

## Chapter Twenty-six

### *The Start of a Long Journey*

It was daylight when Ruth opened her eyes. She saw, indistinctly at first, a cracked, stained and dusty, ceiling above her, with peeling paint and a liberal application of cobwebs. Her gaze followed the slope of the ceiling down to a drab, green, wall, and then down past a small, plain, skirting to the bare floorboards. There was a small window, extending upwards into the ceiling, through which she could see grey sky and nothing else. In one corner was a small, unpainted, door.

Cautiously she tried to sit up, but the room revolved and she was conscious of a sharp pain in her left arm. But her throat was painful and dry and there, a few feet away, standing on the floor, was a water pitcher and tumbler. It was simply a matter of finding the strength to reach it. Laying back once more on the mattress she listened carefully. She thought that somewhere, far off, she could hear a dog barking, and the sound of someone, a woman, singing, but other than that, wherever she was, it was silent. When she thought the giddiness had stopped, she edged her feet onto the floor, rolled sideways, and crawled to the pitcher. She choked violently as she tried to gulp the water, thinking for a moment that she would be sick. But the feeling passed, and after cautiously sipping more she was able to stand. Still clutching the glass she crossed, unsteadily, to the door. She could see, without trying the latch, that it was locked from the outside. There was a bolt on the inside, and for a moment she thought of drawing it, but to what avail? She was already a prisoner.

When she went to the window she looked down onto a familiar scene and it immediately was clear where she was - in one of the servants' rooms at the top of the house. She had never been up there before, but why? Why had she been brought up here? Recollections of what had happened began to filter back into her mind. She had found her uncle's Will, but better she had not now that she knew what it said! She could see why her uncle had said that it would bring pain and embarrassment to both her mother and sister. And it meant that she had almost certainly been completely wrong in her judgement of each of the members of her family and most else around her. Worst of all, she had been completely wrong in her assessment of the man she loved and had married. How could she, a writer, who prided herself on having such an insight into her characters' lives, have been so completely at fault in judging other people's motives?

Her attention was suddenly drawn to two people, a man and a woman, standing in the street outside the house. One, but it could not surely be, looked like Lucy? The other, and she was sure of this, was Signor Calaceli. They appeared to be arguing and he was waving his arms about as Lucy appeared to block his access to the house and push him away. Her initial thought was that Lucy was trying to protect her mistress, but why was she locked away up here if that were the case? Ruth could invent a number of scenarios - it was for her safety or her own well-being - but she began to wonder if she had been mistaken about this man as well as every one else. But, no! Surely she could not be. He had to be at the back of this, everything that had happened! Yet she could not resist the instinct to try and attract his, or anyone's, attention. The window would not open so frantically she rapped on the glass and waved but although he appeared to look up at the house, he seemed not to see her. How would he or anyone else see her, a pale little face, lost in the grey reflection of the sky?

She watched him leave. Several times he stopped and looked back at the house. "Please come back," she whispered, but he did not return. She heard, somewhere deep below her, the sound of the front door slamming shut, then there was silence.

Holding her arm, she sat on the bed and tried to collect her thoughts. Her absence would be noted at the office. Mr Spruce would curse and blame her for her absence but how many days would it be before they sent anyone around to the house to question after her? And Matthew, no doubt triumphant now that he had what he had been seeking all along, would

have sent a word of apology but his wife was taken sick to her bed for a few days. That was all he needed to say. No-one then would come.

Of course, if she had heard correctly, and if everything she had heard was true, she would be killed. There was no doubt of that. If it were not for the suspicions that her uncle already harboured, they might have done it already, but Matthew might find it difficult to explain why a third tragedy had happened in the family so close after second. If anything would arouse suspicion, her death would. It meant that she had time. It meant that if they had to keep her alive, they also had to keep her captive. Not here, not in the London house, of course! She would be taken to some remote location, perhaps committed to an asylum as it probably would not be difficult for him to have her certified. And if she was alive and had to remain alive for a number of months, perhaps even years, he would have to get her to sign a number of papers unless he had added forgery to his list of calumnies.

