

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Richard's remedy might be easy to think of, easy to think about. It was not easy to put into practice. It required diligent preparation. It required the right opportunity, a favourable atmosphere, and, above all, it required a level of cold-blooded courage of a kind that he doubted he possessed. He could be reckless, even brave. He had been. But he had always been told that soldiers who had committed the greatest acts of valour and won the highest awards for bravery had all acted on the spur of the moment. They had not sat down, thought about and planned for days their particular act of heroism. The campaign did not go forward smoothly. There were days when his courage failed him totally and when the temptation to run away from the line of fire was nearly irresistible. On other occasions the defendant's fire was too intense and he was forced to retreat. But the fact that he had a strategy which, sooner or later, he would be able to put into effect, raised his hopes and spirits and sustained him. The slide in his work halted. The amelioration was noted by Mr Pennington. "You appear to have turned a corner," he told Richard, kindly.

"I think I have," said Richard. "I think I have learned how to cope."

"That is good. You'll find your trials and tribulations so much easier to face when they arise in the future." Stephanie noted the change too, and agonised long over the possible cause. And Dennet temporarily renewed, to a limited degree, their relationship, though Richard nursed the uncharitable suspicion that this act might be connected in some way with the approach of the still distant Sports Day.

"I really cannot promise any help this year," said Richard when the inevitable question was broached.

"Not one evening a week?" exclaimed Dennet. "You've already turned down the tennis!"

"I am tied up, well and truly. I couldn't take on another thing."

"This blasted Cross business," Dennet grumbled. "I don't know why you bother."

"Someone must. No-one else does." Dennet muttered something under his breath and stalked away. It was subsequently arranged that Mr Fox would assist with the heats and the preparations, but Dennet remained far from happy. Little by little Richard began to wear down Eileen's implacable refusal to unconditionally leave her son's side. It was not an easy subject to talk about and he met with many rebuffs, but he persisted in searching for the slightest chink in her defence.

"I really am worried about your health and well-being," he would say.

"You need not be," she would retort sharply.

"But you need a change. Let me take you out. Mrs Howard will come in, I know."

"Oh, Richard! We've been over this time and time again. I wish you'd stop asking me!"

"You won't come out?"

"No!" It could be emphatic. He was careful never to push the point so far that it could risk permanently damaging their relationship. He watched her expression and, in particular, her eyes. He knew that when they came alive, that was the first sign of real danger. That was the time to stop, retreat, wait, retrench, then start the attack again. If the castle was not to be taken by storm, it might be undermined. And reinforcements were on hand. Both Mrs Howard and the family doctor added their voices to the argument, though their motives were undoubtedly not as selfish and far reaching as those of Richard. He did not purely wish to see the castle fall. He aimed to conquer and take it, and thereafter maintain possession.

It was Richard's task to prepare the draft mathematics examination papers for the first two years. Within an agreed syllabus he drew up the questions and specimen answers, which were checked by Mr Pennington. At a time when educational pundits were questioning the purpose and value of the examination system, Rochester House clung to them as if they were the very last bastion of civilisation, the sole remaining measure that prevented society from sliding into the abyss of fundamental ignorance.

"They are important, of course," said Mr Pennington. "Vitaly important in the immediate sense because the boys' careers will depend on the results. One would have to

admit that they do not constitute the ultimate criteria. Bright boys may do very badly in examinations. They could be unwell on the day, or just react to the pressure and stress. Exams are not just milestones scattered along the route of school life. They represent little crises, too, which grow in magnitude as the pupil gets older. They call a halt in school life at an instant and make one ask how far one has got, how much one knows, and what the next step should be. Do not dismiss them. Examinations are not perfect, but they are probably a more reliable objective indicator than would be your method of subjective assessment if it were applied to all."

The draft papers were passed to Mrs Hiller to type and reproduce, and then store until required. She would continue to smile at him in her strange, suggestive, knowing way, but there was no hint of an invitation to Rose Cottage. In a way that he did not really like to think about, the absence of such an invitation hurt his pride. From the stories he heard, others were invited and did go. The dog was being liberally exercised.

