

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was a dry, Autumn day when Richard stood amongst the fallen leaves and watched the mortal remains of the man who had considered himself his second father lowered into the ground. There had been a short and simple church service at which Joyce had stood out in her mourning, all eyes being on the widow rather than the coffin of the deceased who had so adored her. Richard recognised a number of faces in the congregation, including Mr Crompton, but there was a man who he did not recognise, a greying, tall, smartly-dressed, distinguished man, who stood beside Mrs Pennington and took her arm when they followed the coffin after the service. Richard watched the couple, wondering who he was. Joyce did not say very much to him, but there was something, a kind of spark, that seemed to pass between them.

He was there at the grave-side as they watched the coffin lowered slowly into the ground. The clergyman was saying something that Richard could not catch, but he watched Mrs Pennington step forward and scatter earth over the lid before turning back to this stranger. He scanned the small gathering, hoping that she might be there, but there was no sign of Stephanie. He felt saddened by the occasion, saddened by the loss, saddened by her absence. Did he really want to see her again, especially on an occasion like that? How frustrating it would be if she was there and they could not talk intimately! It was, perhaps, better that she had not come. The gathering was beginning to thin as members dissolved amongst the graves. Joyce looked straight at him, then said something to the man, who also looked at him intently, provoking in Richard an uncomfortable feeling. But as he started to circumvent the pile of earth and move to the other side of the grave where the couple stood, the man turned and started to walk away. Joyce stood and watched him leave, then moved towards Richard. "Who was that?" he asked, feeling compelled to ask what could have been regarded as an impertinent question.

She smiled. "Just someone very important to me," she said. "Someone I have known for years and years. Someone who knew your father before the War, would you believe? Now, you will come back to the house with everyone, won't you?" How could he refuse?

Richard was left with a nagging question of whom the man was. Clearly Mrs Pennington did not intend to tell him else she would have done it there at the grave-side. He asked Mr Crompton. "I have no idea, dear chap," said the Headmaster from behind closed lids. "Our Mrs Pennington is a delightful creature and she has always had this air of mystery and allure. She has been a marvellous school secretary but none of us would claim that we know all her private affairs. I doubt if even her late husband knew everything!"

Richard looked across to where the object of their conversation was in animated discussion with the school's Latin teacher. There had been something that Mr Pennington had said the last time he had seen him. What was it? A cryptic comment about his wife even having a lover? "But, what about you, dear boy? What are you doing now? I heard that you eventually married the Cross widow and gave up teaching? Whereas I would not comment on the former, I would certainly deprecate the latter!" Richard smiled. A couple of years earlier he might have stood in awe of this man and been overwhelmed but now, on neutral ground he felt that he could almost meet the man as an equal and certainly stand up to anything the Headmaster said.

"I hear that you are now Headmaster," he said.

"Indeed, yes. And I am making a number of changes, especially in the social calendar. I shall have a vacancy for a mathematics teacher if you would be prepared to consider it."

"Oh, no, not me! I don't think I want to go back into teaching!" It was the wrong thing to say, in that place and on that occasion, and Richard felt immediately guilty. Mr Crompton would have no idea of what had passed between him and the late mathematics teacher only yards from where they had been stood, but Richard could not forget and felt that he had betrayed the memory. "At least, not yet," he added. That was true. With the charges that had been brought against him and the trouble they would cause for the business, he could

no longer consider a return to teaching for the foreseeable future. He thought that Mr Pennington, wherever he was, would see this, and understand.

The Headmaster gave a short, dry, sceptical, laugh which did make Richard feel uncomfortable and he edged himself towards where the widow was standing. "Hello Richard," she said softly. "We haven't really had a chance to talk, have we?"

