

## Chapter 7

The wind blows through the street as Evelyn closes the shop door, Henrietta is in animated discussion with Lucile as they walk towards the carriage. The street is fairly busy and many people walk past her as she follows them, a few meters behind.

"Lady Lucile!"

A woman in a light green dress calls from across the street. Lucile and Henrietta both spin around to face the woman as she approaches with a younger woman but it's the man she is with that makes Evelyn's heart speed up. His tousled ginger hair and crooked nose make him distinctly recognisable. The woman has stopped in front of Lucile with her two children and she talks quickly.

Evelyn stays a few meters away, unsure whether to join the conversation. She decides that to join them of her own accord is better than being spotted standing awkwardly in the middle of the street with nowhere to run.

"And Petunia is expecting several others this..." The woman trails off as Evelyn joins them. Her pleasantness vanishes and she gasps.

"Lady Evelyn, I mean Miss Wright." The woman says shocked but her eyes flash in malicious delight. "It has been an age."

"Lady Edith." Evelyn curtsies, "It has been awhile."

"I'd almost forgotten about you," Edith says, her lip curling, she wraps an arm around her daughter. "Have you met Petunia?"

The young girl smiles delicately and smiles. She's a pretty creature with a very slim figure, one that Henrietta is most certainly jealous of.

"I haven't had the pleasure," Evelyn says lightly.

"You remember my son, Fredrick," Edith says, gesturing to him.

"Of course." Evelyn curtsies to the man who bows his head and smiles.

"How are you, Miss Wright?" He asks politely.

"Well thank you." She replies. Henrietta coughs delicately and beams at him.

"This is my cousin..." Evelyn begins.

"Lady Henrietta Buxley," Henrietta boasts as she curtsies shallowly.

Edith looks intrigued at the eager way Henrietta looks from her son to her.

"Both my nieces are staying with me for the season," Lucile explains. "And my nephew William."

"How lovely," Edith says with a sugar sweet smile.

"It is my first time in London," Henrietta says. Petunia gasps as does her mother.

"Then I insist that you come to our party tonight, it's a small air but everyone will be there," she says.

"Oh, how delightful." Henrietta claps her hands in joy, "Can we aunt? Can we?"

Lucile looks from Henrietta's eager expression to Edith's charming smile. "We'd be delighted to come."

"Excellent," Edith says and Henrietta squeals with excitement. Evelyn feels a sense of foreboding wash over.

"Aunt, there's a bookshop around here somewhere, William asked me to pick a book up for him." She says, looking around. "May I be excused?"

Lucile nods, but Henrietta regards her suspiciously.

"It is pleasure to see you again Miss Wright," Edith says, emphasising her lack of title. Evelyn offers her no reply but curtsies.

"I'll accompany you," Fredrick says. Evelyn doesn't reply but walks away and crosses the road.

"What a gentleman," Edith says fondly. Evelyn has already walked a considerable distance away, her desperation pushing her quickly away from the carriage. Fredrick follows her a few bowing to the ladies. His long stride means he catches up with her easily, much to her annoyance.

"I don't need an escort to a bookshop." She says once he is by her side.

"I am quite aware of that. I simply wish to talk." He says as they walk down the main street.

"About what?" She asks.

"How have you been?" Fredrick inquires.

"Quite well, thank you." She replies shortly, she keeps her pace quick as she passes a flower shop, she is considering breaking into a run to get away but she knows he can match any pace she sets.

"Wait." He places a hand on her shoulder and turns her to face him.

"What?" She snaps, spitting hair from her mouth. "What do you want?"

He smiles at her annoyed expression.

"You are still remarkably beautiful." He says.

Evelyn sighs and looks around. "I am sorry for snapping. It's just being back here...I don't know..."

Fredrick shakes his head. "I understand four years is a long time."

"I know I didn't leave things well, I wasn't really thinking at that time." She says downcast.

"I am not here to torment you over your past." He reassures "Shall we?" He gestures to the top of Churchbright street.

Evelyn nods and starts walking down the street at a normal pace. "Tell me, why do you want to talk to me?"

Fredrick laughs and it's a boyish delighted sound. "Because, I know you to be of intelligent mind and sound character."

"But that was me four years ago, I might have dramatically changed." She suggests.

"I very much doubt that four years in the country have caused so much of a change in the very stubborn Lady Evelyn." He says, amused.

"That is true, I am still frightfully stubborn."

"And frightfully beautiful," Fredrick adds.

"You flatter me," Evelyn says, she relaxes into his company. "How have you been?"

"Well, when you refused my offer was inconsolable for weeks..." He starts.

"You were?" Evelyn's voice goes up a few octaves and guilt settles into her stomach.

"So terribly miserable." He says woefully, "I hid in my room for months..." A smile slips through his forlorn expression. Evelyn catches the cheeky gleam in his eyes and the guilt vanishes.

