

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“If I were you,” said Mr Pennington, “I wouldn't get in the least involved in it. Let them sort it out for themselves. I have made it a rule in my life never to get involved in other people's lives. You may call it Pennington's First Law if you like. I am perfectly happy to give advice if it is sought, but not to become part of the problem. I have seen others do it and invariably it has all ended in a complete shambles. You never know what people are thinking or whether they will change their minds. I once knew a young chap who tried to stop a husband and wife who were quarrelling and ended up being attacked by the two of them! Steer well clear, Joyce. You have to let people sort these things out for themselves.”

Joyce shook her head and looked out at the monochromatic grey sky and the rain driving against the windows of Rose Cottage. The patio looked more like a lake and the goldfish pond was close to overflowing. “You will have them swimming up to the back door soon,” she told the Mathematics teacher. “All you'll have to do to feed them is open the window and drop the food out.” However, it was the journey home that was more on her mind. She would invariably walk to and from the cottage and did not know the times of the buses from Orpington. Or perhaps she could ring for a taxi? “I don't entirely agree,” she said absently. “I don't think that we should stand by and let people ruin their lives and do nothing.” She wanted to say more, perhaps make a reference to her own experience, but that would only provoke curiosity and probing questions, and she was not about to confess all the facts of her life to Mr Pennington. She also thought that he might have other things on his mind, things he might want to discuss, things he might want to say to her, but could not because she was going on about the Crosses. If he did, they were things that concerned her, and she began to regret having mentioned the matter and diverted Mr Pennington from his intended course. He would keep. He would not lose interest or rush off to make advances to another woman. He would be there tomorrow, and the day after, courteous, attentive, polite, considerate, perhaps in his way even loving, everything a model husband could be, waiting for the moment, the right moment. Not today, though! Not when the rain was streaming down the windows. Much better on a balmy evening when the scent of the blossom would fill the cottage.

“You have allowed your daughter to live her own life,” he said suddenly. Joyce turned to look at him, but there was no reproach in his manner. It was just an observation, except in his equation if she could do that for Stephanie, why could she not do it for Owen Cross?

“I had little choice in the matter, if you recall,” she said wearily. “Had I been able to, I would have stopped her. But this is different. He loves his wife but my daughter has bewitched him. She does that to men. I have seen her at work.”

“She is not the only woman who is capable of bewitchment,” he said.

“I don't know what you mean,” she said lightly, then turned to study the rain. If anything it was coming down harder than before. The gutters would be over-flowing and the flowers in her garden dashed and beaten to the ground. She could imagine a large damp patch appearing in the middle of the lawn at the spot where Owen had stood.

“You do know exactly what I mean,” he insisted, “but it will keep.”

“I don't,” she protested softly, but she did not want to entice him into a proposal, not then, perhaps not ever. He would need little enticing and it would be pleasant to live at this Rose Cottage and not have to worry about leaking taps, over-flowing gutters, or even lakes that appeared in the middle of the lawn! It would, in a way, be advantageous to have the protection that the presence of a husband would give when it was required, and yet to have one who could easily be moulded not to restrict or cramp her lifestyle. Yet there were other considerations and she was as yet unready to come to a decision.

“Joyce,” he began. She stopped him by holding a finger to her lips.

“I thought you said it could wait?” she said gently. “I think I know what is on your mind, but this is not the time, not here, not today.”

“Not ever?”

“I did not say that. I did not even hint that. I think I want to enjoy my freedom for a

little longer. I enjoy being a gay divorcée.”

“I would not restrict your freedom, not for one moment. You know that, Joyce.”

“I know that?” she said reflectively. “I think I know that, but you will have to be patient with me.

“Is there someone else?”

“There is, but no-one that need concern you.”

“How do you mean?”

“He is married and likely to remain so for many, many years to come. That he exists is no impediment, but you will have to be patient with me.” The truth of course was that she was not absolutely free, at least not in the sense she portrayed or he understood. There was always that forlorn hope that something might happen and Michael would contact her to say that he was no longer tied. It would be dreadful if that were to happen after she had tied herself down again. She could hardly think of anything worse.

