

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It did not take Stephanie long to fully convince herself of her changed position. Her life appeared to be falling apart at the seams. The man she loved was accused of some heinous crimes and could go to prison. He was visiting the house on occasions yet she felt that she could neither see him, nor let him know she was there. And now her father had indicated that he was going to come to live at Newington with his new bride, and that she should move out of the House. She did conclude that this was unlikely to happen before the work on the house was completed, but a move to the cottage had long been in her mind and it might as well be now as in a year's time. Yet, when it came to it, she did not really want to go. As the first snow of winter dusted the trees and the ground, Stephanie sadly packed her personal belongings and moved to the more modest surroundings of Rose Cottage. Miss Lightfoot was beside herself with anxiety, but Stephanie insisted that was what her father wished, and she was bound to comply. "I will be comfortable there," she insisted.

"That may be so, Miss Stephanie," wept Miss Lightfoot, but it won't be the same here without you. It is not right! I am sure that it is not what Mr Bernstein meant."

"And I will be away from the noise of the workmen and the dust. You will come down and see me daily."

"I will come down and clean daily, and cook for you, Miss Bernstein."

Stephanie smiled. She took with her, carefully wrapped, the portrait of Natacha Bernstein, thinking that if her father missed it she could always return it. Jack Barnes organised matters for her, inwardly concerned by what she was doing, outwardly trying to make the transformation as smooth as possible. "You will be able to have some fine log fires in the living room," he told her, "and it has a superb Aga. It can be a warm and very cosy cottage. You should be very comfortable there!" She could hear the combination of disappointment and disapproval in his voice, but this was the course that fate had drawn out for her.

It was a strange feeling, to suddenly be transported to this fairy tale location, to look out of the window and see nothing but trees and bushes, to be totally alone. No doubt this would be added to the list of eccentricities she had displayed. Everyone would be talking about it on the Estate. That did not bother her at all. What did concern her was the thought that her father would have told this all to his bride; that he was prepared to do that, yet not come to see her and tell her to her face. Instead it was conveyed through his lawyer. It was painful and crushing. She had been exiled. She was now resigned to that fact. It had been a dream, a beautiful, incredible, dream, but no more than a dream. Now she had to face the reality. Yet, as the early days of December passed she felt there was something benign and healing in the atmosphere of the cottage, as if who ever had lived there had been happy and as if it was capable of making her happy, too. Even after only a few hours there, spent arranging her belongings, putting away her clothes, locating and loading the airing cupboard, practising with the immersion heater, setting up her tape recorder, and coming to terms with the Aga, she felt content and at home. She had never seen herself as, or been cut out to be, a grand lady, living in a large house, parading airs and graces. Let his new wife assume that mantle. She would live out her life down there, in rural bliss. One day would follow another. Providing her father maintained her allowance, she would have no worries, no cares, no men, and no love. "Oh Richard!" she said out loud. But no reply came.

And it was as the first snow fell at Eastgate that Richard's father went back to work, cheerful, energetic, eager to do all the things his wife forbade him. "Goodness me," he said, "am I glad to be back at the office. I felt I simply could not take another week at home! Your mother wanted me to stay off until the New Year! I would have gone mad." Richard concluded that his father would probably never retire, at least not fully. Whatever happened, his father would be there, watching his activities, until the day he either was prevented by ill health, or died. In some ways it was not a welcomed or reassuring thought.

"I am not surprised," said Richard. "I have been nagged incessantly, but I told Mother

that you were the best judge of how you felt and what you could sensibly do. She is convinced we are going to have another bad winter, but I also told her she did not have to worry about the weather as most of the work is indoors.”

“You are enjoying going down to Newington House?”

“To be honest,” said Richard apologetically, “I have only been down there few times. I do see what you meant. It however is far more interesting than the conversion work, far more satisfying. I wonder if we could specialise in such work?”

“I don't think there is enough about, certainly not in this area. You might be able to if we were based in London. Anyway, how is our benefactress? Have you seen her?”

“Seen Miss Bernstein? I don't think anyone sees Miss Bernstein! Her latest trick has scandalised everyone on the Estate. She has taken it into her head to move out of the main House into a cottage in a remote part of the Estate. She claimed that the noise and dust caused by our men was more than she could bear!”

“So you have not seen her?”

“No such luck. It is almost as if she doesn't want to be seen.”

