

## Chapter Twenty-four

### *Ruth Makes her Decision*

It was not unexpected that Ruth would follow her normal custom of retiring to her room, not to work, but to sit at the writing desk and consult the image that was, she had to admit to herself, the only true confidant she had. There were things she held back from Matthew, not matters over which he might reproach her or accuse her of bad faith, but personal thoughts and ideas that she did not feel it appropriate to share with him, or with any other living person for that matter. But through the long dark days of Winter, and into those uncertain days of Spring, she had brought her troubles, her fears, her anxieties to this small shrine presented to her by her uncle and dedicated by her to his memory. If there was one thing she had resolved herself upon, it was that the desk and image would accompany her wherever she might go. It would most certainly be transported with the greatest of care to the house that Matthew rented. What was it like, she wondered. He had never talked of it, but then apart from the very first occasion that he had visited and sat at Mrs Tucker's table he had said very little about himself. In truth he had little chance as she had dominated their meetings with her troubles which seemed to come upon them like the ranks of some invading, hostile, army. It would have been so easy for them to have been overrun, but he had defended her and for that she simply loved him all the more.

Was it important, that she knew so little of him? Should she probe and satisfy herself as to his position and income, his *bona fides*? What would either of her uncles have done? Or was it simply that it did not matter, that she was prepared to take him for better or worse, until death - no, she would not think like that, not after her uncle's untimely death and her sister's illness. She was prepared to take him just as he was.

But there was another more pressing matter that occupied her thoughts as she sat before the image that Sunday afternoon and addressed her uncle. "It seems that I am always supplicating myself to you, uncle," she said softly, "and seeking guidance. I know that Mother will oppose me in this. I know that she will use every means, every influence, at her disposal to try and thwart me or persuade me not to marry. Indeed, I have to face the awful possibility that she may never speak to me again. I know that nothing I say or write will change the way she thinks any more than anything she says or writes to me will change that which I am about to do. How could I possibly convey to her in words how I feel and how he is more important to me than all the riches in the Universe? Had she loved in such impossible circumstances she might have understood, but I fear that will never be. Yet I know that I must write to her and tell her, face her wrath, and seal my fate. Once I have done that I will be free to accept and marry him."

Trying to steady her hand, she put pen to paper and wrote to her mother a short, simple, note:

"Dearest Mother

I am compelled to write and tell you that Matthew Fayrbrother, who I love with all my heart, has proposed marriage to me, and that I intend to accept him. I know that you are not likely to look favourably upon our union, but I can assure you that he is the dearest, sweetest and kindest man I have ever met or am likely to meet. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me and to accept him as a son for he is truly worthy to be one. I expect that the wedding will be here in Lambeth in not more than four weeks time. I will send an invitation to Uncle Lancaster with a request that he accompany you. I beg you to come.

Your loving daughter

Ruth.”

Ruth laid the letter on the desk and stared at the words. There was so much more she could say, but it would be wasted. She knew that her mother was unlikely to read very much further than the first sentence. She could imagine the letter crumpled and cast into the fire, or thrust under the Curate’s nose. Not even all the words in the World would stop that happening, therefore it was sensible to keep it short and to the point. Yet she would be criticised for doing that.

She addressed an envelope and left that beside the letter where the two remained until the following evening when she plucked up the courage to place one inside the other and seal the flap. The next morning, on her way to work, she paused before the mail box. It was still not too late to retract! “For better or worse,” she whispered to herself as she released her grip and heard it fall, irretrievably, to the bottom. It was done and her fate was sealed.

“A letter arrived for you today,” said Mrs Tucker as she arrived back at her rooms later that afternoon. “Another delivered by hand.” Ruth was puzzled. It could not have come from her mother as she would not yet have received her letter and started her fuming and pacing the floor. There was something familiar about the hand that had written the address, though she could not place it. It was likely to have come from Roger, she thought, and told Mrs Tucker so.

