

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When Richard arrived at the hospital he found his father, asleep, in a small room off the main ward. His mother was waiting for him. "What have you done, Richard?" she hissed. "This is all your doing! How could you? How could you bring disgrace on the family and the business? After all the work your father has put into it - ruined! Look what it has done to your father; and what about Sandra? She will almost certainly lose her job now. I don't think I can talk to you anymore," she said, becoming tearful. "I am very disappointed." Richard said nothing as she leant forward and started to sob. He should have comforted her, but he was pregnant with anger and a deep sense of injustice.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked after a short while.

"No," she murmured. "Just don't talk to me."

"How is he?" he asked after a further pause.

"The doctor says he should be all right, but it is no thanks to you. Dragged from his bed in the middle of the night, and he with a heart condition. You should be thankful that it is not more serious."

"I am thankful," he said, "and innocent. I haven't done anything wrong!"

His mother glared at him. "Don't be ridiculous, Richard. Are you suggesting that your father is the one who is guilty? That he is the one who has done all the things the police are talking about? You surely are not going to tell me that the charges are all trumped up?"

"There are no charges as yet," said Richard, coolly. "What I cannot understand is what prompted the raids in the first place. What made them think there was something for them to find?"

"That's their job, isn't it? That is what we pay our rates for! If you do something wrong, against the law, they are supposed to find out and prosecute you."

"I have not done anything wrong. Nor has Eileen."

"Well, your father certainly hasn't done anything wrong, and the sooner you tell the police that - that he is not involved - the sooner this will be cleared up," she said, snorting her disbelief and disapproval. Richard left her and went and sat at his father's bedside. "Don't wake him!" she hissed after him. How peaceful he looked, lying there, insulated from all the cares and tumult that had descended on the rest of his family.

"Perhaps he is better off this way," he thought. "Just for the present." A nurse in a dark blue uniform appeared at his side.

"You are his son?" she said softly. "He is lightly sedated at present. It is just a precaution as his condition appears to be stable and satisfactory. It was probably no more than a reaction to the shock of what happened to him this morning, but we would like to keep him here, under observation, for a couple of days; just to be sure." Richard looked back at his mother who was standing in the doorway, looking anxious.

"I am sure that he will be all right," Richard said to her. He turned back to the nurse who was tidying the bed. "How long is he likely to be asleep?"

"I would think at least another hour, possibly two," she said. "There is nothing to be done at present." Richard went back to his mother.

"Mr Vincent said he understood it was only a mild attack," he began.

"Mr Vincent? What does he know about anything other than what he is told? I have told you Richard, I hold you responsible for this. If anything happens to your father, I will never forgive you, never!"

"There isn't much I can do about it," he protested.

"There is," she hissed. "Go to the police and tell them the truth. Tell them that he had nothing whatsoever to do with it, what ever it is you have been up to. Then perhaps they will leave him alone."

"I have not been up to anything. As far as I am concerned there is no truth in the allegations whatever they are. None at all."

"I do not want to discuss it," she said sharply. "You know what to do. And I think you might serve us all best by being at the office, or the police station clearing this matter up."

I don't want you to be here when your father wakes up, causing him further stress and anxiety.”

Richard shrugged. “I will go to the office. Eileen has gone there already. You will let us know if there is any change?”

“Very well,” she said sharply. “Don't forget, I want this all cleared up!”

“What about Sandra?” he asked, almost as an afterthought.

“Sandra? She is at home, beside herself, poor child. I do not think for one moment that she will be able to go back to work, ever. Just look at what you have done to her, your own sister!”

Mrs Brown knew that there was an element of licence in this, but quite justifiable given the circumstances, she thought. Sandra had arrived home late after her unexpected evening with Richard and Eileen, acting rather strangely, and announced that she would not be going into work the next day. Mrs Brown thought it odd, but in the light of what had subsequently happened she decided to disregard these events. As far as she was concerned, Richard was responsible for the fact that Sandra had stayed at home and that she now looked as if she would lose her job.

“I have done nothing to anyone,” said Richard, weakly, then left.

Eileen found the office in chaos when she arrived there. A young man was waiting for her, introducing himself as Andrew and explaining that he worked for Mr Vincent who had placed him there to ensure that the police recorded everything they removed. “Have they finished?” she asked.

