

CHAPTER TWELVE

For several days after she arrived at Newington Stephanie found herself either trapped in, or forced to stay close to, the main House. It did allow her to familiarise herself with the layout and the number of individual rooms. She discovered false doors, concealed cupboards, and unexpected stairs. She found a boiler room, dark, musty, clearly unused and harbouring what could easily be a stock of vintage, pre-war, coal. When the weather permitted she ventured out into the walled garden, occasionally encountering one of the gardeners whom she found very helpful and attentive, or exploring a little of the way up the drive. The door to the hay lofts was locked when she tried it. Mr Barnes was apparently true to his word in protecting what were now her valuables.

Mr Brodie visited her but he did not have much to report. He told her he had been to see her father to discuss contractors. "You have seen my father?" she asked with more than curiosity. "Did he say anything about me, or him coming down here?" Mr Brodie had, she thought, looked slightly uncomfortable at the questions.

"He asked how you had reacted to seeing the House," he said cautiously. "I told him you were both pleased and enthusiastic about its restoration. That was all right, was it?"

She smiled. "I think that I would have said something of the same had he asked me. About his coming down?"

"He said nothing about coming here," said Mr Brodie.

"And you talked about the appointment of a contractor. Have you engaged one yet? I was just thinking of the leaks and all this rain."

He shook his head. "We did no more than review a short list. I think he has a firm in mind, but it could be two or three weeks before we have one, and another couple of weeks before they are set up here, on site. As for the leaks, I know you may be anxious but I don't think a little more water will cause any more harm than has already occurred."

"I am just anxious to get started," she said.

When it was raining, which seemed to Stephanie to occupy a far greater proportion of the day than in Bromley, she spent much of her time with the housekeeper, unprofitably it transpired. Miss Lightfoot had become very cautious and reticent when it came to talking about anything in the past which might be remotely personal. Some things she could not remember, saying that she was now an old woman and her memory was not what it once was. Some questions were met with evasion or an outright refusal. It was for others to tell her, not that there was anything to tell. Which others? Her father and, possibly, her mother. Her father would, Miss Lightfoot felt, come to see her, in time, when he was ready and he judged that the time was right.

Stephanie found this all vexatious and frustrating. What ever mystery she had stored about herself and her origins when she lived at Bromley was now increased and multiplied tenfold. She would find herself lingering in empty rooms, not looking at, or seeing, anything but simply going over matters in her head. She would lie in bed and conjure up all kinds of fantastic explanations. Perhaps she was related to nobility? Or perhaps her father was a member of some crime syndicate, although she had asked her mother whether he was a criminal and she had denied it. Then again, he could be a spy, a foreign agent. Or even someone on their side, high up in MI5, someone who could not reveal his identity without putting others, including her, at risk. Yet he had seen Mr Brodie. Mr Brodie, clearly, was dispensable.

She would also dwell on what she would say when she met him. Once, after the truth had been revealed and admitted by her mother, she had fabricated what she would say if she met him. Now, it seemed, she no longer had to deal with a hypothetical situation. Now it was simply a matter of time and his inclination. Years ago she might have been tempted to thrust a knife into him for deserting her and her mother, for condemning her to, and failing to protect her from, all the awful things that had happened to her during her childhood and early teens. Sometimes her thoughts drifted back into her childhood but she found only pain and unhappiness waiting for her there. If only he had come and rescued her then! If only he had not listened to her stupid mother! How different her life would have been! How different

everything would have been! Her life would have been different, but she would not have met Him. No, she would not think of Him, not even his name! How he must loathe and detest her! He had spoken fine words when he had come to see her but, on looking back, it must have been a sham. He must hate her, every bit as much as she once hated her father and could not fully forgive her mother.

One afternoon, Mr Barnes let her back into the hay lofts. In the second she found the contents of the library, some of the books still being on their original racking. Many appeared to be very old and dusty, addressing such strange and obscure subjects she found it wonderful that anyone could think of such a thing, leave alone write a voluminous book on it. She also found a number which aroused her interest, including two, in particular, which were together. The first was a treatise on the architecture of English Churches and it was the name of the author, Michael Bernstein, which attracted her attention. The second was written by a clergyman some time in the nineteenth century and dealt with the history of the Newington Estate. Flicking through the pages she came upon a chapter dealing with the Monastery of the Monks of St Clare. It told how they had come over from Angevin France shortly after the conquest and established themselves on the Downs above the port of Dover, farming the fertile lands in the valleys below. Before the Dissolution they had established, under a Charter given them by Henry V, a trust for the maintenance of the Order. The trust was still extant at the time the book was written but used for the upkeep of the monastic gardens which had been established at a later date. Much of the stone of the buildings had been quarried for local use but, according to the author, the ruins were well preserved and worth a visit from those who sought and obtained permission to cross the Newington Estate. "These must be the ruins I can see across the valley," she thought. "And how strange! A land island in a land sea, but a haven, a kind of sanctuary."