Once in her room she casually tore open the envelope and took out the card that was inside. She had a severe shock when she read:

Dear Miss Mottram,

It is absolutely imperative that we meet as soon as possible as I have every reason to believe that your life, like that of your sister, may be in the gravest danger. When it is safe for me to do so I will contact you, either at your place of work or at your rooming house. For the safety of both of us, please treat this note in confidence and tell absolutely no-one about its receipt or contents. I repeat, no-one.

One of your many admirers,

Angelo Calaceli.”

Ruth dropped it on the desk as if it had stung her fingers and cautiously glanced out into the graveyard. There was no-one there. She sat down heavily on the bed and stared at the note. He had the effrontery to write to her! There was absolutely no doubt that it was a trap. He would try and lure her somewhere and then, well, there was no saying what he might attempt. And he had the gall to write in terms of such familiarity when all he planned for her was harm! *Her* life was in danger? Of course it was, but only from him and his cohorts! Who was there who knew this better than her? However, he had made a fundamental error. He had presented her with tangible evidence which could be passed to Matthew’s contacts at the earliest opportunity. They would know what to do. If she had her way she would have him arrested and deported!

Yet the receipt of this note presented her with another dilemma. How was she to convince Matthew when she gave him her answer that she was not responding to the threat posed by this man? The only way she could be sure that he understood her true motives was to conceal the note and not tell him that she had received it. Yet, if she did this there was the risk that this man would escape apprehension. Once again she looked to her uncle for inspiration. When she thought about it, she wondered if she should be concerned with what Matthew assumed her motives to be. She would tell him the truth, that she loved him and that her decision would be the same whatever the circumstances or the threats to her person. If he loved her he would accept and not question her word.

She decided that she would hand the note to Matthew after she had given him her answer. He could decide what use to make of it. And having both decided that, and sent the letter to her mother, she felt more settled and content and ready to face Signor Calaceli and the worse that he could do, than she had for many weeks.

Was it perhaps a coincidence that the very next day Mr Spruce asked her to go to an address in a road off Stepney Green? He did offer to accompany her, or to send someone with her, but he would have known that she would refuse and travel alone. He did say that it was not exactly a suitable place for a gentlewoman to venture unescorted knowing that this was a gauntlet she would readily pick up. Leaving him in no doubt as to her intentions to do what she was asked without having him or someone else beside her to hold her hand, Ruth took a cab to the Mile End Road and completed her journey on foot. The address was that of a commercial building, crammed into a row of semi-derelict and largely empty properties which were reserved for demolition yet which had been adopted as an abode by a number of otherwise homeless children and families. Ruth's appearance, black from head to foot, provoked a variety of comment, some favourable or sympathetic, other less so, and although she felt that it was not the kind of location that she would have chosen to visit, contrary to Mr Spruce's predictions, she was neither impeded nor molested.

Having conducted her business she emerged onto the empty cobbled street and into the sunlight. As she looked in vain for a cab to take her back to Lambeth, she heard her name called. She spun around and saw a figure standing, partly obscured, in the darkness of a small archway. She had no doubt as to who it was.

"Miss Mottram," he hissed. "I must talk to you, but we must not be seen together. It is absolutely imperative."

"Signor Calaceli!" she gasped.

"You know my name?" he said. Ruth shook her head and started to back away. She could not see him clearly. She could see the white of his teeth and the reflection of his eyes, and that was enough. "Come here, quickly!" Nothing could have been further from her mind at that moment. Terrified she looked around her for assistance, or for a means of escape. Any moment he might leap out and drag her back into the alleyway. "Miss Mottram!" he hissed, again. "Come here, please!" It was a voice which compelled her to do the opposite of that she was bid.

She thought he had started to emerge as she turned to flee but in the same instant she was confronted by a cab which had turned into the street and was heading towards her. Without the slightest regard for her safety or the possibility she might fall beneath the cab's wheels, she ran into the road, wildly waving her arms and imploring the driver to stop. "Miss Mottram!" she heard Signor Calaceli call after her. "Please do not leave. I must talk to you, to warn you before it is too late!"