"I am sorry," he said. He did not know what else to do other than to ask her again who the man had been, and that would appear rather indelicate. There was, however, another question talking shape in his mind. "He died quite peacefully in his sleep during the night," she said, smiling wistfully. "I didn't even realise what had happened when I came in to draw the curtains the next morning. I think that he died contented, and that is what matters, isn't it? It must be awful to be taken from this World knowing that there are matters which are unresolved, problems that are still hanging over your head, or ambitions that are unfulfilled. He was fortunate in that he died with an absolutely clear conscience but, then, he was man totally without malice who never hurt a fly. It is sad, really."

Richard had never contemplated death or the desiderata of dying. That was the province of the aged. "What will you do now?" he asked, not really thinking about the substance of the question, simply choosing it as something that seemed appropriate to ask. The smile appeared again, blossomed and reminded Richard of someone else and of the other question that was germinating.

"Oh, that has been planned for a long time. You look a little scandalised? Richard, you mustn't be so prudish. Just look where it has got you! But I have always know that it was odds on my husband dying years before me. He use to tell me so before we were married. I said that it seemed to be an odd way to propose marriage, but that was the way he put it. I have had plenty of time to think about it and prepare. Much like the way in which someone plans for their pension and retirement. Don't you think I would have been foolish not to have done so? Would you have had me wait for the event and then start trying to think of things to do? You find it shocking, don't you?"

"No," said Richard, hollowly.

"He was a good, gentle and kind man," said Joyce, throwing her head back. "He was an understanding man who lived his life fully but at a slow pace. Now the living of it is ended, but for us, for you and I, Richard, life goes on. How is Eileen?" This was the second reference to Eileen and Richard did not want to think about his wife at the present, yet he found himself visualising her sat, at home, or in the office, diligently plotting, planning and preparing for what ever it was she would decide to do once he was dead and buried. He had read somewhere that, as a man, his life expectancy was considerably less than that of his wife. It was a strange, disconcerting thought and one that made him feel even more uncomfortable.

"Eileen?" he said, as if there could be some doubt as to her identity, "she's fine." He could have mentioned the operation, but there was no telling where the conversation would then lead; probably in the direction of the intricacies of female anatomy which would make him feel even more uncomfortable. He could have mentioned the charges that had been brought against him and Eileen, but he wanted to leave that behind just for the present. Yet he found his thoughts constantly wanting to go back and relive the moments when the police arrived outside his house and hammered on the door. He had been soundly asleep, but he had heard Eileen addressing him from near, yet afar, from the perimeter of his dream, seemingly part of it, seemingly still in bed and at his side, announcing their arrival. He could recall asking her later whether she knew that they were coming because that was the impression that had been left on him. At first she had not answered the question, not clearly. Then, once they had been released from the station and escaped from the solicitor and were back at home, he had asked her again. What was it she had said? She had laughed and talked about her previously unrecognised clairvoyant powers. Yet, there she had been, at the top of the stairs, cool and collected whilst he was below in the hall, flustered and confused, instructing him not to talk to the police. She had reacted quicker and more positively than he. It was possible she might have gone through a similar experience before, but she had never mentioned one. There were other little things that had happened, that she had said, which had seemed out of place at the time. If only he could remember what they were!

“And your father?” said Joyce.

“I am afraid that he has had a mild stroke.”

“Another one? I am sorry to hear that. He had one whilst you were up here, didn't he?”

“Yes,” said Richard, still trying to shape and frame the question he wanted to ask and worrying that he might be running out of time in which to ask it. “We are hoping that this one is nothing and that he will soon be back on his feet.” Perhaps his mother was now planning what she would do if and when his father died. Perhaps wives everywhere were doing this in some gigantic feminine conspiracy. There was that word again, “conspiracy”, creeping insidiously into his thoughts and making him shudder. “I wondered whether Stephanie would come,” he said clumsily. There, he had taken a first step and said it, but it was a panic measure as someone was hovering, trying discretely to redirect Mrs Pennington's attention away from him.

“To the funeral?” she said, smiling an acknowledgement at the would-be interloper but persisting in addressing Richard. “I think not. I doubt if she would even come to my funeral. If she did it would certainly not be to mourn. Maybe to gloat, or dance on my grave?”

