

PAUL S A REDMOND

THE NEWINGTON QUARTET

BOOK TWO

THE FLOW OF THE RIVER



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Life is not what we make it. It is what it makes us.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

"You are looking very smart and attractive this morning, Mrs Hiller, if you don't mind me saying so. Very attractive, indeed!"

"I do not mind in the least, Mr Pennington. I try and do my best, and it's all for you, of course!"

"For me?" he said bashfully, as if his boldness had evaporated. "Surely not for me alone?"

"Of course it is," she said sweetly. "Who else would it be for?"

"I don't know," he said hesitantly. "I suppose I thought it might be to impress our visitor?"

"You mean you think I should set out to ensnare him?" she cried, fluttering her darkened eyelashes. "I leave such distasteful things to my daughter! How could you think such a thing of me?"

"I am sorry," he said, reddening and looking sheepish. "I meant that we are all trying to make him feel welcome. I wasn't meaning that you - well, you know what I mean, or rather what I didn't mean. You know that I would never want to offend you."

"I know," she purred and then looked reflective, feeling the snakes that entwined her left wrist. "Perhaps I will set out to make him feel welcome? Who knows? We have no idea what he is like and just for the present he is just coming for an interview, nothing more."

"But he is the only candidate, and you know how desperate we are!"

"I do know," she said soothingly and examined her fingernails, "but he might turn out to be entirely unsuitable for our purposes."

"That is not what worries me, Mrs Hiller. What worries me is that he may turn us down!"

"So, you do want me to make him feel welcome?"

"Not in that way," he complained. He was now studying her closely. She could feel his eyes as they scanned her up and down, from the light auburn hairs on her head to the high-heeled shoes she usually displayed below the skimpy courtesy panel on her desk. She almost asked him whether he liked what he saw, but she had no need to. She knew the answer. And she did not mind. It was something she had grown accustomed to, some thing she enjoyed, even encouraged. She adjusted the snake on her wrist so that the head pointed up in his direction.

"Well?" she said.

"I must say, if I can be so bold and you will not take offence, that your jumper is a little on the tight side. I mean it shows your -."

"Do you like it? It's my new underwear." She swung around in the chair. "Do you want to see the suspenders?"

"No, Joyce. I mean, not here," he said panicking. "Someone might come in. And it's not whether I like it, which I do, of course. It's the effect it may have on the boys I am worried

about.”

She sighed. “Come now. I am the only woman here amongst nearly five hundred boys and some twenty four masters, unless you count the dinner ladies and I have doubts about one or two of them. You don't think they will think any differently whether I wear exotic underwear or not, do you? They will lust after me just the same, at least those who already do, will. Those who don't, won't. I could probably come naked and no-one would feel any different!”

“I would,” he said.

“I know, and I am not proposing anything of the kind.”

“It's just that I wish you would not talk like that, Joyce. Have you thought any more about the proposition? Would you like to come out to the cottage this afternoon and discuss matters?”

“In this snow? Goodness me! I had enough trouble getting here without attempting to get out to the cottage. Goodness knows how our young man is fairing.”

“You do think he'll come?”

“I am sure of it. As for the other business, let me wait until the Spring before I make any sort of decision. And I have other personal matters I must attend to before I can give you an answer. You will have to be patient, Henry.”

It was one of those strange coincidences one stumbles across in life without going out of one's way to look for them - that another house called “Rose Cottage” was featuring in her life. She cherished such tender and loving memories of the first despite all that had subsequently happened. It was always possible, it was always her unspoken hope, that one day she might go back to live in the first although here was someone proposing that she should take up residence in the second. It was a beautiful house, this Rose Cottage offered her by the Senior Mathematics teacher. The first had now been renovated and was maintained in a state of readiness for her. She felt flattered when she thought of how Michael had it carried out secretly then took her to see it and be there yet, when she thought about it, the chances of her being able to live there still seemed to be so remote. That bird was with its mate, deep in the bush. This alternative Rose Cottage could prove to be an acceptable substitute and Mr Pennington was ageing and growing frail. And he was completely harmless and could be rather sweet, so why not?

