

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Thank you for coming to see me, Mr Brodie,” said Michael from behind his desk. “If we sit at the table you can show me your plans and tell me where we are at.” Mr Brodie felt ill at ease in the presence of Mr Bernstein. After all, he was the principal partner and rumoured to be excessively rich. He was not sure whether he should address him as “my Lord” or “your Lordship”, or simply Mr Bernstein. So he spent a large proportion of the meeting applying most of his mental agility to arranging his phrases so that he could avoid addressing him formally. “So, my daughter has been to see Newington?”

“We went down together, last week,” said Mr Brodie, conjuring up a picture of the view across the wooded valleys and the monastic ruins.

“And she hasn't been deterred?”

“I think, if I may say so, that she now realises what a mammoth task it is, but I had the impression that she likes the house and is planning to move down as soon as she can tie up the arrangements for selling her flat. She was quite enthusiastic in the car coming back. If she has a concern, it is over the likely cost.”

“I can assure you that she need have no concerns over that matter. Did she meet Miss Lightfoot, the housekeeper?”

“The housekeeper? Oh, yes. She arranged the lunch.”

“Can you recall what they talked about?” Mr Brodie frowned. He had not been prepared for such a question. He was armed with answers to an enormous range of questions about the condition of the house, the specification and finishes, and the work that had to be done, right down to quite minute detail, but not for this.

“I cannot honestly say,” he said. “I think there was something about her knowing your daughter's mother. I can't say I really understood what she meant and I didn't think it was my business to take too much an interest.”

Michael smiled. “That's reasonable. I just wondered. And you say she is preparing to go down there to live?”

“As soon as she can put her affairs in order,” said Mr Brodie, wondering when he would get to talk about the work.

“Hmmm,” murmured Michael. “Perhaps I had better go down there before she moves and square up one or two things.”

“Will you want me there?” Michael shook his head.

“Personal matters,” he said. “Just loose ends. Now, where are we regarding the work?” Mr Brodie breathed a sigh of relief.

“The survey of the roof is complete,” he said, pleased to be on a secure subject. “All the lead will have to be stripped and a fair amount of woodwork replaced. We are drawing out the plans and elevations and I have someone trying to source suitable timber. I think we will be in a position to go out to tender in three to four weeks.”

“Is that on the roof or the whole of the renovation?”

“I think we should look to appoint a good main building contractor at this stage. He can bring in specialists as and when they are needed, so I was thinking of seeking tenders for the whole of the work. Clearly it will have to be mainly on hourly rates and prime cost sums.”

“Have you drawn up a list?”

“Yes,” said Mr Brodie, rummaging amongst his papers. He handed it to Michael.

“Let's see,” said Michael, running his finger down the dozen names. “Cuthbert & Co. - I know them. And Wicks - that rings a bell. I think they have both worked for us before on building contracts. And who is this, Brown & Son?”

“Something of an outsider. They 'phoned up looking for the work and as they are relatively local I put them on. I think they are a bit of an outsider.”

“Do you know anything about them?” said Michael, curious.

“They are based at Eastgate and the owner is one Arthur Brown who said his father-in-law worked at Newington before the War.”

“Arthur Brown,” said Michael slowly. “I knew Arthur Brown before the War. So that

is where he is! And he still has his own building business and has taken his son into it? Are they any good? Could they undertake a contract like this?"

"As far as I can ascertain, they could," said Mr Brodie, becoming slightly concerned. "They appear to have a good reputation, but Eastgate is some way from Dover."

"So are Canterbury and Ashford, Maidstone and Bromley - I see you have a firm from there on the list." Michael sensed that Mr Brodie had started to feel slightly uncomfortable. "I am pleased that you put them on the list, but it presents me with a dilemma, Mr Brodie. Years ago I was asked to put a company called Muir & Co. on a tender list, which I did. I was later to regret my actions as the company won the contract and went bankrupt undertaking it. The daughter of Mr Muir of Muir & Co. married Arthur Brown of Brown & Son, and I still feel I owe them something. If we give them this contract, is there any danger of it putting them out of business? You said it would be an hourly rate contract?" Mr Brodie felt nervous as he was not exactly certain what Mr Bernstein was seeking.

"Yes. I cannot see how we could fairly award on the basis of a schedule of rates, but what if it is not the same Arthur Brown?" he asked.

"If you have any doubt, ask him if his wife's name is Moira and whether she worked as a secretary for a novelist before the War. If the answer to both questions is "yes" I think you can take it that is the company, and you can appoint them straight away."

"Appoint Brown & Son?"

"Yes, Mr Brodie."

"Without a competition?"

"Yes, and ensure that their rates are adequate. I do not want another company failure on my conscience."

