

CHAPTER FOUR

When Joyce thought about the proposition that she had put to her daughter on Michael's behalf, she wondered if any sane and rational person could reasonably refuse it. To be offered a stately home and a country estate, and, seemingly, all the money you might need to restore and maintain it seemed to her to be beyond most peoples' wildest dreams. Yet she knew only too well that Stephanie could be capricious and perverse. She might turn it down on a whim, or because of her mother's involvement. She might turn it down, just to spite her. On reflection, perhaps if she had wanted to guarantee that her daughter would accept she should have hinted that if she declined, she, her mother would be next in line. If she would turn it down to spite her, she would also certainly accept the offer to spite her. When a couple of days had passed and no word had come, Joyce began to grow concerned. There was a temptation to hang on and hope that Stephanie did act perversely, and that she could then benefit. Michael had said that he needed someone to live in the house. If not Stephanie, why should it not be her? She had once answered foolishly when Michael had once asked her if she would like to live there. Surely he would not hold that against her now, especially as he had given an undertaking to preserve it, but when she thought like this she subsequently felt ashamed. It was Michael's wish that Stephanie would go and live there and she felt she should try to comply and support it. Her happiness lay with him, not in a pile of crumbling bricks and cracking plaster. Apart from that, how could she be so petty to want to rob her daughter of an inheritance, or seek to pay her back for the cruel things she had said? Calmly she resolved that if she had not heard from Stephanie by the time a week was up, she would go and see her again and use any means or argument she could think of to persuade her to agree.

Joyce did not have to carry out her resolution for, next morning, there was a reply waiting for her at the school when she arrived. It had been delivered by hand and was lying on her desk. She immediately recognised the neat handwriting. "She has accepted," she thought before she summoned up enough courage to slit the envelope open and examine the contents. She was right. For a while she sat there, contemplating her daughter's brief note, re-reading it, ensuring that she had read it correctly and not misinterpreted the intention. She could not help the feeling of envy that returned when she thought that there would be Stephanie, living in that large house and surrounded by beautiful things, like the Lady of the Manor, whilst she had to live in Mr Pennington's modest cottage. It was a very nice cottage, really, but it was a cottage and no more than a cottage, none-the-less.

It would have to be done. She consulted her address book and telephoned Michael's solicitor. Mr Robart was in. "Mrs Pennington?" he said as soon as she was put through, "I was just about to ring you. Have you seen your daughter? I have the papers somewhere - let me see, yes! Here they are! It's about a property near Dover. Has the young lady agreed?"

"She has," said Joyce coolly.

"Good, good. Let me see. I have her address. There will be some formalities, of course; some papers to sign; and I see I am to introduce her to an architect who will act as her adviser and organise all the work. Yes, I think I have it all here. I will get in touch with her direct. Thank you for your assistance in this matter, Mrs Pennington. I do not think I will need to bother you further."

Somehow she felt hurt and excluded, and she could not control nor conceal the tremble in her hand as she replaced the receiver.

"Not bad news, Mrs Pennington?" asked the Headmaster from behind closed eyelids. He had slipped into the office whilst she had been on the telephone and his presence only compounded her discomfort.

"Bad? No," she said lowly, twisting her bracelet, "not bad at all."

"And Mr Pennington? How is he this morning?" Joyce shook her head and screwed up Stephanie's note.

"Much the same. I did offer to stay home with him, but he would not hear of it. Although it does not seem to be anything more than a heavy cold, he really is not at all well."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" said Mr Crompton, suddenly opening his eyes wide. "We do not

appear to have much luck with Mathematics teachers lately, do we? Or Physical Education teachers for that matter?"

"No," said Joyce lowly, thinking that there were some people who did not appear to have much luck at all.

Richard did not have long to wait before he received notification that once again they had been unsuccessful in their latest tender for the flat conversion work. The rejection letter arrived three days after Stephanie had made up her mind and written her short note to her mother. This communication was also short and revealed nothing other than their offer was declined but in view of its prompt arrival, Richard surmised that they could not have been better than third. In a small way he was initially relieved, but as he thought about it he realised that it was a major blow to his plans and he knew that when the tender prices were published their rates would be considerably above the successful one. "How on earth can they do it?" he asked himself. As he drove home to his parents' house that afternoon he resolved that he would have to confront the family with his view on the firm's financial position and his plans for improving it. When he told them that it was a question of either poverty or the firm going out of business, they would have to listen. If these London firms could tender so low and still make a profit, and he had to assume that they were making a profit from the contracts already awarded, so could they. He would address them over dinner when the whole family would be assembled and could not easily escape hearing what he had to say.