Confronted by a wild and determined woman the cab driver reined in the horse and brought the vehicle to a sudden halt causing the passenger, a large, red-faced man to thrust his head out of the window and demand to know what it was that had caused him to be propelled head first from his seat into the front bulkhead. "I appeal to you, Sir," cried Ruth, running around to the door, "to let me ride with you, even for half a mile, anywhere, anything to take me from this place!"

Without uttering another word the door was opened for her, as the man looked up at the driver and nodded. As the cab lurched forward, Ruth glanced fearfully at the archway but her enemy appeared to have gone. "Well, now, what have we here, I asks myself?" said the man.

"I am very much obliged to you, Sir," said Ruth.

"Why, of course you are. And you said anywhere? Well there is no harm in me telling you that this cab is bound for the Covent Garden if that may be in a direction which is to your choosing. I am sure that if that is to your liking there is no harm in us taking you there, is there Joe?"

The cab driver looked back down through a small flap in the roof and smiled, exposing a set of broken, brown teeth. "None at all, Mr Biskit. None at all!"

“There, now, that’s my name,” he said, mopping his brow with a red handkerchief. “Toby Biskit, but to my friends I’m plain Toby. But Joe here won’t have none of that. It’s always Mr Biskit this and Mr Biskit that. I tells Molly of him and she says one day she’ll come up to London Town to put him a’right on the matter, not that she does or will, my Molly. But there’s me being rude and unthinking on account of you being distressed and in trouble, not that I am after pushing or probing you as to what that trouble may be.”

“Thank you,” said Ruth, cautiously. “I can see that you are a gentleman, Mr Biskit.”

“I would likes to think of myself as one despite not being educated in the basics. And I would like to think that you felt safe with old Toby as for sure you are. Now, so that we do not inconvenient you more than you have already been, would you be as kind as to indicate whether the Garden is to your liking or we could a’drop you off afore that, in the City, Ludgate Hill or Fleet Street. It is up to you to speak up, Miss.”

“I have to return to Lambeth,” said Ruth, and seeing a look of puzzlement on his face, she added, “it’s south of the river, but I could easily hail another cab at Covent Garden.”

“I would not hear of it. Molly would never let me rest if I was to tell her that I’d let you out to find another cab. Joe will take you there to what ever address you care to tell him. That’s all right, aint it Joe?”

“Consider it done, Miss,” said the cab driver.

“There! You may remain in this cab all the way to your destination. And Joe is the most dependable of drivers. I always looks out for him when I’m in Town and I look to him to take me everywhere. And that’s nearly every week or so.”

“What is your business, then, Mr Biskit?” said Ruth, becoming curious.

“My business is carting, Miss. I am a dying breed, a carter of fresh foods and vegetables trying to earn his honest living in the face of the coming of the Railway companies. But I have three carts and struggle on bringing goods and baggage up from the Royal County of Berkshire as that’s where Molly and me lives. Back and forth, forth and back, that’s all theys do. And I comes up here regular like to see that everything is ship-shape and straight. It doesn’t do for things to get bent, that what my Molly says. Its like the flowers in her garden, things need regular attention, buds need a’nipping, you knows what I means.” Ruth was not entirely sure that she did, but she nodded her head in agreement.

“Well, this day,” he continued, “you are particular in being in good fortune as you find me returning from visiting my wife’s sister having gone out of my normal way to take her some fresh produce and eggs sent by my Molly on account of her having been poorly this Winter. It is not a healthy place. Miss. It is not a good place to die. I would want my last breath to be clean country air. But I am in danger of becoming morbid, a weakness on my part that Molly likes to curb against. My word! You are a handsome young woman if I may say so without the fear of offending you. Why, if I was only some thirty years younger, but then my Molly would have something else to curb against!”

