

CHAPTER NINE

Gwilym lost no time in asking Sandra if she would go out with him. Sandra lost no time in saying "yes". Her mother was scandalised. "You cannot go out with him," she said.

"Why ever not?"

"He is a married man, with a wife and two young children."

"I will be perfectly safe, then, won't I?" she laughed, and went on her way. Whilst Mrs Brown was complaining to her husband about the licence enjoyed by their grown-up daughter, Gwilym was acting very properly and courteously. He walked her to the cinema, bought her a box of chocolates, told her that he wanted no more than sisterly company and that it was miserable staying in his lodgings on his own and no fun going out alone. He added that his intentions could not be described as honourable, because he had none.

"How come you haven't a steady boy friend?" he asked. "Or is that the kind of question I should not ask?"

"I don't know," said Sandra. "I just seem to have no success with young men."

"But you've had boy friends?"

"Oh, yes," she said, scornfully. "There was Ken who is a policeman, but he seemed to spend his entire life in a drunken stupor which isn't exactly a recipe for romance. Anyway, I find him a bit of a joke."

"But he likes you, this Ken?"

"So he used to say. He has been a little more circumspect since he came back and I wonder if he is seeing someone else."

"Would that bother you if he was?"

"Not really," Sandra said. "In fact it might be a bit of a relief. There was also another young man, a friend of Richard's when he was teaching. I really liked him, but he died in an accident."

"I am sorry," said Gwilym. "I shouldn't have raised the subject."

"Oh, it was over a year ago. I was upset at the time, but I think I have got over it now. Just now, there is no-one. Mother talks about me meeting some nice young man, as she puts it, at work, but I spend most of my time simply avoiding Ken. I don't really fancy marrying a policeman."

"I can understand that. I expect you will meet the right young man someday soon. I am sure of it. Maybe I am being selfish taking you out like this, denying you the opportunity to look for him?"

"Don't be silly," she said, squeezing his arm. "It is nice to be taken out!" All this was said on the way to the cinema with the result that whilst Sandra sat and watched the film, Gwilym sat and thought about Sandra. He could not understand it. Here was this pretty young woman with a gay, almost carefree, disposition, unattached and seeming to have no prospect of becoming attached. Now, were he not married; were Megan not there at home, tending to the children, waiting for his letters and cheques, what would he do? There was no doubt what he would have done, but the question was what could he do? He did not have a catalogue of available young men, nor any in stock. Nor, on reflection, would he have introduced them had he had some! No, it would be better, more pleasant, to enjoy Sandra's company without inviting any competition. It would lead to no harm and perhaps, just perhaps, he could teach her a thing or two?

The night was clear and warm when they came out of the cinema. "Shall we have a coffee before I walk you home?" he said.

"Oh, yes please. I would like that, only don't talk of walking me home. It sounds so formal, and it would be a long way out of your way. I could walk myself home, or get a taxi."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Gwilym. "Megan would never forgive me if I let you walk home alone, in the dark."

"You are joking!" she laughed.

"Am I?" he said, pulling a face. The bright lights dazzled and the juke box deafened them as they went into the Ice Cream parlour.

"It must be years since I came in here," Sandra shouted. "Isn't the juke box loud?"

"We could find somewhere else, if you like."

"No, no. We had better get a seat before the whole cinema audience comes in."

"That is one advantage of sitting at the back," said Gwilym as he placed the tray before her. "You can get out first, before the credits have really started!" They watched the shop rapidly fill with people, talking and laughing. Sandra smiled as it had seemed to her that she and Gwilym had been the only couple watching the screen. "Do you want anything else?" he asked. She shook her head and sipped the froth from the top of the cup as the clatter of the crockery and cutlery from behind the counter was suddenly drowned by the result of another coin deposited in the juke box.

"It is as well we didn't go upstairs," she said, nodding. "Look, the treads are completely open. I am sure that they can see right up the girls' skirts!" Gwilym turned to watch two short-skirted girls make their difficult way, giggling, knees clamped together, up to the mezzanine floor. "You would worry about someone looking up your skirt?" he said, smiling.

"It would all depend on who it was," she said.

