

Chapter 17

The next week and a half run like clockwork. Every morning Evelyn wakes up and has breakfast with her aunt, cousin and brother before making an excuse to why she cannot join them in their outings and tea parties. Each day the excuses get longer and more extravagant but thankfully her family are so wrapped in their own lives that they don't question her. At 11 Blackmoore's carriage will pick her up at the top of Kingston Street and then they stay in his private study till 4. The carriage then takes her home in time to hear all of Henrietta's daily adventures. If she is unlucky there is a party in the evening and she has to struggle through that with her cousin whispering ridicule in her ear as well as the scorn that follows her from room to room. When her head hits the pillow she falls into a deep sleep, preparing to do it all again.

Exactly two weeks after meeting Duke Blackmoore Evelyn leans over the balcony of the second floor of his study, book in hand. She bites her thumbnail as she reads, the more she knows, the more she realises how damned he is if they don't find the real killer.

"I just don't see how Lady Carrick could have killed Phillipa." Blackmoore restarts the current argument of the day. Evelyn groans and closes her book.

"She goes on the list because she has more spite than any woman I have ever met and she hates you because of some reason you don't want to tell me but insists is awful." She reasons walking along the balcony to look at him directly.

He grumbles but writes her name on the list that has been growing longer and longer over the weeks. Evelyn slides her book into its spot on the shelf and leans against the wall of books as her stomach growls it's hunger. She freezes, her eyes fixed on a spot above the fireplace. She steps forward, tension racking her body.

She uses the railing to lead her round to the stairs, her eyes never leaving the spot. She slowly walks down the stairs and walks over to the fire. Blackmoore looks up as she moves past him to stand in front of the desk. He frowns when she makes no movement or speech.

"What are you looking at?" He asks, returning to his papers, confused by her antics. She doesn't reply and goes over to a small table.

"What on earth?" Blackmoore cries as she sweeps all the books and papers onto the floor in a large scattered pile. She ignores him and carries the table to the fireplace.

"Miss Wright?" Blackmoore's voice turns from anger to worry as she climbs onto the table and rises onto her tiptoes. He rushes from his chair to stand behind her as the table wobbles dangerously when she rocks on her tiptoes.

"Look." She turns around and is surprised to see him behind her but she points at an empty space. "I cannot believe we missed this!"

"You've lost me." He says, "What am I meant to be looking at?"

"There's nothing there." She says in delight.

"And?" He frowns.

"Claude told me that there were a few things that belonged to your grandfather around the house." She points to the empty space. "There should be a pistol here, the little pins couldn't support a sword, only a pistol and look." She points to the handle of one of the swords. "V.B"

"By God." Blackmoore whispers. "I never knew they belonged to him, I just thought they were heirlooms."

"This is where they got the pistol." She says excitedly, Blackmoore helps her to jump down as the table wobbles more violently with her excitement. She looks up at him, ecstatic with her discover but then a horrible realisation crashes over her. "There are only two keys to this room...." She steps back.

"No!" Blackmoore says firmly, "He didn't!"

"It's the only explanation." Evelyn so ly, wary of the sensitive subject.

"He wouldn't betray me!" He yells, jumping from annoyed to fuming in a second.

"It's the only way..." She cries, "I am sorry but..."

"I trust Claude with everything, he is the most loyal friend I have." He shouts. "It wasn't him!"

They both glare each other, storm versus fire. They continue to shoot daggers at each other until a soft cough breaks the tension. Claude stands in the doorway and raises the small tray in his hands.

"Tea?"

"Perfect timing, Claude." Blackmoore smiles. "Miss Wright was just about to explain why you shot Phillipa and framed me." He looks at her expectantly. "Go on."

Claude moves to the desk and begins to pour two cups of tea. Evelyn looks at his neutral expression and bites her lip.

"That's not what I am saying." She protests. "All I know is that your grandfather's pistol has vanished from a room that only two people have access to."

"So the killer is obviously my lifelong manservant and loyal frame." Blackmoore folds his arms. Evelyn rolls her eyes at his biting comment.

"I understand why Miss Wright would think such a thing, I would too," Claude says calmly, stirring in sugar, "However I did not take the pistol to frame my lord, you forget I have never met Lady Tremontane before."