Matters at Hayes Close came to a crisis just before half term. Jonathan sank into a deeper coma than before. The doctor came and decided that the end was very near. Richard was informed by Mrs Howard who intercepted him at the gate as he arrived that evening. "I've just come out, ducks," she whispered. "Door's on the latch. It'll be such a release for 'er if 'e does pass away now. Poor little mite!" Mrs Howard was not one given to weeping but on this occasion she reached into the recesses of her clothes and produced a handkerchief with which she dabbed at her eyes.

"You think its come?"

"Laws, yes. Doctor's been and shook 'is 'ead. Told 'er to prepare 'erself. She's up there with 'im now." Richard's hopes rose as he went up the stairs. Eileen's familiar figure was sat, crouched, on the end of the bed, watching intently the limp figure that lay, still and outwardly lifeless, on the pillow.

"I've just seen Mrs Howard", he whispered. "It is come?" Eileen put a finger to her lips and nodded. He sat in a chair and watched them. Apart from her single movement when he arrived and the slight indication of breathing, both might have been taken as being without life. Outside it was becoming dark. "Shall I draw the curtains and turn on the light?" he whispered.

She stirred. "I'll fetch a candle," she said.

"A candle?"

"It seems more appropriate than the hard light of an electric lamp." While she was gone he re-arranged the chairs so that they could sit side by side at the end of the bed. On her return he slipped downstairs to drop the latch on the door and make a pot of tea. So, there they sat, a vigil together, as the clock ticked slowly and loudly into the night. The breathing from the pillow grew fainter and fainter until Richard could no longer detect it. When he looked at Eileen, querying, she shook her head to signify that he had not yet passed away. Richard stayed. He could not bring himself to leave. Eileen did not question his continued presence. Nor did she resist when he reached out and took hold of her hand. It was cold and damp. At twenty minutes past two, with the candle burning low, she suddenly fell asleep. Richard found a blanket and covered her. He lit a second candle and took up his position at the bedside. Several times he reached forward to feel Jonathan, in case. Each time he was still warm.

By half past three Richard was finding it difficult himself to keep awake. His limbs ached, some were numb, and an unbearable heaviness in his head was trying to force his eyes to close. What could he do? He would shut them, rest them; just for a moment, not to go to sleep; no, not to go to sleep; just to rest them, because they ached. It must be the smoke from the candle, and he felt so weary, so terribly weary - .

"Why, hello Mr Brown!" said a sharp youthful voice. Richard opened his eyes, blinking, confused by the brightness of the sun glinting through chinks in the unfamiliar curtains, puzzled by the strange room and the burnt-down stubs on the candles. "I've had such a funny dream. I didn't expect to see you here. What's wrong with Mummy? I'm ever so hungry!" Richard stared incredulously as Jonathan appeared to lever himself up off of the pillows into a semi-sitting position. It had to be a dream! He could not begin to believe it was real. This could not be happening! Perhaps they were all dead, Jonathan, Eileen, and he, and

this was what it was like. You just carried on where you had left off? Beside him she was stirring. When she saw her son and realised, she burst into tears.

"It is a miracle!" she cried, darting forward. "It's a miracle, it must be! Oh, God, thank you! I do believe, really and truly. Oh, Jonathan!" Richard said nothing, but stood unbelieving, disbelieving, the evidence of his eyes. She turned around to face him, animated, beautiful, her eyes full of joy, smiling. He had never seen her looking like this before. "Isn't it wonderful? Oh thank you, Richard," she cried, kissing him on the cheek. "Thank you for staying, for being here. And, thank you most for believing. You were right and I was wrong. There is always hope. Always!"

He left the house an hour and an improvised breakfast later, trying to adjust to a world which had suddenly turned upside down. Eileen was elated, overjoyed, but he felt crushed and full of a dreadful foreboding, though he could not explain to himself the reason why. Except, he had received a tremendous shock and a vicious set-back to his plans. Perhaps, after all, the castle could not be taken. His arrival, unshaven and unwashed, at Mrs Morgan's in the middle of breakfast was guaranteed to provoke immediate comment and speculation. But the good lady knew a little of the to-ings and thro-ings at Hayes Close. "I stayed with him all night," he said as Mrs Morgan frowned at him in the hall. "He had his worst crisis yet, but he's rallied." Had he had the courage to look, her smile would surely have finally put him out of his misery.

