

CHAPTER TWO

The honeymoon was over. Richard sat at his father's desk, in his father's small, modest, office, with its papers and files kept in their proper place and tidy by Miss Logan who lurked in the outer office, sadly contemplating the sign-writer who, outside in the yard, was changing the name of the company displayed over the builder's yard. The honeymoon was certainly over - the night of sweetness, excitement, discovery, intimacy and romance, had passed, and now everything looked starkly crude and different in the harsh, cold, light of a new day. He had been defeated on every front. No matter which way he turned, or in which direction he looked or sought to manoeuvre, he could not detect one iota of success. All his aspirations in life had been torn apart and had collapsed in one fearful, catastrophic, night. At first he thought he might rally and have salvaged something from it, something that would rise from the ashes of his hopes, but now it seemed that even that was doomed to fail. What was it Eileen had said? Hope was a four letter word? How right she had been then! How right that was now!

Bitterly he examined and catalogued his failures. In his chosen career, after confronting and deriding his father, and, if his mother was to be believed, exacerbating his heart condition, he had failed and found himself catapulted headlong back into joining the builder's company, the very occupation he had striven so purposely to avoid. It seemed almost as if his mother had him at the end of a long length of rope with which she could, and did, haul him in. Now he was securely bound, hand and foot, by it. Once installed in this small office, there would be no escape, no parole, no remission. He would be there for the rest of his natural life.

It did not stop there. When he had eventually prised the company books and ledgers from the jealous hands of Miss Logan and examined the margins, even his untrained eyes detected that the turnover and profitability were far lower than he had hitherto assumed. On the strength of his appointment, his father was aiming to edge into semi-retirement, but even when he was in full retirement he would supplement his pension from the business. When asked, his father admitted that there was a pension plan, but Richard discovered that the potential income appeared to fall short of the amount required by his parents. A lot had been spent on his education. Sandra was still living at home. And he now had a wife to support and a mortgage to repay. In time, he hoped they would have a family. It was all expense, and he doubted the business could produce enough income to meet it.

He had to worry, too, about his father's health which had not been good since the heart attack a year or more ago. That left Richard feeling exposed as he did not know the business intimately, certainly not as well as his father or Miss Logan. There was always this feeling that some of the employees resented him, seeing him as a failed upstart. "The old man is OK," he could hear them saying, "but that young master Richard - ." It made him feel hot and uncomfortable when he thought of it. He had looked for success and comfort in his marriage. He had married with his hopes high, at the pinnacle of a long and difficult courtship. Now he wondered if he had erred in having his eyes only on the short-term objective, oblivious to what might lie beyond. After her son's death, Eileen had been hostile and that had spurred him beyond what was, in hindsight, recklessness. He had been patient but persistent with her and had won her only by his perseverance. Now that he looked back at and summated all the months he had known her, splitting them into those when she was hostile or indifferent, and those when she appeared to like him, the former far outweighed the latter. How could he have missed this? How could he have made such a basic error? And, on top of this, he thought, she had changed of late.

He idly pulled some papers which lay on the desk towards him and opened them. It was a tender for a large flat-conversion contract. The rates were entered in Miss Logan's neat hand and with it he found the summary he had done which set what the costs and income might be. His father had protested. He knew what the going rates for the work were, the rates at which they could recover their costs and the rates at which a contract might go if priced by local builders. Richard had grown excited and told him that was no way to price contracts of this magnitude and explained that the costs for each rate should be individually calculated and

margins applied to recover their overheads and to earn a profit. His father and Miss Logan had found this quite comical. He was told that he would never get any work on that basis. Tendering did not work like that. Richard had been rash and had argued, and the whole thing had become quite fraught, so much so that it now pained him to think of it.

The trouble was, Richard was sure that he was right. How could you expect a business to flourish and succeed if you just plucked figures out of the air? His father saw no grounds for fancy arithmetic. He could have told his son that he could forget that, and that he had tried to become a mathematics teacher! Yet Richard stuck to his guns, with the result that they had agreed that this tender could go in on the rates he had calculated, once his father had decided that they were perfectly safe and there was no chance of them being successful. They would humour him and try it his way, and when it failed, no doubt they would laugh and tell him they had told him so.

