

Chapter Twenty-nine

How Ruth's Story came to be Written

It was a sweet perfume, a strong scent of roses, which greeted Ruth as she opened her eyes. She was lying in a strange room lit by the reddish glow of a late afternoon sun. Above her was a wood, ornately panelled ceiling, one which was vaguely familiar, yet one that she could not place. At the open window blue velvet curtains were moving almost imperceptibly in an invisible breeze and when she moved her head she saw a massive arrangement of some of the most beautiful and colourful flowers she had ever seen. "Could this be heaven?" she thought, hardly daring to move. "Oh, no, I could never have gone to heaven, not after the wicked thing that I did. I shall never be allowed into heaven." She could remember it now, the sky flashing past, the green of the grass and the trees and the whitish grey of the stone. She could remember the pain and a bright light that exploded within her mind. But after that, there was nothing.

She turned her head away from the window and was surprised to see a young woman sat beside her, reading a book. The movement drew her attention away from the page before her. "Oh, your Ladyship!" she cried, startled. "I am sorry! I did not realise that you had awoken! I will fetch someone immediately!"

Ruth turned back to look at the window and saw something that filled her with reassurance. There, standing exactly where she would have placed it, had it ever been in this particular room, was the writing desk! She closed her eyes for a moment, thinking this must be some cruel deception of the mind. Perhaps this was what happened when one died? Perhaps one's life in various forms really did flash before one? When she opened her eyes the room and its contents were still there, in place, precisely where she had seen them last. It was not a dream. It was, by some miracle that she did not fully understand, as real as anything could be.

"I do not understand," were the first words she uttered when her uncle entered. "I should not be here. I should be dead. Tell me that I am not in my grave."

"You are not in your grave, Ruth. You are where you should be. You are where you should always have been were it not for a grave injustice that can never be corrected. The restoration of you to this place is the most that can now be done."

"I am, then, at Hazleton Court Hall?" she asked.

"You are, in your house, on your Estate." Ruth looked away and tried to gather her confused thoughts. "You do like the flowers?" he asked. "We had a long debate as to what you should see when you first awakened on account of the doctors' worries that you might be affected by amnesia. There was some risk in it, but we thought it should be the writing desk which was brought down from London two days ago, but the flowers were placed there at the insistence of someone you shall meet shortly."

"I can remember it all," she said slowly.

"That is good," he said, quickly. "That is very good!"

"I can remember being locked in this room where there was a table and paper for me to write except that I could not bring myself to tell the most important story I ever was called upon to write. I can remember the bars to the window which I removed. I can remember climbing up and - was it so wicked of me, Uncle?"

He picked up the chair and took it round so that he could sit beside the flowers. "What ever was in your mind at the time is not for us to judge. What is important is that you are here now. There is much to tell you, Ruth, but you have been very ill and I am cautious about saying too much now and distressing you."

“And my writing desk is here,” she said, vaguely. “It kept its secret well. That was where the Will was hidden, you know. For all that time I had been carrying it about with me! I know what it said, Uncle.”

“Indeed,” said Mr Lancaster. “I, of course, knew its contents from the day it was made but could tell no-one. It was a heavy burden, not made lighter by the dreadful matters that followed, but I now know and understand so much more, thanks to the persistence and bravery of one man.”

“One man?” asked Ruth.

“You may meet him shortly, provided I am satisfied that you are strong enough. I think that the doctor should examine you first.”

“I have no need of doctors!” she said, abruptly. “I have a headache and my head appears to be painful, and that is all!”

“That is where you struck it,” said her uncle. “There was a nasty wound and we were fearful that there could be a fracture of the cranium. I am pleased to hear you say that you have no more than a headache.”

“My shoulder feels sore as well,” she said, impatiently. “This man? Was it Matthew?”

“No, Ruth,” said the solicitor, “it was not Matthew.” There was something present in the solemnity of his tone that concerned her and made her fearful. “But we will have plenty of opportunity to go over everything that has happened in the fullness of time. First things should be attended to first. You must be hungry and thirsty. I will arrange for a tray to be brought up to you.”

“What of Matthew and Roger, and that dreadful girl, Lucy?” said Ruth, sharply. “Do you know that she ensconced herself in my house and had the impertinence to try on my dresses!”

