

Chapter Twenty-two

A Visit by Mr Lancaster

Ruth now prepared herself for another business-like meeting, this time with her Uncle who was not renown for his personal touch even when dealing with his closest members of the family. To her dismay she found him waiting for her at Mrs Tucker's when she reached there, and comfortably established in the sitting room with a pot of tea and a generous slice of her landlady's very best fruit cake which Ruth had never sampled and which was not even produced from the larder for Matthew!

"I am sorry," she said, hastily and blushing slightly. "Am I late?" She knew she could not be, having been very careful to leave the office with ample time.

"Not at all, Ruth," said the solicitor, "and even if you were, I have been admirably entertained!" He looked up at the ebullient Mrs Tucker who's look in response might, for those who knew her, have rivalled that had she just looked outside and perceived a snow storm on what was a mild, if misty, day. There was no doubt, Ruth thought, that Mrs Tucker took kindly to visits by professional men.

"I will bring another cup, then," announced Mrs Tucker. Ruth noted that she was not offered a slice of the fabled cake. "Then I will leave you to one-another. You are sure to have a great deal to talk about."

"You had no difficulty in finding your way here, Uncle?" asked Ruth, uncertain whether to be forthright and ask him whether he had see Victoria as he planned.

"Not really," he said. This unseasonable weather has not assisted me. I am sure that it is thicker now than when I arrived. Is it like this often? I dare say it is due to the proximity of the river?"

"I expect so," she murmured, sitting opposite him and placing her hands in her lap.

"Now, Ruth, I see that you have made quite an impression, quite a name for yourself."

"I am not sure whether I would describe it in those terms, Uncle, but I have been relatively successful in having no submissions rejected thus far."

"That makes an impression on me as it would have on your uncle, Earl Mottram, had he lived to see it. He would have been very pleased by what you have achieved. Sadly, I cannot say the same of your mother, I am afraid. She still considers your occupation to be anathema although I am of the opinion that she will come to accept it in time. You will have to be patient with her. Now, before I get to the main reason for my visit, other than to call on one of my favourite nieces, that is, I must raise another matter that has come to my notice, a matter that would greatly concern your mother were she to hear of it. I must assume at this juncture that she does not have any knowledge of it as she has not mentioned it to me and I am sure she would if she did know, and so on. You get my gist?"

"Yes, Uncle," said Ruth with a feeling of dread.

"You are seeing a young gentleman, regularly?"

"I am," said Ruth as her heart started to pound. "I assume you have been talking to Mrs Tucker? What has she told you?"

"I must stress that what she did say she did so in all innocence of the implications that might be drawn from it and I can assure you that I was casual and circumspect in my reaction. She has not the least idea of the hiatus this knowledge might cause."

"I see," said Ruth, wretchedly.

"She tells me this young gentleman is a very personable gentleman, a professional man, a doctor I understand, and someone who you have known for a considerable time, years even. You were quoted as saying that the two of you grew up together."

"I do not think I quite used those words."

"Whether you did or did not, Ruth, is immaterial. Now, may I assume that this is, by some chance, the same young gentleman to whom your mother has taken such exception and most certainly would continue to do so?"

"It is Matthew Fayrbrother," said Ruth, defiantly. "I make no secret of that!"

"And, you have not told your mother of these, meetings? I ask this as all the evidence suggests that you have not."

"I have not because I know word for word exactly what she will say and what her reaction will be. I could write it down for you if you wish!"

"That will not be necessary."

"I am not under my mother's control any more! I am free to do exactly what I chose to do and as I please!"

"Why, yes, that may be so within limitations. But I now find myself placed in a most difficult position."

"How, Uncle?"

"Your mother is my sister and you are my niece. I consider I have a duty towards you both and we are dealing here with the son of a man who poisoned his wife to death for her fortune."

"Allegedly, Uncle," said Ruth, defensively. "But it is no more than rumour and malicious gossip! I have no time whatsoever for those who say such things and those who heed them. I have no time for those wicked innuendoes. Look at the disservice done to Victoria in respect of her relationship to our other uncle!"

"I am sorry?" said Mr Lancaster, looking puzzled and staring at her. He paused and seemed to turn over what she had said before he continued. "You know then? You know the truth?"

"Yes!" said Ruth, forcefully. "Of course I do! It became painfully obvious during our stay at Hazleton Court."

"Did the Earl tell you?"

