

## Chapter 29

Blackmoore looks up from his desk, the clock strikes five in the hall and he closes the book in front of him. He leans back in his chair and pours himself a large glass of brandy. He hasn't eaten since Evelyn rode away from him, he hasn't even contemplated sleep despite his body and mind protesting profusely. He requested to be alone with the company of an expensive decanter of whiskey.

There is a knock on the door of the study but Blackmoore doesn't even register it, he simply stares at the alcohol in his hand, his eyes drink in the dark amber colour and search in its intoxicating depths for answers that it will never be able to provide. Consequently, he doesn't realise a man has entered his study until the stranger is right in front of him, a disapproving scowl over his handsome face. When Blackmoore recognises the fellow in his slightly inebriated state his mood goes from bad to foul.

"What are you doing here?" He asks, putting down his glass and glaring at the other man.

Jasper Harrington gives him a condescending look and surveys the distressed room, he perches on the nearest chair, ignoring the stacks of papers and letters.

"You have sunk far beyond my expectations." He says, taking in the duke's wrinkled shirt, messy hair and dead face, not the mention the strong smell of whiskey. "I thought you would have more fight than this."

"What are you doing here?" Blackmoore repeats, his temper rising at the man's imprudence.

"Not even going to attempt a cordial conversation then?" Jasper asks.

"I am not in the mood for self-centred dukes to lecture me on the proper way to host guests." Blackmoore grits his teeth. "Particularly when said duke is so far up his own arse that he never hosts people anyway!"

Jasper greets these words with an unsurprised look, he shakes his head and reaches into his jacket, he takes out a file.

"I met your man at the legal office unsuccessfully trying to get hold Miss Wright's information. He explained to me the situation so I pulled a few strings." He throws the file onto the desk. "You are welcome."

Blackmoore reluctantly opens the file and reads the first few lines, his brow becomes furrowed. He flips through the pages, skim-reading the contents. He looks up to see Jasper staring at him expectantly.

"What are you still doing here?" He shuts the file and leans back in his chair. "Do you want my gratitude?" He mocks.

"Not particularly," Jasper replies, coolly.

"Then leave," Blackmoore says clearly. Jasper raises his eyebrows but doesn't comment on the rudeness however his expression becomes one of cold efficiency.

"Let's be clear." He says standing up, "I am only here because of my wife, she likes Evelyn, she doesn't want to her hang. Originally I was going to give you the file and leave but seeing how much of a mess you are I don't think I can." He sniffs, "I can smell the whiskey from here."

"I don't need your help." Blackmoore spits. "Nor your wife's."

"But Evelyn does, Evelyn needs all the help she can get." Jasper says, "Or are you going to sit back like normal and let her die."

"Don't you dare." Blackmoore whispers, "You have no right."

"She's going to die if you continue like this."

"Be quiet!!" Blackmoore roars, throwing his glass against the wall, it shatters and the sparkling glass flies everywhere. Jasper doesn't react to the outburst, he gives the duke a moment to calm down before he walks over to the desk and flips open the file.

"You love her, so help her." He says simply. Blackmoore's anger dies immediately and he meets the other man's eyes.

"I love her?" He questions.

"Apparently so," Jasper says. "And when you love someone you do idiotic things like this."

Blackmoore looks confused. "I love her?" He repeats, he stares through the man in front of him, past the walls of his study, past the borders of his house and into a place he has never seen.

"I am going to get you some tea." Jasper decides when Blackmoore still hasn't moved an inch, he glances back nervously at the frozen duke before leaving the library. When Jasper returns he still hasn't moved but he does accept the tea offered, in a wobbly hand.

"How do you know I love her?" He asks.

Jasper sips his tea, "The first time I knew that I loved Eliza was when I lost her. I was a mess, like you now and I couldn't think straight." He confesses, "You love them and would do anything for them but you get caught up in what is going to happen if you lose them forever."

"Hypothetically let's say I do love her, I still don't understand why you are here," Blackmoore says slowly. Jasper runs a hand down his face, he suddenly looks very tired.

"Eliza is expecting, so she got a bit emotional when I told her about Evelyn, she demanded that I find you and set you straight. She said that if you were a wreck then it's because you love her and if you weren't then to beat you up." He says amused.

"Your wife is scary," Blackmoore says.

"I am aware," Jasper says smugly. "She is also right."

Blackmoore grumbles. "Thank you." He says reluctantly. "For the file and...."

"Of course." Jasper rises to his feet, "I would recommend a wash, a shave and some clean clothes."

Blackmoore nods, he orders his hand to the other duke. Jasper accepts it and they shake firmly.

"Don't be an idiot." He says before turning and leaving.

Blackmoore begins to read the file, he goes through every page, writing down anything he thinks is valuable. He then starts to read it again, he combs through every sentence, analysing every word. He closes the file after his fourth read through and then studies his notes. He jumps to his feet and speeds to the hallway.

"CLAUDE." He shouts, looking around for the man, "CLAUDE."