“Ah, yes, our little Lucy. You should not feel entirely bad towards her as the wretched creature curiously was partly instrumental in saving your life, such is the paradox of how events unfold. Of course she had not the least intention of doing so at the time, nor any knowledge of the outcome of her actions. And she has another redeeming feature, or one that you might view in that light. Upon her arrest she has been most co-operative with the authorities, which is more than can be said of your cousin, Roger who is in custody too. I am afraid that an order has been issued to exhume both your sister’s body and that of your uncle. If we find what I suspect will be found, that evidence together with Lucy’s admissions, will send both of them to the gallows.”

“Oh, no, Uncle!” Ruth exclaimed. “I cannot begin to believe that is what I would want!”

“I am afraid it is completely out of our hands and not a matter over which we have more than a fleeting influence.”

“And there is nothing that can be done for them?”

“No, Ruth, and in my opinion, neither of them deserve to have anything done for them. If they are found guilty, as I have no doubt that they shall be, they will pay the ultimate price.”

“But I meant neither of them any harm, Uncle,” she said, wistfully. “All that I ever wanted to do is write.”

“I know. I understand that now. And so you shall, if you so wish. As soon as your strength has recovered.”

“And Matthew?” she said, suddenly. “What of him?”

“Ah, well, he presented everyone with a problem. At first all we knew was that he brought you here and then returned to Sutton Minety. Then, quite suddenly, he disappeared, vanished off the face of the earth.”

“Matthew disappeared? You mean he escaped?”

“We were desperate to find him as we hoped that through him we might find you. But we did not find him and it took some remarkable and patient work of detection on the part of the one you have yet to meet before we tracked down where you had been taken. However, Matthew did not escape.”

“What do you mean?” she said, shaking her head.

“The authorities were baffled until, a few days ago, a young man from your village, one Albert Wentworth, admitted he knew where he was.”

“Albert?” said Ruth, puzzled.

“They found Matthew’s body hidden under a bridge close to the village not more than fifteen minute’s walk from your mother’s cottage. It was badly decomposed, I am afraid. I am sorry.”

“Matthew is dead?” she said, unbelievably.

“It is not absolutely clear what happened but it appears this youth lured him out to this location then killed him. He will stand trial for the murder and most likely hang.”

“Not, Albert,” she said, lowly. “He once said that he would give his life for me and I told him he should not say such things. It was on that very bridge at the time. Oh, Uncle! I cannot bear this anymore. It appears that everyone who comes into contact with me is destined to die! Pray say that there is no more that you have to tell me?”

“No more about death or anything of that kind, well except two which I will mention later which have a bearing on these events, but none can be laid at your door. You have been a victim as much as any of the others. You would have died had it not been for an absolute miracle.”

“I should have died,” she said, gravely. “I must confess that it was in my mind to die and I do not understand how I come to be here. How long have I been here?”

“We brought you straight here and you have been under sedation for over a week. In addition to the injury you suffered, you developed a fever as a result of your exposure during your trip from London. None of us still can believe that you actually walked all that way.”

“I did receive two short lifts. And I owe one innkeeper a pannier basket which he kindly leant to me with some provisions which I lost when I fell into a stream. I fear now that I will have lost the pannier besides.”

“That is not so, Ruth,” said her uncle, smiling. “At least there is something on which I may put your mind at rest. You were clutching a pannier basket when this Albert found you at the Sutton gibbet. He carried it with you to your mother’s and I have established that it is save, there still.”

“Albert again, but it cannot surely be Albert who you say I am to meet?”

“No, Ruth, there is another who stepped forward and ensured your safety.”

“And poor Matthew is dead,” she said, reflectively. “What do I feel? Sorrow, loss, yet relief! I did love him, Uncle. I loved him with all my heart and I would have done or given him anything that was in my power to do or give. Yet, did I really love him as I should as when it came to it, I was not prepared to give my life to him?”

“You must not reproach yourself. You were not asked to give your life to him. As I see it, he was prepared to take it and I feel that no-one, no matter how deep or pure their love, would have acted in any way different to the way in which you did.”

“Perhaps it was an illusion?” she said, again vaguely. “Perhaps I simply thought that because I loved him he must be kind, gentle and good. That is the vanity of all vanities, the blindness of all blindnesses.”

“And now?”

“I do not know,” she said, smiling weakly. “It is passed. I feel nothing towards him at present as if my senses were numbered.”

“That is probably the effect of the sedation. You will tell me if you start to feel exhaustion, will you not? We would not want to fall at the very last obstacle that we face, your recovery to sound health.”