“How long do you want me to wait?”

“I don't know,” she said lightly, “perhaps a couple of years?”

“Oh, Joyce!” he exclaimed, unable to hide his disappointment.

“Perhaps you would tell me why I should take him back?” Eileen's voice was crystal clear and unwavering and Joyce was only half prepared for the question. Several weeks had passed since she had ambushed the errant Owen Cross at the end of her road and she had to admit that although she had been fired up to say her piece then, the passion had waned during the intervening period. None of that was her fault. It was all due to Eileen's husband dissembling and being unable to detach himself from the arms of her daughter. Or so it seemed. The embers might have been fanned a little when Owen contacted her and they met again. This time she was the one to find herself ambushed. He was waiting for her outside the school when she left one afternoon.

“Why, Owen!” she exclaimed brightly. “I didn't expect to see you. I thought you'd given up on me.”

“I'm sorry,” he said sheepishly. “It was a difficult decision, but I would like you to talk to Eileen for me. Will you?”

“You have changed your mind?”

“Yes,” he said regretfully. “I have thought about it and decided that you are right. I have no hope whatsoever of saving Stephanie whilst I am living with her. It only makes matters worse. So I've decided to go back to Eileen.”

“That's your reason is it?”

“It's the only way,” he said, ignoring her question. “Will you go and see her? You did say you would.”

“Did I?” It was not meant to be taken as a question to be answered and she certainly was not challenging his statement. She knew she had made the offer but now, weeks later, all the arguments she had once paraded before him and the counterparts she would have used on his wife, were gone. “I suppose I did,” she added. “I can hardly tell her what you have just said, though, can I?”

“She came around to the flat once, you know,” he blurted. “It was early on. She said that if I didn't return there and then she might never take me back. I don't think I have any chance of seeing her without you preparing the ground.”

“You mean you haven't actually seen your wife since you left her? Nor your son?”

“No. And I'm not all that good at these kinds of things, but I expect that you are, having to deal with all the boys, teachers and parents where you work. If I go and see her she won't listen to me, not unless someone prepares the way. Will you go?”

“I suppose I will, but what do I say to this long suffering wife of yours? I can hardly tell her you want to go home to reform so that you can launch another attack on my daughter's way of living!”

“Tell her I am sorry and that I want to come back if she will have me.”

“That's it? There's nothing more?”

“No.”

"I really cannot think of one good reason why I should take him back," continued Eileen, "after all that he's done. Someone who is now distinctly second-hand, a sort of cast-off, someone who has been with *her*. Oh, I'm sorry Mrs Hiller, I forgot for a moment that she's your daughter."

"I wouldn't let that fact concern you, Mrs Cross. There's no love lost between me and my daughter and I doubt that you could say a single word against her that I haven't said ten times over already. As for your comment that Owen will be second-hand, as you put it, show me a man who isn't! If you were his first on your wedding night you should count yourself blessed in one respect and cursed in another in that he is seeking all his experience after marriage rather than before. When you get a little older you will begin to appreciate the benefit of men with experience, I can assure you." As she said this the picture of the young man from Martin's Bank flashed into Joyce's mind, and she smiled. Perhaps Stephanie was educating Owen in the not-so-fine things in life. If she could not, no-one could.

"I don't know. I really don't know," said Eileen, rubbing her hands together. "Did he mention my parents?"

"No? Should he have done?"

"Perhaps he doesn't know," said Eileen, almost to herself and shaking her head. "I just wondered if that was the reason why he has changed his mind."

"There's your son to think of."

"Yes, Jonathan," Eileen whispered. "I have tried to keep the truth from him. I said that his father was working away, in Glasgow, and that he was very busy and it was a very long way to come home regularly. But these things get out, don't they? It was soon around the school. You cannot imagine how cruel children can be."

"I can," said Joyce. "But of Jonathan. Doesn't he need his father here? Boys do need a father image." She was not going to stray too far down that line of argument, but it was worth floating.

