

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I hear that there has been some kind of development," said Jack Barnes, knocking out the bowl of his pipe into the ashtray conveniently supplied by the landlord of the Newington Arms for this and associated purposes.

"What is that, then?" asked the Welshman. Wormley leaned forward in his corner and pricked up his ears. He had spent a miserable week after his fruitless visit to Eastgate, treading on this ice, always looking behind him, expecting to see the police closing in, or a shadowy figure ducking down out of sight behind a gravestone or dodging behind a tree. He saw no-one, but he was now convinced that he was being watched. Phantoms stalked his every move. Ghouls lay in wait for him at night. One afternoon he had addressed the garden shed and called upon them to come out after he had thought he had heard a disturbance in there. Another night he heard rustling overhead as he lay in bed and was mortified by the thought that they were above him in the loft, drilling a hole in the ceiling through which to pour acid or molten metal. They were there, closing in on him.

"Mrs Hastings said that she overheard Father Thomas saying that he understood the police think they now know who the man is. They are watching him, waiting for him to make a wrong move. Then they will pounce." Wormley shrank back, deep into the shadows as nemesis stalked his night and awaited him with open arms.

"Is that so?" said Ned. "I'd a-not heard that."

"I suppose it is the sort of thing that it must be very difficult for them to prove unless they catch him red-handed," said the Welshman.

"Or come at dawn, knocking the front door down and beating the living daylights out of him?" asked Jack Barnes. "Oh, but they're clever now-a-days with all this forensic stuff. They can use it to prove anything. They've got the threatening letters. They are probably covered with his fingerprints. By now they will have discovered what kind of paper it is, where it was bought, possibly even who bought it. And they'll have identified the newspaper or magazine he cut up to make the message."

"How do you know that he did that?" asked Ned.

"That's what they do, blackmailers. I saw it in a film once. They don't use typewriters because they can be traced when the letters are wonky. So they cut letters out of magazines or daily papers and make words out of them. And when they do that they leave their finger prints behind."

"That is right," said the Welshman, holding up his empty glass. "All they need then is to get a matching set. What the devil are you doing, Wormley? Do you want another?" Wormley had been sat, unconsciously rubbing his half pint glass against his sleeve and holding it up to the light. Almost reluctantly he held it out, and never took his eyes off of it all the time it was at the bar, until it was back safe in his hands.

"You are very quiet tonight, Wormley," said the Welshman. "It is not like you to be so quiet for so long."

"Oh, come now, Di," said Ned. "He doesn't say a lot at the best of times. You're poor company," he told the besieged grave-digger. He received little more than a grunt in reply, so they continued their conversation without any contribution from Wormley as they thrust more and more imaginary pins, unknowingly, into what was rapidly assuming the form of his image.

"Well, I hope they catch him," said the Welshman, studying the colour of his refilled glass. "And I hope they put him away for a long time. In my view hanging is too good for him. Then we can all go back to normal. Eh, Wormley?" His skin started to prickle. Did they suspect or did they now more than suspect? Were the police likely to throw open the door to the private saloon and drag him off any moment? Perhaps they were only detaining him there until the police arrived? The landlord could have sent for them! Had he said anything to give himself away? How could he be certain? How could he test them? Dare he test them?

"I suppose once they arrest him, her Ladyship will be able to stop her meanderings" said the Welshman.

“Oh I think they will have to reduce anyway once we get into the Autumn and Winter is approaching.”

“I think she goes out to the old Monastery a lot,” said Ned. “Likes it out there, she does.”

“I heard,” interposed the landlord, “that they had brought in half a dozen commandos to stake out the gardens over there. Seems you can't see that they are there once they're dug in and camouflaged.”

“They go to ground, do they,” said the Welshman. “They'd be all right in the churchyard, then. Wormley could dig them a few holes.”

“I'll dig you a hole if you don't bide your tongue,” the grave digger snapped. “I've never heard so much stuff and nonsense. I've been over the whole of the Estate and I've not as much as seen a single policeman, leave alone one of these commandos. I suppose you all think you know who it is?”

“Good grief, no,” said the Welshman. “Who do you think we are, Sherlock Holmes?”

“Now he's a person who'd a-got to the bottom of it,” said Ned.

Wormley half-listened to the remainder of that evening's chatter, satisfied that they did not know. They might have suspicions, but they were not prepared to voice them. He was not likely to be safe until the police caught the person who had threatened her life, and even then there was the risk that they might conclude that there were two people involved, independent of one another. Even then they might trace him. Clearly he could not risk sending any further messages to her Ladyship, as they called her. He still knew her secrets, but he could see no other way of using them. In the meantime he would have to remain silent and watchful. If he now revealed what he knew, someone might draw a logical conclusion. All that knowledge and potential power! It was all unusable and wasted.

