

Chapter Twenty-eight

Capture and Imprisonment

The sun was shining into the room when Ruth opened her eyes and looked around her. For a moment she could not believe what she saw. It was as if she had been transported back in time a full fifteen months or more. There, before her, was her bedroom in Meadowview Cottage just as it had been the day that they had packed and gone to the station to catch the train. Even the half-finished painting of the view from Maggot's Bridge was there, leaning against the wall. And there was no writing desk! It was as if she had never left it to go to Hazleton Court. It was as if none of it had happened, as if it was some grotesque nightmare.

She tried to sit up but could not as there appeared to be some impediment, some enormous weight, stopping her from lifting her head and shoulders from the pillows. She twisted and with some difficulty pulled herself backwards so that she could adopt a semi-sitting posture. The effort made her dizzy and uncomfortably hot.

It was her room but the writing desk was not there! No, she realised, that was still in the house in London. She felt sickened when she thought that it could be being used at that very moment by the usurper, Lucy. No, it was not all a dream. It had all happened and here she was, not knowing how she had been brought there, perhaps more than a day's walk from her uncle's house, and probably in one of the last places on Earth that she would want to be. Yet when she tried to push back the sheets and lower her legs to the floor, there seemed to be hardly any strength in her limbs.

"So you are awake, then," said her mother when she came into the room. "I must say, Ruth, that you have put a great number of people to a great deal of trouble with your antics!"

"How did I get here? The last thing I remember seeing was a gibbet."

"Yes," said her mother coldly. "You were at the gibbet the other side of Giblet's Wood. Albert Wentworth found you there, barefooted, and carried you all the way here, in the pouring rain, through the wood, over the bridge and up the hill. It was an unpleasant shock when I opened the door as you were as white as a shroud and had all the signs of being dead already. He carried you up here and I lit a fire, changed your clothes which are nigh on ruined, put hot water bottles in the bed and tried to get you warm again. That was yesterday afternoon."

"I must see Uncle Lancaster," said Ruth.

"You are not seeing anyone except that husband of yours. He was down here earlier in the week looking for you and raising Cain on account of you not being here to be found!"

"Matthew was here?" Ruth asked weakly, her hopes being totally destroyed.

"Of course he was," said her mother, crossly. "What would you expect a husband to do when his wife runs away without good reason?"

"I did not run away without good reason."

"You cannot imagine how worried everyone was. Then you turn up like this! I consulted Mr Clauncy on what the best thing was to do and he was in no doubt that I should send word to your husband."

"You have told Matthew that I am here?"

"He is on his way now, I dare say," said Mrs Mottram.

"Then I am lost," said Ruth. "I must try and get away. I must get to see Uncle Lancaster."

"You are not going anywhere," said her mother, quite brusquely. "You will just lie there and rest and be quiet. You have caused enough trouble! I have said all that I need to say."

"He is coming here for me! He will kill me!"

"I dare say that he will after what you have done! What ever possessed you to run away like that? What on earth was in your mind?"

"I mean that he really intends to kill me. He wants me dead. They both want me dead, him and Roger. I can see it all now. They killed Victoria and Uncle Mottram!"

"How dare you say such wicked, thoughtless, things!" snapped her mother. "I do not know what has happened to you in London. I do not know where you get it from, certainly not my side of the family! I cannot believe it is from your father, either. It must be as Mr Clauncy has always said. All this writing is corrupting you. He always said no good will come of it and it has not!"

"It has nothing to do with my writing. I found the Will, uncle's Will. Roger and Matthew have been plotting to get the inheritance, and I know the truth now!"

"Ah!" said her mother. "You know the truth, now? Is that what is at the back of all this? The truth my fine, young, lady is that there is never a day that goes by when I do not think of how badly I was used and taken advantage of, and how badly I was then treated, set aside and married off to the younger brother because he had no prospect. Someone I barely knew and who had no feeling whatsoever for me? How do you think he felt at receiving something handed down from his brother who was destined to take everything anyway? How do you think he felt when I bore him a daughter instead of a niece? What do you think he thought of me and of our marriage? And what so you think I see when I look at you? How could either of us possibly forget when you were always there to remind us? Do you not think that I am still reminded of it when I see you now? God knows I tried to bring you up as if you were our child, as if you were no different to Victoria, but how am I rewarded? You conceal from me the fact that my other daughter is terminally ill! You marry in secret and in direct defiance of my wishes! It will avail you little to tell me that your marital arrangements are now not working out the way that you hoped. You have made your bed and it is not beholden upon me to deny it you."

"But, Mother, I am your daughter," Ruth protested.