And here, under her nose, was another of life's coincidences. This young man who everyone awaited so eagerly was named Brown. That was nothing in itself. There were plenty of Browns about, but his Christian name was Richard. She was sure that her sister had told her that Moira had a little boy called Richard. It was a long time ago and her memory was not all that reliable, not for details like that. She could remember every moment in the cottage, but who in her position would not? As for Moira, did she remember or think of her? Did she wonder what had happened to her once-time friend? She had not seen or heard from her since before the War. Just the same, it could be her boy.

But, then, this Richard Brown was coming up from Thanet, not Dover where Moira had been living when they were last in contact. What exactly was it that Debbie had said about them moving? The Thanet telephone directory was undoubtedly crammed with Browns. Many of them would be “Arthurs” or “Richards”. It was a common enough surname and not uncommon Christian names. She would examine him very closely when he arrived to see if there was a family resemblance. That was if she could remember clearly what Moira looked like. She could not remember Arthur at all. Oh! How foolish of her! His parents' names should be on his application form, except the file and the duplicates were now in the Conference Room laying on the table before the Head Master and the two School Governors. It was a safe bet that they were playing little attention to the form. If she could just think of an excuse to go in and recover the file!

“But someone may come along and snap you up!” protested the Mathematics teacher. “Someone who is far younger than I am.”

“No-one is going to snap me up,” she said, standing and going over to the double doors that led to the Conference Room. “Only creatures that fall into traps get snapped up and I am not about to fall into any kind of trap. You do not need to worry on my account, Henry.”

“There's someone else, then? There's clearly some reason why you cannot give me a clear cut decision now.”

“I have told you,” she said, poised with her hand on one of the door handles. “There is nothing for you to worry about but I have some personal matters that I wish to attend to and which I cannot deal with for several weeks. Bear with me.”

“I am not getting any younger,” he complained.

“None of us is,” she said, studying him. She could not help wondering just how long he might live. Was she in danger of ensnaring herself? The last time Michael and she had met he had complained that his wife appeared hale and hearty and seemed destined to live for many years yet. Christina was, on that reckoning, likely to out-live Mr Pennington by many years. He had been kind and supportive to her over the years. She had to acknowledge she owed him a great deal. She could make his remaining years a little more pleasant without prejudicing her future. No, she was not likely to fall into a trap of her own making.

She knocked on the door and opened it. “I wonder if I could borrow back Brown's file,” she said. “There are a couple of points I would like to check.” She knew they would not oppose her, or even query her request. She could do, within reason, what she pleased. In matters of school administration her word was Law.

“Are all the members of the Board here?” asked Mr Pennington as she returned to her desk.

“Of course they are,” she said softly. “Don't worry.”

There it was, there on the application form at the back of the file! His parents were stated to be Arthur and Moira Brown. It was reasonable to assume that they *were* the Arthur and Moira Brown who she had known all those years ago and that this was their son who was even now on his way to the school in search of a position as a Junior Mathematics teacher, and was highly likely to get it. Oh, the things she could say to him! Yet, on reflection, did she really want to reveal that she knew his parents and that his mother had once been her closest friend? What was there to be gained by such an admission whereas there could be everything to be gained if she remained silent. On balance perhaps it would be better to stay silent, for the present at least. There might come a day when she would tell him though it did seem that if she did not tell him now, she never would. She returned the file to the Board and went back to her desk. “Yes,” she said, “they are all here and locked in discussion now.”

“I pray that they will find him suitable and disregard that this is his first teaching post. People have to start somewhere and the way things are I am almost at the stage of suggesting we go out into the street and stop passers by and ask them if they are interested. Do you think I should go in and voice my concerns?”

“Goodness, no! I think they should find him most acceptable,” she said, feeling if he was Moira's boy, he would certainly be so. “He certainly looks good on paper as you've said yourself. What we must do is ensure that he wants to work here. Now, if he does I imagine he will have to find somewhere to live and that won't be easy.”

“You're not thinking of taking him in as a lodger?”

“Mr Pennington! The thought never crossed my mind!” The idea did have its attractions, but it would be far too dangerous in all kinds of ways. “No, we need to come up with some leads to give him, even if it only something temporary to get him started. I have some addresses somewhere.”