She later asked Mr Barnes about the maintenance of the gardens and was told that they were, indeed, still maintained. "It is a long standing tradition that the Estate workers look after them, for nothing," he said. "It is also said that they actually require little in the way of maintenance or weeding. And it is also said that a miracle occurred there. Did you read about it in the book?" Stephanie shook her head.

"I was only browsing," she explained.

"I am not entirely sure of all the details, but a couple of centuries ago a young girl from the Estate saw a vision of the Virgin Mary there, in the remains of the Chapel. I think the Church hushed it up at the time." Stephanie felt her blood run cold and shivered, although she did not understand why.

"I wouldn't go there, if I were you, Ma'am," said Miss Lightfoot when Stephanie mentioned the ruins to her. "It is a long way and very isolated." Stephanie had the impression that the housekeeper could have said more about the ruins than she did, but did not press her. She was beginning to learn that Miss Lightfoot was a woman of many secrets and was resigning herself to having to wait for them to be shared. After all, she did have all the time in the World. "Some of the families on the Estate have worked in the gardens for generations," said Miss Lightfoot.

"It is not a tradition I would wish to stop," said Stephanie, feeling that, like the House, here was something to be preserved.

On the wet days a damp, clinging, mist drifted in from the Channel and Stephanie could not see the ruins. Then came a morning when the sun rose early, steam crept up the walls from the Wisteria, and against the blue sky the shape of the monastery was clearly cut into the horizon. Stephanie had made up her mind even before Miss Lightfoot had prepared breakfast. She would walk to the ruins that day. Miss Lightfoot thought, of course, that it was not something she should do alone. There was a touch of vehemence about her protest that baffled Stephanie and she stood firm, condescending only to take a light picnic with her. Armed with the directions which she had extracted from her housekeeper, she set off mid morning, crossing the lawn then joining a track which gradually dipped into the valley floor, passing a small farm house and outbuildings, thinking she could hear children although she saw none. Beyond the farm the track degenerated into a narrow footpath which snaked around a small, impenetrable, copse and started to climb the opposite side of the valley. It was muddy

in places, but Stephanie stepped from turf to turf and as she climbed the path became quite dry.

She crossed a meadow, disturbing blue, brown and white butterflies as she did so, pausing as she reached the summit before the path descended again. On the horizon she could still see her objective although it did not appear to be materially nearer. Perhaps it was like a rainbow, ever moving but indicating the location of an unattainable crock of gold. Miss Lightfoot said that it was a considerable walk. She still had some distance to cover. The path led down into a densely wooded valley where she had to cross a small stream on a rickety log bridge, something about which the housekeeper had not told her. Perhaps she did not know! Away to her left she caught glimpses of a fairy tale cottage through the trees, too far away for her to be able to tell whether anyone was there, or make a diversion to find out.

“This is my Estate,” she repeatedly told herself. “This is my land over which I am walking. They are my trees, my leaves and my grass.” It seemed strangely like a dream, the thought of having this huge expanse at her disposal after the confinement of her flat. The path joined another as she made her way around the side of a field and into a delightful wooded glade where shafts of sunlight cut their paths downwards, illuminating her way between the leaves and boughs. From this point she started to climb, gradually at first, then increasingly steeply until she was almost on her hands and knees. “This is really lady-like,” she thought, wishing that she had worn a longer skirt and hoping that she did not encounter any of the estate workers. But she appeared to be completely alone.

Then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, she was there, on the edge of a plateau, looking up at the creeper-clad remains of the monastery buildings. A bank of tall, green, nettles blocked her immediate access but she was able to follow a well defined path around these until she found herself standing between two long, walls of stone flanked by a tall gable end, which was pierced by an ornate round window and which still, defiantly, reached up, skywards. Beneath her the carpet of grass was short, green and soft. Above her, as a meadow lark hovered, the sky was a deep, unforgettable, blue.

Stephanie tried to recall the description of the ruins in the book she had found in the hay loft. There had been mention of the dormitory and a refractory. Somewhere there should be the remains of the cloisters, if someone had not subsequently removed them and, of course, Mr Barnes had mentioned the chapel. That was where this vision, the miracle, was said to have occurred. She looked around her, at the weathered stones and the tracery in the windows, and surmised that she was actually standing in the chapel. “It happened here,” she said to herself not without some expectancy. “This is where the Virgin appeared.” Except she did not believe in that sort of thing.