She had to escape and the sooner the better! That might be difficult enough, but where should she go? Not the office, because she feared she could not trust Mr Spruce as he would simply deliver her to Signor Calaceli and, unless she *was* mistaken, that could be worse than being where she was. Not to Mrs Tucker's as that would place her in peril. Not to her mother's as they were sure to go there in search of her. Perhaps to her uncle as if he would listen to her story, he would know what to do to protect her. If she went to Paddington once she was on a train they were unlikely to overtake her. There were risks - if she was held waiting for a connection, or if they were close on her heels and her uncle was out when she reached his house or office. There was also the risk that her absence might be detected before she had a chance to reach Paddington and board a train. That would be the first place they would go! And they would check the stage. Either way, she was travelling in a predictable direction and by a predictable route. She would have to be unpredictable!

A footstep outside the door made her start. The key turned in the lock and the door was thrown open. It was Lucy, carrying a tray.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Ruth. "Why am I locked away like this and where is Ethel? You realise, I trust, that there are severe penalties for wrongful imprisonment."

"If that is all I get put down for," Lucy said, "I will consider I got off lightly. Where is Ethel? She is gone, and the cook too, as the Master dismissed them yesterday. Why are you locked in here? That is on the Master's instructions," she added, staring at Ruth with wild, defiant, eyes. "And why am I here? I am here, my fine Miss Mottram, because in time I shall be married and be Lady Mottram which is mine by rights!"

"I don't understand you. Lucy. What you are saying makes no sense, but I demand that I am released immediately! I demand to be set free in my own house!"

"Set free? In your own house?" laughed Lucy, putting down the tray but never once taking her eyes off Ruth. "That would be worth more than what my living's worth."

Ruth did not respond, but looked beyond Lucy to the open and inviting door. It would be so easy to push her way past the girl, but she had the impression that she was not alone and that there was someone else there, standing, out of sight, perhaps waiting for her to try that very sort of thing. Well, she would not give them any excuse to hurt her any more than they had done and, in any case, if she did not make an attempt to escape right away, perhaps her captors would be lulled into a false sense of security which might assist her.

"Is your arm sore, then?" asked Lucy, unsympathetically. "That'll be on account of the morphine."

"Morphine?"

"Yes. Don't you realise that you've been unconscious two whole days."

"Two days?" said Ruth in astonishment.

"Two whole days," confirmed Lucy, going back to the door. "You'd better drink and eat that as I dare say the doctor will be here to give you another dose later. Strange, isn't it? To think that we were half-sisters all this time and neither of us as much as suspected it!"

Ruth watched the door close and heard the key turn in the lock and waited until she was sure that the maid had gone downstairs. Would they have left anyone outside? That was a question that she would have to answer later. At least she knew she could reasonably expect

that Lucy would not return for another couple of hours. The next risk then was that Matthew, who seemingly was out, would come home. If she was to do anything, it would have to be executed quickly.

She contemplated the contents of the tray. She dared not eat nor drink anything in case it was already laced with poison, but there was a knife. What should she do once she was outside? If only she knew how much time she was likely to have before anyone came to check on her, but it could be minutes, it could be hours. So she hit on an outrageous, daring, plan. It was an idea that had been planted in her mind by Victoria which, at the time, had seemed preposterous, but now it seemed to be the only sensible option left to her. She would walk to Tetbury! At least, she would start out by walking in the hope that she might receive assistance along the way. But she could not use the Great West Road, the route the stage followed, as they would be bound to keep that under check. Instead she would start by heading north and then cross the country in a westerly direction. It seemed so easy on the map in her mind, but she realised that it would take days. She had days. Perhaps the longer it took the better as they then might tire of searching for her. As long as she took with her enough money for her to provide herself with sustenance. As long as she stayed away from the main thoroughfares and kept to the lanes and byways. Then perhaps they would not find her.

Softly she crossed the room to the door and looked into the keyhole. The key was there and, providentially, the knife would just fit. She knelt and fed out her skirt, pushing it under the door. If there was anyone on the other side and they saw they would probably make their presence felt by standing on it and she would be trapped! After a small amount of fiddling she was able to push the key out and heard it fall with a soft thud on the other side of the door. When she recovered her skirt, there it was. All she had to do was pick it up, turn the lock, and she was free.

