

CHAPTER NINE

Joyce sat mournfully in the kitchen as the sky outside gradually darkened, listening to and hardening her heart against the sound of Stephanie sobbing in her bedroom. A sense of dread, horror and foreboding filled her as she stared aimlessly at the unwashed dishes and the unironed clothes. She told herself that she had to act, but to do what? There appeared to be so many conflicting demands on her and she could not make up her mind that she really was prepared to believe all her daughter had told her. Could she really have saved up enough to purchase a flat by whatever means? Was it possible that Stephanie had seen Michael and was inventing an elaborate story to cover the fact? It was so far fetched that it strained her credulity now she thought about it. Perhaps her daughter thought that she was more likely to believe an outrageous story than a plausible one. And if Stephanie had seen Michael she might wish to revenge herself against her mother for having kept his existence secret for all those years. Then again, if Michael had given her the money but asked her not to reveal the fact, Stephanie would have to find a story to explain it and would be hard pressed to do so. The more Joyce thought about it the more difficult it was to believe her daughter's story and the easier it was to give credit to her own explanation. After all, there was not one shred of corroboration of the fairy tale Stephanie had recounted. No, it was plain that she had been given the money by her real father and was being provocative to hide the fact, pay her back, and goad her into letting her leave home. That was the only sane explanation! "The little bitch!" she thought to herself.

But what should she do now in the face of what Stephanie had said? Could she reasonably go along with it? What about the particularly unpleasant things she had said and the allegations? Could she let these rest? Joyce stood and started upstairs intending to confront Stephanie, but went instead into her own bedroom and looked at herself in the mirror. She looked pale and drawn. "It's hardly surprising," she said aloud. "This could put years on me." It was as she was standing there that her gaze fell upon the reflection of the wardrobe and an outrageous thought crossed her mind. She went over to the window and looked out cautiously. It was not quite dark, but the streetlight was on and there was no sign of the Rover outside. Mr Hiller must have been still at Mr Wick's house.

Stealthily she went back downstairs and to the toolbox her husband kept at the bottom of the larder, something she had complained about often enough, but something for which she was grateful on this occasion. She selected a hammer and a pair of long, stout, screwdrivers and went back upstairs. All was quiet when she paused outside Stephanie's room. Perhaps her daughter had fallen asleep. How could she after having told such a fabrication? She checked the road again but everything was clear. It was not at all hard to prise open the lid of her husband's deed box although she could not do it in such a way that her entry would be undetectable when the lid was once again closed. "So much for security," she thought as she put the screwdriver down. She was less than half prepared for what she saw when she emptied the contents out on the bed.

"I want a divorce," she said coldly as soon as Mr Hiller returned and was confronted by the open deed box on the kitchen table. "And I want all this burnt, now! Every scrap of it else I will take it to the police."

"You know?" he said, shaking his head.

"Stephanie has told me everything, at least I assume she has. Even if she hasn't, she has told me enough. And I didn't believe her! I thought she was making it up until I looked at this filth. You must be sick. You make me feel sick."

"Mr Wick told me he had spoken to you about Stephanie wanting to have her own flat and that our consent was necessary."

"My consent, not yours. I don't want you to have anything to do with her."

"Yes, of course," he said. "I suppose I am pleased that it is all out in the open. In a way I'm surprised it all took so long."

"So long? How long in God's name has this been going on?"

“Ten years,” he said almost casually. “With Stephanie, that is.”

“Ten years? That means she was only six when you started.”

“It was all very light at the beginning, nothing serious or harmful.”

“Nothing harmful? How can you say that after you have perverted my daughter?”

“Only to the extent she was capable of being perverted.”

“What? Are you suggesting that a child of six knows what she is doing and can make choices between right and wrong?”

“And she was good at it. I think she enjoyed it and still does.”

“Enjoys it? No woman enjoys being used or treated like that.”

