

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Did you enjoy your party?” asked Mr Pennington. Joyce looked up with a puzzled look on her face.

“That is not the kind of question you are supposed to ask,” she said sweetly.

“Ah, but there I disagree. I am not one of your elite. It is the kind of question I can ask.”

“In which case, it is the kind of question that I cannot answer.”

“You could at least tell me whether it lived up to your expectations and whether you enjoyed it?” Joyce closed her eyes and pictured her daughter glaring at her from between her entourage.

“I suppose so,” she murmured. She had no real intention of being evasive. A number of things had happened to her at the function and she had not made up her mind whether she would tell anyone anything about them, not even Michael.

“Well?” he said. Joyce sensed a little more than curiosity in his voice. He was really asking had she or had she not? “What happened?”

“It is all supposed to be kept secret,” she said softly.

“Rather childish I would think,” said Mr Pennington.

“Rather childish you might think, but they hardly acted like children.”

“Yes?”

“It turned into some kind of orgy,” she whispered. “They warned me it was completely uninhibited. I saw why!”

“And did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Participate?”

“Would it matter if I had?” she said sharply.

“Why, er, no,” he stammered, “I don't suppose it would.”

“Mr Pennington! What kind of woman do you take me for?” she said, exposing the long neck that he so admired and twisting the snakes around her wrist.

“I'm sorry, Mrs Hiller,” he said nervously. “I didn't mean to offend you. I am just interested in your welfare. I look upon you as, well, I would never seek to interfere in your life, you know that. But on the other hand I wouldn't want to see you do anything silly.”

“I am not going to do anything silly,” she said fussily. She watched him retreat and felt pangs of guilt over her treatment of one of the few friends she had. “You might be very surprised if you knew who was there.”

“Except you are not permitted to tell me.”

“I can tell you that my daughter was there. That came as a nasty shock I can tell you and she was perfectly beastly to me.”

“Was she? How is she getting along?”

“Do you know her?”

“No!” he said. “You know that I don't.”

“I keep on finding out things that I didn't know.”

“Well I do not know your daughter. I was just asking after her welfare.”

“Oh, I would say she is doing very well measured by her standards. Do you know she is virtually adored? All the men have placed her on some kind of pedestal? It really is extraordinary.”

“It is not at all surprising. After all, she is your daughter.”

“Yes,” Joyce said sharply, not accepting this as the compliment it was meant to be, “that is just about all that can be said in her favour.”

After he had retreated from the office she sat at her desk contemplating the papers before her but barely seeing them, thinking about what had just passed. It was unlike any other conversation they had before and was probably the closest they had come to quarrelling. She knew why he was anxious. She did not know why he did not understand her better and trust her, except she did ask why, if she did not fully understand herself, she should expect

him so to do. But he had been mildly aggressive whilst she had been firmly aggressive, and it was all over the party. Perhaps, if that was the effect they were going to have, she should not go again except she knew that if she were to be asked, she would.

Unusually, it was raining when the next appointed day came to make her trip down to Dover. Little had happened since the night of the party. Joyce spent the Christmas at home, alone, against the advice and wishes of Mr Pennington who implored her to go over to the cottage, at least for Boxing Day. She did not as much as receive a card from her daughter, and she did not send her one either. After some thought, and against her earlier inclination, she declined an invitation to the next party, saying that she had a prior unavoidable engagement. Mr Holt was clearly disappointed. Perhaps he thought he was likely to succeed this time where he had previously failed. Joyce thought of him as a pleasant, attentive, not unattractive young man, and her refusal could have been based on exactly the same assumption as was his invitation. As Spring took hold in the garden, she began to wonder about making contact with Owen Cross to see if he was still in the market for cutting, pruning, and other odd jobs. And she thought increasingly about the coming meeting with Michael.

Normally she could rely on the weather being fine if not always mild and it came as a great disappointment when she drew the curtains to find the reflected dawn glistening on the pavements. Of course she had to go! He would be there. Neither of them could allow something as petty and insignificant as the weather to keep them apart. Yet did she have just this feeling of unease, just a sense, a temptation, to find an excuse that would preclude making the journey that year?

She walked to the station through a fine drizzle. She was not alone, but most were heading in the opposite direction to her. She wondered if it would be sensible to suggest to Michael that they should meet in London. It would be so much easier for her to get to, especially on a day like that day. She could just imagine herself wading through the skirt-long grass and trying to climb the slippery slope up to the gardens at the summit. As a precaution she took her boots in a plastic bag. Perhaps she could take a taxi to the end of the track that led to the cottage, walk along it and hope that she could catch him there? Although she liked the cottage, on a day like that it would have been much nicer in the comfort of a London hotel, and where were the risks now?