"He needs a father who is here!" said Eileen, her voice becoming strained. "Not one who is for ever wanting to go off with another woman."

"Ah, the other woman. You must know her, have seen her?"

"Of course I know her! She was my bridesmaid! I thought of her as a friend, and she does this to me! If you want the proof, look at the wedding photograph, there!" Joyce looked up at the photograph which stood in a silvered frame on the top of the upright piano. She had noticed it when, full of apprehension, Eileen had shown her into the room, but she had not until now looked closely at it.

"Why, that is Stephanie!" she exclaimed. "Doesn't she look pretty? And so do you, Eileen. I had no idea she was at your wedding."

"It was his idea," said Eileen bitterly. "I opposed it at first. I should have known that he had an ulterior motive. He was infatuated with her then, but I didn't see it."

"You looked lovely!" said Joyce softly. "I just don't understand how I didn't get to hear about it, but then there are lots of things I don't know about my daughter. I expect I was working at the time. I know," she went on, seeing the change in Eileen's expression, "there are those who do not approve of working mothers."

"Yes," said Eileen, coldly.

"Well, it is as well that I did as my husband's wages were poor and now that I am divorced all he pays is the mortgage. I have to support myself in all other respects."

"Divorced?" said Eileen, reflectively.

"Oh, don't think of it, my dear," said Joyce hastily. "Not with a young child. I had no option, but you - it would play straight into Stephanie's hands, wouldn't it? You would give them what they both want."

"Perhaps that might be for the best in the long run."

"I cannot see how you can think that. Where would it leave you? I can tell you. You would be left to bring up your son on a miserly allowance whilst they would be off living the life of Riley. It isn't worth it, not if pride is the only thing you are satisfying. And, don't forget that he is asking to come back."

“So he might,” said Eileen slowly. “That doesn't mean that I have to take him back just when it suits him, or at all. If I allowed him to come home, how long would it be before he was off again with her or some other woman he takes a fancy to?”

“Have there been other women?” asked Joyce, feeling uncomfortable as she pictured herself standing at her kitchen window watching him cut the grass.

“I don't think so, but how would I know? How would I know anything about what he gets up to?”

“I don't think any wife knows,” said Joyce wishing she could get away from the subject of infidelity. “But wives don't usually let their husbands go without a fight.”

“What about your husband? Did you know what he was up to? Did you fight to keep him?”

“Goodness me, no!” said Joyce, thinking that Eileen could not possibly know to what she was alluding. “That was completely different. My husband was a fiend. As far as I can tell Owen is a kind, good-natured, young man who has fallen into the trap set by a ruthless and highly attractive young woman. You cannot entirely blame him because that is what she sets out to do, lure men and trap them. Most men cannot resist her. Believe me, I have seen her at work. You should not blame your husband because he turned out to be no better than the next man. Won't you at least see him, talk to him, hear his side of the story and what he has to say? You should give him a chance, if only for your son's sake.”

What *was* she doing there, in that pale, buff, room with its lime green curtains, talking to this young, dark, heavy-eyed, woman who looked as if she would burst into tears at any moment? Joyce looked out through the French window and thought of telling Eileen to have him back if only to cut the grass. But, then, she had said enough. She had reluctantly agreed to plea Owen's case to the extent that his wife should meet him, and she had done so. If Eileen would now, or at some time in the future, talk to him, it was up to him to argue his case. She had said her bit and now she should go home. “At least, see him and talk to him,” she added. “You owe each other that much.”

“I did go and try and see him,” whispered Eileen. “I went around to her flat and pressed the intercom, but she answered. She said he wasn't there and didn't want to see me, anyway. I am sure he was there. Someone was there, but he did not come down and see me or even talk to me, his wife! And now you are telling me that he says he wants to talk to me?”

“Yes!” stressed Joyce. “He does want to.”