"What marvellous news, Mr Brown," she called after him as he wearily climbed the stairs. "Did you see the letter for you?" He had. Without thinking he had picked it up from the hallstand. Now he dropped it, unopened, on the dressing table where it would remain until that evening. It was inevitable that he would have a bad day. He was tired and unable to concentrate on anything but one subject and, driven by anxiety, he went straight to Hayes Close as soon as the school day was over. Eileen smiled as she opened the door. It was an unfamiliar form of greeting and although she was clearly pleased to see him, he derived no pleasure from it.

"How is he?" he asked.

"It is wonderful, a complete miracle. He's able to use his hands again. The doctor's been and although he was cautious, he could not deny that it is a miracle. You were right, so very right!"

"You must not say that. I had no knowledge of the facts. My hopes were based on ignorance, utter ignorance. They were completely without foundation. The doctor thinks that he really is cured?"

"No," she said cautiously, as if she did not like the question. "He didn't say exactly that. But they do have to be careful and non-committal, don't they. I know!"

"It is not a false horizon?"

"Oh, Richard! Don't say that. Don't even think it! Life could not be that cruel to me, nor to him. No, he must and will pull through now!" Ostensibly, as far as he could see the castle gates were open, the drawbridge was down, the portcullis raised. Yet he dared not cross and attempt to enter. Instead he sat in his traditional chair, staring at her, trying to appear pleased, yet confused by emotions and the feelings of dread and outright disappointment. Where did it leave him? Where, indeed, did he now stand? "And you," she continued, bright and excited, "you've been so wonderful! A veritable rock to cling to through all the long dark hours. I can never repay you, nor cease thanking you."

"It was nothing," he said lowly. A little while later, feeling disconsolate, he left her planning her new future, a future in which he appeared to play no part other than that of the subordinatory role of being her son's former mathematics master. It came as no surprise to encounter Mrs Howard waiting in her diminutive front garden. She made a point of coming to the hedge as he passed.

"Mr Brown," she called softly. "About Mrs Cross. I can see from your face that you're worried."

"I am," he said convincingly.

"So am I. She thinks it's all over, done, dusted and dried. Not according to my ol' 'arry, it aint. That's not what the Doc said, and 'arry saw him. That aint what 'e said at all."

"Go on," said Richard coolly.

"He didn't reckon it was a cure, just a sort of part-recovery, temporary-like. Gave it some long-sounding name, you know. Not that 'arry could remember it."

"You mean Jonathan could still die?"

"Will die, Mr Brown. According to my 'arry he will. She got it wrong, didn't listen, or didn't understand 'im, only 'eard what she wanted to 'ear. You tell me. But you must put 'er right about this, tell 'er the truth!"

"Me? I don't think she'll listen to me."

"If she won't listen to you, she won't listen to no-one, that's for sure. What happens to 'er when 'e takes a turn for the worst?"

"We will have to be there, I suppose," he said sadly, "ready to catch her when she falls." He walked back to Grove Crescent in a totally reflective and preoccupied mood. If he was correct in his surmise that Eileen would not heed him if he tried to explain that Jonathan was as ill as ever, and that it was hopeless, what should he do? How could he even attempt to mount such an argument based on the ramblings of a next-door neighbour whose husband was, by all accounts, an alcoholic! Why should he not just say nothing and then proceed with a modified version of his plan? In her present frame of mind Eileen might be receptive to a cautious, gentle, persistent, wooing. True, she had given him no clear indication that she harboured any special feelings towards him but, then, there had always been this diverting, consuming, preoccupation with her son. At least she had not told him that she saw him as some kind of surrogate brother. Clearly, if he was going to press his suit, then the present was the time to do it, while she was light-hearted and partially released from her self-imposed captivity at Hayes Close. Wait, and when Jonathan had the inevitable relapse that Mrs Howard predicted, he would be back in the same impossible situation as before. If it was to be done, the time was now. Defeat could be turned into victory. And he would say nothing about Mrs Howard's ramblings. Nothing should be permitted to shake or undermine Eileen's confidence.

