

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Oh my goodness, Arthur?” cried Moira. “What ever has happened? You look dreadful! Have you taken one of your pills?”

“I am all right, I think, but what has happened,” said Mr Brown, wearily as his wife closed the door behind him and ushered him towards the lounge, “is there has been the most awful scene and argument at the office and having thrown a quite extraordinary tantrum, Miss Logan upped and simply walked out!”

“Miss Logan? Walked out? After all these years? What ever have you and Richard been doing to her?”

“I suppose that it is a whole accumulation of things over a long period,” he groaned. “Let me sit down first and get the weight off my feet.”

“And I will make us a pot of tea. Sandra isn't in yet, so we will have to wait before we eat. You can tell me everything over it.”

“Where do I begin,” he said, wiping his brow. “I suppose it goes back quite a long way. She wasn't all that happy when Richard came home and started to work there. I think she might have been jealous, or concerned that she was now working to two masters. Then there was a little of her wanting to work only for me, and not for him, but the real problems appeared when Eileen went to work there on Richard's exercise. Now, I will say from the very outset, Eileen is blameless. She has, as far as I can see, applied herself to her work and not interfered in the least with what Miss Logan has to do or the way she runs things. But Emily has not seen it that way. She has accused me of introducing Eileen and placing her over her on more than one occasion, and claimed that she and the way she does things were being criticised on occasions. Put simply, she has resented Eileen's presence there.”

“Has she, indeed,” said Moira, pouring. “What right is it of hers?”

“None, I suppose, but after having been there for that length of time you start to believe you own a part of the place. Right or no rights, she asked for an assistant. When I said “no” she got all worked up, claiming that was the proper way that things should be done. She should be given an assistant to do the work and Eileen should be sent home to have children or clean the huge house she had to live in whilst she lived in a hovel; her words, not mine.”

“Could we afford an assistant? Eileen has been working for nothing, hasn't she?”

“I expect we could, if the level of turnover continues to rise. I didn't have time to tackle the problem and, as if Emily walking out on us was not enough, now Richard tells me that Eileen has to go into hospital for an operation.”

“Hospital? Oh, dear Lord, what for? You could have told me!”

“I didn't know. Richard only told me to day. Apparently it is something to do with a growth in her womb.”

“Oh, no! What can I say to her? When will she have to go in? What will she do when she comes out - she can come here to convalesce, unless Richard is arranging for her to go into a nursing home? The St Andrews is said to be very good, but this is dreadful news. Oh dear!”

The subject had swung away from the sudden departure of Miss Logan which, if he was honest, was of greater consequence to Arthur Brown than the prospect of Eileen going into hospital for what his son had described as a routine operation. After all, he had been in hospital and not that long ago, but at the office there were wage sheets to make out, wage packets to make up, cards to be stamped, invoices to record, check and pay. All of these problems were now running through his mind like forceful aftershocks following the particularly violent earthquake Miss Logan had unleashed on him and his business. It could have been his own fault, to a degree. Perhaps he should have got her an assistant long ago. As Richard had pointed out, they ought to be thinking of training someone to take over from her, but he had resisted that concept. He could just imagine her reaction if she thought she was being asked to train her replacement. There had been such an increase in the volume of administrative work due to the new contracts, yet was there sufficient work to justify another pair of hands aside from Eileen's? And what if the volume of work then decreased and there

was not sufficient to keep Miss Logan and her assistant busy? What would they do then? It would be poor reward for someone who had left school and had come to work for them, bursting with aspirations and hopes, simply to be sacked. No, when he thought about it, he could not justify taking on another person in the office, not yet, and this he had told her.

It was the ferocity of the explosion that took him by surprise. She let go the full weight of all the resentment, assumed grievances, jealousies and frustrations, which had grown and been restricted and compressed inside her over the years. The years were, of course, mentioned more than once. The years of faithful, uncomplaining, service, at a miserable subsistence-level wage which she could have trebled in any one of the local banks, and with no pension - which was untrue because he had, long ago, taken out an annuity in her favour. She knew that because she processed the payments. There was the additional work, which she said she would be happy to do under normal circumstances, but she was not getting any younger, was she? Then there was the young Mr Brown, the upstart, and his know-it-all wife. He was no more than a pale reflection of his father, had no idea how to run matters, and would ruin the business - was ruining the business! Not to mention his awful wife, pushy, demanding, bossy, autocratic and self-opinionated. She was not prepared to work for either of them. She would not accept Mrs Brown being brought in over her, and would not listen to any of his protestations that was not the case. She had eyes! She could see the way that things were going. How could he have let his son marry such a woman, and a widow, too!