There had been a marked change in the fortunes of Eastgate and the nearby seaside towns, a change that neither he nor his father barely found credible. Being within two hours of London and the suburbs, the early post-war years had brought a boom of holiday makers who had filled the numerous large pre-war hotels and boarding houses to overflowing. Guest Houses opened their doors, private houses were converted, and for a decade visitors could be seen roaming the streets during the summer months, knocking on doors, desperately seeking accommodation. Those who failed in their search or who had arrived with insufficient funds to meet the ever escalating charges the landladies demanded, spent nights under the pier or sleeping in the open in one of the two large parks. Then, almost suddenly, as if someone had built a barrier that either prevented access or diverted the flow, one year the crowds stopped coming. The end was prefaced by talk of low bookings, even no bookings, which was countered by those who said there would be a last minute rush as they had seen it all before. A few faithful stragglers did visit the resort, spoilt for choice of the hotels and finding that they had the town almost to themselves, but the masses bought cars and went to Wales, the West Country, or Scotland, or even ventured abroad on an economy package holiday. With them went their money and without them the closures started. Some of the floors at the Grand were not opened the following Winter. Landladies who had fretted over the size of peeled potatoes no longer found reason to buy them. A slow, inexorable, death started and one by one the great dinosaurs that stretched along the sea front and the cliffs, closed and were boarded up.

A couple of sea front hotels had been demolished and flats built on the sites before someone, no-one could ever recall who, suggested that it would be simpler and quicker, possibly cheaper, to convert the hotels. Arthur Brown had been very cautious not to become embroiled in the builders' gold rush that ensued. The contracts looked attractive but they were large and, because of this, they soon started to attract firms from as far away as South London, which greatly increased the local competition. Then, again, the work appeared to him to demand a low quality; a lower quality than he was prepared to ask of his craftsmen. Some of the contract terms were said to be onerous, with large penalty clauses lurking in the small print. And, because of the nature of the work, most of the detailing was left to the builder which seemed objectionable to Arthur Brown in that they were being asked to do the work of the Architect.

Of course, Richard saw the conversion contracts in a different light. To him they appeared to be an attractive source of work, concentrated in one place, non-seasonal, not vulnerable to the weather, and offering a route to the expansion of the business. After a number of heated discussions his father had relented and agreed to tender for one, and he had priced it. They had been called in, not because they were in danger of being successful. No, it was to be told that their prices were so uncompetitive that unless they sharpened their pencils or, possibly, bought new ones, they would not be invited to tender again. It was this that had prompted Richard to trot out his different approach and brave the reaction. He would often say that it was an understatement to suggest that it had not been well received. His father had become excited, his mother had become anxious and cross with her son, but when passions subsided, Arthur had agreed to Richard to try his approach. "There is no skill in getting work," he had told his wife. "The skill is in getting it at the right price. And our right price

might be entirely different to someone else's. But we will try it his way. He has to learn and maybe this will teach him!"

It was a challenge that Richard did not relish, especially as it appeared that he would have to fight it alone. At home he received little support from Eileen and none from his mother who thought he was being divisive. She might have even gone as far as to consider that he was being spiteful although she never said as much, not to him nor his father. At work he faced assault from his father and Miss Logan, but the gauntlet was down and he was not going to give up easily. It was true what his father said. He could easily have slashed the rates and they would have lost money on the contract. This was something the business might not withstand. So he had been cautious, keeping the rates high in this first tender, planning to reduce them in the next, if there was a next. He was unsuccessful, but they were not the highest bidder and Richard did not get called in to have his knuckles rapped. Now he faced pricing his third.