“I cannot believe that,” he said, hesitantly, “not of Stephanie.”

“I see that I have managed to shock you yet once again!” she said with a little, endearing, laugh. “Be warned! You have seen only one side of my daughter. She is a very emotional person but she is capable of hating every bit as much as she is capable of loving you.”

“And you?” he asked, daringly.

“Goodness!” she exclaimed, smiling broadly. “Is that some sort of proposition?”

“Well, no,” he said, blushing. “I, er - .”

“I mean emotionally, of course,” she added, rotating her bracelet. “I suppose the answer is I am very much like my daughter and she is very much like me. If anything we are too much alike and if there is one thing that we do which is the same that is when we fall in love, and I do not mean some five minute romance or a roll on the sofa, when we truly fall in love, it is forever. Anything else, anything in the meantime, is just a peccadillo, an adventure. Are you an adventurer, Richard? Now I have shocked you all the more!”

Richard shook his head bashfully. He could hear Mr Pennington saying in his ear what a remarkable woman she was. She certainly was like no other woman he had met and he left Bromley thinking more about the magnetic Mrs Pennington than anyone else. It seemed that all that he had heard about her, by direct account or by innuendo, was likely to be true. She appeared to be fearlessly independent, self willed, oblivious to criticism and she filled none of the female role patterns he had encountered in his domestic life. He could not imagine his mother, or his sister, least of all his wife, talking or behaving like Joyce Pennington.

Perhaps Stephanie was like her, very like her. Perhaps that was and had always been the problem. He had been conditioned in his upbringing to expect women to behave in particular ways. Eileen conformed and was therefore acceptable. Stephanie did not, but she was the woman in his life, if there was one, and the woman who he would cite as his lover, if he was called upon to name one. He could have asked Joyce where she was and what she was doing. He had let the opportunity slip by simply because he had not the courage to follow the subject. It was not just that someone was seeking to cut in. He had not the guts to ask the question and face the answer and that was because he was frightened that he could not trust himself with the information. It was better that he did not know.

Did she think of him, in the way he thought of her? Did she ever think of him? Probably not! In all probability she would never know that she owned a large part of his heart and would continue to do so until he died. She was probably sat on the deck of a luxurious cabin cruiser anchored off some Greek island or the African coast, paying for the privilege in the only way she knew how, whilst he was sat there, on a slow train, heading towards winter, a doomed marriage, and prison. For that moment it all seemed to be so hopeless. His father's condition, Eileen's operation, the prosecution, the loss of the business, and the total loss of the woman he loved. The train would soon be pulling in at Eastgate and he would have to get out and face this unpleasant future. And when he did, he felt that he would never see Joyce

Pennington again and that, in this, he was now losing the last physical link with Stephanie, for ever.

Mr Arrowsmythe was not at all the kind of person Eileen imagined a leading Queen's Counsel would be. She had expected, although she had no good reason, that he would be tall, young, handsome, dashing, dark and debonair, but Mr Arrowsmythe, although he portrayed or possessed most of her requirements in small amounts, had in reality none of these things completely. He was short, the wrong side of thirty - Eileen would never admit to anyone that this start to the slippery slope into middle age was looming large on her horizon - short, with thinning hair, and slightly portly - Mr Arrowsmythe would describe himself as robust. Out of court he was quietly spoken, patient, persistent and thorough, and he had the most extraordinary blue eyes that he seemed to fix upon Eileen, hypnotising her, making her feel she was compelled to do, or comply with, whatever he desired.

