

## Chapter Eighteen

### *A Meeting with Victoria*

Ruth was delighted to receive a hand-delivered letter from her sister within a week of her return to her lodgings in Lambeth. She recognised the handwriting on the envelope immediately and opened it with excitement. Clearly the funeral had a salutary effect on Victoria and had brought her to her senses! There was no doubt in Ruth's mind that this was a letter of reconciliation, but it soon became clear, as she read the first few words, that her sister had other things on her mind:

“Dearest Ruth

I have had great difficulty in both writing this note and in having it brought to you. It was by sheer luck that I encountered a mutual acquaintance, who I shall not name at this time, who was both willing and able to secrete it about her person and accept the risk to her person that discovery might bring. Even as I write this, however, I have no certainty that it will be delivered into your hands. I pray to God that it shall.

You may have realised at our uncle's funeral that my life is much changed. I was not aware of the whole truth until Roger told me matters which have thus far been concealed from me. I cannot risk repeating these things here as surely it would place you in jeopardy as it has me. But I must meet with you, dear Sister. I desperately need to see you and to tell you of the wicked things that are perpetrated against me and my beloved husband.

It will not be easy as I am watched all the time and I do not know who I can trust. I have asked to ride in the carriage in Hyde Park on Tuesday next at two of the afternoon. Can you be there? If I see you I will stop the carriage and dismount, saying that I wish to walk a while. Do not approach me or the carriage until I lower my parasol as we cannot know who will be present. And do not reply to this message as there is no knowing into whose hands it may fall. Oh, and show it to absolutely no-one as we do not know who in London there is we may trust.

Please, please try to be there, dearest Ruth. I long to see you and I am so very, very afraid at what may be about to happen.

Your loving sister,

Victoria”

Ruth read and re-read the letter several times, dwelling on the words, trying to picture some scenario which would explain the matters that gave rise to the fears her sister expressed. The writer in her was curious and already active. The sister in her was alarmed, and foremost in her mind was whether something had actually happened since the funeral to prompt her sister to write as anything she had to say could have been said at Hazleton Court. Yet there was Roger's outlandish behaviour to consider. Supposing, she told herself, just supposing he was aware of what ever it was that Victoria was now fearful of, but she was not at the time? Then she would have taken him to task, and he would have told her everything, hence the letter! But did he know she had written it? And what could it possibly be that would provoke

such a missal? There was no question that she would have to be in the Park on Tuesday at the appointed hour.

Ruth did exactly as she had been bade and told no-one of the contents of the note. Mrs Tucker had, of course, seen it and was naturally curious. Ruth told her that it was from her sister, expressing her sadness at the passing of the uncle who had made such a fuss of her and been so generous towards her. There had been a bond developed between them, and Victoria felt the loss more acutely than others might. That story satisfied both the landlady and the two teachers who, after her first day back, were more concerned with the next instalment of the novel than they were over her loss.

Mr Spruce, however, was very interested in the untimely passing of the Earl. "It may have repercussions in the City," he explained.

"As far as I understand, my uncle's business will be conducted as normal," Ruth told him. "At least until the problems over the Will are resolved."

"Problems over the Will? What are they?"

"I am not sure that I should tell you," she said, defensively. "They are matters that concern my family and no-one else."

"Oh, I am not certain that is the case," said the City Editor. "I can understand your feelings at such a time but there are hundreds who have money invested in the Earl's companies and thousands who depend upon them for their living. I think the future of the Earl's business interests could be viewed as a matter of considerable public concern."

"It is just that my uncle repudiated his earlier Will and made a new one, but this new one cannot be found. My other uncle, his solicitor and the sole executor has talked of an application to the Court of Chancery if it is not found."

"So even the title is not determined?"

"No, my uncle said an application might have to be made concerning that as well."

"That would be to the Court of Chivalry," said Mr Spruce, "if my understanding of such matters is correct. How very interesting!"