Ruth smiled and started to study her travelling companion, thinking it would be a small reward should she catalogue his characteristics and insert him in one of her short stories.

“Might I be as bold as to ask what it was that brought you out to the wilds of Stepney?” he added.

“I am a journalist,” she said, confidently. “I write for the Daily Pitch and two periodicals.”

“Ah, yes,” said Toby. “I must say that I leaves all the readings and writings to Molly, I does. Never saw much point in it myself and now, with my eyes being what they are, all the words run and smudge together like they were some scrawl I’d just attempted with pen and ink. I can make my mark and that mark is known and recognised. That’s got me by over all these years. That’s good enough for Toby Biskit. But you write, eh? Will she have read any of your writings, my Molly?”

“I do not know,” said Ruth. “The Daily Pitch is well circulated in London and I think it is sent to a number of provincial towns by train each day.”

“The railways again,” moaned Toby.

“The periodicals that I write for are called The Vesuvius and The Etna,” added Ruth.

“I can’t say I’ve ever heard my Molly as say one word about them,” he said, sounding disappointed. “But then I dares say they don’t reach out as far as Wycombe.”

“Oh, I expect that they do,” said Ruth. “If your carts can make the journey into London and back, then I am sure that our periodicals can too.”

“Then, will you tell me your name so that I will ask Molly to find one and read me some of your writings. Then I can sit in the Waggoner’s Rest and say that I shared a cab with the young woman what wrote them.”

“Ruth Mottram.”

“Ruth Mottram,” he repeated.

“Do you wish for me to write it down?”

“Write it down?” he said, chuckling as if she had told him a comical joke. “Oh, there’s no need of that, none at all. I can remember anything and everything. The day that comes when Toby cannot remember a name is the day they bury him. Why, I can recall the name of the Squire’s father’s first gamekeeper. It was one Joshua Blythe who always told the story of how he’s seen Napoleon Bonaparte when he’s been brought to London and paraded, and he’s been dead these thirty-five years! That was old Joshua’s claim to fame and he earned many a full tankard in the telling of his tale. As for me, I will say I met Ruth Mottram!”

“I trust that I will not have cause to rival Napoleon in importance!”

“Oh, you’s mustn’t take any offence at what old Toby says,” he said, hastily. “I was not meaning to say that your work will be lesser thought of Bonaparte’s.”

“I certainly aim to be less notorious!”

“I am not sure that you should be travelling around London unescorted if that’s your aim, Miss Mottram, if I may says so. I am sure that my Molly would say the same of it. Just wait ‘til I tells her!”

“I hope that your wife is able to find something by me to read you,” said Ruth.

“If it gives me half the pleasure of this journey it will have been worth its trouble, it will,” beamed Toby. “And if you are ever over Wycombe way you must call in on me and my Molly. Everyone knows where Toby Biskit lives!”

Ruth was saddened when the cab reached Covent Garden and her companion dismounted and bade her “goodbye”. She had found herself fascinated by his character and was even more determined to fit him into a short story as soon as practicable. She wondered whether either he or his wife would recognise him if she read the story to him. That was something she would never know, but that was not likely to deter her. The journey to Covent Garden had taken her mind off the earlier incident but now as the cab crossed Waterloo Bridge she found herself thinking about Signor Calaceli, and the fact that he had been there, waiting for her. There appeared to be only two possible ways for him to have known where she was. The first was that he had followed her in another cab. To have done that he would either have had to be waiting in a cab for her to emerge, or to have been able to hail a cab immediately after she had boarded hers. She tried to picture the scene when she emerged first from the office. She was sure that there was only one cab for hire and that was the one she had taken, but she could not be absolutely certain. The other possibility was that he was in league with someone in the office who had somehow told him of her destination. In practical terms that could only be Mr Spruce. He was the only one who would have known in good enough time to get a message to Signor Calaceli. It was hard to believe, but Matthew had said that this man had agents everywhere. She had often wondered if Mr Spruce was in his pay. It now seemed likely that Mr Spruce was. It might explain his persistent interest in Roger’s business venture.

