

## Chapter 19

Through the smoke and the thick stench of burning the three manage to stumble their way through the house and out into the street.

Evelyn's hand is gripped tightly in Blackmoore's as he pushes her in front of him and staggers down the steps of the house. Already a large group of spectators have gathered a safe distance from the building as the fire spreads from the back, licking up walls and devouring house from the inside.

Their carriage is still out the front, Blackmoore bundles her inside and shuts the door. He bangs frantically on the roof.

"What about Mathew?" She gasps as they charge away from the house that now cannot be seen through the thick smoke and flame.

"He ran to his carriage," Blackmoore says, panting. "He is safe."

"Good." Evelyn takes short sharp breathes. She places a hand on her heart and sighs, leaning her head against the window. She suddenly becomes very aware that her other hand is still wrapped in the dukes. She freezes and looks down at their entwined hands, he feels the sudden tension in her body and also glances down. He quickly removes his and brushes the hair from his sweaty face. She links her hands together and looks away. Despite the carriage taking them far away from the burning house, the smell of smoke and burning lingers, and smothers the clean air coming in.

"I don't know what I am missing." She cries, frustrated. "Why would someone burn down that house?"

"I wasn't expecting that," Blackmoore says, leaning back. "But it hardly matters."

"But what if the next time the building burns down with you in it?" She says.

"I didn't realise you cared." He smirks, a dangerous charm seeping through.

"Don't flatter yourself, I can't have your death on my conscience." She snaps. He doesn't push her but keeps the self-satisfied smirk on his handsome face.

"Someone has a serious vendetta against you, don't let it cost your life." Evelyn lectures. Blackmoore doesn't reply but his cheery expression dims and he bites at his thumbnail. The carriage moves down a main street of town. Evelyn contemplates the many questions that have been raised into her mind by the events of the last hour.

"What did Mathew mean about 'I've heard things about him that would make your skin crawl?'" She asks suddenly. The duke becomes as unmoving as a gargoye, his face turns rigid and his eyes, black.

"I don't know." He chokes out.

"You don't need to trust me, you just need me to trust me to help you. And that includes no secrets." She says with an honest look, he studies her.

"I'll tell you if you tell me why those men knew you back there." He barters. "The real reason." He says when she opens her mouth to make an excuse.

Evelyn considers his words. Games or trades like this are on the cause of the destruction of reputations and relationships. Reluctance tightens her chest but she nods.

"I am not a good man." He says, "You could say I have enjoyed my youth to the fullest extent, drink, women, gambling."

"As does every young man with a vying soul and weaker constitution." She says, "You're not any different."

The duke grins.

"I am worse than any your innocent soul has ever met and I will not corrupt you with tales of my treachery. Is it enough to tell you that I have never broken the law?" His eyes are a swirling mass of darkness and desire.

"That's not an answer." She murmurs. "You are evading."

"I have good reason to, there are things I have done that I shudder to remember now, don't ask me to." He says quietly.

Evelyn's mind is begging to know his sinister secrets but her heart breaks through the longing and she slowly nods.

"Your turn." He demands, folding his arms. She sighs, her hand fiddles with the stitching at her waist and her eyes follow the pattern on the floor.

"When I was first introduced into society I adored everything about it but I found that being a lady of leisure was not as it seemed. I was bored and refused to sit idly by. I discovered how to play the perfect part while controlling the strings of those around me. Cards and gambling was a way to stimulate my mind, I met Mathew at an elite gambling house in north London, invitation-only and no women under any circumstance."

"You became part of his group?" The duke's face reveals none of his emotions.

"Mathew has....connections, he has the influence to get you into any game," Evelyn explains. "It was valuable to have him as a friend."

"How good are you?" He asks, intrigued.

She chuckles, "Not that brilliant." She lies, "I can do quite well if luck is on my side."

"You are a Kasam of mysterious Miss Wright." He says. "You have the potential to be much less boring than you are."

Evelyn folds her arms and scoots. She looks outside the window. "I may be boring but at least I can face the darkest parts of myself."

Blackmore freezes and glares at her defiant expression.

"Oh?" He asks, deadly so.

"You say you have done things that make you deserved of death, but you don't voice them. Nothing is too terrible to be said, the fact you don't means that your moral conscious has already judged you and therefore you scoot at the possibility of being redeemed."

"So the smart disgraced girl thinks she has my measure." Blackmore says mockingly, he leans forward, "I am not talking murder, arson, the . Have you ever screwed the youngest of three country girls, let her pregnant or promising her a remote farm life, then proposed to her eldest sister but assuring her that it changes nothing? Leaving her in disgrace so that she takes her own life and that of the baby's? Have you ever done something like that because you could, Miss Wright?" He sneers at her, his presence has filled the carriage and has caused her to shrink into her corner.

"You are trying to scare me to prove a point," Evelyn whispers. "I don't believe you are capable of such a thing."

"Don't assume to be the only one that knows how to use people." The duke says, regret crosses his face but he pushes it away. "I am taking you home."

"What, why?" She frowns, still a bit shaken.