“I think just about so. I have assisted them as far as I could but obviously it would have been helpful to have someone like yourself here.”

“Assist them?” said Eileen with horror.

“Mr Vincent thinks it will pay dividends in the long term. It will allow our counsel to confront the jury with the fact that you all co-operated fully with the police. That is not the actions of guilty parties, is it?” said Andrew, thrusting his thumbs into his waistcoat.

“Jury?” said Eileen weakly. “I hadn't thought about a jury. I hadn't begun to think that far ahead.”

“It pays to,” said the youth, too cockily for Eileen's taste. “And for the present we try to ensure that anything the police want to look at they can, without the need to break open drawers or cabinets. Most of what they've taken appears to relate to the flat conversion contracts you have. They took a load of analysis papers, and the cash books, but once we have a complete list we will be able to look at the nature of their evidence and the kind of case they are attempting to build, and on what basis they may bring charges.”

“I know, at least I think I know, what they are about,” she said lowly. The youth did not appear to either hear her or comprehend what she meant.

“There are a couple of locked drawers the police could not open because we could not find the keys. I asked them to leave them until last.”

“I have the keys,” said Eileen, wondering whether they had ransacked her house and if it was secure.

“Good! I'll get them in and they can deal with them now. It's best to get it over and done with.” Eileen went into the outer office whilst the police were examining the contents of the drawers she had opened. She looked in Miss Logan's filing cabinets. The police had taken nearly everything from one. “I expect that they have taken more than they need and that they will return a large proportion during the course of the next few days,” said Andrew.

“That's ridiculous,” complained Eileen. “Can't we do something about it?”

“We might be able to,” said Andrew. “We can claim they were on a fishing expedition and were operating outside the terms of their warrant, beyond their authority.”

“That's all very fine,” said Eileen, “but how are we going to run our business? There's men to pay, suppliers to pay, materials to order. Goodness knows what this will do to our credit worthiness! We could be put out of business!”

“I think that Mr Vincent has been in touch with all the main suppliers, the bank, and your main clients. He has also demanded that the police return everything that is vital to the

day to day running of the company. Just to be on the safe side, could you draw up a list of what is needed?"

"I will if they have left me any blank paper. Goodness, I wish Miss Logan was here although I don't know how she would have dealt with all this!"

"Miss Logan? Is that the lady who left recently?"

Eileen sat at Miss Logan's desk and found some paper and started to write although she found it hard to concentrate. "I don't think she left," she said. "I think there was a row and she walked out, but Mr Brown simply considers that she is on extended leave. He thinks she may have gone down to her sister's in the West Country."

"Mr Vincent wondered if she took any papers or documents with her when she left?"

"Papers? I cannot imagine that she did. She did not even take all her personal belongings. Look, they are still here in her desk. And these are all her precious plants which I have been tending to. I don't think she would leave them if she had left for good. That's why Mr Brown thinks that she will come back." The young man gave a grunt of superior knowledge. He was deliciously pompous, she thought. If only he could see himself!

The two plain-clothes men had finished examining the contents of the desk drawers in the inner office and were discussing what they were taking with Mr Vincent's young man. Eileen tried to prepare her list but still found it difficult to concentrate. Her mind kept on trying to assess the likely consequences of the day's events and the things that they should be doing urgently. They ought to be doing something, although it was possible that Mr Vincent had done everything that was immediately necessary. Everything, her life, her work, had assumed an unreal, surrealistic, character. It was a nightmare which now started might never end. In conformity with good television practice she should wake up, any minute.

They met again at four o'clock in Mr Vincent's office. Eileen presented her list of essential documents which the solicitor thanked her for and undertook to seek immediate recovery of them from the authorities. "It is not for me to advise you how to conduct your business, but I think you should follow up the contact I made with your clients and suppliers, explain what has happened, say that no charges have yet been brought and that if any are, they will be strenuously denied, much as I trust they will."

"They most certainly will!" exclaimed Richard.

"Mrs Brown?" said the solicitor. "Are you prepared to endorse that, or have you something you wish to tell us? You can speak openly and frankly here."

"Eileen?" said Richard.