It perhaps no longer mattered what this man intended or what the reason was for him claiming that he needed to talk to her. Her life was in danger! Indeed, it was, and from the very person who was seeking to warn her of that fact! It no longer mattered that he was following her or sending her cards. It no longer mattered that her mother would oppose her plans, or that Victoria was still ill and unlikely to leave her bed for weeks. Her mind was settled. She would accept Matthew’s proposal and marry him just as soon as it could be arranged.

Ruth was to see her sister twice before the day fixed for the Wedding. The response to her letter to her mother was exactly as she feared and not as she hoped, but she wrote again repeating her wish that her mother and uncle would forgive her and attend. But when it came to informing her mother about Victoria's illness, her sister's plea would ring loud in her ears and stay her hand. Day after day she hoped that she would receive a letter telling her that her mother would, against her better judgement, come to her daughter's wedding. That would give her the excuse that she needed to persuade her sister that it could no longer be kept a secret and allow her to write before her mother arrived and discovered it for herself. But no such letter arrived, and Victoria would not relent.

On her next visit to Victoria she thought that her sister was not much changed and that she paid little heed to what Ruth said to her. "You remember Matthew Fayrbrother?" she asked. "Dr Fayrbrother's son?" Victoria made no sign that she did but Ruth went on. "We met, here in London, some time ago, completely by chance. He is a doctor now and, well, you could say one thing has led to another and, I know this will come as a big surprise to you, Victoria, but he has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted him. I am to become Mrs Matthew Fayrbrother!"

"Yes," said Victoria through her swollen lips, as if it was no surprise at all. But that was all she said.

On her third visit she thought that her sister was slightly improved. She seemed stronger and more attentive as Ruth told her of their plans. "He has described the house to me," she said. "Of course it will not be as large and grand as this one and it is not in what could be described as a fashionable area, but it is well placed for his work and for mine. I shall have a bedroom of my own, with a small dressing room. I shall set up the writing desk uncle gave me by the window just as I have it now because I think it will be easier to work with it arranged that way. The view is not spectacular, Matthew says, but it cannot possibly be worse than having to look out on a graveyard. Downstairs there's a sitting room and a drawing room with a partition between that and the dining room. Matthew says it is so that it can be opened up for entertaining, not that I have any pretensions of that sort. It has gas lighting, but only downstairs. And there are a couple of servants' rooms tucked away at the top of the house. Matthew thinks we should be able to have a maid and a cook, possibly even living in. I am not sure that I am happy with the thought of either, but if I am to keep writing, which I intend to, it may be essential. Oh, I believe there's a small, enclosed garden, but nothing like the Italian Garden at Hazleton Court. I do hope it is being looked after and maintained. Perhaps I should write to uncle and ask him? What do you think, Victoria?"

"I suppose you could," said her sister, wearily.

"Of course, when I talk about not entertaining I am not including you. You must come and visit us as soon as we are fully furnished and settled in, just as soon as you are strong enough."

"I will never be strong again," said Victoria, ponderously. "He is poisoning me."

"Oh, Victoria!" Ruth exclaimed. "You should not say silly things like that. Of course no-one is poisoning you."

"They are poisoning me," hissed her sister, lifting her head from the pillow. "And they will poison you, too."

"Now, that is not true, Victoria. It is just in your imagination. I have been receiving reports from your doctor for weeks and he is pleased with your recovery. There is no question of you being poisoned."

"No, Ruth," Victoria gasped, and closed her eyes as she let her head fall back on the pillow. "They are killing me. I will never leave this room alive, and they will kill you too."

"What can I say to convince you that is not so?"

"It is true, Ruth," whispered her sister. "And there is nothing you, or anyone else, can do."

"Oh, Victoria!" said Ruth, holding her sister's wasted hand, but Victoria had sunk into a stupor and did not say anything further.

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