She met him first on a dull, damp, February afternoon in an office at Mr Vincent's premises. The solicitor had advised them that following consultation with Miss Bernstein's lawyers, they had concluded that Mr Arrowsmythe was the best counsel they could obtain. He would be expected to run rings around the County prosecution. Mr Vincent did express his surprise that anyone as eminent and as much in demand as Mr Arrowsmythe could be persuaded to take on what was, after all, a small provincial case which would have minimal publicity and which would not add to the counsel's reputation or figure prominently in the Law Reports. He could only conclude, and he expressed as much to the Browns in conference, that Miss Bernstein possessed quite extraordinary powers of persuasion as well as considerable wealth. "He is the kind of man who can simply name his price," he told them. "We are indeed very fortunate that he will act for us."

Eileen was surprised to learn that Mr Arrowsmythe, having read his instructions, had asked to see her first and on her own. "Do not be afraid or in awe of him," advised Mr Vincent. "Do be frank and truthful, and tell him everything down to minute details, including anything that you might feel is, or could be, self-incriminatory. He will want to know exactly what he is defending and where the strengths and weaknesses in our case lie."

Mr Arrowsmythe did not speak when she entered the room but gestured to her to sit opposite him. She was immediately aware of the eyes as soon as he lifted his head from the papers he was reading. "He has the most extraordinary eyes," she told Sandra later. "They seem to pierce you."

"As long as they don't appear to undress you," said her sister-in-law glumly.

"This is your statement to the police?" he said, passing the document to her. "Are these your exact words?"

"Yes," she said apprehensively.

"And you did read it carefully before signing it?"

"I did," she said softly, "and Mr Vincent was present at the time."

"And you are satisfied with its accuracy?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly. "Is there anything wrong with it?"

"We'll come to that later," Mr Arrowsmythe said, taking the copy of the statement back.. "Now tell me exactly how your petty cash system is operated." Eileen was not prepared for the question and for a brief moment her thoughts appeared to fall into disorder, but she rallied them and described the way in which the cash floats were maintained by the supervisors and how they had a voucher system for un-receipted expenditure. "You have a lot of un-receipted expenditure?"

"No," she said confidently. "We have some, where it is difficult to get a receipt, or the receipts have been lost."

"And receipts are not foolproof, are they?"

"I am sorry?"

"I know," he said smiling, that if you are a regular business customer, many suppliers will be prepared to give you blank receipt pads for you to fill in just as you wish. Garages are particularly notorious at doing such things."

"I am sure nothing like that was going on," Eileen protested.

"I am just exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the petty cash system. What exactly was your involvement in the administration of the petty cash?"

"None, really. Not at the time, at least. I spent most of my time analysing the costs and receipts on the conversion contracts."

"So, why did you see the vouchers?"

"Simply to allocate the costs to particular activities."

"Allocation of costs," he said, writing this down on a blank sheet of paper. "Good, good. Now did you ever look at the receipts or the vouchers to ascertain their authenticity?"

"No," said Eileen. "I did complain when there was inadequate information on the vouchers or no receipt."

"Why?" said Mr Arrowsmythe, fixing her with the eyes again and making her wonder how anyone could possibly lie to this man.

"If there was not sufficient information, I could not allocate the costs."

"Good, good!" he said, writing again. "Now, did you at any time have a petty cash float or an impressed account from the company?"

"No," said Eileen, firmly.

"Not at anytime? Not for dresses or housekeeping?"

"Good gracious, no! I have never received a penny direct from the company. My husband, Richard, draws a salary and all our personal expenditure comes out of that."

"So, you do not draw a salary?"

"No."

"Nor anything from the petty cash?"

"No! I did not draw any money from the petty cash system for my own purposes. And I do not mean that to sound as if Richard or his father did."

"But you would not know if others were using the petty cash system, shall we say, improperly?"

"I would not, but as far as I am aware all expenditure was properly incurred and explained. Exactly what are you suggesting?" A wry, rather captivating, smile spread across Mr Arrowsmythe's face.

"I am suggesting nothing, Mrs Brown, or may I call you Eileen? I am simply establishing the facts, the background, the context and where you fit in. So, as far as you were aware, the petty cash system was being used properly and was, to the extent that it could be, properly documented; and you have no involvement in its operation, nor access to it."