He was impatient to get around to Hayes Close next evening. He had rehearsed various possible scripts and combinations of arguments. An out and out declaration of love was out of the question. It would be too precipitous. He had to be certain of her feelings first of all. And he had to get her out of that house, into a different, disarming, environment. Hayes Close, undoubtedly, contained too many memories, inhibitions, and unbreakable loyalties from the past. "Can I talk to you, about yourself?" he said when they were sat at the kitchen table after he had paid his customary visit upstairs and had been reassured by finding Jonathan bright and cheerful. She gave him a knowing look, but there was no hostility in it.

"I suppose you are going to tell me that I ought to go out?"

"I was," he said. "Now that Jonathan's clearly on the mend, I think you can relax and think a little of yourself. You've been through a terrible period, and I think you owe it to yourself, and Jonathan. You need to get out, amongst people. Start to live again."

"Give me a little time," she said seriously. "I want to make sure he really is on the road to recovery before I do. If I guess right, there's more in your suggestion than a superficial interest in my health?"

He nodded and started to speak. "I - ."

"Not now, Richard. Let it rest for a while. Don't hurry me. I need time."

"Can I hope?" he asked, awkwardly.

"Oh, yes," she said strongly. "You have taught me to hope. It would be wrong if I were to deny you the same privilege."

He could have danced and sung his way back to his lodgings that evening. At each subsequent visit he observed, and commented upon, how much better Jonathan appeared to be. There was truth in his observation. Very slowly and painfully, life began to creep back into the boy's wasted limbs. He could move his left arm, then the lower joint of his right. Each little sign brought joy to his mother's heart and, paradoxically, loosened the bond that had so firmly anchored her to him. And Richard found himself silently praying for the boy's recovery or, at the very least, that there should be no relapse, not just yet. Inevitably, Eileen's reserve faltered and collapsed. She agreed, at last, to allow him to take her out. "Where would you

like to go?" he asked.

"Oh, somewhere where there's lots of people and noise," she said. "I'd like to be in a crowd!"

"There's the School Sports Day, for a start. Or would that be too painful?"

"Not at all," she replied very brightly. "It seems rather appropriate. After all, if you don't count that Parents' Evening, it was the first and only time that we saw each other outside of these four walls."

"I did meet you by the gate one day, I think." Eileen laughed.

"To think it was only a year ago. It seems so much longer."

"You remember it?"

"Of course I do."

"Shall I, then, ask Mrs Howard if she'll come in and look after Jonathan for you?"

A small cloud seemed to pass over her face and for a moment he feared that she was going to change her mind. But she did not. Instead she said that she would arrange it herself. And, although it was several weeks before Sports Day, Eileen was adamant that she would not allow him to take her out before. She wanted to be certain, of Jonathan, and of herself. So he had to content himself with the promise and the anticipation, and just wait. His fears persisted right up to the day.

It pleased him to be able to report Jonathan's progress at school, but he avoided mentioning the subject to Stephanie. In fact he saw less of Stephanie than she did of him and it was no longer consistent with his plans that he should see her other than on odd occasions. He had not told Eileen of his former association and he would not risk her finding out, certainly not before he had put all of his plan into operation. So he went to Hayes Close regularly where Eileen enjoyed his company and took pleasure in feeding him. Stephanie would watch him each weekday morning as he passed by on his way to school, distant, remote, un-reachable. She nursed her memories, of the Zoo and the Serpentine, the Park, the trips to Eastgate. She had been given her opportunities and had wasted them. It was all hopelessly in the past now.

The Examinations came, were sat, and the papers collected. Richard awaited the results of the first and second years with great anticipation and interest. The initial results that Mr Pennington fed back were most encouraging. "They are quite good," said Mr Pennington, "especially those of the boys you singled out for special attention. Your method of individual assessment pays dividends."