Eileen was waiting for him in the hall when he opened the front door. "I have received two letters today," she announced, clutching the envelopes. Richard could not gauge from her appearance whether the content was good or bad until she said, "the first is very distressing. You should read it." Richard hesitantly took the letter. It was from an insurance company and referred to a life insurance policy for a person who was described as deceased, but whose name did not immediately strike him as being familiar. Then he realised - it was Owen's.

"Well," he said, "I cannot see how it can be out of time." He tried to work his way through the maze of legalistic phrases but found he could not readily make sense of the contents. "I can't see how they can reject it just because you didn't make the claim immediately after, you know, but I don't understand the rest. What are they saying?" Eileen had more time to study the text and form a view as to the meaning.

"They are saying," she said tearfully, "that as Owen was in a high risk occupation and they considered he was to blame for the accident, they will not pay out!"

"I see," said Richard, losing focus on the words. "How can they do that?"

"I don't know! They knew he was a roofer or worked in high places. He paid a much higher premium because they said he was a special risk. Roofers only harm themselves in two ways - they either fall through the roof or off it. It is really disgraceful and distressing coming on top of everything else! I do not know what to do!"

"Do?" said Richard, perturbed the reference to "everything else". "We don't really need the money," he added, thinking how useful it might be under the present circumstances.

"It is not the money! It is the principle! Owen paid in for those years whilst we all went without things. They were happy to take his money but now, when it comes to it, they are trying to wriggle out of paying. It is appalling!"

"You said you had two letters?" asked Richard, hoping that the other one would be less distressing and that if it was, talking about it would settle her.

"It's from Megan, and more trouble. Gwilym's contract is coming to an end and he hasn't been able to find work. They don't know what to do, either." Richard mumbled about the likelihood of something turning up, and went to the bathroom. This was about the only room in the house where he could be alone to think. He was perplexed. How could he sit down at dinner and talk about their business problems in view of the position with Eileen's life insurance? Why had he just told her, or tried to lead her to believe, that money was not a problem, when it was or was likely to become so? Perhaps the most sensible thing to do was to go and talk to his father.

Mr Brown was, as was his custom, in the model railway room, just about to lift an

express up from Ramsgate Harbour Station. Richard explained the problem with the life insurance and his concern about the business, but received little help or support from his father. "I am sure that you are exaggerating the state of the business," said Mr Brown. "I don't think that things are half as bad you think they are."

"But we will have no work soon!" protested Richard.

"Oh, I have seen this situation time and time again. Something will turn up; something always does. And if the opposition are chasing your flats like there's no tomorrow, they will leave something else for us. But do, by all means, raise it at dinner. I will be interested to hear what the women have to say about it. Perhaps your sister will forgo a few dresses this year?"

"What about Eileen's life insurance?"

"I don't see any difficulty there, not as far as what ever it is you are going to say. If she asks, or even if she doesn't ask, simply tell her that you would not think of touching her money. Your mother has some money of her own, you know. I have never touched it, although she has offered it on several occasions when things looked hard. She may trot it out tonight at dinner."

"I suppose I could say that," Richard said, wondering whether his small falsehood was now being compounded.

"That's right," said his father attending to some uncoupling which did not appear to be going smoothly. "Tell them what they want to hear. Let them feel a little independent, but not too much so. They need to feel needed as well, but not exploited. You'll soon learn and, as for the insurance business, I'll get Maurice Vincent to write to them tomorrow. It is surprising what a well worded solicitor's letter can sometimes achieve! Come along!" The up-express was brought to an unscheduled halt in the London suburbs and they went down to dinner. "Richard has something to say to all of us," said Mr Brown mischievously as Mrs Brown thought about the coffee.

"Have you, Richard?" asked his mother, excitedly exchanging knowing glances with her daughter. "Is it good news?" At this point both Mrs Brown and Sandra, who emitted a nervous giggle, turned their attention on Eileen who felt uncomfortable and resorted to studying her lap.

"No it is not," said Richard who felt he had been pitch-forked into saying something just when he was wondering if he should say anything and was inclined to say nothing. "To put it bluntly, I not happy with the state of the business. As you know, we all depend upon it and my calculations suggest that it will not generate enough money for us all, certainly not to live the way we live."