The door opened and a tall, thickset man entered. “Has our budding candidate arrived yet?” he asked, removing his glasses and closing his eyes as he spoke.

“No,” said the School Secretary. “In fairness to him, he is not due for another ten or so minutes and in this weather one could forgive him for being late.”

“Punctuality is everything,” said the newcomer.

“I expect that he is somewhere between here and the station trying to compose himself. It can be quite an ordeal, being interviewed, especially if it is your first position,” she said.

“We all have our own views about that, but I don't recall it being an ordeal when we interviewed you, Mrs Hiller,” said the Deputy Head. “If I remember it correctly, we were all totally captivated, just captivated.”

“You might well have been, Mr Crompton. As far as I can recall I was not. Anyway, it was not my first job and it was several years ago.”

“I see that you have marked a day's leave in May again on the holiday chart,” said Mr Pennington suddenly.

“Something of a mystery there, Pennington,” said the Deputy Head. “We are all aware that our invaluable school Secretary takes that particular day off each year but none of us knows the reason why. Could it be an anniversary of something, I wonder?”

“Mrs Hiller? Perhaps it is someone's birthday? Not your daughter's, surely?”

“My daughter? Believe me she is just about the last reason why I might consider a day off. No,” she said, smiling, “I have a prior engagement on that day. It is an engagement I must not miss. That is why I book that particular day so early in the year.”

“And you are not prepared to let us in on your little secret and tell us what it is?” asked Mr Crompton almost jovially.

“No, gentlemen, I am not. There are some secrets a woman is entitled to keep and must keep. This is one of them. Now, I think it would be sensible if you were both to leave my office before our young man arrives. We do not want him overwhelmed and, yes, Mr Pennington. It will be safe to leave me alone with him.”

“Such a thought never crossed my mind,” said the Senior Mathematics teacher, hesitating.

“Come along, Pennington. We should know where we are not wanted, and I have to hand out some admonishment to Dennet. After you?”

Joyce expelled a little sigh once they had gone and she was left alone. Her words, said in jest, seemed to haunt her and fill her with alarm. The words “safe to leave me alone with him” sent shock waves reverberating down the passages of her memory, disturbing the most unpleasant recollections of incidents she would rather have forgotten had she been able to; events about which she had never told a soul, not even Mr Pennington. And she remembered some of them so clearly although it was such a long time ago. But now that she thought about it, how different they were, her and her daughter. Joyce could remember a time when her life was dominated by going to Church whilst Stephanie would not dream of setting foot inside one. There had been a time, a halcyon time, when she heard Mass and took Holy Communion daily, a time when she lived in a blissful state of Grace, a time when life was simpler, dealing with spiritual matters, preserving her soul, and suppressing all physical thoughts and actions. That was a time before she met Michael.

No, it was not his fault. He did not corrupt her or lead her from the path of righteousness any more than she had corrupted her own daughter. Perhaps she could have been more careful and directive in her upbringing, but Stephanie had been a wilful little girl from an early age, always seemingly older than her years, never seeming to have an age of innocence, always appearing worldly. Not that there was ever anything crude or coarse about her. She could be taken anywhere. Michael would have been proud of her. Joyce told him so. No, it was not Michael's fault that her life had been reduced to living, God-less, in a menial, anonymous, semi-detached suburban house with a man she did not love and a daughter she could not control or understand. It was not Michael's fault. He had just been there at the start of her decline.

He had asked her if she still went to Church. He asked her that every year, seemingly forgetting that he had raised the question a year before. She always gave the same answer. There were times when it hurt slightly, when her memories of her lost youth were more vivid, when the days were bright and the sun streamed through the stained glass lighting up the incense as the vapour climbed upwards. She said “no” to him. It had once been a matter of betrayal and lost trust and belief. Now she knew that it was simply a matter of convenience. Had he asked her whether she believed rather than whether she went to Church, she would have had to be honest with him and answer “yes”. But how could she go now, without having to sacrifice the freedom of her life style? And he was a fine one to talk! He never went to Church. And his excuse was not that he would have to accompany his wife.

