

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It soon became clear to Stephanie, as the days grew even shorter and the weather increasingly unfriendly, that life in the cottage was more isolated than she had imagined. During her life spent in suburbia she had never known what it was to be entirely alone. Even when she was in the flat, between clients, as she used to like to think of it, there were people all around her. She could hear the sounds they made in the adjacent flats, or look out of her window to see them passing, sometimes to see someone very special passing. When she had been up at the House, as she now described it, she could hear the workmen or Miss Lightfoot. It was true that she would escape from that into the solitude of the Monastery gardens, but that was just an interlude and one that she thought was forced upon her by circumstances. This exile had not really been forced upon her. Although she had trotted out a number of excuses, the news of her father's wedding, the work at the House, she knew that the decision was hers. She also knew that once taken it was one that she could not readily reverse. That it would be talked about and commented upon, she did not mind; and she did see Miss Lightfoot on a daily basis when the housekeeper arrived to try and find things to do, and was later collected by Jack Barnes in his Land Rover. In between these visits she was alone and, what was worse, she had time to think, too much time she thought. Even when she played Brahms on her tape recorder or tried to settle in front of the fire with a book, or listen to a play on the wireless, she found her thoughts drifting, and always to the same subject.

She found herself wondering what he was doing, what he was thinking, how he was bearing up under the pressure and the strain of the police action which had been brought unjustly against him. Sometimes she would fantasise that he was there, with him. She would address him, offer to cook dinner for him, ask if he was comfortable, or reach out for him in the night. Sometimes she would look out the window in the forlorn hope that by some miracle fate had despatched him to her, and he was there, confused, full of anticipation, on the track, opening the gate, now at the door. It was on one such occasion that she did espy a man's figure approaching along the track. Although her heart leapt and her pulse quickened, she knew it was not the one she awaited or prayed for; it was an older man, slightly bent in his gait and labouring in his movement. Almost spell-bound she allowed him to come to the gate and approach the front door before she went to open it. "I hope that you do not mind me calling on you like this, Miss Bernstein," he said, running his hand through his thin, grey, hair, "but I do like to get around to all my parishioners at least once a year, and always before Christmas. Not that I am always welcomed where ever I go."

"I do not mind at all," she said, opening the door wide. "Do come in, and I will make a pot of tea, that is if you would like one."

"I could think of nothing better at the present," said the priest, going into the living room, looking around and up. "This has hardly changed over the years," he added.

"Changed?" called Stephanie from the depths of the kitchen as she wrapped a cloth around the handle of the kettle that spent most of its life steaming gently on the Aga. He waited until she came back into the room bearing some of the best china the cottage could muster, feeling that he deserved, and would recognise her gesture for what it was, the touch of luxury. Father Thomas shook his head.

"You will remember that I told you that I used to see your father to instruct him in the Catholic religion. I used to come regularly to this cottage. I used to sit right here. He would stand, or sit over there, where you are now, and he would ask the most awkward questions imaginable!"

"It is strange," she said slowly, thinking this must be why the cottage had been special and feeling excitement welling inside her, "how I seem to be following in his footsteps. Everywhere I now go I seem to find that he has been there before me. He came down from London to the Estate, as I have. I understand that he frequently would walk up to the ruins of the Monastery and the gardens, as I love doing. And he lived here, as I am now. Yet I have never met him - no, that is not entirely true, and I feel I should be truthful before a priest - I have never met him and known at the time he was my father."

“We should always be truthful all of the time,” said Father Thomas. “I had not realised that you had ever met your father.”

“I think I did. It is strange how memories grow hazy over the years and I had so idea of the significance at the time. In fact I only remember it at all because my mother did not come home that particular night and was away from home for several days. She said at the time that she had been called to see a dying friend, but I never believed that. He turned up on the doorstep one dark night, my father. I was alone in the house and I had no idea who he was. He asked if my mother was there. I said she was not and that she was still at work and he went off to see if he could meet her. I don't know exactly what happened, but he was there next morning, outside in his car. He said he had been there all night, so wherever my mother had gone, she did not go with him. My school friends thought he must be a private detective. I suppose I thought the same although I could not think of any reason why anyone should spend all night watching our house. It was years later that my mother me who he really was. I have never seen him since. I would not even know what he looks like other than that is his sister,” she said, nodding towards the portrait.

“Ah, yes,” said the priest. “That was a great tragedy.”

“He is marrying again, you know,” she said impetuously.

“Who? Mr Bernstein? I did not know.”

“And I think he will be coming to live here, in the House. That is part of the reason why I have moved here.”

“I see,” said Father Thomas. “I had heard that he had given the House to you.”