Eileen had changed since they had come to live at Eastgate. Richard was not good at spotting change and with his preoccupations at work, he had not initially noticed anything different. Perhaps the change was almost imperceptible at first, subtle, evidenced by her getting out of bed a little later, or being slightly more withdrawn at dinner when he and his father would hold forth on the virtues and pitfalls of competitive tendering. His mother noticed it first, wondered if it was something she had said or done, and concluded that it was the strain of having to live with one's in-laws and the constant frustration from the delays in completing the house they were extending and modernising for her and Richard. Then gradually Richard became aware of the changes in his wife though he was unable to analyse what was happening or have any idea as to what might be causing it. At a glance, on occasions when she was at her best, Eileen seemed to be the same person he had wooed and married, but there was a cancerous worm burrowing deep inside her being. She could become inattentive. She was sometimes morose, frequently withdrawn, and increasingly depressed. Eventually he asked her if there was anything wrong and she had snapped back her denial with so much venom that it immediately served as an affirmative. Yes, the honeymoon was over.

It was the custom for the local builders to occasionally meet in a boozy, noisy, informal, gathering in one of Eastgate's too numerous public houses. On this occasion they met with the expressed intention of trying to forge a common approach to the question of the hotel conversion work. Arthur had described the meeting as futile and probably illegal, and declared that he would not go. Richard had attended but, in accordance with his father's predictions, had gleaned nothing. There seemed to be some kind of popular idea passed around on the evening that if the local firms won all the early contracts, the newcomers from London would lose interest and send their estimators elsewhere. If they did not drive this invasive competition away, everyone's margins would be under pressure and there might be some who would go to the wall! They had to fight. It was their business in their markets that they were fighting for! "Goodness," said someone, "it'll be the French over here next!"

That view, in various guises, was expressed forcibly and publicly yet no-one could come up with a lucid and acceptable plan as to how it could be countered. If local firms were to take all the early contracts, some, if not all, would have to be taken on at a loss. How would those bearing this loss be compensated? How many contracts would it take before the Londoners lost interest? And would there be sufficient contracts left for the indigenous builders to mark up their rates and enjoy the fruit of their strategy? Richard sat and listened, thinking that there had to be a balance between what the developer could recover by way of rents and what it cost him. It would be far better if contracts were negotiated rather than this primitive method of fiscal Russian roulette. And as virtually all his objectives appeared to be diametrically opposed to the direction the meeting was taking, he quietly left and went home.

Now he had to make up his mind; where to pitch the rates for the next tender? How much could he risk? How much would he be allowed to risk? There was one saving grace that he returned to, time and time again, in his deliberations; they had been comfortably high so far. If the other tenderers maintained their levels of pricing he would still have to carve a large

chunk out of their prices to be successful. Knowing his father, there was little chance that he would agree to that. Of course, the other tenderers would be thinking along similar lines. Those who had been amongst the lowest would be wondering by how much they could raise their prices. He would have to be careful that in reducing rates, he did not suddenly pitch them a long way below the others as they raised theirs. Two different firms had carried off the contracts so far and both had started work. He had sneaked in with his father to see what they were doing. It was early days and there was no indication that either was in difficulty though his father had some caustic remarks about the standard of workmanship. "I couldn't ask our lads to do work like that!" he said once they were out in the street. "Did you see the architraves? God knows how they will get the doors to fit! If that's the quality of work that's necessary to match the rates at which these jobs go, we want none of it." Yet Richard did want some of it. Richard thought that it was essential that they had some of it. What was he to do?

He thought about the changes in Eileen. Was it his fault? The courtship after she had fled from Bromley and gone to Rhyl had been protracted and difficult. At first she had refused to see or talk to him but her denials only had the effect of spurring him into an ever increasing stance of determination. Then, one morning, she had stalked out of the house and confronted him, threatening to call the police. Richard had not laughed, as some might have been tempted to at the spectacle of this short, wild, red-faced, woman. Nor had he returned her anger. Instead he had calmly said that he was concerned about her. He had been all the time. He was now. All that he had done had been solely for her welfare and benefit. Nothing more. If she thought about it, calmly and logically, she would realise this. Would she think about it, when she went back indoors and stopped attracting the attention of her sister-in-law's neighbours? Would she think about it, then talk to him? He thought of the words he had used, to coax, coerce, persuade and demolish her resistance. He wondered if he had been really truthful concerning his motives and whether there was an underlying selfish intention there. It had been one of those rare moments when all the right words had presented themselves on his lips and emerged in the right order. He had spun them out, like a silvery thread, reckless of their meaning or implications, and she had heard and yielded.