Her tirade had degenerated into what Arthur Brown took to be a number of veiled threats. She knew all that was going on, she said. She was no fool! She had kept books for years - she knew exactly what was going on! He should not delude himself on that score! Arthur assumed that she had in mind the prospect of Richard and Eileen taking over the running of the business. That had never been seriously in his mind, not in the way she put it, and he repeatedly told her so, but she would not listen. He told her that Eileen was going into hospital, but that did no more than fan the already uncontrollable flames. That would have something to do with her being a widow, would not it? And if he thought she was going to take on all that work whilst Mrs Brown was away, he had another think coming. It was all a waste of time, anyway. The auditors would see through it.

He was perplexed. He was used to dealing with rational arguments, not this emotive irrationality. He prided himself on being able to get the other person to calm down and listen, anyone other than Emily Logan, that was. She would not be calm. She would not listen. She would not be persuaded and he gradually felt his patience slipping off the hook and falling beyond his reach. In the end it was the only way to settle it. He told her to go home and cool off. She had unceremoniously thrown her personal possessions in her bag and announced that if she went home, which was what she had been instructed, she would not return, not for all the tea in China, nor any number of bent knees. The door to the yard slammed behind her. And now, when he wanted to talk about the problems caused by Miss Logan's departure to his wife, she wanted to talk about her daughter-in-law's prospective operation. "About Emily," he began.

"Oh she'll be back," said his wife, dismissively. "She's been with us too long to walk out for good. Now, about Eileen's operation, ones like that can result in complications. Did you ask Richard about the implications? What about children?"

"What children?" asked Arthur, his mind still on what he saw as more pressing matters.

"Eileen's operation!"

"I didn't ask," he said, looking for somewhere to turn if only mentally. "We had only a few moments to discuss it and the matter of the letter before he went out."

"What letter?" she demanded sharply.

"The one that came the other day for him from Bromley. Had you forgotten?"

"No, I had not!"

"It was from the wife of the Senior Mathematics teacher who Richard worked under when he was there. He is dying and he wanted to see Richard again for the last time. He went up yesterday."

"Oh! Good! Now, what am I to do about Eileen? Shall I telephone her, or should I

call around on her?"

"What am I to do about Miss Logan?"

"Nothing, Arthur. I would have thought she was the least of your problems. She will be back at work tomorrow."

"And if she is not?"

"She will be, but if she isn't, I will come in. After all I did this kind of work before and I doubt that it had changed all that much. Even if I do only the essentials whilst you get something else sorted out, that'll help. But she will be back."

It was not long before Mrs Brown found herself established in the office, able to talk directly with her daughter-in-law as Miss Logan did not return and did not appear to be at her home when Arthur called around to look for her. Whilst the two women joined forces to unravel the mysteries of Miss Logan's book keeping and filing system, he made several visits to the small terraced house where she lived but could get no reply. Nor did he see anyone. If she was in, she was keeping well out of sight. Eileen was interrogated on the nature of the operation and its possible consequences. She had to endure a catalogue of the experiences of Moira's acquaintances who had similar operations, mostly for a variety of reasons, or no reason at all. Eileen was evasive. She had found it difficult to tell Richard. She found it impossible to tell his mother, an eager, potential grandmother, everything, but she let slip that she and Richard had discussed adoption, although no positive decision had been reached, and that sufficed.

When she was told, to Eileen's relief, Moira appeared to bear the news well, better than she had expected. She had now been forced to accept it herself in much the same way that someone in an accident might accept the prospect of an amputation. No-one could have wanted to have a child more than she. The drugs had reduced the physical pain. Now that she knew the worse, her mind was numb and the mental pain had disappeared as well. Perhaps it would always be like this now, no pain, no feeling?

Moira took the bad news home to her husband, being unable to mention it in the office with Eileen there. Neither knew whether to be disappointed for themselves, sympathetic for Eileen and Richard, or both. Although she would not admit it to Arthur, Moira was deeply disappointed. Most of her friends had grandchildren and regaled her with tales that she could not, and now seemed never likely to, match. "There is always Sandra. I suppose," she said, clinging on hopefully.