“That's where you are wrong, Joyce. Just as there are men like me, there are girls like Stephanie. It is the way we are made. We simply can't help it. It's something inside us, a tendency, a predilection. I don't know what to call it. It is just the way we are made.”

“Rubbish!” cried Joyce. “I trust you realise all this is very much against the law and that I am prepared to go to the police.”

“And expose Stephanie to a trial, having to give evidence, being cross-examined, having to describe everything in graphic detail? That is the stuff that Sunday newspapers are made of. Would you do that to her?”

“I won't if you will give me a divorce and burn this filth.”

“That's taken me a lifetime to collect.”

“I don't care. Either it is all burnt or I will take it all to the police station. My daughter is there, amongst them. What I want is a divorce and the house.” She could see the torment on his face and wished she could hurt him in some other way. “And I want you to move out right away.”

“Not tonight, surely? Where would I go?”

“You can sleep in the park for all I care.”

“Oh, come on, Joyce. Surely I can stay here tonight? Just one night?”

“Very well,” she said curtly. “But you are not to go near to Stephanie. In fact I will ask her to sleep in my room with me. And when I come home from work tomorrow I will expect to find you and all your belongings gone.” He did not answer but stood there, awkwardly, staring not at her but at the box on the kitchen table. “Burn them,” she hissed. “Burn them all, and now!”

“Yes,” he said hesitantly. “I am glad that it is out in the open. It has been a strain all these years not knowing if you knew and simply were not prepared to say anything, or whether you might suddenly find out. I didn't enjoy leading a double life. I had no idea how difficult it would turn out to be when I married you. And what I said about Stephanie is true. She was always precocious.”

“I don't believe you!” cried Joyce. “I don't believe any of this. Oh, God, let it all be a dream! Let me just wake up to find that it is morning and that everything is normal again!”

She watched him from the kitchen window as he built a small bonfire and destroyed the photographs. She wanted to hurt him more, but she thought what he said was right. If she went to the police and they prosecuted him, both she and Stephanie would find themselves in court and their private disgrace would be public. What would Michael say? She would have to tell him, of course, but better that she did so herself rather than he learned it from the gutter press. She waited there until she was satisfied that everything was burnt, then went upstairs without a further word to her husband. On the landing she paused outside her daughter's room. Beyond the closed door Stephanie was sobbing again. For a moment Joyce felt a surge of compassion and wished she could comfort her. Stephanie would only reject her if she tried. No, she had to be strong now, resolute, level-headed and not emotional. She could not face her daughter again that night.

Joyce lay back on her bed in the dark, fully clothed, listening to the sounds of the house, waiting for the slightest hint that her husband might creep upstairs, and unable to put the slightest part of the evening's happenings out of her mind. What hurt the most was the deceit, the treachery, the lying that had been going on for all those years. How could they, how could she, her own daughter, have acted in such a shameful way and never once mentioned it to her? How could she have acted in a way that seemingly everyone knew about

except her? What on earth could she have done or be asked to do that would have earned enough to buy one of Mr Wick's flats? Joyce shuddered when she thought of it. And there was the injustice of it, her daughter accusing her of having known, having connived, having had extra-marital relationships herself, when nothing could be further from the truth! Except there was Michael, although Stephanie did not know about him. At least, she did not know the nature of the relationship. Well, if they wanted her to do something they could talk about perhaps now was the time to do it! Why should she care, about Stephanie or Mr Hiller? They had chosen to go along a certain route, and she was sure that her daughter had acquiesced otherwise she would have said something to her about it, then let them continue along it, but elsewhere, not in her house.

Tomorrow was approaching. Joyce decided that she would go to work at the school as normal, but that she would not go back to the builder's office ever again. Instead she would write a short, polite, firm note telling him that the circumstances of which he was well aware rendered it impossible for her to continue working for him, and tendering her resignation. Stephanie had even ruined her opportunities there! She would not be able to look him in the face. She wondered again how many other men there were that she would not be able to look in the face? Half of Bromley, no doubt!