Within a few days, Eileen had been prepared to talk. She did not send him away as perhaps she should have done. And, once he began to talk he had been diligent, methodical, and calculating. He did not rush her. She was permitted to make up her mind, slowly, step by step as he led her towards him. She had the counsel of her brother-in-law and his wife. Although there were things that Richard regretted now he looked back, when Eileen had said "yes" she had known exactly what she was doing and what the implications were. So, what was wrong now? Had she changed her mind? Had he done anything to make her regret her decision or change her mind? Had he not been the epitome of kindness and consideration? Had not his family taken her in and treated her as if she were another daughter and sister? Perhaps his mother was right; it was just a question of having to live with his parents. It was having to live in someone else's house and all the strains that created. It would all be solved once their new house, the house they had chosen together, was ready. It should be completed in only a few week's time. That should lift her spirits.

He returned to his deliberations about the tender and made up his mind to take off at least another five percent. That would make it marginal on his costings and outputs, but they had to try. They could not afford not to be involved in such a large local market. Not if the business was going to grow! The papers were bundled up to await finalisation the following day. Outside it had begun to rain lightly but the sign writers had already finished, packed up, and left before the paint from the words "Brown & Son" had started to streak.

It was several days before Joyce Pennington summoned up enough courage to go to her daughter's flat. At first she blamed herself for being weak and for not having stood up to Michael when he had asked her to undertake this mission. Then, as she started to think about what she would say, and rehearsed her replies to her daughter's vitriolic responses, she realised that it could not have been easy for him to pose the question with her, his lover. He could have sent a lawyer, or gone himself, or even written to Stephanie, but he had chosen a

more difficult approach. How much more difficult would it be for her, to broach this matter with someone with whom she had barely exchanged a civilised word for several years? She thought of telephoning the flat before she went, but rejected the idea. It would only give Stephanie the opportunity to refuse to see her. She would have to make a personal visit, but what if her daughter was not alone? That was a risk she would have to undertake. As it was a relatively short walk from the school, she made her excuses to her husband and set off one lunchtime as that seemed to her to be the time she was most likely to catch Stephanie in, but unoccupied. "Yes?" said a weary voice when she pressed the button.

"Stephanie. Don't hang up on me. It's Joyce." After a moment and when nothing was said in response, she added, "your mother." The silence continued and she was unsure whether Stephanie was still there.

"What do you want?" her daughter asked after a pause.

"I need to talk to you. It is very important. May I come up?"

"To me?"

"Yes! May I come up?"

"Up here? To my flat?"

"Yes, Stephanie," she said crossly. "Do let me in." She heard the lock release and pushed open the door. The foyer was clean and well decorated, with a number of dark, large, potted plants. She paused outside the door to the flat and tried to remember what she was to say. It was still not too late to turn on her heels and go.

"Come in," said Stephanie, coolly.

Joyce had been in the flat only once before and that was only months after Stephanie had moved in. Her recollections of it were dim, but she was sure that the decor had changed radically. Most of what she considered to be feminine excesses had been removed. Through a half-open door, in the sole bedroom, she could see a plain, single, divan bed without a headboard. What had become of the large ornate bed with all its trappings? Stephanie had changed too. Her face was gaunt and she was dark around her eyes. There was something in her movement too, as if she had lost the spring in her step that had been there. She was now moving around the room almost lethargically. And her dress! She was wearing a plain blouse, jacket and skirt!

"I am sorry," said Joyce. "Shall I come back another time? You look as if you were about to go out."

"I am not," said her daughter, indicating to her to sit.

"The flat looks different."

"Yes. I expect it is different to what you saw the last time you were here, or what you expected to see this time. Well, it is different." Joyce took a deep, audible, breath and searched for words to keep a semblance of conversation going.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Nothing has happened, as you like to put it," said her daughter crossly. "I have been redecorating, and I have been up half the night." Joyce thought that was nothing new, but did not say so. She looked around for paint and paper, just in case Stephanie meant that she had been up late, decorating, but she could see none. Of course, Stephanie had always been meticulously tidy, but it was more likely she had been up half the night with the decorator. That would reduce the bill!