"I do not find it at all interesting. I find it upsetting and very disturbing. My cousin has already said that he will contest any application to Chancery that does not favour him."

"Yes, your cousin. I was going to ask whether this may upset his plans?"

"Not as far as I am aware," said Ruth, flatly.

The following Tuesday dawned bright though chilly. It was a day which, coming in the wake of a severe winter, provoked an unusual number of riders and carriages in the Park and it was quite crowded when Ruth arrived. She scanned the length of the Row but could not see her sister so she walked along the edge of the track, acknowledging complete strangers as they passed and wondering if a single one of them knew who she was or whether they had read any of her work. Perhaps she should have a banner to carry, or a notice placed around her neck, saying "I am Ruth Mottram". That might have brought her more attention but, then, her sister, by her account, was trying to remain anonymous. Perhaps she should think of doing so as well?

She was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she did not see the open carriage until it was virtually upon her. There was Victoria leaning forward to say something to the driver. Clearly she had spotted her! But suddenly the carriage lurched forward as the driver spurred the horses on and Victoria was thrown back in her seat. "Victoria!" Ruth cried as it rattled past so close to her that she was forced to take a step backwards. For a moment she hesitated, looking after it in astonishment. Then she lifted her skirts and started to pursue it as fast as she could. She would have been no match for the carriage had it not been brought to a halt by the crowding at the end of the Row. As she rushed towards it, Ruth could see her sister standing and struggling with the door. She thought that the driver turned and caught hold of Victoria, restraining her. Then, as suddenly as before, the carriage lurched forward into a gap. Victoria tumbled back, out of her sight, and was gone.

Ruth stood for several minutes alone in the Park, brimming with indignation and fear. She thought to go straight to the house, but she knew she would not gain admission. If she made a scene, someone would call a constable and what could she say? She did not even have her sister's note with her to produce as evidence. Furthermore, it would not be becoming for

her, who now had something of a name to protect, to become involved in even a minor fracas. Indeed, on the strength of Victoria's note it was reasonable to assume that any appearance by her might threaten her sister. Why else would she have not invited her to the house rather than try and arrange a clandestine meeting in the Park? It seemed that there was nothing she could do or no-one she could turn to. She had no option but to wait and hope that Victoria made contact again.

It was something that played heavily on Ruth's mind for the next few days. She found it hard to concentrate and continually asked herself if there was more she could do, whether she should take the risk of calling to see Victoria. She could do so in all innocence, simply saying that she had come to visit her sister. She would even have a card printed! It came as a great relief to receive a second note from her sister, again delivered by hand, by a young, pretty, dark-haired girl, Mrs Tucker reported. It was written in pretty much the same vein as the first:

"My dearest Ruth

I am so terribly, terribly, sorry about the incident in the Park but it serves only to illustrate the difficulties I and my dear husband face. I spoke to Roger about it immediately and he confirmed that the coachman was acting on the orders of another. It is of him that I must speak to you. I have Roger's consent to a further meeting between us. If you come to the end of Robert Street furthest from the park and cross the road you will find a narrow path leading down the side of St James' Chapel. Beyond there is a garden where it should be safe for us to meet. Wait for me there at three in the afternoon of this coming Friday. I will try and slip out unobserved, but do not be alarmed if I am a few minutes late. Come alone, and take care that none follows you for he has spies and agents everywhere. Do, do, do try to be there, dearest Ruth, so that I can inform you of the parlous condition I find myself in.

Your loving sister

Victoria."

This letter contained a new ingredient. Victoria referred to a "man" who appeared to have some influence over some of the servants they engaged as well as engaging his own. It could not be Roger, as she had referred to him as her "darling". It was someone else, someone who was powerful and influential enough to wield this degree of control and so affect her sister's life. Cautiously she asked Mr Spruce if he had any fresh intelligence as to who Roger's business associates were.

"Why do you ask?" he said. "I was hoping that you might tell me that."

