

## Chapter 12

Evelyn sets off from the house with a thick grey cloak wrapped around her shoulders and a matching green bonnet tied around her throat. She thought it would be too risky to take the carriage and decided that to brave the three-mile trip to Nathaniel Blackmoore's house on foot. The grey clouds have not settled and they still haunt the sky, concealing any hint of blue.

Thankfully, the wind has chosen not to make an appearance and Evelyn estimates that she will arrive at his estate within an hour. As she walks down the busy London streets, every few meters she spots something that she remembers or recognises and a sense of longing washes over her until she reminds herself of the reason she is walking down the streets of her past.

Around ten she has made her way to the outskirts of town to where most of the rich socialites have estates. The country lanes make for a beautiful sight. The smell of grass makes her think of home and her father. She almost smiles, almost. She stops in front of a high black wrought iron gate. A sign on the sandy walls that bend around the estate, reads, Colebeck Manor.

She pushes open one of the gates and slips through, she is amazed that the garden in front of her is filled with brightly coloured flowers, growing wild. Her eyes widen as she walks down the gravel driveway, the plants all around are twisting and entwining in each other. There is no care in this mess of a garden. Her eyes flick from the atrocious state of the rose bushes to the house itself. The house appears to be split into three wings. The two side wings are identical and the middle wing is the largest with the wide front door up rounded sand coloured steps. She walks under an arch of ivy where the drive splits into a courtyard and heads around the right side of the tree in the middle. The windows in the house are not shielded by curtains however Evelyn cannot see any activity or movement from inside.

She hurries up the steps and pulls on the heavy chain that dangles from the large bell. It clangs loudly. She quickly smooths her dress and pats any flyaway hairs. She waits for a minute or so but no one comes to the door. She pulls the chain again and waits. The door remains shut. She walks down the stairs and across to the nearest window, she peaks inside. The room she is looking into is a parlour, it has numerous chairs and a fire that is roaring invitingly.

She frowns and walks back to the door, she tries the bell again, this time pulling more firmly and for longer. She taps her foot, waiting.

She is about to give up when the door opens and a small man, who looks like he is over 60 peers at her from behind a pair of tiny circular glasses.

"Hello," Evelyn says brightly. He looks her up and down before replying.

"How can I help you miss?" He asks, his voice is gravely and he speaks rather haughtily.

"I'd like to see Duke Blackmoore." She replies with a pleasant look. His white eyebrows shoot up and his eyes narrow into small black dots.

"He's not here I am afraid." He says slowly.

"Where is he?" She questions, conscious that this man is lying to her.

"Gone out." He says firmly.

"Are you sure?" She says, looking around him.

"Quite." The man moves to close the door. Evelyn throws her hand to stop him, he gasps and glares at her.

"Are you sure he's not in his room, drunk, stinking of whiskey and sweat?" She asks sweetly, her patience having been pushed too far.

The man lets go of the door, he glowers at her and her determined expression.

"I simply want to help him." She says dropping her arm.

"How could a girl like you help him?" He asks, the sneer in his words makes her bristle.

"You'd be surprised." She states, folding her arms.

He thinks for a moment before standing back and allowing her to walk into the house but something in his eyes says that he is never going to trust her. Evelyn contains her awe at her own determination and enters the house.

The hallway is grander than any she has witnessed before. Everywhere she looks there are portraits in gold frames, gold candle holders, gold statues and many vases that stand on highly polished tables, empty. She turns in a small circle, not able to hide her impressed look. The man coughs and snaps her out of her admiration.

"I am his manservant, Claude." He holds his arm out for her cloak.

"My name is Evelyn Wright." She says, unfastening her cloak and handing it to him. He doesn't make any indication that he knows who she is or having heard about her. He hangs her cloak upon a gold coat stand.

"If you would follow me." He leads her up a wide set of velvet carpeted stairs and along a corridor to a door. He opens the door, she attempts to enter but he stops her.

"If you would wait here." He slips inside and shuts the door in her face. She glowers and places her ear to the wood, she hears nothing for a moment or two but then a groaning reaches her ear. It then falls quiet and footsteps approach the door, she pulls away and stands straight. Claude appears on the other side of the door, he comes back into the corridor.

"The Duke is still sleeping and will not be woken, I am afraid." He tells her.

"May I try?" She proposes.

"Be my guest." He says, giving her a critical stare.