She thinks for a moment, she ignores Blackmoore's deadly gaze on her and pushes her rational mind into action. If Claude had never met Phillipa then how could he have known who to kill?

"Right, it wasn't you, I am sorry for thinking so," Evelyn says quietly.

"Don't fret miss, you are very clever, you only thought about what is logical." Claude smiles and hands her a cup of tea. He also hands one to Blackmoore who looks at it thoughtfully and then at her.

"Maybe I shouldn't drink this in case it's poisoned." He says mockingly.

"Don't let me stop you." She says sipping hers.

Claude bows and exits the study with a mysterious look at both of them. Evelyn walks around the desk and settles on the fur in front of the fire, she places the tea on the edge of the hearth and settles down on her stomach before opening a book from the large pile and reading. The Duke perches on the edge of his desk and watches her, tea in hand. After five minutes she slams the book down.

"What?" She demands, "Why are you watching me?"

"Because you are surprisingly pretty when annoyed." Blackmoore replies, putting his cup on the table. She doesn't quite know how to respond therefore she hushes in response.

"I think we should visit some suspects." He says, plopping down next to her. She rolls onto her side to have a better view of him.

"They aren't suspects." She tells him, "They are person's of interest."

"We should still pay them a visit." He rolls his eyes and takes the long list off the desk. "Who do you think first?"

She pinches the list from his fingers and looks down the list. She pauses at the last name. "Why am I on here?"

He laughs and takes back the list.

"And Jackson?" Evelyn sits up, curious.

"Because you are people of interest." He explains looking down the list. "I think we should start with him. Something about him makes me suspicious."

"We should start with Lord Mathew." She says, mentally making a note not to let her name on the list go.

"Fine." Blackmoore lies down next to her, she rolls onto her back and they both stare at the ceiling, listening to each other's breathing.

"Why do you think someone is framing me?" He asks quietly. She turns her head to look at his face and it surprises her to see unmasked regret and sorrow. She looks back at the ceiling.

"Because life is cruel and unfair." She murmurs, "And justice is rarely sort."

He doesn't reply.

"You better cross my name off this list though, or they won't have anything to hang when it comes round to it." She says lightly. That makes him laugh.

"Is that why you have such a cynical view of life?" He asks, "Because it was cruel and unfair to you?"

"I am cynical because what was worse than losing all our money and my life, was not knowing why or how. It destroyed everything. We had nothing and nothing to be angry at so my brother blamed me and I blamed the world." Evelyn confesses. "I do blame the world."

"I blame my parents." He says bitterly.

"Why?"

"They are heartless and lack any kind of compassion. To them all that matters is appearance. That's how I came to own my own house, I can be as unscrupulous as I wish is this house without a worry about how it will affect them. My grandmother raised me." He continues just to stare at the ceiling, "She was my world."

"When did she die?" She asks so ly.

"Three years ago."

He sits up when she doesn't say anything and stares at her in confusion. She slowly sits up too.

"What?" She asks, the unguarded expression on his face making her uncomfortable.

"You didn't apologise." He says. "Everyone always apologises, I hate it."

"An apology changes nothing." She says honestly, "It can't bring back my life or your grandmother. It is a tool used by the uneducated to justify their grandness."

He nods and his eyes bore deeply into hers, searching for something that she doesn't want him to find. She looks around the room, her heart constricting.

"Why do you have so much gold in your house?" She asks, eager to distract both of them.

Blackmoore also looks around the room. "Gold is the colour of everything that will always matter; power, influence, money. It doesn't require your attention, it demands it."

"Why would you want so much attention?"

"What's worse than drawing attention to yourself is being forgotten." He says slyly.

"My Lord? Miss Wright?" Claude's voice calls from the door, a hint of worry in it. "Are you in here?"

"We are over here." Blackmoore replies. The manservant appears a moment later and his eyebrows pinch together at the sight of his master and guest sitting next to each other on the fur by the fire.

"It's four o'clock." He says clearing his throat and looking anywhere but at them. Evelyn immediately scrambles to her feet.

"Thank you, Claude." She says, she looks to his master, "Pick me up at 12 instead for our visit."

Blackmoore inclines his head.

"Wear something obviously expensive tomorrow." She says cryptically. Both Claude and Blackmoore look at her small smile with equal curiosity.

"Goodbye, thank you for the tea and food." Evelyn curtsies before leaving the room.