"It is not like that," said Stephanie tersely at breakfast. "It was never like that. It was always a relatively small group of men. It still is."

"Still?" said Joyce hoarsely.

"Still," affirmed her daughter. "You didn't think I'd given up or was prepared to just because of this, did you? Why do you think I want the flat?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Joyce abruptly.

"Of course I use to let some of the boys at school try, but most of them didn't know how to, or didn't have the equipment, or simply didn't have the money."

"You asked for money from the boys at your school?"

"Of course I did! Why should I give it away free?" asked Stephanie sharply. "I've always received money, right from the earliest of days when the going rate was half-a-crown to sit on a lap and keep quiet. Do you want to know how much I can earn now?"

"No!"

"You would be surprised what men are prepared to pay. I cannot imagine what their wives are like."

"Oh, Lord! These are married men?"

"Of course they are!" said Stephanie. "It's mostly married men, some old enough to be my father. Just think, Mother. He could be amongst them and neither of us would know! That would be pretty kinky wouldn't it?"

"He's not like that!"

"How do you know? He made you pregnant didn't he?"

"That was different," said Joyce defiantly.

"Of course it was," said Stephanie sarcastically. "Of course it was different. You are going to tell me you didn't do it for money. Well, I won't get pregnant any more than I shall never get married. And do you know the best of it? What I have is something that I can sell over and over again and yet always have. I didn't think of it, but it is true."

"I don't know how the two of you could do this to me," Joyce said lowly. "I can never forgive you."

"And I can never forgive you for keeping the truth about my father from me all these years!" said Stephanie standing. "Now, I am going to school. Doesn't it sound ridiculous me having to say that? I trust that you will at least keep your promise and sign the papers for Mr Wick consenting to be getting the flat?"

"I don't know," said Joyce falteringly. "I will have to think about it."

"Think about it?" cried Stephanie. "What do you mean, think about it?"

"I don't know whether I ought to sanction the purchase of a flat for immoral purposes."

"Immoral purposes? What has morality to do with it when you think of what has happened? Would you rather I went to the police? Or do you want your daughter to end up on

the street?"

"If that is where you belong," said Joyce beneath her breath.

"Or perhaps I should bring my men home here? How would you like that? What would the neighbours say?"

"I will sign what ever is necessary," said Joyce quietly. "I will sign anything to get both you and him out of my sight. You will have to bring the papers to me or have them sent here. I am not prepared to go and see Mr Wick again."

"And my father? Will you tell me who he is?"

"No," said Joyce. "I will not, not now, not ever. Don't ask me again or I might even now change my mind about signing this consent."

She would have to tell Michael. She would have to tell him that his daughter knew of his existence. He would ask how she found out and she would have to tell him the truth. And she would have to tell him the kind of life his daughter had been leading and was proposing to lead. It would not be easy to find the right words. At least she had a good while in which to prepare. She would have to tell Mr Pennington, too. She would tell him, but no-one else. Even to admit the truth to him would be difficult, given the disgrace and shame she felt, but she had to tell someone. It was too momentous to keep entirely to herself.

"You have heard about all my troubles with Stephanie?" she asked. "And that I am divorcing my husband?" Mr Pennington shook his head sadly and looked grave.

"I have heard one or two rumours," he said. "It is all very sudden."

"Did you know what was going on?" asked Joyce thinking that if he said "yes" she would not have to tell him. "I had no idea myself."

"No, Joyce," he said. "Had I known I would have talked to you. I did not know what was going on, as you put it. I still am not certain what went on. I have heard rumours about the activities and conduct of some of the teachers here, including a certain senior one, but there was never anything definite or substantial at the time. And, as I have told you, I do not move in those circles. Are you able to tell me what has happened?"

"Stephanie has announced that she is leaving home and moving into a flat. She cannot do it without my consent and I do not know what to do about it. She is still so young. I am still wondering whether I should try and stop her, not that I really want her to remain living with me. It is such a mess!"

