

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“You seem to be in an excellent mood this morning,” said Mr Pennington. “What’s the news concerning young Cross?” Perhaps Richard was in an exceptional frame of mind. He had enjoyed a fine, full, weekend, The tennis session had gone well on Saturday, while on Sunday everything had gone to perfection. Not only had the electrical work been straight-forward and not too time consuming, but he had trodden carefully through everything he said and had avoided every pitfall in his conversation with Mrs Cross. As for young Jonathan, he was up and about, bright, eagerly helping. Subject to seeing the doctor, he would soon be back at school.

“It is one of his better days,” she said on the subject of her son. “He has his better days.” She thought, but did not say, that part of Jonathan’s brightness on that particular day was due to the stimulus from Richard’s presence. Any discussion now with her son rarely lacked some mention of his favourite, adopted, teacher.

For Eileen Cross, however, there was no such brilliance. Richard could see that it pleased her to see Jonathan so well and so animated, and she was far from being ungrateful to have her electrical supply restored to the whole household. But the emotional response went no further than skin deep and came nowhere near penetrating the dense black cloud which had enveloped, and was slowly suffocating, her soul. So, when she was extending her profound gratitude to Richard for his service, there was no sign of feeling or emotion, neither in her voice nor in her features.

Richard was embarrassed by his new elation, but he found himself quite unable to suppress or conceal it. He bubbled over at having something to do on a Sunday for a change, at Jonathan’s restored health, at the simplicity of the task at Hayes Close, and most of all at Mrs Cross’s presence, on her lounge carpet, in the hallway, and all over the kitchen floor. The poor woman saw his reaction, read his emotions, then dismissed them from her mind. A large faction in her demanded that he should be politely thanked, then banished, or at least kept at that double arm’s length that should be extended to all men. Yet there was still a tiny minority, which contained a germ of life, and which would, if allowed, expand and dominate her again. It forced her to study and address her pale image in the bedroom mirror. “Life must go on,” she said, even though her eyes seemed to contradict and deny the statement and her teeth were clenched against it.

What should she do about the attentions of this young, good-looking, man? How should she, a young widow of but a few weeks, act? Her tired mind gave her no guidance. She simply could not bring herself to face the problem, nor consider it, nor worry about what the neighbours might think or say. She had started with shock, overlapped that with grief, and then wrapped it all up in a faithful reverence of a tarnished and impure memory. Trapped at the very core was that tiny fragment of Eileen Cross that was still living. And it was good to have someone like Richard around, yet she was fearful of enjoying his company. She was ashamed of feeling a tinge of pleasure when he came, and sorrowful when he left. She was petrified by the thought that he might shatter the protective shield and eliminate the respectful grief and mourning that she bore before the world at large. Worst still, he might seduce her into betrayal and cause her to cast off the mantle herself. Yet she prayed secretly that one would come to scale the walls and lift the siege. “He’s super, isn’t he, Mum?”

“Who?”

“Mr Brown, of course!” She shut her eyes as she suffered the tumult.

“Oh, Jonathan!” she cried, “he’s only your teacher!” This failed to dampen her son’s enthusiasm, but it brought her to the realisation that there might be more than just her own feelings to be considered.

She lay, lonely, in bed, looking up at the darkened ceiling, illuminated only by the flickering light of the street lamp as its beam squeezed between the bursting petals of the flowering cherries. What were her true feelings now? Towards Owen? She loved him, and that was a secure foundation on which to start, but he had been untrue, unreliable and unfaithful. What did that signify? Immorality and morality could not be equated to love, she

told herself. And the woman was very beautiful. Her mother had said that any man who came close to her would never escape. Owen was just another man, that she had to allow. He had been boorish, self-willed, dominant, almost reckless, and such had brought about his untimely death. But he had also been tender, generous, amusing, good to live with. She clenched her fists. "Oh God," she cried aloud, "give me some guidance!" He had left her once. Well, if she was honest, she had told him to leave. But she had not gone any further. She had been patient. She waited and received him back. Yet the thought of that woman had remained in his mind and we had been planning to leave once again. Now he was gone again, rather, he had been taken. Could she believe that? Was she really released from her vows? Until death? There was still her love, which would go unrequited now, at least until Owen became a distant and faded memory, if ever that was to be the case.