"That is Richard's view," emphasised Mr Brown.

"What is your view, dear?" asked his wife, calmly.

"Mine? Well, I think there is something in what Richard is saying. We have a problem with these out-of-town firms muscling in and taking contract after contract as they try to establish themselves in the area. It is making life very difficult."

"You are suggesting that they are much cheaper than we can be? Why?"

"Oh," said Mr Brown, now thinking of his coffee. "Lots of reasons. Lower overheads, lower standards of work. Perhaps they are willing to take losses simply in order to get themselves established in the area and destroy the competition."

"Including us?" asked Sandra.

"You have just put in a tender for one of these flat conversion contracts, haven't you?" asked Mrs Brown.

"We have," said Richard, "one of several, and we have lost it. We heard today. That prompted me to have this discussion."

"Mark you," continued his father, "I am not sure that we could handle one if we won one. We'd need a different type of creature to old Matt."

"Old Matt is the senior building foreman," Richard told Eileen. "He's been with the firm since Dad started it."

"I suppose he was young Matt then," said Eileen, her mind on other matters.

"What we need," said Richard boldly, "is more work. We need a much higher

turnover. It is as simple as that.”

“Well, the work is there,” said his father. “It is a question of going out and getting it, at the right price, mark you. But if we do, we will need to find ourselves a high calibre general foreman.”

“Gwilym!” exclaimed Eileen suddenly. “How about Gwilym? He is out of work.”

“Who is Gwilym?” asked Mrs Brown. “I don’t mean to sound funny, my dear, but I have never heard mention of him before.”

“He is Eileen’s brother-in-law,” said Richard without thinking.

“Pardon?” said his mother.

“I am sorry. Gwilym is Eileen’s former brother-in-law, but he lives up in North Wales.”

“He could come down,” maintained Eileen. “I am sure of that. He came down to Bromley once and worked there for a while. He lived with us at Hayes Close! He could do it again!” Richard instinctively thought that he did not like the idea of someone like Gwilym suddenly appearing in the middle of his newly formed love nest, such as it was. “I am not sure that the business could support him as well,” he said.

“I’ll pay him,” Eileen said stubbornly. “I’ll pay him out of what ever I get on the life insurance, if I get anything.”

“No, no, no,” said Arthur. “That would never do. Tell me about him, Richard. What can he do? What’s his trade? What is the quality of his work like? Have you seen any of it?” Richard looked at the anxious expression on Eileen’s face. He had not expected this development and he had to think very hard to picture Gwilym of whom he had seen little whilst he had been in North Wales, leave alone describe his work.

“Well, now,” he began, “how would I describe him? He is a cut above a crafts foreman and I believe he has a number of diplomas.” He raised his eyebrows and Eileen’s nodded reply made him feel just a little more comfortable. “When I was up there he was working on a large civil engineering job which for a large London consultant called Bernstein, Ballie and Nathan, I think. It had quite a large element of building work but I didn’t visit the site. I had no need to.” The mention of the consultant’s name caused his mother and father to exchange glances but neither offered any explanation as to the significance.

“Gwilym is a well respected supervisor,” said Eileen quietly. “And he takes an interest in the profitability of the work as well. He was always telling us about some cheaper source of material he had found.”

“If he has been working on a large civil engineering contract, would he fit into a small family business?” asked Mr Brown. “It is somewhat different.”

“Are you seriously considering him?” asked Richard.

“I don’t see why not,” replied his father. “The question is whether he will fit in or feel constrained by the size of our firm.”

“Owen would fit in anywhere,” said Eileen.

“Gwilym?” asked Richard, taking her hand and squeezing it gently.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, colouring. “Yes, Gwilym.” A faint hint of a wistful smile crossed her face but then was extinguished as she found herself thinking about, although she did not understand why, the policeman she had met on the path by the cliffs.

“And can he be trusted?” asked Mr Brown, weightedly.

“Trusted?” queried his son. “In what way?”

“To work and to get his men to work, with the minimum of support or supervision. He wouldn’t have a major organisation backing him up or a resident engineer to sort out all his problems. As far as I can see these conversion contracts are a matter of making it up as you go along. That’s half the problem.”

“I would have thought so,” said Richard frowning, still wondering why his father was asking all these questions that he could not fully answer. “But this isn’t the object of this discussion. We are supposed to be finding ways of saving money, not spending it.”

“I thought you were aiming to generate more turnover,” said Mr Brown dryly.