“I can report that I do not feel fatigued and I feel quite calm and at peace with the World. But there are many questions that still remain unanswered!”

“All in the fullness of time, my dear. Perhaps I should next introduce you to your saviour, the man who finally saved your life. May I bring him in?”

“Of course!” said Ruth, looking down to ensure that she was decently covered, then watching her uncle as he crossed to the door. The newcomer was about the last person who she would have expected and, shocked and frightened, she shrunk back in her bed as he

approached. "Uncle!" she exclaimed. "What is he doing here? This man has persecuted me and plotted against me! He is the criminal behind all that has happened!"

"No, Lady Mottram," he said. "I beg you to believe that I am innocent of virtually every charge that you might level against me."

"It is true, Ruth," said Mr Lancaster.

"No," she cried. "It cannot be! You are in this together against me! If that is not so, please ask him to go as I am much afraid of him!" It was at that moment that all she saw before her collapsed and she thought that she was doomed. Her uncle was in league with Signor Calaceli and had been so all along. Every obstacle that had stood in their path had no been conveniently removed, except for her and she was now absolutely at their mercy! He, this wicked man, had won in the end!

"Ruth, Ruth," said her uncle, soothingly. "I know that this is a shock. Possibly you may feel it an unpleasant shock, but please hear us out as there are many, many things that you do not know, things that have been hidden from you or things that were simply misrepresented to you."

"But he is an international criminal!" she cried. "Matthew's contacts in the police said he was! They had him under constant surveillance!"

"I doubt that your late husband had any contacts in the police," said Mr Lancaster, patiently. "Please accept my word that anything that you say or think against Signor Calaceli does him the greatest disservice. It was he who came to me, what, three weeks ago to say that the Will had been found, that he believed you were being held against your will, and that he believed that your life might be in danger. I was not convinced at first but when I heard of your flight from your house in London and the manner in which you were taken from your mother's cottage I had began to have my suspicions. It was then we started the search to find you which was hampered by your husband's disappearance. But it was Signor Calaceli's painstaking research through your husband's papers at your home and at his clinic, if I can call it that, which led us to where you were. And then it was he who risked his life to save you."

"He is just saying and doing these things to win your favour!" Ruth protested.

"No, Lady Mottram," said Signor Calaceli. "I can assure you that I am innocent of all the charges you level before me. I could not even begin to think of harming you. I am one of your greatest admirers. I have been so since the day I saw you first here, in your late uncle's sitting room. I have collected and read everything that you have written and had published. And it was I who stood below your window and had the audacity to send you the note and poem last New Year, the one that told you that it was Love that came to call upon you, not Death."

"You sent it?" she said slowly. "You are my secret admirer, the one I so often would wonder about? But why did you visit me like that and write the note?"

"I was sailing to South America in connection with your cousin's business venture. He had engaged me to act as his lawyer, to advise on the South American matters of law and custom, and to verify the statements made in the prospectus. I am a lawyer, born of a Scottish mother and an Italian father. But as I say, I was sailing and I was desperate to see you. Of course I had no idea what peril you might be in until much later. Then I tried to speak to you and warn you. And as soon as I had been informed that the Will had been found and I was aware of its contents, I came to the house to try and see you as by then I was beginning to fear the worse."

"That must have been when I saw you in the street, arguing with Lucy," said Ruth, reflectively. "This is too much for me, Uncle. Everything is stood on its head! But my sister, Victoria! She went in utter fear of you and your henchmen!"

"I have no henchmen, believe me," said Signor Calaceli. "If I had I would have put them to work to rescue you. You cannot imagine the despair I felt when we were looking for you, not knowing whether we would ever find you or, if we did, whether you would be alive or dead. As it was it was a very close thing!"

"We did arrive in the nick of time, Ruth," said her uncle. "Believe me. You do recall what happened at the sanatorium?"

"I do now recall what happened after I had jumped," she said.

"Let me say, firstly, that we arrive within minutes of you jumping out of the window," said Mr Lancaster. "It is impossible for me to fully describe the scene, but we found this crowd stood in front of the building arguing as to how to recover your body. We could see immediately what had happened. When you jumped, your skirt became snagged on the iron hooks that were placed there to deter inmates from doing exactly that. Your dress tore, but the sewing on the hems of your camisole held, a fine testimonial to your mother's craft and a small thanks to Lucy who, we suppose, packed the clothes that were the least fashionable and the most functional when Matthew came down to the cottage to collect you. We could see you, hanging there, upside down and lifeless. They were going to go up to the room, lean out the window, cut you down, and let you fall onto the paving stones below, but we stopped that. The question then, of course, was how to rescue you. Of course we had no way of knowing whether you were alive or, as everyone else assumed, dead. You certainly would have been dead if we had listened to others! I will let Angelo take over the story at this point."