She sat on a low stone wall and surveyed the scene of decay and dereliction. Some stones, still unaccountably wet, glistened in the sunlight that probed through the window openings. Ivy tumbled loosely over and down the face of the wall and swung noiselessly in the gentle breeze. A brown butterfly zig-zagged its way towards her before soaring past the holes where the roof beams had once rested and high over the top of the wall. She was alone, completely alone. It was the sense of timeless peace and serenity that most struck her. It seemed to infuse her with a sense of calmness and tranquillity as if she was receiving, or had received, absolution for all her sins. She knew that she would be thought by most to have sinned grievously, but she had never sought absolution nor considered that it was necessary. She had been asked if she would be going to Church, a question that had made her laugh inwardly at the time as such a thought was anathema. Yet she now was beginning to feel she regretted thinking like that. Her mother had been a Catholic and she was baptised a Catholic. Here, in this sanctuary, alone, perhaps as she had never been alone before, remote, she acknowledged for the first time in her life that there might be a God, and that she might be able to believe in Him.

She stood and picked up her packed lunch. “You are being foolish, Stephanie,” she said out loud. “It is this place!” She went through a low doorway, along a short vaulted passage and came out into the sunlight in what she assumed had once been the cloisters. She could not help but think of the monks, kneeling there at their prayers, going about their labours, living their lives and dying their deaths. Perhaps they were still there, under the flat

stones set in the carpet in the chapel, ghosts influencing the living, some kind of magic, some kind of miracle, being practised on her? "Don't be silly," she told herself. "It is all in my imagination. It is simply because I am here, alone. Perhaps I should have asked Mr Barnes to have come with me?" No, he would be off being busy, looking after the Estate, managing, doing what ever Estate Managers did. Had he said he was single? She wondered why. Surely Estate Managers would be marriageable. Still, marriage was not a subject she wanted to dwell upon, not now, not at any time. It was almost as bad as religion!

A gravel path led her into the gardens. She walked slowly around, admiring the flower beds, sampling the fragrance of the shrubs, pausing on a bridge that spanned an arm of a lily covered ornamental lake to watch the golden carp as they lazily swum below her. No-one, not a single other soul, was to be seen. She was alone like at no other time in her life and she found that she relished the isolation. It was uncanny. She came to the end of the gardens and stood by a low stone wall looking down on the town of Dover. She could see the docks and beyond them the glistening waters of the Channel. A ferry was entering the harbour entrance, manoeuvring between two wide arms of stone. There were people there, but so far away, so distant. For the present she felt as if she could not have a care in the World. She was alone, completely alone, and she was in Paradise.

A step on the gravel behind her startled her. "Good morning, Ma'am," said a man's voice. "I trust that I did not startle you? Miss Lightfoot said you were coming here and asked me to see that you were all right."

"Why, Mr Barnes! You did make me jump a little. I had just been thinking what a magical place this is, so beautiful and peaceful, and private."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll go."

"Oh, no," she cried, holding out her hand to restrain him although he was beyond arm's reach, "I didn't mean it in that way, not at all. In fact I had just been thinking that I ought to ask you about something, except I have quite forgotten what it was. But all this! It's almost unbelievable!"

"I suppose it is," he said, hesitantly. "Not many folk come here because it is well off the main road and you can't get to it anyway except across the Estate."

"Yes," said Stephanie, shielding her eyes and looking towards the sea. "I find that curious as well. How far does the Estate land extend?" He came to her side and pointed down the steep, sheep grazed, hill that dropped away before them. "You see that line of trees and bushes at the bottom? That is the boundary and it runs way on out of sight in both directions. It is a large Estate. Would you like to see it this afternoon?"

"I would, but will there be time? I haven't eaten my packed lunch yet. Would you like to share it with me?"

"I couldn't do that," he said hastily.

"Of course you could," Stephanie said firmly. "Here. Let us sit on the wall and see what Miss Lightfoot has prepared for us."

As she sat there, and persuaded Mr Barnes to take sandwiches from the neat, crustless, rounds she had carried with her from the House, she studied the dark green boundary. For a moment she thought she saw, far off below her, a man's figure, coming through a gap and starting up the hill towards her. In that moment she was unaccountably overwhelmed by passion, frustration, sadness and despair. Then, when she looked again, the vision was gone and she could see only the sheep, peacefully grazing, oblivious of the two of them. "It is a beautiful view," she said, but without conviction.

"I'm sorry," Mr Barnes said, catching her tone. "I shouldn't be here, doing this."

Stephanie turned to him and smiled. "Please excuse me. I am the one who should apologise, but I do find all this overwhelming, a lot to adjust to. I think it may take weeks. If you knew what I have come from - but that is all past, all behind me. Perhaps we should start back if you are going to show me around the Estate?" Mr Barnes stood and offered his arm.