There remained the threat of discovery hanging over him. Perhaps if he sent her one last note, making clear that he had sent only two of what ever she had received, and that he never intended her any harm? He could say that he would not send any further messages. That might stop the police pursuing him. On the other hand it might give them conclusive evidence. The risk was too great. He could stop now, but the process of the law would grind on. He would have to let it run its course.

It was barely dawn of the next day when Eileen was woken by the ringing of the door bell and by a vigorous thumping on the door. She had no doubt at all who it was. “Richard!” she cried, shaking her dormant husband. “Wake up! It is the police! You had better go down and open the door before they break it down.” Confused, rubbing his eyes and the back of his head, Richard staggered to the window and opened it. Outside were three cars and a number of men, some in uniform, some not. He called out to tell them he would be down straight away, then closed the window.

“I think there's one policewoman there,” he told his wife as he hunted for his dressing gown.

“So they've come for me as well?” she said.

“What do you mean, come for you?” he asked, confused. “What do you know about this? What is going on?”

“Go downstairs and open the door whilst I put on something respectable. I wouldn't want them to see me like this,” she said. “Go on!”

When Richard opened the front door several men burst past him, at least one bounding up the stairs. Another stood and confronted him, thrusting a piece of paper under his nose which he could not read in the half-light. He was saying something, but in his confusion Richard did not grasp what was being said to him. He heard the question “is your wife upstairs?” and nodded. The policewoman slipped by and followed her colleagues.

“She's locked herself in the bathroom!” someone called from above.

“The drains!” shrieked the man near him. “Damn it, Mason, the drains!” He turned back to Richard. “Don't worry, Sir, we won't damage anything unnecessarily. Now, are any items of furniture locked? Desks or bureaux. That sort of thing? If they are, sir, it would be sensible to let us have the keys. Is there a safe?” Richard shook his head.

“What is all this about?” he said slowly, trying to recover his composure and think. “You can't just come into my house and ransack it.”

“Oh, but we can, Sir. I did explain. This is a warrant which enables me to carry out a search of these premises and to apprehend one Richard Brown and Eileen Brown, your wife. Has she come out of the bathroom yet?” he called up the stairs.

“She will come out when she is dressed,” said Richard. “A search? What on earth for? What is the charge?”

“That will all be explained at the station in due course. We would like you and your wife, when she comes out of the bathroom, to accompany us there. I am sure that you will both come voluntarily?”

“Say nothing, Richard!” said Eileen's voice from the top of the stairs. Behind her the policewoman, red faced and vexed, was holding her arm and attempting to restrain her. “Say absolutely nothing unless there's a solicitor present.”

“We will deal with your rights when we get to the station.”

“And you have a warrant for my arrest, and my husband? If you haven't you are unlawfully detaining us.”

“I did say that I had? Now, I wouldn't want to have to bring a charge of resisting arrest or obstructing our search, would I, Sir? Now, shall we go? Your wife will follow in the other car.”

“Perhaps I could have some clothes?” suggested Richard, thinking that the whole street would by now have been woken.

“We'll arrange for some to be brought in later. After you, Mr Brown.”

At the police station Richard was shown into a dingy sparsely furnished room and told to sit. He sat on one of the two chairs placed at a small table and addressed the only other occupant, a young, uniformed officer who stood by the door. “How long am I going to be kept here?” he asked. “May I see my wife and my solicitor?” He knew there was a degree of pretence in this as he did not have a solicitor to call his own, but he was planning to contact his father's. “I would like to talk to my father as well.”

“All in good time, Sir,” said the constable, expressionless. “All in good time.”

Eileen was not left alone. She had been bundled into the back of a car, closely followed by the policewoman who appeared to view her with contempt, and was shown into a small room not dissimilar to that her husband found himself in. Detective Sergeant Oxer was there, waiting for her. He immediately dismissed the policewoman, but Eileen stopped her. “I would like her to stay,” she protested.

“That won't be necessary, not for the present,” said the policeman. “Leave us!” The policewoman looked at Eileen, then closed the door behind her and they were alone. “Well, Mrs Brown, we meet again. I seem to be continually bumping into members of your larcenous family. I must say that I didn't have you marked down as the criminal type. You can usually tell, you know, which are honest and which are on the make. You would be surprised at what hides behind the cloak of respectability. Or perhaps you wouldn't?”