"Well, well. Miss Brown! I didn't realise you frequented places like this!" The man's voice made Sandra jump and look around. Two men were standing over and behind her. "And you are?" said one, addressing Gwilym.

"This is my sister-in-law's brother-in-law," said Sandra, tersely, to one of the men. "Oh, hello, Ken," she said, sourly, to the other.

"Hello Sandra," he replied, sheepishly and colouring.

"We like to keep a careful note of the people we find in here," said the first man.

"I would have thought that the majority of them are quite respectable," said Gwilym, "seeing that they have just come out of the cinema."

"So, you've been to the cinema, Sandra?" said Ken.

"Yes, we have. Do you want to know what we saw, or what we did? Which? And I suppose you will want a written statement. I could type it, you know."

"That will not be necessary, Miss Brown. I would, however, caution you to remember your job and the information you handle. You should be careful about where you go and who you associate with." He looked at Gwilym and saw a wild look appear in the Welshman's eyes. "Present company excepted," he added. "Goodnight!" He beckoned to his colleague, nodded to the proprietor, then left.

"Goodbye, Sandra," called Ken as he turned to follow. She did not respond.

"What was all that about?" asked Gwilym as soon as the two men had left. "Do you work for him?"

"No, I am glad to say!" she said, looking upwards. "He likes to throw his weight around, and he's slimy. Just about the first thing the girls at the office did was to warn me about him."

"Warn you? In what way?"

"Nothing specific. Just to keep clear of him, they said. He fancies himself and his chances. I do not." Gwilym tried to imagine the kind of man this delightful creature would fancy and wondered if he would fall into that category. It was just his fancy. "I would also like to see your lodgings, this miserable hovel you talk about. Are you going to move in with Eileen and Richard now they are in their house?"

"Move in with Eileen? I don't think so. I would only be in the way, and things aren't really right there anyway. The last thing they need is me around the place."

"Not right? How do you mean?"

"Forget it. I shouldn't have said it. And I am sure that you neither want to see my hovel or be responsible for getting me chucked out which is just about what would happen if I turned up there at this time of night with a young lady, no matter how respectable she might be."

"Oh, I don't believe that for one minute. You are just looking for an excuse not to take me there. I imagine that it is like a mansion in reality, not a hovel at all! Yes," she asserted, "I do want to see it!" Gwilym raised his eyebrows and looked at his watch.

"It is getting late," he said.

"I could always go into work late tomorrow. Are you going to show me or shall I go and find Ken?"

"Very well," he said. "It is not all that far. Come along." They turned off of the Sea Front into an older area of the town where flint walled buildings clustered around irregular, dimly lit, courtyards. A damp, unpleasant, smell filled the air and greeted them as they wound their way through what seemed to Sandra to be a veritable maze. "I had no idea all this was here!" she said, softly. "And I have lived here nearly all my life." Gwilym laughed.

"It is not the kind of place that I would expect a genteel young lady like yourself to visit, you know."

They passed under an arch and along a narrow, dark, damp, alleyway, emerging into a small square bordered by Georgian terraces built when the town was growing and becoming fashionable. Now they were gradually decaying as the paint peeled and every year the roofs leaked a little more. "This is Clarendon Square," she exclaimed. "I used to come here for piano lessons! It was that house over there, but it all looks so different at night!" She pointed into the furthest corner of the square at a house that stood in silent darkness.

"And my lodgings are here," said Gwilym, stopping outside one which showed more signs of being inhabited.

"May I come in?"

"You are very forward, young lady," he said. "You'll get me hanged before you are done. I don't think my landlady is so broad minded. Look, here are the rules. No pets, and no women in the rooms after ten o'clock. That's what it says!"

Sandra opened her eyes wide and scowled. "I will come earlier next time!" she exclaimed.

"So there is to be a next time?"

"I don't see why not. I have thoroughly enjoyed the evening. Thank you, Gwilym."

"It isn't over yet. I have still to walk you home."

"I couldn't ask you to do that," she said, shaking her head. "And have you come all the way back again. I know the way. Goodness I did it enough times when I was younger."

"It was probably light then."