"Yes," she said levelly, "I shall most certainly deny any charges that are brought."

"There is more? There is something in the tone of your voice that suggests you are concerned about something."

"Eileen? Is there something I should know? Something you haven't told me?"

"Be patient, Mr Brown," said the solicitor, seeing that she was having difficulty in responding. "You must appreciate that the charges will be brought against individuals and not the company which, not being limited, has no legal standing. And it will be the specific charges that will have to be answered, not anything else that you may have done or omitted to do. There may well have been, shall we say, errors or failures to exercise proper control or judgement on the part of individuals in your organisation."

"You are thinking of Gwilym, aren't you?" said Eileen.

"You are thinking of him, I suspect," said the solicitor. "No matter. The police will have to show not only that something unlawful occurred, but that it was at your direct behest and that you were fully aware of and condoned it. Is there anything you would like to say at the present, Mrs Brown?"

"No," she said, looking her husband fully in the face. "I would rather wait until Gwilym gets back and until the charges are brought."

"Very good. For the present then we need to counter the bad publicity and keep the business running. I think I can leave that to you two, mainly, but if you require my services you have only to contact me."

"Shouldn't we be instructing counsel?" asked Richard.

“No, not yet,” said Mr Vincent, firmly. “There will be plenty of time for that if and when charges are proffered. Counsel is expensive. Let us see what developments there are first before we rush headlong into anything else. Mark you, I think the question really is not so much if, but when, and whether they will include the more serious charge of conspiracy. We will see in due course.”

“It is all right for him,” muttered Richard as they left the office. “He hasn't got all this hanging over him.”

“I am not sure that I have very much confidence in him anyway,” said his wife. “After all, he didn't get very far with a simple matter like Owen's life insurance. Goodness knows what he will be like handling this.”

The news of the troubles that had descended upon the Browns reached Newington House some time before either Mr Vincent telephoned Mr Brodie's London office to inform him, or Richard followed up that telephone call to reinforce what the solicitor had said. It was carried by the team of workmen who managed to persuade the police that there was no incriminating evidence secreted in their van and that they should be allowed to travel down to Dover as normal. It became the main subject of conversation at the Newington Arms that evening where, inevitably, it became inexorably entangled with the other matter that had so occupied them of late. It was also the subject of a long telephone conversation between Mr Brodie and his client. “The question is whether it is prudent under the circumstances to continue with Brown & Son at the present time, or whether we should terminate the contract,” he said, comforting himself that the appointment had not been his decision in the first place. Had it been left to him they would never have been appointed, and he had the impression that, at the time, his client felt much the same way as he did.

“Of course we must let them continue with the work,” said Stephanie emphatically. “I cannot believe that either Mr Brown or his son would do anything that was in the least criminal! No, we continue with them!” Mr Brodie could not believe his ears, as this was not the answer he expected. There was more there, besides.

“You know them?” he said. “Personally?” He wished he had been there, to see her reaction.

“I know of them and their reputation,” she said defensively. “I have heard nothing other than favourable reports about them and I am sure that my father would not have suggested them had there been the slightest doubt about their honesty and integrity.”

“Very well,” said Mr Brodie, unable to gauge the credibility of her answer, “we will stick with them. I must say that I have no complaint about the quality of their work or their progress,” he added defensively. “They are marginally behind programme but they have had extra work. There is no other reason why we should change contractor. I just thought you should be aware of what has happened and the likely consequences.”

“Likely?” she asked sharply.

“Possible consequences,” he said, correcting himself.

“Providing they are in a position to continue, they should,” she said, and put the phone down.

The news sent a surge of excitement and apprehension though Stephanie. Mr Brodie had suggested she attended the next site meeting so that she could hear at first hand what Mr Brown had to say about the police action and his business, but she declined. This might prove to be troublesome for Richard. It might even turn out to be a catastrophe, but it would not assist either of them now if she were to reveal herself.

Two days later the architect telephoned again, not without a note of triumph in his voice which irritated her. Charges had been brought, again Richard Brown and his wife, against Arthur Brown, against a Welshman called Gwilym Jenkins, and against two clerks of works engaged by the local council. “The charges are conspiracy to corrupt, corruption and false accounting,” he announced. “It all sounds very serious to me and I do not see how they can carry on. Mr Brown claims that they can, of course.” Stephanie's reaction was the complete opposite of that of the architect. Whereas he was concerned only about the work, she was concerned only about the people.