“Perhaps she is deformed?” suggested Eileen, looking up from her work. “Or scarred?”

“Not according to Mr Brodie, the architect,” said Mr Brown. “He described her as young and very attractive. In fact I think he went further than that and described her as a beauty.”

“I see,” said Eileen coldly. “Perhaps it is as well that neither of you have met her!”

“Oh I am old for that sort of thing,” said Mr Brown.

“Richard isn't,” said Eileen, looking at her husband and not returning his grin.

“Anyway, Fairy Godmothers are supposed to be beautiful, and here we have our Fairy Godmother who none of us has ever seen. Someone who we owe so much to! Goodness knows how we will ever re-pay her.”

“Perhaps you could write to her, Richard?” said his wife. “You are right,” she continued, addressing his father, “we do owe her an enormous debt. Writing to her would seem to be the least we could do. In a way it hardly seems enough.”

“I agree,” said Richard. “Writing is not an adequate response. Perhaps I should go and see her, especially if we win. I know, as she has taken such an interest in our case I will take the news to her whatever the outcome, like Perseus with his white sail.”

“It was Theseus,” said Eileen, “and the sail was black. Don't you remember, he forgot to change the sail, with disastrous consequences?” Richard laughed and apologised for his lack of knowledge of the Classics, but as did he felt a sudden pang of nervous discomfort and excitement, almost as if the myth had some special significance for him. It soon passed.

“I do not think I can take anymore of it, Eileen. I know I have said that before but it is really getting to me. I know you haven't said anything, but I can see that look in your eyes. The pressure feels unbearable!” Eileen laid down her cutlery and looked around the restaurant.

“Had it occurred to you that we might be being watched?” she said.

“Watched? By whom?” exclaimed Sandra.

“Them,” hissed Eileen. “For example, have you seen Ken recently?”

“No,” said Sandra. “I suppose I ought to be grateful for small mercies.”

“I find it odd that nothing has been said to you. Ozer must know that you are likely to tell your story. I am surprised he has not put any pressure on you not to. Perhaps he is worried that if he did he might provoke you into doing something like making a formal complaint.”

“I could have done that anyway, at any time.”

“But you didn't,” said Eileen, “and as each day passes he will feel safer. I am just surprised he has not attempted to take out some insurance by having you kept under observation. Just to see what you do and who you meet. Just to see if he can get something he can use against you. And all the time that you - we - remain silent about him simply helps him all the more!”

“What are you saying?” whispered Sandra, “that I am still in some sort of danger

from him? Surely he would not try the same thing again?"

"No, but he might try and shut you up. Of course, he does not know who you have told, but I would assume he thinks you told no-one, partly because there was no indication that we were expecting the police raid, and partly because nothing has worked its way back to him."

Sandra breathed deeply. "You are not planning to break your promise and say something are you, Eileen?"

"I am not going to say anything," said Eileen raising her cutlery. "I said all I am going to say some weeks ago when I offered to talk to Mr Arrowsmythe. I am not changing my position."

"You just don't know what it is like. Little comments here, jibes there, lectures on the duty children owe to their family! Anyone would think I am withholding some vital evidence that will save a condemned killer from the rope. It is not like that. It is personal, intensely personal and has nothing to do with the case, but no-one will listen to me!"

"I am listening, Sandra, and I will say one thing. The more I think about it, the more I think we should not let him get away with it. He ought to be made to pay, one way or another. And you are the only one who can do that."

"But it is so awful and intimate, what he did! Unless, of course, you are suggesting that we get rid of him."

"Get rid of him? What do you mean?"

"I could lure him up to the cliff top again. I am sure that he would go like a shot if I asked him. And when I had got him there, you could push him over the edge."

"We would have to ensure that the tide was in," said Eileen.

"You are not taking me seriously," complained Sandra.

"I did not think you were being serious."

"I sometimes feel like doing something like that! I know what you are going to say - it would solve nothing, but I would feel a whole lot better."

"I don't think we should push him off a real cliff, but we still should not let him get away with it. Think how much worse it might have been, and think that he could be doing exactly the same thing to some other poor, helpless, woman right now, even as we sit here and eat our lunch! Didn't you say that he had done something of the kind before?" Sandra nodded slowly. "We ought to get him," continued her sister-in-law. "Men like him should be locked up and it's women like us who let them get away with it and roam free."

"Oh, Eileen, now you are getting at me!"