"What difference does it make? I have nothing to fear, especially with certain members of the police force roaming the streets."

"Are you sure?"

"I am, completely."

"Well, goodnight then," said Gwilym, bending forward and kissing her on the brow.

"Goodnight, Gwilym," she whispered. He watched her until she reached the corner of the square, waved, then went up, in the best of spirits, to his room.

Sandra not only knew the way home, she also knew all the short cuts known only to locals, the alleys that ran between the backs of the walled yards behind rows of low terraces. She felt gay and light hearted as she set out. It had been a highly enjoyable evening even allowing for the incident in the coffee bar. It was a lovely night with, it seemed, an unprecedented number of stars set on display. If she looked up she might see a shooting star arcing towards the horizon, to where, just above the roof tips, she could see the narrow slit of a new moon. Now it had disappeared behind a bank of cloud which seemed to be intent on drawing a veil over the night sky.

Soon she became aware of a sound behind her. At first she thought it was the compliant, mandatory echo which was always so lucid at night but barely noticeable during the day. Or perhaps it was her imagination? No, it was there, a soft padding or shuffle. She stopped and listened, and it appeared to stop. At least she could no longer hear it, but as soon as she started walking again it was back, syncopated with her step. Perhaps it was Gwilym, shepherding her home like a Welsh Collie? No, she thought. If it were him he would not have stopped when she stopped, but would have continued and come right up to join her. He could be playing a trick on her. If he was, it was in rather poor taste and she would tell him that she would think twice before going out with him again!

A large, steep, hill rose before her. It was inevitable that she would have to climb one

of the roads that crept up it and once on the hill she would not be able to run up it, only down, back towards who or what ever it was following her. She could deviate and cut across the hill, but if there was someone there, they would only follow her. What should she do? "Stay in the light, Sandra," a voice from inside told her. She started the climb, zig-zagging across the street from gas lamp to gas lamp. Once she stopped under a lamp and pretended to look down at the heel of her shoe. In the darkness, beyond her range of vision, the padding carried on for a few paces, then ceased. There was no doubt that there was somebody there, out of sight but following her.

Sandra had advanced only a few paces farther towards the next haven when she saw the lamp at the top of the hill extinguish itself and submerge the street in darkness. Then, behind her, the one she had just left went out. A sense of panic began to rise inside her as she turned into a street lined with Victorian terraced houses, praying that in one a light would be on and she could knock on the door and seek sanctuary. At the very moment that desperation was upon her, a door to a house that was cloaked in darkness opened softly and she heard the unmistakable sound of a woman's footsteps start and echo along the street. Without thinking, Sandra stepped back and huddled in a dark doorway. She could hear the soft padding growing louder and coming nearer as the woman's footsteps grew softer. Then it sounded as if her follower was right alongside her and she imagined that she could see a shadowy outline there, in the night. She felt that she wanted to run, or scream, to somehow relieve and end the tension that was binding and constricting her.

Farther up the street she heard the sound of a key being inserted into a lock, then a door closed, quietly but quite perceptibly. From much nearer came a sound of something rustling and then a match was struck. For a brief second she crouched, terrified to look, thinking it was above her and the match was to reveal her presence, but it was a little distance off and when she did look, her heart fell as she recognised the gaunt, distorted, face as it was briefly illuminated. But she stayed still and silent, daring not even to breathe. A short time after he was enveloped again in darkness she heard a grunt of annoyance and he padded away. How long she remained there, petrified, in the doorway she did not know. She was not conscious of time passing until she heard the clock of St Lawrence's Church strike one. It crossed her mind that he might still be out there, waiting for her. Slowly she took off her shoes and edged her way up the road. It was not until she encountered an injudiciously placed milk bottle that she quickened her pace.

"You came in rather late last night, Sandra," said her mother, trying to sound casual at breakfast.

"Did I?" said Sandra, trying to sound both casual and innocent. "I know that I will be late for work if I don't get my skates on, and that would never do!" Her mother shook her head and assailed her father as soon as her daughter had left.

"You had better speak to that girl," she declared.

"Had I?" said Mr Brown, wearily. "She is hardly to be described as a girl."

