

Chapter Seventeen

A Gathering in the Library

There was only a small number of mourners at the funeral, an even smaller number of which were invited by Mr Lancaster to be present in the library after the Earl had been laid to rest in the family crypt. It was ironical, Ruth thought, that her uncle should chose the very room in which the Earl had fallen and seemingly set in motion the train of events that had led to his untimely death. It was also unseemly, she told the solicitor, that they should gather so soon after the crypt was sealed to squabble over the distribution of the spoils. Mr Lancaster had muttered something about the jackals gathering, then laid great stress on establishing how the Earl's affairs would be administered in the future.

"It is still unseemly in my view. Unseemly and irreverent," she said. "What can there be that is so urgent?"

"It is the way of things," he said. "You must know that as a journalist reporting on such matters every day of the week. The Queen is dead - long live the Queen! And I have no doubt that there are those amongst us for whom that moment cannot come a second too early. Well, without giving anything away, they are doomed to be disappointed."

"Well," said Ruth. "I am not to be counted amongst them and if that is their disposition, disappointment is a just reward!"

Ruth stayed close to her late uncle's side when his coffin was taken from the house, and stood close by, separate from the rest of the congregation, throughout the ceremony, earning the disapproval of her mother in doing so. She had, however, very few words for her elder daughter and those that she did have mainly concerned Victoria. Ruth could understand this as she had also closely studied her sister. It was unusual to see her soberly and plainly dressed, but that was not all that was changed.

"What do you think about Victoria?" said Mrs Mottram to her in a low voice as they walked back to the Hall. "She is much altered and appears very subdued, very subdued! She has so very little to say which is so unlike my little Victoria!"

"This is a sad and solemn occasion," said Ruth. "She may feel the loss more acutely than anyone else given the way uncle treated her and the obvious affection he displayed towards her. He was exceptionally fond of her."

"She may well be in mourning," said her mother, "but I fear that there is much more to it than that alone. She appears so cowered, as if all the life has been drained out of her. It is almost as if her spirit is dead!"

"Oh, Mother!" exclaimed Ruth. "I do not know how you can say think such a thing, let alone say it."

"I know my Victoria," said Mrs Mottram, grudgingly, "and that is not she. As for saying it, I would say it to no-one other than you, and I say it only to you as you are also living up in that place. But you mark my words. Something is terrible wrong. And did you note how he guards her? I have not been able to get anywhere near her to have an intimate word with her. I, her mother!"

"Oh, I do not think that is true, either, Mother," said Ruth, wondering why she was apparently taking a stand against her mother and joining issue with her cousin.

"Well, I can assure you that he made sure that we did not talk. I know when I am being manoeuvred aside. And what did I receive in the way of greeting from my own daughter? A light, formal, kiss on the cheek! And a handful of vacuous words of greeting scattered in my direction. I might have been anybody! I might have been nobody!"

"Perhaps she is concerned about Roger's business venture?" said Ruth, thinking of her visit to the house in London. "It is at a very delicate and difficult stage I am told."

"How would you know that, Ruth? Of, I suppose you get to hear these things through your newspaper contacts. Well, I still do not approve of any of that. I know you say that your

work has been well received, but that does not change my view. And I know that it is wrong to speak ill of the departed, but your uncle was wrong in encouraging you. He was wrong in this matter, as he was in others.”

“I owe him everything, Mother.”

“You owe him no more than that which was due, Ruth. But it is all over now. It is finished and done with, and I am content to let it rest.”

In accordance with Mr Lancaster’s instructions, the small group gathered in the library. Ruth sat next to her mother and angled her chair so that she could continue to observe her sister who, with her husband, sat apart. Mr Twigg appeared and stood behind them as the solicitor set down a small bundle of documents on a table before them. Ruth could see Roger lean forward in his seat with interest. “Should he be here?” he asked, pointing at Mr Twigg. “Surely he has no interest in my late uncle’s Will?”

“As the sole executor of your uncle’s interests,” said Mr Lancaster, “I have a right to decide who or who should not be here, and I consider it necessary for Mr Twigg to attend. The reasons for this will become clear in due course.” Roger muttered something that Ruth could not catch and slumped back in his chair. Victoria did not move, remaining stiff, upright and quite expressionless.

“Now,” continued the solicitor, “I will reiterate that the late Earl Mottram appointed me his sole executor. Here is the Deed of Appointment should any one here wish to examine it. Here is the Earl’s signature, delivered in his own hand, and here are the signatures of the witnesses.” He paused and wiped his spectacles. “The first thing that I am empowered to inform you is that in the Autumn of last year the Earl renounced his former Will and all earlier ones, and decided to execute a new one. I drew up the new Deed entirely in accordance with his wishes and saw it duly and correctly executed. At this point, however, there is a problem.”

