

Chapter 36

The carriage ride to Lady Edith's is full of laughter and smiles. Evelyn can't remember a time she that she has felt so carefree, and happy to be in the company of her father and brother.

William, for once, doesn't smell of whiskey and he seems to be more aware and appreciative of the world. Mr Wright cracks jokes the entire journey and has his two children in stitches by the time the carriage stops in front of the brightly lit house. William helps her down and they link arms as they walk inside.

The hall has been decorated with thousands of glass diamonds, they hang from candles, are draped over portraits and attached to doorways. The light bounces off them and reflects all over the walls and floor. Evelyn immediately spots her cousin standing with Fredrick and Edith. She is wearing a white and red patterned dress with heavy jewels around her throat, a large bejewelled mask and a tiny tiara on the top of her sleek plaited bun. In this demure dress, Evelyn has to admit that her cousin suddenly looks more mature and not like the ignorant selfish child that she has endured for the last few years.

Henrietta lets out a little squeal when she sees her uncle and cousins enter. She bounds out of line and hugs Evelyn tightly.

"It's so good to see you." She cries, squeezing until Evelyn has to push the girl away to stop her from injuring her ribs.

"Congratulations." She says lamely. Henrietta's eyes sparkle behind her mask and she beams.

"Thank you." She says, "I have never been this happy in all my life and it's all thanks to that lovely man." She turns her head and gazes lovingly at Fredrick who is shaking hands with Mr Wright while Edith politely greets William.

"You are very lucky indeed," Evelyn says as Henrietta pulls her over to greet him.

"You remember my cousin Evelyn." She says to Edith, who wrinkles her nose and plasters on a fake smile. William and Mr Wright take this opportunity to slip into the crowd heading towards the main room.

"But of course." Edith says graciously, "Seems we were destined to become family a er all."

Evelyn has to admire the composure in the woman, but she can feel the disdain being directed at her despite the neutral words.

"We are most fortunate to share in the happiness that these lucky people have found with each other," Evelyn replies, smiling at Fredrick who looks awkwardly away.

"Quite," Edith smirks, "Well enjoy the party." She turns to Henrietta who is still gripping tightly to her cousin. "Come, I must introduce you to my friend."

Henrietta reluctantly allows herself to be pulled away, leaving Evelyn alone with Fredrick.

"Funny situation this is," He says. Perplexed, Evelyn raises one eyebrow and tilts her head.

"I mean, you, unmarried, at my engagement party to your cousin." He garbles, a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"Hilarious." She comments, completely unamused. He coughs uncomfortably.

"Are you well?" She asks, noticing his skin has turned from pale to pure white. He opens his mouth to answer but a shocked voice behind her cuts him off.

"What are you doing here?"

Evelyn feels her heart skip several beats at the familiar voice, she has to count to five in her head to calm herself but eventually, she turns to face Blackmoore, a cold calculating look on her face. She ignores the effect the duke is having upon her heart, dressed in a pitch-black dress suit, complete with cane and a half black, half white mask.

"I beg your pardon." She replies, sticking her chin in the air and doing her best impression of Henrietta on a bad day.

"I can't believe you're here." He says, grinning, feeling lighter than air. He steps forward to hug her, but she steps away from him and he freezes when she gives him a heated glare.

"I guess I got tired of waiting." She says bitterly.

"Evelyn..." He says, unsure how to react to her standoffish front. Her stormy eyes search his face, but the heat within them is enough to melt the ice in the champagne being served.

"Have a nice evening your grace." She curtsies to him and then to Fredrick before striding away.

Her heart pounds furiously against her chest as she enters the dazzling ballroom. So music tinkles from the orchestra and couples waltz in time to the steady beat. She melts into the crowd and ends up in a small corner of the room watching the happy faces. Edward Tremontane waves to her from a boozy corner with three already drunk ladies but she ignores him and searches the crowd for her father and brother. She spies Mathew but does her best to avoid his gaze.

Thoughts of the duke creep into her mind and despite her best attempts, they remain at the forefront of her mind until a face with a similar expression to her own has her blinking in surprise. She edges along the walls of the room and walks up to the man hiding behind one of the pillars.

"Lawrence! What a surprise! I thought you would be on your way to America by now."

As he turns to face her, she registers that something is wrong. His eyes that are usually so light and friendly, are dark and dangerous. His mouth is unsmiling and set firmly into a frown.

"So did I." He says darkly, he grabs her shoulder and roughly pulls her behind the pillar. She stumbles on the hem of her dress and is forced to use his arm to prevent herself from falling on her face. The change in his demeanour shocks her into silence, so she doesn't scream when he shakes her, his nails tearing through her gown and biting into her skin. The punishing grip causes tears to prickle in the corner of her eyes but she bites her lip to stop herself from crying out.

"You are hurting me." She whispers but he ignores her.