Joyce left feeling that although she had extracted a promise from Eileen that she would think about seeing Owen, she had not put his case as well as she might. It was his fault, asking her in the first place, then leaving it so long. Who was she to make a plea for married life? She who had married the wrong man for all the wrong reasons and could even be in danger of doing so again. Why should she marry again? She enjoyed her freedom. She had her own house and an interesting job which, after tax and deductions, brought in enough each month to allow her to live a reasonable life. She could save a little and there would be a small pension when eventually she retired. There was even the prospect of Michael coming free although she admitted to herself that was remote. “You may have more chance of walking on the far side of the moon, Felicity Joyce,” she told her image in the dressing table mirror.

Yet, when she thought about it, she warmed at the prospect of living at Rose Cottage and would imagine her dressing table there. She itemised the terms she would extract, which included having her own rooms and freedom to take there whosoever she pleased. Perhaps such a request would be enough to deter him, but she was not prepared to sacrifice her single status without extracting a heavy price. One day, maybe sooner than later, he would ask her outright to marry him. She might defer, ask for time to consider it, but she knew that providing nothing happened as far as Michael was concerned, and providing all her terms were met, and she had little doubt they would be, she would accept.

As she crossed the park on her way home she was telling herself what a fool she was to think that way, to talk herself into what would be, for her, a pointless, loveless, marriage. If he was prepared to meet all her demands, why tie herself down for something that was no more than what she had now? It was at the back of her mind, this strange thought, that she

was indebted to Mr Pennington for all the support and advice he had given her over the years. It was one way of repaying him. It was a small voice, but it was persistent and not to be deterred by the argument that there might be ways of rewarding Mr Pennington other than becoming married to him. But on those days when this voice linked up with the one that relished the thought of living at Rose Cottage and, perhaps, one day owning it, they were undefeatable.

Michael knew, of course, about Mr Pennington, but not to the extent that he might propose. She would have to tell him. She would have to talk to him before she could give Mr Pennington her reply. It would cause him pain, but what did he expect? She was an attractive woman, still in her prime. She was still considered to be a catch by many. He would express his reservations, then tell her that he would never seek to stand in the way of her taking any decision or following any course she wanted to. She would tell him that Mr Pennington was becoming advanced in his years and that she could be some comfort to him. He would say that Christina was still healthy and that she might have another twenty or thirty years before her. And she could tell him that if that was the case, she would still be free before him. Then they would reaffirm their love and the hopelessness of their position, make love, and look forward to the next anniversary.

It was a ridiculous way to carry on! There were rash moments when she thought that she ought to terminate the arrangement they had agreed all those years ago, but these moments were fleeting. The truth was she was as powerless to do so as he was. When she was with him at Newington she was living her true life. Without the elixir of those meetings, she might simply waste away and die.

“What on earth have you been up to?” demanded Stephanie the next time that Joyce had, for her, the misfortune to encounter her daughter. “What right have you to interfere in my life? Tell me!”

“I do not know what you are talking about, Stephanie,” said Joyce, trying to turn away. “I have had nothing to do with your life. I want nothing to do with your life.”

“Owen!” cried Stephanie, blocking her path. “That's what I am talking about, Owen! What right had you to interfere and go to see his wife? What did you think you were up to when you persuaded him to return to her?”

“I didn't persuade him to return to her. And I went to see Eileen because Owen asked me if I would.”

“I don't believe you! He would never have gone back to her if the decision had been left up to him.”

“That's rubbish!” cried Joyce, wondering how she was being dragged into this argument when she wanted to be seen as an innocent, disinterested, bystander. “He asked me. I can't see how you could expect him to live in your flat with you given its size and the use you put it to.”

“That shows how much you know!” snapped Stephanie, looking wild. “We had an arrangement which worked. And as for Eileen, he was supporting her. She had nearly all he earned so she had no grounds for complaint. I was able to earn enough to keep the two of us.”

“That is exactly what I told him would happen!”

“It wasn't for you to tell him anything! You had absolutely no right to poke your nose into my affairs! Don't you ever do it again, Mother! I am warning you!”

