

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"There's another one of those parties coming up, Mrs Hiller," said Mr Holt. "Or may I call you Joyce?"

"I think Mrs Hiller would be more appropriate here in the school, Mr Holt," she said, conscious that her heartrate had increased. It was a wet morning and November was approaching. She had walked to school, dodging the puddles and the spray from passing cars, her small umbrella held close to her head. Now it rested by Mr Holt's feet, waiting for her to collapse it and place it in its customary position beside her handbag.

"Mrs Hiller, then," said Mr Holt. "It's a Halloween do."

"I am not sure that I agree with celebrating Halloween," she said. "It is an American custom, isn't it?"

"I don't think the party is intended to celebrate Halloween," he said anxiously. "The point is, I am allowed to put forward the name of a guest, a lady guest. Would you like to go with me as my guest?"

"Me? Why, yes, I would." There! She had said it, and it was not all that hard, after all. She felt as if she had broken out of some kind of enclosure that had been built around her. Now she was suddenly free, free to roam and do as she pleased. It was time that she did see exactly how Mr Pennington's inner circles lived and disported themselves. They, she was sure, did not stand about and watch a young Adonis cutting their lawns or pruning the roses. She would go and if she felt uneasy at any time she could just drop out. Mr Pennington would not approve, but why should she tell him? Why should she tell anyone? "Mark you, Mr Holt, she said sternly, "I do not want this matter of my acceptance to be brandished about the school. You do understand me, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he said hastily. "One of the rules is that we do not talk about who is going or who we meet there. It is very select, you know. I can't even guarantee that we will both be invited as our names will go forward to a vetting committee. But if we are, we will be given a time, place and password. That is all. Rather exciting, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," she said, "but I will have to know more. Do I have to bring a bottle? What about dress? Is it formal? What kind of party is it, dinner or cocktail?" The Mathematics teacher was clearly not prepared for her questions. She could see the confusion in his face but there was more. Her agreement to go had clearly pleased him.

"You really mean it?" he said excitedly. "You would be willing to go with me?"

"To the party, yes."

"Smashing!" he exclaimed. "As for the other things, don't worry about them. All women get in free and they wear what they want to wear. You can be as formal or informal as you like."

Joyce knew from the personnel records that the Junior Mathematics teacher was several years her junior. She also thought that if he found out, Mr Pennington might object to her going with someone from his faculty, as it were. But why should she look on Mr Holt in any different light to any of the other unmarried teachers? It crossed her mind that Mr Pennington might be able to use his contacts to get himself invited, but he would never take her. No, he had said he would rather spend the evening at home with his mathematical problems. Well, she had spent more than enough evenings at home.

"Sometimes people wear fancy dress," added Mr Holt, "but it isn't a fancy dress party so you wouldn't have to."

"Good," she said. "I would much rather not go in fancy costume. "And there's no need for me to take a bottle? You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely certain," he said. "The event is funded entirely by the men who go and all the women are by invitation." She thought he said that strangely as if there was a clear distinction between the selection of men and that of women.

"But wives go?" she asked.

"Only at their husbands' invitation."

"That must cause a few difficulties on occasions?"

"I expect it does. I don't know. But, you are sure you want to go?"

"For the third time, yes," she said. "Even if it is only to see what it is like."

"They can turn out to be pretty wild," he said suddenly, almost apologetically. Joyce wondered if he was getting cold feet.

"Wild? How do you mean? Not violent, surely?"

"No," he said cautiously, "but you may have to be a bit broad minded at some of the things that go on."

"I am as broad minded as the next person," she said. "I do not think you need to worry. I won't turn around and reprimand you for taking me to something which turns out to be, shall I say, risqué." She picked up the registers and took them across to the cupboard in which they were kept. Mr Holt was still hovering, as if either he did not believe her answer or had another question yet to be asked. He was watching her every move. She could feel it. "At Halloween, then," she said.

"Yes!" he said. "Oh, yes."

"And not a word to anyone, please."