“Do you hide behind a cloak of respectability?” said Eileen vehemently. “I know what this is all about and what you have been up to.”

“What I have been up to, as you put it, is not an issue here. It is what you and that family of yours has been up to that we are interested in. Come on then. If you know what this is all about, tell me what has been going on and I can make it easy for you and that priggish little sister-in-law of yours. We can go very easy on you if you make a confession. I don't think you really want to get caught up in this rather nasty affair. We are talking long, long sentences here. Conspiracy is a very serious offence. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Eileen shook her head. It was providential that Sandra had come to her the previous afternoon and that she had been able to prepare herself, to a degree, for this. She was concerned for Richard who she had not been able to warn without breaking the promise she had given Sandra. Even though she had prepared, her heart was pounding and she felt a nervous, fearful, excitement. The room was oppressive, airless, with the small window barred. What would she do if he laid a hand on her? She would mark him, she thought. What ever it cost, she would scar him for life. It was a shame that Sandra had not done the same, but she

has been at a disadvantage. "I have nothing to say," she told him, clenching her fists and planning where she would strike first. "I wish to see a lawyer, and I demand to know what had happened to my husband!" The Detective Sergeant gave a sharp laugh.

"Come now, Mrs Brown, you can do better than that. Surely you realise the gravity of the charges that will be brought against you and your husband?"

"I don't realise anything," she said, trying to appear calm, but trembling. "I have nothing to say, and I will say nothing until a solicitor is present."

"Very well. I will let you sit here and think about it for a while. I will see how you feel in an hour or so. Concentrates the mind, being here."

"How about the solicitor?"

"Whilst you are thinking about your position, I'll think about your solicitor," he said, going to the door and beckoning to the policewoman who was standing there. "I will be back."

"I have to tell you that your wife is being very co-operative," Detective Sergeant told Richard.

"Co-operative about what? What is this all about?"

"There's no point in playing games with me, Mr Brown. It just wastes police time and ties us up when we could be out catching other criminals like you."

"I am not playing games, nor am I a criminal! I have no idea why you have dragged me and my wife from our beds at some unearthly hour. I wish to see my solicitor, or be allowed to go. You have no right to detain either me or my wife."

"We do have powers of detention, Mr Brown, where we have reason to think that a serious crime has been committed," said the policeman, walking around behind him and prompting Richard to turn on his chair just to keep the man within his range of vision. "But let us say for the present that you are here, voluntarily helping us with our enquiries. That sounds so much better and reads better in the local press."

"My God, are the papers involved?"

"There is always a reporter close at hand. I am being pressed for a statement. I would like to say that both you and your wife are co-operating."

"It sounds to me that you want me to co-operate in incriminating myself. I have nothing to say without my solicitor being present. You can tell the papers that."

It was nearly half-past ten when his father's solicitor arrived and was shown into the room where Richard was being detained. "I am sorry that I couldn't get here earlier, but I have had rather a busy morning, having to go to your office and the hospital as well as get in an application for bail processed!"

"The hospital? What has happened?"

"I don't think it is serious but your father collapsed in the police car. In a way it was fortunate because they had the sense to take him straight to hospital. I have known situations where the officers have been so stupid they couldn't recognise a genuine attack from a real one. We were lucky this time."

"Lucky?" exclaimed Richard. "How is he?"

"He is conscious and perfectly cogent. I left your mother with him. It was she who contacted me. I was in bed, too."

"We were not permitted to contact you, but are you telling me that the police dragged him, a man of his age, from his bed at six in the morning? It is preposterous!"

"It may appear so, but it is also a serious matter and we must proceed with extreme caution."

"This is dreadful," said Richard, leaping to his feet and starting to walk quickly up and down. "And the accusations, what ever they may be, are ridiculous!" Mr Vincent waved his hands dismissively.

"I don't want to hear any protestations of innocence or guilt, or any comments you may wish to make. There will be plenty of time for that later in a more appropriate location. You have not made a statement, or anything like that?"

"No. Eileen told me to say nothing, but the police say that she is co-operating."

“Her advice was sound and I can assure you she has followed it. And, you have not been formally charged with any offence?”

“No,” said Richard, hesitantly. “I haven't got the faintest idea what this all about.”

“Good! Just remain silent and I will have you and Mrs Brown out of here as soon as possible. I must go and see her, now. I am afraid that my small practice is not equipped to deal with a crisis of this magnitude.”

“Before you do go, you mentioned the office. The police have been there?”

