

Chapter 25

When Evelyn collapses onto her bed, her heart still hasn't returned to its normal pace. She didn't even look back as she climbed out of Blackmoore's carriage, only murmured a goodbye and a thank you before vanishing into the house. The house is silent as she creeps upstairs, everyone must be still at the party as the servants are nowhere to be seen. Her room is lit by a few candles and she manages to stumble to her bed. She has too many emotions running through her head to think straight so she pulls her blankets over her dress, shoes, not bothering to remove her makeup or jewellery and closes her eyes. The memory of his lips pressed against hers springs into her mind and her eyes fly open. She groans and places one of her pillows over her face, the kiss, the money, her father, it all is too much to process. How could she let such a thing happen? How is it possible for her to lose sight of her priorities like that?

"Miss?"

Evelyn starts and removes the pillow to see a concerned Juliet standing over her.

"You startled me." Evelyn sits up and brushes the hair from her eyes. "Did I wake you?"

"Not at all, it's not even 10 yet," Juliet says, sitting down on the end of the bed.

"Oh really?" Evelyn frowns. She catches sight of herself in the mirror across the room and suddenly all she wants is to take it all o. Unable to stand the sight of the gold dress she turns away and begins to take o her shoes and jewellery. She stands up and gestures for Juliet to undo the back of the dress so that she can step out of it. The beautiful gown drops to the floor and Evelyn steps over it, not caring that the expensive dress lies on the floor in a crumpled heap. She sits down in front of the mirror and starts to take o the remains on her make up.

Juliet picks up the gold dress and hangs it up. "Did it work?"

Evelyn pauses taking pins and the gold ivy out of her hair. "Did what work?"

Juliet crosses the room and removes the pins on the top of her mistress's head so that her silvery hair falls down in a sleek mass. She shoots Evelyn a patronising look in the mirror and places the hair accessories away. Evelyn takes a small comb and runs it through her hair before twisting it into a long plait.

"Everything worked out alright," She says walking around to her wardrobe. She takes o her underclothes and slips on a nightdress.

The girl in a light cream nightgown and simple plait looks like a different person compared to the lady drenched in gold.

"Henrietta was quiet today," Juliet comments, going around the room and blowing out the candles, "Everyone was quiet today."

"I am not surprised." Evelyn climbs into bed and settles against her pillows. "But when you haven't got anything worth saying..."

"Are you alright?" Her maid asks, folding her arms. "

"Me?" Evelyn smiles, "I am not not alright but..." She shrugs. "Things have changed and I am not sure whether it is for the best."

"Not a lot has changed in the past three years," Juliet says, "I think we are all in need of a difference."

"Even if that difference hurts?" Evelyn questions.

Juliet just smiles and blows out the last candles, the room is plunged into darkness.

"Sleep well." She says.

Evelyn closes her eyes, she hears the door shut and is left alone.

While her body pleads for sleep, her mind keeps her awake in her state of confusion and turmoil. She is still awake when her cousin arrives a few hours later, Henrietta barely makes a sound as she undresses in the moonlight, careful to cause as little a disturbance as possible. She slips into bed quietly and quickly. Evelyn has the urge to say something to her but by the time she has managed to organise the right words in her head, the soft breathing from the other bed tells her that the girl is asleep. Evelyn closes her eyes and tries to dream but distorted images of the duke and her family haunt her mind.

When Juliet wakes Evelyn the next morning she is surprised to find that Henrietta also rises with her for breakfast. Her surprise turns to shock when they enter the dining room and see her brother and aunt both waiting at the table. The food is laid out in front of them, smelling divine and waiting to be eaten.

The cousins sit and everyone begins to eat. No one talks, the sound of knives and forks on plates is the only thing that echos around the room. The tension in the room is palpable, no one meets anyone's eyes, they keep their heads low and their attention focused on their food. Although Evelyn feels that she is directly responsible for the current state of her family, she doesn't feel guilty and the weight from her shoulders has been lifted. Lucile might not be fully informed of yesterday's events but she is intelligent enough not to question or to start up any type of conversation.

Evelyn finished the last of her toast and places her knife on her plate.

"Aunt," She begins, clearing her throat, "With your consent, I was hoping to stay a little longer than planned....permanently in fact."

Everyone looks up at her. Lucile puts her tea down, delight across her face. "What? All of you?" She looks from William's blank expression to Henrietta's miserable one and back to Evelyn.

"Just me," Evelyn says, "Father is in agreement that it will be most valuable for me."

"Oh, I am ecstatic." Lucile gushes, standing up, "I am overjoyed to have you for as long as possible! Come here!"

Evelyn smiles and crosses the room to be embraced by her aunt. She breathes in her aunt's perfume and relishes in the warmth of her hug. Lucile rests her hand on her niece's face and her smile is electric.

Evelyn sits back down, feeling lighter and hopeful for the future. William tries to meet her eyes but Henrietta hasn't looked up from the remains of her breakfast.

"I am so excited, there are so many things we can do." Lucile babbles, "Of course we should get you involved in charity work, maybe improve your knowledge of the arts, there are some beautiful works out there right now, I must introduce you to a close personal friend of mine...."

"I am going out." William interrupts Lucile, he stands up and forcefully throws his napkin on his plate, the china rattles. He kicks his chair back and storms from the room.