Hers had been a long downwards winding path after a short sharp descent. She could not blame Michael. Father Thomas had started it but she did not want to dwell on that now.

Without thinking Joyce rotated the bracelet and started studying the draft minutes of the last PTA meeting which lay on the desk. Father Thomas had started it, Michael had gently, unintentionally, assisted it, even her irrational and compulsive desire to compete with her daughter had progressed it. She knew she would sink even lower before she started to ascend again. Her inexorable decline would continue until the day came when they were united.

“Oh, pull yourself together, Joyce,” she told herself. “This kinds of thinking get you nowhere and solve nothing. Things are as they are, and life is there for the living.”

A head appeared around the door to the conference room. “Is our young man here, yet?” he said. Joyce looked up at the clock and smiled.

“No. He has a few minutes yet,” she said sweetly. “I will let you know when he is here.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said the Vicar. “I will let the others know.” The door closed and left her alone again accompanied only by her thoughts.

“Yes,” she said to herself. “He must be Arthur's and Moira's son. How strange that he should be coming here for an interview and for a job he is almost certain to get, and on today of all days. How strange it will be to have him here, working. But, no, I am not going to say anything. I won't tell him, not yet at least. There's no saying what Moira thinks of me. She probably still thinks that I am someone who went wickedly astray and if she caught a flavour of my life now, or Stephanie's, that would confirm her views. She might object to her son coming here to work and being exposed to such moral risks. She might even persuade him not to come, and that would never do. No, I will have to stay silent and that can be another of my little secrets.”

She spun around and found the small mirror from her handbag, examining her face and gently pushing her hair so that it took its most satisfactory profile. “Let's see what he thinks of me,” she thought. “I am sure that everyone will think well of him.”

“I did mean to ask you,” said a voice from behind her, “it is the funeral today?”

“Oh!” she said, trying to appear completely relaxed although Mr Crompton's return had made her start. “I didn't hear you come in!”

The eyes closed and his lips straightened into a menacing smile. “Stealth is one of a teacher's best attributes. Indeed, I would say it is an essential one. There are times when it is absolutely essential to be able to descend upon a classroom of little beasts completely unheralded. It was not my intention to descend upon you, Mrs Hiller.”

“I should think not, Mr Crompton,” she said, laughing. “I am not one to be descended upon. But you are right. It is today, Jonathan Cross's father's funeral.”

“A rather poor day for it, I would say,” said the Deputy Head. “You would think that people would be more careful about when they die.”

“It was an accident,” she said softly.

“Of course, you knew him, did you not?”

“Only vaguely.”

“That does, at least, explain why young Cross is absent.”

“There was a note from his mother,” she said. “I attached it to the Form Register this morning.”

“You are so efficient, Mrs Hiller,” he said, beaming.

“Thank you, Mr Crompton,” she replied graciously. “I do try to be.” She returned to the PTA papers she had started to look at. Would Stephanie go? Would she leave the warm comfort of her flat to risk the chaffing effect of the North wind on her complexion? If she did decide to go her presence would hardly be welcomed by Eileen Cross, far from it. But knowing her daughter, Joyce would have been prepared to lay odds on that she would turn up just to spite the widow. Stephanie was like that. And she should never have become involved. There had been no call for it, none at all. She should not have become involved with a married man in the first place. She could have counselled her daughter against that, except she could not have told her daughter, and she would, in her turn, not have heeded her mother, anyway. Indeed, the more she spoke out against the relationship the more Stephanie was likely to pursue it.

That was not to think that she would not speak out against her daughter. She had

taken issue with her and look what that had led to, row after row. The time had come when they could not even bring themselves to say “good morning” to each other in a civil fashion. That they saw eye-to-eye on next to nothing was entirely down to Stephanie. She was impossible and uncontrollably headstrong. And she should never have taken up with Owen Cross and led him astray. Goodness there were enough other men amongst their mutual acquaintances that she could have seduced, driven to distraction, then destroyed. Why pick on Owen and make a widow of that sad little mouse-like wife of his? But it had been an accident, had it not?

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