"And to ask if his wife's name is Moira?" said Mr Brodie, writing it down.

"If you have to. Although Brown is a fairly common name, I would not imagine that there are many Arthur and Moira Brown in East Kent who are also builders, do you?"

"No," said Mr Brodie, quietly.

Stephanie had made up her mind to move to Newington. She had arrived at this decision during her visit with the architect. The sum paid into her bank account gave her all the financial independence she needed and, she told herself, she would be foolish not to take this opportunity and make a break with her present life. She reproached herself for the moments of weakness when her mother had come to see her and, antagonised, she had been on the verge of turning down the offer. Who, in their right mind, could refuse such a thing? Yet, there had to be some kind of catch there, somewhere. Life had taught her that there was always a price to be paid, for everything. If she was going to leave Bromley, she wanted to make a single clean break and not to leave any reason that would require her to come back. She placed the flat on the market with a number of Estate Agents with instructions that it would be available, vacant possession, in less than six weeks. She gave herself this length of time to tie up her affairs although she knew it could, and should, all be accomplished much quicker. What would it matter if her flat was empty for a few weeks? She could give Mrs Cuthbert, the caretaker, something to keep her eye on it. She carefully selected a small number of items of furniture to take with her to Dover and informed the Agents that the remainder could be sold. Similarly she went through her wardrobe and threw all except the most sober garments out with the rubbish. It all belonged to her dark past, to her former life, and she was concerned now only with the future.

All the time that she was decimating the contents of her flat, Stephanie found herself reliving the visit to Newington and making plans. Most of all her thoughts centred on the housekeeper and what she knew or might know, about her father, about her mother's life before she married; about all these questions that had long gone unanswered. It took a supreme effort to telephone her mother at the school and request a meeting. Joyce was not receptive and said she could see no point in it, but eventually agreed to seeing her on neutral ground. They met in the nearby park and sat together, at first at opposite ends the same park bench, near the bandstand and overlooking the lake. "To think I used to loiter here, on the bandstand, with the lowest and filthiest boys from the school, and watch Eileen Norris and

Owen Cross saunter by," she said. "I never really knew what she saw in him or he in her, but there must have been something as she took two men off me. I suppose it was the fact that Owen did see something in her that first drew me to him. And look where they are now. He is dead; his son is dead; and she is married to the man I love. I used to go with the boys in those very bushes, for no reason other than that was what I thought was expected of me. It took Owen to show me that it was not." Her words hurt her mother who had not come for another confrontation.

"That's where they found that man's body," she hissed. "You remember. He was a City broker. He had been strangled. I don't think they ever found the killer."

"How horrible!" said Stephanie, suppressing a shudder. "Of course I remember the case. He swindled a lot of people, including some I knew very well. I expect the police had too many suspects."

"Do you want to move to another bench?"

"No. I will be all right. It's just the thought of it."

"I was sometimes worried that something like that would happen to you, Stephanie; seeing all those men." Stephanie shook her head.

"If there was one other thing that Owen taught me, that was to make me realise I could be selective. As time went on I realised I could be very selective. I will leave behind me only a small number of disappointed males." Joyce spread her hands on her lap and studied a long grey cloud which was aimlessly edging its way across the otherwise clear blue sky.

"Why did you want to see me?" she asked.

"I suppose, if I am honest, I wanted to thank you."

"What? What for?"

"For coming to see me when you did, especially seeing the way that things have been between us. I know that most of that was my fault and for that I am sorry. I cannot change what I am or have become, or the way that I feel, but I do think that the time has come for us to bury the hatchet. I don't want to leave here with us still feeling hostile towards each other." Her mother looked away, which encouraged Stephanie to slide nearer.

"There's an old woman at Newington who says she knew you before the War," she said.

"Old? How old?" Joyce said sharply.

"I don't know; fifties, possibly she is in her early sixties."

"Miss Lightfoot," said Joyce, tentatively, still with her back to her daughter.

"Mother," implored Stephanie. "Won't you tell me everything? Wouldn't it be better coming from you? I am sure that she will tell me, in time, everything she knows if I ask her."

The temptation to yield within Joyce was strong. Her daughter's expression was plaintive and she was unused to dealing with such coaxing tones, but she did not know what Michael had said, either through his solicitor to Stephanie, or in the form of instructions to her sister. "I cannot," she said flatly. "It is for your father to tell you."

"My father? I haven't even met him yet!"

"You will, when he thinks the time is right. And don't ask Miss Lightfoot. If she acted indiscreetly, it might be harmful."

"Harmful? For whom?"