"Not other than through Miss Logan."

"Ah, yes, Miss Logan. We will come to her in time. But I understand that you did express concern about the levels of expenditure being processed through the petty cash system on the conversion contract, and the absence of receipts or explanations?"

"At times, yes."

"What made you feel that the levels were excessive?" Eileen paused and closed her eyes, trying to recall exactly the occasions and the circumstances when she had said this.

"I must admit," she said slowly, "that I was expressing only a view. I am no expert in these matters and certainly not as to how much might be expected to be spent through the petty cash system, but I did complain on a number of occasions about the absence of explanations and receipts. I think I also suggested that the amount of petty cash transactions were increasing."

"Why would that concern you?"

"The increase? It is money going straight out of the company. If we purchase on credit through our normal accounts we usually do not pay until after we have been paid."

"So you were concerned with the cash flow position?"

"I was expressing an opinion that this could affect the company's cash flow situation."

"And the vouchers which had, in your words, an absence of explanations and receipts?"

"As I have explained, my concern was to allocate the costs to activities within the contracts and not to overheads."

“These are petty cash vouchers which could have represented proper expenditure or improper expenditure?”

“They were vouchers which were un-receipted and unexplained,” said Eileen defensively. “I cannot say whether the expenditure was proper or not. I would always have assumed that it was proper.” The smile appeared again.

“Humour me, Eileen,” he said, standing and crossing to the window. “Don't fight me. I am not suggesting that there was anything improper about the petty cash expenditure or that you were aware of it if there was. I am asking - suggesting - that if a voucher is un-receipted or unexplained, the money could have been dispersed in a number of ways, some of which are legitimate, some of which are not. The latter could include fraud against the company as well as corrupt payments. And I am also suggesting that the very presence of a receipt, whilst it may assist you in your analysis, it is not a guarantee against improper payments. Now, exactly what made you concerned about the levels?”

“Well, they were increasing,” she said hesitantly. “I used to keep the books for my former husband so I had a feel, if you like, for the level you might expect, but then the turnover on the conversion contracts was increasing so one might reasonably expect the petty cash expenditure to rise, too. It was just a feeling.”

“Intuition?”

“You could say that.”

“And your former husband. He was Mr Jenkins's brother-in-law?”

“Yes. Oh, now I remember that our accountant always insisted on receipts for the petty cash expenditure. He said it made his life easier with the tax man.”

“Just so,” said Mr Arrowsmythe, returning to his desk. “Now, was your concern about a general rise across all the contracts, or only on certain contracts?”

“Only on the conversion contracts. I only concerned myself with those.”

“On the contracts that your former brother-in-law was in charge of?”

“Yes,” she said reluctantly.

“I assume that the petty cash float was reconciled and balanced regularly.”

“I assume so. That would have been done by Miss Logan but she was meticulous. I am sure that we would soon have heard if she could not balance the withdrawals against receipts and the cash float.”

“We are back to the veritable Miss Logan, the architect of all this. But you knew that from the very beginning, didn't you, Eileen?”

“Yes,” she relied, colouring. “I mean, I assumed it was her,” she added, sheepishly.

“I am sorry, but you are being evasive again, Eileen. I think that you knew that Miss Logan had been to the police and made a statement even before they arrested you. Am I right?”

“Yes,” said Eileen, lowering her head.