"If only it was less time consuming! It seems unfair on the other boys, those who have not benefited."

"Ah! That's always a major problem in teaching classes of this size. Attempt to give any small section special attention and the remainder will apparently suffer. You have to watch that aspect closely."

To a degree, Jonathan's recovery did release Richard from his overwhelming obligation at Hayes Close. He was able and happy to assist in the final preparations for Sports Day, although he steadfastly kept his involvement on the day to a minimum. It was true that it was a normal working day. He would be paid. He was obliged to attend. The majority of the staff seemed sympathetically aware of his reasons, but Mr Crompton was his inevitable sarcastic self, declaring that Richard's interests were "not of this school", even stooping to a weak pun based on Jonathan's surname. Dennet was antagonistic, but it was not the Dennet of old. He had relapsed and now wore a perpetual worried expression, appearing continuously preoccupied as if some awful parasite was devouring him from within. What ever the problem was, Dennet steadfastly refused to communicate it to others.

Sports Day was held on a Friday that year. The day was, as it had been a year before, unimpeachably fine. It seemed to Richard, as he walked around the grounds, that they looked more decorative, brighter and joyful than before. The green of the shrubbery appeared richer and the colours of the bunting seemed more vivid. Yes, he had come through his long dark Winter into Spring and that season was about to burst into glorious Summer.

A further letter arrived from Eastgate. He found it awaiting him in the hall. Preoccupied, he had taken it into breakfast with him and when he came to put it in his pocket,

he found another, rather crumpled, unopened envelope there. How long had that been there? A stream of abuse flowed through the time warp and across galactic space from the fifth dimensional kitchen, but he took no notice. Murder might be being committed, but it would only seem to be common-place. A heated discussion suddenly erupted at the other end of the breakfast table. Mr Frobisher had gone quite pale while Mr Hughes had assumed the colour of a furry beetroot which looked about to explode. Richard paid them no heed.

He had arranged to go around to Hayes Close at lunchtime to meet Eileen. It would save him from suffering the anxiety of waiting at the school for her to come, and minimise any chance that there might be of her having a change of mind at the last minute. Her vivacity surprised him when she opened the door, but the development of any conversation there was abruptly terminated by Mrs Howard who appeared on the path behind him. "If there is any problem you will contact the school, won't you?" said Eileen, fretting. Halfway down the path she stopped. "You know, I really wonder if I am right to go." Richard's heart fell, but he was saved, for not the first time, by the positive attitude of Mrs Howard.

"You go away, ducks. You enjoy yourselves," she cried, blocking the door and looking prepared to physically eject Eileen if she showed the slightest hint of weakness. Richard took her arm and for the first time they walked together along the petal strewn pavements under the flowering cherry trees. Her dark eyes were downcast as if she was deep in contemplative thought.

"It will be all right," he said, squeezing her hand. "You must not worry."

She made a striking figure that afternoon at the School. Not one that turned heads as Stephanie had done, but her delicate, dark, prettiness attracted attention and drew favourable comment. It was an Eileen who Richard knew only from that wedding photograph, attractive, bright, joyous, yet retaining that reflective mystery which arose from her great preoccupation. Mrs Hiller stared at her before coming across. "Hello, Eileen," she said in her dusky voice. "I'm pleased to hear that Jonathan is on the path to recovery. We all hope to see him back at school soon." She then turned to Richard. "You've made a good job of things. Be careful. Don't spoil it all now. Excuse me, I must go." They watched her stride away, hips swinging. What did she mean?

"She is a strange woman," said Eileen quietly.

"And dangerous," muttered Richard. The School Brass Band stomped into its Souza march, Mr Crompton blew and barked over the public address system, startling the crews of ocean-going liners in the distant reaches of the Thames, and Sports Day was officially under way. They wandered among the side-shows that continued to proliferate in their frenzied attempt to raise proceeds for the non-specific School Fund. Richard commented that he wondered what happened to the money. Eileen giggled, enjoying herself, and laughed. It struck him forcibly that it was the first time that he had heard that happen. It was there that they ran into Dennet or, to be more precise, he ran into them. "Come and say hello to Mrs Cross," called Richard as Dennet seemed to rebound and was on the verge of running away.