Marriage, families, and children were a long way from Sandra's thoughts. She was enjoying a respite from the attentions of both Detective Sergeant Oxer and Ken. Since the night of the Dance and the incident with Gwilym they both appeared to have adopted a strategy of keeping away from her and the office in which she worked. The girls commented on their absence and asked Sandra for the secret. Sandra had decided from the outset that she would not tell them about what had happened. She found it uncomfortable and embarrassing to think about, and not a suitable subject for discussion. Of course, she thought, both Oxer and Ken could assume that she would have told Alice and Debbie and that they would get a good ribbing if they showed their faces. Perhaps that was why they had not come and bothered her? Perhaps neither of them would bother her again?

It was a week after Miss Logan had walked out that Detective Sergeant Oxer did appear, one lunchtime, at her desk. He had chosen his timing with care as, to her dismay, both Alice and Debbie were out, but she had what she saw as her weapon and was fully prepared to use it in what ever way possible. "All alone?" he said rather brusquely. "Could you type a statement for me?" It sounded all so business-like, just like the kind of request she received each day from a number of officers. Sandra took the proffered sheets of paper and scanned them. They were printed in Oxer's untidy hand, in blue biro. "Please, Miss Brown?" he added. "Could I wait?"

She pulled a face and wound a sheet of blank paper onto the carriage of her typewriter. She had typed no more than a couple of sentences when she stopped, her fingers seeming to go numb, unable to press the keys. She glared up at him. "Is this some kind of sick

joke?" she asked.

"No joke whatsoever, young lady," he said. "It is a genuine confession, freely given, not even solicited or inspired. Go on, read it! Read it all!" Trembling, Sandra picked up the printed sheets and read them slowly. At times she could hardly focus on the words. "It is all lies!" she said when she had finished the first page. "It is all untrue. I cannot believe it! I will not read any more."

"Oh, you should! It is all true," he said, leaning forward. "I have checked the facts and made a number of discrete enquiries. Not enough to arouse suspicion in any quarter at this stage, but enough to satisfy me that this is a matter of substance and that there is a serious case to answer."

"I cannot believe it," she whispered, her heart pounding with dread.

"Oh, but it is true, and it is all there. Every word of it."

"Why have you asked me to type it? I am the last person you should ask! Why bring it to me?" she asked wretchedly.

"On the contrary, I though you were the first person I should bring it to," he said smoothly, taking the papers from her limp grasp. "I have a little proposition to put to you, young lady. But not now, not here. Meet me after work, in the car park. I will be there, waiting for you, and I am sure that we can work things out. But if you mention a word of this to anyone - if I get the slightest hint of a whisper - the deal will be off and I will file a report. I am sure that the magistrate will swear out a warrant on the strength of this and the results of my enquiries. You understand what I am saying?" Sandra nodded. "Until later, then! In the car park. Don't forget, because if you are not there I will be looking for a warrant."

"I shall be there," she said.

"Good," he said, and leant forward and kissed the side of her temple. "Until then."

Sandra barely spoke to either of the girls during the afternoon. Debbie knew that something had happened and tried to tease it out of her, but without success. After while she gave up and Alice, seeing her friend's lack of progress, did not even attempt to interrogate Sandra, but engaged Debbie in conversation, leaving Sandra to her Carmelitic misery. Doom and dread appeared to be closing in on her from every front and she prayed for the hands on the clock to move more quickly so that she could get it over and done with, yet wished for time to stop dead so that the moment of the fate that she so dreaded might never come. When the hands of the clock did reach the position that indicated it was time for them to go home, she lingered, giving a feeble excuse why she should be doing so. There were one or two things to attend to; they should run along. They stood there, hesitant, exchanging glances and knowing looks, as she tried to usher them out. Eventually they did go, and a little while later she followed, determined not to give him the satisfaction of thinking that she was going to rush out to meet him. She had prayed that he might not be there, that some criminal act would have taken place and demanded his attention, but he was, waiting in his car.

"Get in," he said as she approached. "I was beginning to wonder if you were being very foolish and planning on not coming to meet me?"