"That is not important! We cannot have her staying out to all hours of the night and with a married man. It will ruin her reputation and could harm the marriage! I mean what time did the film end? What ever were they doing for the rest of the time, I ask you! You will have to put your foot down."

"I suppose you are right, but I look at it this way. Sandra is a young woman and is well and truly of age. It is not for us to dictate who she goes out with or sees, and I would rather that it is someone we know, even if he is married, rather than some perfect stranger and cad."

"That may be so, but we have a duty as Christians. So do you as a lay preacher. We cannot stand by and say nothing!"

"Then it might be better if I spoke to Gwilym. Or it might be even better if I got Richard to speak to Gwilym. Yes, that is what I will do when I have an opportunity. I'll get Richard to speak to Gwilym."

"Make sure he does it soon, before it goes too far. For all we know the harm may have already been done."

“Oh, Moira! How can you even think that, leave alone say it, of your own daughter?”

“I only have to remember what happened to Felicity and how her life was ruined by a man. Make sure you speak to Richard soon.”

“Yes Dear,” said Arthur, picking up the daily paper and seeking refuge behind it.

Sandra found Ken lingering, hands in pockets, when she arrived at her desk. “Goodness,” she announced loudly, unlocking the drawers and dropping her handbag in one, “I only just made it!” She looked across at Alice and Debbie, but they were talking and laughing animatedly and did not respond.

“Who was that man I saw you with last night?” he asked, unaware of the droll nature of his question. Sandra was aware that Alice and Debbie had heard that as they had stopped talking and seemed all attentive. She looked, challenging, at him and he averted his gaze. “I told the two of you who he is. He is Eileen's, Richard's wife's, brother-in-law. And if you really must know and keep records of everyone who visits the town, he has come down from North Wales to work here as there is no work for him up there! I suppose that is some sort of crime? You had better also know, as it will save you time investigating the matter, that he is happily married and has a wife and two children up there to whom he writes daily. He just asked me to go out with him because he does not like going to the pictures alone and, being married, could not just ask any girl. And I was happy to go and will go again if he asks me! That is all there is to it!”

“Oooooo!” said the girls in unison, but Sandra was suddenly aware of a new arrival in the office.

“Well, Miss Brown,” said a smooth, silky, voice. “Been burning the candle, have we?” His hand came to rest on her shoulder, following her as she withdrew, tracing the curvature of her neck. She shook her head, but could not bring herself to say anything. The officer laughed. “Would you let *me* take you to the cinema?” he said, looking straight at Ken who blushed and turned away. Sandra looked towards the other desks for assistance but other than the shaking of heads, none came.

“I've got work to do,” she said, forcing the words out through clenched teeth. Her hands were shaking as she reached out to pick up the papers from her in tray.

“Then we had better leave you to it,” he said, lifting her hair and allowing it to glide slowly over his hand and drop back into place.

“Are you all right?” hissed Debbie once they had both left.

“I will be, in a minute.”

“We did warn you!” she continued. “You have to stand up to him; not give in. If you do, he will lose interest after a while and find someone else to persecute.”

“That cannot be too soon for me,” said Sandra, wiping her shoulders and neck with her handkerchief, as if to eliminate all evidence that a hand had been placed there.

The task of moving to Newington took longer and occupied more of the day than Stephanie had anticipated. The small furniture van was late in arriving at the flat, and even later arriving at the House. Stephanie decided that she would be patient and not let either the delays, or the close attention giving to her leaving by others in the block of flats, upset her. She assumed that they would be thinking “good riddance” but she comforted herself with the view that they might have thought otherwise had they known what she was going to. She had half hoped that her mother might have taken an hour off, just to walk along to see her go, but there was no sign of Joyce before the van was eventually loaded and the men declared themselves ready to leave.

