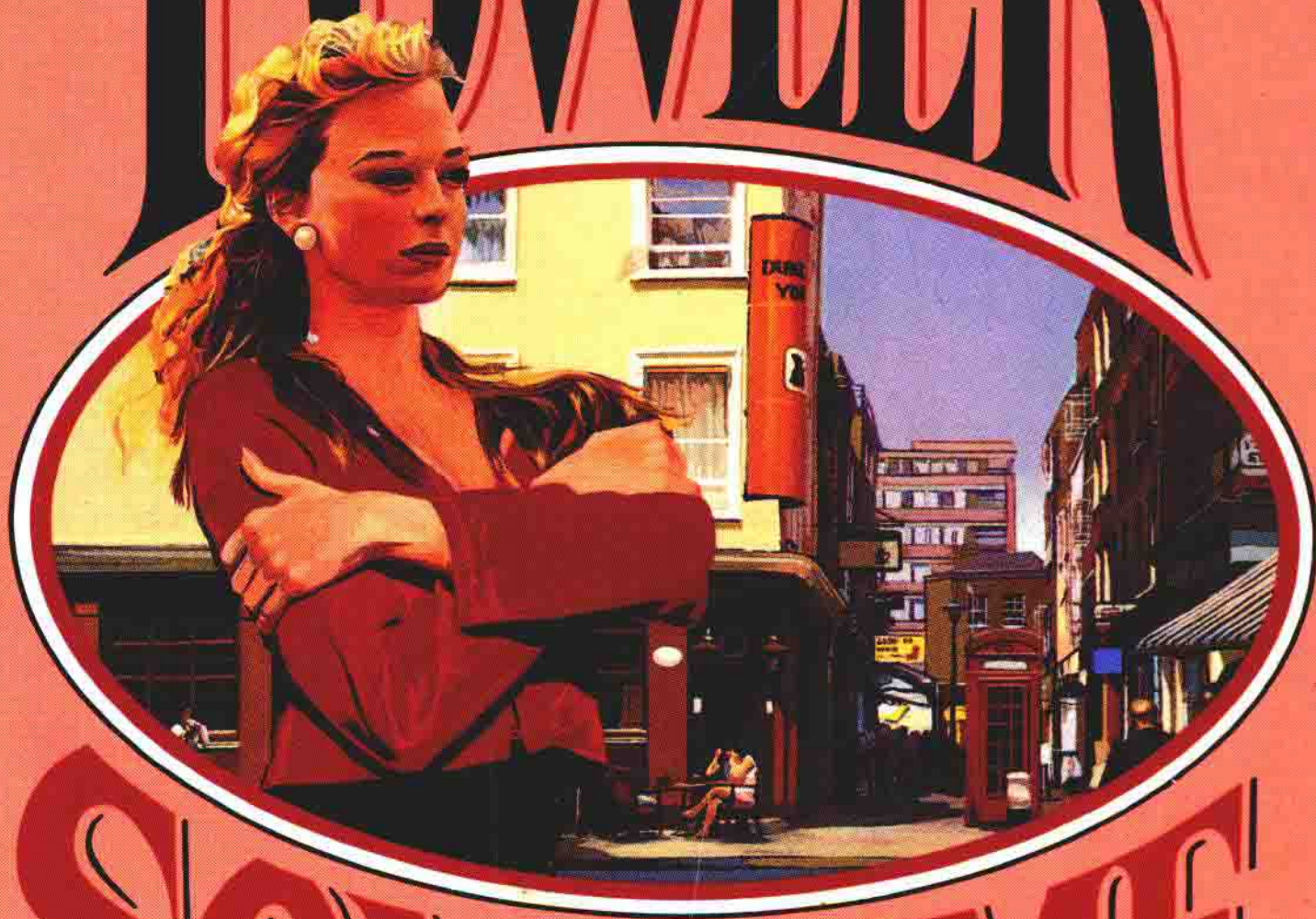


DEBORAH TOWLER



SOMETIME... NEVER

A STAR IS BORN...
AND A DREAM IS FULFILLED

Sometime . . . Never

DEBORAH FOWLER



SPHERE BOOKS LIMITED

A Sphere Book

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SOMETIME . . . NEVER

Daniel moved out of the shadows and, taking Anna by her shoulders, turned her to face the light. 'You're crying,' he said, bewildered.