“I will go out to work!” Sandra suddenly announced, having sat silently through the whole of the discussion and felt increasingly desperate to make a contribution.

“You will what?” cried her mother.

“Go out to work. Get a job! Get a proper job!”

“Doing what?”

“I don't know. Something clerical, maybe. I can type reasonably well. Don't forget the articles I used to do. And I know about book keeping, Mother!”

“It was time well spent,” said Mrs Brown.

“And I dare say I can brush up on my shorthand if required. I can't see me getting anything, sitting here playing the piano, at least not anything that I would want to do, and I don't fancy working behind a counter. Yes, something clerical.”

“But, Sandra? You - go out to work?”

“Don't make it sound so preposterous, Mother. I suppose you could say it is about time that I earned my keep. Even a little additional income would help, wouldn't it, Richard?”

“It would help,” he said. “There's no doubt of that. But what Father said was true. We do need more work.”

“Did I say that? I suppose it is true. We need more quality work - work where quality counts as well as price. That is likely to be the kind of work on which these London firms will not be able to compete. I'll 'phone around my contacts tomorrow and see that might be coming up. I am sure that there is plenty. It is just a question of finding it and getting our share.”

“And Gwilym?” said Eileen softly.

“Why don't you write to him, Eileen?” suggested Mr Brown. “You can tell him how things are and what the situation is like down here. You know - there's no guarantee, but there is work about and we are looking to expand. Put it that way.”

So, later that evening, Eileen sat and wrote to her sister-in-law. She chose her words with great care, anxious to avoid making the situation sound promising, making the offer highly conditional. She knew that Richard was not at all pleased with the decision to write to Megan and her husband. He told her that he was not pleased with the prospect of someone else coming onto the non-productive payroll before they had sufficient additional work to justify it. He was not at all pleased at the thought that Gwilym might end up living with them, and he told her so. She responded by saying that it was wrong that they should expect him to run two homes, certainly not under the circumstances, and put this in the letter. Of course, the offer was conditional on Gwilym not having found work closer to home in the interim and, of course, on him deciding to come.

Richard, for his part, felt uneasy on one further count which he did not convey to Eileen and which she certainly would have excluded from the letter. He did not, for one moment, suspect that his wife had any hidden, ulterior, motive in suggesting that her brother-in-law should come and stay with them, but he did recall Megan's words when she said how strange it was that she should marry someone so alike her brother in all respects. Eileen had endorsed this, saying that Owen and Gwilym might have been taken as twins. There had been the slip at dinner which worried Richard. There was just the chance that Gwilym's presence would affect her and something would spark between them. And she had not forgotten her husband as she had made painfully clear to him when she had told him of her intention to visit his grave. No, she did not want him to accompany her. She would travel to Bromley alone. He gained a little comfort when she said that she was not looking forward to it as Bromley held mostly painful memories for her. Later they lay side by side, in silence, awake in the dark. Each was tormented by thoughts. Each thought similar thoughts. Each thought parallel thoughts but neither could find the words or the courage to express them to the other. Each knew that the other was awake and each resented the other's silence. Eventually it was Richard who had to break the silence. “Have you thought about when you will go up to Bromley?” he said lowly.

“Tomorrow, I thought,” Eileen whispered. “If it is fine.”

“It'll be fine,” he murmured, turning on his side and feigning sleep. But Richard did not go to sleep. He could not get to sleep. He would think that he was dropping off and then a tiny noise, or an unpleasant thought, would catapult him back to full, alert, consciousness. He

heard the clock strike the half hour, the full hour, then the half hour again, after which he lost track of time. Perhaps he did doze slightly but he was convinced that he remained awake whilst his wife, as far as he was concerned, slept soundly.

Eventually he reached a point where he concluded that the best he could do was to get out of bed, go to the bathroom, come back, and try to start again. Eileen did not respond when he turned on the side light, nor when he opened the bedroom door and went out onto and across the landing. When he opened the bathroom door and started back, he received a severe shock. Standing in the bedroom doorway, silhouetted against the light from his bedside lamp, was a woman. Richard felt himself transported back to a similar vision when She had appeared there, on that very spot, and a forbidden name, Her name, had already formed on his lips when the woman spoke in a soft, low, voice. "Richard? Are you all right?" It was Eileen.

"Yes," he hissed, worrying about waking the remainder of the household. "I couldn't sleep." Then he did sleep and dreamed of Her, awaking to the sun unrefreshed and feeling more miserable than ever.

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