"Have they admitted the charges?" she asked, anxiously.

"No. Mr Brown told me they have denied them and that they will fight them strenuously. Those were his very words, but it all sounds very expensive. It will be a great drain on the company resources, especially as it is an unlimited company. Put another way, if it all goes against them, they could lose everything, business, cars, homes, the lot."

"Oh, that is awful!" exclaimed Stephanie. "There is no question of them not continuing with our contract for as long as they can. I want us to demonstrate to their other clients that we have confidence in them."

"You still wish us to continue with them?" asked Mr Brodie, astonished.

"Most certainly," said Stephanie, "now more than ever!" After the conversation with the architect she sat and considered the position. She was obsessed with the idea that she should help them in some way, without them being aware that the help came from her. So long as she kept her identity concealed, it would be all right; concealed in particular from Eileen who would certainly not accept her help if she knew where it came from. For a moment she felt distressed to think that he had married again and that he was not as free to marry as was she. She would never marry, not now, not anyone other than him.

"You have rich and relatively influential friends, Mr Brown," said Mr Vincent from behind his enormous desk. "I have heard this morning from a Mr Robart of a firm of City solicitors acting on behalf of a Miss Bernstein that she has undertaken to pay all your, your wife's and your father's legal costs incurred in your defence, regardless of the outcome. It is a very generous gesture indeed."

"Miss Bernstein did you say?" asked Richard, puzzled. "I don't know a Miss Bernstein other than the one who is our client on one of our contracts and, even then, I don't know her. I have never even met her, nor has my father. As far as I can gather she is something of an eccentric and a recluse."

"Eccentric or not, she is clearly very generous. Your father must have impressed her."

"I cannot imagine how," said Richard.

"I cannot imagine how, either," said his father when Richard relayed the news to him. "I have never met the woman. I did once work with *Mr* Bernstein, but that was before the War and I cannot imagine that he is involved in this in any way. I cannot see why his daughter would now go out of her way to help us like this."

"You must have impressed her in some way."

"I repeat I have never met the woman. In fact I think she may have gone out her way on a number of occasions to avoid meeting me. It must be someone else."

"How very odd. I suppose that it will be all right to accept the offer? Mr Vincent thinks it is."

"I am not thinking, Richard. I am in no position to comment or judge. I am so dosed up the World could end and I wouldn't care. I doubt if I would even know."

"I suppose we can go along with it," said Richard, feeling concerned. "I find the whole thing ridiculous. I mean I find I am having to involve myself in all these things and I haven't done anything illegal, you know, despite what Mother thinks. Nor did I sanction anything improper."

"I never thought that you had. Don't take any notice of what your mother has been saying. She is just distraught and has to find someone to blame. But what about Gwilym? It could finish off the business, you know."

"Surely not?"

"Loss of business," said his father. "Loss of confidence, loss of credit. Who will want to place work with us after this, whatever the outcome?"

"Even if we are totally exonerated?"

"Mud sticks," said Mr Brown, wistfully. "It is you and Eileen that I am most concerned about, if I am concerned at all. I am too old to be affected by it. Your mother will feel hurt and her pride will be crushed, but she will get over that. Sandra will get another job if she quits or loses this one, but it is your future that is in jeopardy!"

Richard had not told his father of Mr Pennington's request and his promise. In a way

this could all be some kind of omen, a signal that he should consider getting out, moving, and starting life again. "I could always go back to teaching," he said softly.

"Teaching?" said his father. "Of course, but would you? After what happened?"

"I would have to consider it although I doubt that anyone would take me if I had a criminal record."

"Yes. We could find ourselves in prison together. Your mother would be very busy visiting us."

"I don't think it is the sort of thing to joke about!" exclaimed Richard. "Anyway, you are innocent. They cannot send you to prison. You had nothing to do with the flat conversion contracts, and I will get up in court and say so."

"And you think the jury will listen to you? Mr Vincent will tell you that the law can be a strange and unpredictable thing in operation. There are plenty of innocent men in prison serving time as proxies for the guilty. I am simply quoting him, you understand."

