

Chapter Twenty

Unwelcomed Developments but a Welcomed Guest at Luncheon

When she reached the safety of her own room later that afternoon, Ruth felt very nervous. Her hands were trembling when she came to write and she found herself compelled to lay down the pen and try to compose herself. She had gone further than she had intended that day. She had spent the whole week debating whether she should say anything to Matthew about what her sister had told her. To do so was a breach of the promise she had made to Victoria. Yet when she had been put to the test, she had failed miserably. She might have been able to excuse herself had she been put to the torture, stretched on the rack, or threatened with burning coals, but everything she had told him she had said voluntarily. The truth was she would have said even more but for the check she placed upon herself. She had not only told him about the man that Victoria feared, but had also mentioned her sister's illness. Having found someone in which to confide she should have felt better. A trouble shared is a trouble halved, she told herself. Yet here she was and she felt far worse!

She was frightened. She was frightened that this Angelo Calaceli would hear of Matthew's enquiries and take retribution against him and against her sister. He might be out of the Country, but he would have left someone there in charge. His vile business would still be conducted, even in his absence. All this would happen, and it would all be due to her.

There was more that concerned her that was just beginning to reveal itself. Too much was happening, and too quickly. Quite suddenly, her life which had been following a quiet and controlled path towards some form of literary success was spinning out of control and she could see no steps that she could take to bring it back on course. It was all very well for the ladies downstairs in the sitting room to gossip about "Ruth's young man", or for Mrs Tucker to invite him to luncheon, but where would this lead? It was all happening too quickly and she had lost control.

She entered on one of the longest weeks of her life. Whereas during the previous week she was simply looking forward to seeing Matthew on the coming Sunday, now she found herself viewing their pending meeting with a mixture of fear and dread. She should never have told him what she knew, nor agreed to his involvement! She wondered how he was spending his week. No doubt he was busy. It was possible that he would not even be able to find the time to make the enquiries! What would she do if he appeared on Sunday brimming with apologies? But she was sure that he would not be sharing her concerns. He had not heard Victoria, nor seen her. If he had, he would be as worried as she was!

But nothing unusual happened that week. Matthew did not contact her. She did not receive another message from her sister. Nor, as far as she could be sure, was she followed or being observed. There was the point that Victoria had made. This man could have spies anywhere. Mr Spruce could be one. Anyone who worked at the All Saints works could be in his employ. It was even possible that he could have recruited either of the teachers who daily sat down at the table with her, or even Mrs Tucker who placed their meals before them! Yet it was a normal week, during which one thought surfaced above all the others. She had no doubt that whatever the outcome, she desperately wanted to see Matthew Fayrbrother again.

As the days of that week eased by, Ruth found her thoughts turning more and more away from her sister's troubles and to what he might be doing, or thinking. Did he think much of her? Was he thinking of her even now as she was thinking of him? She felt guilty when she realised that she had fully occupied the little stage on which they performed and that he had been able to tell her little about what he was doing or how he came to be in London. All she had done, in the relatively brief periods they had spent together, was burden him with her responsibilities! What could he think of her? And how brusquely she had treated him in rejecting his suggestion of a day at the seaside! What could he think of her?

"Matthew!" she breathed as she crossed the road to where he stood bathed in the late morning sunlight. "Before you say a word may I enquire whether anything is changed in the arrangement that you should come to luncheon? I must warn you that my companions are most curious that we should know one-another and are like to severely cross-examine you!"

"Will it please you that I can say that nothing has changed and that I would be pleased to come? As for the cross-examination, I am sure it cannot be worse than a Medical Council Board." Ruth returned to where Mrs Tucker and the teachers were standing and told them that they would both be there, at the table, in not less than thirty minutes. From the glee on Miss Cramm's face Ruth had no doubt that she would be spending the next half hour in sharpening her questions.

"I do have news for you, Ruth," he said when she rejoined him. "I am afraid that none of it is good. I say this because I fear that you should prepare yourself."

"What has happened?" she said with alarm. "What have you discovered?"

"Let me start with our South American lawyer. In fact he is not a South American, but an Italian. Yes, say my contacts in the Metropolitan Police Force, this man is a lawyer and a business man. But when you probe below the surface they say he is has been involved in fraud, embezzlement, blackmail, theft, and much more. He has been associated with a number of deaths although none has been directly attributed to him. His name keeps arising, as one of them put it. They say that he is very clever in the way he operates, in that it has always been very difficult for the authorities to bring charges against him, although they would dearly like to. But they are in no doubt, he is a very dangerous man who has built up an large and effective criminal empire, and one who poses an significant threat whether he is here or whether he is not. Their advice to me is to keep you well away from him. There is little that can be done for your sister or her husband if they are already in his grips."

"Oh dear Lord!" Ruth exclaimed. "What shall I do?"