“So he had,” said Stephanie softly. It was an awful admission and hurt her pride and trust to say so, but she felt that she could talk to this man, openly and as candidly as she wished. “But people do give you things then take them back again.”

“You are still worried about the problem you came to see me about earlier,” he said. “Have you received any further communications?”

“No, not a thing.”

“Perhaps, then, my little subterfuge actually worked. It did gain immense proportions at times, so much so that I wondered if it was going to get out of control, but it appears to vindicate my view that the person was here, on the Estate, and not someone at Eastgate.”

“I have no idea who it might have been,” she said. “All I want to do now is forget it and put it behind me.”

“Forgiveness is a Christian virtue.”

“I did not say that I had forgiven anyone,” she said sharply. “I just want to forget it.”

“Just so. Is there anything else I can help you with?” he asked.

“No,” she said, reflectively. “I don't think that there is.”

“May I call again on you, now that you are here?” Stephanie smiled. There was the suggestion that moving out of the House had in some way made her more approachable, maybe brought her down to the level of other mortals, yet she knew she was still exactly the same person.

“Yes,” she said. “So long as you do not come to instruct me or attempt to convert me.”

She would stay there that Winter, whilst she thought about her position, whilst her father married and resolved his position, and whilst the matter at Eastgate crept forward towards the trial. She would stay in the cottage and hibernate. In the Spring she would emerge and, maybe, spread her wings.

Mr Arrowsmythe saw Eileen in a small private room at Mr Vincent's offices. “Well, Mrs Brown,” he said lightly, “I trust that you have not had me come all this way for nothing. You have something new to tell me?”

“I have had quite a number of conversations with Sandra on a particular matter, and she has now reluctantly agreed that I should tell you what she told me on the afternoon before the police raid. I have assured her that you will treat what I tell you in strict confidence and only use it if any of it is material to our defence.”

“I am content to work within that framework. If it is not of significance I will not take

it any further and she will hear no more about it. However, if it is significant, I will certainly have to interview her and possibly take it all further. She does appreciate that?"

"I think she has always understood that. That has been the problem but before I do begin I must reiterate how she feels about what happens. She still sees it as intensely personal and is very sensitive and vulnerable. She has come here with me and is waiting outside should you wish to talk to her later. As I have said, she will answer your questions but she does not want to have to go over the story if it can be avoided. Least of all does she want it made public."

"I fully appreciate all of that. You must appreciate that I am well accustomed to dealing with sensitive issues. You must get her to trust me, but first, why don't you tell me what you have to tell. Then I will decide whether or not I need to talk to her about this at all.

Eileen started to gather her thoughts. "You will tell me if I go into too much detail?"

"I think that is unlikely, but I will. Please proceed. I will just listen, initially."

"Well, I was at home and it must have been about half past five in the afternoon when the door bell rang. I went to the door only to find Sandra on the doorstep in what I can only describe as a terrible state. She was breathless, wild-eyed, terrified, I would say, and quite distraught. She was bare-footed and her dress was ripped." Mr Arrowsmythe raised his eyebrows.

"May I ask you at this point what you thought when you saw her?"

"I thought she had been attacked - raped."

"Why raped?"

"She was clutching a pair of panties. I assumed they were hers. And just the general state she was in."

"I see. Go on."

"She begged me to let her in. At first she could hardly say anything about what had happened other than keep on recriminating herself, saying that she had failed, let everyone down, that it was her fault, that they would all go to prison, and things like that. After a while she calmed a little and told me that Detective Sergeant Oxer had come to see her whilst she was alone in the office during that lunch time and had given her a statement to type. As she typed it she realised that it concerned her family and that it had been made by Emily Logan, alleging that they, and me, had been making corrupt payments to un-named Council employees in return for the measurement and variations on work that had not been carried out, and spurious dayworks."

"Did she type it?"

"No. She told me that she stopped and told him that she couldn't or shouldn't. Detective Sergeant Oxer then proposed that if she met him after work that day he might be able to find a way to stop the case going forward."

"He was proposing to not proceed with the case? At that late stage? That explains why the warrants were not sworn out until the very last minute, that is, later that evening. Now what was the nature of the proposition?"

"I do not think that was made clear at first. I should explain that Sandra is a sweet girl but not very worldly and with limited experience of men. I don't think she initially knew exactly what he had in mind. Anyway, he drove her to the outskirts of the town and he took her along the cliff path to a fairly remote location. It is sort of place where you hardly see another soul. I know because I have sometimes walk along there myself."

"And she went voluntarily?"