"No. Not a word." After he had left she did have a few qualms, but what could be the harm in going? If others let their hair down or were carried away there was no need for her to do the same. And if many of the people who went were respected, professionals, and that sort, it would hardly harm her reputation. There was the chance of course that she would come face to face with Mr Wick. She could cope with that now, she thought. She would have to cope with it as she was not going to allow the prospect of him being somewhere to deter her from going where she wanted to.

Perhaps that was what she needed to do, let her hair down? She had rarely gone out to any function with Mr Hiller. She did not smoke and rarely ever drank. She had never been up to London to a show, or the ballet. "You are a very dull person, really, Felicity Joyce Lightfoot," she told herself. "You have to get out instead of moping around at home. If you do not, you face a winter trapped in the house with nothing more than the television for company." She did not even have a cat.

"I hear that you are going to go to a certain party with my Maths teacher," Mr Pennington said to her a few days later.

"Goodness me," she said, blushing slightly. "You are not supposed to know that. I told Mr Holt he was not to tell anyone."

"As far as I know, he did not. I have my own sources, Joyce."

"Any way, it is not settled that I am going. There has to be some kind of selection process before I get an invitation. It all sounds a little odd to me."

"Oh, you will get an invitation," he said. "There's no doubt of that. You realise of course that Mr Holt sees you as something of a catch, someone no-one else has landed, someone who he can show off in his bag?"

"Perhaps I should feel rather flattered?" she said, heartlessly. "I'm sorry," she added quickly. "I did not mean to hurt you. You have done so much to help me and stood by me throughout all my troubles. I feel I need to get out to meet people and have some excitement but if you don't want me to go, you only have to say the word and I will decline the invitation." She thought she knew what his reaction would be although she regretted having made the commitment to accord with his view. But having said it she should have to abide with his decision. One strict word from him and Mr Holt would be looking for another catch or going empty handed.

"It is not the kind of social event that I would wish to go to, but then I have never been the type who was good at socialising. And I would never attempt to interfere in anything you wanted to do."

"You are not going to tell me not to go?"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Joyce. I know that some of those who do go rely on the event to satisfy some of their more basic needs. I am not that way inclined. I never have been, but it is not for me to dictate what others do, including you."

"But you don't approve of these parties and the goings-on, do you?"

"I neither approve or disapprove," he said smiling. "I suppose it would be easy for me to try and take control of your life and tell you what to do. I must admit I have been tempted on more than one occasion, but it is not for me to do. I can offer you advice if you want it, but I cannot, I must not, attempt to get you to follow it."

"And Mr Holt?"

"He is a foolish young man. Not because he has invited you. In a way that shows a degree of common-sense and good judgement. But he is immature for his age, inexperienced and naive. If you do go, you should look after him. He could easily go astray."

"And you don't think I will?" she asked.

"I am banking on you not doing so."

"And what about my position here at the school? Do you think going to this select gathering will jeopardise it?"

"On the contrary," he said mysteriously, "it could well enhance your standing and reputation."

"Do you think I look all right?" asked Joyce when Mr Holt called at Wordsworth Street to collect her. She would have been both surprised and dismayed if his answer had been less than enthusiastically affirmative because she had taken as much care over her appearance as she had the day she surprised Owen Cross and left him with an impression he was unlikely to forget quickly. She fully expected to be flattered.

"Very nice," he said, looking her up and down. "Perhaps a little too sober for the occasion?"

She looked down at her high-necked ultramarine dress and then back at him. "Too sober?" she said, briefly checking her mascara in the hall mirror. "What kind of party is this?"

"Every kind. As I said, you will meet all kinds of people there. If you want intellectual stimulation of the current state of quantum physics you are more than likely to find someone there who can provide it although it is not my idea of the reason for going. If you want simply to have a good time, like me, you will not be disappointed. You'll see."

"But, my dress?" she said, looking down again and tugging at the skirt.

"It is very fetching. I could say - but I won't. Are you ready to go?"

"I am quite mystified," she said as she followed him down the garden path to where his small, green, Singer was standing, fully aware that this was something that would get the neighbours talking.

"Actually," he said as he opened the door for her, "you do look absolutely superb. Simply gorgeous!"

"Thank you!" she said, wrapping a chiffon scarf over her hair. The journey took less than fifteen minutes and although Mr Holt took a rather circuitous route and it was dark, she recognised the road. It was that next to the one in which Mr Wick lived, but the houses were larger.