'What if I am?' said Anna angrily, trying to wipe away her tears.

'Why?'

There seemed little point in not telling him the truth, since quite clearly there could be nothing between them now. 'Because, like you, the other evening meant something special to me.'

. They stared at one another in silence. Carefully, gently, he pulled her to him until her head rested on his shoulder, and her arms slid round his waist. In an instant, the raw emotions of the moment before were replaced by a feeling of warm comfort. They relaxed against each other. Anna's body felt soft and inviting against his own and Daniel longed to kiss her, but he knew the moment was wrong.

To Red Hands

**With love and thanks
D.C.**

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Chapter One

The man sat alone in the book-lined study behind an old mahogany desk. He cradled his head in his hands, his shoulders hunched. He was tense, so tense that his very posture seemed to suggest he was waiting for some form of assault.

Gradually, however, his body began to relax and when, at last, he raised his head from his hands, his expression was calm and self-assured. He opened the right-hand drawer of the desk, removed a small revolver and four bullets and placed them, with infinite care, on the blotter in front of him.

Slowly, he began inserting the bullets into the chamber of the gun. His voice, strong now, had a deep, melodious quality. 'This year, next year, sometime . . . never.' The words of the old nursery rhyme rang out into the stillness as he counted the bullets into the gun. He gave a deep sigh of apparent satisfaction. Then, raising the gun to his head, he squeezed the trigger . . .

After the sound of the explosion had died away, there was a breathtaking silence. Then, from somewhere in the inky blackness of the auditorium, there came the sound of spontaneous applause. Anna, standing in the wings, had watched the scene more times than she could possibly count, and yet, as always, unshed tears collected in the corners of her eyes. Gerald's performance never failed to move her.

'Well done, Gerald,' said a voice from the stalls.

'Never mind "Well done Gerald",' came the reply. Gerald Kingdom rose from the desk and strode purposefully across the stage. 'Never mind "well done", where's my bloody whisky?'

The spell was broken.

Experience during the last few months had taught Anna that

this remark was aimed at her. Running ahead of Gerald down the narrow passage behind the stage, she opened his dressing-room door. She had prepared a bucket of ice a few moments before and as the sound of his footsteps advanced down the passageway towards her, she mixed his whisky with all the speed and dexterity born of considerable practice. He walked into the dressing room, slammed the door and collapsed in the chair, facing his make-up mirror. He reached out for the glass without even looking at Anna and she placed it carefully in his outstretched hand. He took a gulp.

'God dammit, girl, what the bloody hell are you playing at? I asked for a whisky, not a glass of coloured water.'

'I'm sorry Mr Kingdom,' Anna said carefully, 'but Martin has insisted that I make your drinks weaker. You're on in just under an hour, you know. It's well after half past six.'

Gerald swung his chair round to face her, his handsome face contorted with rage. 'I know what bloody time it is.'

She tried to meet his eyes. They were blue, a startling bright blue highlighted by his sudden anger, and they seemed to be boring into hers. Everything about Gerald Kingdom was formidable and intimidating. How could Martin seriously expect her to stand up to him – particularly where his drinking was concerned?

'It's just that tonight is so important . . .' she began.

'Good God, girl, how long have you been in the theatre? Just because this is a first night, it doesn't make it any more important than any other. Every night's important, surely you've learnt that, if nothing else.'

'But all the critics . . .' she began.

'Sod the critics, sod Martin and sod you too.' He paused dramatically – just to see what sort of effect he was having, Anna thought angrily. She could feel tears prick her eyelids and she knew she was blushing.

'Tell me, Miss Wetherby,' Gerald continued, making no attempt to disguise the contempt in his voice, 'whose bloody whisky is this?'