"Never in so many words, but I could tell from his conduct, and there were the rumours which had to have some foundation. In the end it left very little to chance or one's imagination, certainly not for one who was purporting to become a serious writer."

"And how do you feel about it? Do you mind?"

"No. I am concerned only for Victoria's well-being, that is all!"

"Victoria? Ah, yes, I am afraid I was unable to see your sister. I did meet your brother-in-law who received me rather coolly, if I may say so, but he said she was away for the present. Have you seen her recently?"

"No," said Ruth, cautiously, "not for several weeks."

"Well, it may be of no great consequence, my missing her. I wanted to talk to all of you really, but two out of three may suffice. I have come to the conclusion that I must advise you that we must consider that, despite our best endeavours, the Will is not going to be found. I therefore consider that an application should be lodged in the Court of Chancery."

"Will that not take a very long time and consume the entire proceeds of the estate?"

"Oh, Ruth, my dear! We are not talking of *Jarndyce v Jarndyce* here. It will obviously take some time as the court is very busy and moves very slowly, but that is the way the legal system operates. And we can assume that there will certainly be an attendant cost, but it now appears to be the only way the issue will be settled."

"Could we not all come to an accommodation?"

"Even within the legal process I doubt that you could reach agreement and there would always be the possibility of someone unexpected entering a challenge. No, a full application is the only course."

"I wonder," said Ruth, taking a deep breath and trying not to tremble, "whether it is still premature. Should we not wait a little longer? Just in case the Will is found?"

"Oddly, those are virtually identical to the words used by your cousin when I posed the same question of him. The two of you have not been in communication with each other, have you? We *could* wait, but I do not hold that there is anything to be gained from it, Ruth. Believe me, the Will is lost."

"You are certain of that, Uncle? You know it to be a fact?"

"I can surmise that it is lost."

"And, is there any harm that will arise should we wait further?"

"No," he said, cautiously. "The business side and the Estate are being managed by Twigg and myself. It is a burden, but not of the order of the Augean Stables. But there is also the question of the title and I am not reassured by your cousin seeking already to portray himself as Earl Mottram. I have told him he must not be that presumptuous as the female succession was changed during the Restoration and is not that straightforward. There are laws against what he is doing."

"I am sorry, Uncle," she said. "I still feel uncomfortable at the idea of starting a legal action. I would feel happier were we to wait for a longer period after uncle's death. It will not look good if it is thought that he omitted to make a Will and that his successors are squabbling over the estate. I would not wish to be a party to it. And you do not yet know Victoria's view on this, though I would expect it to accord with mine. I think we should wait."

"I see," said the solicitor. "As I have indicated, given that I have two out of three opinions, I am prepared to wait, but not indefinitely. I would say not more than six months at the utmost."

"I would be happy to agree to that at present."

"And you must realise, Ruth, that I have the power to act unilaterally without any consensus. If I think the circumstances are such that warrant it, I shall act."

"I realise that you have our best interests at heart, Uncle, but I would hope that you would still consult me, if not Victoria, before you did so. I think I have a better head for these things."

"I will bear that in mind," he said, smiling. "Let us return to this young man, Matthew Fayrbrother. Is he, Ruth, just an acquaintance or can I expect more of it?"

Ruth looked her uncle straight in the eyes. She thought she saw sympathy there, something she did not expect to find from one who carried such a reputation for being cold and unemotional, indeed one who had never married. "I think there may be more," she said, reflectively. "There would be more if I were the arbiter and I have told no-one else this, Uncle, but I think I love him. I have written about love and what I think love is, and that is how I feel about him. I think I may always have loved him."

"And he, this Matthew Fayrbrother?" he asked gently. "How does he feel about my niece?"

"I do not know. At times he speaks to me gently. He uses words of endearment. At other times it is not so though he is never cruel or rude. I hope that he feels for me as I do for him, but I cannot be sure."

"This worries me, Ruth. I would not like to think that he is trifling with your feelings or that he has other motives. He has not said anything that makes his intentions clear? Should I speak to him? I will if you would wish it. You have only to ask it of me."

Ruth could not deny that she was dearly tempted to accept her uncle's offer, but what would she do if he went to see Matthew and he declared that he had no intentions towards her? It would come to an end and she would have no friend, no-one in which to confide. All the time she continued to meet and talk with him, all the time that matters were allowed to drift on without being brought to a head, there was hope. She could not risk destroying that. "I think he has had little time to make his position clear. Most of the time that we have spent together have been devoted to my troubles."