Clutching the knife and carrying her shoes she crept to the end of the corridor and the top of the stairs. She could neither see nor hear anyone below. When she reached the lower landing she could see that the door to her bedroom was slightly ajar. It clearly could not be closed as a result of it being forced. As she grew close she could hear someone humming softly and when she cautiously peered through the crack she caught sight of Lucy, wearing one of her dresses, one she could not wear under normal circumstances but one she would have considered wearing on this occasion had she been able to have access to her wardrobe. For a moment she watched in astonishment as the hussy preened herself in front of the mirror! Then Ruth slipped down the staircase into the hall. She might have hesitated in the hope that Lucy would vacate her room and allow her to slip in undetected for apart from her clothes, all her money was in the dressing table. But every second that she delayed increased the chance of discovery and she was certain that if she were captured she would not find escape this easy again.

In the kitchen she went to the jar in which she kept the days' house keeping money. Mercifully there was still some there. Pocketing this and taking a small basket of provisions from the larder she softly opened the back door and let herself out. If Lucy were to look out a window now she would be detected. There would still be a chance of escape, but once she was past the yard gate she would be safe. Seconds later she was in the street and heading north.

It was as well she had a working knowledge of London, she told herself, as she made her way up St Marks Lane in the direction of Tottenham Court Road. This route would, of course, take her close to Roger's house, but they would never think of looking for her there! Even so she decided she would skirt the Park to the west and head towards the cricket ground. Cutting through the side roads of Marylebone she emerged at Regents Circus which was closer to Roger's than she would wish, but she went on unchallenged free and, for the present, satisfied.

She did not walk quickly. She felt the urge to hasten, or use the little money she had in hiring a cab to take her to Swiss Cottage or beyond, but she argued that she should not hurry. The sun was beginning to break through the cloud which would make the afternoon warm if not hot. And she had a long journey before her. It was best to conserve her strength for the arduous problems that she knew must lie ahead and which she must inevitably face.

With some nervousness she reached the edge of the Park. She knew that she was now not far from Paddington Station. If they now realised that she had left, they would be on their way there. They might even be there right now. That close! She did not begin to feel comfortable again until she had left the cricket ground well behind her and was on the edge of open countryside. Shortly after noon she passed through the village of Neasdon. She stopped at the churchyard of St John the Baptist at Wembley to refresh herself, begging a mug of water from a nearby house. An hour later she rested below the village of Harrow on the Hill and congratulated herself on the progress she had made. The sole casualties so far were her feet. Her shoes were not stitched with walking on this scale in mind, but she assumed that her soles and heels would harden as the days wore on. It will become easier, she told herself.

It was here that she started to try and estimate how long it might take her. She reasoned if she walked consistently and covered two miles every hour, she would walk sixteen miles in an eight hour day. An eight hour day would allow a generous amount of time for rest, especially at noon if the sun was out. She was not certain of the whole distance she was setting out to cover, but at sixteen miles a day she would have travelled one hundred and twelve miles in one week. It was probably further than that to Tetbury, which meant that it would take her at least seven days and she did not have enough money to last for that period. If she ended up scavenging or begging that would still be preferable to being caught and incarcerated.

As she cut across the fields towards Pinner she started to think more about the events of the preceding few days. Up until now escape and evading detection had been paramount in her mind, but now she was feeling more at ease, even relatively optimistic as to her chances of reaching Uncle Lancaster. And he would listen! She would make him listen and having listened he would know what to do and take the requisite action!

Now, as she clambered over a stile and avoided a nettle patch, it seemed remote and dream-like. She found it hard to bring herself to accept that the man she loved had deceived and betrayed her from the outset. Even now she did not fully understand how he could have done it not what his motives were. What did he hope to gain? If it was the Mottram inheritance she would willingly have given that to him had she known it was hers to give. She would have given him anything and yet he would not have loved her for it. How could he have been so cruel? How could she have been so blinded by her love that she did not see him for what he was? But should she reproach herself? What sign had there been of his treachery? She could think of none and she began to wonder, hope even, that she had been mistaken, that this was all a plot hatched by Roger and Lucy in conjunction with Signor Calaceli, and that her husband was as much a victim as was she. What was it Lucy had said about the doctor returning? She had not mentioned Matthew by name. She had not said Mr Fayrbrother! For all Ruth knew, he could be there still at the house, drugged, locked in one of the other rooms and if that was so, she had left him to what ever fate they had planned for him. Worse still, he could be dead.