"I think you also own a number of rented properties down there," he said indicating towards the town. "They come with the Estate." But Stephanie was not listening. She was still studying the spot where she thought she had seen a man. There were sadness and sorrow there, where they stood. She could feel it, something, some essence, nearby, restless,

unrequited.

“We ought to start back,” she repeated, forcing another smile. “Don't mind me,” she added. “I am just feeling the emotion of the occasion. Have you brought a car?”

“I brought the Land Rover but only up as far as Rose Cottage so we have a tidy walk before we get to it. Did you pass the cottage?”

“I saw it, the fairy tale one, but it was a little way off on my left as I came up here. There was one that Mr Brodie took me to see. Is that it?”

“That sounds like it. It is always kept in readiness for Mr Bernstein. He lived in it before the War when he was a young man and it has been special for him ever since.”

“He uses it?”

“Why yes!” said Mr Barnes, a little surprised. “He comes down every now and then.” Stephanie felt a tinge of excitement. Here was a way that she might encounter, even confront, her father. “I came in from the main drive but there was a new access constructed from the main road to the cottage some years ago. If you have a key for the padlock on the gate it is possible to slip in and out without anyone knowing. It's no more than a track, but you can get a car along it.”

“So my father could visit his cottage without me knowing it? I think I would like to know whether he is here or not,” she said. “If you are aware that he is visiting, would you make a point of letting me know?” She paused at the ruins and looked up at the walls. “I find it hard to believe that all this is here. And when are the gardens maintained? I haven't seen a soul.”

“I did say that they do not require a great deal of attention,” said Mr Barnes, looking back towards them. “I cannot explain why. It may simply be that over the years the plants that have established themselves are ideally suited the soil and the surroundings and now live in perfect harmony with their environment.”

“A sort of natural selection?” she said softly.

“You could say that. I imagine the Monks did much the same thing - cultivated the plants that would grow here happily. They sunk a deep well, you know, and it still provides water for the garden and the lake. Up to a few years ago it had to be raised by hand, or by horse to be more accurate, but I managed to persuade the Trust to allow us to install a small electric pump.”

“And they are not open to the public, the gardens?”

“You are not thinking of opening the gardens to the public?” he said, concerned. “We had someone down a few years ago from one of the Ministries. Lady Newington would have none of it and she sent them away with fleas in their ears, if you will pardon the expression.”

“No,” said Stephanie softly, “I am not thinking of opening them to the public.” It seemed a shame that so much beauty should not be shared yet she felt an overwhelming desire to keep this sanctuary she had discovered in the heart of her inheritance, personal and private. She consoled herself with the thought that the gardens were open to the public, but it was the Estate that was private and closed.

They paused outside the cottage where the Land Rover was parked. “I can see why my father wants to keep this to himself,” she said. “It is so picturesque, just like something off of a post card. I will have to speak to him about it.”

“You can see how bad the access is,” said Mr Barnes. “You see there is barely room to turn a car and the path is the only sensible route up to the gardens. Imagine if the gardens were open to the public. All the cars and coaches that would have to come up here, leave alone the problems of people wandering off and trespassing on the Estate. Lady Newington decided that it just was not feasible.”

“I cannot see my father being in favour of it, either,” said Stephanie. “Bringing Piccadilly Circus right to the front door of his cottage. Can we look inside?” Mr Barnes looked embarrassed. “I have not brought the keys with me,” he said defensively.

“Another time then?” she said lightly, moving around the back of the vehicle and opening the passenger door. Mr Barnes watched her get in and closed the door behind her.

“Well,” he thought, “you are a fine young woman and any man would be proud to have you as a mistress or, better still, a wife. If you are some man's mistress, I envy him.” She

caught his eye, and smiled sweetly. It was his cue to start the engine and slowly drive off.

Unseen, but seeing all, Wormley watched them go. He was puzzled. He now understood why Jack Barnes took Miss Bernstein's side when ever she was discussed by the gathering at the Newington Arms and, to be true, little else was talked about at present. She was wrapping him around her little finger. Perhaps he even had designs there, on her, seeing himself as a future owner of Newington House? There was something else, besides; something about this Miss Bernstein, something vaguely familiar. There was an older, elusive, woman he had seen about the Estate on odd, rare, occasions; a strikingly handsome woman with a face that was not readily forgotten. There was a likeness between the two of them. He was sure of it. So, there was another dimension to the mystery of who and what this Miss Bernstein really was. He knew where she had come from and what she had been, but that only made it all the more difficult to reconcile now that he had seen her. Was there a relationship between the two of them? Could they be sisters? If so, why did they come separately to the Estate? And why had this younger one come to live there now? Oh, there was much to be discovered.

“I will uncover all the truth about you, my fine young lady,” he thought as he watched the Land Rover until it disappeared around a bend in the track. Then, like a swift black fox he darted back onto one of his secret paths through the undergrowth.

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