"There is little more to tell, Lady Mottram," said Signor Calaceli. "It was just a question of pulling you back inside the room."

"That is nonsense, Ruth, and you must not listen to his modesty. There was no ladder long enough to reach where you were and we found we could not pull you back into the room. So we went up on the roof and Angelo insisted on being lowered on the only rope that could be found, made his way along a ledge to where you were suspended and then fastened the rope around your waist. In order to do he had to remove the rope from himself then, as the rope was not of sufficient length to allow you to be lowered to the ground, he had to guide you away from the spikes, ensure that you did not strike the wall again, and manoeuvre you through the window. All this perched on a narrow ledge forty feet above the ground. It was a heart-stopping moment, I can tell you."

"It was nothing, really," said Signor Calaceli.

"Perhaps he just wants me alive," said Ruth, unkindly.

"Most certainly I do, Lady Mottram, but not for the purposes that you might think."

"Why then?" said Ruth, sharply.

"Oh, Ruth," said her uncle. "Can you not see? This poor fellow has told you clearly why!" Ruth did not reply but looked at Signor Calaceli who was standing with his head lowered. It was too confusing, to now be told that this man who she had come to regard as her most deadly enemy in the whole World was an admirer and possibly more. How could she, in the space of a few seconds, unravel the picture that she had sewn and embroidered a new one? "Is this proving too much for you?" he continued. "Would you like to rest?"

"Or would you just like for me to leave?" said Signor Calaceli.

"No," said Ruth, thoughtfully. "If you have performed all the services for me that have just been catalogued, it would be less than charitable for me to dismiss you." She looked down at the counterpane. She would have to accept that it was all true, that this man who she had disliked since the day she had seen him first with Earl Mottram was the man to whom she owed her life. She had no doubt that had she scripted the plot she would have had it differently, but there was nothing now that she could do to effect that. "It appears that I do owe you an apology, Signor Calaceli," she said, measuredly. "It would appear that neither are you what I assumed you to be, nor are you what I was led to believe you to be. I appear to have misjudged you as much as I misjudged nearly everyone else, possibly more so."

"He is a good man, Ruth," said her uncle, "if he will excuse me saying so in his presence."

"And your part in my cousin's business venture, Signor Calaceli? That was entirely innocent and beyond reproach, was it?"

"You are very hard on me, Lady Mottram," he said, smiling, "but I consider it to be a privilege. My part in the affair? I must admit that I had my suspicions at an early stage, not because of anything untrue or underhand that I discovered, but because I could not confirm who their financial backers were. I did make my own enquiries including coming here to see Earl Mottram, saying that I was seeking financial assistance for the venture, but knowing that

if your uncle had already given them his backing or underwritten their debts, he would tell me so. In the event he did not. Then there was the matter of your sister's illness, but it appeared to be natural, something that she had contracted. Your cousin had started letting it be known about this time that if he did not inherit the Mottram fortune, his wife would. My concern for you started when I heard that you were to marry Matthew Fayrbrother as apart from any personal involvement I might have had, I could not understand their reasons but one or two things I overheard tended to suggest that their intention was to harm you. I would have done more, but it is hard to separate a woman from her husband, especially if she loves him as it was clear to me that you did. How could I rightly step in and deny you that happiness? It did not all become clear until, as I said, I learned that the Will had been found. Then I knew that what I feared most was in danger of coming to pass and I came straight down to Tetbury to convey my suspicions to your uncle."

"And, as you have heard, Ruth, it is as well that he did for neither I nor your mother had any knowledge of these things and we both saw matters in an entirely different light."

"I still find this so difficult to comprehend," said Ruth "I scarcely know what to say other than to thank the two of you. It would be most ungracious of me not to do that, and to ask you to forgive my confusion."

"That is perfectly understandable," said Mr Lancaster. "We have had days to assess and adjust to all of this. You are just hearing it for the first time."