"I will park her here," he said suddenly pulling over to the kerb and stopping. "We can walk the rest of the way. It is not far. They like you to park a little way off as it attracts less attention."

"It's not here then?" said Joyce, looking at the dark outline of a house standing some way back from the road.

"No," said Mr Holt. "Just a little way. Now, you remember the password? When we get there we will go in one at a time, you first. At the check tell them the password, go on in to the reception area and wait for me there. I can then show you around and perhaps introduce you to a few interesting people?"

The house was very large and well off the road, masked by a dense shrubbery of bushes and trees. As they walked up the arcing gravel drive to the front door Joyce could see no sign of life. She thought she might have heard music somewhere far off but otherwise everything was still and silent. "It is here, is it?" she said.

"Yes," he whispered. "Now you go in first and wait for me. All right?" He stopped and she automatically stopped as well. "Go on," he hissed. "I will catch up with you inside. You'll be all right."

The door opened slightly before she reached it. "Good evening, madam," said a deep masculine voice. "Please step inside." Joyce found herself in a small, dimly lit, room which was too large to be called a porch but too small to be used for any other purpose. Another man sat at a small table on which he had some papers. "Password?" he said as he looked up at her. Joyce felt silly, then a sense of panic coupled with the temptation to open the door and flee. But Mr Holt would be out there and she would appear even more foolish than she felt as she repeated what she had been told to say. The man at the table ran his finger down a list on one of the sheets, then looked at her again. "You can go in," he said suddenly and the second man opened a door through which poured the sound of chatter and a bright light. She stepped into a large, high, bright hall, lit by a large chandelier. Before her a curved staircase hugged its helical way up the wall to what appeared to be a long balcony. Around her, and off of the balcony, she could see a number of doors, some of which were closed, others open. From somewhere she could hear music and the sound of people talking, but she could see no-one and she felt very vulnerable.

"There!" said Mr Holt, joining her. "That wasn't all that bad, was it? Certainly better than going to the dentist's! I should explain the passwords are normally unique just to stop gate crashers. It's a sensible way of doing it."

"You would certainly never know there was a party going on here," she said. "Not from the outside and not readily from the inside. Where is everyone?"

"Oh, it may still be a little early yet, but some are here. You can hear them. And now you are in you can forget all your inhibitions. No-one talks about what goes on here. I would hate to think what might happen to them if they did. You can do almost whatever you like so long as you do not harm anyone else. You can talk, dance, drink, take drugs, make love, anything. Are you all right?"

"I do feel just a little nervous," she said.

"That will soon wear off. Come along," he said, taking her arm. "Let's go and find someone." Joyce found it hard to believe that this was the young, nervous, junior Maths teacher whom Mr Pennington thought would not survive because of his nerves, immaturity and shyness. Instead it was she, who usually so impressed everyone with her calm and grasp of situations, who felt tense and apprehensive. "You are bound to see quite a number of familiar faces," he added.

"That thought only makes me feel all the more nervous," she whispered. "I am beginning to wonder whether it was wise for me to come. Perhaps I should go?"

"Of course you should have come! There's absolutely no reason why you should leave, not yet at least. Give it two or three hours, then see how you feel. And come and meet some of the other guests." He led her towards one of the open doors and the sound of music and chatter grew louder. Joyce was not certain as to what she expected to see, but it all looked very ordinary and conventional except amongst the first people she saw, and who saw her, was Mr Wick. What was worse, before she had time to hide behind Mr Holt or flee in another direction, he made a bee-line for her!

"Mrs Hiller!" he exclaimed. "By all that's wonderful. May I still call you Joyce?"

"I suppose so," she said glumly.

"You have no drink! Can I get you one?"

"Actually I think Mr Holt is about to get me one," she said turning to her escort.

"Ralph," he said, at her shoulder. "Call me Ralph. What would you like?"

"Oh, something soft."

"No," said Mr Wick with scorn. "Have some of the punch. It is delicious." It was a bad tactical move to say that Ralph Holt was fetching her a drink because he faithfully went off leaving her with the man she would rather have avoided. "How are you keeping?" he asked. "I must say you are looking ravishing."

