

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mr Wormley was not a man who enjoyed travelling. Indeed, Mr Wormley was not a man who was given to travel or had travelled much. Catching a local bus to take him down into the wicked streets of Dover was something of an excursion and to contemplate a trip to this dreadful place called Bromley took on all the characteristics of a full-blown expedition beyond the pale and was certainly not something to be enjoyed. But, when he thought about it there was little in life that he did enjoy and as he did not enjoy thinking about it, he did not think about it very often. And here he was, doing something he did not enjoy, something he disliked more than most other things, forced to do it, a victim of necessity. That was not to say that it might not be without reward. Even this cloud might have a silver lining.

They had met in the Newington Arms on Saturday evening, those who could escape the traces of domesticity or who had none to escape, and he had found that the position he had established the night before had been eroded, partly by the tide of events during the day, partly by the spineless, cowardly, nature of his companions. The Welshman had reported that he had met Miss Bernstein in the garden, braving the unfriendly elements in favour of a "breath of air" as she had put it. He waxed almost poetical as he described how this Rose amongst roses had accepted his offer to conduct her through the other flower gardens. There had been a brief shower and she had insisted that he sought shelter in the same arbour as she. Throughout her tour, her Ladyship, for the Welshman could not refrain from referring to her in this way, had listened to all the Latin names of the plants, taken great interest in the work, asked about double-digging and composting, and had declared the gardens to be beautiful. He, for his part, told the assembled company that her Ladyship was about the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It was just as if she had stepped out of a film at the Odeon. It was plain to him, as plain as the petals on the roses, that she had breeding and did not, in the least, bear herself like another man's mistress.

"I don't see how you can tell," snarled Wormley, determined to defend his position.

One of the other gardeners added his support. Although he had not had the privilege of conducting the new mistress of Newington House through the gardens, indeed, he said, he had not as much as seen her and bewailed the passing of the old tradition whereby all the household staff were presented to the new mistress, tales of her presence, kindness and grace were already spreading across the Estate. He had no doubts as to her parentage and virtue.

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Wormley, becoming very excited. "Mere tittle tattle!" Had Stephanie been present and heard the wild praise that was being poured upon her, she might have been embarrassed and concerned, but Wormley was neither. He was outnumbered and cornered and, in this situation, was at his most dangerous. Jack Barnes, who was beginning to regret the necessity of having to cancel, because of the weather, the guided tour of the Estate, did caution him, suggesting he should be more moderate in his utterances, even going so far as to mention slander. Slander, indeed! He would show them, and her! Wormley was not content to sit there and be shown to be flawed in his judgement of this woman whom he had never met, leave alone seen. He felt he did have one small advantage over his adversaries, a slender clue which might help him in his quest for what he saw as the truth. He had seen and noted the name on the removal van that had come down from this place called Bromley.

After coping with the obstacles of going to the station, purchasing a ticket, catching the right train and dismounting on the correct platform, finding the office of the removal firm in Bromley was not difficult. He paused outside, looking in the window at the photographs of vans and reading the statements about their vast storage facilities, and the legendary care they took of customers' possessions, found nothing in all this about their customers' morals, and, his story line pregnant on his lips, went in. "I wonder if you could help me?" he said slowly, adopting his most condescending attitude.

"We can try," said the young girl lightly.

"It is a bit embarrassing, but a young lady, an acquaintance of mine moved down to Dover last week. I find that I need to get in touch with her fairly urgently but I have done the most stupid of things - I've lost the piece of paper on which I wrote her new address. I don't

know how I did it - I know I had it on me yesterday! I am sure that you moved her. You are my last hope. Can you help? It was towards the end of the week."

"Moved last week?" mused the girl. "To Dover? In Kent?"

"Yes," said Wormley, craning his neck to read the records. "Come to think of it I think she said it was just outside Dover. Oh, I have it on the tip of my tongue. It's been like that all day!" He leaned across the counter and studied the green slips as the assistant flicked them over.

"This must be it," she said, "to Newington House? Shall I write it down for you?"

"Let's check," he said trying to read a careless, almost illegible hand, upside down. "Miss Stephanie Bernstein?"

"Oh, there must be some mistake. Her name here is Miss Hiller."

"She must have used her maiden name," he said, thinking quickly.

"Of Flat 12, Bellingham Court?"