"I gather that there is probably a lot more to it that you do not wish to say," said Mr Pennington kindly. "I am not going to press you, but if I could talk about that particular problem - tell me, could you stop her, or if you tried to do so would she simply leave?"

"I think she would leave. We had the most dreadful of scenes, so awful I could not begin to describe it or what was said. I think she would go what ever I did."

"Then why do you talk of trying to stop it?"

"She wants to buy a flat. Yes, can you imagine it? A girl of sixteen and she wants to buy the lease on a flat! She cannot do it unless I agree to a trust agreement for her because she is a minor."

"And if you do not agree? What then?"

"I don't know," said Joyce wondering if she really cared. "In my present frame of mind I wonder if I care. I suppose she could not buy the flat. Perhaps one of her men would buy it for her or set her up in it."

"In which case at best she would be obliged to whoever did it and at worst she could be under his power. I wonder if you ought to be pragmatic and ensure that she does, at least, have somewhere of her own."

"But if I sign," complained Joyce, "I would be aiding and abetting her to live off immoral earnings. It is tantamount to me giving her my seal of approval when nothing could be further from the truth, leave alone the question of whether it is all highly illegal. I find the whole thing quite sickening and abhorrent."

"There clearly is a lot more to it," said Mr Pennington thoughtfully.

"Oh, God!" exclaimed Joyce. "What ever can you be thinking about me? To let this sort of thing happen under my nose and not to have realised what was going on. Do you know she has even taken money from the boys at her school? I could strangle her, you know. I feel

so dreadful about it, I really do.”

“Let me say at the outset that it will not affect what I think about you, Joyce,” said the Mathematics teacher. “I think I know you well enough now. However, regardless of how you feel about her, I still think you should do what is best for your daughter, no matter what she has done or how disgracefully she may have behaved. It seems to me that if she is determined to leave home, the best thing is to allow her to be independent. The worst thing would be for her to fall under the control of someone unscrupulous. That is what can happen to young girls and if that happens they can never escape from the kind of life they are trapped in. I am sure you would not want that to happen to your daughter. I know you Joyce. No matter how you feel about her, you will do the thing that is in her best interest.”

“I can never forgive her.”

“That is not the issue at this moment. In time you may feel differently and think how you would feel then if you do the wrong thing now.”

“No I shan't. We are finished, she and I.”

“Think of her as a victim.”

“A victim? Mr Hiller was right when he said she was good at it. Do you know she has enough money to pay for this flat? Do you know that it all came from men? Men! This is a girl of sixteen! I cannot think of her as anything other than a slut who has the effrontery to blame me! Me, would you believe!”

“Many things are said in the heat of the moment and not meant. She may feel different herself in a few days.”

“She will not and neither will I. The die is cast.” Mr Pennington shook his head sadly and sighed.

“These things happen,” he said. Joyce did not ask him what he meant. “My advice to you is to sign this consent and let her have her flat. At least she will have a home of her own. The other things you cannot change.”

Joyce knew that his advice was probably sound, but every time she thought or talked about what had happened the anger and pain swelled inside her and submerged everything else. She could have screamed with frustration or with outrage. She could have torn out her auburn hair in large handfuls, one after the other. She could have written “slut, slut, slut” in red lipstick all over the mirror in her daughter's bedroom. She could have done all manner of wicked things to avenge the wrong done to her by her daughter. If only she had said that it had been Michael that had given her the money! To think she had returned home that evening, petrified that this might be the answer, only to find it was something far more terrible and unacceptable. It would have been a disappointment and she would have been very angry, but it would have been palatable. If only it had been Michael!