He had said some harsh things the evening that this had all started, the evening when she had found the Will. Perhaps she had misheard him, or perhaps he was simply playing along with Roger in order to make him reveal his hand, not knowing of course that he would be confronted by the deeds when he burst into the bedroom! When she thought about it carefully, the only implication she had of his involvement was what she had heard, or thought she had heard, that evening. She had been wrong about so many things and people. She could have been right about Matthew all the time and it was simply that she was being wrong now.

There was something else said that she did not understand. It was plain that Roger must have installed Lucy in her house after she was locked in the servants' room. That supposition did not conflict in any way with her view that Matthew was innocent. But how could Lucy believe such that she could say that they were half-sisters? She had been told something of Lucy's birth but she could not remember the details. Was it possible that the woman who she thought of as her mother since she was a baby was not related to her and that she was adopted?

The sun was becoming low in the sky as Ruth skirted the edge of a large estate, passed through a wood full of elms and oaks and started the descent to a village that stretched

across her path before her. It was plain that if her money would not stretch to feeding her for a week, she could not afford to waste it on accommodation in one of the local hostleries for the night. It also occurred to her that if Roger and Signor Calaceli were in league, he might have men scouring the countryside for her. All they had to do was to ask if anyone had seen a woman in black. She cursed Lucy for her impudence, but now the priority was to find somewhere to rest for the night.

The sky slowly reddened before her, glistening on a stretch of water that lay beyond the village and beyond that she could see a small town which she would have to avoid. She would first have to cross the water and Calaceli could well have all the bridges watched, but what was the alternative? It appeared as she scanned the scene before her that if she headed in a south-westerly direction she could miss both the village and, providing she could find a crossing, the town. She would have to risk there being someone looking for her.

As she approached the river she picked out a small farm with a number of out-buildings. One was a large, black, barn which, upon examination, she found had a hay loft. Pleading silently that she should not be discovered, she climbed the ladder and tried to make herself comfortable for the night. But she could not sleep properly, constantly disturbed by various noises and always in fear that some small, furry, creature might crawl over her, or worse. When she did sleep her dreams were lurid and menacing so she was glad when the first rays of dawn came and, cold and stiff, she climbed down and set out again before anyone discovered her.

South of the village she was able to purchase some bread and cheese from the home of a woman who regarded her initially with a great deal of suspicion, then refused to take the money until Ruth pressed it upon her. She was sorely tempted to tell this woman her story, but that would have been tempting providence and she could not pour out her life history to everyone she met. Perhaps she needed an alternative story, an explanation why she, dressed in black, was wandering about, miles from anywhere, virtually without funds and totally without shelter. She was a writer. She should be able to invent one! On this occasion she did resist the temptation and simply thanked the woman and asked the way to the nearest point at which the river could be crossed. It was possible, the woman readily explained, a little further downstream at a lock that her husband controlled.

It was as she walked away that a mild attack of paranoia took hold of her. She had always been led to believe that lock keepers lived in small cottages immediately adjacent the lock gate so that they were there at all hours of the day and night. How was it that this woman and her husband who she said was the lock keeper lived here, some distance from the lock? Could she trust this woman? Could she really afford to?

Her detour to the north took her several miles out of her way. She followed a canal, passing a dusty Works, until she came to another lock and bridge and was able to cross without trouble. If they were waiting for her at the other point, they would be disappointed. The sun was already high in the sky as she started to climb away from the river, across a large common. That was the sort of place where she felt the most vulnerable as she could be seen for miles in open countryside. Even the sight of a lone man on a separate path some half mile away was enough to make her nervous and quicken her pace towards the shelter of a small copse.

As she came out upon open ploughed fields she could see the steam from a railway engine to the south of her, but she thought she was far enough from the line not to be seen by the passengers on the train. Just to be sure she remained where she was until she was sure that it had passed. In the distance was another wood so she headed determinedly for it, thankful for the cool and shelter once she was beneath the beeches.

Her journey for almost the whole of the remainder of the second day was uneventful as she followed the lines of hedgerows, sometimes crossed fields and occasionally used short stretches of lane. But, as she was descending a small hollow having come out of a particularly extensive wood, a searing pain shot up her leg as it suddenly went from beneath her, throwing her forward on her face and squashing the basket and its remaining contents beneath her. She lay still, breathing heavily and froze. Approaching her, perhaps no more than twenty paces away, was a horse and rider. She could hear the sound of the hoofs striking and ripping up the

turf. She could hear the animal breathing and blowing. Any moment now he would be upon her but, no, the rider passed by without as much as checking the horse's pace.