"There was something Lucy said that I did not understand at the time," said Ruth, pensively. "She seemed to think that we were half-sisters. That could not have been so, could it, Uncle? I would expect to hear the truth from you on this matter. If there are more things that I should hear, I would prefer to hear them now."

"Ah, yes, our little Lucy again. If ever there was an ungrateful creature, our Lucy is. You may remember a few minutes ago I mentioned that there were two deaths? They were those of her mother and father. Her father had come down from London to Gloucester in the company of some actress and when that relationship broke up he gravitated to the Mottram Estate in search of work and was taken on. Here he met Lucy's mother and married her, bigamously it turned out. The Earl, on hearing that a child was on the way persuaded his mother to allow them to live in cottage on the Estate. The father showed his gratitude a few weeks after Lucy was brought into the World by filling his pockets with some of the Earl's best silver and fled. It being Winter, the boating lake was frozen over but as he crossed the ice it gave way under his weight and all the silver he was carrying. The lake was grappled and a small amount of the silver was recovered, but most and his body was never found."

"Lucy's mother was absolutely distraught. No-one knew whether it was love for him, or simply the disgrace that his actions had brought upon her, but she followed him. Her body was removed from the lake a month later, and it has never been used again since that day. The Earl had the child brought up amongst the servants in the household and one might have thought that any child thus reared and privileged would have been grateful, but not our Lucy. She may have heard some of the tales that were whispered below stairs not only about her father and mother, but about your mother and the Earl's brother. It is possible that the two stories became confused in her mind as it seems that your cousin had no difficulty in convincing her that the Earl was her father, had wronged her mother, and that she was about to be excluded from any part of the inheritance. He also callously told her that he would marry her to make things right and that she would become Lady Mottram. I am sure that he had not the slightest intention of carrying this through. Nor now, it seems, has Lucy."

"Shall I be called upon to testify?" asked Ruth.

"I would think it unlikely. Unless something very strange happens, Lucy will say enough to secure their convictions without any corroboration. But I am forgetting that your mother is here and would, of course, wish to see you now that you are awake."

"Mother is here?"

"Yes, your Ladyship. Would you be willing to see her?"

"Uncle! You are not permitted to refer to me in those terms. I expressly forbid anyone to use them! And, of course I am happy to see my mother!"

“Then I shall send for her on the condition that you relax your stance concerning the way in which you are addressed. It is your’s by rights to receive and will be expected of you. And it has been won in the hardest of ways. Until the last twelve months the name of Mottram was held in great esteem and it will fall to you, Ruth, to restore its prestige. I am sure that your uncle not only intended that you should assume the title when the time came, and I would add that was clearly signalled to all who had eyes to see when you wore the Mottram necklace, but he would also have wanted you to continue his good and charitable works. I am afraid that you will also have to receive on occasions. Despite what has happened, several of my least favourite ladies have already delivered their cards. But there is much good you can perform with the wealth that now is yours to command. And now I will lecture you no more, but we will both withdraw and I will send for your mother. Do not be too hard on her, Ruth.”

The few minutes which elapsed before Mrs Mottram reached the room allowed Ruth to contemplate all that had been said to her. The most important thing was that Matthew was dead. She felt that she ought to be feeling anguish and sorrow, but she felt nothing. It was true that she had loved him, but it was a mirage of her own creation which was now no longer before her. The Matthew she had loved had never existed and certainly was not the man she had married although she had been blind to that at the time. “But I did love him!” she protested to herself.

And now he was dead, at Albert’s hand. Poor Albert, who had stood beside her on the very bridge and insisted that he was painted into her picture and Matthew painted out. That painting was never completed and now never could be. She would speak to her uncle to ensure that Albert received the very best defence in court when he came to trial. Someone would have to speak up for him and expose the real nature of the man he had destroyed.

“Am I disturbing you?” asked Mrs Mottram, timidly.

“No,” said Ruth, thinking that her mother had aged since she saw her last. She sat on the chair recently vacated by her brother, reserved and looking nervously at her daughter.

“I am sorry!” she said suddenly. “I said those wicked, dreadful, things to you and I was utterly wrong to disbelieve you. And then I let that man take you from me after all that I had said about him and his father. I should have remained true to my word and never have allowed that. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Me forgive you?” said Ruth. “May be it should be me asking you for forgiveness as I was wrong in the way I acted over Victoria’s illness and I was wrong to marry Matthew in the manner in which I did, but I was deceived into thinking in the way that I did.”