"I? I am fine, thank you," she said curtly. "I must say, I didn't expect to find you here. I understood that your tastes were different."

"Oh, my tastes are very catholic. I would count you amongst them."

"I am surprised. I had no idea you extended yourself as far as women of my age."

"Of all ages, actually," he said laughing. "You mustn't feel bad about what happened."

If anyone should feel bad it is me. I lost the best book-keeper I ever had, and I had been hoping for even better things. As for your delectable daughter, if it hadn't happened when it did, it would have happened at some other time. Some young girls are just made like that."

"You are trying to say that I've been a bad mother and that it was all my fault, aren't you?" Joyce said sharply.

"No, no," he said, still smiling. "Not at all. In any case, in here we all try to leave our external worries and concerns behind us. The purpose is to try to forget them for at least this evening and relax. It is great for reducing stress. In here we should all meet on equal and unaffected terms."

"That may be very easy for you to say," she said, looking around to see if there was anyone else she knew. There was Mr Holt, drinks in hand, but talking to a short, blond, woman and not looking in her direction. "What happened has completely ruined my life, totally wrecked it. You can have no idea how I feel about it, what I think. I cannot completely disregard it."

"It wrecked your life? Do you really believe that, Joyce. You did marry him, and he was like that then. Perhaps it is unfortunate that you did not find out earlier."

"And spoiled your enjoyment? Would you still have employed me?"

"Joyce, Joyce," he said wearily. "I employed you because you were good at what you did, really good. I consorted with your daughter because she was good at what she did. It is as simple as that."

"You disgust me," said Joyce, trying to attract Mr Holt's attention. "You really do! How could anyone molest a child of six?"

"I don't know," Mr Wick said, looking grave. "I never did such a thing. I did not meet your daughter until she was fourteen and believe me she looked and behaved as if she was much older. But, to return for one moment to your soon-to-be-ex-husband. Why do you think he married you?"

"I don't know," said Joyce. "He said he would help me. I suppose he felt sorry for me."

"He said he would help you? Think about it, Joyce. He picked you out at a party, didn't he? It was a party like this, at Halloween, when things might just happen. He saw you as someone who was vulnerable, someone who might just get into trouble. He may well have said exactly what he said to you to any number of other girls of your age. Did you ever think of that possibility? Most men wouldn't dream of marrying a woman who was bearing another man's child, no matter how attractive they might be, but he married you just because you were."

"Oh, Lord," she whispered, as a chilling reality began to freeze her thoughts.

"He would look upon your child as just another child, there, ready for him. It might have been different if he had been the father, though I doubt it. He wanted an expectant, unmarried mother, not to help her, but to have unrestricted access to her child. It is not your fault. You were as much a victim of his vices every bit as much as your daughter was."

"He was using me, all the time?" she hissed.

"That's what they do. And don't get the wrong impression about me. I am not and never have been one of his circle. My involvement with Stephanie happened quite by chance and, believe me, she made the first move."

"The little slut!" said Joyce.

"I had no idea how young she was. Had I known I would not have indulged."

"She always seemed older than she actually was," said Joyce lowly. "That was one of the problems. She developed so early. You don't think what he did to her caused it, do you?"

"I don't know," said Mr Wick, placing his hand on her arm.

"He's not here, is he?" she suddenly exclaimed.

"Who?"

"My husband!"

"Good gracious, no! I cannot imagine anyone suggesting in the first place that someone like that should be included and I certainly would have vetoed it had I been on the selection panel. We may do some wild things here but only between consenting adults. We do

draw the line somewhere!”

“Thank goodness for that,” she breathed.

“Now, you go and have a good time. Go and circulate. There are plenty here who will want to talk to and be seen with a beautiful woman. And here comes your gallant escort with your punch. I will see you later, I am sure.”

“I am sorry, Joyce,” said Mr Holt as he handed her the drink. “I got tied up.”

“So I saw,” said Joyce. She saw his reaction and smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I don’t mind!”

“You know him?” he asked.

