

CHAPTER FIVE

Eileen's train journey to Bromley gave her ample opportunity to contemplate her pilgrimage. She had considered going armed with shears, trowel, and other portable gardening implements but Richard, who had taken her to the station, had prevailed and she carried only a pair of stout gardening gloves. Now, as the names of familiar stations informed her that she was not far from her goal, she started to entertain reservations. Why was she there? Why was she going now? Why was she going at all? Even if she pulled out all the weeds and grass that were bound to be there, they would all grow again. It was too far a journey to make regularly, leave alone the cost. As she stepped out onto the platform she was sorely tempted to simply cross to the other platform and catch a train going in the opposite direction, but she did not. Instead she started walking, along familiar streets, past familiar shops, most offering, now, particular memories. At the cemetery the memories were of a different kind; of the sad, sorry, day; of the wait at the house for the appointed hour for the hearse; of the biting cold wind and the snow covered ground; of the small group of mourners; and of one woman in particular, one who had stood there briefly and apart.

On the train she had thought very carefully how to find the grave and she congratulated herself when she crossed the large cemetery and did so at the first attempt. She felt concern when she saw it. "This cannot be right," she said aloud, looking around. "This cannot be right!" The gravestone bore Owen's name and there was the brief epitaph she had chosen, but the grave was unexpectedly neat and completely free of weeds. A shiny new marble surround had been added and fresh grey gravel spread. "This is wrong, all wrong," she muttered, turning to examine the small overgrown grave alongside. It was right. It was Jonathan's. Weeping she fell to her knees and started to frantically yank at the weeds and grass from her son's grave. Between sobs she continued to protest at the apparent error and inequity.

"Are you all right, madam?" said a man's voice which made her jump. He was standing behind her, middle aged, bearing the appearance of officialdom that comes with years of dealing with members of the public.

"It's my son's grave," she sobbed. "It is so neglected yet my husband's had been tended to. I do not understand it! Why is his maintained and not Jonathan's?"

"They are both here?" asked the man, puzzled, looking at the inscriptions. "This one is your husband's? I believe a young lady arranged for it to be maintained. She pays a yearly sum."

"A young lady?"

"A very pretty young lady. Red-haired, if I remember correctly. I had assumed that she was - ."

"Oh Lord," said Eileen lowly, looking down at the ground. "She cannot even leave him alone in death. Is nothing left for me at all?"

"I am sorry?"

"You say she pays a yearly sum? Is that all that is required to have a grave looked after and cared for?"

"Oh yes," said the man. "Would you like details?"

"What I would like is for my son's grave to be maintained," she said softly. That she had arranged this afforded Eileen some comfort as she sat on the return train. She had followed the man to a small, stone, building near the entrance to the cemetery where he had produced a form for her to sign, and she had written out a cheque. Yet she felt that she had, once again, been usurped. At least Richard was far away and safe where She could not get at him. She had re-possessioned Owen. So be it. She would not fight this Valkyrie, not from a distance. She would turn her back on him and put all her hopes and trust in Richard. Upon deciding this she felt decidedly better and was pleased that she had made the journey. Where ever She now was, she was safe from the influence of the other woman in her life.

The sun had just broken through a band of rain clouds into a pale blue sky when

Stephanie caught her first glimpse of Newington House through the trees. A car, sent by her father, had collected her from her flat. Inside, ready with plans and a lengthy verbal description of the house and estate, was Mr Brodie, the architect. He turned out to be an excitable young man who did not seem overawed or affected by her appearance and who was forever talking or sketching with limitless enthusiasm, describing details, suggesting ideas, eager to please and, possibly, impress the rich and beautiful young woman he found himself with. The architect, with his sports jacket and his bow tie, was in sharp contrast to the solicitor who, stiff, sober, formally dressed and carefully spoken, had brought her the papers to sign. "There are no hidden catches," he had said, almost with disdain, in response to her gauche question. "Except I must draw your attention to the aforementioned proviso that you shall not dispose of the estate or any part of it during your father's lifetime without obtaining your his prior written consent. As for expenditure, you are more or less free to spend whatever you consider is necessary, but Mr Brodie will monitor this and advise you on matters of specification and cost. I will prepare and provide you with a monthly statement of expenditure and income. As I have said, your father anticipates that expenditure on the restoration will exceed income from the Estate and he has undertaken to ensure that the excess is met together with a surplus that is to be your personal allowance. I think you will find him to be generous to a fault. As to the restoration, the choices all fall to you although your father has asked me to express his wish that it should be sympathetic to the character, style and age of the House. Mr Brodie will advise you in this respect."

"What condition is it in, the house?" inserted Stephanie at one point when the architect had paused for air. "Mr Robart, the solicitor, talked of restoration which sounds far more dramatic than decorating."