The rain seemed to be heavier as the carriage headed south, streaming down the window, obstructing her view of the countryside. This was really silly, she told herself. Either way she was going to get wet, and for what? For perhaps what promised to be the worst meeting she would ever have with the man she loved. If he reacted wrongly in her opinion concerning Stephanie, it might even be the last. The thought saddened her. There had been those long years when Michael did not have a rôle in her life. She saw them now as barren and wasted years. It was possible she was about to be plunged into another winter should matters go wrong that day.

When the train pulled into Dover Priory it was still raining. She stood for a moment in the station entrance, sheltering under the canopy, hoping that by some miracle he might be there waiting for her, ready to drive her to the cottage. But he did not come and with an increasing sense of foreboding she crossed to a taxi. With a feeling of martyrdom she asked to be taken to the road which edged the foot of the Downs. She would not break with tradition. She would walk from there.

The taxi driver must have realised she was changing her shoes in the back of the cab. Perhaps he wondered what she was up to when he caught a glimpse of more leg that she would normally be prepared to show in his mirror. He would have had a curious story to relate to his mates later that day. "Honestly, I had this fare. A good-looking woman. She just got out the cab, paid me, went through a gap in the hedge and next thing I knew she was in this field in the middle of nowhere. I wasn't sure if she meant me to follow, you know what I mean, but it was raining. I waited there and watched her then I had to go for another fare. You see all sorts in this job!"

Joyce saw the taxi leave. Now there was no real prospect of turning back. She had to rely on Michael being there. If he was not, if he had assumed that she would not go or was

waiting for her at the cottage, she had a long walk before her. Umbrella above her head, watched closely by the sheep, she slowly picked her way up the steep hill. Soon she was in a mist and she could no longer see where she had come from. "This really is silly!" she said to herself. Yet, she found herself reliving memories from a long way back, of the time before Michael when she had made this walk in conditions every bit as bad as she faced that day. She could remember being there, in the clouds, thinking that no-one could see her. It was equally clear that no-one would have seen if she had been followed. She wondered why it was that Kurt had never attempted to follow her. He had come into her bedroom in the night before she started bolting the door, but he had never pursued her on any of the walks that so concerned her sister. And Debbie was there, not two miles away, probably dry and snug at Newington House. Perhaps now that the divorce was through and Stephanie was no longer at home she should go and see her. Lady Newington would only know her as Debbie's sister. No-one there would know her connection with Michael, not unless she had been seen with him.

She thanked God when she saw him standing, waiting for her. "I half-wondered if you would come," he said, putting an arm around her. Water dripped from one of the cherry trees and ran down her neck, causing her to squirm.

"Of course I would come," she whispered. "Didn't we say we would on this day come heaven and high water?." She nestled against his damp cheek. "Or words very much to the same effect," she added. "So I am here. And is it getting heavier, or is it just me?"

"You could be right," he said. "Do you want to hang on here or would you rather risk it and get down to the cottage where there's a fire."

"I think we had better try and get to the cottage whilst we can," she said. "This really shows no sign of abating. Of course, you remember the last time we sat before a fire at the cottage?"

"How could I possibly ever forget?"

"I do hope it's not an omen. You know what happened after that occasion."

"We went into our respective wildernesses and wandered," he said. "You are not expecting us to have to do that again, are you?"

"I don't know," she said, looking down at the puddles surrounding her.

"Something's happened, hasn't it, Felicity?"

"I do have something to tell you," she said softly, "but not here, not in this weather."

"Very well, then," he said firmly. "We will wait until we are at the cottage."

It was a welcoming sight as Rose Cottage came into view, a thin column of smoke fighting its way slowly upwards from the front chimney. "Perhaps I should have had the Aga lit. It would have made it easier to dry our clothes. I suppose I could always take you up to the House. Apart from your sister, no-one would know you there."

"No!" she said emphatically, halting at the gate as if she was uncertain whether to go on. "We must be alone. I have something to tell you and it is something I cannot talk about in front of others."

"Oh dear!" said Michael. "Now you are beginning to worry me, but what ever it is it cannot be something that can be altered by us waiting until we are in the dry with a nice warm drink. Come on. Let's get out of this rain!"

Joyce had been thinking about what she would tell Michael for weeks. Other than the weather, she thought of little else on the train down. She had lived in anticipation and dread of the moment when she told him of the crisis that had descended upon the family at No 29, wondering how he would react. She had thought about it so much that it all seemed very stale when they settled in front of the fire and wiggled their toes before it. "I am getting divorced," she said suddenly.

"What?" exclaimed Michael. "I had no idea that there was any kind of problem."

"In fact, I am divorced. It is just that I do not believe it."

"Did he divorce you or you he?"

"What does it matter? I am free, Michael. Do you understand what I am saying? I am free."

"And I am not," he said and looked away. "What happened?"

"I have divorced him."

"Ah," said her lover. "But I thought everything was fine between you."

"Well it was not. It just goes to show that you can trust no-one!"