"In name, yes, but not by your actions. No daughter of mine would have done a fraction of what you have done. Your husband says that it is partly due to an illness of the mind. I will forgive you that, but I can never forgive you for the way you dealt with Victoria's illness. Nor can I ever forgive you for your marriage, not as my daughter, not even as Lady Mottram as you undoubtedly are!"

"And to think that I wanted none of this," said Ruth, beginning to sob. "All that I wanted was to be free to write and to be successful, and to marry the man I loved. The irony of it is I would have been a good writer and I would have made him a good wife but for the Mottram inheritance."

"That's as may be," said Mrs Mottram, curtly. "We all have to live with the mistakes we make. I made mine over twenty years ago and I am still punished for it. You have only just begun to make yours. You will adjust to them in time."

"I will not be allowed the time, Mother," said Ruth, shaking her head. "I ran away for one reason only which has nothing to do with my state of mind. They are plotting to kill me, Roger and Matthew. I know. I overheard them."

"Nonsense, Ruth, and I am not going to stay hear and listen to you saying such things even if it due to your illness. I will leave you to rest until your husband arrives for you. I do not imagine he will be all that long in coming."

Ruth slumped back with a sigh and closed her eyes. It was all becoming clear now. Her uncle had changed his Will after they had gone to stay with him at Hazleton Court Hall. He had disinherited Roger and favoured her. That was the significance of the necklace! And the matter with Victoria had been nothing but subterfuge. He could not have realised that Roger had been banking on receiving the inheritance and was already mortgaged in anticipation of that happening. But why had her uncle, the Earl, not confided in her earlier? Why? Perhaps there was an obvious answer. He saw her as his daughter but could not recognise her in public because of the harm it would do her, her sister and her mother. Yet he wanted her to have everything that she most wished for, and what she wished for most was to write. So rather than risk spoiling their relationship as uncle and niece, he had kept the truth from her. Would he have told her one day, when she was successful on account of her talent and hard work rather than her name? She would never know.

And Matthew had been there. That was why he did not come to West Wycombe in search of her. It was not because his was imprisoned or worse. It was because he was already searching for her elsewhere. They were conspiring against her. It seemed likely that they had been conspiring together for a long time before they had married. The thought of what the implications might be was not worth thinking.

She opened her eyes again and looked around the room, a room in which she had been very happy. It might be for the last time. There was an irony in all this as Albert, who had once sworn that he would do anything for her, had found her and thinking that he was rescuing her had brought her here whereas he should have carried her any-where in the opposite direction. And now her mother was preparing to deliver her into the hands of her executioner.

Even now Ruth forgave her mother. She had no doubt that she was being influenced by the Curate. She could hear him saying that she was a wicked, head-strong, girl who never submitted to the rightful wishes of her long-suffering mother, and who married against everyone's express wishes. He would have talked about marriage being for better or worse and about it being a holy sacrament. He probably went on to say that in sinning against her mother she was sinning against God. If she now had any anger in her, it would be directed against Mr Clauncy and not against her mother.

And she was prepared to forgive Matthew as she was sure that Signor Calaceli was at the back of it all and had corrupted her husband, probably blackmailed him, perhaps over his father, and left him in a position where he thought he had very little option but to do as he was instructed. She had married him of her own free will, thinking that she was about to escape the jaws of one perceived peril only to then unwittingly fall into the path of another. Mr Clauncy had played no part in that except, perversely, had he not spoken out against Matthew's father so vigorously that her mother singled out his son, she might never have paid him any attention, and not ended by falling in love.

She could hear voices downstairs. One was Matthew's, soft but firm enough to reach her ears and quicken her heart. Her mother was right. He was her husband and she should submit herself to him even if it meant her death. That was what the Princesses in *The Arabian Nights* did. That was what she must do.

"Is she upstairs?" she heard him say. "Now," he went on, "I should prepare you as I am not sure whether I will have to sedate her. I have some of her clothes in the carriage and if she is in a receptive frame of mind, I will ask her to change into them as it will be more comfortable for her on the journey. However, in my experience, patients who suffer like her from *delerium rejectionum* can be quite unpredictable, even violent. We have to be prepared for anything to happen."

"Violent?" gasped Mrs Mottram. "She did appear almost normal when she awoke although she has been saying some rather wild things."

"Another symptom. Sufferers develop a feeling of persecution and often claim that their life and the lives of those around them are threatened by some extraordinary conspiracy. It is all part of the illness that I mentioned. And you must not be fooled by appearances as their mood can change in the blink of an eye. It is all dependent upon the degree of inflammation of the brain."