Mr Brodie had suggested that the habitable quarters at Newington, as he referred to them, should be redecorated before she moved in, especially as most of the existing furniture was being moved out. Stephanie would not hear of it, reminding him that he had said that this area would be the last to be restored. There was no point as far as she was concerned in spending money unnecessarily, even if it would take the two years or more he estimated before they reached the final stage. Miss Lightfoot was there, waiting for her, ready to instruct the removers and ensure that no harm came to the relatively few possessions that Stephanie

carried with her from her former life. She found herself endowed with a large, bright, bedroom off of which was a bathroom and a small dressing room. Across the corridor was what Miss Lightfoot referred to as the sitting room with French doors leading into the enclosed garden. A few paces down the corridor was the kitchen where she had sat with Mr Brodie and where, she told her housekeeper, she would normally eat in future.

Her furniture looked lost in the rooms and she asked if there were any more of the previous items which could be brought back. She had some misgivings about using articles that had belonged to someone else, yet what was the point of simply storing them. Stephanie stood in the bedroom and looked at the expanse of lawn and the walled garden whilst Miss Lightfoot was considering the question and preparing to advise her. She watched a dark haired man who, she thought, must be in his early thirties, appear from beyond the corner of the wall and briskly head towards the House. Any thoughts she had as to who he was were quickly answered.

"Excuse me disturbing you, Ma'am, but Mr Barnes, the Estate Manager, has called to pay his respects," said Miss Lightfoot. "I have told him that you are unpacking and he said that he would be happy to call tomorrow if that would be better. I have put him in the kitchen."

"No," said Stephanie, without hesitation. "I will see him now." As she heard the words she thought they sounded unduly pompous and she stopped the housekeeper at the door. "Miss Lightfoot," she said softly, "don't call me Ma'am, and under no circumstances refer to me as Madam. Just call me Stephanie or, if you need to be formal, Miss Bernstein. I am no-one, really, and certainly not a Lady."

"Oh, Miss Bernstein! Mr Bernstein is a very important man and there has been talk of a knighthood. And he married into a titled family. It wouldn't be right of me to refer to you by your Christian name. It wouldn't be right at all."

"Yes it would," said Stephanie. "Especially when we are alone together. And I would like to call you by your Christian name, as well. What is it?"

"Deborah," said the woman softly, "but I used to be referred to as Debbie, although no-one has called me that in many a year."

"Well, I shall. Shall we go and see this Mr Barnes, now?" She followed the housekeeper out into the kitchen where the man she had seen crossing the lawn now stood. "Mr Barnes?" said Stephanie. "I am Miss Bernstein."

"I am the Estate Manager, Ma'am," he said. She thought she noted an immediate coldness and reserve in his brief reply. Perhaps, she thought, that was understandable. He would have latent loyalties to his former mistress and probably thought of her as some upstart. In addition, he might be concerned about what her intentions were as far as his position was concerned.

"Yes," she said softly. "I expect that we have a great deal to talk about although, perhaps, not right now."

"I knew that you were arriving today and thought I should call in and pay my respects. I dare say you'll be wanting to be shown over the Estate?" Perhaps that was it, she thought. She had not seen him when she had come down with Mr Brodie and he felt put out by this omission.

"Tomorrow, maybe? If it is a fine day. I would like to see it at its best," she said. "For the present I want to settle in and adjust. It is a lovely house," she added, looking at the housekeeper.

"It is," said the Manager. "It is unfortunate that Lady Helen let it run down but my father told me that after Lady Angela, her daughter, died, her Ladyship lost interest."

"Your father, Mr Barnes?" said Stephanie, thinking of the three women in the photograph Mr Brodie had shown her.

"He was the Manager here before me."

"Ah! And do you remember the House in all its glory?"

"I can recall from my childhood pretty much what it was like although, obviously, I wasn't invited in all that often and there are some rooms I never saw inside."

"But I can call upon you for advice during its restoration?"

"So, it is true?" he asked, looking at Miss Lightfoot who was smiling. "The House is

to be restored. Completely?"

"Completely," asserted Stephanie. "But, tell me, what happened to all the furniture? All the contents? I have this awful vision of ending up with a magnificent house full of empty rooms!"

"You do not know?" he said with obvious surprise. "I can show you, if you wish. It will not take more than ten minutes if you do not linger." Stephanie's curiosity was aroused.