“Oh, come now, Stephanie,” said Joyce, trying to control her rising anger. “Did you really think that someone like Owen would be prepared to be kept by you, given the way you earn your living, no matter what he thought about you?”

“It is the only way I know. I would give it up tomorrow if I could!”

“I don't believe that for one moment. If that was true, you would!”

“Well it is true. And the matter is not over yet.”

“Oh, Stephanie,” said Joyce sternly, “you cannot be seriously thinking of enticing him away from his wife again, can you? Why don't you leave him alone? Why don't you leave them both alone?”

“Why don't you leave me alone, Mother?” Stephanie hissed. “That's what angers me

so. Why you cannot stop interfering in my life? As for Owen or anyone else, I would never seek to entice any man away from his wife. Why do you think I charge them? It's more than money. It creates a barrier between us and stops any involvement. Don't you think they want to be involved, all of them? Don't you realise how I have to fight them off? I would never demean myself by taking another woman's man."

"But you did! You took Owen!"

"I did not take Owen! He was mine from the day he first saw me. Don't you see? She tried to take him from me, but he has made his choice now, thanks to you. It isn't the right one for anyone, but thanks to your interference he has gone back to her. I won't take him back."

"You mean you'll let him be, Stephanie? You won't ruin their lives again?"

"I am not saying anything of the sort," Stephanie snapped triumphantly. "I am saying that I will not take him back. No man walks out on me! And if it comes to it, I will have the last laugh on both you and her, the pair of you. You'll see!"

"I don't understand what you are talking about, Stephanie. Just leave them alone."

"So, you don't know? You haven't worked it all out yet? Well I am not going to enlighten you. We will have to let matters take their course." She turned and stalked away across the room to where her entourage stood, waiting to greet her. Joyce watched her and the little crowd until it disappeared into the next room. She felt slightly alarmed by what Stephanie had said yet could not understand how she might deliver such a threat if she adhered to her other statements. As far as Joyce could see, the Cross family was safe.

Joyce, of course, was bound to discuss this further incident with Mr Pennington. Who else was there for her to talk to other than herself?

"So you think he has definitely gone back to live with his wife?" he asked.

"Definitely!" said Joyce. "Obviously he didn't do it immediately, but he must have gone to see her and she must have decided to take him back. I must assume that Stephanie demanded an explanation from him and he told her of my involvement. How else would she have got to know?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mr Pennington. "That seems logical. And do you think it will last?"

"I don't know. Stephanie said that she would not take him back, but then she said she would have the last laugh. I don't know what she meant by that, but she is not one to make lasting relationships. I don't think he'll go back to her."

"How old is the boy?"

"I am not sure. I think he's a year off the eleven-plus and a bright boy by all accounts."

"Ah! So we could have him here in a year or so?"

"That could well be the case," she said and returned to her work. She had to think of what to say to Michael. She had carried out the mission and had stood up to her daughter. By all accounts it would appear to be a success. Owen was not the man for Stephanie and he was now safely back with his wife, leaving the way open for The One who would sweep her daughter off her feet and save her from her dreadful life, wherever he was going to come from. When she and Michael did next meet, he appeared to be more preoccupied with Newington House where part of the roof was in danger of collapse and his wife was insisting that Nature should be allowed to take its course.

"I could probably go to court and get the necessary powers to carry out the maintenance, but what man wants to take his wife to court?" he said.

"It happens every day of the week," Joyce observed.

"Well, it is not something I would do. My father would have done it as soon as blink an eye, or extracted some other benefit, but not me. It is not my way."

"Are you in love with her?" asked Joyce, looking at him carefully.

"Who? Christina? Good Lord, no! I might pity her though I have to bring myself to even contemplate that much. But she is another human being, no matter how inhumanely she might have acted. I must treat her as such. I don't think anyone loves her, not even her own mother, which is rather sad. It must be awful for a daughter not to be loved by her own

mother. It is hard to find anything nice to say about her. She has no friends anymore other than me. Her parish priest is about the only person who will tolerate her and he deserves to be canonised for it. I must admit I find it hard that anyone who acts in the way my wife does could profess to be a practising Christian. I am surprised that she doesn't get excommunicated."