“Mr Wick? Why, yes. Would you believe I used to keep his company’s books?” Mr Holt nodded but did not speak. It gave Joyce the first opportunity to look about her. The room was large, certainly by her standards, with a high, ornate, ceiling. One wall was completely clad with dark olive velvet curtains which stretched down to the carpeted floor. Opposite her was a pair of folding doors which had been pulled back to reveal another room from which came the sound of laughter. Curiously she left Mr Holt’s side and edged forward to see what was happening, but froze as above the laughter she heard a familiar voice. Mr Holt came up behind her as was about to speak but she waved him to remain silent as the laughter grew closer. Then suddenly, framed in the opening, her red hair glistening as it tumbled down over a shockingly low-cut black dress, and surrounded by, it seemed to Joyce, a legion of admirers, was Stephanie. Behind her was Mr Wick.

“Mother and daughter, together at last,” he said, raising his glass. “Gentlemen this truly is an occasion and cause for a celebration, to have two of the most beautiful women in Bromley, no, in London, here to grace our presence. I propose a toast to you both. To Stephanie and to Joyce!” Joyce suddenly found herself the subject of an unusual degree of attention, but she could not avoid the cold, blank, malevolent stare from her daughter. Joyce tried to escape, taking Mr Holt’s arm, but others had appeared behind her to see what the fuss was and they now blocked her way. Stephanie curtly dismissed her entourage and strode over to where her mother stood, pulled her into a small alcove beside a large, silent, piano, and confronted her.

“What are you doing here, Mother?” she hissed. “Did you come to check up on me?”

“Check up on you?” Joyce hissed back. “Don’t be ridiculous! Why should I want to do that? I didn’t even know you would be here.”

“Of course I am here! I am the star attraction. Half of this party is in my honour! Don’t you think I look absolutely stunning?”

“I suppose you do,” said Joyce grudgingly. “You could do with showing a little less cleavage.”

“And look frumpy like you? What is the point of having good looks and a figure to match them if you don’t show them off? And, after all, that is all I am good at, isn’t it?”

“I am sure there are other things you could do,” said Joyce lamely.

“What like? Do you mean being a book-keeper or a school secretary? Even if someone would employ me, I would be bored out of my mind in minutes. And don’t you say that I should have done better at school! I would have just ended up a pauper. Do you have any idea how much I earn? And do you realise that it is all tax free?”

“I don’t want to know,” hissed Joyce. “I don’t want you parading all your vices in front of me. I don’t want to know anything about what you do.”

“I bet my father does,” said Stephanie. “Have you told him?”

“No,” said Joyce.

“And you are here, aren’t you?” said Stephanie with an air of triumph in her voice. “I believe you may be setting out to follow in your dear daughter’s footsteps. Well I may be able to help you there!”

“I am here because I was invited,” Joyce protested.

“And what are you getting up to with Owen Cross?” said her daughter sharply. “You know that he is engaged to be married?”

“I am not up to anything with him,” Joyce protested further. “He has been coming around to cut the grass and do odd jobs.”

“Are you amongst the odd jobs?”

“Stephanie!” hissed Joyce, looking around her.

“Mother!” replied Stephanie. “Have you heard from my father?”

“No.”

“And will you tell me who he is, pray?”

“No!”

“I see,” said her daughter, firmly. “Well, I will never forgive you for that, never.”

“You forgive me?” said Joyce, trying to keep her voice down. “I don't want your forgiveness, not after what you did. You are the one who should be begging for forgiveness!”

“Ladies! Ladies!” said Mr Wick, coming between them. “This is not conducive to the kind of evening this is meant to be. I must separate you before you come to blows. I feel sure, as they say, this house is big enough for the two of you.”

“I am not so sure that it is,” said Stephanie, sullenly.

“Just so long as she keeps out of my sight,” retorted Joyce, “it will be!” She went back to where Mr Holt was stood talking to two of Stephanie's admirers.

“What was all that about?” he asked, clearly confused.

“Don't you know who she is?” asked Joyce.

“Of course I do. There's not a man here who doesn't know her. She's the fabulous Stephanie Waterhouse. I don't think I have ever as much as spoken to her.”

“Waterhouse? That's not the name I know her under! As for speaking to her, you haven't missed much!”