"I'm not, Sandra, at least I do not mean to," said Eileen softly. "I don't want to see the victim punished, only the perpetrator. Let me talk to Mr Arrowsmythe. Once he knows he will be able to judge whether it is material. If it is not, I am sure that he will treat it in total confidence and he will tell the family that it is not significant. They will stop bothering you, and only one other person will know."

"But he will know, and what if it is significant?"

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it."

"I don't want him to know," said Sandra slowly, "him above all people. And it would just be my word against that beast. How would that look with me being the daughter of one of the accused and the sister of another? I would be pilloried. I would probably end up in the Sunday papers. I couldn't go through all that."

"Sandra, I would put my trust in Mr Arrowsmythe to use the information with discretion, tact and care. I am sure that he would not want to make you feel any more uncomfortable than was absolutely necessary."

"I don't want him to make me feel at all uncomfortable! No, I couldn't go through it all again! I should have thrown myself off the cliffs there and then. I did think of it, you know!"

"You are not being serious, Sandra. You shouldn't say or think things like that."

"But I did! There was a moment, a fleeting moment, when I thought of doing just that. Then he would have had some awkward questions to have answered." Eileen stared at the look of determination on her sister-in-law's face. "I still think we should entice him up

there and push him off," Sandra added.

"You mustn't talk like this," said Eileen softly, but in earnest. "We have to think positively about this. We mustn't let him get away with it."

"I am not talking of letting him get away with it!" hissed Sandra. "The more I think of it, the more determined I become! I could put something in his tea, or I could tell Ken. If I told him I reckon he would pay him back! But it would mean someone else knowing."

"It isn't just paying him back. It is a question of whether what happened to you has some material effect on the case against your father and Richard."

"And you!" said Sandra, sullenly.

"I am not saying all this for myself," said Eileen. "You know that, Sandra." Sandra might know that, but the thought was running through Eileen's mind that there they were, talking about retribution, and maybe there was some justice in Richard being locked up if he had been philandering. She was still not certain that he had not been seeing Her, but he was a man. There was no knowing what he might get up to whilst she was in hospital. Here they were, two women set against men and the things men did to women. Perhaps Richard also deserved to be locked up?

"Ken would sort him out," repeated Sandra.

"That is one option, I agree," said Eileen in a matter of fact tone, sounding to Sandra as if she had suddenly become tired of the whole thing, "but what about Mr Arrowsmythe? Will you let me talk to him, tell him? I would like to be able to do it before I go into hospital."

Sandra sighed. Her resistance was all but eroded and she knew that even should she rally her forces this time, she would be assailed again. Could she hold out for ever? In a strange, dark, way, she felt that she was back on the cliffs once more, laying there with his breath hot on her neck, his rough, coarse, hands exploring her body, his pressure on her to submit. Yielding now would be every bit as repulsive as it seemed then, but there was someone confronting her who would not now be pushed aside. It seemed to be inevitable. Although it sickened her to have to surrender something which seemed to touch her very essence of being, she found herself whispering, "Yes. Go and tell him. Let us get it over and done with."

Although she found that she felt no satisfaction or sense of achievement, Eileen lost no time in making contact with Mr Vincent asking him to let Mr Arrowsmythe know that she needed to see him and talk to him urgently. It was not that she thought Sandra might change her mind and, even if she did, Eileen was not inclined to undertake to be bound to silence again. At least she could tell the lawyer what she knew. Sandra expressed the wish that she could get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Eileen knew that this was only the beginning, but she was not going to tell her sister-in-law that in case she did change her mind. There was also the fact that as time slipped by, she forgot little details, of what Sandra had actually told her. It would not be the same for Sandra. She was capable of remembering every minute detail.

As it would be several days before Mr Arrowsmythe could detach himself from the case in which he was acting and travel down to Eastgate, he sent a message to the two women telling them not to concern themselves. His working day was long and he would not ask them to go up to London to see him as there was no saying how late he might be. He did not tell them that the anticipated interview meeting with Sandra was not something he wished to have to rush and get over quickly. He would come down to see them, at his leisure, as it were. Sandra, faced with the reality of the prospect of actually having to narrate all that had happened, was possessed by misgivings, but Eileen remained there, steadfastly reassuring her that what she was about to do, was the right thing. Her soft, comforting words were enough, just enough, to carry Sandra over the deepest of the black troughs that opened up before her. And then, quite suddenly, the day was upon them both.