"And you stay with her, this creature, when here am I, all foot-loose and fancy-free, waiting for you?"

I have to stay with her. Apart from the fact I married her, if I went she would have no-one in the World. I am all she's got."

"What about her mother? Couldn't she take her in at Newington House?"

"Oh, Felicity! Be reasonable! Helen is too old and frail, and in any case she won't see her daughter any more than her daughter will go to see her. Helen wants me to take legal action against Christina, but I can't. So there it is, the House is falling down around her; she cannot do anything; and it is her daughter who is to blame."

"You are too good-natured, Michael," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "But I cannot wait for ever. There is a man -"

"At least it is a man," he said softly and lightly.

"Michael! I am being serious. I think that he is about to ask me to marry him."

"And you will say?"

"I will turn him down, of course, but he will not be deterred by one refusal. I will probably turn him down the second time, may be even the third, but he will persist."

"What is he like, this man?"

"He is one of the senior teachers at the school. He's like a father in many ways, kind, considerate, not demanding, someone I can confide in and take advice from. In some ways he is almost like a priest."

"But not a certain one? I'm sorry. Are you in love with him?"

"Of course I am not!" she exclaimed. "I couldn't love anyone else, but what has marriage to do with love, Michael?"

"I think we are fine examples of reasons why people should not marry if there is no true love between them. How old is he? I assume he is fairly old if he is a senior teacher."

"He is in his early sixties, and do you know what, Michael? He lives in this paradise called Rose Cottage. Isn't that strange?"

"Very," said Michael curtly, "but I would expect there to be thousands of Rose Cottage all over the Country. Perhaps there's tens of thousands? I could do a survey of them and write a book."

"Don't, Michael. I am serious. Should I marry him?"

"You are obviously inclined to the view that you should, otherwise you would not have to talk it over with me. I cannot make the decision for you. I can tell you that Christina for all her faults is hale and hearty and looks like living to be a hundred. Talk about only the good dying young! You should risk it and marry him if you think it will make you happy."

"But what about you, Michael?" she asked softly. "Won't you feel just the weeniest jealous?"

"You are being coquettish, Felicity," he said sternly. "It doesn't become you and it is one of the faults you find in our daughter. Perhaps we now know who she takes after?"

"Perhaps there is a lot of me in her. Perhaps that's always been part of the problem, that we are too much alike and think we find ourselves in competition. At least I have never sold myself."

"Have you ever stopped to wonder why that is?" he asked, smiling.

"Why what is? Michael! What a question to ask a woman!"

I just wondered whether you thought it had anything to do with your Catholic upbringing?"

"Certainly not!," she snapped. "There are prostitutes in Catholic countries as much as there are in non-Catholic countries. That has nothing to do with it."

"So you might not agree with Christina's latest view that women enter into prostitution when they get married; all except her, of course, as she made sure that anything I

did for her could not be in exchange for sexual favours.”

“No, I don't,” said Joyce.

“And your forthcoming marriage? Would it apply there?”

“Of course not!” she said sharply. “He's too old to ask for sexual favours.”

“So, he just needs someone to look after him, perhaps decorate the house. Is that it?”

“You could put it that way,” she said and fell brooding and silent.

“I am sorry,” Michael said after what seemed like an eternity to Joyce. “We are not supposed to spend this day of the year like this. If you think it would be right to marry him, do so. I have to leave the choice to you. I cannot expect you to wait indefinitely for something to happen.”

“I'm sorry, too,” she whispered, snuggling up close to him and placing her arm around his shoulder. “It will all work out in the end, you'll see.”

“I sometimes wonder if it will. I went to see the Count, you know.”

“The Count?” she said, puzzled.

“Natacha's Count.”

“Oh, your sister. I'm sorry Michael, but I'd all but forgotten. It was so long ago. Why did you go to see him, and what made you think of mentioning him right now?”