Richard's elation had been greatly boosted by the realisation that the electrical work was eminently simple. He had dreaded the possibility that the rewiring would be extensive, that he would have to be delving behind skirting boards, under floor boards, scrambling all over the house, as he ran fresh cable. It turned out that this was not the case. Owen had completed the rewiring but had connected part back into the old boxes which remained live as a temporary expedient, leaving the remainder tied in to the so far unconnected new distribution unit. Details of the circuitry were drawn in pencil on the wall. It took Richard the morning and only a short part of the afternoon to pick up the old leads, the new cables, and transfer them all to the new unit. Jonathan was in attendance throughout, inquisitive and helpful. The completion of the task afforded Richard great pleasure. He was delighted that it had been executed in such a short time as that was likely to keep Mrs Cross's feeling of obligation to a minimum. He bounded back to Grove Crescent, beamed back recklessly at Mrs Morgan over her tray of hot drinks, and enjoyed a good night's rest. "Cross?" he said, looking up at Mr Pennington. "I expect to see him tomorrow. He looked fine. As for myself, I feel good too. On top of the world, you might say."

"You seem different," said Stephanie.

"Different?" laughed Richard, looking down at himself.

"Different," she repeated. "How shall I say? More, mmmmm, self possessed? Confident?"

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure that I like it!" She fluttered her eye lashes and pulled a face. He felt an immense surge of passion swell within him.

"Won't you marry me?" he asked.

"You are too impetuous!"

"I know. Is that why you won't marry me?"

"I have given you my reasons. They have not changed. And what concerns me most is that you would propose to a girl who you barely know."

"I've told you that's your fault. You are difficult to get to know!" She pursed her lips and smiled sweetly.

"Perhaps I prefer it that way. Perhaps that's the way it has to be!"

"As I've said before, you won't come out with me in the evenings, nor at the weekends. I don't know where you live. I don't even know your surname."

"Not many men do. I'm not in the habit of advertising my personal particulars."

"I think you're just leading me on." Her expression changed and he knew he had said too much.

"Oh no!" she said tersely. "I am not leading you on. You know exactly where you stand. I have been at great pains to ensure that you do know! I offer you nothing. I will not be put under any obligation to you. I will not be put under any obligation to anyone!"

"Stephanie," he implored.

"No," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I can say what I want to say very briefly. I like you Richard. I enjoy these meetings, but there is no more in our relationship than this friendship. I've told you that I feel for you in the way that a sister feels for her

brother. Should it go further, it will be entirely at my discretion and on my terms. I will allow no man to dictate to me in my private life. You must accept things as they are, or else we must cease meeting here, this way. If not, I will be forced to find somewhere else to eat; possibly in my flat, a practice I detest. If you drive me to it, Richard, I shall." He was taken aback by the force on her sudden outburst which was delivered in a low, soft, but determined voice.

"I'm sorry," he said, hesitantly.

"I must tell you that I might tolerate any kind of relationship with a man so long as I am under no obligation to him. I must retain my freedom of action and choice. You have to understand that, Richard."

"I think I do," he said softly, "but does it rule out everything other than meeting here?"

"No," she replied, gently and patiently, "not at all. But you must be patient. I am very busy. I really am."

"Would you like to come to the school Sports Day? It is eight weeks off."

She laughed. "Oh, Richard! You are priceless!"

"You're laughing at me now," he said with mock bitterness.

"I'm not! But on the subject of your Sports Day, would I be unkind if I said that I would prefer not to go, for personal reasons?"

"I suppose not," he said regretfully.

"I am sorry," she said, sounding genuinely sympathetic. "I will make it up to you, somehow."