“A problem?” said Roger, impatiently. “What kind of problem could there be? Why don’t you just get on and read it. I can see it there!”

“That is not the Will. That is a Deed of Renunciation which is the legal document that invalidates all Wills made before its date. Now, if I may continue. A copy of the new Will was made which was retained with the original by the Earl for reasons he did not make clear at the time. The problem that now faces us is that neither the original nor the copy is to hand.”

“What do you mean by not to hand?” said Roger.

“He means that both are lost,” said Victoria, coldly.

“You are correct, Victoria, except I trust that they are not lost. We have to assume that the Earl placed them somewhere for safekeeping.”

“Or gave them to someone,” said Roger, looking across at Ruth.

“I am sorry, Uncle,” she said, shaking her head, “but I know nothing of the Will. I was not certain that a new one was made although it has been suggested to me.”

“Well, I asked Mr Twigg to look for them. He has carried out a rudimentary search but without success.”

“They have to be here somewhere!” exclaimed Roger, looking around as if the objects they sought might be lying on one of the shelves.

“Neither the Deed nor its copy has been found yet,” said Mr Lancaster.

“But you know what the contents are, don’t you?” snarled Roger.

“Indeed I do.”

“Well then, I do not see what the problem is! You can inform us!”

“I am afraid that I cannot. Indeed, my word in the matter is of no consequence and is likely to carry little weight in a court of law.”

“A court of law?” exclaimed Roger, sitting up. “What has the Law to do with this?”

“What happens, Uncle, if the Will is not found?” asked Ruth, growing ill at ease.

“Why can we not revert to the previous Will?” cried Roger.

“One question at a time. I will answer Ruth’s in a moment, but firstly we cannot revert because the Earl has revoked it by Deed.”

“You could burn the Deed,” said Roger. “After all, the outcome will be the same!”

"I could not burn the Deed," said Mr Lancaster, patiently. "Neither could I ignore it as if I did anyone who is a beneficiary would be able to sue on the strength of the later Will when it is found. In any case, it would be against the Earl's clearly expressed wishes and I am not prepared to go against him."

"This is ridiculous. Can you not see what he is doing?" said Roger, looking around.

"And Ruth's question," said Mr Lancaster. "Let me say that I am confident that the Will shall be found. The Earl was a very methodical and thorough person. He would not have mislaid it. It is simply a matter of finding where he placed it."

"But what if it is not found?" demanded Roger. "That was cousin Ruth's question!"

"If it is not found, the matter will have to be referred to Chancery for them to pronounce on the succession."

"Which means it will pass to me together with the title!" said Roger, triumphantly. "I am the nearest surviving male relative. How long will this Chancery business take?"

"It could take years," said Mr Lancaster, bluntly.

"I can't wait years!" snarled Roger.

"In all probability none of us can," said the solicitor, "but what I say is likely to be the case. You should all be aware that the succession may not be as straightforward as Roger here suggests. There are others who may have a superior claim."

"Who?" cried Roger. "Who could possibly have a superior claim to me?"

"The children of the late Earl's brother," said Mr Lancaster.

"You?" cried Roger wildly, looking at Ruth. "You mean her?"

"Oh, Uncle!" cried Ruth. "Not me! I can have none of it!"

"This is absurd!" declared Roger, standing. "Everyone knows that I was named to inherit the estate and the title until this new Will that you talk about. Where is it? How do we know that it actually ever existed? We have only your word for it!"

"I can assure you of its existence," said Mr Lancaster, patiently. "Mr Twigg, here, was one of the witnesses to the Earl's signature, although he has no knowledge of its contents. Is that not so, Mr Twigg?"

"That is the case," said the secretary. "I witnessed the Earl's signature on a deed which was titled Last Will and Testament. I saw the title with my own eyes. And I can corroborate that I instigated a search of the house this morning without any success. But the Will must be here as the Earl has not left the house since making it. We will continue looking, and we will find it in due course."

"I pray that we do," said Ruth. "I would not want to be burdened with all that wealth or responsibility."

"Would not want to be burdened," aped Roger. "For just how long are we going to search?"

"I have not decided," said Mr Lancaster. "Until, I suppose, that we are entirely satisfied that it is irretrievably lost. If we then go to the Court of Chancery, it could be five years before a verdict is handed down."

"Five years?" cried Roger, grasping his wife's wrist. "This is a complete farce! Five years! I shall show you how long these things take in court. That I shall! And it will not serve you," he went on, glaring at Ruth, "to continue wheedling and worming your way into this affair in order to rob me of what is rightfully mine. I will not be denied my rightful inheritance! As for the new Will, everyone knows that it was changed in favour of his natural daughter!"