"I did ask such a question. My contacts think that if Calaceli has an interest in your sister and brother-in-law, it can only be on account of the venture they are involved in. I have learnt that it also concerns South America which may explain how this man became involved. Obviously I know little of the details, but your brother-in-law or his associates may have approached him in all innocence in the first place. And it may be that he intends neither of them any personal harm. They say he is like a snake which strikes only when threatened, but when he does, he is deadly."

"But surely they can do something, the Police?"

"They are completely powerless until a crime is committed and they have someone who is prepared to testify. I should tell you that no-one as yet has lived to testify against Signor Calaceli in the handful of charges that have been brought against him. I cannot speak for your brother-in-law or even for your sister should she have evidence of the kind that will stand in court under close examination, but I think my advice would be to think very carefully before they follow such a course. This man sees any move against him as a personal vendetta. He can wreak his revenge on all the members of the family."

"My uncle!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Your uncle?"

"Oh, it cannot possible be so!" she said, distraught, shaking her head.

"What cannot be, Ruth?"

"My uncle turned this man down. He went to him with some business proposition although I do not know exactly what was said, but my uncle dismissed him. I know, because I was there at the time. And then, a couple of months later, my uncle is dead."

"But he did die of natural causes, did you not tell me, Ruth?" said Matthew, sounding slightly alarmed.

"He could have been poisoned," she said, lowly. "It came as a great shock at the time as he was recovering so well. Do you think he could have been poisoned by this man or an agent of his?"

"I clearly cannot say. I do know from my teaching and personal observation that when a poison affects one or more of the body's vital organs, the victim may appear to

recover but then will pass away suddenly when the organ fails. But if what you are saying could be true, it would demonstrate the kind of threat that this man can pose."

"And there is Victoria's illness! Could that be this man as well?"

"Ah! I was going to come to the matter concerning your sister in the fullness of time," said Matthew, gravely. "But first we should deal with the question of Signor Calaceli. I think I have learned enough to satisfy me that he is a most dangerous man. My immediate concern is for your safety. I want you to be vigilant at all times. If anything unusual happens, if you see anyone observing you, following you, or if you receive any communication from this man or one of his henchmen, I would ask you to contact me immediately. Will you?"

"And you must promise me," he continued, "that you will not become involved in the business concerning your brother-in-law as that will only put you at greater risk and may increase the risk to him and your sister. Above all I want you to promise that you will not, under any circumstances, approach or communicate with this man. He is evil, Ruth, and you must keep yourself away from him."

"I can assure you that I have no intention whatsoever of venturing anywhere near him. I still do not understand why he should have any interest in me."

"He may try to bring pressure on your brother-in-law by threatening you. I don't know. He is renown, if that is the way to describe it, for the pressure he can bring to bear on his victims and the way he can manipulate people. It is said that his influence has extended as high as Royalty!"

"About Victoria?" she prompted.

"Ah, yes, Victoria. I think you should prepare yourself for unwelcomed news, Ruth. I have seen and talked to her physician. In a way it is fortunate that he was at Edinburgh as well as I and we understandably have acquaintances there in common. He worked under James Lister and he is a doctor whose opinion I respect and accept. He was very frank with me, as I must be with you. She has lost a child."

"Victoria has miscarried?" said Ruth, aghast. "Oh, I must go to see her this very afternoon!"

"I would advise against that, Ruth. I do not want to sound brutish or cruel, but there are sound medical reasons why you should not immediately and why, when you do next visit your sister, you must be very careful in what you say."

"I do not understand! Of course I must go as she will need me. And I must write to my mother as she must be told!"

"Ruth, Ruth! I do understand your concern, believe me, but what I have to say to you and the advice I have to give you are totally in your sister's interests and none other. I have more that must be said, but I fear that if you told your landlady that we would attend her table in thirty minutes, we are in danger of being gravely late."

"Oh!" she said, feeling confused. "Is it time already?"

"It is. We can continue this matter after we have eaten and I have paid my respects to your companion lodgers and our hostess."

The luncheon that Sunday, which had been the one shining star in Ruth's week, was a morbid ordeal for her. Whilst Matthew regaled Mrs Tucker and the two teachers with an account of how his father, reluctantly, had paid for him to follow in his footsteps and sent him to Edinburgh to study medicine, Ruth sat silent, her head lowered, preoccupied with thought, barely listening. She perhaps heard no more than the occasional word of his favourite anecdotes, or his more sombre description of the practice he had there, across the river. These were all things that she had looked forward to hearing, that she wanted to hear, but which, on the occasion of their telling she was deaf to. She did not notice the glances that were exchanged across the table, the raising of eyebrows or the shoulders that were shrugged in response. Matthew did see all this, and knew what was in their minds. "Ruth, dearest," he said. "Should I tell them?"