This contretemps with Stephanie did not dampen Richard's feelings, but when he found a letter from Eastgate awaiting him at his lodgings and he sat down to write the reply, he wrote solely that matters were going well for him at Rochester House. Even had he sent a blank sheet of paper home, the absence of a comment about Stephanie in response to his mother's questions would tell his family that matters were going anything but well. Mrs Brown had asked to be remembered to Stephanie. Clearly, she thought that to send her love was inappropriate. And, through her mother, Sandra enjoined him to ask Dennet to go to stay with them for a period during the Summer holidays. Mrs Brown qualified the request by stating that it would be inconvenient if he were to invite Stephanie at the same time as Dennet. Richard had thought of asking Stephanie, but he had already assumed in his mind that she would tender her apologies and a refusal. He had not seriously contemplated asking Dennet, but now he considered it, it seemed that it might be fun. Of all his acquaintances, it appeared to him that the ones who would benefit the most from a holiday at the seaside were Mrs Cross and her son. Yet to ask her would seem indecorous and improper. And he could imagine his father's reaction if he wrote to say that he had invited one of the boys and his mother, even if the boy was crazy about model railways. "What does he think we are running? A Holiday Camp?" Somehow it seemed unjust.

He indicated in his letter that he would ask both of the likely candidates during the coming week so that the arrangements could be finalised. At least, then, his mother would know he was still talking to Stephanie.

"Have a fortnight at the seaside?" exclaimed Dennet, next morning. "Sounds super! I'll come, of course. I can fit in my visits to my little old mother around it." This was the first mention Richard had heard of Dennet's parentage, leave alone being in possession of a "little old mother".

"I didn't know that you had a mother, Dennet," he said.

"Everyone has a mother! Unless they are particularly careless."

"You've never mentioned her before. Where does she live?"

"I've never mentioned her before because there seemed no reason to. She lives in Willesden. I expect you've never heard of it. I pop across and see her when ever I can. I would like to write, but I'm not at all good at writing, and her eyesight is getting a little weak. She's getting on, you know. I was a fairly late child. Why don't you come over and see her? Any

weekend would do, and I think she'd like seeing someone different."

"I'd like to," said Richard, hesitantly, "but I am fairly busy at the present."

"Really? I'll mention it to you when I next go over, just the same. You might be able to fit it in."

Dennet's visit to Eastgate was, however, arranged.

Jonathan Cross returned to school clutching a note, written in his mother's neat, clear, hand. He looked better, but the cough lingered on, stubbornly. It being Tuesday, Richard was accosted by both him and Colin Morris about the model railway and he agreed to walk with them, after school, to Hayes Close. He needed little encouragement. With Mrs Cross's consent he measured up the area and drew out the shape of the baseboards on two sheets of paper, giving one to each of the boys. They discussed their general philosophy, and then he left them to develop their own design and went to the kitchen. "It has created a lot of interest at school among the boys in the Form," he said, "but I've discouraged them as best I can. Otherwise you might have been over-run."

"I don't think I could face that. Jonathan says that your Tuesday visits could occur every week?" It sounded a strange way to put it, and she also sounded very formal and not at all enthusiastic.

"Subject to your agreement, yes. For as long as they need help and advise." He could not discern immediately whether or not she did, or would, approve. "And," he added, "having sorted out the electrical wiring, is there anything else I could help you with?"

"There's a bedroom door almost off its hinges," she said without thinking. He could have sworn that she coloured slightly before she firmly retracted the statement and refused any further assistance.

"Is Mr Brown going to help us, Mum?" exclaimed Jonathan, busting into the kitchen, unaware of Richard's presence there and colouring considerably himself when he saw him. "I'm sorry, Sir," he said meekly.

"I expect so," said his mother, flatly and in an off-hand manner which made it sound as if it was Richard dragging his feet, not her. "Has Colin gone home? Now run along and wash your hands before dinner - do you want to stay, Mr Brown?" There was something in her voice. Was it hostility? It made Richard feel that he was not welcomed there that evening. Whether or not his assessment was correct, he declined her invitation, if that it was, and turned to go. She did not protest.