It was at this point that Mrs Mottram appeared to gasp and left Ruth's side, tumbling forward in a confused, involuntary, movement, and down to form a small, disarranged heap of black clothing on the library floor. In the confusion that ensued Roger dragged his wife like an unwilling animal from the room and left. When she recovered, Mrs Mottram issued a stream of apologies and said that she did not know what had come over her. It was agreed it was the occasion and the stuffiness of the room, though Ruth suspected otherwise.

"I had all but completed what I had to say, Alice," said her brother. "I can complete the little that is outstanding later if you wish to rest."

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. "I think that I am recovered."

“Well, then, despite the loss of some of our audience, I have to say that until the Will is found and proved, I have asked Mr Twigg to assist me in the running of the Earl’s estate and businesses. Neither he nor I have any intention of changing any of the current arrangements of employment of staff, or letting of property, or payment of pensions, for that matter. I trust no-one here has any objection to Mr Twigg continuing to carry out the duties he has performed for the Earl for many years?”

Ruth shook her head and studied her mother who was still white and shaking. If she could have asked her what Roger had meant when he talked of the Earl’s natural daughter, she would have, but in her heart she already knew the answer and was painfully aware of the suffering such a question, and the resultant answer, would cause. “Do you want me to return to the cottage with you for a day or two?” she said softly. “I am sure that the paper can survive for a few days without me.” Mrs Mottram looked at her daughter strangely. Perhaps she was concerned with what Ruth might be thinking following Roger’s statement, but Ruth knew that her mother could not raise the subject any more than could she.

“No,” said Mrs Mottram. “I am going to stay in Tetbury for a few days.”

“And you are all right?”

“I will be recovered in a few moments. I do not know what came over me and I do not wish either you or anyone else to make a fuss of me. If you wish to be concerned about anyone it should be your sister. I am very worried about her and this occasion has served only to increase my anxiety. Will you make sure she is all right and remains so once you are back in London? Someone has to look after her, and you are the only one there. I will be relying on you to do this.”

“I will try,” said Ruth.

Keeping her promise to her mother to look after her sister proved to be more difficult than Ruth expected it to be. She wrote at first, but her letters were unanswered. So she expended some of her hard earned money on a cab and visited the house. A liveried butler asked her for her card and refused to admit her when she said she had none. In any event, the lady of the house was not at home. That was a possible explanation, Ruth thought. They could have gone away somewhere, for some reason. It was possible that they were travelling in connection with Roger’s business venture, which could even mean they had sailed for America. Yet would not Victoria have told her or her mother if she was undertaking something that exciting? An alternative was that Roger had simply taken his wife on a holiday, to help her recover from the effects of the loss of their uncle. That was probably it, Ruth thought, and wrote to inform her mother of the conclusion she had reached.

Her letters and her visit to the house did not pass unnoticed and featured amongst the topics discussed when Roger met his associate in a mean, dark, low-ceilinged, tavern on the river bank at Wapping, a building of many twists, turns, and shadowy corners where many a evil deed had been plotted and not an inconsiderable number executed.

“Ruth is trying to see her sister,” Roger said. “She could become a real threat if she carries on.”

“Ruth? What can she possibly do?”

“She might sow seeds of doubt in Victoria’s mind. I would like to move quickly on her, but there’s this problem over the inheritance. Their other uncle, that confounded, meddlesome, self-righteous solicitor, says he would favour Ruth’s claim to the inheritance over mine if the Will is not found. For all I know he has found it and destroyed it so Ruth can succeed over my wife. And if she succeeds, we lose. I do not have to tell you that, do I?”

“It still cannot be found?”

“It cannot. I even went down to the house and spent a day turning everything upside down to no avail.”

“And no-one said anything?”

“I had Twigg’s blessing! Oh, they play their game well, pretending that they are as anxious as anyone that it should be found. They can afford to do that, can’t they, if it is already discovered and burnt. I do not think that it exists anymore.”

“Then we are ultimately in trouble.”

“Then we are immediately in trouble! The word is already around the City that the Earl died intestate! If that gains currency we are scuttled because it places the inheritance in doubt and it could be five years before it is settled according to our friend Lancaster. When you think of what we have had to do to get this far! Well, I am not finished yet, I can assure you.”

“What are we going to tell Angelo when he returns?” asked Matthew. “He will be armed with his affidavits and testimonials and what will we have for him? Absolutely nothing.”

“Ah, there’s the first rub. I can hardly say that my wife might be the heiress, or that it might be me, or that it could be the subject of a long legal action with the prospect that Ruth will inherit. That is about the last thing I could possibly tell him!”

“You have seen a lawyer just to ensure that Mr Lancaster is not wrong?”

“Yes, damn it!” exclaimed Roger. “I have seen two, both prominent gentlemen in their field, though I could not risk consulting one in London. The story was the same. Lancaster is right and it could take years to resolve if it is contested. One advised that I should start proceedings now in my name or Victoria’s, but I cannot do that as that would make the whole affair public and all confidence would be gone. Had I known this was going to be the outcome I would have had Lucy keep that old skinflint alive for a further few months. And she could become another problem if it all falls through, especially if she learns that Ruth might inherit.”