"I think we are talking an extensive restoration," said Mr Brodie without hesitation.

"My father has asked that what ever is done should be sympathetic, in keeping with its style."

Mr Brodie looked slightly worried. "Its style? Which one, I wonder. I am afraid that it is something of a stylistic hotchpotch, not to suggest for one moment that it is not attractive."

Stephanie looked worried. "Is it a heap?" she demanded. The architect shook his head vigorously. "What is it then?" she demanded.

"It is simply that the original house is Elizabethan, but it has been extended with a Palladian frontage and with Georgian additions to the rear. I think if we are to go for a style it could be late Baroque or even early Georgian. I will give you some idea when we get there. Indeed, I think, if you can use your imagination, you will be able to picture how the house was in its pre-war heyday. I have some photographs of it somewhere."

"Use my imagination?" said Stephanie, feeling rather cross.

"Only to reconstruct its past glories."

"I see," she said coldly.

As the car sped south and east, Mr Brodie, undaunted, went into great detail in describing the house, showed her plans and elevations, and the black and white photographs which had been taken before the war. One in particular drew her attention. It was of three women, possibly a mother and two daughters, standing on a lawn with a large tree in the background. "I wonder who they were," thought Stephanie. "And to think they may all be dead now." These ghosts from the past made her feel uncomfortable and she began to wonder if the house was haunted or whether it had what her mother would have described as a bad atmosphere. Any fears she might have harboured were soon dispelled. They approached the House along a long drive under a canopy of trees flanked on one side by laurel bushes, suddenly bursting into the sunlight as they reached the edge of the forecourt. There it stood, the wet facade glistening as the Wisteria steamed mysteriously. It was not as if Stephanie fell in love with the House at first sight, but she was pleasantly surprised and began to feel enthusiastic as she stepped out onto the gravel and scanned the tree lined horizon. "This is very pleasant," she said as the architect gathered up all his plans and notebooks. "You have been here before?"

"Oh yes," he said hastily. "Several times. Let me show you the outside first." Her enthusiasm grew as they walked around the perimeter of the House with Mr Brodie excitedly

pointing out and explaining architectural features. The house was constructed of stone and brick, almost rectangular in plan, with the impressive Palladium facade facing south and looking out, towards the sea, across a wide expanse of lawn and a series of densely wooded valleys. The long drive approached from the East whilst at the rear of the House stood several other buildings, the most imposing of which Mr Brodie described as the former stables. He pointed out a walled garden on the West side, which he admitted he had not visited, pausing by a small vaulted porch at the South-west corner of the House.

“What is that, over there?” asked Stephanie, pointing to the summit of a distant hill. Mr Brodie was fumbling with his notebooks and trying to recover some of the plans which had fallen onto the wet gravel. He squinted in the direction she was indicating.

“I understand that they are the remains of a mediaeval Monastery. There's something odd about them, I believe, as the land they stand on lies within the Estate but is not part of it. It's something to do with some Trust. Mr Robart could probably give you all the details.”

“How intriguing,” said Stephanie, without thinking.

“I also believe there are some gardens.”

“Open to the public?”

“The public cannot get to them. There's no access except across the Estate and even that which there is, is difficult to negotiate. Now, before we go inside, may I just remind you not to be too disappointed by what you see? Try and imagine how it was once, in all its glory, and then how it will be when we have finished with it.”

“I will try,” said Stephanie, feeling now more inclined to accommodate his whim than before, but her mind was being drawn to the ruins, and the thought that she would have to visit them, and the gardens, just to see. Mr Brodie was pointing upwards.

“That is, of course, where we must start,” he exclaimed. “The roof needs a complete overhaul as rain water is penetrating in a number of places. First and foremost we must make the House absolutely watertight before we do anything else!”

“Yes, of course,” murmured Stephanie, breaking away from her preoccupation with the ruins and contemplating the walled garden. There was somewhere else to be visited, and there was a path she could see disappearing from the edge of the lawn into the shrubbery. Where did that lead, and what did it lead to? An unexpected fragrance suddenly greeted her and she felt liberated and ecstatic and, despite the exhortations of the architect, she showed no inclination to accompany him indoors. “Yes,” she thought. “I could live here. I could be happy here. I could break with the past and live a different life here. And in a minute or two I will wake up.”

Eventually, almost reluctantly, she turned on her heel and followed Mr Brodie into the porch and through a heavy wooden door into the house. They passed along a narrow, dark corridor which suddenly opened into the galleried entrance hall; along further, wider, corridors flanking an enclosed garden; looking in the rooms, each one ascribed a name and described by the architect; up a wide staircase to pass along more corridors and to look in more rooms. Everywhere there was a damp, musty, unpleasant, smell which made Stephanie long to go back outside into the fresh air. They reached the point at which Stephanie confessed that she was both overwhelmed and confused. “You must remember, Mr Brodie,” she explained, “I live in a small flat. I can cover that in fifteen seconds. This is all quite a lot to get used to! All the rooms look alike to me, I am afraid.”