"You can trust me," he said, looking at her again.

"Can I, Michael?"

"Implicitly. No matter what happens. Nothing could change the way I feel about you, but to think that you are free and I am not, nor do I look like getting free."

"You say I can trust you. How strong is our relationship? Is it unbreakable?"

"I see," he said. "There's more besides? That was the good news?"

"Our relationship?"

"I see it as unbreakable," he said slowly. "But it is so infuriating to think that you have your freedom and I have not."

"Nothing has changed with Christina?"

"Nothing at all. We go on leading the same pointless, loveless, empty lives, barely talking to each other. There are days when I don't as much as see her. I suppose those are the good ones."

"You could ask her."

"I could do anything," said Michael, shaking his head, "but I know what the answer is. She won't release me, no matter what I said or did. And what is worse, if I did ask for a divorce or annulment, she would suspect something and there's no knowing what she would do."

"You don't think she is still dangerous, do you?"

"I don't know. I am not prepared to take the risk."

"But people do change, Michael. Perhaps she sees your marriage in exactly the same way as you do. She might leap at the chance of a separation."

"Not Christina," he said. "She does not change, at least not for the better. There is no possibility of her changing into an understanding, compassionate, human being. It is not in her nature."

"Yet you continue to meet me here and run the risk that someone will see me."

"No risk really. I told Barnes today that someone was coming to see the cottage with a view to renting it. Would you like to come and live here now that you are free?"

"It is a bit too isolated to live here alone," Joyce said, looking towards the window and into the grey wood that lay beyond. "Any way, I've my job to think of."

"Would you live here with me?"

"We did talk of that once, didn't we? We said how romantic it could be, living here away from the World, in a little world all of our own."

"It could still be romantic," he said.

"We are a little too old for romance, Michael," she said. "Any way, I would prefer to live at the House and be surrounded by fine and beautiful things. That's what I would like to do. That is what you must promise me we will do one day."

"I am afraid that it's not like that any more. There's little fine and beautiful up at Newington House. It just continues to deteriorate and most of the furniture and paintings have been stored. Lady Newington is always complaining to me every time I see her, but there's nothing I can do. Christina will not consent to having it repaired. I believe she is determined to see it rot and fall down, or get to a stage where there will be no choice but to pull it down."

"That's a great shame," said Joyce.

"So it is, but I did tell you what I thought happened to her there. And I have other houses, just as grand."

"Other houses," repeated Joyce. "That sounds grand in itself."

"But you have more to tell me," he said. "Would you like another warm drink before you start?"

"That would be nice," said Joyce, willing to accept anything that postponed the moment.

"Why don't you come down to see your sister?" he called from the kitchen. "If you can come to see me, you could go to see her. You would then see the state the House is in for

yourself.”

“I don't know,” said Joyce, turning to expose her other side to the warmth. “I have thought about it now things are changed, but there's still a risk, perhaps an even bigger risk now.”

“When you say things have changed, you mean other than the divorce? In fact I haven't really asked you about that. We got side-tracked somehow.”

“We will leave that until later. Now that I am worked up enough to tell you the bad news I do not want to be put off.”

“You make it sound very serious,” he said handing her the drink. “What is it about?”

“Stephanie!”

“Stephanie?”

“Stephanie,” she said flatly.

“Don't tell me something has happened to her! Is she all right?”

“It all depends on your definition of all right. I am not sure how to tell you this, but I suppose I should start by saying that we had a dreadful row, the two of us, and she left home.”

“Is that all?” he asked casually.

“Oh, no! There's more, much more.”

“But she is all right in herself? She hasn't been in an accident or been ill, something like that?”

“No,” said Joyce wearily, “nothing like that. Oh, I really do not know how to say this, not about our own daughter. I am afraid that she knows about you. That was part of the reason for the row we had.”

“So, she knows about me and has left home. Where is she living? With a friend?”

“She bought a flat. That is how she got to know about you. I thought you had given her the money. I was very cross at the time and confronted her.”

“Oh dear,” said Michael, pausing as he contemplated what he had been told and waited to see whether there was more. “So, she knows about me and has bought a flat? And you told her?”

“I did! Isn't it ridiculous after all the trouble I went to in order to keep the truth from her? But when I heard she was buying a flat it was the only thing I could think of.”

“You thought the money came from me? Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to have given her the money. I hope that one day I will be able to do something like that for her.”

“You may not feel that when I tell you what she's become,” said Joyce.

“What she's become? Where *did* she get the money?”

“She told me she earned it.”