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs Mottram. "You had better take what ever measures you think are necessary."

Ruth did not know how to react when her husband came into the room. He appeared tired and although his face was passive, there was a wild look about his eyes. "Ruth, dearest," he said in an unfeeling tone, "at last you are found. I have come from London to take you home."

Her body tensed. It was not a reaction over which she had any direct control although a large part of her was crying out that this was the man she loved, her husband, who she had married for better or worse and to whom she had taken an oath before God to submit. He probably noted her involuntary movement as he went on, "you are not going to give me any trouble, are you?"

Ruth could see her mother standing nervously in the doorway behind him. "Mother!" she appealed.

"You must go with him, Ruth," she said, sternly. "He is your husband and you married him of your own will."

Of course she had done this. She knew that her mother was reminding her that she remained faithful and dutiful to a man who she was forced to marry and that she did not expect her daughter to rebel against the husband of her own choice. Perhaps she had thought of running off in the early days before the child was born? Perhaps she had, and had been tracked down and captured, just as she had. It was her duty and Ruth could hear the Curate's voice saying "for better or worse," as clearly as if he was there in her bedroom with them. But then something ignited inside her. She was not like her mother. She had not suffered as she had or travelled this far simply to throw herself on the pyre now. "No!" she screamed, commanding every minute ounce of strength that her body could muster and drawing her knees up to her chin.

"Ruth!" said her mother, impatiently. "Ruth, please see sense."

"I am sorry, Mrs Mottram," said Matthew. "but when she has this kind of attack she is unable to listen to the soft voice of reason. I am afraid that the sickness is upon her and we will have to take measures for her own safety."

He produced a small, green, bottle and a white cloth and withdrew the cork. Ruth tried to fling herself from the bed in the direction of the window, but he was there and she was driven, cowered, into a corner. "Hold her hands!" he shouted as she drove her finger nails into his arm and tried to bite the hand that was being thrust over her face. But even had she not suffered the ordeal of the past week, he probably would have been able to subdue her. And struggle as she might, once he had her pinned she could hold her breath only for so long.

She was semi-conscious as he carried her down the stairs and to the front door. There a man blocked his path and she heard her husband tell him to get out of their way and called him an oaf. She could remember someone else's hand pulling at her, then she saw Albert's shocked face as he was sent stumbling backwards into the rose bushes. The next moment she was flung into the corner of a carriage and Matthew was lifting the step and closing the door behind him as it jolted forward. She caught a brief glimpse of her mother on the path, bending over Albert and trying to help him up, then Matthew lowered the blind.

"Is there a need for me to give you more?" he said, sliding along the opposite seat to face her. "I will if you give me cause. I have barely started on the bottle and I would be quite content for me to have a quiet peaceful journey, especially as it is going to be quite a long one. Or are you going to start behaving like a dutiful wife? My goodness! You have led us a song and dance, I don't mind telling you. You cannot imagine the trouble you have put us to! But that's all at an end now."

"What are you going to do with me?" she whispered.

"Do with you? I would happily leave you here now in the bottom of some ditch or lake. That's what any reasonable husband would do to a wife who ran away, but that would now prompt too many awkward questions. I probably have enough evidence, more than enough, to have you committed for life. Yes, Ruth, I have, with your uncle's death and your sister's death, pressures at work and these claims of persecution that you insist on clinging to. Why even your employers have expressed concern about you! And once you were put away it would be for life. In time, people would simply forget that you ever existed, but that would not quite suit my purposes at the present time. There are some documents that are in preparation. I need your signature on them. And you must be of sound mind when you sign them."

"Then I shall not sign them," muttered Ruth. "I won't sign anything."

"Oh, but you will," said her husband, grimly. "There will come a time when you will be prepared to sign anything and everything that I place before you."

"I do not understand why you are doing this to me or saying these things, Matthew," she cried. "I thought that you loved me!"

"Love you?" he laughed, harshly. "Love you, Ruth? How could any man love you? Have you looked in the mirror? You are plain, ill-proportioned, and barely feminine in your

actions and activities. How could any man love someone like you? A feeble woman trying to do a man's job in a man's world? You are to be despised for it! And what is worse, I am not just married to you, but I find that it is I who has married the bastard daughter in addition! How do you think I feel about that? What do you think will be said of me if this all becomes public knowledge?"

"I am Lady Mottram," she said weakly. "You cannot treat me this way."

"You are my wife and I shall treat you as I see fit. As for the title, I would expect your cousin to challenge and unseat your position. I expect that you have already given him all the evidence that he needs if he is to act prior to your death. And if there is any challenge we can use your money to pay the defence. That is poetic justice if ever I heard it!"