'Yours,' she answered.

'Whose bloody dressing room?'

'Yours.'

'And who's bloody well holding this sodding play together?'

'You are.'

'I'm also forty-nine years old,' he continued, glancing in the mirror, as if seeking reassurance, 'and I am in the unique position of being the only person to have lived with me for that length of time. I know precisely when I've had enough whisky, when I've had too much, and when I haven't had quite enough. At the moment, I haven't had quite enough. Fill it up.'

'I can't,' said Anna. 'Martin will kill me.'

'And I'll bloody well kill you if you don't.'

This time he'd pushed her too far.

'If you want some more, fill it up yourself,' she said, her eyes blazing with sudden anger. No one ever spoke to Gerald Kingdom like this, but she was past caring. 'After all,' she continued, 'it's your career that's at stake, not mine. It's you who will be a laughing stock if you go on stage drunk – not me. I've been your nursemaid long enough. If you want to go and ruin everything after all these weeks of work, then that's up to you.'

She wrenched open the door of the dressing room and was starting to leave, when another thought struck her. 'And incidentally,' she said, turning to face Gerald, who was watching her, one eyebrow slightly raised, 'you're nothing but a hypocrite. How can you possibly say that every performance matters, when you're drunk as a skunk during most of yours?' She slammed the door behind her, making the walls shudder.

Anna hesitated, already appalled at what she had just done. Then lifting her chin, she walked hurriedly down the corridor, looking considerably more confident than she felt.

She found Martin Peters, the director, on stage in earnest discussion with the stage manager. A tall, thin, sandy-haired man, Martin always gave the impression of being on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His jerky uncoordinated movements seemed to suggest enormous inner tension and he wore a permanently worried frown. Yet, everybody agreed that he was brilliant, his reputation was substantial.

In normal circumstances, Martin was also kind and caring

with a natural intuitive flair for understanding his fellow human beings. But the circumstances were not normal and if Martin's pending nervous breakdown was ever to show itself, undoubtedly it would do so while directing Gerald Kingdom in *Sometime . . . Never*. Helping a movie star to make a comeback in the theatre was hard enough. Directing a play where success hangs entirely on the performance of one man is always a terrible risk. The complications didn't end there, though. The company was too small. A cast of three allowed for no leeway when it came to squabbles and feuds. It certainly didn't help, either, that the leading lady, Celia Compton, was also the producer's wife, questionably competent and loathed by Gerald. Into this cauldron, one only had to add a drink problem in order to serve up every director's nightmare.

Anna walked across the stage.

'Martin, I must speak to you,' she said, firmly.

'Later, later,' said Martin, with a dismissive wave of his arms.

'Now, Martin,' said Anna.

Martin looked up quickly. Anna Wetherby was not normally so assertive. He noted her flushed face, her angry eyes. 'Gerald?' he asked.

Anna nodded.

'Don't tell me he's still drinking!' Martin ran a hand through his hair, his face creased with concern.

'It's worse than that,' said Anna, 'I'm afraid I shouted at him. Martin, I'm sorry, but I simply can't act as a go-between any more. You're furious with me if Gerald drinks, and Gerald's furious with me if he doesn't. I've really had enough.'

'You've had enough,' Martin thundered, 'what about me?' If *Sometime . . . Never* and Gerald Kingdom go down tonight, so, by God, do I. But *you*, no one will ever remember you were a part of this mess. The least you can do, the very least, is to help us shorten the odds against failure.'

'I'm sorry, Martin, but you're the director, not me. It's your job to stop Gerald drinking, not mine.'

'You really pick your moments, love, don't you?' said

Martin. 'For the whole of the six-week tour, you managed to send Gerald on stage relatively sober each night. Then tonight, our "big night", the opening performance of *Sometime . . . Never* in London's West End, you blow it. What are you trying to do, Anna, sabotage the production?'

'Of course I'm not, how can you suggest such a thing. I care about this play quite as much as you do.'

