

Chapter 9

The journey to Edith's house is long and Henrietta is constantly fidgeting with excitement, she keeps patting her hair and pulling at her big lacy curls. Lucile is surprisingly quiet and she only nods when she is addressed. As they reach the outside of town attention is drawn to the massive estates they pass, the impressive buildings get more grand the further from town they travel and soon they arrive at a house that is about twelve times bigger than 104.

As they join the queue of carriages entering the estate Evelyn leans her head to look out of the window at the giant house that stands amongst several acres of forest and green.

"I could have been mistress of all this." She murmurs to herself as they slowly roll down the drive. The carriage stops in front of the open double doors and a footman from the house opens the door while a separate one opens out his hand.

Eagerness all over her face Henrietta takes his hand and practically leaps out of the carriage. Evelyn also accepts his hand but climbs down more demurely. Henrietta has given no thought to her companions but is striding forward to join the throng walking inside. Evelyn darts forward and pulls her back. Henrietta narrowly avoids bumping into the Duchess of Kent.

"What?" She asks, annoyed.

"We have to wait and walk in together," Evelyn whispers, tugging her back towards the carriage.

"Why?" Henrietta defiantly holds her head up.

"Because..." Evelyn hisses, "No respectable lady enters a party alone."

Henrietta sighs and waits for Lucile to catch up to them. Once their aunt is by their side, they slowly walk into the house. It has a bright hallway that is filled with all types of noblemen and women. The effort that has gone into making the entrance look pretty is astounding, decorative stars hang from the ceiling and slowly rotate around a large half moon. Silver tinsel has been draped over the portraits and hung between the candle holders.

Already, Evelyn can feel whispers and stares on her as they glide down the polished entrance hall floor.

"I can hear music." Henrietta bounces up and down as she walks.

"There's champagne!"

Evelyn smiles wryly at the enthusiasm her cousin is emitting but it drops from her face as they draw level with the hostess.

"Lady Edith." Lucile curtsies politely, the cousins copy.

"Lucile, Miss Buxley, Miss Wright." Edith smiles and bows her head, "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for inviting us," Henrietta says, ecstatic. "I have never seen such grandeur."

"I hope it lives up to your expectations." The woman replies, her eyes harden as they take in Evelyn. "Miss Wright, it's almost like you never leave..."

Evelyn bristles but keeps a pleasant expression on her face. People turn when they hear her name and most of the hallway's attention is now on the new guests. Edith notices that Evelyn now holds all of her attention and her smile turns sour.

"I hope you have a good night." She says coldly and turns away without a goodbye.

Lucile is taken aback at the change of tone but she doesn't voice her confusion and guides the two girls away from Lady Edith. Henrietta keeps squealing as she drinks in every golden element of this lifestyle she has walked into. Her eyes widen to the size of dinner plates as she spies the ballroom through large double doors. The ballroom is awash with bright light, it sparkles as couples waltz around to the orchestra set on a stage to the side of the room. Servers walk around with glasses of champagne and small glasses of ruby port, their matching white uniforms make them easily spottable against the colourful dresses and dark suits.

"It's all so beautiful," Henrietta sighs

A maid stops in front of them and hands them a card each. Henrietta looks at her card with a frown.

"You write your name on it and then they announce your arrival as you enter," Lucile tells her, nodding towards the man by the main entrance to the ball. All around them the younger guests are scribbling down their names on small cream cards, ready to be announced to the ball.

"Oh, I see." Henrietta takes the ink pen from the maid and quickly scrawls her name.

"I am going to use the side entrance," Lucile says, refusing to take a card.

"What?" Evelyn whirls around, her eyes wide.

"I'll see you both inside." Her aunt says and she walks down a corridor and disappears from sight before Evelyn can utter a protest, her heart begins to beat very fast.

"Here." Henrietta passes her the ink pen. Evelyn looks at the pen and then at the card. She could refuse and follow her aunt but she predicts that if she doesn't accompany her stubborn cousin then her cousin will enter alone and a lady never, under any circumstances enters a ball alone. She scribbles her name and gives the pen back to the girl who moves to the next people.

"Come on." Henrietta drags her forward until they are almost at the doorway. She takes both cards and hands them to the man as he announces the couple in front of them.

"Lady Rosemarie and Lady Charity." His voice echos around the room and the people who aren't dancing turn their heads in interest before resuming their conversations. The man looks down at the new cards and Henrietta links arms with Evelyn. They step forward into the room.

"Miss Henrietta Buxley and Miss Evelyn Wright."

A hush falls over the room and everyone, from the dancers to the illicit meetings in the corners, turn their heads in shock. It feels like every eye in the room is on her as Evelyn walks into the room with her cousin who is bathing in the attention she is receiving with a sickly sweet smile and fluttering lashes. The crowds part slightly as they walk in deeper. Everywhere she looks, a pair of eyes meet hers. They look and then judge.

"Evelyn." Fredrick's voice has her heart singing in relief. She turns around and is surprised when he hugs her. "Tough crowd." He mutters into her ear.

"You have no idea how pleased I am to see you." She says as they part. The people in the room turn back to their conversations but the gossip is now very different.

"Why was everyone staring?" Henrietta asks confused. People cover their mouths as they whisper to their neighbours.

Fredrick tilts his head, "Your cousin was quite the shining star four years ago."

"Really?" Henrietta says, disbelievingly. "What happened?"

"I grew up." Evelyn snaps. She takes two flutes of champagne on a passing tray and hands one to her. "Here."

"She used to have every man on his knees, begging for a dance." Fredrick continues. Henrietta's mouth drops open.

"I would never believe it." She says taking a sip of the bubbling liquid.

"Speaking of, would you like to dance?" Fredrick directs his question to Evelyn. She feels shocked that he would even consider dancing with her in front of so many people at his own mother's party. She glances at Henrietta who is giving her puppy eyes behind his shoulder.