"That's her!" he exclaimed. I cannot begin to express my thanks. It is a great weight off my mind!"

"I am pleased that I could help," said the girl. "I will write the new address down for you."

"So," he thought as he scanned the pavement for someone whom he would trust to direct him to Bellingham Court, "you use more than one surname, do you, my fine lady? Why should that be?"

The block of flats turned out to be no more than a short walk away. At the entrance he found the door locked, but there was a panel which listed the numbers of flats and the occupants. Opposite number 12 was the name "Miss Stephanie Hiller". That's good," he told himself as he made a note, "I won't have to check the electoral register now." He pressed the button opposite "caretaker" and waited until a plump, middle aged, woman appeared and asked him what he wanted. He asked her if there was somewhere that they could talk as the matter he had come about was confidential and concerned one of the residents.

"Can I offer you some tea?" she asked once they were settled in her flat. He accepted and told her that he was a private investigator who had been asked to check on the credit-worthiness of Miss Hiller. "She doesn't live here any more!" exclaimed the woman.

"That is so," said Wormley, assuming his most official, matter of fact, voice. "She moved to Kearsney, near Dover, last week. It is in connection with her move that I am making my enquiries. Now, I understand that she worked in a bank."

"In a bank?" cried the woman. "Has she said that? On her back might be more like it!" Wormley felt an unaccustomed warm glow seeping through his body. Things could not have been going better. He lifted his cup to his lips and raised his eyebrows.

"I don't quite understand," he said innocently. "She has stated that she held a responsible and respectable position."

"I don't know what position she adopted, but it wasn't respectable! Words fail me!" exclaimed the caretaker.

"You mean, and I need to be absolutely clear on this point, that she was not respectable?"

"She was not!"

"And she did not work a bank?"

"She did not!"

"Dear, dear, me," he said, shaking his head and feeling his pulse rising. "What did she do?" The woman paused and suddenly looked uncomfortable. Wormley wondered if she was about to have misgivings about betraying another of her sex, or whether she thought she had gone too far. "What was her occupation?" he prompted.

"The oldest under the sun," she whispered. "She entertained men."

"Men?" he echoed, unable to believe his luck and finding it difficult not to over-exploit this rich band of gold he had stumbled upon.

"Yes, men. Not many, mark you, and even fewer of late. But I used to see them, coming and going. And there were two or three that I recognised. Some of them were quite prominent citizens, I don't mind telling you! I used to have to pacify the other occupants of

the flats as well.”

Wormley began to regret that he had no photographs of Miss Bernstein or what ever she should be called. That would have clinched it but, then, he might have found it difficult to explain to this most helpful and informative woman why he was showing her a photograph in connection with a credit enquiry. “You do astonish me,” he said, trying to disguised his satisfaction, “but I must thank you on behalf of my client for your frankness.”

“Always pleased to oblige. To tell you the truth, I was glad to see her go. She lowered the tone of the place.”

“I can believe that,” said Wormley. He made his way back the station and had the most enjoyable journey of his life on the train back to Kearsney. He relished and enjoyed every mile of it, preparing himself for the next occasion on which they would all assemble in the Newington Arms. He would show them! He would tell them and if they did not believe him they could go up to Bromley as he had done, and see the caretaker! Yet when that occasion came and the little gathering assembled and sung her praise to the ancient, worm-ridden, rafters, Wormley sunk back into his corner and remained smug and silent. After all, his information had been gained at a price and was not something now to be given away lightly.

“Well? What do you think?” Richard asked as they took off their coats and closed the door on Miss Logan who was clattering cups and spoons and plugging in the kettle. His father had remained thoughtful throughout and had sat in silence in the car on the journey back from the meeting. Richard thought that it had gone well and was relieved that his father had given no indication that they were not prepared to undertake either or both of the contracts. He had talked to Gwilym who was confident that he could manage the two of them. He even appeared enthusiastic about the prospect, as if one simply was not enough. Perhaps it had been that which had swayed his father's opinion? What ever it might have been, and it certainly was not the influence of Miss Logan, his father appeared to accept both that they were favourites for the award.

“I think that the weather is lousy and that Sandra will be soaked going home if one of us does not go and collect her,” said his father.

“I could go and meet her,” volunteered Gwilym, sensing that family business was about to be discussed. “If I leave now, there's just time, you know. Only two for tea, Miss Logan,” they heard him say as he closed the door behind him.