She opens the door and walks inside. The room is massive, twice the size of her's and Henrietta's. A king size bed sits in the middle of the floor opposite the large fireplace. The curtains around the bed are hanging open and Evelyn can clearly see a man, with only a pair of white underpants on, wrapped up in his covers. The closer she gets the more intense the smell of whiskey and gin hangs thickly in the air.

It seems to have claimed the entire bed area with its foul odour. The man lying on the bed is fast asleep, a pillow over his head, no doubt to cover his face from the sun that pours in through the large window. Evelyn crouches by the side of his bed.

"Duke Blackmoore?" She says loudly. "My lord?"

The man groans and rolls over but he doesn't reply. Evelyn looks around the room. She makes a split second decision. She picks up a water jug from a side table and pours the stream over his face. His eyes snap open and he sits up, spluttering. He shakes his dark brown hair, and water sprays around him. Evelyn wisely takes a step backwards and tries not to look at his bare chest.

"What the?" He looks around and spots her, he looks even more surprised. "Who are you? Why are you in my bedroom? How did you get past Claude?"

Evelyn fights not to look at him, she stares at the ceiling. "If you could meet me downstairs as er you have dressed I would be most obliged." She says before quickly striding from the room leaving the astonished duke in a wet pile.

She walks past Claude and down the steps to the front door. She takes her cloak off the hook and puts it on. She purses her lips while she waits, she isn't sure he won't just fall back to sleep in his sodden bed but she hopes his curiosity or outrage will force him downstairs.

A few minutes later she is proven right when he appears in a white shirt and trousers. As he staggers down the stairs she takes a good look at the duke. He has dark, almost black hair that has been highly rubbed by sleep, a sharp jawline that emphasises his well-defined nose and chiselled chin. He has short stubble around his mouth and up his jaw, it gives him a ruggedly charming look, however, it is his eyes that draw her in, the light amber colour that smoulders and promises nothing less than sin. Unsurprisingly however as he walks to meet her, he looks thoroughly angry.

"Shall we go outside?" Evelyn says, not waiting for an answer and disappearing into the cold. The duke catches up to her as she walks around the side of his house. A small stream trickles across the land and through the trees.

"Do you have any idea who I am?" He fumes, walking in front of her.

"Of course I do, that's why I am here," Evelyn says irritably pushing past. Duke Blackmoore stops in shock at her tone.

"Who are you?" He demands, grabbing hold of her arm and forcing her to stop.

"Let go of me and I'll tell you." She says, her eyes flashing. His hot glare pierces into her cold one and he lets go.

"I am Evelyn Wright." She says.

"Who?" He asks, unimpressed.

"It doesn't really matter."

The duke laughs mirthless and walks a few paces away.

"Then what do you want so badly that you had to throw water on me to wake me up?" He asks heatedly, "I thought I wasn't popular at the moment."

"You aren't," She agrees, "You are a scandalous disaster to be avoided at all costs."

His sinful eyes meet hers and glare with ferocity. He advances towards her, she backs up and he traps her against the wall of his house.

"Then why are you here?" He whispers, his body creating a cage around hers.

"I want to help you," Evelyn says, breathing in the smell of cigars and feeling his body heat radiate through her clothes. This close to him she can fully appreciate the deep depths of his wicked gaze, it consumes her.

"Help me?" He sneers at her, "What can a little nobody like you do to help me?" He keeps her trapped for a moment and then wanders away from her to the river, lighting a cigar.

"I was there." She admits, following as soon as she regains control, "When Lady Tremontane was shot."

"Were you now?" He asks, bored, puffing clouds of smoke into the air.

"You don't believe me?" She says in disbelief. He turns to her and smiles cynically.

"I believe you are a conniving woman who is trying to make a lot of money from my situation." He says with another sneer. Evelyn glares and marches over to him, she plucks the cigar from his mouth and chucks it into the river. The water sucks it down into its icy depths.

He doesn't say anything but his sour temper seeps into his eyes.

"Listen to me." Evelyn says, "I was there, in the garden, you both were under a tree, she was shot in the left of her chest. You ran away when you realised she was dead."

He looks at her but she doesn't let him speak.

"I know you didn't kill her and I am willing to help prove your innocence but if you don't want my help then fine, I am sure a rich boy like you will look just as spoilt hanging from a noose." She spits, her eyes have turned black and stormy. "I hope you enjoy drinking your final days away."

She turns on her heel and marches away.