"I don't feel like dancing but I am sure Henrietta would like to." She says. Fredrick turns to Henrietta with a smile, he holds out his hand.

"Shall we?"

Henrietta blushes and beams widely, she passes her glass to Evelyn and accepts his hand. Evelyn watches as he leads her on to the dance floor. They join the other couples and soon they are on the other side of the room. She places Henrietta's and her now empty glass on a server's tray before setting it around the corner of the room. It's never a good idea to stay in the same place for too long at a party such as this, some might presume her loneliness as an invitation to approach.

People stop and stare as she passes them. She recognises many faces, faces that she used to have a moon tea with, faces that would crinkle with laughter as they discussed the most eligible bachelors, faces that are now filled with pity, shock and most of all, hate. She spots an empty group of chairs in a corner and takes a seat in the middle one. She watches the dancers and her foot, taps, keeping in time to the music. She lets the light flow of music wash over her and her fingers mimic the piano chords as they dance along her lap.

"I surprised you could face returning."

Her fingers freeze. A man with a northern accent and blinding white teeth takes one of the seats next to her.

"Lord Mathew, how are you?" She asks, tilting her head to look at him. He looks the same as before, floppy blonde hair, wide golden eyes and a dashing smile, the cause of ruin for many ladies.

"Charming thank you." His teeth gleam like the floor.

"Glad to hear it," Evelyn says, concentrating on the dancers.

"Are you though?" He asks, leaning back and spreading his legs.

"Of course. I refused you, remember." She replies, smirking. A flash of anger appears in his eyes and he closes his hands into fists.

"But of course, how could I forget." He relaxes and his hand brushes her arm as he settles them in his lap. "Who was the sweet thing you entered with?"

Evelyn looks at him sharply, her eyes narrowed, "Why?"

"Woah, don't get your claws out." He holds his hands up and laughs. "I am an engaged man, not that you would know."

"And who is the unlucky woman?" Evelyn asks a moment, her defensive posture still intact.

"Some duke's daughter," Mathew replies. "Jane, I think her name is."

"You don't even know her name? How typical." She says mockingly. Mathew laughs.

"My father convinced me that I wouldn't be young, he made arrangements." He watches Henrietta spin around in Fredrick's arms. "She shall not interrupt my day to day activities."

"Touch her and I'll make you regret." Evelyn's nails dig into his arm as she follows his gaze. He sneers.

"How? You have no power any more... Miss Wright. You're nothing." He points out. Her nails push deeper into his jacket.

"I'd find a way, you know how smart I am." She bites out.

Mathew removes her hand from his arm and pats it, some might mistake for comfortingly. "I won't touch your penitence where of cousin anyway."

Evelyn purses her lips, "I wish you many congratulations." She stands, "If you'll excuse me."

His hand shoots out and grabs her wrist before she can move, he stands and pulls her close to him. In their small corner, no one casts them any looks, causing a scene would only implicate her.

"We could have a great partnership, Evie." His voice causes shivers to run down her spine.

"How do you know I don't do it anymore? Four years is a long time." She keeps her voice steady as her heart pounds. His laugh has her skin crawling.

"You know where to find me if you change your mind." He lets go of her wrist but his fingers brush up against the bare skin of her shoulder. She shoots him a disgusted look before striding away. She can feel his heated glare on her back as she looks for her cousin as she walks around the room, she spies Henrietta in conversation with Fredrick who is introducing her to some of her friends. The delighted smile on her face makes her look a lot prettier than the usual caty grin. Evelyn scans the crowds for her aunt but she cannot spot the woman anywhere. In her search, she bumps into a man who curses and spills his drink on the floor.

"Sorry." She says not looking up at him.

"Dammit, Evie." William groans, looking miserably at the tiny dregs of whiskey left in his tumbler.

"Will, what are you doing here?" She asks looking up at him in surprise. His skin is flushed, and his eyes are slightly red. His speech is slurred as he speaks.

"Jackson's...got friend's, said it would be fun." He giggles.

"You are drunk." She sighs.

"Slightly, but on real good whiskey." He throws an arm around her shoulders and looks down at her. He frowns, "You look nice."

"Thanks." She replies tersely. He sighs dramatically and leans on her more.

"Are you 18 again? Do we still..." He trails off and burps, she lets his arm over her and shoves it away.

"Wait, Evie." He calls a moment as she storms away. She pushes past a group of ladies and reaches the doors to the garden. She pushes it open and marches onto the balcony. The air hits her and cools her flushed cheeks. She takes long breaths of the night air, she leans on the stone wall and closes her eyes. She turns around and is glad that her brother hasn't followed her outside. She feels immediately much better in isolation. She knew it would happen, she was an idiot to think that she would actually enjoy herself with so much baggage in the past and so many people refusing to let go of it. She takes a steadying breath and hears the tinkle of water nearby. She spots the outline of a water feature, just visible through some bushes. She hurries down the stone steps and walks along the grass. The fountain stands in a circle of bushes shaped into cute woodland animals. She dips her hand into the cool water and splashes the surface around.

"Idiot." She kicks an owl-shaped bush.

She hears laughter and darts to hide behind said bush. She peeks out from behind the cut branches to look from whom the noise had come from her. It has come from her left, from a patch of trees with a small wooden gazebo.

She has to squint but in the darkness, she makes out a man and women underneath a large tree. The man's back is to her as he presses the woman up against the tree. She giggles again and this time Evelyn hears deep throaty laughter, presumably from the man. Evelyn debates how to get out of this situation, she is quite certain they haven't heard her and decides that just to hurriedly leave in the direction she came is the best option. She rolls back and forth on her heels, ready to make a dash of it.

1...2...BANG