“It is all internal work,” said Richard, wondering if there was some mutual understanding between his father and Gwilym that they should be left alone to discuss matters.

“I know, I know,” muttered his father, adjusting the position of some papers on the desk. “It is just that I had hoped - still, a bird in the hand - .”

“Two birds, actually.”

“Hmrrrrrr. And we are confident that Gwilym can cope? And that he will stay here at least to see the contracts through? He is an unknown quantity as far as we are concerned.” Richard nodded, thinking uncharitable thoughts of Eileen. However the Welshman had gone to collect Sandra. His sister might prove to be the perfect foil. “I only know what I have told you. He appears to know what he is talking about and everything about him seems to be honest and genuine.”

Mr Brown stopped and wondered whether his son's assessment of people could be considered sound. He had brought him up to know and understand the building business. He had taken him to sites, showed him examples of good and bad workmanship. He had pointed out the bonds in brickwork, the joints in joinery, and the face smooth plaster-work. As a child and teenager he appeared to enjoy it, but then, as a total surprise, he had suddenly announced his intention to become a teacher. He had never discovered what had made Richard take this decision and turn his back on his upbringing and his family. He often wondered if it was because although he had taught the child and the young man all he knew about building and little about dealing with people. But that was all in the past now. He had to concern himself with the present! “I think we could put Peterson on one,” he said suddenly. “His job at

Castigliano's is all but complete, and Martin could take the other with Gwilym looking after the pair of them. You realise, of course, that this ties up most of our best teams on two, low-reward, contracts?"

Richard stared at his father for a minute, uncertain how to react to the first positive suggestion he had made. "If they pay their contribution to overheads and cover all their other costs, I will be happy. I do hope that we might get more than our overheads from them and my cost analysis will tell us just what is happening."

"Your cost analysis," said Mr Brown reflectively. "I might have to pull Martin out as he's our best craftsman," he continued.

"Why?" said Richard sharply. "Are you thinking of this stately home thing? I would have thought that we would have heard by now if we stood any chance of getting on the tender list. We are back to the birds in the hand, Dad."

"I know," said Mr Brown, not a little wearily, "but these things can take time. I suppose you're right." Miss Logan entered with the tray, cocking her head as she placed it on the desk. "Thank you, Emily," said Mr Brown. "I must say, Richard," he continued once she had left, "that I do have misgivings about this." Richard felt his pulse rise.

"So do I, to a degree, but I look at them as a springboard to better things; to them giving us some experience in this market."

"I trust it will be good experience."

"So long as we can make them pay their way and we use my cost system to analyse the costs and rates. Would you like to go over it now?" Richard produced his notes and draft forms and explained to his father how they would be used to assess the costs and profitability of each work activity. "It will be a bit rough to begin with but over a period we can gradually refine it and at least we will know which rates matter and what they should be instead of having to stab in the dark all the time." His father sighed.

"We don't stab in the dark, Richard. You know that. I use a lifetime of experience. You will find that as you go on you build up a close understanding of the rates you need and how much things cost to do. You don't need a - cost analysis - or what ever you want to call it to do that. And who is going to do all the work?"

"Miss Logan?" His father coloured slightly and Richard felt a surge of anxiety. Two years earlier and such a suggestion might have provoked an outburst but now the tablets appeared to be working, although he could hear his mother's voice entreating him not to excite his father. "Eileen, then?" he added, guessing what might have passed between him and the dragon and knowing what was in his father's mind. "She had done book-keeping."

"I don't think Miss Logan could handle it. As it is, if we are awarded these two contracts it will mean a lot of extra administration work for her; wages, orders, invoices. I don't think I could give it to Miss Logan."

"I would like to give it to Miss Logan," Richard thought. "How about Eileen, then?" he asked.

"I had not thought of Eileen as a likely candidate. The trouble is, could she and Miss Logan work together? Your analysis would have to be done here as whoever does do it will need access to the wage sheets and invoices. It sounds to me a little like water and acid."

"Prussic acid," thought Richard.

"I'll talk to her if we decide to go ahead," said Mr Brown.

