

Chapter 30

The next day, across town, Blackmoore waits in his parent's smallest parlour. It took a lot of encouragement from Claude to make him travel the journey to his parent's manor but he did it.

The butler looked most surprised when he opened the door to see his master's estranged son on the top step. He informed the duke in a haughty voice that Verity and Wilfred Blackmoore were currently having a late breakfast and would be unable to see him but Blackmoore insisted and was then told to wait in the parlour for them. That was an hour ago.

Blackmoore wasn't expecting the warmest of welcomes from the parents that he hadn't seen in many years, except for at public functions, however, he wasn't prepared for them to make him wait this long.

His hands tap along the side of the chair he is sitting in and his leg bounces up and down as he keeps his eyes on the door. He took Jasper's advice and washed and shaved this morning before putting on one of his finest suits as he knows his parents' high regard for smart appearance even on a casual day.

The door clicks open and his mother swans in dressed from head to toe in the finest French silk. Gleaming jewels hang from her ears and throat.

Verity Blackmoore possesses the ability to make everyone, no matter how rich or powerful, to stop and take notice of her. Some might say that this envied skill comes from the advantageous marriage she has, however, only those born with such a sense of entitlement can hold such a power by their mere presence, it cannot be learnt. While she is considered snobbish and arrogant, no one can accuse her of not knowing her worth as a woman, she knows the limitation of her sex and how to take advantage of those who can be swayed by a pretty face or a large cheque.

"Dear, mother." Blackmoore rises to his feet and bows. He orders to kiss her hand but she swishes past him, ignoring his hand, and elegantly sits upon a chair. He opens his mouth to speak but she holds her hand up and he goes silent.

"I was quite aghast when I was told of your visiting." She says, her voice, sweet but with an edge. "I said to Wilfred this and he refused to see you."

"Is father well?" He asks, trying to meet his mother's eye but she turns her face away from him.

"Your father is moody and barely leaves his study, he is well as he will ever be, his isolation suits me well." She sniffs and casts him a scathing glance. "What is the purpose of your interruption?"

"I need to ask you a question," Blackmoore says, slowly. "It's a sensitive matter."

"Four years and you turn up for a question?" Verity raises her eyebrows.

"I assure you, if it was avoidable I wouldn't be here." He says impatiently.

"Then don't waste my time." She snaps, "I have some ladies coming over for lunch."

He fights the urge to roll his eyes at his mother's antics and speaks. "I lately found myself in an undesirable situation that has recently become void at the expense of a friend."

Verity's eyes narrow and her lips become thin. "I want nothing to do with your mess, your father and I have spent far too much time cleaning up your life and for what? To still have a son that is a disgrace? Not worth my time."

"There is no longer a mess as the result of a french pistol....did you...." He leaves the sentence hanging in the air. His mother glares at him, she stands and faces the window, keeping her eyes away from him.

"Your father is the one I would discuss such delicate matters with..."

"I don't pretend that father isn't powerful or rich but he hasn't the cunning nor the intelligence to preempt what has happened." He cuts across.

"Don't disrespect your father like that." She hisses, spinning around and raising her hand to strike him. The many thick rings on her fingers would no doubt cut his skin but she drops her hand and turns back to the window.

"What does it matter regardless? You say you are out of trouble?" She only turns her neck slightly to see him nod. "Then it is best to forget the whole nasty business ever happened, and be more careful in choosing who you spend your private time with."

"Someone very important is taking the fall for my mistakes. I cannot let that happen." He says "She does not deserve such a fate."

"She?" Verity says sharply, "A woman?"

"A smart, beautiful woman." Blackmoore insists. "Her name's Evelyn."

"Evelyn..." She tests the name in her mouth, "I knew an Evelyn once, smart girl, blonde and quicker than most, I forget her name..."

"That's my Evelyn." He says so ly, smiling slightly as he imagines her stormy clever eyes staring back at him.

"Yours?" Verity turns to see his sad face.

"Well...I..." He stammers, going red.

"You care for this girl?" She asks. He nods but she doesn't look convinced, more like cautious.

"I don't expect you to understand but I do, I do." He says. His mother freezes and the temperature in the room drops by twenty degrees as Verity processes his sentiment. She sits down next to him and reluctantly places her hand over his.

"I am aware that I am not the most maternal of people but I understand what it is to care for someone." She says.

"Father?"

"Oh heavens no." Verity laughs mirthlessly, "I respect him, nothing more." She looks him directly in the eye for the first time. "Do you want to marry this girl?"

"She's penniless." He replies automatically.

"That's not what I asked."

"What I want is for her not to be punished for my mistakes."

"This family cannot suffer through a scandal, someone has to pay," Verity says heavily.

"I know that I am going to find them but Evelyn cannot be anywhere near this." He promises, gripping her hand.

She considers his words, "Then why are you wasting my time here?" She releases his hand.

Blackmoore rises to his feet, "And Evelyn?"

"Who's Evelyn?" She says with a fake confused look.

"Thank you, mother." He says, grabbing her hand and kissing it before she pulls away.

"Don't thank me and don't get yourself killed." She says. Blackmoore nods.