"I said I would come and I am here. Where are we going?"

"Somewhere we can talk and where we are not likely to be disturbed."

"Talk? What do you have in mind?"

"Ha! What do you think? We've got some unfinished business to settle from the night of the Dance. I trust your Welsh moron won't be around to get in the way this time. I trust that you have been sensible and not contacted him?"

"I have spoken to no-one," she said, tight-lipped. "What are you proposing?"

"It is very simple. You have to be extra nice to me. Or, put another way, you can have the statement and the evidence if I can have you." Sandra stared straight ahead, out through the windscreen, but she saw nothing other than a series of hazy, blurred, coloured, images. She had no idea of where they were going or where they had been. She took no notice of the places they passed. There could have been arson, murder, mayhem, riot or armed insurrection being committed at every corner of the streets, but she would have remained oblivious of it all. Her brain ceased to function as invisible hands appeared to reach up and dragged her few desperate thoughts deeper and deeper into a bottomless quicksand. The car suddenly stopped.

“We get out here and walk,” he said, opening his door. “Come along!” She started to tremble, small uncontrollable convulsions. “Are you cold?” he asked. Sandra shook her head and managed to open the passenger door. Now he had her arm and was propelling her along a grassy path, between bushes and brambles. She could smell and hear the sea, somewhere close on her left. “Down here,” he said, leading her down a bank onto a low grassy ledge set in the cliffs. “We aren't likely to be disturbed here at this time of day,” he announced and took off his jacket, laying it carefully on the bank.

Suddenly she recognised the spot. She had been there before, with her family and it was near the place where she had stopped with Gwilym that evening. “Just relax,” he said, pulling her down beside him. She could not help but resist as every muscle in her body froze rigid in response to his touch. “I am not going to hurt you,” he added. “Am I the first? You mean I am not following in the footsteps of that Welshman? Oh, it is even better than I thought. Lie back.”

Her breath started to come in short shallow gasps as her heart pounded and accelerated. A sense of hopeless despair washed over and submerged her and she wanted to cry but no tears would come. She wanted to cry out, but her throat was dry and hoarse and, in any case, there appeared only the seagulls there to hear her. “Lift up,” he said, tugging at her clothing. All the time she could hear his voice, talking to her, and feel his hands touching her, trespassing, probing, penetrating further. So this was how it was going to happen? This was how her age of assumed innocence was to end? She was to be denied the gift she would bring to the man she eventually loved. It was now to be taken from her. It would have been better that she had given it to Gwilym. He was fumbling inside her legs. Then he started to move over her, pinning her body to the ground, pressing her into the grass.

“No!” she cried suddenly, pushing upwards with all the strength she possessed. “It can't be like this!”

“What do you mean?” he said, having rolled and slipped away from her, down the slope. “What are you doing?” It was a shame she thought, as she scrambled to her feet, that he had not rolled right over the edge of the cliffs. As she struggled to leave she felt her skirt tugged, and then the material gave way as he lunged at her. “Stop!” he cried. “Stop!” But she did not. “I hope that they all rot in jail! All of them!” he yelled after her, adjusting his clothing and straightening his tie before stalking off in the opposite direction towards a woman who was approaching along the path, walking her dog.

Eileen was sitting in the kitchen when the door bell rang. Whoever it was did not release the button and its continuing ring irritated her as she made her way to the front door, ready to give someone a substantial piece of her mind. But on the doorstep, gasping for air, her chest heaving, dirty and dishevelled, still clutching her underwear, was Sandra. “Oh, dear Lord!” cried Eileen, “what has happened? Come along in.”

“Oh, it's all my fault,” she sobbed, “but I couldn't go through with it. I really couldn't! Now they'll all go to prison simply because I am weak and selfish, but it was too dreadful, Eileen. I couldn't. I just couldn't!” Eileen gently guided her sister-in-law into the lounge and down onto the settee.

“Sandra,” she said softly as she knelt beside her, “what couldn't you go through with? Has anything happened? Should I send for a doctor and the police?”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Sandra, looking frantic. “Not the police, not them! Don't send for the police. Don't send for anyone. I ran all the way here because your house is the nearest and I couldn't go home like this. Look at me! I've lost both of my nice red shoes. I had to kick them off so that I could run faster.”

“Sandra, please tell me what has happened. Was it Gwilym?”