"You said that you needed to talk to me," Stephanie said, impatiently. "I must say this is an honour. It is not everyday of the week that my mother says she needs to talk to me. What is it about?"

"I have seen your father," said Joyce, recklessly.

"I beg your pardon."

"Your father has been to see me."

"What? My father? Which father? I seem to have so many!"

"Your real father, your natural father."

"So he is still alive, then? When we last discussed him you said that you did not know."

"He is," said Joyce, feeling uncomfortable.

“And he knows about me?”

“He does.” Joyce fell silent, conscious that her daughter was regarding her with suspicion. She wondered what to say next, half expecting that Stephanie would flare up in a blaze of fury and indignation. “He knows about you,” she continued, taking another deep breath. “He has known of your existence since the end of the War.” For a while the import of this statement appeared to be lost on, or had overwhelmed, Stephanie as she did not respond but continued to stare at her mother. “All that time,” she said slowly.

“All that time,” said Joyce softly, thinking that she could so easily have made the mistake of telling her that Michael had only just found out he had a daughter. That might have appeased Stephanie, but it could have led to problems in the future. It was better to tackle all the obstacles now and get as much out in the open as was necessary. If it provoked her daughter's wrath, so be it. “I have to tell you the truth, you see,” she added.

“Sixteen years?” said Stephanie to herself. “He knew all this time and I didn't.”

“Yes,” said Joyce, nervously.

“It was it him in the car, the man I opened the door to that night when you ran away? He stayed outside all night and we thought he was a private detective. I use to assume he was watching your husband because of - you know.”

“Yes, it was. That was the first time I had seen him since before you were born, but I cannot explain it all at present. We did what we thought was best at the time. We did the only thing that we could do. I wanted to start a new life. He was married and his wife - well, she could be vindictive.” She hesitated after the reference to Michael's wife, wondering if she had already said too much.

“Is there any more? You are my mother? You are not going to tell me that I was adopted and that explains everything.”

“I am your mother,” Joyce said calmly. That was true, but she had said that Michael had been to see her, and that was not exactly true. He had arrived late, hadn't he? And in the context of the proposition she had to put to her daughter, it could pass as true. “But there is more,” she added.

“Do I really want to hear all this?” cried Stephanie, walking to the window and looking down on the street. That was where she had stood and saw him walking to and from the school. She was sure that her mother had a hand in his going, somewhere. She would much rather have assured her of that than have to listen to whatever it was she was going to say. Except it all seemed too much trouble. The fight was gone out of her. “Do I really?” she repeated. “Why are you telling me all this? Is it revenge? Have you come to get your own back? I would have thought that you had done enough with Richard!”

It would have been so easy to fight back or walk out, but she had given Michael her word. “I had nothing to do with Richard or his leaving. I was as disappointed as anyone when he resigned. You were in love with him?”

“What if I was?” said Stephanie angrily. “Are you jealous?”

“Me? Goodness no!” Joyce exclaimed, but could not help feeling a little guilty. “How could I be jealous? I knew his mother, years ago.”

“Knew his mother?” Stephanie frowned. “How can that be?”

“She used to be my best friend, but none of this is relevant to the reason why I have come to see you.”

“I do not understand,” murmured Stephanie, shaking her head and sitting down. “I am finding this very confusing. Why did you come here, then?”

“As I said, I have seen you father. His wife died towards the end of last year and as a consequence he now considers himself free to act, something we agreed he could not do before.”

“Act?”

“He wants to make some reparation, to you, for all the years when he hasn't been able to do anything.”

“Isn't it a bit late for that now?”

“He doesn't think so.”

“What does he mean, reparation? Has he any idea of the kind of life I have led?”

"I think he does. He has even been down here to see you."

"Down here, to see me? I don't understand."

"He wanted to see what you looked like. He was very impressed."

"I am not! I would have thought he would have at least come and see me himself! The thought of it, him coming down here to spy on me and he doesn't even make himself known!" Joyce shrugged.

"He asked me to come and talk to you first. He felt that you might be more receptive to his proposal if it came from me."