"Her. She relies on your father for her livelihood."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Stephanie. "I do not understand why there is this conspiracy of silence about me! Did I do something dreadful when I was born or when I was a child? Did something scandalous happen? Or was it criminal? What am I to believe?"

"It is none of these things, Stephanie. For me, it is simply a personal pledge that I gave your father. For Miss Lightfoot, it may be the same. I do not know. What I do know is that rich people are very powerful and sometimes they do not think twice about using that power. Your father is very rich."

"Is he a criminal?" Joyce gave a short, bitter, laugh.

"Not in the conventional sense, no."

"Is he vindictive?"

"No. He may be some things, but I have never known him to be vindictive. I think he

will tell you everything there is to tell, gradually, in his own time. If you want my advice, you should wait and leave it at that." Stephanie looked straight ahead and clenched her fists.

"The woman at the House, the housekeeper. Are you related?"

"Your father will tell you everything," Joyce repeated, trying to remain and appear calm.

"Oh, it is all so frustrating! But I am not going to quarrel over it; not again. I promise that."

"Good," said her mother softly.

"Except I believe it is important to know who you are and where you come from. I suppose you don't agree?"

"Not whole-heartedly. It seems to be a bit of a luxury to me."

"If I knew there was nothing to discover, I would stop, but there isn't nothing, is there? You are here and he is - ." Joyce watched a couple of mothers walk past, pushing prams, each with a toddler in tow. Did they realise the potential problems they were stacking up for themselves? "When will you move to Newington?" she asked.

"That is the other reason why I wanted to see you. In about three weeks, I would think. Just as soon as I can tie up my affairs, if you will pardon the word, up here."

"The flat?"

"It is already on the market."

"Oh, you haven't hung about. What about your last clients?"

"I have told those that there are to tell that I am going. I haven't told them where I am going. I don't want any of them following me."

"How did they take it?"

"Not all that well, but stuff them, that's what I think. Have you told Mr Pennington?"

"No," said Joyce. "I did not think it appropriate. It might provoke too many questions although I must admit he is a sweet and doesn't ask many. Anyway, he is not at all well at present."

Stephanie now felt in a difficult position. It would be expected of her to ask her mother down to stay with her, yet she could not bring herself to do this. It would not have sounded genuine and she thought that her mother would not have accepted. "There is a lovely cottage on the Estate," she said softly, "called Rose Cottage." She sensed a tenseness in her mother, and continued. "Mr Brodie took me to see it. I understand that my father may wish to retain it for his own purposes."

Joyce closed her eyes, wondering what was in her daughter's mind. Was she really setting out to hurt her again, after saying that she did not want to part with hostility still between them. The thought of her and Michael at the cottage and her daughter up at the House, Lady of the Manor, was almost too much to envisage, yet that clearly was what Michael had in mind. Perhaps that might have been feasible when she was young and innocent. It did not seem palatable now. "Yes," she said at length. "It has a special significance for your father."

"And you?" said Stephanie, enlightened. "I am sorry. I did not realise. Do you see him at all, apart from the time he came to see you about all this?"

"Rarely," said Joyce softly. "Not more than once a year. Do you know I once dreamed of living at Newington House. I do not know why I did as there were no grounds for me to think that such a thing would ever come about. It was no more than a young person's fanciful idea. And now, my daughter is going to live there. I am not jealous of you, Stephanie; not even envious, but I sometimes think that I am still being punished in some way. You probably have considered whether to ask me to come and visit you. I can tell you now, it would be difficult, either for me to come alone, or to come with your father, certainly the way things are at present. I hope you will understand what I am saying."

"I think I do," said Stephanie, lowly.

"And now I must be getting back to the school, otherwise they may suddenly discover that they can get along without me."

"You didn't answer my question about Miss Lightfoot."

"I did," Joyce said, standing. "I told you that your father would tell you in his time."

Be patient, Stephanie. Some of us have waited a whole lifetime for that we desire the most." She turned and started to walk away. For a moment Stephanie was tempted to rush after her, but they appeared to be parting on what was for them equable terms and to prolong the meeting might run the risk of all the old enmities falling out again.

"I will write to you," she called after her mother. Joyce stopped and looked back. She did not say anything, but Stephanie could see a half smile on her face. Then she was gone and Stephanie was alone once more.

They seated Gwilym directly opposite Sandra at dinner. Mrs Brown thought that it was the most apposite way of arranging the seating, with her facing her husband down the table, and with Richard opposite Eileen. It resulted in Gwilym sitting next to Eileen, but she decided that was quite acceptable. Richard did not think it quite so acceptable, but kept his thoughts to himself. His thoughts were compounded when Gwilym arrived, on time, smartly dressed, well groomed, and immediately created a favourable impression on the ladies of the Brown household. Eileen smiled a rare smile, one which reminded Moira and her daughter that she had told them so!