“We were all deceived,” said Mrs Mottram.

“And now he is dead and I shall wear black for another year at least. It is strange but I never once pictured myself as a widow.”

“You have been through a terrible ordeal, Ruth and lost much. We have both lost much,” said her mother, sadly. “Things can never be the same again, but you are still my daughter. You are now my only daughter and I hope that it something you can acknowledge and take to your heart and forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you. You must know my true nature as well as do I and know that I would never allow a few intemperate words to come between us or erase the memory of the happy years spent at the cottage. I would happily return there and live out the rest of our lives together, but I fear that my uncle has other things planned for me.” Mrs Mottram did not respond but stood and went over to the window.

“He seems a very pleasant young man,” she said, suddenly.

“Who?”

“That young lawyer, how do you pronounce his name?”

“You mean Signor Calaceli? It might be easier if we were familiar and called him Angelo,” said Ruth. “On second thought,” she added, “it might be better if we did not!”

“Of course your uncle and he found common ground between them immediately, both being men of the legal profession. Did you know that he attended university in this country?”

“That is no great recommendation.”

“He thinks highly of you, Ruth. I have talked to him and I find him a very personable young man.”

“Are you going now to tell me that Mr Clauncy would approve of him?”

“Mr Clauncy? Do not talk to me about that vile toad! Do you know what he has done? The slightest hint of scandal and he was off! He has proposed marriage to Miss Seymour and she has accepted him! The wedding is to be in a month’s time! Why, there were times when I thought - well, enough about that. I dare say now we will both receive invitations.”

“I shall not go,” said Ruth.

“Nor shall I,” agreed Mrs Mottram, “but I was talking about this young man. You know that he thinks the absolute world of you, Ruth. You could still do far worse than to consider him.”

“Oh, Mother! Here I am not yet having put on my weeds and here you are trying to marry me off! What kind of scandal would that cause? Apart from that I have my position in Society to consider. Why I would now expect that half the eligible male aristocracy will at this very moment be plotting their path to my door! I would have thought that as a titled widow with great wealth I would be irresistible even if I am ugly and ill-proportioned.”

“I cannot imagine who said that of you, but it certainly is not the way in which this young man views you. You are of course right, Ruth. Many men will beat their path to your door and seek your hand if you permit them to, but they will all be interested in your wealth and position first, and in you second. Some will even bring wealth and a title with them, but you have no need of either. I am not suggesting that you should throw yourself into this man’s arms straight away, or even ever. But he appears to be upright, sober, responsible, courteous and kind, and he loves you, of that I am sure. He is not someone to be turned away, or even readily let go because there are other women out there in the World. Nor is he someone to be played or trifled with, but I believe he is absolutely honest and genuine in his feelings for you and that you should contrive a way in which to keep him near you. Love, true love, is not something that you should let slip through your fingers.”

“You say that Signor Calaceli is in love with me, and he professes to be so. I do not know how he can say that. He does not know me. He has barely ever met me. How could he possibly love me, the real me? Or will it be just the same as between me and Matthew, only reversed? How would I know that I would not come to hate and despise him, and he me? I am not even sure that I am any more capable of love.”

“Oh, Ruth! That cannot be true. If you give him the time and the opportunity, he will reveal his true feelings. As for knowing one-another, there are times when it truly is love at first sight. That was the way with your father and me. You must not allow a similar mistake to be made now. You should not accept him or anyone else unless you are absolutely satisfied on every count, but do not reject him prematurely, not after all that he has done. That is all I am asking of you.”

“I am certain that I have no intention of accepting him or anyone who asks for my hand,” said Ruth, firmly, “but I will note what you say and not dismiss him either, although his presence frightens me still.”

“Thank you, Ruth,” said Mrs Mottram, standing and crossing to the door.

“Where are you going, Mother?” asked Ruth, sharply.

“I thought that you might now like to rest. And I must think of returning to Meadowview Cottage. I have some unfinished business with a certain person’s bridal gown.”

“I see,” said Ruth. “I am having a little difficulty in adjusting to my new position in life but in one thing I am already clear. I wish for you to come and live here with me.”

“Oh, Ruth, I couldn’t.”

“Indeed you could and shall. I am not going to live here in relative comfort and have to think of my mother sitting in her cottage, screwing up her eyes and sewing away until her fingers bleed, and whilst you live there you will be continually under pressure to sew for others and that I cannot permit. In any case all this, the house and gardens, is as much your’s by rights as it is mine. You shall come and live here with me!”