"I wish I could be as calm about it as you are!"

"Take a couple of my tablets. They are over there - no, I am joking. How is Eileen taking it? When will she be coming to see me?" Richard shook his head.

"She is minding the shop at the moment. How is she taking it? I am not really sure. On the surface she appears to be coping very well, but beneath I think she knows something that she has not told us. So does Mr Vincent. Yet she maintains that she has done nothing. She says she doesn't think that Gwilym has done anything. Listen to her and we are all innocent, that is the irritating thing about all this."

"Watch her carefully, Richard. She has her operation hanging over her as well as this, hasn't she? Make sure that she has all the support she needs. And did I hear your mother right about Sandra?"

"It appears they will keep her on as she is a civilian, so long as she does not come into contact with any of the papers to do with our case. I don't know how long she will keep the job, especially if the worst comes to the worst."

"Perhaps it would be better if she left anyway, but that is her decision."

"I am not sure," said Richard. "I wonder how it would look if she left as far as we are concerned? Still, for the present perhaps we had better accept this Miss Bernstein's offer and take the rest of it as it comes?"

A smile appeared on his father's face. "Perhaps you are right," he said, and closed his eyes.

A few days later a black edged letter arrived informing Richard that Mr Pennington had died peacefully in his sleep and expressing the hope that he would be able to attend the funeral. He contemplated it at breakfast, watched carefully by his wife. "I would like to go," he said, "to pay my last respects, but it is difficult with this other business and my father's condition. Could you manage without me for a day?" Eileen did not reply immediately, but lowered her head and reached for a piece of toast.

"Will *she* be there?" she said suddenly.

"She? Who do you mean?"

"You know who I mean! Stephanie!"

"I wouldn't have thought so. I was never really certain that Mr Pennington knew who she was. He never once mentioned her. She was not on the best of terms with her mother, you know."

"I often wondered why," said Eileen. "But as for managing, providing the police do not carry out another raid, we ought to be all right. After all, it is only for one day."

By then most of the papers and documents taken by the police had been returned and put back in their proper place. Miss Logan's filing cabinet was nearly full again, but she had not returned to see it. With Mr Brown still in bed no-one had gone around to her house to see if she had come back. The truth was that they were learning to get along without her, although Eileen was at pains to point out that something would have to be arranged for the period she was in hospital.

Mr Vincent had no doubt that the offer from Miss Bernstein was genuine, substantive

and substantial, capable of acceptance and one which should be accepted although he had not been able to throw any light on the reason for her generosity. He had discussed the case with Mr Robart and they were now considering the appointment of a leading counsel to defend the Browns. Richard was concerned about Gwilym and had obtained agreement that he would be represented too by whoever was appointed. And, Mr Vincent said, providing he complied with the terms of his bail, there was no legal reason why he should not go to the funeral.

“You had better go,” added Eileen. “If you do not you will only regret it. Make sure that you behave yourself. Strange people can turn up uninvited at funerals.” She had the vision of a lone woman standing apart in the snow.

“I think it is the widow that you should call upon to behave herself. She has quite a reputation and goodness knows what she will get up to now.”

“I see,” said Eileen. “As long as it is not something with you. I always wondered what kind of school that was that you taught at!”

“Would you mind if I went back to it again? Teaching, I mean. Not at Rochester House - I wouldn't want to return there.”

“Why are you asking me this?” she asked with surprise. “Why now?”

“He thought that I should, Mr Pennington did. And my father doesn't think that the business will survive this affair. All this concentrates the mind, doesn't it?”

“It is a question I never thought I would hear you ask. What do you think, Richard? Would you like to go back? Would you prefer it to what you are doing now?”

“I don't know. It would be easy to say “yes” just to have a means of escape. I suppose that when he put the idea to me when I visited him I came away with the thought that I would prefer to be teaching. I just couldn't see any way to escape from the family business. It looks, for all the wrong reasons, as if a way may be appearing, so I suppose I would have to say that I would prefer teaching to being a builder for the rest of my working life.”

“That is funny,” she said softly. “I think that I would prefer to be a teacher's wife.”

“Thank you, Eileen,” he said, and kissed her on the brow.