"I see no justice in it or any of this," she said, lowly.

"No? I suppose that you might not, but it is ironic, isn't it, as you may end up as a news feature in the very newspaper you had the impudence to write for."

Ruth closed her eyes. If Matthew still required her signature on some papers that he did not have with him, she was not in any immediate danger unless she acted in such a way as invited it. Whereas a short while ago she assumed that the only thing he wanted was her dead, it was quite the opposite. He needed her alive so perhaps as it had previously been her aim to stay alive to thwart him, it was her duty now to die and challenge his plans that way. Her gaze fell on the door of the carriage and the handle not more than six inches away from her. It would be easy to open and all she then would have to do was fling herself forward. Yet there was a risk that she might fall beyond the wheel and only be injured. If she could but just step out, she would probably fall under the rear wheel, but that would require more time and that was not something her husband would allow her.

"I do not know what is on your mind, Ruth," he said, sharply, "but we have ways of doing this. We can continue as we are or with you totally sedated. Which is it to be? Are you prepared to be left alone and unconscious with me? Believe me, I would take the greatest of delights in venting my anger upon you, have no doubt of that!"

"I have nothing on my mind," she said slowly. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere remote, a place where not too many questions are asked, and somewhere you will be safe. It is one of the advantages of being in the medical profession. You get to learn of the establishments where patients can be tucked away and forgotten. Places where, if instructed, the diet is sparse and just less than that required to prevent one from gradually wasting and fading away. My goodness, would you believe that some young ladies, dissatisfied with the disfigurement facilitated by their corsets, take to doing this of their own accord?"

"And what shall I do there, in this place?"

"Wait, my dear. Wait my coming. Wait for *his* coming."

"I see. May I ask to be provided with pen, ink and paper?"

"The writer unto the last? Well, I would not want to be the one to disappoint you in everything you learn of me. I will speak to the superintendent and you shall be provided for, not that it will be of any avail as I cannot promise that your story will have a happy ending!"

"Thank you! It will help me to pass the time."

"It is such a very small service in comparison to the one you are to provide," he said, leaning back in the seat. "Tell me, Ruth, how did you evade us? Roger thought that he really had you cornered at Wycombe? We suspect that either the story about the horse and trap was bogus or you were not the woman seen getting into it that day."

"Horse and trap?" she said, feeling concern for those who had helped her.

"We were told that you were seen getting into one on the Wycombe road."

"Then I am sure that was true except to the extent that it was not me, as I hid."

"Hid?" he said, harshly. "Where? From what Roger told me there was no where anyone could hide and I did not think it plausible from his description that you had leapt out of the window, especially on a strained ankle."

"I was behind the door," she said, softly. "No-one knew that I was there and as soon as I thought the coast was clear I slipped downstairs and out of the house without being seen."

“Ha!” exclaimed Matthew. “Behind the door? I always thought that whereas your cousin has a devilish, scheming, mind he is a little short when it comes to the application of the little energy he possesses to practical matters. It matters not, now. Wycombe was enough for me to assume that you were heading here and as I had already taken the precaution of coming down to see your mother where I was surprisingly well received, considering. But then, as you are not a model wife, she is not much of a mother-in-law. I suppose we will be doing you a service as you would not want to grow into that sort of thing, would you? Of course, I will actually have to go and see her again, in person, just to assure her that you are safe and well and receiving the very best treatment for your condition that medicine can provide. I have to return to Sutton Minety as soon as I have delivered you. I can call to see her then.”

“I will try to escape,” she said stubbornly.

“So you might, but I have seen the rooms. The windows are barred and there are double doors which are kept bolted from the outside at all times. Other than that it is quite civilised. I do not think there is very much chance of you escaping this time.”

“And Signor Calaceli? He is behind all this?”

“Calaceli?” said Matthew, with a slight note of puzzlement. “Yes, of course. Why at this very moment he is drafting the documents which will ultimately seal your doom. A kind of death sentence, although he may not be fully aware of it.”

Ruth did not answer. Perhaps there would now be no escape and she had lost. She could not let matters rest there. She would set down her story on paper, in full, giving a full account of everything that had happened to her and to those about her. There was a hope that by chance, or by design if she could find someone who showed the slightest degree of sympathy towards her, her written story might survive her and fall into the hands of someone who would be prepared to bring it to the notice of the World and seek justice for her and those who had been grievously wronged by the triumvirate that faced her. If there was no friend to take possession of and safeguard the document, she would try and conceal it somewhere in the room in the hope that one day it might be found and be published. It would not be an easy task. It would be a painful task, but it would be something that would keep her alive at least until she had completed it. For the present, however, she did not want to even think about it just in case she let slip what was in her thoughts. Her mind was numb in any case, and she now would just sit there, in silence, and await the outcome of this long journey.