“It was you mentioning how it would all work out in the end and me, I must confess, wondering if it ever would. I'd owed the chap a visit since the end of the War. I sent him all the paintings of my sister with the exception of one that is at Newington House and he wrote back asking me to visit him if ever I was in his locality. The years have gone by without me going there and I decided that if the time was not going to come of its own accord, it would have to be made to. I found him a sad, lonely, man in some respects. At the same time he was a wonderful host. After Natacha's death he could never bring himself to contemplate marrying anyone else, so he has remained single. He has a gallery in the Chateau dedicated entirely to her. A Mass is said every day to her. He goes daily and prays in the crypt where she is laid. I think I scared him when I wrote to him because he thought I might have changed my mind and decided to repatriate her body. When I saw his love and attachment to her memory I realised that I could never have done that even had I wanted to. Then I thought of us. There he was, hopeless, reconciled to serving out his remaining years on earth and keeping her memory pure. It isn't like that for us. Our position is not hopeless, is it Felicity?”

“Would you love me just as much were I dead?” she asked softly.

“Don't say things like that. I don't want to even contemplate such a question. I would like to think of us as never permanently parted, neither in life nor in death. I sometimes am fearful that we may end up like the Count and Natacha and be united only in death.”

“Do I detect from that, Michael, that you really have come to believe in an afterlife?”

“Yes. I think I have. Does that surprise you?”

“No, not really. I know you received your instruction from Father Thomas but I was never convinced that you believed.”

“I don't think I did, not then.”

“When did you change?”

“I don't really know. It wasn't in a flash of blinding light. No voice spoke to me. I suppose I finally became aware when I was with the Count, listening to him, realising that although he was alone in this world he never considered he was separated from Natacha. He was adamant that no day passed without him feeling her presence and that they would always be together. I saw that we are the same. We are bound in spirit even though we may be far apart, and that we will always be together. I suppose it is selfish of me to expect that we might be together in this life as well as the next.”

“I never realised you felt quite that way, Michael,” she said cautiously. “You make me feel as if I should wait for you whatever happens.”

“Don't you feel the same way?”

“Of course I do. I always have done and always will. I think I was just afraid that if I asked you might feel differently. Yet it was not something I could take for granted.”

“That being the case, I think you should marry your school teacher, but you should tell him about me if you haven't done so already. Tell him before he proposes. Tell him how

much you love me and how we will love each other for the whole of eternity. Tell him what a powerful and wonderful thing love is.”

“And dreadful,” she whispered.

In the days that followed Joyce often bathed in self-congratulation over the part she had played in persuading Owen to return to his poor little dark wife and child, and the fact that he then stayed with her and did not abandon her for Stephanie. As weeks turned to months she sometimes wondered whether she ought to call around at the house in Hayes Close to see how they were and she was usually on the lookout for his van or a sight of him scrambling across the tiles of a roof. But although signs went up here and there to announce the presence of Mr Wick or, at least, some of his employees, Owen never accompanied any one of them. It seemed strange that they should live so close yet never encounter each other.

“The mathematical probabilities of the two of you meeting are actually quite small, given the number of people you see every day and the size of the local population. You have to add to that a factor for the way in which the population deploys itself. That is more or less on the verge of chaos as far as mathematics is concerned, something I have been working on. I have this idea, you see, this theorem -”

“You could add a factor for people who perhaps go out to their way to avoid people,” Joyce said, adjusting the papers on her desk to try and show him she was busy.

“A sort of neural factor?” he said. “I expect you are right. In my view mathematics can be used to express anything in the Universe. But are you sure that he is trying to avoid you? It could just be that you miss him because of your different working hours. And think of how often you see your daughter in the normal course of events. She lives and works even closer to you geographically speaking.”

“There you do have two people who are doing their best to avoid each other!” exclaimed Joyce. “There's nothing much left to chance there.”

“I hear that she has become very selective, or perhaps the word I should use is exclusive.”

“Exclusive? Who told you that?” demanded Joyce.

“Several highly disappointed men who didn't make it onto the final list.”