“They raided the office at about the same time as they were at your house. They were still there when I arrived and took away a quantity of material. I insisted on it all being properly identified and labelled, and I have demanded a list of all that has been seized as soon as possible.”

“This is going to have a dreadful affect on the business if we don't sort it out quickly. What about the men?”

“They are all right. I spoke to the foremen and assured them they should carry on as normal. Things have not been helped however by your Welsh foreman who appears to have absconded. The police will try and make a big point of that.”

“Gwilym has not absconded,” protested Richard, feeling the concern mounting again. “He went home to North Wales for a long weekend. He is probably on his way back at this very moment.”

“Oh, well, there's little we can do about contacting him,” said the solicitor. “For the present I must concentrate on damage limitation, and get you and your wife released. But first I must go and talk to her.”

“I have said nothing,” said Eileen firmly. “I was fortunate in a way because I was prepared for this.”

“You knew that this was going to happen?” asked the solicitor, dropping his voice.

“I knew that it was likely.”

“How did that come about?”

“I really cannot tell you that, not at present,” she replied.

“Ah,” he breathed. “Well it is a matter that can wait. Do the police know that you were, as you say, anticipating detention?”

“I think they might.”

“Oh dear! In some ways that could be unfortunate; still we must live with that.”

“I am sorry,” said Eileen softly.

“No need to be. I am not suggesting that you have done or said anything wrong or out of place. Just remain silent. I don't think the police have any intention of charging you with anything. I think you are here just to keep you out of the way whilst they carry out their searches and in the hope that one of you might confess to something. I will now see about getting you and your husband released.”

“I think I have secured your release,” announced the solicitor to Richard when he reappeared just after lunchtime. “I argued that notwithstanding any charges that might be brought, you have a business to run and lawful contracts to comply with as well as your employees' employment to be protected. I stated that there was nothing to be gained by further detaining you. I strenuously denied that any of you had committed any offence, and I gave an undertaking that you will each be required to endorse, that you will fully co-operate with the police enquiries and not attempt to leave the Country.”

“I cannot imagine any of us wanting to go abroad at a time like this,” said Richard. “Have you any news of my father?”

“I understand that he is not in any danger.”

“And are we being charged with anything?”

“Not yet, but that does not mean that charges will not follow.”

“You sound as if you think that we will be charged.”

“I cannot judge that for certain, but this has been a large and expensive and high profile police operation even if it has all the hallmarks of having been mounted in some haste.”

I think the police will find themselves obliged to bring a prosecution. If they do not there will be some embarrassing and difficult questions to be answered.”

“And, is it likely to be as serious as they have been trying to make out?”

“Again I cannot be certain, but they are talking of bringing charges of conspiracy. That is a very hard charge to defend against because you start guilty and, providing the authorities can show they have reasonable grounds for suspecting that a conspiracy took place, the onus is on the defence to show that it did not. It is one of the few situations where you have to prove your innocence, but we can talk more about that later. Let us get you and your wife out of here first of all.”

Richard met Eileen under the porch to the main entrance, in the very spot that Sandra had stood and contemplated the rain. Now they were facing a far bigger crisis. “Oh, Richard!” she exclaimed, bursting into tears and throwing her arms around his neck. “I am sorry. I should have known. I saw all the evidence and I did not realise!” Richard did not understand what she meant, but he held her close and tight, stroking her hair and extolling her not to worry, pleading with her to remain calm.

“Your wife has done very well,” praised the solicitor, ushering them towards a waiting car. “We have a lot to do and you will want to go to the hospital as well as getting on with the running of your business.” Richard stopped at the car, looking back at the building which, in his eyes, now had taken on the nature of a mediaeval castle, equipped with dungeons and implements to extract confessions, and from which they had just escaped.

“What about Sandra?” he asked suddenly. Eileen stared at him, not knowing whether he knew more than she thought, but feeling unable to say anything herself.

“Miss Brown is fine,” said the solicitor. “She stayed home today! Can we go?”

“To think that she worked there,” said Richard lowly as they drove away. In the car they agreed that Richard would go to the hospital and Eileen would go to the office, aiming to meet up again at the solicitor’s office for a conference later that afternoon. Eileen was concerned about the prospect of being arrested again should the police decide to bring charges. “When they do,” said Richard, not feeling optimistic.

“I would expect them to ask you to go to the police station for the charges to be read out there,” said Mr Vincent. “And, as you are co-operating fully with their enquiries, you will. I assume you do not have it in your mind to run away, Mrs Brown?”

“Goodness me, no!” replied Eileen.