

Stained

JOANNE HICHENS



Stained

JOANNE HICHENS

Series Editor: Peter Lancett

Published by Ransom Publishing Ltd.

51 Southgate Street, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 9EH, UK

www.ransom.co.uk

ISBN 978 184167 715 6

First published in 2009

Copyright © 2009 Ransom Publishing Ltd.

Cover by Flame Design, Cape Town, South Africa

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

The right of Joanne Hichens to be identified as the author of this Work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

CHAPTER 3

Party girl

Martha has fed me, clothed me, kissed grazed knees, paid school fees, schlepped me to Sunday school and church, for as long as I can remember. *An education, Grace, is all I can give you.* That's her mantra. Plus a dose of God on the side. I'm sick of it.

Friday night I lie to her.

Ramon Hill, extra-hot in black denims and a black Diesel shirt and his midnight hair sleek and shining, picks us up round the corner from Sha's and mine, then gets Freddy Martin at his flat. They stop at the abandoned container that used to be a satellite police station, on the corner of

Prince George's and Faure. Freddy rushes in and out for the hits of *tik*. *Tik-tik*, Freddy says, is the sound of the crystals as they pop around in the light bulb before you pull in the smoke and get high.

'This, Ramon, is good stuff,' Freddy says, waving a fistful of straws of the crystal meth at Ramon and then at us, me and Shardonney sitting in the back. 'I got extra to chase away the headaches on Monday. And if you fat and want a good figure, this is the drug for you ladies, but I see you don't have that problem.'

His eyes linger on *my* shape, Sha being definitely Out Of Bounds. Freddy's curls are gelled springs on top of his head. I don't ever want to touch Freddy, with his leer, and his pimples between the pinpricks of stubble on his neck.

Ramon parks the *Citi Golf* right outside Liquid Dreams. Before I get out of the car, I say to Shardonney, 'Martha would kill me if she knew I was here.'

‘Hey, you feeling guilty, Grace?’

‘A bit.’ But it’s more than that. Freddy, with his wet mouth, gives me the *grills*, the creeps.

‘But she won’t know you here, hey, will she? Unless you tell her.’

‘She wouldn’t like it, that’s all.’

Inside the club Shardonny smiles over her drink at me. ‘Hey, Grace, good thing she didn’t check you out in those clothes.’

‘She’d freak out.’

‘You look twenty-one in that crossover top. And *stunn-ing*, girl. You got your alibi, Grace. She thinks you going to a movie right? If she gives you shit or whatever, tell her what a brilliant *fliiek* it was. Long too. And how you went for coffee afterwards to discuss the ins and outs. She’ll be impressed! Tell her to call your friends. We’ll vouch for you. Ha, ha!’

‘Don’t they ever check ID?’ I ask. Twins who live down the road from the duplex with their single-parent mother gyrate on the dance floor. ‘Those girls can’t be older than fourteen.’ The twins specialise in pelvic thrusts and jerks that get attention, their belly rings glinting in the light. ‘They shouldn’t be here,’ I say, shaking my head.

‘What else is there to do on an effing Friday night?’ Sha says.

‘It’s not right.’

‘Hey, you joking, right? Get a life, Grace. Chill, you starting to work on my nerves. Just school school school with you. Look, you can do what you want. You sixteen. Martha’s not even your real mother. Don’t take this trip so seriously, Gracie.’

That’s me. I admit it. I’m serious. I do well at school. I’m leadership material. An example to the younger girls. Right. Sure. Sitting here in the deep muck of Liquid Dreams.

Stained

‘Cheers.’ I clink with Shardonnay, the two of us huddled in a dingy booth, me sipping sweet *Brutal Fruit*, Sha taking deep hits from her bottle. The hot-pink satin of the short skirt hugs my hips and bum, but hardly covers my thighs. I cross my legs and the skin-tight micro-mini creeps higher. Freddy fixates on a bare stretch of my flesh, but moves off as soon as some client calls his name – I’m relieved – to do business out of sight.

Ramon is back briefly from wherever, and puts his hand on my shoulder. It’s like he touches me and I’m burning. ‘Grace, relax. Enjoy yourself.’ He sits next to me. His thigh brushing against my leg is an electric shock.

Ramon tilts his chin at Shardonnay and she jumps and follows him to a corner of the dance floor where I watch them get close. Sha’s hips melt into his heat.

So it’s me at the table on my own. The décor is black walls, black plastic seats. Tables with black tops. A stream of takers

at the smokes machine. The DJ in his glass box, earphones on, eyes shut, does the squeaky thing with the vinyl. Nothing liquid about this club, apart from the booze.

Hard-house assaults my eardrums. *Doef, doef, doef*, the mindless never-ending sameness of the dance tracks. The constant beat is as close to me as my heart beat. Merging, taking me over. Smoke spirals at my eyes. The air is dense with warm breath and the smell of sweat and Impulse, and Hugo, and DKNY. I'm dizzy. Ready to explode. I need fresh air. I settle for a sip, hold the bottle to my mouth and drink what's left.

Ramon and Shardonnay grind into each other, and graunch right there on the dance floor, the lights washing over them, moving back and forth, fragmenting their solid bodies.