“So, if you knew, how did you find out? Someone must have told you, and that someone could only have been your sister-in-law, Miss Sandra Brown, who I have yet to have the pleasure of meeting. I see that she works, still works, as a civilian at the police station. Is this not so?” Eileen did not answer. “Come now, Mrs Brown. I am your friend, your ally, come here to help you and save you and your husband from prison. You must trust me and tell me everything and let me decide how I can best use what you tell me. You must let me decide what is or is not material and if you do not tell me everything, I cannot do that.” Eileen remained silent, recalling her sister-in-law's desperate pleadings as she sat, distraught and dishevelled, in her neat and tidy lounge that afternoon. “I would have to ask you this question under cross examination and you, under oath, would be bound to answer it. I would rather I knew the answer now. I will also be asking Miss Brown the same question, but I would like to hear your side of the story. I have surmised that Miss Brown somehow found out about the police investigation and told you. Am I correct? Now, what I do not readily understand is why she told you, and not her father or her brother. Did she think that the charges were going to be proffered only against you? Or was there some other reason? Why was that Mrs Brown?” Eileen looked into his face, then away again.

“Sandra will have to explain that,” she said reticently. “What she told me, she told me

in the strictest confidence and I promised never to tell a soul.”

“When did she tell you what ever it was she told you?”

“The day before.”

“And the two of you then remained silent? Why would she tell you something as momentous as this, yet you did not tell your husband or any of the others that they were under investigation? Did you believe that they might be guilty?”

“No! Certainly not!”

“Why, then?”

“I do not rightly recall,” she said untruthfully. “I suppose that I either doubted the truth or thought that it might fizzle out. There seemed to be no point in raising everyone's fears if it was all going to come to nothing.”

“So, it was just some idle gossip, this tale that your sister-in-law confided in you, this confidence you will not now break? I do not believe that is the truth, is it? I would surmise that there is more to it. Do not worry, Eileen, I shall be seeing Miss Brown tomorrow and the truth will come out, but I would still like to hear your version.”

“I think that you should talk to Sandra first and hear what she has to say,” said Eileen stubbornly.

“Very well. You have nothing else on your conscience that you wish to impart to me?”

Eileen studied the pattern of the linoleum on the office floor. In truth she did have matters on her conscience. She had wrestled with the question of whether she should have broken her confidence and told Richard what Sandra had told her. After all, her loyalty to her husband should be stronger to that she showed to her sister-in-law, but what had happened to Sandra was so personal and she thought should not become common knowledge if Sandra did not wish it. She had been told in confidence and Sandra was another woman. She asked herself whether things would have turned out any different had she told Richard. Perhaps his father would not have had the heart attack, but she also wondered whether either Richard or Gwilym might have acted rashly had they known that Sandra had been compromised. Not Gwilym, she told herself, because he was not there. But, then, she did not know when the police would act, or even if they would act. Sandra's confidence could have been broken for nothing. Richard suspected that she was not entirely unprepared for the raid and had hinted this on several occasions although he had not asked her outright. How would it now appear if she had to admit that she knew, especially if Sandra did not tell all of her story? If only half of the matter came out in the open, what would Richard think of her, this wife who had known he was likely to be arrested, but had kept quiet. This wife who had kept silent and caused his father to have a stroke? Once she had lived in a normal world where her little white lies, minor deceits and withholdings, all could pass without harm or her being called to account for the results of her actions. Now she found herself being drawn into a parallel existence where all this would be swept away and only the truth, the whole truth, would be tolerated. “No,” she said.

“Tell me, Mrs Brown. Do you think you could take the stand and lie under oath, without me knowing?”

“No,” she said lowly. A voice inside her was crying out for her to tell him and rid herself of Sandra's burden, but she had given this woman her word, and it was for her to tell. “You must speak to Sandra. If she is willing to tell you what she told me, I will then corroborate her story.”

“Very well, Mrs Brown,” he said, nodding. “We will leave that part for the present. Now, whose idea was it that you should go to work at the office as a supernumerary in the first place?”

“Mine, I think. As I said, I have done book keeping before and I felt I needed something to do to take my mind off other matters.”

“Other matters? What kind of matters?”

“Nothing that concerns this case. I was seeing a Specialist - I have a growth that I will have to go into hospital to have removed.”

“That is one matter,” said Mr Arrowsmythe, studying her. “And the others?”

"I have been having trouble with my first husband's life insurance. The insurers will not pay up."