“Earned it? That sounds like my father's granddaughter. How enterprising! She must have worked exceptionally hard. What does she do?” Joyce did not answer but looked into the heart of the fire. She could have remained silent and told him none of this. She could have kept everything that passed between her and her daughter from him. She could have said that everything was fine and that Stephanie had a mundane job in an estate agents or tobacconists. She could have said that her daughter had a particularly nice boyfriend. She could have said almost anything and it would have sounded better than the words that formed on her lips. But they had promised each other to be truthful and she had never told him a single lie, at least not since the day of the promise. From the kitchen the kettle whistled, breaking her concentration and compelling Michael to get to his feet. “How foolish of me,” he said as he went out the door. “I must have put the kettle back on the stove.”

“Stove?” she said. “What stove?”

“I've a small calor gas stove, but that need not concern us now,” he called. “What does concern me is what our daughter has been up to, something you do not appear prepared to tell me. Well, I am loath to think bad of her, indeed of anyone actually, but there are few ways in which a young lady can amass sufficient to buy a flat and of which her parents might not wish to talk. Is it a nice flat?”

“I don't know,” said Joyce lowly. “I have not been there. I am told it is nice. I will have to tell you. She earned all of it immorally.” Michael reappeared and sat beside her.

“Immorally?” he said thoughtfully.

“You are not angry?”

“Why should I be angry and with whom? With her for what she has been doing, or with you for allowing her to do it?”

“I had no idea!” Joyce cried. “Really, Michael, I knew nothing about it. I was horrified and disgusted with her when the truth came out. Are you sure you are not angry?”

“I would say alarmed, disappointed, saddened, but not angry. What can I do to help?”

“Nothing!” she said abruptly.

“Nothing? Now I am feeling angry.”

“You do not mean that, and you are not half as angry as I was or still am,” said Joyce defensively. “Even now, when I think about the shame and the humiliation! I have to live with it, Michael.”

“Isn't that all the more reason for doing something about it?”

“No,” she said sharply. “There is nothing that can be done about it.” Michael did not respond but placed another two logs on the fire which collapsed under the weight sending a shower of sparks racing upwards. “I hope the chimney's been swept,” she added.

“We must do something,” he said at length.

“That's what I was about to suggest,” she whispered.

“I mean about our daughter, Stephanie.” Joyce felt a surge of jealousy rising inside her. Here he was talking about helping her wicked, ungrateful, delinquent daughter but not a word had been said about offering her any assistance now that she was single again.

“Oh,” she said, trying to remain calm. “I do not think there is anything that we can do. She is very popular you know.”

“She clearly doesn't charge enough then,” he said. “Perhaps she needs professional business advice. We are talking about the same thing, aren't we? The same profession?”

“Yes,” said Joyce.

“Well, we can't just leave her to it, can we? Where will it all end? Did I tell you about Jenny Forbes? In any case it is illegal.”

“It is not illegal.”

“It must be otherwise my father would have been well and truly into it. Perhaps he was and I never knew? All the records were destroyed in the War, you know.”

“Not quite everything was destroyed in the War,” she said softly. “And it is *not* illegal. What is worse, I am told that she both enjoys it and is very good at it, what ever that means.”

“And she is very good looking, isn't she? Why haven't I a photograph of her?”

“Oh, Michael! How can you think of such a thing? What would happen if your wife found it?”

“Well it seems such a waste to me,” he said. “There must be something I can do. I will have to think about it.”

“No, Michael, there is nothing you can do, nothing either of us can do. Think about it. How would you help her without revealing that you are her father. Then think of your position. How would your colleagues, your business partners, react if they got to know that your daughter is a prostitute. There, I've said it!”

“I couldn't give a fig what they think.”

“Or what Christina might do? Remember our non-interference agreement and the reasons for it. Apart from that there's my position. I have kept to our side of the bargain and refused to tell her to the extent that we no longer speak to one another. If you did anything for her now it would completely undermine my position. Think where I would be left.”

“You are the one who told her,” he said.

“I know I did. Don't you think I regret it? But the fact that she knows you exist makes no difference to the situation. Whether she knows or not, we must leave her to her own devices. Apart from that, how do you think she will feel if you suddenly put in an appearance now, after all these years? She probably hates you if the truth were known. At the very least we must allow some time to pass to allow her views to mellow.”

“But anything could happen to her in the meantime. Aren't you concerned for her

safety, her well-being?"

"I suppose I am," Joyce said slowly, "but not to the extent that I would ask you to interfere in her life. She does know what she is doing, I fear. She is very bright and she has a smart head on her shoulders. She is already well up-market. Oh, God, I cannot believe I am talking like this!"

"And I suppose the divorce has something to do with this?"

"In a way," she said. She did not intend to tell him everything, about the men that had come to her house when she was at night school or at work, or about Mr Hiller taking her daughter to other houses in the area, and especially not about the contents of Mr Hiller's box. Michael would have to draw his own conclusions.

"I see," he said. "At least, I think I do. Do you really think she hates me? Would she tear my eyes out?"