'Then you've a bloody funny way of showing it,' said Martin. 'Get out of my sight. I've got enough problems without assistant stage managers playing the prima donna.' He turned away from her and for a moment she stood staring at him. With all her heart she wanted to tell him she was quitting there and then . . . but she couldn't. It wasn't just that she needed the money, though goodness knows how she'd manage without it. It was because after all they'd been through together, she was wedded to *Sometime . . . Never* – for better or worse, she had to see it through. Her pride in tatters, she stumbled off the stage.

With all the props carefully checked, and doubled checked, there was little else for Anna to do before the performance began. Finding a stacking chair in a dark corner of the wings, she collapsed, and finally gave in to the tears that had been building up all day.

To the casual observer, the theatre might seem rather a strange career for Anna to have chosen. Hers was an academic background – her father was an Oxford don, her mother a lecturer. Anna had attended Oxford High School for Girls, where it was considered that a place at the University was well within her reach. But Anna had other plans. She was lucky with her looks. Her hair was red-gold, the colour of autumn leaves, her eyes enormous – deep brown, set in a fragile face with high cheekbones and creamy skin. She was not a classic beauty, her mouth was too large, too full, her features were too irregular. Well above average in height, she was, however, a striking figure, and her features had that mobile quality so valuable to an actress. She could look beautiful or plain, seventeen or seventy.

Anna had her own very special reasons for adopting a stubborn single-mindedness when it came to her career. Her

parents disapproved, but were eventually forced to accept her decision. She knew they considered her ambitions to be romantic rather than practical, and her talent questionable. Certainly, she could not look to them for moral support when things were rough. 'I told you so' would always hang in the air between them. There was too much hurt, too much misunderstanding.

The only encouragement she regularly received was from Sally, her childhood friend, who envied her choice of career enormously and considered it to be the most glamorous in the world. How wrong Sally was. Anna had joined a repertory company straight from school, at seventeen, initially as an assistant stage manager. Eventually she had been allowed to act occasionally – her first appearance on stage had been as a chambermaid in a Victorian drama, when the first, and only, words she'd spoken were 'Yes Madam'.

During the next five years, Anna advanced a little. She joined a bigger company, and now, at last, she had made it to Shaftesbury Avenue – not only as assistant stage manager, but also as understudy to Celia Compton. Yes, it was progress, of a sort . . . but hardly Sally's idea of glamour.

Sitting alone in her dark corner, Anna thought of all the dreary digs in which she'd stayed, of the sleazy little hotels, the half-empty cold theatres and the loneliness – above all, the loneliness. Was it worth it? Was her persistence fuelled by faith in her own talent, or perhaps some latent desire for self-destruction? It seemed to her at that moment that the latter was infinitely more likely.

She was disturbed from her reverie by the persistent shaking of her shoulder.

'How about a coffee in my dressing room, dear, just to wish me luck.'

Anna started and looked up into the face of Richard Manning. His expression, as always, was kind and smiling, and Anna couldn't help but smile back.

'I'd love to, Richard, thank you.'

She watched him as he poured out two steaming mugs of coffee. Richard Manning was one of those actors whose face

the general public always recognise, but to whom few can ever put a name. He'd begun working regularly immediately after the war, indeed war films had been his speciality. He usually played the commanding officer, sitting safely behind a desk while the hero took all the risks. The theatre, however, was his first love, and in later life, he'd been relegated, almost exclusively, to the role of butler, a part he played with enormous relish, and which he was repeating yet again in *Sometime . . . Never*. He'd never been a star, but then he'd probably never wanted to be, Anna thought – the true professional, always even-tempered, always on time, always word perfect.

'There you are, my dear, coffee is excellent for calming the emotions. It'll do you good.'

Anna looked up at him in surprise. 'Heavens, Richard, has someone told you already about the scene I made?' she asked.

'I didn't have to be told, dear. We could hear your scene all over the theatre. I thought the short, sharp lecture you handed out to Gerald rather splendid, and certainly apt. He'd had it coming for years, of course.'