"Oh, nothing important," she said evasively.

"Nothing important? You are not given to asking questions that are unimportant, Miss Mottram. That is what is so surprisingly refreshing about you as a woman. You are concentrated and very focused. No vainglorious or evil gossip for you. No boudoir confidences or amorous adventures. Just business. So why do you ask?"

"Just that something has happened," she said, conscious that she was colouring.

"Ah! I like it when you blush. I know that something is up."

"It is not something that I can talk about," she added, hastily. She was already regretting involving the City Editor in her sister's affairs. What was it Victoria had written? He has spies and agents everywhere? If that was true, how did she know she could trust Mr Spruce? "It is, if you like, a kind of lead which I feel compelled to follow up, but I am not entirely certain how to tackle it."

"You could try it out on me."

"It is nothing," she said, trying to sound casual. "Just something I have heard, been told, completely uncorroborated. I need to investigate further, a lot further. I still recall the lecture I received on reporting the truth."

“Very well,” he said, looking at her closely. “I can remind you that there is a said-to-be eminent South American lawyer engaged by your brother-in-law who is also said to be on his way back to this country at this very moment with statements and the like of the work for the venture that has been carried out thus far. But like so many other things surrounding this venture, he is shrouded in a degree of mystery. Much more than that I do not know. As for your lead, come and talk to me when you are ready.”

The day of their meeting was dull and overcast with clouds that hung low in the sky, giving everything a sense of gloom. Despite having Victoria’s directions, Ruth had some difficulty in being certain about the path that she was to take beside the Chapel. She stopped and asked for guidance twice, feeling that it was better to risk this rather than fail in her quest to meet her sister. It lay beyond a closed, wrought iron gate which looked to the uninformed as if it were simply a private access. Weeds grew up around the gate, indicating that it was infrequently used, but it opened to her touch. The path then wound its way between the walls of the Chapel and the adjoining building, turning this way and that, until it suddenly opened out into the gardens, hemmed in by buildings, that Victoria had described. Had she not had the directions she would never have guessed they were there.

Before her the path split and darted off past shrubs, beneath trees, and between gravestones and ornamental sepulchres. Clearly it had been an ancient cemetery which, being hallowed ground, could not be built over. On that day, below the dark, grey, sky it looked and felt eerie, and had she not been meeting her sister Ruth probably would have ventured no further. This was not, she thought, the kind of place where she would chose to wander or sit alone!

To her relief, Victoria was already there, veiled and dressed in black, sat on a wooden bench in front of a large grey tomb in which, due to uneven settlement, large, gaping, cracks had appeared. If they became any larger, Ruth thought, something might escape. “This is a strange place to chose for our meeting,” she said. “I am not at all sure that I like it here, amongst all the graves and tombs.”

“Were you followed?” hissed Victoria through the veil, looking beyond her sister to the entrance.

“Followed?” said Ruth, feeling guilty as she had forgotten completely the point that Victoria had made in her letter. “Why should I have been?”

“It is as I said in my message. It is dreadful, Ruth! He has spies everywhere and he must not know that we have met.”

“There is no one here but us,” said Ruth.

“I am watched and followed, and there is every possibility that you are too.”

“Watched, followed, spies? Who is this man?”

“This man? Oh, he is an awful, wicked man. You cannot imagine for one moment of time how dreadful it is. And I am so afraid of what he may do, or have done. He has some kind of hold over Roger. I am certain of it, and it can make him so beastly and quite unreasonable! And would you believe that I am no longer mistress in my own house? I have been relieved of all my duties, everyone of them. Roger says it is to ease the pressure upon me during these trials. Lucy has taken over everything!”

“Lucy? Do you mean our Lucy, from Hazleton Court?”

“Roger has brought her to London, but she now has the keys and controls the housekeeping, pays the servants, distributes the linen, and I do none of this. There is more, though, Ruth, much more, things that I am not sure that I should tell you. Do you know that he goes to her room at night?”