"Hello," said Dennet breathlessly.

"You shouldn't be here," continued Richard. "Your demonstration starts in less than ten minutes!"

"I shouldn't be here! I wish I wasn't!" exclaimed the Physical Education Instructor, woefully. "Have you seen Susan Larkins about?"

"No. Do you want her?"

"Do I want her? She's looking for me!"

"Why all the fuss, then? If you go and do your thing out there in the middle of the field, she is bound to see you, in all your glory." Dennet looked angry and caught hold of Richard's arm, turning him aside from Eileen.

"Look!" he hissed. "I'm in trouble! She's in trouble!"

"Trouble, Dennet?" echoed Richard, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Lord!" Dennet almost screeched, looking briefly up at the faultless blue sky. "I've got her into trouble! That's why she's looking for me!"

"Isn't that Susan Larkins there, by the hoop-la? Coming this way?" Un-unerringly, the Headmaster's daughter made a bee-line for the couple while Dennet fled, doubling back

behind the stalls.

“Have you seen Dennet?” she asked in a cold, slightly ruffled, cultured voice.

“He went that-a-way,” said Richard, pointing in the direction in which Dennet had departed, but not the way in which he had ultimately gone. Susan glared at him.

“Thank you!” she said, sharply, and strutted away.

“She’s a pretty girl,” commented Eileen.

“Nemesis,” said Richard.

“How so?”

“Dennet’s been messing about and says he’s got her into trouble. At least he thinks she is.”

“How dreadful!”

“Well, he may run, but he isn’t exactly going to escape her, is he? How to win friends and influence your Headmaster! “

“Will he marry her?” Richard suddenly thought of Sandra and the letters in his pocket. Momentarily he felt sad, but then a gradual feeling of smugness overcame him. He had once entertained brief designs on Miss Larkins. Dennet had messed it up. He would not make that sort of crass error.

For the second year running the Gymnastic Display was held without its leader. Richard did not see Dennet again that afternoon. He surmised that either he had escaped, though he thought that unlikely as Mr Larkins was bound to have posted guards at all the school exits, or he had been taken and locked in one of the changing rooms. When he casually observed that a police car had arrived he assumed it was because Dennet was being taken into protective custody. It was Eileen who first took note of the public announcement. “Listen,” she said suddenly. “What was that? Was that my name?”

Before Richard could react she was gone, running in front of him and away, as fast as she could. When he reached the Pavilion, Eileen was there, standing in the shade with her back towards him, close to Mr Crompton. They were both listening intently to a policeman. His face was familiar. As Richard started up the steps she spun around, confronting him, her whole body arched and trembling, her face white, her eyes ablaze with a wild frenzy and primed with hatred. “He is dead,” she spat, “and I was not there! It is all your fault! I should never have listened to you! I will never forgive you, never! I never want to see or hear from you again, ever!” The world around him appeared to fade and grow dark. Figures became indistinct and blurred as a roaring noise deafened his ears. Helpless and hopeless, Richard shut his eyes. When he reopened them, Eileen, the policeman, and his car, all were gone. A sympathetic hand gently rested on his shoulder. It was that of Mr Crompton.

“Come and sit down,” he said softly. “It is the most terrible shock. You did a great deal for that boy. He must have meant a lot to you. I am dreadfully sorry. You have my deepest sympathy.” Head in hands, Richard sat deep in the gloomy interior of the Pavilion. A cup of sweet tea was produced, which he accepted and drunk mechanically. He was oblivious of the passing of time, or the comings and goings around him as Sports Day ran its appointed course regardless of his catastrophe. Then quite suddenly, as if he had burst out of a long tunnel, the world, noise, light, music, people, chaos, all erupted around him.

“I must go to her,” he said aloud, and he went out into the cold, harsh, sunlight.

“Let him go,” said Mrs Hiller, restraining Mr Crompton. “He’ll be all right. He’s not the kind to do anything foolish.” Richard’s path took him straight to Hayes Close where he was confronted by a weeping Mrs Howard.