"Your troubles?" said Mr Lancaster, raising an eyebrow. Ruth began to feel panicky. She had never intended to make any allusion to the threat posed by Signor Calaceli. Despite this slip, and the reference in the note to her uncle, she still was determined not to tell Mr Lancaster because it would be conveyed to her mother and back to her sister who would then know that her confidence had been breached. In addition her mother would probably react by demanding her return to Sutton Minety and that was something she could not contemplate.

"Oh," she said, trying to find a subject that was not, in her small world, *sub judice*, and only just being saved from revealing her sister's illness by a sudden flash of what she

thought of as inspiration, "I have had a wretched Winter trying to make two ends meet without there being sufficient cloth. I simply could not match my outgoings to my income or, at least, I could only do so with great hardship." Her uncle frowned again and looked puzzled. Clearly there was something she had overlooked. She was not cut out for subterfuge!

"You are telling me that you have not been able to pay your way?"

"Not since I started work up here. Not without sacrifice, although my finances are gradually improving. I still live in the dread of next Winter."

"I do not understand this, Ruth. Your mother has told me that you have sent her regular amounts. At least that is what she has given me to understand and I am sure that I would not question her word. I trust that you are telling me that these were sums that you could not afford at the time?"

"Oh!" said Ruth. "It is true. I have sent Mother money, partly because I am concerned for her needs, partly because I feel it essential that she should believe that I am a success and that she should neither worry about me nor be in a position to suggest that I am not. But, Uncle, I must implore you not to inform her else all my sacrifices and tribulations will have been for nothing. I do not mind telling you that my Winter was like Hell stripped of the benefit of its fires. My circumstances are improving and I can still live very modestly. You will not tell Mother, will you?"

"I see," said Mr Lancaster thoughtfully. Ruth was uncertain whether he would accept that this alone constituted the troubles which occupied her and her young gentleman when they met. If he did, she was to congratulate herself on averting what came close to being a crisis. "Well, Ruth," he said, looking at his pocket watch, "it seems that all I will return home with is a number of confidentialities. You need not fear on that account as solicitors are used to dealing with matters of this kind with the utmost discretion."

"Thank you, Uncle," she said.

"However, I would advise you to yourself inform your mother of these matters as soon as you feel you can. I trust that you will, and that the time will be soon. And I trust that you will act wisely in these matters as well. As for the other matter, the one which even now I find it difficult to talk of, and which, as you rightly say, will cause your mother and sister a great deal of anguish and pain if it is confirmed, you realise that it will become public if the Will is found and read? My way, an application to Chancery, might conceal it for ever."

"You cannot be certain of that, Uncle."

"No, Ruth, I cannot be certain."

"Then I would rather wait. If the Will is found it will provide the beneficiary with his or her own compensation and soften what might otherwise be a mortal blow. A court hearing could lead to all kinds of acrimony and we cannot guess at what other secrets might be revealed in the course of one. I would prefer that we wait."

Mr Lancaster stood. Ruth thought the expression on his face suggested that there was still a question on his mind that he was undecided over, that he could not bring himself to ask. "Very well. As I have said, I will wait, but not for ever, Ruth!"

She watched her uncle's cab pull away from the door, raising her hand to wave as he leant out and called, "take care of yourself!" She remained standing there, looking aimlessly along the street, for some while after the cab had disappeared into the mist. The afternoon had slipped away and now as shadows appeared and merged together around her, she awaited the anonymity of the night. A noise from across the street disturbed her. She was not sure whether it was a door opening, or whether someone was there, lurking, but she was never happier to close Mrs Tucker's door and retreat upstairs to her rooms. As she crossed to the writing desk she caught sight of a dark figure standing there in the graveyard, a white face looking up at the window. Terrified she stepped back and when she had the courage to timidly look out again, the figure had gone.

"I am absolutely certain that there was someone standing there! It was a few minutes after my uncle had left. I looked out and there he, it, was. I saw his white face. I saw a cruel mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. He was there, standing in the graveyard, standing below my window and looking up! What does he want of me, Matthew?"

"Was it him, though, Ruth?" asked Matthew. "Was it Calaceli himself?"

"I do not know. It is many months since I saw him and then I saw him only briefly and that once. It so scared me that it was a little while before I was able to look again and when I did there was no-one there, only the mist."