Claude hurries into the hall from dusting in the dining room. "What is it, my lord?"

"They have a pistol." Blackmoore says, "They have a pistol."

"A pistol sir?" Claude frowns.

"In the file, it says that they have the murder weapon, a french pistol but we know that Evelyn took the actual pistol so any evidence they have is fraudulent." The duke explains, "If we can prove that my pistol matches the bullet then they have nothing to prosecute her with."

"But then you would be under suspicion," Claude says.

"Better me than her," Blackmoore says gravely.

"A french pistol you say? How strange," Claude rubs his forehead, "They are hard to possess with the king's aversion to the french, you'd have to be very rich or have a lot of power.....or." He slows to a halt.

"Both," Blackmoore says, "You don't think.....?"

"It wouldn't be surprising," Claude says.

"Damn." Blackmoore, he rubs the back of his neck and grimaces, "And I say my parents don't care."

Evelyn dismounts in front of Oakmere House, there is no light glowing behind the windows and the country house looks dark and abandoned despite it being early evening. She sighs and leads Neptune around the right side of the house to the main garden. She walks him to the tiny stable that only houses two small ponies. She unlocks the larger of the two stalls and gently pulls him inside. He immediately brushes past his new companion and sticks his head in the hay tied up by the back wall. Evelyn gives the tack a calculating look, too many buckles and straps for a tired traveller to comprehend at this time. However, she begins to undo as many as possible and after several attempts, she manages to remove the saddle and place the heavy thing on the side of the stall. Neptune raises his head from the water trough and Evelyn manages to the fiddle with the bridle and slides it over his head. He nickers sofly and returns his attention to the hay. The pony in his stall approaches him as Evelyn closes the stall door, the pony whines to him and Neptune moves over to allow his new friend access to the food.

Evelyn walks back to the front door and frowns, she could sneak through the back door but that would alarm any servants that are in and possibly terrify them into attacking the unknown person, or she could ring the front door and wait for someone if anyone is in to come grumbling up from the basement and open the door, get through the questions and interrogations before eventually being allowed up to bed. She skips up the front steps and pulls down hard on the chain that hangs by the door. The clanging sound is enough to wake up anyone sleeping within a mile. Evelyn waits for a few minutes but the door remains shut, she pulls down on the chain again and waits.

There is some scuffling behind the door as Evelyn decides to take the other option, she pauses on the bottom of the steps as the door swings open and the cook stands there with a candle and a deep frown.

"Lucy?" Evelyn hops up the steps.

"Miss Wright?" Lucy frowns and lifts the candle higher to see her face. "But we weren't expecting you back till July." She says confused.

"I know," Evelyn says but doesn't expand.

"Everyone is out." Lucy says, "It's just me and Lydia."

"That fine," Evelyn says, "I've had a long journey, I just want to sleep."

Lucy leans out the door, "Where are your things? And your carriage? Are you on your own?" She starts to splutter, "...did...how did you get here?"

"I rode, I have no things, no companions or anything, just me," Evelyn replies, losing patience. "I just want to go to sleep." She says desperately.

Lucy blinks several times, processing but then she steps back hurriedly. "Of course."

Evelyn steps into the house and relief fills her, she is home. Even in the dark, she can recognise the traditional furniture, small corridor and frightfully outdated carpets. Her eyes travel from the tiny paintings to Lydia who is covering by the servant's door and her face changes from fear to shock when she sees Evelyn taking over her coat and things.

"Lydia, take Miss Wright to her room." Lucy instructs, lighting another candle.

The serving girl nods, still surprised.

"Do you want any tea? Anything to eat?" Lucy asks. Evelyn shakes her head.

"No thank you, just my bed."

Lucy nods to Lydia, passing her a candle. Lydia smiles weakly but leads Evelyn through the darkness and up the stairs, they pass Henrietta's room and Evelyn can almost hear the girl's voice in her head. Lydia opens the door to Evelyn's room and moves to start lighting candles around the room but Evelyn stops her.

"Just the one by the bed please." She says walking over to her wardrobe and digging through her clothes to find one of the nightgowns she had left behind. Lydia moves to the bed and lights the candle, she then steps back to the wall.

"Is there anything you would like miss?" She asks. Evelyn pulls out an ivory nightdress and turns around.

"No thank you, that will be all." She says. Lydia bobs her head and closes the door behind her. Evelyn pulls over her dress and shoes and puts on the nightclothes. Her bare feet patter over the floor and she jumps on her double bed, the blankets and pillows have been washed since she has left, the smell of lavender. She slips under her covers and nestles down in the middle of the bed. She stares up at the ceiling, travelling has made her exhausted but now that she is finally resting from most stressful two days of her life, she can't seem to even close her eyes. The light from the single candle allows her to see out of her window towards the canal it runs past her home. It feels strange to Evelyn to be home after all the dramatics that took place in London, she could never have predicted the day she left that she would be back under these circumstances.