“You don’t think we could go to the market now?”

“No. It’s too soon as we need to publicise all that Angelo is bringing back with him. In addition, someone might just call our bluff over the backing. I tried to get a statement from Lancaster to the effect that the missing Will favours my wife, but he would not come across.”

“And forgery is out of the question?”

“I have considered that, but if Lancaster found out he would challenge the document and even if he did not succeed, it would damage credibility. No, the only answer is to find the Will.”

“Or Ruth’s other uncle could fall ill, or have a nasty accident!”

“It could well come to that. Do not think for one moment that it is not an option I have not thought about as I racked myself to find an answer. I have thought of everything you could imagine including some of the blackest thoughts that perhaps you could not imagine. And it does not matter how I approach the problem, it always comes back to the same one person. Ruth!”

“Ruth?” exclaimed Matthew. “Why her?”

“Because at the end of the day she is the key,” said Roger, leaning forward. “And Matthew, my dear chap, you are going to marry her!”

“Me? Marry Ruth? That’s preposterous!”

“It might sound it, but it appears to be the only way. With me married to one sister and you to the other, we have the Mottram fortune in our hands even if it is initially only on paper. That might be all we need for the present. It is the answer.”

“It is hardly an acceptable answer. I would have been more than happy to marry Victoria, but Ruth?”

“Well, Victoria is already married and she will not be around long enough to marry again. And, as for Ruth, you do not have to retain her for any longer a time than I shall my wife. I would marry her myself but it would look like bigamy unless I was bereaved, and I doubt that Ruth would readily accept a proposal from me in the wake of her sister’s funeral. No, it has to be you, and it has to be whilst Victoria still draws breath. In fact, you need to marry her quickly before anyone else does on the strength of her possible inheritance. She will soon become known as a young lady of great expectations.”

“But, to marry Ruth?”

“There is no other way,” hissed Roger. “And it is rather neat as it ties up them both. Ruth does not know of our connection so she will not be suspicious if you approach her. Then what ever way this inheritance business goes, we have it covered.”

“But there’s still the problem of the timing as far as the venture goes. If that runs against us I will have married Ruth for nothing.”

“Well, that’s a risk we will have to take. I could well have married Victoria for nothing. It is not permanent. Perhaps it would look odd if they were to pass on too close to one another, but that’s a detail.”

“And what if she won’t have me? What if there is someone else?”

“If there is someone else,” said Roger, “we will have to remove him. And you will have to ensure that she will have you. She has always been favourably placed towards you, has she not?”

“I suppose so,” said Matthew. “But I am not sure that it ever ran to marriage.”

“In which case we will have to ensure that she is of a mind to marry. First, I think I can use Victoria to ingratiate yourself with her.”

“But Victoria barely knows me.”

“She will not need to know you, Matthew, not for what I have in mind.”

“And what if Ruth is not of the marrying kind?”

“All women are of the marrying kind if you treat them properly,” said Roger. “It’s the ones which don’t leave a chap alone which are the real problem. Have you any more obstacles you would like to throw in our way?”

“Only that we had better tie this all up before Angelo gets to hear of this as he will be beside himself when he does.”

“Angelo!” said Roger, leaning back. “I must not forget Angelo. Now, it would never do if he were to make contact with Ruth. A few words from her might rend the whole plan from end to end. And there could be a real risk of him interfering once he is back in the country.”

“A very real risk. You could almost guarantee it! That is why I said we would have to tie all this up before he returns which leaves us very little time. No, it is impossible!”

“Nothing is impossible,” said Roger.

“But he is absolutely besotted with her. At least he was before he left. He even went around to her lodgings in Lambeth and stood in the snow outside her window on New Year’s Day. He knows where she lives so there is every chance that he may do it again.”

“As we cannot control Angelo, we will have to ensure that Ruth will not see him or, if she should meet him, she must be absolutely hostile to everything he says, does or is.”

“How on earth will you achieve that?” asked Matthew.

“I will not achieve anything. Ruth would never once listen to me, take my advice or believe what I say. But she may believe you concerning some things and she will certainly believe her sister. If both of you happen to say the same thing, perhaps in slightly different ways, perhaps even slightly contradictory of one-another, she will believe. She will believe that black is white and day is night if it is put to her properly, and by the right people.”

“So, what am I supposed to say?”

“Nothing just for the next few days. I have the outline of an idea forming which will take care of all our problems, but it will have to be allowed time if it is to succeed. Yes, if we tell Angelo that we are delaying the floatation until the late Spring we should just have enough. I think the first move is down to me, and then it is all up to Victoria.”