"Decide to go ahead? Dad! We need the work and we also need to learn from it so that we can be equipped for the next contract. You admitted that Peterson is almost out of work. Martin's work will only last another four or five weeks and Jefferies is not much better. We need the turnover to expand! If we can make a success of these contracts they could be the first of a long line. There's talk of converting the Imperial. Imagine that! And then possibly the Royal Invicta. This could go on for years!"

"As long as you remember that this is a small business," said his father, grudgingly. "Not one of your Marley and Ellisses."

"Is that an affirmative?"

"Yes. I suppose so," said his father, resignedly. "And I suppose that I had now better talk to Miss Logan. There's no time like the present."

“You are suggesting that I have Mrs Cross -.”

“Brown!”

“Mrs Brown, working here? Working here with me, not for me?” exclaimed the beleaguered lady. “Where would she sit?” She clutched the edge of her desk and looked around her. “And I have been here since you started. Why introduce someone else?”

“It is a lot of additional work, Emily. Book work and analyses.”

“I can keep book!” she cried. “I do keep the books!”

“I know you do,” he said, wearily. “There is no criticism of what you do. You know that your services have been much valued over the years.”

“Services?” she said softly.

“Emily! You and I know each other. You know that I want you to continue doing the sterling work that you've been doing these last fifteen or so years. There is no question of that changing, none at all.”

“Perhaps that's the problem,” she said softly. Mr Brown did not appear to hear her.

“This is all additional work and may be no more than a short, on-off, exercise. I can't ask you to take it on especially as we will also be starting two new, large, contracts.”

“The flat conversion contracts?”

“Yes.”

“You are going to take them?”

“We are. We are both getting old, Emily. It's time to let the young people in. I don't know whether they will be a success but Richard has to learn somehow. I just hope it is not going to be the hard way. As for Mrs Brown, I will squeeze a table or another desk in my office.”

“In your office?”

“Yes. There isn't really room in here and you can stay here, at your desk, and work just as you have always done, quite normally. Unless you want the company, but it would be an even greater squeeze to get another desk in here.”

“In your office, then,” she said coldly, “but I will still work to you, and not Mrs Brown?”

“Nothing will change in that respect, but I will expect you to assist her in giving her access to the papers and all the information she'll need - invoices, wage sheets, and so on.”

“Just so long as I continue to work for you,” she said lowly, “she can have what ever she wants.”

“Will you come out with me on Thursday?” Ken was sat on the edge of Alice's desk, casually removing the accumulation of evidence from beneath his finger nails with her scissors whilst the three girls looked on and exchanged glances.

“I can't,” said Sandra.

“Oh, come on, San. It's my day off! Surely you could come out with me. Can't you say something to her, you two?”

“We are just innocent bystanders,” said Debbie, smiling.

“We could be witnesses if you need them,” said Alice from behind him.

“And my name is Sandra, not San! Anyway I cannot go out with you on Thursday.”

“There!” said Alice. “You must refer to her by her proper name for a start if you are to get anywhere! You are lucky that she does not insist upon you calling her Miss Brown. We sometimes have to!” Debbie started giggling. Baiting this particular Detective Constable was a favourite pastime of the Section and Debbie never had a giggle far away.

“Oh, come on! exclaimed Ken. “We were at school together and I called her San then.”

“We are not at school now,” said Sandra, sternly. “He used to carry my books for me,” she told her work-mates.

“Come on, Sandra. It is the only night I've got.” Sandra was fully aware of that. She had typed the duty rosters, but she would not run the risk of telling him that she was free on any night in case he persuaded a colleague to swap shifts with him.

"I am sorry, Ken," she said, "but I have already arranged to go out with someone else!" Alice and Debbie pulled faces at one another, then both smiled sweetly at Ken, awaiting his response.

"Go out? With whom?"

"That is none of your business."

"It is that damned Welshman!"

"Oooo! Language!" exclaimed Alice.

"You're seeing him, aren't you?" blurted Ken.

"Welshman?" said Debbie. "What's this? Have you been holding out on us, Sandra?"

"You're a dark horse," said Alice, peering around the obstruction on her desk. "Got a fancy man, have you?" They both giggled and looked at Ken, though Sandra was now colouring as much as he was.

"No, I haven't," complained Sandra. "He is just a friend of the family. Someone nice to be with."