"Oh my." Lucile says in distress, "I should check on him." She half rises from her seat but Evelyn stops her with a shake of her head.

"Let him be." She advises. The three women hear the front door slam hard, Henrietta jumps a little at the loud bang. Evelyn plasters a false smile on her face and ignores her brother's show of anger.

"I cannot wait to meet your friend." She says to her aunt with forced positivity. Lucile smiles warmly but looks a little shaken as er William's display. Juliet enters the room and begins to clear the empty plates, she doesn't comment on the door slamming or William's available chair. Evelyn leans back in her chair, she bites her lip, what scares her more than her brother's show of violence is the fact that he acted out while being sober.

"Evelyn and I are going to go for some fresh air," Henrietta speaks for the first time, her voice quiet but steady. "Excuse us?"

"Of course," Lucile says. Evelyn tries to catch her cousin's eye but she is deliberately facing away. It's Evelyn's intrigue that makes her follow Henrietta's example and she rises from her seat. She follows her from the dining to the hall.

"A walk isn't your type of activity." Evelyn comments as they both pull on a coat. Henrietta doesn't reply. They step out from 104 and turn to the right, they walk silently for a few meters before Henrietta even makes a sound.

"I really like Fredrick." She says. Evelyn glances at her and is surprised to see that the usual haughtiness is absent on her face and instead she looks vulnerable.

"I can picture myself very happy with him." Her cousin continues, "And I think he likes me too." She twists her hands and slows to a stop. "I think he's going to ask me to marry him."

Evelyn stops a little way ahead and turns to see tears glittering on the girls face. To an outsider, Henrietta would appear the epitome of distressed maiden but Evelyn spares no sympathy.

"Why are you crying?" She asks, "Surely this is what you have always wanted?"

"Beucause," Henrietta smiles, "I want to be good enough for him. He is inherently good, his heart is truer than anyone's and he...." She pauses, scrabbling for the words, "He is the kindest, most gentle soul I have ever encountered and he deserves more than me."

Evelyn is a little stumped by the words that have come pouring out of Henrietta. She can't quite fathom what her cousin is saying.

"But..." She says slowly, thinking, "Despite what you believe, you want to marry him?"

"Of course but for me to marry him when he deserves someone like you is a cruel and selfish thing to do." Henrietta cries, on the verge of a meltdown.

"No one deserves me, I am a nightmare," Evelyn mutters, more to herself than to Henrietta. She sighs. "I agree with you."

Henrietta nods and tries to brush the neverending flood of tears. Having seen her fake tears before Evelyn is surprised to see real ones dropping into a puddle at her feet. When Henrietta fake cries she is always conscious of her face but here and now, she has put eyes, red face and ruined makeup.

"However," Evelyn says, "If he wants to marry you then marrying him and trying to prove every day that you are deserved of him is a different story."

"What?" Henrietta croaks looking so pitiful that Evelyn has to step forward and wrap her into a hug. Henrietta sobs into her coat, Evelyn strokes her head comfortingly.

"If you try every day to be a better person, then you are good enough for anyone including Fredrick."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Henrietta looks up at her, a sparking of hope in her red-rimmed eyes. Evelyn nods.

"Marry him and prove you are better than anyone could ever have predicted, including me." She says. Henrietta nods and sobs loudly, squeezing her cousin tightly.

"It's alright." Evelyn rubs her back. "Calm down, it's all going to be fine."

Henrietta takes a few large heaving breathes and manages to stop crying, she steps back from the embrace and dries her eyes. "He might not even ask me."

"But you want him to," Evelyn says and they continue their walk.

"I do," Henrietta says honestly. "He's so sweet to me and I feel so happy whenever he is around." She lightly taps Evelyn's shoulder, "You know he danced six dances with me last night."

"No." Evelyn gasps with a grin, "He is head over heels." She announces. "No doubt."

Henrietta laughs but her face drops and she looks guilty.

"I am sorry." She says. "I know I've not been easy to live with, or at all really. I chose to be a brat rather than like a sister to you and I am sorry for that." She looks down at the ground. "I don't pretend that I've changed overnight but I am going to try to be better, try to be a person that I can be proud of."

"I am not stupid, I don't pretend to think for a moment that it was me that caused this sudden change, you never listen, so?" Evelyn asks.

Henrietta coughs awkwardly, "I was so angry with you." She confesses, "I hated you for everything you said. I wished awful things upon you."

"Charming." Evelyn comments, unsure how her cousin wishing death and destruction on her caused a miraculous change in her behaviour.

"So I ran," Henrietta continues, "And I didn't stop running until I was at Fredrick's house. I thought he would be sympathetic and sweet but he wasn't. He told me things that I didn't want to hear. He gave me a fresh perspective."

"I am glad he uses his head," Evelyn says. Henrietta nods and starts to tell her all about her and Fredricks connection, about their dancing and common interests. Evelyn listens but her mind wanders away from the street they are in. Although the change in Henrietta is favourable, she questions the sincerity of it. It is possible that it comes so suddenly because Fredrick does want to marry her, but she knows that Evelyn could ruin it if she wished. Despite their confrontation yesterday being long overdue Henrietta never listens to her so why would she this time?