"Where is he?" He asks, she looks at him with terror and confusion. When she doesn't reply he shakes her again, more roughly. "Where is he!?"

"Who?" She murmurs, fear lodged in her throat.

"Don't give me that rubbish." He laughs cruelly but she simply stares at his wild face, silent as a ghost. She shakes her head at him, wordlessly mouthing. He drops one of his hands from her frame but the pressure on the other increases as he reaches into his jacket and pulls out a pistol.

Her eyes widen at the sight of the weapon, but she has no time to process it as he yanks her from behind the pillar and into the centre of the room. He holds the pistol up and shoots twice in the air. Bits of ceiling rain down around them, women scream, the dancing stops and everyone freezes where they stand. Lawrence holds the weapon in front of him, people move out of range and that gives him a clear path to the small raised stage that holds the orchestra. A simple flick of his wrist has the musicians scrambling off and into the wings. He holds everyone in the room's attention, he says nothing but scans the crowd of guests. Evelyn stands at his side, her arm trapped in his grip, waiting.

"BLOODY MASKS," Lawrence screams, firing another shot into the air. More debris rains down. The crowd murmur and move back. He licks his lips watching them, but they don't move. He then points the gun directly at Evelyn's forehead and people starting muttering anxiously.

"If this won't make him cry then I don't know what will." He whispers maliciously into her ear. He turns his head to the crowd.

"BLACKMOORE, show yourself, you coward." He shouts. He takes a short breath and continues in a deadly quiet tone that carries across the room. "Or I will shoot the lovely Miss Wright in her pretty, little head."

"You've gone insane," Evelyn whispers to herself but he hears her and his eyes flash at her words. The barrel of the pistol presses directly into her forehead and she whimpers.

"Jordan!" Blackmoore steps out from the right side of the crowd and removes his mask. "Put the pistol down."

Lawrence grins and turns his weapon towards the duke who stops in his tracks and holds his hands up.

"No." Evelyn whispers, her expression pleads for him to run but he stands his ground.

"You took everything from me!" Lawrence yells, Blackmoore opens his mouth to speak but Lawrence shouts over him. "NO, you don't get to say anything, she said you could talk your way out of anything, but this is one sentence you cannot avoid!"

"She?" Evelyn lifts her head to look at the duke, questions in her eyes. Lawrence jerks to look at her, his rabid eyes travel over her face.

"Who's she?" She asks, her confusion outweighing the fear.

"Charity." His voice breaks.

"Your sister?" She frowns, "I don't..."

She is cut short as he lets go of her and pushes her off the stage. She falls to the floor. Blackmoore is immediately at her side, helping her to her feet. She looks him in the eyes and his heart breaks to see so much fear, confusion and hurt in hers.

"He killed her!!" Lawrence announces to the room, pointing his weapon at the duke. "He killed my sister!"

The crowd buzzes, looking at him.

"He would never kill anyone!" Evelyn says clearly, turning to address the crowd.

"Evelyn, don't!" Blackmoore whispers frantically in her ear, trying to force her behind him. She shoves him away.

"No!" She cries, "This is utter stupidity! I've had it. He never killed Phillipa, I was in the garden, I saw everything, he never hurt her, not once."

Blackmoore reaches for her but she slaps his hands away. "He's done some questionable things but that doesn't make him a murderer! It makes him human. We are all as bad as each other, even the most perfect person makes mistakes, the only difference is that they keep them well hidden!" She spins around to face Lawrence, "And he would never kill your sister."

His face twitches and he lowers the pistol.

"I am sorry for your sister, and the baby," Blackmoore says honestly, "But I would never harm a woman."

"Baby?" Evelyn repeats, she turns to Blackmoore who shakes his head. Lawrence tears up at the mention of the baby and then it all falls into place in Evelyn's mind.

"You had three sisters." She says. "This was never about me or Phillipa, you killed Phillipa to avenge Charity because you thought it was Nathaniel's fault."

Lawrence lets out a tortured moan and points the pistol at her, "I lost everything so it's only fair that he does too." He jerks his head to Blackmoore. "But I didn't kill his mistress. Losing a mistress is nothing like losing someone you love. I was just going to kill him but then I saw how he acted around you and I knew that if you died because of him it would hurt him more than any hanging or execution."

"I never touched Charity." Blackmoore says, "I confess I have carried her death on my conscience for a long time, but I never touched her."

"BE QUIET," Lawrence screams, his hand shakes violently.

"But why did you try to kill me at Hardwick Manor and then make friends with me?" Evelyn asks, as she advances towards him, her hands held up in surrender.

"What?" Lawrence snaps, "I never tried to kill you at Hardwick Manor, I specifically made an effort to get to know you."

"But..." Evelyn looks back at Blackmoore who has gone a frightful shade of white.

"Get down." He mouths.

BANG BANG BANG