“Victoria!”

“He does! I am sure of it. I have heard him. I have heard them, together. He does not visit mine anymore on account of what has happened to me. He says that is good enough reason.”

“Oh, Victoria! This cannot be!”

“Of course it can be!” said Victoria, firmly. “It is exactly as I say. So much has changed since our wedding. He has changed. I have changed. Our life together has changed.

And there are now the days when I feel so terribly ill, as if I am going to die. You are sure that you were not followed?"

"I am absolutely sure that I was not," said Ruth. "Look! As I said there is no-one here but you and me."

"And the dead," said her sister, darkly. "I feel that I will be numbered amongst them shortly."

"Victoria!" scolded Ruth. "You should never say something like that. You should never think such things, let alone say them!"

"Well. I am afraid that I do and I cannot stop myself for thinking thus. There are days when I think Roger would wish to be rid of me because of what I have become, and intends to be so. I do not think he will have long in waiting."

"I am sure that this is all in your imagination," said Ruth. "But let us go back to the beginning and start over again. You shall tell me everything. Now, for a start, who is this man you talk of, who you appear to be afraid of?"

"Who is he?" said Victoria with a shudder. "Oh, Ruth, you should ask me what is he! He is the very epitome of evil. He is Satan himself."

"What is his name?"

"His name? Do not be fooled by his name! He is a foreigner. He is Spanish or something, perhaps South American. I do not know. I do not like foreigners, do you? I do not trust them."

"What is his name?" persisted Ruth.

"Angelo Calaceli," said Victoria, slowly. "Roger says he appears to be a lawyer by profession, but that is simply a mask he wears for respectability. He is behind it all. And he has some control over Roger who appears to be almost completely under his power. What it is that he has done and this man knows about he will not say, but there is something, I am sure of it."

"This man, is he about thirty, dark, of average height and not unhandsome?"

"Most foreigners are," muttered Victoria.

"Because I think I recognise the name. I am sure I encountered him one day at Hazleton Court. He was leaving uncle's sitting room as I was arriving, late as it was, to read to him. I am sure that was the man."

"I expect he was there to blackmail uncle over something he did in the past. That is the way he works. He finds out what skeletons people have stored in their cupboards and extorts money or services from them in payment for his silence. I suppose being a lawyer puts him in a better position to find out these things."

"I cannot believe that he would have attempted to blackmail uncle. I cannot imagine that uncle would have done anything that he could be vulnerable to being blackmailed about! He said at the time that it was to do with Roger's business."

"He would," said Victoria. "It was probably true. I do not know how long Roger has been one of the victims, but that is the way he works. Outwardly he is a respectable business man, but all the time he is building, controlling and using this network of spies, informers and assassins. When he has enough information on his chosen victim, he strikes. He is a venomous serpent, Ruth, and once you have been poisoned by him, there is no escape. That's what Roger says. His agents are everywhere. You must be watchful for them and no-one can be trusted. Least of all can you risk meeting and talking with him!"

"You may rest assured that I am not likely to!" said Ruth.

"Roger mentioned that this man has taken an interest in you of late. He has been asking questions about you, now that you are successful. This is partly why I was so anxious to see you, to warn you against him. This man is very dangerous, Ruth, and you never know who he has ensnared to carry out his villainous activities."

"I cannot see how I should be at risk from him or from anyone else. What have I that anyone else might want? No, you need to have no concern on my behalf. But I am concerned for you. But you say that Roger brought Lucy up to London on account of what has happened to you? What do you mean?"

"Roger says that I am delicate," Victoria said, evasively.

“Delicate? You, Victoria? You were never delicate.”

“The doctor says it is partly the London air, and the strain of running the household, but he does not know about the conspiracy or he is part of it. It makes little difference. They are all conspirators, Ruth, every one of them. There is no-one here that I may trust other than you.”

