, then said something about there being a couple of jobs to do on the car.

"Then I may take those plans around to Mr Wick," he added. "Are you sure that nothing you have to say concerns me?"

"Positive," snapped Joyce. "It is a matter between Stephanie and me." Joyce watched him leave the room and waited until she heard the front door click shut behind him.

Stephanie's head was buried once more in the magazine. "I have just been speaking to Mr Wick," she started. "I think you know what he had to say to me? What I want to know is where you got the money."

"You know where I got the money," said her daughter without looking up.

"Yes, I do now," snapped Joyce. "When did you see him?"

"Who?" drawled Stephanie.

"Your father of course!"

"Just then. He's just gone out the room."

"Don't play games with me young lady! I mean your father. When did you see him? How did he make contact with you?"

"I don't understand," said Stephanie, lowering the magazine and looking up."

"Don't play games with me, Stephanie. I'm in no mood for this. You know perfectly well what I mean. You must have seen him. Who else could have given you enough money to buy a lease on a flat? God, I am so furious! After all the promises he's made he goes and does this."

"No-one gave me the money," said Stephanie, looking at her oddly. "At least, no one person gave it me. I earned it and saved it."

"Don't lie to me," snarled Joyce. "Do you think I was born yesterday? How could you possibly earn and save enough to buy a flat?"

"How?" cried her daughter. "I thought you knew how!" Joyce's heart missed a beat. She suddenly felt that she should break off the dialogue before it went any farther, before any more secrets tumbled out into full public view. But they were adrift, in deep, dangerous, uncharted water and it was, perhaps, simply now too late. "And what exactly do you mean," continued Stephanie, "when you ask me if I've seen my father and whether he has contacted me? Are you trying to tell me that Mr Hiller, your husband, is not my real father? Am I adopted? I know I am not as I have seen my birth certificate."

"Stephanie," implored Joyce, "be reasonable. How could you possibly have earned that much money. You haven't even had as much as a Saturday morning job."

"I have been working and being paid since I was a child," she said quietly, looking down again at the cover of the magazine. "Since I don't know when. You must know that. Of course you know that!"

"Working?" asked Joyce, unable to comprehend what her daughter was talking about.

"Yes, working! But I want to know what you mean about my father seeing me and whether he has given me money. Are you really telling me that Mr Hiller has been my stepfather all these years? Oh, God! When I think of all the things I've done and I've let him and his friends do, thinking he was my father and that you knew but didn't want to interfere. All those beastly evenings when you were at night school or at work, or simply away! All that because I thought he was my father and all the time he was not!"

"Stephanie! I do not understand a word of what you are saying! You are not making sense. All what things?"

"You know," cried Stephanie sharply. "You must know! Father, Mr Hiller, said that you knew from the very beginning and did not mind. In fact he said that you preferred it that way."

"Preferred what?"

"And I thought all along, Mother must know what he's doing, what I am being asked to do, what I am being paid to do, what's going on. How could you not possibly know what has been going on in this house and in others? How could you possibly be so blind as to not know? Surely you knew the kind of man who married? I just accepted it because he was my father and that was what some fathers did, and all along it was a lie!"

"This money you earned? Are you telling me that you have been given it? By men?"

"Of course I have!" screamed Stephanie. "Ever since I was a child I've known I've a place where men like to go and I've let them go there!"

"You slut!" screamed Joyce. "You filthy little slut! I should throw you out of my house right now!"

"Your house? Is it your house? And if I am a slut, what kind of Madam does it make

you? What is it that you are now telling me. That I have a natural father somewhere, that I am illegitimate and a bastard?"

"Don't use that word, Stephanie."

"Why not? It's true, isn't it? I know a few stronger words that I could use and it sounds quite innocent to what I've become; what you've let him make me. So, you are telling me that my real father is rich because you thought he had given me the money and that you are in contact with him because you say he has made you promises. Who is he?"

"I can't tell you that," said Joyce, unable to control her thoughts.

"You can't tell me? Why ever not? You can tell me that I am illegitimate and that the depraved creature you married is not my father but you can't tell me who my real father is? I demand to know! I have a right to know!"

"No," said Joyce emphatically. "I am not able to tell you that. This thing, with men, is it still going on?"

"Of course it is!" snapped her daughter. "It is the only thing I am really good at."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Joyce, sinking into the chair opposite her daughter. "What am I to do? How could you, the two of you, do such things under this roof and right under my nose."

"I cannot believe you did not know," sneered her daughter. "This feigned innocence doesn't become you. Any way, you are no better really, what with your fancy men."

"Fancy men? What on earth do you mean?"

"Your Mr Pennington. Always popping over to his cottage to see him. More likely to give him a bit. Everyone knows what is going on and it all makes sense now if Mr Hiller is my stepfather. I can see it was a trade off. You let him do what he liked as long as you could please yourself."

"It isn't at all like that, Stephanie," said Joyce weakly.

"And there's the evenings spent at the office. I wonder what goes on there? Are you wearing a desk out, Mother, or do you do it in a chair?"

"Stephanie!" exclaimed Joyce.

"And Mr Wick! He's in a fine position, isn't he? Knocking off both mother and daughter!"

"You and Mr Wick? He pays you?"

"Of course he does! Doesn't he you? Don't tell me you give it away for free!"

"I won't have my good name impugned by a little slut like you!" Joyce cried. "I won't stand for it! How could I have brought up such a daughter?"

"Easily! By never being here and leaving me in the hands of a man like Mr Hiller. You know about the photographs, don't you?"

"Photographs?"

"In his tin box. That's what is in there. His photographs, mostly of children and young folk. I'm in there, of course."

"Oh, Lord," sighed Joyce. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, I do not care in the least what you do. I am leaving. If you won't let me buy the flat I will rent somewhere. I can lie about my age. I can pass for twenty-one quite easily and I only have to smile and men do exactly what I please."

"I will sign what ever is necessary," said Joyce softly. "I will leave it to you to make the arrangements as I don't think I could look Mr Wick in the eye again. And you can stay here in this house until you are ready to move. It is not you that needs to move out. Just how many are there, Stephanie? Just how many men will I be unable to look in the face?"

"Enough," said her daughter.

"I will never forgive you for this, never!"

"You forgive me?" cried Stephanie. "After what you've done to me and allowed to be done to me? You should be begging my forgiveness. At least you could say you are sorry."

"I am sorry."

"And tell me who my real father is!"

"No," said Joyce, adamantly.

"Then that's it! I will move out just as soon as I am able to and once I have I will

never speak to you again. Never!”

“As you wish,” said Joyce coldly. “You go, and be damned!”

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