'Good grief!' said Anna, in horror, 'I had no idea everyone could hear. Do you think I'll get the sack?'

Richard considered the question seriously for a moment. 'No dear, I don't think so. If Gerald insists, it might make things rather awkward, but it's not logical. Now at least we've made it to the West End, there's no time to rehearse a new understudy for Celia.' He smiled at her, a sweet gentle smile. 'I'd play a low profile for the next few days, though. The Great Man can be awfully unpleasant when he's conducting a vendetta.'

Anna shuddered. 'I wish I was like you, Richard. You just get on quietly with your job and all this washes over you.'

'It hasn't always been that way, Anna dear. Even *I* was young once, you know. Just like all you young things, I thought I'd be a star, and accordingly, I threw the required number of tantrums to prove I had the right temperament. Then, one day, a well-meaning veteran thespian told me I'd never make the big time, and so from then on, I concentrated on being a very professional supporting man. Frankly, dear, it

was the best thing that could have happened to me. I've been married to the same woman for over twenty years, and I don't need to drink the best part of a bottle of whisky in order to go on stage.' He sighed and shook his head, pensive for a moment. Then he brightened. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-two,' Anna replied.

'Yes,' Richard mused, 'twenty-two is too young.'

'Too young for what?' Anna asked.

'Any real sense of compassion. You shouldn't feel angry with Gerald, you know, you should feel sorry for him. Right now, he's a very frightened, lonely, old man.'

'Frightened, lonely and old aren't the sort of adjectives I'd apply to Gerald,' Anna said, scornfully. The scene in his dressing room was still painfully fresh.

'Then, with respect, dear, you'd be wrong. Take age first, because it's the most obvious. You and I, Uncle Tom Cobbley, the World and his wife, all suspect Gerald Kingdom isn't forty-nine. I've worked with him many times over the years and I happen to know he's in his late fifties. That's no age, I agree, but it is terribly old for an actor who is still trying to be a heart throb.'

'OK,' said Anna, 'point taken, but what about "frightened", I can't accept that?'

'If he wasn't frightened he wouldn't drink. The days of the glittering Hollywood star are over. He's too old to play the male lead any more and he's back in England in a desperate attempt to regain his crown as King of the British stage. The critics are determined he's past it, the public suspect he's past it, and Gerald is terrified in case they're all right.'

'And what do you think?' Anna asked.

'I think actors like Gerald Kingdom are a very rare breed indeed. His talent is immense. The question is whether it's big enough to save the man from himself.'

'And lonely?' Anna asked. 'How can you possibly say he's lonely? There can't be a housewife on either side of the Atlantic who doesn't swoon at the mention of his name. The beautiful women in his life have been legion.'

Richard smiled at her sadly. 'Even at twenty-two you must have learnt the difference between being alone and being

lonely. Four marriages hardly smack of emotional stability, do they, and then there's the children.'

'I didn't know he had children,' said Anna.

'He had a son, Christopher. He would have been your sort of age, I think, but he died of a drug overdose when he was eighteen.'

'How awful,' said Anna, 'was Christopher his only child?'

'No, there are two more, girls I think, though I'm not certain. They're by his second wife, but she, if you remember, is Australian, and I think he sees them rarely. Certainly, they all live in Australia now.'

'But he has consolations,' Anna suggested.

'I don't think his relationships with women are particularly consoling,' said Richard. 'Actors have such fragile egos to protect . . .' He saw the query in Anna's eyes, '. . . yes, even me,' he said, with a smile. 'Gerald needs a beautiful woman in his life. It doesn't particularly matter who she is, and true love certainly isn't the relevant feature. It's more a question of retaining a self-image.' Richard looked hard at Anna for a moment. 'And talking of self-images, you weren't frightfully good for Gerald's just now, were you?'

'No, I suppose I wasn't,' Anna admitted, trying to ignore the growing feeling of remorse.

Just then there was a thud on the door. 'Ten minutes,' shouted a voice.

'Oh dear,' Richard said, suddenly in a fluster, 'talking to you has made me late.'