"Will we see you next Tuesday, then, Mr Brown?" she asked as she opened the front door.

"I expect so. Will you be coming to Sport's Day?"

"I expect so, too," she replied coldly, killing his words, dead. "I tried to support all the social events and functions at Jonathan's junior school. I will make the effort."

Her answer was an affirmative, but her words seemed to have a struggle to escape.

Displaced from his euphoric zenith, Richard went back to his lodgings. In the twenty-four hours following his argument with Stephanie, he had suffered a similar reverse with Mrs Cross and had now lost, for the time being at least, his excuse for visiting Hayes Close on a Sunday. Tired and depressed, burdened with anxiety, he forewent both the pleasure of dining with Stephanie and the delights of Mrs Morgan's lounge, and went straight to bed. It never occurred to him for one moment that he might have been tricked into carrying out the rewiring. His trust was unquestioning. Yet it was long after two o'clock in the morning when he eventually shut out the noise of the presses and managed to fall asleep.

He spent the whole of Wednesday in a kind of mental stupor, being bad-tempered in class and non-communicative outside. In the evening, after the sports heats which seemed to be dragged on for eternity by Dennet's fumbling and false starts, he hurried around to the restaurant in the hope that Stephanie might raise his spirits, but he was cruelly disappointed. She did not come in. And his mood was not ameliorated by a letter from Eastgate which reached Grove Crescent on the Thursday morning, in which his mother wrote to say how pleased they all were at the obvious success and enjoyment he was experiencing, all of which

served only to salt the wound. Richard immediately pictured his father. He would not be pleased. On the contrary, he might have derived some pleasure if he could see him now, languishing at Mrs Morgan's breakfast table, oblivious of both the world in general, and that parallel existence out in the kitchen. What was the worst of it was that he seemed to be trapped in his own misery. When he tried to think of what he should do, his mind would go completely blank and he found that he could think of nothing. His panic in response to the situation greatly aggravated it. Rescue was close at hand, however, and appeared in the form of a brief, clear, note handed in to him at school by Jonathan Cross. It read,

“Dear Mr Brown,

I trust that you will forgive me writing, but I do feel that I did you a disservice the other evening when I might have appeared rude and off-hand. I have found, of late, that I am not always able to act towards people in the manner in which I would like. May I make amends by offering you tea on Sunday? Perhaps you could come a little early in the afternoon as Jonathan has some questions concerning the model railway and I have an errand door on my hands,

Yours Sincerely,

Eileen Cross “

As he read and re-read her words, he had to struggle to conceal his emotions and relief. Surely this was the most wonderful letter he had ever received? Conscious, suddenly, that all the eyes of the form were on him, he folded the note and placed it safely in his pocket book. Jonathan Cross was looking at him quizzically. Did he know the substance of Eileen's - his mother's note? What was it she had said? That Jonathan had taken to him? Probably he did know. There was the reference to Sunday. As the boys left for Assembly, he called Jonathan over. “Thank you, Cross,” he said. “I'll give you a note for your mother in reply this afternoon. I have to clear my other Sunday arrangements.” He really did not know why he made a reference to Sunday. Perhaps he did not wish to appear too eager and so impoverished for company to be at a loose end.

“Thank you, Sir,” said the boy as he went on his way to the hall.

When Richard came to write his note, although the content was simple, he found it hard to put pen to paper. His reply, at the third attempt, was simplicity:

“Dear Mrs Cross,

Thank you for your note. May I call around at three o'clock?

Yours sincerely,

Richard Brown. “

Such a struggle over such a small thing. He gave the note to Jonathan without revealing any hint of its contents and went off to share ninety minutes with Dennet. “Are you free on Sunday?” the Physical Education Instructor greeted him.

“No. I'm afraid that I'm not.”

“Shame. I was thinking of going over to Willesden. You could have come. Make a change for you. Still, if you've got something on.”