“Oh, it cannot be that bad, Victoria!”

“It is that bad, Ruth! I am telling you!” said Victoria, coming close to tears. “And the worst of it is that there is not a single thing I can do. I am trapped, hopelessly swept along by events and actions I do not understand and over which I have no control. My little ship is being driven onto the rocks and I have no hope of escape or rescue.”

“But why, Victoria? What is this all about? What is at the root of it? Is it the question of the inheritance? Should I contact Uncle Lancaster?”

“No!” said Victoria, sharply. “You should speak to no-one, least of all him. Roger says he is very suspicious as to what Uncle Lancaster did with the missing Will.”

“What he did? What did he do?”

“Well, there is this business of it being lost. Is that not strange? Is it nor strange that uncle should revoke his earlier Will and make a new one? And what part did this man play in all this? You saw him there, visiting uncle! Within a few weeks a new Will is made and now it cannot be found. It is another conspiracy. That man is at the back of it and Uncle Lancaster is involved!”

“I do not know what to say,” said Ruth.

“But what should I do? I thought of running away, but how? And where would I go? I even thought of simply walking away, you know just picking a direction and walking until one drops. I could not go to someone who knew me, such as you or mother as they would find me. And then there’s other problems.”

“Surely you could go to a hotel or boarding house? They would be unlikely to find you there.”

“Where would I go, Ruth? And I have no money.”

“What about the allowance that uncle gave you? Why should you not draw on that? I should suffice to meet any need you can think of. My goodness, I am to get by on a much smaller weekly sum.”

“I do not have it anymore,” said Victoria, lowly. “I made it over to Roger in its entirety to help him fight this man. I no longer have access to the income.”

“Oh, Victoria!” exclaimed Ruth.

“In any event, I could not leave Roger. He may be cruel on occasions but I do love him and I do not think I could live without him. You would say exactly the same if you were in my place.”

Ruth did not reply. The truth was that she did not know what she could say. She longed to be able to speak her mind and tell her sister that she was being foolish and that she should flee to a safe haven, anywhere, and without her husband, but who was she to attempt to separate them. Perhaps at the root of her concern was a lingering doubt as to the veracity of what her sister was saying. Could she really accept that there was this man, this evil man, who was affecting her life to this extent. Could she really simply take her sister’s uncorroborated word for it?

“I had to talk to you about it, Ruth,” Victoria was saying. “There is no-one else I can talk to or trust. What am I to do?”

“I do not know what to advise,” said Ruth, slowly. “I will have to think about it and perhaps seek wiser counsel.” She had no-one in particular in mind when she said this, but Victoria clearly feared the worst.

“No!” she said sharply. “You must not talk about it to anyone, not even mother. It is not safe. You do not know who it may be to whom you are talking or what their connections are. I am beginning to wonder if I am even wise to say any of this to you!”

“Oh, Vicky,” said Ruth. “You know you can trust me above anyone in the World. If that is what you want I will tell no-one of this conversation, but if we do not speak to someone how are we to procure any assistance?”

"I so not know," said Victoria. "Ruth, there is one more thing, something that I have hinted at, one more handicap, one more tribulation that I face. I am not sure that I should even show you, but it is this!" She lifted her veil to reveal her face. Her normally peach-coloured skin was disfigured with a number of small, irregular, blotches which varied in shade from scarlet to violet.

"Oh, Victoria!" exclaimed Ruth. "What has happened? Has someone beat you? Has Roger done this?"

"No-one has done this," said Victoria, wretchedly. "They have just appeared over the last few days. I have a similar rashes elsewhere on my body. The doctors say that it is not catching and that it is due to an allergic reaction brought on by my nerves. But it frightens me, Ruth. What is happening to me?"

"Perhaps they are right?"