“Disappointed? What kind of man is it who would want to share a woman with someone else?”

“It all depends on the woman,” said Mr Pennington thoughtfully, “and the terms on which she can be had. If that is the only way and the woman is worth it, many a man is prepared to consider sharing.”

“I don't agree. It is only because she sells herself as if she were a commodity.”

“Surely that only makes it only all the more remarkable? That men are prepared to share her and pay for that privilege, pay handsomely I might add. I think the cost eliminated a number of runners.”

“What utter nonsense,” said Joyce. “I cannot understand any man paying a lot for so little. And I suppose she says no National Insurance or Income Tax. There ought to be a law against it, no, several laws.”

“Maybe there should, but there is not. And your daughter is looked upon as a exquisite creature by her admirers. You could feel proud of her, you know.”

“Proud of her?” exclaimed Joyce. “Proud of having a little slut for a daughter? And how do you come to know what she is like?”

“I don't Joyce,” he said patiently. “What I see is the reverence in which she is held by those who do know her. In fact I would go to say that she is almost worshipped by them.”

“Well, the more fools them! That is all I can say. As far as I am concerned she is despicable and I am sure their wives and mothers think so too.”

“I also see a mother and daughter who are at each other's throat. I would like to see an end to such an unnatural situation. I wish there was a way, some way, in which I could effect a reconciliation.”

“Mr Pennington,” said Joyce firmly, looking up into his sad, blue, eyes. “You have known me many years. You have known some of the troubles I have faced over those years.

You know exactly the thing that lies between me and my daughter. You must know that we will never see eye to eye and that all thoughts of a reconciliation are hopeless. It is not a one-sided position. It is mutual. Even were I to give her what I want, which I am not for one moment, she would still never forgive me any more than I could forgive her for what she's done. There is absolutely no chance of us ever being reconciled."

"That is a shame," he said. "Perhaps we can return to our young man. Is he still working for Mr Wick?"

"Only as a sub-contractor. He has set up in business on his own. He has a little red van and it is that I have been looking out for, but in vain."

"Well, perhaps that's your answer. If he now has his own business, perhaps his work takes him much further afield? It could be that Mr Wick doesn't have enough roofing work to keep him fully occupied, or that his rates are not always competitive. He may simply be working elsewhere, in Penge or Beckenham. That could be why you have not see him."

"I suppose that could be the case," she said slowly.

"Perhaps you no longer need to concern yourself with this young man and his family?" asked Mr Pennington. "He is back with his wife as far as we can ascertain. Your daughter has made herself even less accessible which would appear to rule out the possibility of him easily going back to her, and he has set himself up as his own business which no doubt required a little capital, the repayments on which no doubt will keep him fully occupied. I do not see any reason for you to concern yourself more with them. It might be better to direct your efforts to your own life, to our lives, and to the subject that I have started to broach with you on a number of occasions."

"I know what you are going to say, Mr Pennington. At least I think I do and if I am right, this is hardly the place or the time to take that matter further. In any event, there is something that I need to tell you before you do.

"Another of your little secrets, Mrs Hiller?"

"Yes, Mr Pennington. The biggest of all."

"You are a remarkable woman, Mrs Hiller," he said as the form bell rang. "Most remarkable!"

One day she *would* tell him about Michael. For the present she could forestall and just remind him that she had this something to tell him before he proposed. She would remind him of it every time she thought he was about to propose although she did not have any particular plan in mind as to how long she wished to delay matters. Perhaps she was just clinging on to the remote hope that something would happen and she would find Michael on her doorstep ready to carry her off to be married and to start a new life. Perhaps she just enjoyed gently teasing this kind and gentle man who was now leaving his middle-age and preparing for his twilight. Whatever the motive that drove her on, Joyce had no intention of hurting him. If she did tease she always closely monitored his reaction just to ensure that her gentlest of scratches had not pierced the surface and drawn blood. And if she did play with him as a prelude to, one day, devouring him, it was only because he enjoyed the first and would be a more than willing participant in the second.