"Please do," she said, wondering just what he was going to show her. He led her out of the kitchen and out into the sunlight and the scent which seemed to be drifting across from the walled garden.

"We could have come along the subterranean tunnel," he said, as they crunched along a gravel path between tall, green, bushes, "but it is a bit damp down there. It connects the House to what used to be the servants' quarters."

"So, we have a tunnel? I assume there is a gardener?"

"Several," said Mr Barnes smiling. "We have tried to keep the gardens up to standard. Several of them live on the Estate. One lives in the Gate House. You may have noticed it when you came into the drive. A couple come down from Kearsney, and one comes in from the Town. Of course, you may wish to change the numbers or what they do."

"I doubt it," she said. "Not in the short term." Beyond a row of tall, green, trees they came to a number of red brick buildings.

"These were originally the stables but they are now used to garage the cars and the hay lofts are used as stores. I'm afraid we will have to walk around to the main entrance." Stephanie recognised the buildings as the ones she had seen as they drove up the drive. A tall arch set in a high, rectangular, tower led into the large, paved, courtyard which was completely enclosed. "We are there," he said, looking around. "There is a water tank at the top of the tower and all around you, above the stables, are the hay lofts. They are crammed full with items from the House. Come and see!" He went up to a massive, dark, wood door and unlocked it. "I have no idea how many horses were originally stabled here, but I don't think any have been since the War. Do you ride?"

"No," said Stephanie as she followed him up a gloomy flight of wooden stairs.

"The lofts keep remarkably dry but we do have a problem with vermin so I have to keep it baited. I don't like having to do it, but it has to be done. Let's see!" So saying he threw open another door and with a flourish indicated that she should enter. In the dim light she could see, stretching before her, a collection of irregular shaped, sheeted over, objects. "There's everything here," he said sadly. "Queen Anne, Georgian, Chippendale, Adams fireplaces. There's at least three large crystal chandeliers, two of which used to be in the Ballroom. The other was in the front entrance hall. There's several pianos, Louis the whatever tables, books by the thousand from the library together with all the shelving. I have a full inventory of it all and every item is marked with the room and location it was taken from. I will be delighted to see it all back in place. Keeping it here has been quite a weight on my mind."

"I don't know what to say," said Stephanie. "This is all quite overwhelming. I really had no idea it was here! It must be worth a fortune."

"It is a veritable treasure chest. My father said that Lady Christina wanted to sell most of it but her husband would not agree and insisted that everything was retained. I used to worry that we would run out of space, but we managed to get it all in. What you see here, in this loft, is a little over a third of what is stored. Mark you, I don't advertise the fact otherwise we might attract the attention of some unwanted visitors from London, you understand?"

"I am not likely to tell anyone," she said softly, wondering if Mr Brodie was aware that all this was there.

"And I always keep the main door double locked. The other doors are all bolted from the inside, so the one we came through is the main access. It is just in case. Just to make life difficult for any unwelcome intruders."

"This is all too much to believe," said Stephanie, advancing a few paces and lifting the cover from a large painting. It was of a young woman in a crimson evening dress, standing by a piano. "Oh, she is lovely! Who is it?"

“That? That's Mr Bernstein's sister. It was painted, I believe, by Lady Helen's son.”

“My father's sister?” gasped Stephanie, thinking that this gave her an aunt. “What happened to her? Is she still alive?”

“I believe she died in an accident in France before the War. She was a concert pianist. And I can see the family likeness in you, if you will allow me to say so.”

Stephanie smiled and nodded her head and stood contemplating the portrait. “We progressively filled the lofts,” said Mr Barnes, suddenly. “As rooms were closed, all the furniture and fittings, paintings and carpets, were brought out here and stored. So the furthest items are the from the top and front of the House, and the nearest are from the rear as they were the last to be put up here. I do check them regularly, but although the lofts are dry, I wouldn't like them to be left here for any longer than is necessary. There's no sign of worm, but you never know.” Stephanie nodded her understanding.

“I believe that the restoration will be a long process. The architect has been talking of something in excess of two years. What I will do is ask him whether, once the House is completely weatherproof, some of the rooms could be completed in advance of starting others. That could allow some of the items to be put back in their original locations before the whole thing is finished. I take it Mr Brodie has not seen all this?”