"We almost died, I think that warrants a rest." He says in a final tone, "Plus I'll see you tomorrow night I presume."

"Tomorrow night?" Evelyn says slowly.

"There's a ball at Hardwick Manor." He explains.

"Oh." She says to herself quietly. The prospect of more balls is hardly inviting.

The carriage stops at the top of her street.

"I have some business to attend to tomorrow, so I shall see you in the evening." Blackmoore opens the door for her.

"Till tomorrow then," Evelyn says. He doesn't look at her as she climbs down nor does he look back as she watches the carriage pull away. As the carriage had disappeared from sight she is still standing, looking into the distance, confusion, pain and excitement swirling in her blood.

Evelyn realises too late that she is standing in the street in a dress that is too small for her with a deep neckline, without a coat and gathering attention. She lowers her head and walks quickly to the house. Luckily when she opens the door and walks upstairs her aunt and cousin have not returned from the dress shop, therefore, she gets to her room and changes into a sensible day dress without being confronted.

Evelyn curls up in one of the armchairs with a blanket. For some reason she doesn't feel scared or upset, she feels alive.

Just as she finishes her lunch, a few hours later, Henrietta bursts into the room. She dances around humming to herself, twirling a pink ribbon as she twirls. Evelyn puts down her book as Juliet and the butler both enter the room, staggering under the number of boxes they carry.

"Cousin!" Henrietta trills, she takes Evelyn's hands and pulls her into dancing with her. Evelyn stumbles around in a hasty circle, almost crashing into Juliet as she places her boxes on the bed. She curtsseys and follows the butler from the room.

"I see you have your dresses," Evelyn says, detaching herself from the energetic twirling.

"Yes." Henrietta says, elated. "I had my doubts but each dress is stunning." She giggles, "But that's probably because I can make anything look good."

"I wonder which one you are going to wear tomorrow night." Evelyn says slyly.

"Tomorrow night?" Henrietta's attention is instantly caught and she ceases her dancing.

"There's a ball at Hardwick Manor, I thought you would want to go," Evelyn says non-committal.

"But of course!" Henrietta claps her hands together in delight.

"The only problem is that our aunt won't let us go." Evelyn lies.

"What?" Henrietta sounds genuinely heartbroken. "Why not?"

"Aer what happened at Lady Edith's she's reluctant to let us socialise at big parties." Evelyn continues smoothly.

"Oh." Henrietta sinks into a chair, a lost look on her face, tears threaten to spill down her face. Evelyn crouches down in front of her.

"I could...no it's silly." She moves to turn away but as suspected Henrietta seizes her shoulders, hope on her face.

"No, what is it?" She asks.

"I could convince our aunt to let us go but I also need to convince her to let me go on a short outing tomorrow and I fear she won't let me without a companion, therefore, convincing her on two subjects seems unlikely."

Henrietta frowns, her forehead creases as she thinks. "What if I come with you tomorrow? Then Lucile would have no complaint and you could convince her about this ball?" She says excitedly.

"That could work," Evelyn says.

"Not just a pretty face." Her cousin smiles and pats her hand comfortingly. "What are you going to do now you aren't the clever one?"

"Only God knows," Evelyn says between her teeth, she stands and walks around the chair. "I'll go talk to aunt."

"What sort of outing is it?" Henrietta asks before Evelyn can escape down the stairs.

"I just need to visit an old friend." She evades the question easily but her cousin's expression says she is not convinced.

"His name is Edward, we were friends when I was younger," Evelyn says quickly. "He's harmless."

Henrietta smiles and nods. "I am going to unpack my dresses."

Evelyn relaxes as her cousin turns to her many boxes and she walks down the stairs and finds her aunt in the west parlour.

"Hello dear." Lucile looks up from the writing desk when she enters.

"Hello," Evelyn takes a seat on the sofa. "Henrietta seems pleased with her dresses."

"Yes, it was more stressful than expected but she's happy." Lucile slips the letter she has written into an envelope. "Did you have a nice time at your friend's?"

"Yes, thank you, it was most pleasant," Evelyn says. "I was hoping to discuss something with you."

"Of course." Lucile turns to give her her full attention. Evelyn rubs her hands together nervously.

"I know you must be terrified to let Henrietta and I socialise aer what happened to Lady Tremontane, every concerned guardian would, but I think it would be useful for Henrietta to experience a ball without the frightening experience of a shooting."

"I.....", Lucile frowns, Evelyn waits patiently as her aunt considers her words.

"You are quite right." Lucile says finally, "I am reluctant to let her out but I don't want her time in London to be overshadowed by this event."

"Indeed," Evelyn says. "There's a ball being held at Hardwick Manor tomorrow, I think it would be wise to go. The sooner Henrietta goes, the sooner she can forget this whole shooting business ever happened."

"That is an excellent idea." Her aunt says.

"Brilliant." Evelyn feels the rush of triumph flow through her veins. "I'll go tell her the good news."

She leaves the room and ducks behind the stairs to catch herself. That was easier than she thought it would be. Mathew once told her that the key to lie is to not get caught, the actual lie is the simple part, it's covering your path where most lies unravel and explode.