"After what she's been through it's a distinct possibility." She had not meant to say that but Michael did not appear to pick up on the point so she went on. "And she is fiercely independent, and proud of it. For all I know she might throw any offer of help back in your face. No, I am convinced that we should leave her to get on with her life, whatever that entails. If she wants help she knows where I live."

"And you would give it to her? I can't say I am happy about any of this. When we agreed what we agreed I never contemplated such a thing happening."

"Nor did I, but Stephanie must be allowed to get on with her own life!"

"But she's such a child!"

"No, she is not, and if you met her you would not think so either."

"I would love to meet her again," he said. "Perhaps I could do so incognito? She would never know."

"Michael! I trust for a start that you will keep to our agreement. And, for a second, I also trust you do not call upon the services of such women!"

"No I don't!"

"And she is living under an assumed name. I am not prepared to tell you what it is or where she lives as I am not that sure you can be trusted."

"I can be trusted, but I am not going to ask you for details. I would just like to know if you move. You will tell me, won't you?"

"Of course I would," she said softly. "I have kept the house and I have no plans to move, not just yet."

"Good," he said. "I suppose you are right about all of this. I will have to sit on my hands and do nothing. It will be damned hard, you know."

"I know," she purred, "but as I have told you, that is the price you have to pay."

When she looked back on this and subsequent meetings Joyce felt she had done rather well hold to her line. Michael would always ask after his daughter and she would always answer him truthfully although it sometimes pained her to admit that Stephanie was appearing to be very successful in all respects in her chosen profession. This was all hearsay, of course, but when she saw her daughter at parties there was no outward sign of any problem nor any attempt from her to cease hostilities. Stephanie appeared to be well and safe. No, they were not talking, nor likely to. No, she had not met a nice young man who might sweep her off her feet and take her away from the kind of life she was leading. That was Michael's idea. Joyce thought that nice young men were unlikely to be attracted to excessively used goods, but she did not tell him so.

But something had changed between them. She had not realised it when they met first after the divorce, but on the anniversary, when he asked what she was doing now that she was foot-loose and fancy-free, she felt resentment at the question. It was really quite simple. It was her marriage to Mr Hiller that kept her in check, if that was the way to describe it, not her relationship with Michael. Now that the restraint had been removed she resented any attempt by Michael to impose, or even appear to impose, control over what she did, or where she went, or who she went with. So on the anniversary after the divorce, in a moment of uncontrolled passion, she told him so, sweetening the blow with as great a declaration of love

for him as any she had made before. It may have shocked and confused him, but did he really think that she was going to live the life of a spinster of the parish in the anticipation that one day he too would be free, when there was no prospect of that happening? She could see that it hurt him, but she held her ground on this point too. "Men always expect their women to be absolutely faithful to them, Michael," she told him. "They act as if they have some divine right to ask for it as well as having the same divine right to go off and seduce other women. Can't you see the double standards in all of it?"

"I am not seeking to seduce other women. I never have and I never will."

"Well, just because you have taken a vow of celibacy it doesn't mean that I have to," she snapped. "You should have been a priest, Michael. You would have made a better one than Father Thomas."

"I appear to have followed the same path as Father Thomas," he said lowly.

"Michael!" she cried.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We mustn't be reduced to trying to hurt each other. I remain as I am because I love you. I am wrong to expect you to reciprocate, or even to expect you to love me."

"But I do, Michael," she said softly. "It is just that you cannot expect me to go home, sit knitting or watching the fire, and simply wait for something that may never happen in our lifetimes. Christina could live to be a hundred. How old is her mother?"

"Ancient," he said. "Positively ancient."

Sometimes after her meeting with Michael she would sit on the train back to Bromley and think about her daughter, trying to imagine what her life really was like. Joyce wondered if she was too hard on her and whether she should try and reach some form of accommodation. It would have been easy to have relaxed her aggressive attitude and forgiven her a legion of trespasses, but they would soon have arrived at the main stumbling, that being the identity of her father. She sometimes toyed with the idea of sounding out her daughter to see just what her attitude towards him would be, but she always came to the conclusion that she would be as hostile towards him as she was towards her mother. And she could not run the risk of sounding her out unless she was also prepared, if the circumstances warranted it, to tell her the whole truth. She could not do that without receiving Michael's prior consent. Oh, he would give it readily, right enough! But it would mean climbing down and swallowing her pride, at that was something that Joyce was not prepared to do. Perhaps if there was some sort of crisis, if something happened which gave her an opening, she could approach her, but there was no sign of such an occurrence. Outwardly Stephanie appeared to be happy, successful and secure. It did not comply with Joyce's idea of what a prostitute's life should be like, but that was the way it was.

And then, supposing that she did find that she could tell Stephanie with Michael's blessing, what would happen then? With Christina still alive and a threat in the background he could not be a proper father to her. The most he could do was give her money, and by all accounts that was not something that her daughter was short of. No matter how Joyce looked at it, everything seemed to justify the line she had taken and the continuation of that line.