"You know," said the Welshman, "I do not think that Megan would have let me come for one minute if she had known Richard had such a charming mother and so beautiful a sister!" Sandra blushed and preened herself, thereafter fluttering her eyelashes across the table whenever she thought that Gwilym might be looking in her direction, which seemed often enough. Richard spent most of his time at the table unhappily watching his wife out of the corner of his eye and concluding that her gaze never once moved from Gwilym's direction. Even his mother seemed to be paying this cuckoo in their nest an indecent degree of attention.

"I hear that you went to have a look at the conversion of the Royal Hotel today," said Mr Brown, assuming that Gwilym needed to be put at ease when, in reality, it was Richard. "What did you think?"

"If the ladies will allow me to talk about work? It looked to me to be quite a straight forward job, not like those where you are trying to knock two or more buildings together and have difficulties with alignment and levels."

"You know that we've tendered for several and had no success?" added Mr Brown. "Even Richard has tried his hand without luck."

"I wasn't all that far out," protested Richard, feeling vexed.

"I know," said Gwilym. "Richard has told me and I have had a look at the rates he put in. They looked competitive to me."

"You see," said Richard, feeling slightly more comfortable.

"I still don't see any way that we are going to get down the level of price at which these jobs are going," complained Mr Brown. "No way at all. Not without running the risk of making a loss."

"Shush, Arthur," cooed his wife. "That is enough of that else Gwilym will think that we invited him to dinner simply to pick his brains."

"Well I did come down here to work and to help in any way that I could but, talking of work, I understand that you are starting a new job on Monday?" The eyelashes went into overdrive. "Yes," purred Sandra. "My first."

"Now there's a coincidence for you. You and I starting a new job, together."

"I thought you had already started," said Richard, coldly, not knowing whether he should be protecting his wife or his sister from this, in his eyes, Welsh Don Juan.

"No," said Gwilym. "I'll come onto the payroll as from Monday. It will keep it all neat and tidy, if that is all right with everyone? We do not want odd days spoiling the books, do we?" He looked back across the table at Sandra. "Let us see which of us lasts the longest!" he said, smiling.

"Oh, I am sure that I will give up long before you," she said sweetly.

"Have you and Megan any children, Gwilym?" asked Mrs Brown, being unable to judge exactly where the conversation was leading but feeling, with a Mother's instinct, that the direction needed to be changed.

"We have two, a boy and a girl called Ivor and Meganwie. One is five and the other is

just under four.”

“I suppose they miss their father?” said Richard sourly, receiving a kick from Eileen as a reward.

“They are a little close together,” said Mrs Brown. “It must have been a quite a handful for your wife.”

“Meganwie was unexpected, you know, but these things happen. And we thought we might as well get all our family troubles over and done with in one go, instead of having to start all over again later.” Richard looked at Eileen who had coloured slightly, and blushed all the more when she realised he was looking at her. Puzzled, he looked back at his mother who was looking cross about something.

“I think that we should drink a toast,” said his father, coming, he thought, to everyone's rescue. “To Sandra and her new job, to Gwilym and the business, and to Richard and Eileen for their happiness in their new home.”

Harmony was established and the conversation for the remainder of the dinner and the evening passed along safe, conventional, lines. Even so, the dinner left lingering questions in the minds of several of those who had participated. Sandra felt flattered by what she assumed to be Gwilym's flirtatious advances and went to her bed very contented indeed. Richard was vexed by the very same thing. Eileen was also cross, not because she was jealous of the attention Sandra had received, although this is what Richard assumed, but because she felt that her protégé was letting her down. And Gwilym went back to his lodgings thinking he had enjoyed a fairly successful evening and made a good impression. Mrs Brown did not know what to think.

“What do you think of the evening?” she asked Arthur as they were getting ready for bed. He gave a slight groan.

“Think? About what?”

“About Sandra and this Gwilym creature? The way they flirted with one another!”

“Oh, I think it was harmless enough. He was just trying to be nice to her, and she was being silly in return.”

“But he is a married man! The way young people carry on today! And there's Richard and Eileen. There's absolutely no sign of anything happening there. Do you think that everything is all right between them?”

“I expect that they are waiting to move into their own home.”

“Wait? People didn't used to wait in our days! And as for Sandra, well - .”

“I do not think that it was any more than simple banter between them,” he said wearily.

“HMMMMM,” said Mrs Brown, looking stern as she brushed out her hair. “We will have to watch things.”

“We? What things?”

“You know. You know precisely what I mean!”

“I suppose I do,” he said, turning onto his side and closing his eyes.