She was stung by the word he used. At any other time, even if she was secretly thrilled by "dearest", she would have soundly rebuked him for his presumption, but this day she felt neither excitement nor outrage. But she saw the excitement and anticipation that his question caused amongst the other ladies present. Clearly they thought that something else

was afoot, and she would have to see them disillusioned. "I am sorry," she began, with a pronounced quiver in her voice, "if I feel and appear out of sorts. I had hoped that this would have been a merry, joyous, occasion for us all, but Matthew has had to impart serious news concerning my sister and I fear that on her account I am spoiling everyone else's enjoyment."

"I should have mentioned it earlier," said Matthew, gravely, "but Ruth's sister has been taken ill. I am afraid that I was in the middle of telling her of it when it was time for lunch. I trust you will excuse me when I suggest that we should not discuss the matter further or press her for the details now."

"Oh, Miss Mottram!" exclaimed Mrs Tucker. "You poor dear. Why did you nor say so earlier? We all here are your friends, your very good friends, and there was us, laughing and joking and being so entertained as to not realise that you would not be so far withdrawn from us unless it was on account of something of a most serious nature." Her sentiments were echoed by both of the teachers.

"I thank you all," said Ruth, hesitantly. "I did not want to spoil this occasion for all of you, but it appears that my sister's marriage has brought nothing but misfortune for her in its wake."

"Marriage does that to a woman," said Mrs Tucker, authoritatively.

"And there is nothing that I can do to help poor Victoria," said Ruth, looking down at the barely disturbed food on her plate.

"Well, I feel that I must assure you good ladies," said Matthew, "that when I marry I shall take the very best care of my wife in protecting her from the kind of problems that have beset Ruth's sister." This statement was met with approval from Mrs Tucker and the teachers, but there was no response from Ruth and he wondered whether she had heard his words.

"May we ask what is wrong with your sister?" asked Miss Cramm.

"I am not sure that this is an appropriate subject for the luncheon table," said Matthew, "especially on account of the fact that I have not been able to discuss this fully with Ruth."

"She is not one of your patients, is she, Miss Mottram's sister?" said Mrs Tucker, taking some pride in being able to address a professional man on what she considered to be professional matters at her dining table.

"Oh, no," he said. "Not at all. I am not sure whether it would be acceptable professional conduct if she were. It is certainly not advisable for husbands to treat their own wives." He caught Ruth looking at him and regretted the implications of his statement.

"But there is no family or marital connection between you and Miss Mottram's sister, is there?" asked Miss Stern.

"No," said Matthew, "not yet. Now, I think I must spend a short while with Ruth to complete telling her the facts about her sister's illness, and then," he went on, looking at Ruth and gauging her discomfort, "I would prescribe some rest as this will all be a shock to her system. I might even take leave to order that she should take it. Sleep is one of Nature's remedies."

"The two of you can use the privacy of the sitting room, if you like," said Mrs Tucker. "I am sure that none of us would find objection to that in the slightest, would we?"

"Oh, no!" said Miss Cramm and Miss Stern almost in unison.

"I am sorry," said Matthew as soon as they were alone in Mrs Tucker's sitting room. "I should have foreseen what was likely to be said and eased the pain for you."

"That is all right," said Ruth. "It was a subject that had to be aired. It might at well been now as at any other time."

"Well," said Matthew, thoughtfully, "I had better try and pick up where we left off. As I said, your sister has had a miscarriage. It is not her first. I understand that she had one at the end of last year."

"I had no idea," said Ruth slowly. "Victoria did not give me the slightest of hints."

"That is understandable. I need not dwell on the physiological effects such a thing may have on a woman. The problem with Victoria is that she developed a secondary infection."

"A secondary infection?" exclaimed Ruth. "In what way?"

"Like your uncle, although for absolutely different reasons, she has septicaemia, blood poisoning. The severity of her condition was not appreciated until last weekend when, without warning, she collapsed. Her doctor was called in, of course, and he is presently calling upon her two times a day. She is under constant medical supervision and there are strict instructions for him to be called should she deteriorate further. She is, I am afraid, very ill."

"Oh!" said Ruth. "This is the most dreadful news, especially coming as it does on top of that you told me earlier."

"I deeply regret that I have to be the bearer of such tidings, but I felt that you should know everything."

"Of course. You have been very thoughtful and I am deeply indebted to you. But I must go and see her immediately. She should have someone she knows at her bedside."

"No, Ruth. I am sorry, but as I think I said before, she is not permitted to receive visitors. Her doctor told me that when she recovered consciousness after her collapse your sister was incoherent and delirious. He had no option but to put her under sedation and proposes to keep her so until he is satisfied that she is recovering. I think I would have followed the same course myself although I might have recommended that she be transferred to a convalescent home in the country. However, I have not examined her myself and, in any event, her husband has decided to keep her in London for the present where she can receive the best treatment."