“That is nothing to worry about, Miss Bernstein,” he said. “I expect it will seem quite overwhelming, all of this, to start with. I am sure I would feel much the same way if I had been left a large house and an Estate.”

“I do not think I have been left it,” she said sharply. But Mr Brodie did not appear to react. He had pushed open another door and was looking up at the ceiling, shaking his head.

“Here you can see some of the worst parts of the house,” he said. “Don't go in as the floor is unsafe.” She looked up at the rafters exposed where the ornate ceiling had collapsed, and at the debris spread across the floor.

“How long has it been like this?” she asked.

“I do not know. A good number of years I would guess. This sort of thing does not happen over night.”

“How strange,” she said softly. “How strange that a man as wealthy as my father would allow all this to happen; to allow the house to deteriorate like this. Just let it go when it would have been so easy to maintain it. It is almost as if he was waiting to do this.”

“Don't be disheartened,” said the architect. “I have seen far houses worse than this - no more than shells - fully restored. We will tackle the problems methodically and painstakingly. It will obviously take a long time and you will have to be patient, but it will be worth it. It is a very pleasant house.”

“Yes,” breathed Stephanie, “but I really wonder if the whole thing is too big for me. Imagine living here alone and, as for restoring it, I don't know where to begin!”

“With the roof,” laughed the architect. “That is my job. That is why I am here. We begin with the roof and then, once that is secure and watertight, we will start below. We will be taking out all the rotten timber work and damaged plaster, always ensuring that we keep copious records of what is removed. As for living here alone, I believe that is what the former occupant did, ever since the end of the War, right up until she died a couple of years ago.”

“Was she one of the women in the photograph? The older woman with the kind face? Standing on the lawn in front of a large tree?”

Mr Brodie shrugged. “I really do not know,” he said. “Shall we go on?”

“I thought there is a part of the house that is inhabitable?”

“So there is,” said the architect. “I was leaving that until last. It is at the rear and when we come to the restoration it will probably be the last area we cover. Perhaps we could go down there now and you could meet the housekeeper.”

“The housekeeper?” exclaimed Stephanie.

“The housekeeper,” said Mr Brodie. “You have to have someone, even when the living quarters are as reduced as they are. Just follow me.” They descended the staircase and retreated back along the corridor until they reached another sturdy door. “This separates the habitable portion of the house from the remainder,” he announced. “I think that the woman who lived here eventually determined the area in which she wanted to live and simply closed it off from the rest of the house. I expect she found it easier to maintain, heat and light. I think you will find it quite comfortable and manageable.”

The decor changed. Beyond the door the corridor was clean, light, bright, a complete transformation. Sunlight reflected off the windows that faced each other across the garden, and stretched across the carpet before her. Several large oriental vases, bristling with fresh flowers, stood on small tables at the side of the corridor. “This was originally to be the servants' quarters,” explained Mr Brodie, “but was never used for that purpose. Instead they and the kitchens were built by the stables, some distance from the House. Not surprisingly recent generations decided that it was not too good an idea to have cold food and a new kitchen was built here, at the rear of the main house, and I expect that is where we will find Miss Lightfoot, the Housekeeper. I think she should show you around this part rather than I.”

“Lightfoot?” queried Stephanie, puzzled. Surely that had been the name on her mother's first marriage certificate? She had seen it only once when she was six years old and had found it whilst illicitly exploring the drawers of her mother's dressing table. That was where she kept her secrets, not in a locked box on top of the wardrobe. Her mother had been furious and the document had not been there when, some years later, she had the courage to look again. No, perhaps she had been mistaken!

She followed the architect to the end of the corridor and into the kitchen. It was large and lit by high-placed windows at one end. In the centre stood a long, wooden table at one end of which two places were set and surrounded by a lavish and colourful salad. Beyond, by a long, black, sinister, range, sat a grey haired woman who rose, smiling, as they entered. “You must be Stephanie,” she said slowly, studying her closely. “Oh, you are beautiful! Far more beautiful than I thought you would be.” Stephanie did not know how to respond. She could see that tears were streaming down the woman's face as she struggled to find a handkerchief and dab at her cheeks. “Do excuse me,” the housekeeper added. “I am just a foolish old woman who knew your mother very well when she was a girl, before she married and went away.”