"But I cannot appear in public or entertain looking like a leper. You suggest fleeing to a haven. Who would admit me looking like this?" She lowered the veil and stood. "Now, I have told you everything, probably far more than I should have. You promise that you will not divulge a single word to anyone, Ruth? Promise?"

"I promise," said Ruth. "Shall I walk with you back to your house?"

"No," said her sister, firmly. "It would be better if we are not seen together. The house is watched. I have no doubt of that."

"Perhaps I could write to you then?"

"No. Do not write. All my mail is intercepted and I am not sure that I receive all of it any more. If you have anything to say, do not put it in writing."

"But, Victoria, how am I to contact you?"

"It is perhaps better that you do not," said Victoria, gripping Ruth's hands and kissing her on the cheek. "I will endeavour to get a message to you and arrange a further meeting when it is safe to do so. We have managed it this time. Pray God we can manage it again. Now, dearest sister, I must go before I am missed and there is trouble on that account. Remember, it is not safe to talk to anyone, and do be very careful."

"You will contact me?" said Ruth.

"As soon as it is safe to do so," Victoria, and turned and walked away. Ruth watched her figure right up to the point where she disappeared between the buildings. She waited a full ten minutes then left by the same way as her sister, fearful that she might find her prostrate on the path or in the street, but she did not. However, she did not fully relax and feel safe until she was back in her rooms in Lambeth.

Even then, perhaps understandably, she could not dispel what Victoria had told her from her thoughts. Instead of working on the current short story she found herself sat, looking at her uncle's image. "What should I do?" she asked the empty room. "What should I believe?" It was true that the longer she sat there, the smaller became the amount of her sister's story that she was prepared to give credence. Yet there were facts, things she knew to be true, that could be cited in support. It was undoubtedly true that the man her sister feared had visited her uncle and she still recalled the look in his eyes as he passed her on his way to the door. Perhaps even then he had taken an interest in her? Surely what her uncle had told her concerning his visit was the whole truth. Yet her uncle had dismissed him. Perhaps there was more?

And the new Will *had* been made after this man's visit and then it *had* disappeared. That had happened after only two people were aware of its contents! One was now dead. The other could well have concealed the fact that he had both the original and the copy in his possession, and then destroyed them both. Uncle Lancaster could hardly have admitted to such an action. She would not accept Victoria's suggestion that he was in some way bound into a conspiracy. If he had destroyed the Will it was because, under the criminal influence of this man, the Earl had included provisions against his will, and this was Uncle Lancaster's way of frustrating this aim. This all sounded plausible to her except for the fact that the man would have insisted on having a copy of the amended Will himself and would have produced it by now. Unless, of course, Uncle Lancaster had somehow managed to withhold it from him!

There were other matters that demanded explanation. There was the incident in the Park when it was clear that her sister was deliberately prevented from dismounting from the carriage and meeting her. And there was the bringing of Lucy up from the country to take over the running of the London house. Perhaps it was to relieve her sister from the stress but Ruth had her doubts. What was the real reason for this?

Above all, there was the change in Victoria herself. No-one would have recognised the bright-eyed beauty who had so dazzled and danced away the night at the Earl's Ball, or the vain, irritating but loveable creature who had fussed over her ribbons and bows. In a matter of months all traces of the sister she knew and had grown up with had disappeared. Was this the work, too, of this man?

"Oh, Uncle," she addressed the Earl's image. "How I need your guidance now! Who is there that I can talk to concerning what Victoria has told me?" She could not talk to Mrs Tucker as helpful as the good woman would like to be, this was not a problem for which she would be likely to have a solution. She could rule out her fellow lodgers on much the same ground. She simply did not trust Mr Spruce and she was not on close enough terms with Mr Braithwaite to take the problem to him. Next to her mother, perhaps the only two people who she thought she would have trusted were Mr Twigg and her Uncle Lancaster, but even if she were to disregard her sister's veto, they were both some hundred miles distant. No matter how she addressed the problem it appeared that there was nothing that she could do to affect it.