“I have,” said Richard firmly.

Richard had found it easy to turn down Dennet though he realised had it been Stephanie asking him out, things might have been more difficult. He found her waiting at the table when she arrived at the restaurant. “I missed you last night,” he said as he sat.

"I was working, for a very special reason," she said, with great emphasis. She appeared to be quite excited about something and she could not contain it for long. "You will not believe this," she began.

"Won't I?"

"Would you like to take me out on Sunday?" she said, nonchalantly. His mouth fell open. His hand froze, fork and impaled potato in mid-air. "I've rearranged all my engagements to clear the day totally," she continued. Then she saw his expression. "It is what you want!" she asserted. His mind was in a spin as he galloped through the alternatives. If he said "no", what then? He could guarantee that Stephanie would never again be able to find a free Sunday. But if he said "yes", what was he to do about Eileen Cross? His note to her had barely passed out of his hands long enough for the ink to dry. How would she react towards him if now he retracted? For a brief, reckless, moment he wondered if he could manage to fit both in, take Stephanie out in the morning, and go around to Hayes Close in the afternoon. But, no, that seemed to be out of the question. "Have I said the wrong thing?" asked Stephanie, quite sharply.

"No, no," blustered Richard. "It came as such a surprise. I simply wasn't prepared for it."

"I thought you'd be overjoyed."

"I am," he exclaimed. "Really!"

"I must say that you do not look like it."

"I'm sorry," he said, resuming eating and deciding to live dangerously. "Where would you like to go? Bear in mind it's a question of Shank's pony and public transport."

"Oh, I don't know," she said lightly. "I have trouble enough getting a Sunday clear without having to work out an itinerary. I'll leave that to you. How about the Zoo? I have not been there for a long time."

"Regent's Park?"

"Yes. I like to see animals in cages. We all have our cages, don't we? Ours may be invisible, but the bars are there, just the same. They restrict you and your movement every bit as much. And they hurt." Richard stared at her for a moment, trying to understand. Her serious mood was broken by her radiant smile and a tiny shrug. His heart leapt.

"Very well," he said. "Where shall we meet?" Stephanie lowered her eye lids and pushed a card across the table.

"Come to my flat at eleven sharp. That is the address, a secret that I now entrust to you. You should find it easily. It is just across the road from the Phoenix Tea Rooms."

"I am to eat it once memorised?"

"It might be just as well." They had laughed together, but Richard's heart was heavy as he walked back to Grove Crescent. The choice between Stephanie and Eileen Cross had determined itself. He was now about to achieve one of his most cherished ambitions, but what a vile taste it had. He sat in his room and tried to compose the second note of the day, which went through several versions before ending up as:

"Dear Mrs Cross,

I hope you will forgive me, but when I accepted your invitation and wrote earlier it was on the assumption that a long standing engagement I formerly had was cancelled. I regret that I now find that is not the case and I feel bound to give it precedence. I trust you will accept my apologies for now declining.

Yours Sincerely,

Richard Brown

P.S. Perhaps I could come over on Sunday week if it is convenient?"

He put the note in an envelope and next day he handed it to Jonathan Cross, again

giving the boy no indication as to the contents. The dilemma was resolved, but not in a manner which afforded him much pleasure.

“I do not understand our Mr Brown at present,” said Mr Pennington to Mrs Hiller. “One moment he's up in the clouds, the next he's ambling about like a bear with a mouth full of bad teeth. I'm sure I do not understand it.”

“Spring is in the air,” said Mrs Hiller, meaningfully. “I expect he's in love.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed the Senior Mathematics Master. “With whom?”

“Well, I don't think its me, for a start. With some young lady. Young people fall in love very easily, even young teachers.”

“I do hope that whoever she is, she will make him a suitable wife.” Mrs Hiller raised her eyebrows. “You know,” he continued. “Someone like you, Mrs Hiller.”

“Thank you, Mr Pennington,” she said sweetly, neutralising the slightly acidic tone he had adopted.

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