"If you consider being under the kind of threat he was using as being voluntarily, yes. When he reached a particularly sheltered spot, he tried to rape her. Apparently, and I have no reason to doubt her words, she repelled him before he could and ran away, all the way in fact to my house. I think you can understand why she pleaded with me not to tell anyone. She felt used, abused, duped and awfully foolish. We did discuss whether we ought to tell someone about the statement, but we thought if we did it might lead to all manner of awkward questions and, if the police never followed the matter up, if it was all a bluff by Oxer to seduce her, we would look foolish and be accused of crying "Wolf". In the event, of course, the police did come the following day, which was earlier than either of us expected."

“Given the timing of the raid I would doubt that our Detective Sergeant Oxer ever had any intention of keeping his side of the bargain he proposed. A police raid like that has to be planned days in advance and having gone through all the preparation. I think he would have had some difficulty in justifying a cancellation.”

“You mean you think he was planning to cheat Sandra all the time?”

“In all probability.”

“Oh, don't tell her that! She will only feel far worse about the whole thing.”

“I have no wish to make Miss Brown feel bad about anything, leave alone worse,” said Mr Arrowsmythe, studying his notes. “I could say that telling her of Detective Sergeant Oxer's duplicity might lighten her burden, and yours for that matter, because it means that the raid would have taken place no matter what she did.”

“But she will feel tricked as well as humiliated and the rest,” said Eileen lowly. “You must have regard for her feelings.”

“So shall I. I do appreciate your decision to tell me this, Mrs Brown. I had not expected anything like this. It could put a completely different complexion on everything. I am afraid that I will have to talk to Miss Brown, to ask her a few discrete questions and hear what she has to say. Would you ask her to come in? You may stay if either of you think it would be of benefit.”

“Oh yes!” said Sandra when Eileen asked her. “Please stay in there with me. I may have need of your moral support.” Minutes later the two women sat nervously before Mr Arrowsmythe.

“I am sorry that we are not able to meet under more pleasant circumstances,” he began. “You should have let me take you to dinner, Miss Brown; or may I call you Sandra because it is a nice name and it sounds so very much less formal?” Sandra nodded her assent, but remained silent. “Now,” continued the counsel, “Mrs Brown has told me a most alarming and interesting story. I do not propose to trouble you greatly with it at present because I know the very thought of it causes you distress. I can assure you that will diminish with time.”

“It does not appear to,” said Sandra in no more than a whisper.

“It will, I assure you. I only regret that I do not have the powers to speed that outcome. On the contrary I will have to keep it alive for a while and I trust that you will forgive me for having to do so as I have no real alternative. The very first point is whether you will corroborate what Mrs Brown has told me; that this Detective Sergeant Oxer propositioned you, offering to drop the case against members of your family if you performed a sexual favour?” A shudder ran through Sandra's body and she turned to look at Eileen who nodded encouragement.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And that you were taken by him to an isolated spot where you managed to escape from him before that favour was exacted?”

“Yes,” she whispered, again.

“And that you then ran to Mrs Brown's house in a state of dishabillé and sought refuge?”

“I did. I ran the long way around.”

“The long way around? Why did you do that?”

“When I got back onto the path there was a woman with a dog coming along. I didn't want to face her. I felt so dreadfully ashamed, so dirty - .”

“A woman with a dog, did you say? That may be it! That could be the very thing I am looking for. Do excuse me, ladies, I do not often get excited, but this woman may well hold the key to the whole of our case. Do you think she saw you?”

“Oh yes. I saw her looking at me. That is what made me run the other way!”

“I don't understand,” said Eileen.

“But I didn't recognise her,” said Sandra. “I am sure that she did not know who I was.”

“But she did see you?”

“Most certainly. She was looking right at me.”

“This is excellent! The point, Mrs Brown, is we may have an independent witness to

the incident or, at least, the outcome of the incident.”

“But we do not know who she is,” complained Sandra. “How will we find her?”

“That, my dear Sandra,” said Mr Arrowsmythe beaming triumphantly, “that may be the easiest part of all! Now, I do not want either of you to say a word about any of this to anyone. Not to your husband, Eileen, nor to your father, Sandra.”

“I am not likely to,” said Sandra.

“Nor I,” added Eileen.

“Good! Very good! I think that about wraps up matters for us for today. I thank you for coming and compliment you, Sandra, upon your bravery. It will all come right in the end. You will see.”

“There is one other thing,” said Sandra quietly. “I have something for you. I shouldn't have, and I don't like doing this, but this is for you.”

“What is it?” asked Mr Arrowsmythe, taking a small piece of paper from her. “It appears to be an address. Is it what I think it is?”

“Yes,” said Sandra softly. “I must not say how I came by it except that I did not obtain it myself; it was given to me. I do have one friend, one real friend, still in the police force.”