"You are teasing me." She lightly hits his arm with an outraged expression.

"I could not resist." He admits with a grin. She tuts but grasps his elbow and he stops.

"I am sorry for any pain I caused you." Evelyn says seriously, "I did like you, I do like you but we were both so young and..."

"I am glad you didn't accept, you are right we were too young." He reassures. They look at the corner of the street and there is the bookshop, sitting comfortably alone.

"Evelyn... I would like to be friends if you would permit me," Fredricks says, she looks up at him and a small genuine smile crosses her face.

"I would very much like to be your friend, Fredrick." She holds out her hand, he smiles at the gesture and lightly shakes her hand. They walk to the bottom of the steps at the bookshop, Evelyn feels lighter than before, almost hopeful.

"After you." He extends an arm up the steps and she climbs up them and pushes the door open. A bell chimes somewhere in the vicinity. Fredrick closes the door as Evelyn breathes in the scent of ink and parchment. The shop is rather dark as every wall is a bookshelf that holds hundreds of faded and new volumes. The only light is from a roof window that looks dusty and a few candles perched precariously on stacks of paper.

A small man comes tottering towards them between two high shelves that run to the very back of the shop. He wears an old bottle green suit that brings out the flecks of gold in his eyes.

"Good day, miss, sir." He says, his voice is lower than expected and his grey hair sticks up at the back. "How may I help you?"

"I am looking for a book," Evelyn says moving deeper into the shop.

"Indeed? Shakespeare? Or something a bit more romantic?" He suggests.

"Not exactly." She says, "Applied criminal law in the British Empire."

The bookkeepers grey eyebrows disappear into his hair. "An interesting pick, if you would follow me."

He leads them down the centre aisle but soon they are lost in a maze of shelves and books. The pass labelled sections such as Greek Philosophers and Garden until the man stops in a small corner with "LAW" written on a sign above the section. He moves down the aisle and

picks up a small stool before walking back to them and standing on the stool to reach the second highest shelf. His long fingers dance across the multicoloured spines before he pulls down a thick book with a bright blue cover. He hands it to her.

"Applied criminal law in the British Empire."

"Thank you." She says as he climbs off the stool. The book is heavy in her hands and it smells like new paper and fresh ink.

He nods and smiles before taking them back through the maze to the front of the shop.

"Just some light reading?" Fredrick asks her as she pays the man for the book. She tosses him a look before thanking the man again. He opens the door for them and wishes them a good afternoon.

"Explain the book," Fredrick says as they meander down the street.

"My brother is studying to be a lawyer," Evelyn says as she struggles to fit the volume into her bag. "I often have to read the books and then test him."

"Don't you find them dull?" He asks.

"Not at all, I admit some law is drier than others but I'd choose a law book over French needlepoint any day"

"I'll take the needlepoint." Fredrick jokes. Evelyn rolls her eyes as they walk past the flower shop.

"Hang on a moment." He says, catching her arm.

"What is it?" She asks.

"I just want to say before we reach my mother, that I would like you to come tonight, I know you must be feeling apprehensive about the whole situation but there are a few that would love to see you again." He says passionately, "Promise me you will come?"

"I will be there." Evelyn says, "I am hardly one to shy away from such a challenge."

Fredrick relaxes and resumes walking. They round the corner and see that their family are in the same place that they left them. They approach them and Edith stops talking to smile at her son.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Lucile asks Evelyn.

"Yes thank you." She replies.

"Your charming cousin is just saying that you now live in a small town in the country," Edith says with a blinding smile at Henrietta.

"Yes, it's a large farmhouse, the gardens are lovely." Evelyn supplies.

"And do you...work on the farm?" Edith asks tentatively, hunting for gossip.

"It isn't a working farm," Evelyn says.

"Hmm." Edith looks pointedly at her son. "We must be off, a lot of work still to do but we will see you tonight."

"Goodbye," Henrietta says happily, waving as Edith smiles and leads her children away from the carriage. The family are soon swallowed by the throng of people.

"What did Fredrick have to say?" Lucile asks Evelyn as they climb into the carriage.

"Nothing really, we were just catching up." She says taking her seat.

"He's a sweet boy." Her aunt comments, "A real gentleman."

"It's because he has a proper mother." Henrietta says factually, "He was raised by a proper, sensible, cultured woman."

The carriage begins to roll away from the shop.

"You've known them less than an hour and you are already an expert on Fredrick upbringing?" Evelyn queries bitterly.

Lucile frowns at her tone but Henrietta just tosses her head and smiles in reply.

"It's exciting that it's only your first night and already a ball to attend," Lucile says, trying to smooth the moment over. "It has been a while since I attended one of these occasions.

"I don't wonder why," Henrietta mutters but Evelyn hears every word clearly and shoots her cousin a glare.

"Oh no," Henrietta sits up straight and her skin turns an ashen grey. She raises a hand to her mouth and her eyes well up. "What am I to wear?"