“No. Not yet.”

“I think he will have to, in time.”

“Do you want to walk through to the other lofts?”

“Not today, I think,” said Stephanie. “I am already overwhelmed!”

“Do you want to come down and see the cars?”

“Cars?”

“Oh, yes, cars. Lady Helen refused to sell any of the pre-war ones, or buy anything more modern. So there's a Rolls Royce and two Daimlers, together with a couple of sports cars that Mr Bernstein bought and stored down here. I think his favourite is the Alvis but that hasn't been used since before the War and it was hardly used then.”

“I don't drive,” she said. “Are you going to tell me I have a chauffeur as well?”

“No. Lady Helen rarely went out in her last years so when the chauffeur retired he was not replaced. If you want to be driven anywhere, one of the gardeners will do it.”

“I think there will be enough to occupy me here,” said Stephanie, thinking that she knew nothing about cars or antique furniture. She looked around, wondering what secrets and treasures lay hidden under the dust covers, waiting to be rediscovered and brought back into the light of day. Her mission was more than the restoration of the House. It was to empty these lofts as well. She might as well start straight away. “This portrait,” she said. “Could it be hung in my bedroom?”

“Of course,” said Mr Barnes, almost looking pleased. “I expect that you will wish to rest tomorrow after you've been around the Estate. It could be done whilst I am showing you around?”

“That would be fine.”

“And, Sunday? Will you require a car to take you to Church?”

“Church?” A pang of alarm raced through her. This was something she had not expected. “I will see how I feel,” she said lamely.

“Lady Newington always attended the Chapel on the Estate every Sunday,” he said, looking at her levelly. “Even towards the end when she was nigh on crippled.”

Stephanie smiled weakly. “If I need a car, I will let you know,” she said.

Back in the relative safety of her new sitting room, Stephanie sat and waited for Miss Lightfoot to bring her tea. It was almost like being on holiday, she thought. Except it was also like being on trial as well. She had no doubt that Mr Barnes was sizing her up and testing her. She thought she had conducted herself reasonably well until the subject of religion arose and then, she had to admit to herself, she had panicked. What should she do? Although her mother had told her she had been baptised and had once showed her the certificate, she had never been inside a church other than for weddings and funerals, and even then, rarely. What was she to do now?

“Debbie, Mr Barnes mentioned a chapel,” she said when the housekeeper came in. “What denomination is it, and where is it?”

“Roman Catholic. The Chapel is quite small, really. Lady Helen was a devout Catholic and I used to accompany her to Mass. There's a number of Catholic families on the Estate who attend. The priest comes up from Alkham. I expect that he will call on you tomorrow or early next week. You know your mother was a Catholic, too?” Stephanie's alarm grew.

“I know,” she said tentatively. “She had me baptised in Canterbury, but I have never been to Church, not to a Service, at least. I do not believe in anything like that and I am nor sure that I would want to see the priest.”

“Oh!” said the housekeeper. “I don't know what to say. Your mother was a devout church-goer until she met Mr Bernstein. I had hoped she might have brought you up a Catholic. As for Father Thomas, would you like me to ask his to defer his visit until you have settle in?” Stephanie shook her head.

“No, nothing like that. If anything, I would rather not see him at all. I wouldn't go so far as saying that I find the whole thing repugnant, but I have no inclination whatsoever to go to Church. I trust it is not expected of me as everyone is going to be disappointed if it is!”

Miss Lightfoot forced a weak smile, but Stephanie could see that her words had disappointed her. They might even upset have upset her and Stephanie began to wish that she had dealt with the subject more sympathetically. “I asked Mr Barnes to arrange for a portrait of Mr Bernstein's sister to be hung in the bedroom,” she said, anxious to change the subject. “On reflection, I think it would be better in here. I expect you know the one? Do you agree?”

Miss Lightfoot nodded and returned to her kitchen. No more was said about religion that evening, but Stephanie went to bed on her first night in her new home thinking that she had made a bad start and this one subject had ruined what would have otherwise have been a near to perfect day.