Perhaps Michael was right when he suggested that Stephanie needed to meet a nice, unattached, young man who might take her away from all that she was doing. But she met lots of young men all of which threw themselves as supplicants at her feet. She appeared to revel in it, but she did not appear to see them as human beings, only admirers who she could treat with disdain or favour if the mood took her. That was not the kind of culture in which she would meet a future husband but, then, Stephanie had never given any indication that she wanted to have a husband.

"I don't think she is the loving kind," Joyce told her lover. "I cannot see her ever making any kind of permanent attachment. Perhaps when you look at our experience that's no bad thing?"

"You can't say that, Felicity," he said. "If you look at us you would see two people who did form a permanent attachment which has withstood the test of years. The tragedy is we have never been able to act upon it. As for Stephanie, perhaps it's because of her

upbringing?"

"What?"

"Don't get me wrong. Don't misunderstand me, but she seems to see men as simply no more than creatures to whom she will give pleasure and receive payment in return. I am suggesting that her whole experience of men has conditioned the way she thinks about them."

"I just don't think she is the loving kind. She's too hard, un-giving, ruthless and self-centred."

"Well, I wouldn't know because I only know our daughter through your eyes but I'm sure she cannot be as bad as you make her out to be. Maybe she's like her mother and there is a man somewhere out there, who she hasn't yet met, but who when she does she will love to distraction, as he will her."

"If there is I don't know how we are going to find him," said Joyce sourly. "It sounds a bit like the search for the Holy Grail."

"But he may exist, and when they meet they will be just like us and fall in love, desperately, hopelessly, and deeply."

"Desperately?" she mused.

"Desperately," he asserted.

"Hopelessly?" she asked.

"Well, perhaps not entirely without hope," he said.

"Deeply?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes," he confirmed, "as deeply as you could possibly imagine."

Then there was the strange business with Owen Cross. "I am not certain of all the facts," Joyce told her lover. "It is difficult to keep up with events as I have to get all my information about Stephanie second or third hand."

"You haven't talked to her about it?"

"Goodness me, no!"

"Yet you've been involved in it?"

"Well, only in a little way, and then more with his fiancée or wife rather than Owen himself or Stephanie. He used to come and cut my grass, you know. That's really how I got to know him. But as for Stephanie, nothing has changed. We do not talk other than through intermediaries."

Michael smiled. There was something in Felicity's tone, in her mannerisms, her looks, the small changes in her expression that told him they did have words, even if they were not civil ones. As for Joyce, it was true that Stephanie had come upon her and caught her in what could be described as a compromising position with a dark, handsome, young man from the local branch of Martin's Bank.

"Now I know where I get it all from!" her daughter had cried. "You are no better than me!"

"At least I don't charge for it," said Joyce over the young man's shoulder as he, confused, lost his way.

"That's just as well!" snapped Stephanie. "You wouldn't get much if you did! No-one would want to pay you!" And she was gone, stalking off, leaving the bank-man apologising for his failed effort.

Joyce did not have many adventures like this and she considered it particularly unfortunate that her daughter should chance upon her whilst she was having one. But she had to admit to herself that as the years went on, the number of such adventures increased. She did not, however, tell Michael about them. For that matter, she did not confide in Mr Pennington, but he tended to find out from other sources and would deliver a mild lecture rebuking her as soon as he learned of any indiscreet act. Joyce would simply let them wash over her and smile as she knew he would never press a point with her. And then it might all have passed by unreported upon had she confined her adventures to the parties, after all that was their sole purpose as far as she could see. But she did have one or two dalliances in the outside world. Perhaps they were more than that. In any case they too were enough for Mr Pennington to comment upon. Perhaps she was being foolish, but she had dipped her toe in the water and

formed an appetite for immersion. She was bound to try other pools.

She would let Mr Pennington talk to her in a way that no other man could, not even Michael. Only he could address her in that way. She would sit, listen, smile, looking ravishing, perhaps half-heartedly defend herself, and tell him she only lived once. "When a woman reaches my age," she would say, "and realised that more than half of her active life has passed her by, there is more than a little temptation to make up for lost ground. You can even feel desperate sometimes."

"Your age, Joyce?" Mr Pennington would say. "Goodness me, you are still young."

"And you are going to tell me I am in my prime? What better time to live life to the full? And don't forget I have a grown-up daughter."

"I mean to say that you would be a catch for any man. I hate to see you giving yourself away cheaply like this."

"You sound just like my daughter! Anyway, I see no reason why I should limit myself to just one man, not yet."

"But you might, one day?"

"I don't know. It hasn't done me any good up to now," she said, wondering how deep Mr Pennington's interest in her actually ran.