Evelyn wakes early the next morning and finally drifting around midnight. She lies in her bed looking out the window at the surrounding greenery. Although spring is yet to come upon the trees and flowers, the garden has a hauntingly beautiful look in its sparse appearance. She lies in bed most of the morning, staring out the window, waiting. At lunchtime she reluctantly gets dressed and eats a few mouthfuls of Lucy's excellent stew before closing herself away in the parlour that has the best view of the entrance to the house. She settles on the window seat with a book and tries to read but every so often she looks up when she thinks she hears the sound of hooves or a carriage.

In her head, she knows that it is unlikely that Blackmoore would be on his way to find her, it is almost impossible that he has cleared her name in such a short space of time but every little sound from outside has her heart leaping with hope only to sink with disappointment. She waits in the small room as the moon slips into evening, she leaves to have some dinner and then returns promptly. Lucy tries to tempt her away from the window with all manner of food, drink and suggested walks but Evelyn remains curled up by the window, not moving. The sun sinks lower and darkness descends upon the house.

"Miss?" Lydia gently knocks on the door and pokes her head around the door.

Evelyn glances from looking out the window, a discarded piece of sewing in her lap, to the girl at the door. She says nothing, the candle on the windowsill flickers.

"Miss, um, we are all going to bed, but if you need anything just ring for us," Lydia says timidly.

"What time is it?" Evelyn asks, dragging her eyes away from the empty yard.

"Almost 1," Lydia replies.

"He's not coming today," Evelyn whispers to herself, watching the candle that has burnt down to a stub, strain to keep alight.

"Miss?" Lydia looks concerned.

"Yes, go to sleep, I will be up in a moment," Evelyn says distracted, "I won't need your help."

"Goodnight," Lydia curtsies and leaves. Evelyn picks up the candle and retires to her own room more slowly. She walks along the dark corridors, hating every inch of the walls that keep her trapped inside, waiting, waiting for the only person who can save her. Maybe, just maybe, he has solved the mystery by now and will be setting out in the morning to find her. Or maybe she'll be stuck in this house, uncertainty swimming around her mind and fear encasing her heart for a month, two months, a year. While she is thankful to be alive she can't help but wonder if her duke has forgotten about her now that she is gone, they are both alive and both safe, what's the point of finding the murderer?

The next five days are almost identical, the only factor that changes is the amount of hope Evelyn has in her heart when she wakes in the morning, day by day, night by night, she loses hope but she still waits in the parlour for him to come galloping towards the house.

After six days of watching Evelyn's miserable routine, noticing her lack of food and refusal to leave the house, Lucy decides to call the local doctor before her mistress rises from her bed. Evelyn profusely refused to see Dr William Calden but after a whispered argument, with the kind doctor outside the door, she allows him to attend her.

He enters her room and sets his bag down on a side table. He has a kind face and a tiny wispy beard. Evelyn likes the older doctor as he frequented their household with tonics for her father's old age and has become a family friend over their time in Darlington but at the moment she is not pleased that he is in her bedroom.

"I am not ill." She says stoutly, crossing her arms, "There's no need for such fuss."

"And I believe you but some people are concerned about you so it's best to check." Dr Calden says taking out a few instruments and bottles of strange liquids.

"It best for everyone to mind their own business and leave me be." She snaps, he raises his eyes brows and she immediately feels regret pooling in her stomach.

"I am sorry." She apologises, "That was rude and uncalled for."

"Tis alright." He smiles, "Now can I ask you a few questions?"

After the doctor has finished all his checks and routines he begins to pack his stuff away. Evelyn settles his back into bed.

"I can safely say that you are perfectly healthy," He says shutting his bag. "Fitter than most in fact."

"I did try to say." She grumbles.

"It's your mood that is affected."

"My mood?" She sits up a little straighter.

"Have you experience a significant change or event recently?" He asks.

Evelyn opens her mouth but she can't quite pick which change or event is the best to tell him so she settles on the safest one. "I've just returned from town."

"I see, I cannot give you medicine for this." He explains, "Plenty of exercise and mental stimulation will help and don't skip any meals, maybe try a new activity."

Evelyn nods, although she is not really listening.

"If there is no improvement then please call me back next week." He says.

"Of course." She says, he bows and leaves her alone. She slumps back onto her pillows, is her mood really what is the matter with her?

Admittedly she is feeling a little low, and the wait is agonising for her, she cannot be bothered to anything but she thought that was down to the travel exhaustion.

She flips the covers over herself and trudges to her wardrobe, she gets dressed and ties her hair up into a simple bun. She is determined to not let this depressing mood get the better of her. She pulls her ankle boots on and puts on her thickest coat, she passes through the house and slips out the back door. She takes the south path around the side of the house, it winds down to the side of the canal and follows the water's path to the next village.

Her boots squelch in the mud and she breathes in the crisp air. She walks and walks until she reaches the small bridge that crosses over the canal. She collects a few sticks in her walk and watches a collection of birds swoop above her head.

She runs her hand over the stone sides of the bridge and when she reaches the middle, leans over and drags the sticks below. She watches them slowly float away. She manages to perch herself on the thickest part of the bridge, her legs dangling above the water. She spends an hour or so on the bridge, the fresh air does nothing to affect her low mood but she finds the quiet allows her mind to relax a little. As midday approaches her stomach grumbles just a little and she contemplates the idea of returning. The sound of so many hooves on grass has her getting to the edge of the bridge and moving to the south side. Her heart leaps in her chest when she recognises the horse and rider.

"Hello!" She calls, a bright smile on her face and Lawrence Jordan looks up in surprise.