"You are telling me that Victoria is unconscious?" said Ruth, slowly.

"She is being sedated which means she is held just at the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness. He will keep her that way for most of the time. I would expect her to remain that way until the fever has passed."

"And I may not see her?"

"She must not be disturbed."

"But I must do something! I must write to mother and tell her."

"Of course you must do all that you think is fit," said Matthew, softly, "but will you first listen to my counsel? As Victoria is not permitted to receive any visitors, what could your mother do other than fret and worry? I am not sure that there is any purpose in informing her prematurely. Would it not be better to wait until Victoria is recovering? Then she will be able and be pleased to receive a visit from your mother, and you, of course. I think, were it my decision, I would not tell her, not yet. Of course if I was called upon to answer a direct question I would be compelled to tell her the truth, but not otherwise."

"But what if she becomes worse? What if she were to die? People do die of blood poisoning! My uncle did! What could I possible tell my mother were she to die and I had never told her that she was ill? Oh, do forgive me! I should not say such dreadful things, nor seem to reproach you for your advice."

"No, Ruth. I understand perfectly how you feel. You are quite right to challenge my advice and it is only right that you should feel that you should contact your mother. That would be the right thing to do in ninety-nine of one hundred cases. And there is nothing that I would rather tell you at this time other than that in my medical opinion your sister will make a full recovery, but I cannot say that. She is young and strong, and given plenty of carbolic she should pull through. But I cannot guarantee that she will and we have to face the possibility that given the effect this man has had on her, she may have no will for recovery. I have for the present agreed two things with her physician that may help. Firstly that he will send word to me if there is any dramatic change in her and, secondly, that he will let me have a weekly bulletin of her progress. And I will convey both to you at the earliest opportunity."

"This is the most dreadful thing I have ever heard," she said slowly. "And you are certain there is nothing I can do?"

"Ruth," he said softly, leaning forward and taking hold of her hands, "will you believe me when I tell you that if there was something you could do to assist your sister's recovery, I would have told you of it?"

"I know," she said, forcing a weak smile, "and I thank you for all you have done. It is just that I feel so helpless. I felt the same way when Uncle was dying and there was nothing that I could do except sit there and watch him slip away."

"There is nothing either of us can do at present, but pray for her recovery. As for our Italian South American, I will protect you from him by what ever means I have at my disposal!"

"Thank you for coming, Matthew," Ruth said as she stood with her hand on the door latch. "You have been very kind and thoughtful. I am only sorry that I have dragged you into this sad and worrying affair."

"That is nothing," he said. "It is a privilege to be of service to you. I only wish that there was more that I could do. Providing that nothing happens during the week, are you happy for me to meet you next weekend?"

"Of course!" she said. "You are the only friend I have in London at the present, perhaps the only true friend other than my uncle that ever I have had or could have wished for!"

He paused for a moment in thought and she wondered if she had said too much. "Thank you," he said softly, never taking his eyes from hers. "Until Sunday, outside the church."

"Oh, yes," Ruth whispered. If she could have found a way, she would not have let him leave. She did not want to have to wait for the days of the coming week to slowly creep past. She did not want to go through the agonies of the possibility that he might not be there. Yet these thoughts made her feel wretched and guilty, firstly on account that she should both have them and dwell upon them, and secondly that she should be thinking of herself when her sister was lying barely more than two miles away, and could be dying for all she knew. Still, it made no difference. What would she have given to be assured that she would see and be with him every day!

Mrs Tucker saw her motionless at the foot of the stairs. "Can I get you something?" she asked.

"Perhaps you would like to sit with us?" said Miss Cramm. "We are only embroidering but the company might help."

"Thank you," said Ruth, again forcing a reluctant smile, "It is kind of you, but will you forgive me if I decline. I have some work that I must try to put my mind to."

As she climbed the stairs she heard Mrs Tucker's voice, indiscreetly loud, say, "what did I say? They are childhood lovers!"

Once in her room, Ruth sat before her uncle's image. "Why?" she asked, aloud. "Why is all this happening to me?" Up until the receipt of that letter asking them to go to visit her uncle her life had been untroubled and predictable. It had been dull, unimpassioned, but it had also been painless. If she had yearned for anything, it was to write and be closer to Matthew Fayrbrother. Now both were within her grasp, but at what price? Her family was split asunder. Her uncle was dead. Her cousin was in dispute over the inheritance. They were all threatened by this evil man, and her sister had been taken seriously ill. How was it possible that her life could change so in a year, to go to extremes of both her desires and dreads? The sun had disappeared from her universe and the sole star in an otherwise black sky was Matthew. She could not imagine for one moment how she would have fared but for his presence. It was just about all she had.