She was tempted to try and make contact with him rather than wait until their next annual meeting, but what would he do other than reprimand her and demand that he should be allowed to save Stephanie from the life she was slipping into. She, Joyce, would be blamed, for letting it happen, for stopping him all these years from becoming involved in his daughter's life. She could hear him saying that none of it would have happened had she allowed him to do what he had wanted to do all along. And Stephanie would be rewarded for her wickedness by being granted an income for life and never having to want for anything again! Joyce decided she would wait until their normal meeting. Anything could have happened by then and it could all be academic. She might even have the divorce and that would be something to lay before him! As for her daughter, everything pointed towards her signing what ever was required of her. Mr Pennington thought that was the best course and she could tell Michael that it seemed to be the only reasonable thing open to her to do. At least his daughter would have a roof over her head.

One saving grace was that Mr Hiller kept to his word. When Joyce returned from school on that first afternoon, he and all his belongings were gone. She was never to see or speak to him again. The only contact she had was through his solicitor who told her that she would be allowed to divorce him and that it would not be contested. He would make the house over to her and guarantee the mortgage repayments, but no more. Joyce asked for no more.

A few days later, or it seemed like a few days later, Stephanie left. She asked Joyce whether she wanted to go and see the flat but Joyce declined. They could not even part other than on a sour note.

And then she was alone in the house, and with his furniture. She expected to be asked to surrender it, but the request never came. At first being on her own was a novelty but very soon Joyce began to miss the presence of someone in the house when she came home from school. As the remaining weeks of the summer passed she became increasingly lonely, missing the two evenings that she once spent looking at the builder's books and dreaming of better things. But she turned down most of the invitations to visit Mr Pennington's cottage. "People may talk," she told him. The truth was, if her daughter was to be believed, people were already talking. "The worst part of it is I am so lonely," she added.

"Then you should come out and see me."

"There's the divorce to consider as well," she said. "I don't want anything to affect that."

"No," he said reflectively. "I had not thought of that. You are right to be careful."

"It is ridiculous, really, that I, the innocent party have to lead the life of a recluse whereas my husband can go off and do exactly what he pleases without it having the slightest effect on the case. That's justice for you!"

"What about your daughter? Couldn't you go and see her?"

"See Stephanie? There's little chance of that. I haven't seen her since she left home nor have I any inclination to do so. If she wants to see me, she knows where I live but I don't think she'll come. I think we have mutually agreed that we detest the sight of each other and I do not propose to be the first to attempt to change that."

"So you do not think there will be a reconciliation?"

"Not unless she comes and apologises to me. I am not going to go to her."

"I think you are being a bit hard on her," he said, "but it is not for me to interfere."

"Thank you," said Joyce. "It was her choice. I did not ask her to leave home. I will not be the first to ask her back. It is that simple."

"What about the house? Will you sell it once the divorce goes through?"

"Sell it?" The thought had never crossed her mind, but it was clear that it was in his. Perhaps he simply thought that it might be too large for her to manage on her own. Perhaps he had other ideas that he had not yet fully formulated.

"I just wondered," he said, giving nothing away.

"I hadn't really thought about it," Joyce said. "I suppose it has some pleasant memories and a few really painful ones. I will have to see how things go."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "You are right in saying you have to be careful regarding the divorce. You wouldn't want to present your husband with any evidence that would allow him to enter a cross-petition."

"I don't think he would do that," she said thoughtfully, "but I am not going to run the risk. Not yet, any way."

"Quite wise. I have heard of couples who hired private detectives to watch each other."

"Really?" she said, trying to remain calm as her heart leapt. She had told Michael they were being watched, but he had disbelieved her despite it being the truth. Still, had it not been for the private investigator and the notes he kept, Michael might never have come looking for her again!

"Oh yes! You can imagine that it leads to all manner of problems, with accusations and counter accusations. Then when they appear in court, all the intimate details are trotted out. It can be very lurid and unpleasant."

"I don't think Mr Hiller would want to take me to court," she said darkly. "No matter how I behaved."

"Even so, it is best to be cautious and take no risks at all, Joyce," he said. "No risks."