“I will be sorry to leave the cottage,” said Mrs Mottram, shaking her head.

“As am I, but our futures lie here. You may assist me in carrying out the Earl’s good works because I am sure that I will need assistance and guidance. There is one proviso, though. You are not to oppose my writing should I decide to take up the pen again.”

“Of course I shall not. Now I will let you rest as you must feel quite fatigued,” said her mother, softly, and closed the door behind her.

Ruth lay back, but she felt anything but fatigued. Standing her ground against her mother had quickened her pulse which was not conducive to rest. She would gladly then have risen and sat at the writing desk, or gone out into the Italian Garden and sat there. She was sure that if she attempted to do any of these things she would be ordered back to her bed.

They had said she had been ill. It might have been as a result of her long ordeal, of becoming and remaining soaked to the skin, but there was also the possibility that she had been poisoned by something in her food whilst she was living with Matthew. She did not know what they had used to remove her uncle and Victoria, but it could have been slow acting, and the poison could still be inside her. Perhaps the doctors feared this? But if she was being kept in bed because movement was injurious to her condition, it was rather too late to apply the remedy!

The thought of poison took her thoughts straight to this man, Signor Calaceli. She felt slightly ashamed, but the connection was understandable and she still had difficulty in convincing herself that he was not, even now, acting a sham and simply manipulating everyone around her to his own advantage. Could it be that she was the only one who could see this and that all else could be fooled so easily? Or should she defer to her mother’s judgement as she should have done so once before?

Ruth barely heard the soft tap on the door and it was repeated before she said “come” in a faltering voice. It was Signor Calaceli, sheepishly carrying a small sheaf of papers. “They are not for me to sign, I trust,” she said, sharply. “Not already?”

“No,” he said, tentatively. “Nothing like that.”

“Good,” she said, remembering her mother’s words. “I must repeat what I said earlier, Signor Calaceli. I have done you, it appears, a great disservice. I received such bad reports of you from my sister, my husband then-to-be, and to a lesser extent, my cousin, that I thought very unkindly towards you and perceived you as my mortal enemy. Now I receive only good reports of you, from both my mother and my uncle, which I find confusing, but they are anxious to press your case and seek your restitution. Are there others who wish to step forward and give evidence on your behalf as to the goodness of your character?”

“Lady Mottram,” he began, “or may I call you, Ruth?”

“I would prefer, Lady Mottram,” she said.

“Lady Mottram, then,” he continued. “I am of course delighted to hear that there are those who speak on my behalf, but I would prefer the opportunity to advance my own cause personally.”

“And is that why you are here, Signor Calaceli? To advance your own cause, what ever it may be?” He looked uncomfortable and she chided herself for making him so, but this was a man who before today she would have avoided as she might the plague. Now her professed to love her. At least, he did visit her window and send her the note. And she had released it, letting it fall back to the ground in the graveyard! Had that been an omen?

“No, not exactly,” he said, still looking nervous and glancing towards the door as if he was minded to leave. Ruth wondered if he did now leave her presence, he would leave the house and, if he did, whether she would ever see or hear of him again. She had written of situations like this and she determined that he should not leave until she gave him leave. The discovery that she had been left the Mottram fortune must have been the very best and worst news for him to receive. He would have been concerned for her safety and that it would place her irretrievably beyond his reach, and yet if he loved her truly he should be pleased for her. Was it still in his mind, the inheritance, or had it never been there? He would be here partly on account of the courageous act he had performed in rescuing her. He was also, in all probability, receiving discrete encouragement from both her mother and uncle and here she was, still treating him quite badly. She should not give him the slightest encouragement, but

on the other hand, not to do so might be poor reward for a man who had risked his life to save hers.

“Has it to do with the papers?” she asked, kindly. “Why you have come to see me now?”

“Why, yes!” he said, looking down at them. “I found them in your room at the sanatorium. It was something you had been writing. They were on the table, but it is unfinished. I hope you will excuse the fact that I have read what you wrote.”

“I had all but forgotten that I had written that,” she said, wondering what she had said about him, if anything. “I was going to write a full account of all that had happened to me which would have been as compelling and awesome a tale as any fiction I have written. But when I came to do it, I realised I could not and still cannot. I could bear to relive the pain of having to set it all down on paper. It will, I am afraid, remain unfinished.”