“I couldn't, Eileen. I simply couldn't go through with it! I thought that I could; that I could be strong, but when it came to it, I wasn't. I just couldn't go through with it. I've failed, let them all down, and now they'll go to prison, and it will be all my fault.”

“Sandra! You are not making any sense. Let me get you something hot to drink.”

“No! Don't leave me, Eileen, not yet. Stay here for a few minutes more.”

“I'll stay, Sandra, but you must tell me what happened. Have you been assaulted? You

must tell me so that I know what to do. You really must!"

"I don't think I've been assaulted," she sobbed. "And I went voluntarily, of my own free will."

"I don't understand," said Eileen perplexed. "Come with me into the kitchen and I will make us both a hot drink. You will feel better then. And you can tell me all that happened. Tea?"

"Tea, I think, sweet, hot, tea," whispered Sandra. Once in the kitchen and refreshed, Sandra appeared to rally herself. "Eileen," she said calmly, "I have had the most dreadful experience. I don't really want to talk about it and, least of all, do I want others to know about it. If I tell you what happened, everything, will you promise, sacredly promise, to tell no-one? Not Richard, not my father or mother, not Gwilym, no-one? Oh Lord, I don't want anyone to know what I have done."

"Not Gwilym? So he wasn't involved?"

"No," whispered Sandra, shaking her head. "Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"I can't promise that," said Eileen, "not without knowing what I am promising to."

"You must! I do not want anyone to know. No-one must know!"

"Well, someone else must already know, and Richard may be home any minute. If he sees you he is bound to want to know what has happened."

"Oh dear God," wept Sandra, looking around for sanctuary. "Do save me!"

"If Richard rings the bell," said Eileen after a pause for consideration, "go straight upstairs and lock yourself in the bathroom. I will tell him that you came to see me but felt queasy. You can come down as soon as you feel ready and when you have repaired your appearance. And you had better put those back on."

Sandra looked down at what she still clutched in her hands. "And my dress?" she asked, "where it is all torn?"

"We'll think of something. We can say it got caught in a car door. You were given a lift here - and that's why you feel queasy. Richard isn't likely to query that."

Richard did not suddenly arrive home and Eileen was able to sit with the distraught young woman and coax and comfort her as she told her story. Once Sandra had started, it all poured out in an avalanche of words as if she sought to sweep it all away and bury it for ever. "This is all very serious," said Eileen when Sandra had sniffed herself to a halt. "I really do not know what to suggest."

"You won't tell? You promised!"

"I don't know. It is so serious."

"Oh, Eileen! Think of me! What will people think? What will they say?"

"I really wonder if you ought to go to a lawyer and tell him what has happened, so that there is some independent witnessed record of it."

"Oh, I couldn't! I couldn't go through it all again. It was awful, absolutely awful! Men!"

"And you are absolutely sure that nothing happened. He didn't touch you?"

"No! I pushed him off and was away before then. And I ran and ran. I even had to go the long way around because there was someone with a dog coming along the path. And my shoes? I wonder where they are?"

"You can take a pair of mine to get home - we are about the same size I would say. That's no problem. It is where we go from here is the problem. Will you go back to work at the station?"

"I haven't really thought about it," said Sandra.

"You could always stay at home tomorrow and say that you were unwell. That would give you some time to consider what to do."

"Actually," said Sandra, a little brighter. "I am not that inclined to give in to him. I don't think he will risk trying anything again. He may vaunt it over me, but I will suffer that."

"Shouldn't you report him?"

"How can I? It would be his word against mine, and who would believe me under the circumstances?"

"But you know about the statement."

“He gave it to me to type. That's how I got to know about it.”

“Wasn't that an error on his part?”

“It could be, but he could always say that he needed it typing in a hurry and I was the only one there, which is true. I don't know how the police deal with such conflicts of interest. I expect I will get the sack, which is a shame because I quite enjoy the work.”

“Don't let us worry about that now. Come upstairs and let us get you tidied up before Richard comes in. Why don't you stay to dinner? Could you face that? Then we can let events take their course, what ever that may be. After all it could all be one enormous bluff concocted to try and get the better of you.”

“If I believed that, it would only make matters worse. You won't tell anyone about what has happened?”

“No,” said Eileen, “I will not.”

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