“Such a dreadful thing to ‘ave ‘appened, Mr Brown,” she sobbed, dropping H’s all over the hall carpet. “‘e was as right as rain one minute, then ‘e gave a little cry, called out “Mummy”, and just flopped back on the pillow. I called the doctor, but there was nothing ‘e could do. It was all too late.”

“And Eileen - Mrs Cross?” he asked, impatiently.

“The Doc’s given her a sedative and she’s sleeping now, poor thing. I ‘ad to put her to bed myself. Oh, what a terrible thing to ‘ave ‘appened! What will my ‘ubby say?” Richard was reluctant to leave, and lingered. There, above his head, Eileen was lying, sleeping, dreaming poisonous dreams about him. And she was unreachable, totally unreachable.

He dragged his heels back to Grove Crescent, but there was no consolation to be found there. After shuffling around his room and staring aimlessly at the unmoveable platform out of his window, he went out and, with little thought or premeditation, went to the High Street restaurant, sat in his once customary place, and waited. It was a wild, reckless, desperate, idea, but perhaps Stephanie would come in. Perhaps she would comfort and console him?

“Why, Richard!” she cried, approaching from behind him. “What a pleasant surprise!” Then she caught sight of his face. “Goodness! Whatever has happened? Not your father?”

“My father?” he echoed, failing to grasp the implication. “No, it’s Jonathan Cross. He’s dead.”

“Oh, Richard, I’m - .” She broke off as her expression changed to one of suspicion and suppressed anger. “Jonathan Cross? Not Eileen Cross’s boy?”

“Yes,” said Richard with no sensitivity. Stephanie turned aside in an attempt to hide her fury from him. She need not have bothered for he had not moved his gaze from the table top.

“Eileen Cross,” she hissed to herself. “All this time it has been Eileen Cross. Had I only known!” She slid onto the seat opposite him and stretched her hand across the table towards him. Frantic ideas, wild improbable schemes, ran through her head. So it was Eileen who had cheated her again, or had she? Why was he here? What really had happened? If Jonathan was dead, why was he not with Eileen, comforting and consoling her? “I am sorry, Richard,” she said slowly. “I really am, but, you - and her?”

“It just - happened. One of those things, but it is over now,” he said wretchedly. “At least, it appears to be. I seem to have made a total mess of my love life, if you can call it that. First you, then her; and all for nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“There’s always hope.”

“Don’t mention hope. Hope is a four-letter word.”

“I mean - there may be parts of your - love life which may still be retrievable.” The tone of her voice made him look up at her, but she could see from his expression that he did not understand what she was implying. He was thinking, still, only of Eileen. “It will be painful now,” she continued, “but it will heal in time, though you may always bear the scars. It happens to us all. Now, what we need is something to take you out of it, to take your mind completely off it.”

“I’m not sure that I want my mind taken off of it,” he moaned.

“What? Wallow in your misery? No! You’ve got to bounce back, just as they do in the films. Come out fighting! How about a party? How about coming with me to a banshee?” He looked puzzled. The term was familiar. Somewhere, in the past, he had heard it. “There’s one in a week’s time, next Friday,” she went on. “I think I could get you an invitation. I have already made certain commitments, but I think I could unscramble them. Be warned, though! They can be wild, uninhibited, parties. Almost anything goes, and happens, even though you are among the best people. But I will give you a night that you will never forget.”

“A party?” he murmured. Really, he was only half listening to her and nothing seemed more irrelevant or incongruous than the thought of going to a party, yet he found himself accepting her offer and agreeing to go.

“I’ll set it up, then,” said Stephanie, brightly. “If we can meet here next Wednesday evening I can give you the instructions and the passwords.”

“Passwords?” he said without a trace of interest.

“They really are select. You won’t get in without your password and number. It is to stop gate-crashers and the undesirables. Each person has a word and a number and the two have to match to be correct. It is virtually impossible for anyone from outside those invited to gain admission.”

“Who keeps them out?”

“The Police,” she said quite firmly.