“If that is so, your full story will never be told. Some will emerge in court, but that will only be the merest tip.”

“Yes,” she said. “I can almost see the headlines and columns in the Daily Pitch now. I suppose there will be those who will enjoy reading the lurid and over-dramatised account.”

“And there is always the point that the longer the writing down of the details is delayed, the more there is that will be forgotten and omitted. Of course, I can see that may be your preferred intention and no-one could blame you, Lady Mottram.”

“No,” she said, thoughtfully. “It is not that I wish to forget what happened to me and others around me. Nor would I wish for anything, anything, to be omitted. I started with the intention of writing it all down in as full an account as I could manage with my limited knowledge. It just that I cannot bring myself to write it, not in the first person.”

“Could you dictate it to another?” he suggested. “I am sure that we would have no difficulty in finding a scribe to take it all down.”

“To another?” she mused. “It would have to be someone I trusted implicitly, someone close, because so much of it touches on things which are close to my heart. It would not be an easy task for either of us, me or my scribe as I feel it would be impossible for each of us to remain completely detached from the drama.”

“Those terms would be very hard to meet, Lady Mottram.”

“Possibly, but may I put a proposition to you, Signor Calaceli? I know that you are a busy man who is likely to have many engagements, duties and commissions. I know that lawyers are used to recording facts and statements, to taking affidavits and arranging documents to be sworn. Would you be willing to be my scribe for these purposes? I do not know why I am saying this, but I feel that I could tell my story to you, fully, openly and frankly if you were but prepared to write it down. Oh, we would not attempt it all at once, but say that we set out to tackle it in instalments, over a period of months, say, one chapter at a time? That would allow you time to fulfil all your other duties and, of course, I would pay you for every minute of it. You could stay here and charm my mother at the times we were working on it. Could you accept such a commission?”

The idea had sprung upon her without warning and the words were not the ones that she would have used had she been able to prepare. It all sounded too much like a business proposition, too hard, too calculated and formal. She was mindful of what her mother had said. “I would also like to get to know you better and to think of you as a friend,” she added. It was clear that the proposition had taken him by surprise and she wondered what she would say if he declined. Would she try to convince him to change his mind, or rally her uncle and mother to that cause? Or would she just let him leave, never see him again, and leave her tale untold for the rest of eternity?

“You wish to engage me in the position of a personal secretary?” he said, hesitantly.

Did he think she was attempting to patronise him? Did he expect her to establish a formal, business relationship between them? That was not what her mother would expect of her were she consulted. Ruth was not sure that this was exactly what she had in mind. Yet if she suggested something less formal, would that create the wrong impression in his mind? It would be better, she decided, to act without guile and be open with him. “I am not sure that a secretary is exactly what I had in mind,” she said, slowly. “If I can be frank with you, Signor

Calaceli, and avoid giving you a false impression as to what is in my mind, I see it as being more akin to a companion cum confidante. I offer to pay not for your services, but because I feel it unjust of me to think you should be out of pocket as a result of giving your time to me. I could not fairly ask you to neglect your practice without recompense.”

“I would not wish to become your paid employee,” he said.

“Fie, Signor Calaceli!” she exclaimed. “Men are marrying women for their money every day of the week! Wherein lies the difference between marriage for that purpose and working for that purpose? I am not proposing marriage, you may be pleased to know, only an informal engagement and one that can be severed readily should it suit either of us. But there is no need to make up your mind on the spot. Unless you have any pressing business elsewhere, I would ask you to stay here with us for the next few days, until at least I am up and we can stroll together in the gardens. And during that time you can tell me about yourself so I will know exactly what kind of man I am proposing to confide in. Will you do that?”

“I do not think I could accept any payment from you, Lady Mottram,” he said, “but I can stay as your guest certainly for a few days, if that is what you really wish.”

“It is,” she said. “Now, I think I should rest.” She closed her eyes and heard the door gently click shut. More perfume filled the room and engulfed her. What had she done? Was this another mistake, like the last? She owed him something for all that he had done, but she did not owe him her heart. She owed that to no man and probably would never again give it to any man. Yet, he had a dark, handsome, kind face. He seemed gentle in his character and she now felt no menace when he was close to her. All this she would have said of Matthew! Why should she even concern herself with this man, or any man? Only he came with the recommendation of both her uncle and mother, and she did need someone to pen her story.