"I am sure that is something we can settle fairly easily. Any more, Mrs Brown?"

"Only domestic ones. A new house to move into, that sort of thing." How could she tell him that she thought her husband might be seeing another woman, yet she was tempted to, and pulled back just in time.

"So, it was not your husband's suggestion, or his father's?"

"I do not think so," she said quietly.

"Or your former brother-in-law's?"

"No! He had no involvement in the decision."

"And how did your former brother-in-law come to be working here when his home is in North Wales?"

"I think I may have suggested it one evening. His wife, Megan, wrote to me saying Gwilym was out of work. Richard was talking about expanding and trying to get some of the flat conversion contracts. I suggested that Gwilym might assist if he was successful."

"So this Gwilym came here before the company won any of the conversion contracts?"

"Yes," she said guardedly. "Gwilym helped Richard with the pricing of the first two that we won and then supervised the work when it started."

"Your husband thought that by bringing in Mr Jenkins he would win a contract?"

"Not at all! I don't know what you are insinuating. Richard simply continued pricing the tenders in the way he had done before but reduced the overall level of prices. It was simply a matter of finding out how much the rates had to be reduced before we were successful."

"And you were successful shortly after Mr Jenkins arrived down here and started working for you?"

"Yes, but that is coincidence. He did help Richard prepare the tenders but I do not believe he had a big influence."

"Does he draw a salary?"

"Yes. He came down on a small one, enough to pay for his lodgings and his mortgage in North Wales and that sort of thing."

"So he would have initially been short of money?"

"I suppose so," she said doubtfully.

"Was he also drawing unemployment benefit?"

"I am not sure," said Eileen blushing. "I think he said that there was some arrangement by which they paid him something for the first four weeks to help him get settled, but I cannot be certain. I am not that familiar with his domestic arrangements."

"And how did you get on with Mr Jenkins?"

"Very well," said Eileen, brightening. "He has always acted like a brother to me?"

"A brother? No more?"

"No!" she said defiantly. What was he thinking; that she had gone out to work at the office because Gwilym was there? "There is nothing at all between me and Gwilym," she added hotly.

"Do excuse me, but I have to winkle out these little things, every innuendo. I have to know because I do not want to be suddenly surprised by the prosecution on the day. Now, how did Mr Jenkins get on with your sister-in-law?"

"They are good friends, and he has taken Sandra out a number of times, but it is all above board. Megan, his wife, knows." Eileen wondered if she should mention Owen's faux-pas, but decided against it.

"His wife knows all this? How?"

"She writes to me and I write to her."

"You are a kind of confidant?"

"She is another woman," Eileen thought, hanging on to and trusting the man she has married; one who needs every ounce and help and assistance she can get in the battle against the men and the predatory women of this world. "A kind of confidante," she said. "I went to

live with her and Gwilym after my son died. We became quite close friends.”

“So, to return to Mr Jenkins, he was drawing a small salary. When did that cease?”

“It has not. We all wanted to see the business grow in strength and he said that so long as he could cover all his living expenses, he was content to leave the money in the firm.”

“And for how long would this arrangement have lasted?”

“He was talking of moving his family down here. Gwilym has even started looking for a flat or a house for them. I think that as soon as Megan stops work and they come down, it would have to cease and he would go onto a proper arrangement. Events may have overtaken that now.”

“I must now ask you an awkward question now, Mrs Brown. I would ask for your pardon in advance. Do you think that Mr Jenkins has been supplementing his income from the company with money from the petty cash?” Eileen’s heart fell. She could not forget it was she who had suggested he came down to work for them. If it was now revealed that he had been embezzling money from the firm, she would be blamed, and she was already likely to be held culpable over not warning everyone about the police investigation. There was nothing that she could do about it now.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I would like to think that he did not.”

“But the petty cash expenditure on the contracts was abnormally high.”

“I did not say that!” she protested. “I said - .”