There were times when she would lie, alone, in bed, looking up at the stars peering through the chink in the loosely drawn curtains, thinking of her small bedroom at Dover, her age of innocence, and how long and far away it all seemed. There had been those times when she had gone to Mass daily and confessed the most minute of sins. Yet there had always been those dark thoughts, of temptation, the sound of the syrens who called out to her to join and become one of them. Something had always been there. Perhaps Stephanie was right. She did take after her mother.

"You were going to tell me about this young man before you lapsed into a daydream," said Michael. "The young man who Stephanie has met." Joyce rallied herself and blinked. They were sat in the sun, on a grassy mound in the middle of ruins. Everything was still but a faint aromatic perfume reached her from the garden, that aroma she had smelt first all those years ago when she had stumbled across the gardens. Perhaps that was what had distracted her in some way.

"I was miles away," she said. "Shall we walk?" They walked up to the wall and looked out over the sea where the wavelets sparkled bright as they rippled their gentle ways to the shore. "Isn't this the best of days?" she asked.

"It is perfect. And didn't you once tell me that you could see France from here if the weather was clear?"

"I might have done," she said vacantly. "Actually, I am not sure, now. Isn't that funny? That's the kind of thing I would have been so certain of twenty five years ago and now, I'm not sure. I don't think I am sure of anything any more. Anyway, it is too hazy today, even if you could."

"I am sure that you did. Don't you remember I told you that we could see the House from the ruins? You still can, of course. It's much clearer now the large Cypruss that used to stand there has gone. You must remember that? I recall it was not exactly a very comforting thought at the time."

"I think you are mistaken, Michael," she said slowly. "You might well have thought that but you wouldn't have told me that. Don't you remember? I did not know about your connections with Newington House. I thought you were just a young trainee engineer, fresh down from London. No-one special. You kept all that side of your life secret from me."

"I suppose I did," he said. "I still think I told you about it, but it isn't really important, is it?"

"I don't know," she said softly. "It is like looking at someone and never seeing the real person."

"I am real enough!" he declared, standing. "I am quite open and visible. I am exactly as you find me today. There is nothing hidden or kept secret any more. I gave that up years ago having learnt the folly of my ways!"

"I know," she said, wishing she could make the same kind of declaration. He did not appear to be seeking one from her. "But there was a time when you were not exactly what you seemed."

"I know, but I confessed all that and since then I have always been open with you which is more than I can say about Christina with me."

"Or you with her," said Joyce, wondering how she could change the course of the conversation. "Do you think you will ever tell her about me?"

"No," he said softly. "I will never do that."

"She's not changed?"

"If she has it is only for the worst. She seems to be paranoid at times, full of petty irrational obsessions which are directed towards the most unlikely people. For example, she holds the postman personally responsible for the contents of the letters she receives, or accuses the milkman of delivering the milk in different bottles to the ones we had yesterday. I don't know how she can tell they are different, but I wouldn't have thought the dairy was going to set aside two just for us! And as far as Newington House is concerned, in her mind it is the gateway to Hell. If she wasn't my wife I would recommend she was certified."

"Oh, no, Michael," she said anxiously, "you couldn't do that!"

"I know I couldn't, but I do worry that she could become dangerous. I have already told you what she has done and what she could be capable of. Yet in Lady Helen you couldn't wish to meet a sweeter, kinder, rational old woman. Ask your sister. You really should go up and see her sometime. I can't see any reason why you shouldn't now."

"After what you have just told me about your wife? I wouldn't want to run the risk." The truth lay deeper and had more to do with the way Joyce lived her life; she knew that, but she could not tell Michael. It now seemed a very one-sided equation with her holding all the secrets and him holding none other than that of her and Stephanie's existence. How could she live with such an imbalance?

"I can't see there's that much of a risk. Heavens above, you are only Deborah's sister."

"Debbie still might say something out of place. Anything could happen. I can vouch for that! Look at what I did with Stephanie! And if it got out we could find ourselves not meeting at all. Really, Michael, once a year is not enough."

"That is what we agreed," he said.

"I know, but life is slipping by and we are still apart and I am becoming desperate."

"There's nothing we can do about that."

"I need someone to save me," she whispered.

"Save you?" he laughed. "What from?"

"From myself," she said lowly.

"From yourself? I thought it was Stephanie who needed to be saved, not you. And what was it you were going to tell me about this young man? I am sure that is just what she needs to pull her together."

"What is?"

"A young man. Marriage, and the stability that affords one. Don't you agree?"

"I do not think either of us is in a position to say that. And I wouldn't bank on it in Stephanie's case, or in any other case for that matter." She watched a small, lone, triangle of white sail edge its way into view from under the cliff. At least it was not black.

"Tell me about him. We can decide afterwards whether it is likely to be a good thing for her."

"Well, I think it may go back quite a long way, their relationship. She knew him at school although he is older than her. She always seemed interested in him and was not pleased when he took up with the girl he eventually married or even when he became involved with any other woman."