"And you are sure that it was not your imagination? Or a trick of the light?"

"I am certain that I saw someone or something there!" she maintained, wondering why he was choosing to be so obdurate. Perhaps if she had been entirely honest with herself she would have admitted the possibility that it was a cruel trick played upon her by the mist and the fading light. It had happened so quickly. But given what had been said about her being watched, she preferred to believe that someone had been standing there, and so should he.

"This is very worrying," said Matthew, looking around. "I suppose that it is no more than we would expect from him."

"You did say that I was being watched. He said, in the note, that I am being watched!"

"There is a difference between concealed observation, where you do not see the observer, and open confrontation. He has revealed himself, and that is unexpected. Of course it is likely that it was one of his many henchmen, but he would be following orders. Calaceli displays little mercy to those who disobey his orders. Of course, in standing there he, whoever he was, was not breaking any law, but it is a clear escalation and I will have to inform my contacts about this."

"Is there nothing they can do? Am I now to be hounded like this?"

"There is nothing that can be done until he makes his move."

"But I could be followed everywhere! My throat could be cut by one of these men one afternoon or evening and there is nothing that can be done to prevent it?"

"I do not think that it would serve his purpose to harm you, but I wish there was some way in which I could protect you, to be near you so that you have someone to turn to when such things happen."

"You, Matthew? Why should you be placed at risk as well as me? I wonder if we should stop meeting altogether as I am gradually drawing you deeper and deeper into my troubles and there is no knowing where they will lead us."

"Not meet?" he exclaimed. "My dearest Ruth, I would never hear of it!"

"Well, it is all very frightening," she said, lowly.

"I know it may appear that way, but my police contacts assure me that you are not in any immediate danger as you are not a threat to him nor an obstruction to be removed from his chosen path. The problem is we do not know where that path leads. We do not know what he is up to or who the ultimate target is, but they now think it is your brother-in-law. I mentioned the question of the late Earl's estate and the inheritance, but their view is that although this is a far bigger prize, it would be too remote, uncertain, and difficult for him. No, it is Roger's, your brother-in-law's, business venture that interests him. The South American connection, you see. But you have not told me what your other uncle had to say!"

"It is as we thought. He came to see me about the inheritance and suggested that he made an application to the courts to have the matter determined. He believes that the Will is lost and that it will not be found, but he has agreed to defer his action for the present, for six months."

"I think that is for the best. Did he confirm his views as to what the outcome might be if the case goes to the courts?"

"About me? No, he did not mention that again. I think the whole process would be a painful, public, exposé. It could end up as a pitched battle between the three of us plus anyone else who wishes to join in. No, the Will must be found as that is the only way to settle the matter and give Victoria what is rightfully hers. It all seems so silly and unjust to me. Victoria was named in this Will, Roger was named in the previous Will and they are now one. Yet my uncle cannot rule or accept that it was my other uncle's wish that his estate should pass to them. Instead he appears to be prepared to set out to prove that it should pass to me. As I have said, I must resist this."

"I can understand the way you feel, Ruth, about not disinheriting your sister or having the responsibilities that would pass with the wealth of the estate."

"There is another issue. It could be a great handicap. I would feel very vulnerable if it were pressed upon me and I found myself single and alone. It would be a great impediment to securing future happiness, to the possibility of my marrying, for example." That was a daring thing to say, she thought, but she would have to be careful not to overstep the mark and create the wrong impression.

"How?"

"Well," she said, trying to sound as impersonal and matter-of-fact as she could. "I am not an heiress, Matthew. But how would I, if I were one, be able to be confident that any man who declared an interest in my hand was interested in me rather than the fortune that I might bring with me? Can you not see that I would never know whether their intentions were pure or mercenary?" She saw immediately that the question bothered him. Had he interpreted it as a challenge? Perhaps it was unfair, too bold, too provocative? He might even see it as accusative! It might now rebound upon her to her detriment, but it was out in the open now and she could not retract it.

"I do not view you as an heiress, Ruth," he said, uncertainly. "I would hope that any man who genuinely loved you would reveal that fact in his words and deeds. I would have thought that if it were not the case that he loved you, it would be transparently clear to you."