'Can I do anything to help?' Anna asked.

'Yes, there is something you can do, dear,' said Richard, with a shy smile. 'After all these years of playing a gentleman's gentleman, do you know, I still have difficulty fixing my tie, particularly when I'm nervous.'

On leaving Richard's dressing room, and with several minutes still to go until the final call, Anna crept out of the stage door and walked round to the front of the theatre. She knew she should not go front of house so close to curtain up, but the rising tension backstage was claustrophobic, besides which, she wanted to take a look at the audience. She was rewarded by seeing the foyer absolutely packed and there were plenty of

faces she recognised. It was certainly a night for celebrities. Richard's words still echoed in her head. What if Gerald had been drinking steadily since she left? What if her show of temper had seriously damaged his already fragile ego? Tonight could ruin his career, a glittering career that had spanned over thirty years. And *if* he failed tonight, there would be grounds for saying it was her fault. Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Anna ran back to the stage door. Freddy, the doorman, was on duty, his face grim. 'Where have you been, Miss? You shouldn't be front of house now, particularly with all that's going on.'

'Why Freddy, is something wrong?' Anna asked.

'It's Mr Kingdom,' said Freddy. 'He won't come out of his dressing room. He won't let anyone in, not even his dresser, and he won't come out either.'

'You mean he's refusing to go on stage?' said Anna in horror.

'No, he's going on stage, but no one knows what sort of state he's in, if you take my meaning, Miss.'

Anna nodded and rushed through to the dressing rooms. Martin was standing white-faced outside Gerald's door.

'What's happening?' whispered Anna. 'Is he all right?'

'How should I know?' Martin said, his voice hoarse with tension. 'He won't even speak to me. This is your fault, Anna, and if Gerald can't go on tonight. . . ' His words hung in the air, but the innuendo was obvious.

'Beginners please,' came the call. 'Beginners please, Miss Compton, Mr Kingdom.'

Instantly on the call, Gerald opened his door and stepped out into the passage in front of them. He looked splendid in a plum-coloured smoking jacket – his dark hair shone, his blue eyes sparkled, his handsome face appeared relaxed and untroubled.

'He's either drunk, mad, or perfectly all right.' Martin muttered, under his breath.

Gerald strode past Anna and Martin without a glance. He climbed the steps and took his place centre stage, standing alone in the dark, waiting for his audience.

To Anna, those last few minutes before curtain up seemed

the longest of her life. The tension backstage was unbearable. Even Richard, standing beside her, had lost his usual affable expression. They all watched the stage and the brooding figure standing there, motionless and utterly unapproachable. At last the houselights dimmed, the audience babble died away, and after a moment's breathtaking silence, the curtain rose.

In his beautiful measured tones, Gerald Kingdom began to speak. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't mad – he was magnificent.

After the tensions of the day, it seemed impossible that a performance could go so well. Right from the first moment, the enthusiasm of the audience was evident. Aware of their delight, Gerald blossomed, his performance more sure, more able than it had ever been before. By the time he spoke those final poignant words, the audience would have done anything for him. As the curtain fell and the sound of the pistol shot died away, it seemed to Anna that the thunderous applause shook the theatre to its very foundations. She glanced at Martin, who stood silently beside her. Tears were streaming down his face, and she realized that she too was crying. It was a night none of them would ever forget.

'Thank God,' she murmured to herself.

Martin turned and slipped an arm round her as they watched Gerald take the final curtain call.

'No, thank *you*,' he said.

Anna stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

'Gerald Kingdom has just given the performance of his life,' said Martin. 'He did it because he was sober and he was sober because of you. I take back everything I said, darling. It was a dangerous gamble but it paid off. Well done.' He gave her a squeeze.

'I just hope Gerald thinks the same way,' said Anna, ruefully, remembering Richard's warning.

The first night party lasted until dawn. Gerald, Anna noticed, drank hardly at all, and accepted, with his usual grace and charm, the many congratulations that poured in. Anna could have slipped away unnoticed, but Martin's words had made