"And the Detective Constable isn't?" said Alice, poking him in the back so sharply that he jumped up and knocked a pile of files over onto the floor. "Now look what you've done!" she said as they both bent down to pick them up. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Now he's trying to look down my dress! I wouldn't go out with him if I were you, Sandra. If he'll do that in public there's no knowing what he would try to get up to when the two of you are alone!" Ken staggered to his feet, his face scarlet.

"I wasn't!" he stammered and was then driven from the office by their laughter.

"Tell us about your Welshman," said Alice as soon as he had gone.

"There isn't any thing more to tell other than I said the other day when Detective Sergeant Ozer was here asking about him. He is my sister-in-law's brother-in-law."

"Work that one out, Debbie," said Alice

"And he has come down to work for my father. He's like another brother to me."

"Is he handsome?"

"In a way," she said craftily.

"And rich?"

"Hardly."

"I'm not sure that he would suit either of us then! But you are going out with him on Thursday?"

"I am," asserted Sandra. A little later she stood under the entrance canopy to the police station and watched the rain lash down in the puddles that extended to covering most of the car park. She looked up at the sky in the hope that she would see a sign, the slightest hint, that there might be a break in the clouds that would permit her to, at least, make a dash for a bus. There was no sign whatsoever. The dark grey of the low sky stretched right to the horizon where it merged imperceptibly into the grey of the sea. The worst of it was that, devoid of an umbrella, in her light, tight, sweater that she knew so excited Ken, and her short skirt, she was going to get wet, very wet.

"Allow me to give you a lift, Miss Brown," said a familiar, oily, voice as a hand slipped around her waist and downwards, coming to rest on her thigh.

"I was waiting for it to ease off," she said, trying to disengage herself.

"Then I think you will be waiting a long time. Have you brought your nightdress with you? Or perhaps you sleep *au naturel* and don't need one?" Sandra glared at him, not knowing what to say, but he only laughed. "Relax, Miss Brown. I'm no threat to you, not here in front of everyone. Quite the opposite. I just want to get to know you." Sandra remained silent and tried to look aloof although she was uncomfortable and anxious. The rain appeared to be getting heavier than ever. She reproached herself for not having foreseen this situation. The very least she could have done was cadge a lift off of Ken. He would do anything for her.

"I would just point out that you are going to get soaked right through to your pretty little skin rather than be warm and dry in my car."

"Will you take me straight home?" she asked.

"Miss Brown! What are you suggesting? Of course I will take you straight home." His tone was far from being reassuring. It crossed her mind that although there was little

chance of getting a taxi, she could telephone her father's office or home, but they had said something about going to a meeting, so no-one might be available to come and collect her. "Well?" he asked.

"Very well then," she said, harbouring a mixture of fear and regret. "I'll wait here whilst you fetch your car."

"It is only over there," he said, triumphantly. "I won't be a minute." She watched him dash through the puddles. Her inclination still was to flee in the other direction but that would be foolish. Where would she run to? A couple of minutes later he appeared at the wheel of a light blue Ford, leaning across to open the front passenger door. She instinctively went to the rear door, but it was locked. It was just as she started to lower herself onto the seat behind him that a car drew up behind and the driver sounded his horn.

"It's all right!" she cried, getting out and raising her handbag above her head to shelter her. "Someone's actually come to pick me up!" For a brief moment, as the passenger door was swinging shut, she saw the same look of frenzied anger she had seen on the night he had followed her. Then the door slammed shut and, rear wheels spinning, he drove away.

"Am I glad to see you!" she said as she climbed in alongside Gwilym. "And isn't the weather terrible?"

"It is! And I am glad to hear you say that you are glad to see me. I would have been here earlier but for the traffic. It's chock-a-block around the Square."

"You were just in time," she said with obvious relief.

"Wasn't that one of the policemen from the other night?"

"It was," she said, thinking that she would rather forget it all. "Will you do me another favour?"

"A favour? What's that?"

"Will you take me out on Thursday? It has to be Thursday!"

Gwilym laughed. "And there was I thinking that it was only Welsh girls who propositioned men."

"It is not a proposition. Will you?"

"Of course I will, Sandra," he said. They completed the remainder of the journey in silence. Despite her wish to forget it, Sandra could not but help dwelling on what she saw as a narrow escape, though from what she did not know. Gwilym wondered why she had made her request, creating all manner of highly improbable reasons for it, most of which would have greatly embarrassed her had she known of them.