"I wish I could be sure of that," she said, then checked herself. She could now have made matters worse because she was in danger of challenging his integrity. And she had now to face the possibility that he did not really love her, but might be attracted to her by the possibility of her inheriting all or a sizeable amount of the Mottram fortune. Was that something she could accept? Alternatively, if it turned out to be true, was it a price she was prepared to pay to keep him? Yet he had maintained that it was not an issue that concerned him. Why should she not believe him? "My uncle knows about us," she added, darkly. It could have been better phrased, better put, but she was in a reckless frame of mind. "He asked me what your intentions towards me are!" There! She had said it.

"And you told him?"

"I said that I did not know," she replied, terrified of what might follow.

"They are honourable," he said immediately. "I would have thought you knew that. But now you are trying to make my position difficult with this talk of your inheritance and the liability you attach to it. I fear I am in danger of losing your trust."

"I do not mean to," she said bitterly. "I want no more than for you to fully understand my position and how I feel about the prospect of being declared a heiress. But if the Will is found everything will go to Victoria and that will be an end of it. That is one of the reasons why I do not want it referred to the courts."

"Well, Ruth, I can assure you that what ever the outcome, it will not change the way I feel about you one iota," he said, taking her hand. "I hope that you believe me. In my defence I can do no more than remind you that I have advised you to resist your uncle's intention to precipitate matters. I know that in doing so you are seeking to favour your sister rather than yourself. Do you think I would say what I have said if I had a single pretension towards this fortune? I have only your interests at heart, Ruth, nothing more."

Ruth hoped that he would go on and, possibly, make a declaration, or at least say that he loved her, but he appeared to be content to let the matter rest there. Perhaps she had spoiled his chance of him doing anything like that for the present? She felt so desperate, and it was irksome to think of the number of times she had written about similar situations. In one or two stories the opportunity such had presented itself that afternoon, had occurred only once. When the moment was past, it never arose again. Surely she was not going to be a victim of one of her own scenarios? Was this really as close to a proposal as he would ever come? Her head drooped, and she felt close to tears. She knew if she started she would not be able to stop. They were there, stormy, accumulating, held back by this dam of self control and reserve that she had built and struggled now to maintain, but how close it was to being breached!

"I have some good news for you," he said suddenly, seemingly unaware of the intense emotion that gripped her.

"Yes?" she said, softly.

"I saw Victoria's doctor a couple of days ago and he is very pleased by the progress she has made. He thinks that providing there are no setbacks she should be in a position to receive a visitor towards the end of the coming week."

"That is good news," she said, lowly. She should have been pleased. She should have jumped for joy and thanked her Maker, but her head was full of dark thoughts and she felt quite miserable.

"I am sure that she would like to see you. He suggested Thursday."

"I can see her Thursday."

"And you haven't told me what happened when your uncle called at her house. I assume that he did not see her."

"No," said Ruth. "He said he was told that she was away. I must say that I found that singularly odd, although I did not say so to Uncle. Why would Roger tell him that? Why did he simply not tell him the truth, that she was so ill that the doctor insisted on her receiving no visitors?"

"I can only guess, but perhaps he thinks the same way as you. If he told your uncle, he would in turn tell your mother and she would then worry. Worst still she would worry your cousin and I dare say he already has more than enough to be worried about."

"Who hasn't?" said Ruth with some bitterness. "All I can say is that knowing Roger as I do, it does not sound like the kind of consideration he would have for anyone. You must excuse me, but I have never seen him in the most favourable of lights."

"I am afraid," sighed Matthew, "that I cannot comment as I have never met him. Perhaps even if I did know him it would not be proper for me to comment in any case."

"I suppose so," she muttered, thinking about the day at Maggots Bridge. Now she was being rebuked and she did not care for it.

"But you will go on Thursday? I can get word to the doctor and ask him to let me know should there be any problems. I would offer to accompany you but I have a very busy schedule for the whole of the week, and I have no way of gauging just how I might be received by your sister or, indeed, by her husband!"

"I will go and visit Victoria on Thursday."

"Good! Now I was asked to give you a word of warning. You must try and avoid making any reference or allusion to the incident that started her illness. Her mental state is one of denying that it ever happened. She has shut it out and her doctor is concerned that if her equilibrium is disturbed she might relapse. I am also to warn you to be prepared for a shock. She is much changed in appearance, he says."

"Changed? In what way?"

"I do not know. I have not seen her, but I would expect that the illness, which is a very serious and debilitating one, will have taken its toll of her appearance. You need to be prepared for it."

"In which case I will be fully prepared, and I will be the model of discretion in what I say. You may rely upon me."

"Good," said Matthew. "I always thought that I could."