"Married? You are saying that he is married?"

"Yes," said Joyce, still watching the boat. "I don't know what happened. I think he had been seeing Stephanie on and off after his marriage, then suddenly he leaves his wife and moves into the flat with her. To add to the problems they, the couple, have a small child. I can't understand it because I thought they were happily married."

“Perhaps she found out about his relationship with our daughter?”

“I suppose that's possible. I am not sure that it has had any affect on her behaviour. It is only a small flat. It must be very difficult, the two of them there and all the comings and goings. I can't imagine how they cope.”

“And this is the young man who used to cut your grass?”

“Yes,” said Joyce sadly. “He was saving up to put a deposit on a house for him and his wife when they got married. They bought a house in Hayes Close, nothing special, not all that unlike mine. It needed a lot doing to it but he is a craftsman and pretty handy at all those kinds of things. As I say, I don't know what happened but you can bet that Stephanie was behind it. She's probably done it just to spite his wife and it won't last. She will chuck him out as soon as she has grown fed up with him.”

“You shouldn't be so hard on your - our daughter.”

“Yes! Our daughter! But you don't know her or the little spiteful vixen she can be.”

“No I don't,” Michael said, smiling. “That's not the issue at the moment. I accept everything you've said. So you don't think this is our man?”

“Our man? I'm not sure I am in full agreement with your view that all she needs is the right man. I don't think such a creature exists.”

“But if he does, just for the sake of argument, this is not he?”

“No. He is married and whilst he remains so they would not be able to form a lasting relationship. I don't believe anyone can form a lasting relationship outside marriage.”

“We do, surely?”

“Do we, Michael? We see each other once a year, talk, and make love. What kind of relationship is that?”

“It is the only one I have,” he said, still smiling.

“But even we don't know how we would get on if we lived together, day in day out.”

“We could find out. We could run away together right now. Not a word to anyone, just go. We could go anywhere in the World, do anything. There's nothing to stop us.”

“There is,” she said. “There's ourselves. Anyway, I don't think you are being serious. And we are getting off the subject.”

“Well, I will be serious, for a moment,” he said. “You are probably right that we would not be happy if we ran away together, but I am certain that we would be happy if married. You must believe that would be the case otherwise why are we going through all this?”

“All this pain and misery if there is nothing at the end of it? Just think of that, Michael. It's almost like the thought finding there is nothing there when you die. Then again, think of how few marriages we both know that are really successful.”

“Arthur and Moira? As far as I know they are still happily married.”

“After all this time! Have you heard anything of them?”

“Not recently. I assume he's still running his business down in Kent.”

“They have a couple of children, Debbie tells me.”

“I still feel I owe them something. I don't know what I could do.”

“If he's got a building business, get him to rebuild and restore Newington House at some fabulous cost. You know, money no object,” she suggested.

“What a lovely idea! Kill two birds with one stone? If only it was something I could do, but I would run the risk of arsenic in my morning coffee if I as much as attempted it.”

Joyce never found it comfortable to think about Arthur and his wife, her former friend, Moira as when she did so it was difficult not to make unfavourable comparisons between the way their lives had turned out and the mess she had made of hers. It was possible that Moira knew about the divorce. Joyce had told her sister and Debbie could well have passed that item of news on. Moira would have said that it was no more than she expected. What would she say if she knew about the things that her former friend occasionally got up to, leave alone the life her daughter was having! So, any mention of Moira compelled Joyce to reflect on the way her life had turned out and wonder whether she ought to go to see her daughter and tell her if only to allow Stephanie to understand the mistakes her mother had made and, perhaps, avoid making some of them herself. She would answer by telling herself

that her daughter would only disregard everything she had to say and accuse her of attempting to meddle in her life. It would be most unpleasant and why should she seek a rebuke? It was fine for Michael to ask her to talk to Stephanie. He had no idea what his daughter was like!

“So, as far as Stephanie is concerned, we are agreed that this is not the right man and that what she is doing is wrong,” he said, shielding his eyes against the sun. “Should you go and talk to her?”

“Me talk to her? I’ve told you, Michael, that she’ll not listen to me. If anything, a suggestion from me to do something will provoke a quite contrary effect.”

“Would she listen to me, do you think?”

“Oh, Michael,” she said wearily. “We have been over all this so many times before. I think the answer is a categorical No! I doubt that Stephanie would listen to anyone.” Yet, as she said it, she wondered if their daughter would listen to Owen. The thought struck her that if Owen could be persuaded to see sense and tell Stephanie he wanted to return to his wife, she would let him go. There was no doubt that Stephanie had enticed him there, but if Owen was firm, her daughter might just yield. It was an idea that she did not convey to Michael, but one she would take back to Bromley with her.

Out in the channel, the small boat was now tacking into the wind. A cloud had passed over the sun and from where she sat the sail looked quite black.