“Oh!” said Mr Holt, sounding clearly disappointed. “I see you have finished your drink. I'll get you another,” he added, and before she could stop him he was gone again.”

“Well, well,” said a familiar voice behind her. “So this is where you have been hiding, Mrs Hiller!”

“Why, Mr Larkins,” she exclaimed, “I had no idea that you would be here!”

“You will find all manner of people here,” said the Headmaster. “And you can call me Rupert on occasions like this. I trust you will not object to a reciprocal familiarity on my behalf?”

“Not so long as it is limited to names,” she thought. “No, not at all,” she said. “Is Mrs Larkins, your wife, here?”

“Harriet? Goodness me, no. She isn't interested in occasions like this. I expect she's tucked up in bed sipping whiskies and reading golf manuals. She thinks parties are excessive but then she plays far more golf than I go to parties. I see you haven't a glass. Can I get you something to drink.”

“I think Mr Holt is organising one,” Joyce said anxiously.

“Ah, yes, Mr Holt,” said the Headmaster, ominously. “Of course, he is here, isn't he? And I see your beautiful daughter is here too.”

“Stephanie?” asked Joyce weakly. “You know her?”

“She would be hard to miss,” said Mr Larkins, guardedly.

“There aren't all that number of people I know, I must admit. Is Mr Crompton here?”

“Crompton? Certainly not. He's considered to be far too straight-laced, unbending, inhibited. And he's a Gilbert and Sullivan man, you know. Perhaps if we told him there was going to be a private rendering of the Gondoliers he would want to come but I cannot see the committee admitting him. I mean, the man even objects to the holding of the school dance which is, as you know, coming up shortly, on the grounds that it brings men and woman together and could lead to our boys touching some of the girls from the County High! What he would make of one of our banshees I do not know. It would confirm every one of his worst fears.”

“One of your what?”

“Banshees. That is the nick-name we give to our parties. That's what we call them.”

“I didn't think banshees were exactly all that pleasant,” she said. “Aren't they some kind of evil spirit?”

“Perhaps they are in Ireland,” said Mr Larkins, beaming. “Here, well, they are what you make them inside this small world within a world. Mr Holt has explained the rules? The

main thing to remember is that when you see me on Monday and I see you, none of this actually happened. When you stepped through the door this evening you left your normal world and entered a new one. When you leave, you will step back over again. In the period in between you can forget yourself and act in almost any way you please. I would admit that means only one thing to many of those here, but even that can be practised in an infinite number of ways and there are some skilled practitioners here.”

“Now you are making me feel afraid, Mr Larkins - Rupert.”

“I can assure you Joyce that you have absolutely nothing to fear except yourself. No-one here would attempt to make you do something that you did not wish to do, but the point is you can do what you want to do. So for this night, forget yourself and simply enjoy yourself, if that makes sense.”

“I will try,” she whispered, seeing Mr Holt making his way back to her.

“They had run out of punch,” he said. “I was getting anxious. I thought you might be taken.”

“Taken? What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said looking around. “Was that Mr Larkins that was talking to you? What did he say?”

“He just told me to enjoy myself,” she said, sipping.

“Jolly good idea. Would you like to dance?” He took her hand and she realised that was the first time that evening he had actually touched her. They went into a dim room where a number of couples were moving slowly across the floor in each other's embrace. Beyond she could see her daughter talking animatedly to two men and shaking her head. When Stephanie realised she was standing there she pointed in her direction and the two men came over.

“Can we have a word,” said one.

“We were just going to dance,” she said looking at Mr Holt.

“It won't take a minute. We were talking to your daughter about a proposition and she thought you might be interested.”

“A proposition?” said Joyce with suspicion.

“We are casting for a film and wondered if you would be interested?”

“A film?” said Joyce. “A film of what?”

“It's based on a novel by a woman called Marguerita Gascoigne. I doubt if you've ever heard of her.”

“Oh, I have,” said Joyce, feeling her the pace of her heart increase. “Her full name is Marguerite Eliza Gascoigne.”

“Is that so? Well, I doubt that you've read it. It's called The Persian's Harem.”

“I have read it.”

“I've never heard of her,” said Mr Holt. “What's it about?”