"And what is it, this proposal? This reparation that he is going to bestow on me, after all these years, after his spying on me?"

"I should tell you that he is quite well off. No, that is an understatement. He is rich."

"I have a father and he is rich!" cried Stephanie in derision. "I do not believe this is happening to me!"

"Amongst the numerous things he owns," continued Joyce, determined to press on and achieve what she had come to accomplish, "is a large house and estate near Dover that he inherited partly from his wife's family. He wants you to have that." Stephanie appeared to be struck dumb, so she added, "a large house and estate."

"How could I afford to keep a large house?" Stephanie asked. "I am not even sure that I can afford to remain in this flat."

"There is the income from the estate and he proposes to make you an allowance. There are some provisions he asked me to tell you. One is that you cannot sell the house or estate without his permission -."

"And you, mother? What are you getting out of all this? Whilst I am getting this house what are you running away with?"

"I? I am getting nothing, nothing at all, other than possibly seeing you settled and out of all this."

"Nothing? Am I to believe that?"

"Nothing. I think I should tell you that it was not some sordid affair between us. Your father and I loved each other, love each other, very deeply, and we probably always will. You were born as a result of that love and I think your father, who has no other children, loves you."

"Like my mother does? And you say you love him, the way you carry on sometimes?"

"Stephanie! There isn't time and this is not the occasion to open all that up. One day you will understand, everything. Let us deal with the present problem."

"And that's it, all of it?"

"No, there's more."

"I thought there might be."

"Your father says the house at Dover is in need to repair and redecoration. He wants you to undertake this."

"Me? What, hang paper and do painting?"

"No, nothing like that. He will appoint an architect who will take care of all the work. Your father wants you to determine what is done, the specification, the finishes and decor. It would be a little more demanding than doing your flat," she added, looking around.

"I really do not believe any of this. I don't believe a word. What is this, some nasty practical joke, Mother? Are you going to wet yourself with mirth at my expense when you leave?"

"No. It is all true, Stephanie. You have only to say "yes" and you can leave all this, and everything it stands for, behind you and start a new life, seemingly without a care in the World. He has that influence and wealth."

"My father? My so-called father? Why didn't he come and say all this to my face?"

"I asked him that. He thought it might all be too much of a shock for you, meeting him and the matter of the house and estate. He asked me to come and talk to you. It wasn't easy for me to agree to do it, and I have to contact him to let him know your decision. I expect that he will come to see you in time; when he thinks it is the right time." Stephanie shook her

head and started muttering. Her mother could not catch the words but understood the drift of their meaning. She felt gratification because it had gone better than she could have hoped. Stephanie had fought a little, but her heart was not in it. Come to think of it, her daughter seemed subdued and that might be why she had the upper hand. "You are feeling all right?" she asked.

"All right?" murmured Stephanie. "I feel dazed!"

"You don't have to make up your mind now. You could let me know in a couple of days."

"Is this all real?" asked Stephanie, ignoring her mother. "That my father, who I have never heard of, suddenly surfaces out of the blue and declares me to be an heiress?"

"He didn't suddenly appear out of the blue as you put it. I have kept in contact with him over the years, but he could do nothing whilst his wife was alive. It is too complicated to go into now."

Stephanie frowned. Joyce tried to anticipate her next question, but none came. "I don't think there is anymore to say," she said, standing. "You will contact me?" A strange smile appeared on her daughter's face, one that unnerved her. "Stephanie," she said levelly, "we may not get on, but this is very important to your father and to you. Do think about it carefully before you make up your mind. If you find yourself inclined to turn him down, think about it again. Do not think of it as compensation or him trying to dispel his guilt. Think of it as a genuine gift without strings or catches or any other ulterior motives. He will be very hurt if you do not accept." Stephanie gave her a brief dismissive nod and followed her mother to the door.

"What would you do, if you were me?" she asked suddenly. Joyce felt a wave of panic as she wondered how to reply. Her daughter was perverse enough to do the complete opposite of anything she advised, but she could not betray Michael's wishes. She looked her daughter full in the face and, not without some inner pain, said,

"If I were you, I would take the money. I would say "yes" and become the Mistress of Newington."