What happens is the beat – not to mention the *Brutal* booze – gets in my blood. Neat and tidy Grace disappears. I am warm and loose. Shardonnay pulls me to the

Stained

dance floor. I dance with Shardonnay. She thrusts her hips close to mine. Ramon stays near. Freddy comes back from wherever he disappeared to, and pulls me to him and kisses my neck. Someone calls him away. He tells me, 'Later Babe.'

Justin Timberlake. Ramon grimaces when the music slows down, change of pace type thing. No one likes to like pop. Not in the clubs anyway. Shardonnay belting it out in her bedroom is a different story. But we keep on dancing to *Black Eyed Peas*, to words that tell you there's a problem out there in the world. We keep moving no matter what, to this true song, about people addicted to everything that'll hurt them.

Ramon brings another cooler to me on the dance floor. Fingertips touch. I feel the sizzle. Then – *doef, doef, doef*, back to the dance staples, the music is a headache, back to the beat, beat, beat.

Bummer is, I can't blot out Martha's worried eyes, Martha hovering there in the background. Martha biting her lower lip as

her hand reaches to move a damp curl off my forehead. Her likeness is imprinted. I shake my head, but I can't get rid of her.

Fuck you Martha. Watch this. I'm free.

I'm breaking out. I'm doing something nobody would dream 'good' Grace would do. I'm dancing, I'm sexy, swaying, pumping, grinding, going with the flow.

But then Freddy comes near. He grips my hand, pulls me to him. His tongue is wet, probing, hard in my mouth. He says, 'Too bad I can't stay. Business first, Grace, before pleasure. I'll get to know you better next time, Babe.' And suddenly I'm paying attention. I'm wiping my mouth, thinking *no way, this will never happen*. Me and Freddy will never be an item, not at Capricorn High, not here in Liquid Dreams.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I watch him leave out the door, into the black night, and the sensible Grace clutches the neck of her bottle close and takes it slow.

Stained

Way after one, Ramon stops the car outside Sha's duplex. I swear I see the curtain move at Martha's window. I bet she's been waiting up all this time.

I go quickly to my bedroom, and I watch them from my window. I spy on Shardonny and Ramon kissing at her door. His hand moves under her Lycra tube, at her breasts. When they're done deep-throating, Ramon roars off, a flash of silver in the *Citi Golf*. He leaves Sha struggling with the key under the flickering street light, but finally she's in.

I go straight to the bathroom. I pull off my clothes and stuff them in a plastic packet. They stink of ciggies and sweat. I brush my teeth. Rinse my face. My hair reeks of smoke too. In my bra and panties, I walk past Martha's room, past the strip of light under her door.

'That you, Grace?' she calls, her voice a sleepy croak.

'Hi, Martha,' I whisper. Who else could

it be? ‘Yes, it’s me. I know I’m late. We stayed for coffee after the movie.’

‘I’m glad you’re home.’

She’s turned the bedside light on in my room. There’s a mint cream on my pillow, and a note to me, in Martha’s best calligraphy that she learned at adult education:

I love you.

You don’t need me as much, but when you do, if you do, I’ll be there for you.

Martha.

Suddenly I’m glad I lied to her. I try to sleep, but I can’t. My mouth is dry. I go to the kitchen for cold water. On the fridge is a print of two tiny hands. My hands. Painted and pressed to the paper when I was just a kid. Martha’s kept all this stuff I made when I was small. On a shelf is a clay crocodile, a papier-mâché bowl, a jar decorated with strips of wrapping paper. All this useless, childish trash she’s kept.

Stained

Back in my bedroom, I rip Martha's note in half. I'm bleary eyed and reckon I could fall asleep before my head hits the pillow, but I have an urge to look at my real mother. I slide the photograph from under my mattress. I touch the face of the dark-skinned woman in the photo. She's standing on the beach, her feet sinking into the sand, her flimsy sundress blown between her thighs by the sea breeze. She's smiling for the photographer, his shadow at her side. Her sandals are placed neatly alongside one another, on her beach mat of straw. My mother had to be as young and pretty as the woman in this picture. My mother is not a mountain of flesh with varicose veins. In my mind, my real mother is fresh and young.

Unless she's made enquiries about me there's no way I'm ever going to find her. Martha knows the date my mother left me, wrapped up, cared for, clean and fed, at Cape Town station. But that's all she knows. Sometimes I wonder if the truth is ugly. Like it wasn't worth my mother's while to hang on to me. That I was found thrown away in a bin, crying because of the

pain of hunger. That my mother dumped me because she didn't want me, not because – as Martha says – she wanted a better life for me. I put this version of my mother in the mental *outbox*.

The pretty photograph goes back in the cardboard box at the top of my wardrobe, along with the others.

Of course she loved me.

I light a match, set fire to Martha's note. The halves burn close to my fingertips, then to ash in the metal bin. I lie down. Some drunk sings in the street. A loose gate bangs in the wind. Cars rev, some guys dice on the highway. There's a crack, like a backfire, or a gun. My head settles into the slight spin. I'm dreaming of Ramon. I dream of his lips parting, his teeth glinting in the light, and the smell of him, hot and musky.