Stephanie's heart missed a beat and she looked closely at the woman's face. She

guessed that she might be in her early sixties and her fine features suggested that she had probably been very good looking when she was younger. She had said that she knew her mother! Could she have also known her true father? There seemed to be countless questions to ask her when the opportunity arose! And when she came to live there, there would be an endless supply of such opportunities. "To think that you have now come here and that this, all this, is to be yours!" the woman was saying. "I cannot imagine what Lady Helen would have thought of it. It is too wonderful to believe!"

"Yes," she said softly, "I am Stephanie. And you knew my mother?"

"She used to live with me, until she got married," said the housekeeper, replacing her handkerchief. "But I am being foolish. You must be hungry. I have prepared lunch for the two of you, a salad, if that is satisfactory?"

"It looks lovely!" said Stephanie, trying to get her thoughts in order. This was so unexpected, so totally unexpected. Her mother had never been prepared to talk about her life before she married Mr Hiller and now to meet someone who actually knew her then, and here of all places! All the questions that she wanted to ask would have to wait. She could hardly start interrogating this woman with Mr Brodie present, eager to talk about the House and the all the work to be done on it. "But what about you?"

"Oh, I will take care of myself later, and it would never so for me to assume that I would sit down to meals with the lady of the House. For the present I will attend to your wishes and after you are refreshed I will show you around the living quarters. Do you intend to come and live here?"

"I don't know yet," said Stephanie, but that was not exactly true. She did know, but was not ready to admit the fact.

"I do hope you do," continued the Housekeeper. "It has been lonely since Lady Helen passed on. And it will be nice to have someone young here. She was very old and infirm, but you could not have wished to meet a kinder person. Do decide to come!"

Stephanie was tempted to say "yes" there and then. She had to agree that the attraction was great when she thought of the grounds and the space, the gardens, the paths to explore. Then there were the questions she might ask of this woman who knew her mother, she assumed, would be happy to stay on as housekeeper, and who was expressing a desire for her to live there. She was not accustomed to someone expressing a desire for her as a person, as opposed to her body, and was in danger of being seduced by it. But she should not allow herself to appear too eager. "I expect I shall," she said, "but I am not certain when. I would have to sell the lease on my flat first."

"I hope it will be soon," said Miss Lightfoot, fussing around her. "I prepared a salad as it is acceptable to most people, not like some savouries. Lady Helen had simple tastes although she couldn't take solids at the end. It was very sad to have to watch her and the House decline together. It is all right for you?"

"Perfectly," said Stephanie. "And you, Mr Brodie?" The architect nodded his assent.

"I am sorry that we eat in the kitchen," said the housekeeper, "but the dining room hasn't been used for years. And it is a little on the large side. Lady Helen found this more comfortable." Stephanie looked around, mentally fitting a significant area of her flat into the kitchen.

"We are going to change all that," said Mr Brodie, not feeling impaired by a mouthful of lettuce.

"It will take a long time," said Stephanie, "but we are going to restore the whole of the House." As she said it she listened to her words. It was the first time she had openly acknowledged her decision since she had been contacted by Mr Robart, the first time she had overcome fully all the misgivings she had felt after she had sent the note to the school accepting her father's offer. Now she had seen the House and a little of the grounds. Now she was committed, almost enthusiastic. Now she was beginning to look forward to coming to live there and to enjoying the different kind of life she would lead. It would be complete except for one thing, one person, but he was gone and life had to go on without him, no matter how painful the thought, no matter how empty it might be.

"Lady Helen would have been so pleased if she had still been alive. She thought the

world of this house and constantly complained about its neglect. It was her daughter, you know. She wouldn't allow a penny to be spent on it." Stephanie shook her head in agreement. She wanted to ask about Lady Helen and this daughter that Miss Lightfoot had mentioned, but was still reluctant to raise the matter with Mr Brodie present. There would be plenty of time.

"What is the next step?" she asked the architect as the car headed back towards Canterbury.

"I will draw up a specification and schedule of works and we must then appoint a good contractor."

"A contractor?" she asked.

"Yes, a building contractor. One with the right kind of experience and craftsmen. One who can be trusted to do this kind of quality work." The thought flashed through Stephanie's mind that she knew of a building contractor; one which was situated not far distant from Newington, but this idea that was forming in her mind was fanciful, absurd and dangerous. In fact, the more she thought about it, they would be the last builders she would want to see at the House, the very last. She wondered if she should mention them to Mr Brodie but it was unlikely that he had, or would, ever hear of them. On reflection it would be better to say nothing to the architect and let matters take their course. The choice would be left to Mr Brodie.

"I still do not believe this is really happening," she said, to herself as she opened the door to her flat. "I do not believe that I could soon be doing this for the last time. Not standing here at the window, pining, and looking out over the street and the roofs. I don't believe it!" But on the sideboard, the bank statement that had arrived yesterday morning and which, coldly, in black figures, informed her that a substantial sum of money had been transferred into her account, was as real as they came.