“That the amount of unsubstantiated sums was increasing. Thank you. And you have no idea why the goods were not purchased from stockists where you had an account?”

“Only that it was something to do with speed or convenience,” she said with growing dismay. “I have asked myself the same question many times, without finding a convincing answer. I am afraid I cannot tell you.”

“But, and I need to be certain about this, it would have been the normal thing to do, would it not?”

“Yes,” said Eileen, reluctantly, “but it is all very well to be wise after the event. We might as well ask ourselves why we went after the contracts in the first place or what would have happened had Brown & Son not been in the building business. It was obviously unwise and short sighted to buy materials through the petty cash and not extend our credit to other suppliers, but not every stockist is prepared to give you credit.”

Mr Arrowsmythe smiled. He knew that he had touched on a raw nerve there, somewhere. Mrs Brown was right to be concerned about the way goods were procured and the use of the petty cash. There was a significant weakness there which would have to be covered in the defence somehow. There was also something that did not ring wholly true. “I would assume,” he said, “that Brown & Son, as a well established local firm would have a good credit rating amongst local suppliers?” Eileen felt weaker. She was speculating and she knew it.

“I had no direct involvement in the question of the extent of the company’s credit, but there might have been some suppliers who were reluctant to give extended credit in view of the rapid growth in the amount of work and the relatively low prices the contracts were obtained at. Under such circumstances they would demand cash.”

“And did that actually happen, Eileen?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly, studying the linoleum again.

“But there will be some who thought that the tender prices for the conversion contracts were very low, even suicidal?”

“There could be.”

“That is a dangerous argument and the prosecution will want to make the most of it,” he said, almost to himself.

“I am sorry?” she said, meaning that she did not fully understand.

“Not at all. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. Now, we were talking earlier about your concerns about the petty cash vouchers. I just want to make sure that I have this right - you did mention your concerns a number of times?”

“To Richard. I am sure that I did, but only because I was concerned about allocating the costs. Not for any other reason.”

“Other than the effect on cash flow?”

“Other than the effect on cash flow,” she repeated lowly.

“Where were you when you mentioned your concerns?”

“At the office.”

“And was Miss Logan there on those occasions?”

“She would have been, but not necessarily in the same room.”

“But possibly within earshot?” He was writing again.

“Probably,” said Eileen, thinking of the parts of Miss Logan's conversation with the reporter she had overheard.

“And did your husband do anything in response to your concerns?”

“I think he said he would take it up with Gwilym. I am not sure, but he will be able to tell you what he did do.”

“Just so,” said Mr Arrowsmythe, laying down his pen. “Tell me, then Eileen, after you had expressed your concerns did the amount of expenditure put through on petty cash reduce?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I think it continued to rise and I meant to talk to Richard about that as well. I cannot recall if I did do, but the number of un-receipted or unexplained vouchers did drop sharply, so he must have talked to Gwilym.”

“So you were then happy? You had identified a particular problem and asked for it to be rectified, and when it was, you took no further interest in it?”

“You could put it like that, I suppose.”

“What was your relationship with Miss Logan like? Amiable? Friendly?”

“Far from it. She is a difficult, possessive, woman who appeared to resent my presence and my husband's involvement in the running of the business.”

“So you did not get on with her, as they say?”

“Not in the least,” said Eileen, “but that is not to say that she was bad at her job or that anyone wanted to be rid of her. I suppose you could have called her the administrative heart of the company.”

“But she was hostile, towards you and towards your husband?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Good, good! But not towards Mr Brown the elder? That is very helpful. I think I am nearly finished with you, Eileen. There is one last thing that I would mention at the present, a favour for me and for the whole of your family. Would you speak to your sister-in-law? She is obviously prepared to take you into her confidence so she may be prepared to accept and act on your advice. Will you advise her to tell me everything?”

“I will try,” said Eileen, rising.

“Thank you, Eileen. I could not ask you to do more at this stage.”