“That's not exactly important right now,” said the first man. “The point is whether you would be interested in acting in this film.”

“I would be absolutely super if we could get both mother and daughter and use them as mother and daughter!” said the second man. “Just think how that would go down.”

“There aren't a mother and daughter in the book,” said Joyce, puzzled.

“That's no problem. We would just amend the script. Are you interested?”

“Me? Appear in a film?”

“A leading role,” said the second man.

“But I cannot act,” protested Joyce. “I know nothing at all about it.”

“You wouldn't have to act,” said the first man. “At least not very much.”

“Wouldn't have to act? What ever kind of film is it?”

“A special kind of film,” said the first man. “Very special.”

“Liberal,” said the second.

“Liberated,” said the first, “the pay's good.”

“Good?” said Mr Holt. “How good?”

“Can we tell you this in confidence as we would not want to have this get around? For you, given your looks, we would pay five pounds an our for ordinary nude scenes, fifteen



pounds an hour for simulation and twenty five for full penetration, but if your daughter agreed to appear with you we could offer a substantial increase on those rates which are very good in anyone's book to begin with."

"You've already asked Stephanie?" said Joyce taking a deep breath and trying not to tremble.

"Yes," said the first man.

"And she refused?"

"Yes. But if you were willing we think we could get her as well."

"You cannot imagine how wrong you are about both of us," said Joyce.

"You are not interested?" said the second man, sounding astonished. "I reckon we might be able to squeeze some of the rates up a little if that is the problem."

"Not at any price," said Joyce emphatically. "Now, we are going to dance." She had no doubt that Stephanie had sent them across just to embarrass her, but she drew a small amount of comfort that her daughter had also declined the offer. At least she appeared to have a small amount of decency in her.

"Were they asking you to do what I thought they were asking you to do?" asked Mr Holt as soon as they were clear of the two men.

"I think the message came over loud and clear! The nerve! What do they think I am?"

"I don't understand the references to your daughter. What did they mean?"

"You don't know?" said Joyce, wondering why she was smiling at something that would normally make her very angry.

"Know what?"

"I will tell you to save any possible embarrassment later. The girl you referred to as Stephanie Waterhouse. She is my daughter."

"Good grief! I don't believe it!" exclaimed Mr Holt. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to make that sound rude. I just never dreamed she was your daughter."

"She has to be someone's," said Joyce. "It just happens to be me. You might as well know that we hate the sight of each other so she might as well not be my daughter."

Later, whilst they were still dancing, Mr Holt made Joyce another proposition which she also declined. He looked disappointed and hurt. "No," she said softly. "I am not ready, not for that, not yet."

"It is said to keep you young," he offered.

"That may be, but I am not ready." Joyce would have admitted that she felt it was paradoxical that her daughter was prepared to hand out such largesse whereas she restricted herself to one man once a year. She should perhaps have been ready for the question but she found now it was asked, and by a Junior teacher from the school, she was shocked. However, she was not certain what made her hold back. Perhaps it was the fact that she did not know what she would tell Michael, or whether she would tell him anything at all. There had been a time when she piled high her virtue of saving herself only for him, but the passage of the years had eroded this edifice. After all he always said she was free to do as she pleased and that he had no hold over her. How could he have, she asked herself. The very thought that he might try to restrict what she did or who she associated with angered her! Yet she did not know the price placed on her virtue. How highly did he value it? How would he react if she were to have casual affairs? Could she be running the risk of losing him?

She tried to imagine them sitting together on the wall, their wall, looking out over the Downs and the dark green patches of trees, out across the Channel, trying to decide where the sea ended and the sky began. She would have posed the question had she been able to find the suitable words. But how do you ask your lover that sort of thing? How would she explain that she was not proposing to follow in their daughter's footsteps? What would she say if he told her such a conduct simply gave Stephanie a bad impression? Michael did not even know about the divorce and of Stephanie leaving home. He did not know that she would be free in a few months, certainly before they next met. And if there was a chance, the slightest of chances that his circumstances might have changed, she could not take the risk of ruining their chances of finding happiness together. It was still a long time before their next meeting, but she had to try and resist until then at the very least. The burning question was could she?

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