Ruth laid down her pen. She had been a prisoner there for too many days. At first she had done nothing but look at the blank walls and the grills over the two windows. Or she would sit looking out through the grimy glass, down on to the paved area immediately below, or out across the sheep-cropped grass and trees, knowing that somewhere out there her husband was preparing to return. Day after day she had stared at the paper and the writing equipment yet left it untouched. She had not even acted in the manner of a model prisoner and marked the number of days of her incarceration on the cell walls. Given her life expectancy, it was not worthwhile starting now.

She had occupied some of this time with her thoughts, carefully going over all the events of the last year or more, assembling them, trying to probe the motives behind the actions that those around her had taken. But when she came face to face with it, the burden of lies, deceit, treachery, fear and suffering was too great for her to bear and commit to paper. Had it been fiction she could readily have written of it with great relish, perhaps with a little reserve in the style she chose, but with enough panache to hold her reader. She had no doubt that Messrs Braithwaite & Sunbury would have published it with the greatest of alacrity. It was simply that the thought of spreading all of the shame of her family, friends and loved ones out on paper and presenting it as the truth was more than she could face. It was as if all the crimes, fear and dread locked inside her would rise up and devour her should she release it in print. Someone else would have to take up her story and complete it for her. It was a forlorn wish as who could this someone be? She no longer had a single person in the World who was in a position to save her.

Perhaps now it would never be told but it would end there, and soon. They had taken almost everything from her. All that she had left was the name that she could put down on their documents, the account that she found that she could not bring herself to complete, and her life. She could perhaps deny them all these things. If she died at her own hands she would be doomed for all eternity, yet it was the one thing remaining that was entirely at her disposal. It was one thing that she would not allow them to take from her.

Ruth had examined the room closely. Matthew had been correct concerning the doors. One attendant came in whilst another stayed outside the first door and bolted it behind the first. There was always a bolted door between her and the corridor and what she had no idea what lay beyond that. Short of trying to take an attendant hostage, possibly by threatening his life with a knife or her pen, she could see no means of escape that way. She had looked for loose bricks amongst the whitewash as a possibly hiding place for her account. She had found none, but as the account would now not be written by her or there, this was of no consequence. And she had examined the windows.

She estimated that it was around forty feet to the pavement. No-one would survive such a fall, even supposing that one could get passed both the bars and the cruel iron spikes which, curved outwards and upwards, were arranged in a row below the sills. She could see a narrow stone ledge running along the wall about a foot below the spikes, but it could not be more than four inches wide and she could see no means by which she could have got a foot to it, leave alone find a hand-hold to steady herself. Escape to safety through the window was also impossible.

But she had found that not all the perpendicular iron bars across the window were secure and over a number of days, as she sat and watched the sheep idly nibble their way past, she worked at them with the result that there were now two that could be completely removed, except a spider had built her web there overnight.

Ruth looked at the table, at the small pile of papers and the opened inkpot. They, together with the discarded pen, appeared to summate all she had desired from her life. She had not desired wealth or title. Had she known the contents of the Will she would willingly have ceded it all to Roger or Matthew. She would have done that without her sister having to pay the very price that she was about to pay. Of course, she could still do that by signing anything and everything that they placed before her, but it was too late for that course and she would not seek to follow it no matter what they said. She now knew that the love that she had nurtured and of which she had dreamed of was misplaced and that Matthew neither loved her nor wanted her. It was no longer an issue whether this, or her mother's rebuttal, caused the deepest wound of all. Either would have been close to lethal on its own. Together, and in combination, they were quite fatal.

She watched the spider with envy as it scrambled to safety. Then the two bars came out easily. Carefully she laid them on the floor and opened the sash. The opening was quite small, but it would be large enough for her to squeeze between. She returned to the table and looked at the words she had put down on paper. Her last words! If only she had been able to find the courage to complete it! She took the chair over to the open window and stood on it. From there she crouched and stepped forward so that she was squatting on the window frame, not a very dignified position to be found in, she thought. Even now it was not too late to turn back, but to what? To a lingering death in captivity? Or to be suddenly smothered one dark and stormy night? "No!" she said to herself. "I will not give him the satisfaction!"

She flung her small body forward into the abyss. She had the briefest of impressions of the sky, then the grass, flashing before her. Then her head struck the stone and it was all over.