Ruth twisted, sat up slowly and examined her ankle. It looked normal, but it was painful to the touch. A few feet from her she could see the cause of her problem. She, someone who had been reared in the country, had stumbled in a rabbit hole! The question now that faced her was not whether she could go on, but how far could she get. She prayed that it was not broken or sprained as if that were the case she was finished. Even if she found someone to assist her, even if she gave a false name, they would find her before she was able to continue her journey.

Anxiously looking around to see if anyone was watching she cautiously stood and applied her weight on her left ankle. She could have cried out with the pain but she started to limp on. Every step was agony and made it worse, she knew that, but she could not risk spending that night in the middle of a field. The hedgerow that she reached and under which she curled herself up and awaited the next dawn was barely better. It was another night of bad, threatening dreams ending with her being hunted down like a fox by Roger and a group of other men, trapped finally when her ankle was snared in a badger trap. This time the light of dawn was not so welcome as she would willingly have continued to sleep if that had been possible.

Her ankle was sore as she hobbled out of the field onto a narrow, metalled road close to a junction. A signpost pointed towards Tyler Green. A little beyond the junction she found a grassy bank and sat down feeling desperate. She could go on, but only painfully slowly and in discomfort. The more she could rest her ankle the better it would be, but she was beginning to feel hungry and thirsty and there was no house in sight to which she could limp and seek assistance. She was not certain how long she rested there but the sun was climbing above her when she next stood.

Ruth had not progressed far along the lane when she was conscious of a cart approaching from behind her. She glanced back to see two oxen labouring in her direction and for a moment thought of darting into the hedgerow or a field. Perhaps if it had not been for her injury she would have done so, but the way she was situated she would have welcomed the opportunity of a lift and the chance to get something to drink from Roger or even the Devil himself.

She did not turn around, even when the beasts grew level with her and she could feel the steamy warmth of their bodies. Instead she continued, limping determinedly towards wherever the lane led.

"My goodness me," said a man's voice. "What have we got here?" Ruth looked around in astonishment. "My goodness me!" the driver repeated, staring down at the wild, dishevelled woman at his side. "Bless my soul if it isn't Miss Mottram. No, it cannot be, but then old Toby never forgets a face nor a name. It must be Miss Mottram!"

"Toby?" she croaked.

"It is Miss Mottram! What are you doing here in the middle of nowhere and in this state?"

"I was out walking yesterday afternoon," she said, hoarsely and thinking quickly. "I stumbled in a rabbit hole and have been out all night. You are the very first person on which I have laid my eyes!"

"But how come you here?" he said, shaking his head as he dismounted. "Let me help you up. We cannot travel quickly and it is a little bumpy but it will be better than relying on your feet. And your ankle? I could see that you a'limping as I came upon you."

"Yes. I think I have twisted it. I do not think it is any worse than that."

"But, why are you out here? Is it to do with one of your stories? Molly has been a'reading them to me."

"Yes," she said assuredly. "I came out by train yesterday to gather material and had the accident."

"To Wycombe station? But that must be a good four miles down the road. Have you walked out all this far?"

“I don’t think it is that,” said Ruth, anxious to keep her tale plausible. “And I hired a pony and trap,” she said in a moment’s inspiration. “I left it by the road and it must have wandered off.”

“It’ll have gone back to its stable,” and that’s where we are heading, home!”

“Home?” she asked cautiously.

“West Wycombe. That’s where me and my Molly abide and that’s where we’re heading now. It is still a fair journey so you make yourself comfortable. Why won’t she be surprised when she sees who I’m a’bringing home!”

“Home, then,” whispered Ruth and, leaning her weary, aching, body against his, she fell into a deep, dreamless, sleep. She had the vaguest recollection of the cart being drawn up outside a small cottage, and of people talking, paying her attention and being concerned for her. She thought she recalled being assisted up to a pretty porch and through a doorway. Then there were stairs, a light, bright room and, best of all, a bed. She thought she apologised for her presence, her condition, her appearance, and the amount of mud and dust that clung to her, but she could recall little else besides.

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