

## Chapter 1

Evelyn Wright curses her stupidity as she rereads the letter in her hand. Her cousin, Henrietta, had taken her advice to her surprise and now she holds the reply from her aunt, insisting that the entire Wright family come to London before the season begins. Evelyn looks up at her father across the desk in his private study, she slides the letter back across the polished oak and grimaces at the stern expression on his face. Every wall in the room is covered with books and manuscripts, they contain a small portion of all worldly knowledge hidden in their yellowing pages and fading ink.

Mr Wright is lucky to boast having the cleverest and most accomplished pair of children in the whole of Darlington however, despite his son being slightly unrefined at the best of times, it is his daughter that causes him the most grief especially when his wayward niece is involved.

"I presume you had some hand in Henrietta writing to my sister against my express wishes that we would not be going to London this year." He asks, his eyebrows, pulled together. Evelyn sits in her hard chair and folds her hands on her lap.

"It was not my intention for her to write to my aunt." She says mutinously.

"Then why did this letter interrupt my breakfast this morning?" He picks up the letter from his desk, folds it and tucks it into his jacket pocket.

"She came to see me and you refused her and I was simply consoling her." Evelyn explains, "You know I have as little a wish as you do to visit London."

"And now we must go to London," Mr Wright sighs.

"Must we?" She says desperately, "Can you not reply that you are otherwise engaged? Or just send Henrietta and whoever else wishes to see Town."

He shakes his head, "My sister is very persuasive, and your cousin may not be in possession of a fortune but she is one of the silliest girls in the country, I could not, in good mind, send her without the watchful eye of her more sensible cousin" He leans back in his old armchair, "It seems you have created a trap of your own volition Evie."

Evelyn is silent for a moment. Her distaste of London stems from the few trips she has taken in the past years, the manic chaos of city life was exciting to her young mind, she was eager to experience everything she could until she discovered that the people who inhabited the loud, modern city were not as welcoming or friendly as the place itself. "When are we to leave?" She asks finally.

"In two days time," Her father replies, "I hope you will try to enjoy your time there."

"I would sooner have fun in a convent." She replies with a half smile. "Though I am sure William will enjoy the nightly balls and the chance to meet beautiful ladies."

"I am sure he will," He says, ignoring her jest. "Will you send Juliet to me?"

"Of course, father." Evelyn stands and curtsies. She walks around her chair and turns the handle on the door. She leaves the room and wanders across the ground floor of Oakmere House, her slippers patter across the wooden floor until she reaches the door to the small basement kitchen. She walks down the spiral stone steps and narrowly avoids one of the kitchen maids with a sloshing bucket of water. She carefully manoeuvres her way past the cook barking orders at a poor grocery boy and scampers up a small set of stairs to the backdoor. She pushes the small door open and slips into the garden. An icy bluster of wind smacks into her face and blows her pale golden hair across her face. She spits hair out of her mouth and hurries down a path to the walled part of the garden.

The snowdrops are struggling to push their way out of the frosty soil, their ivory heads can just be seen peaking beneath as they prepare to bloom. She walks past the sleeping rose bushes and into the most private part of the garden. A swing hangs from one of the great oak trees and a stone walled pond hides behind overgrown thorns, the wall provides shelter from the chilly wind. Evelyn sits down on the swing and gently pushes herself with her feet. A shadow appears over face and a pair of boots land on the ground in front of her. The man straightens from his crouch and turns to her.

"What did father want?" William asks his younger sister as he leans against the trunk of the tree, an apple in his hand.

"We are to go to London for the season, and stay with Aunt Lucile," Evelyn says swinging back and forth. William's golden eyes widen in surprise.

"How on earth did that come around?" He asks, taking a bite of the shiny red fruit. Evelyn's feet drag on the ground and stop her movement.

"I told Henrietta that a way to go around father was to talk to our aunt, I never thought she would actually write to her." She says. "I didn't know she could write."

"Why did you tell her that?" He asks, amusement sparkling in his eyes. "You know Hatty would jump at any chance to go to London however small or ridiculous."

Evelyn frowns and winces as the bitter January wind attacks her bare shoulders, "She wouldn't stop crying and you know how uncomfortable I am with tears especially whiny ones."

"Then it is your own fault, I for one am glad we are leaving Darlington for the season, I cannot fathom year of spending the dreadful months here. The company is dire at best and the whiskey is not to be imagined."

"It that your plan then? To drink whiskey with new found friends?" She asks, wrapping her hands around the rope and resuming her swinging.

"To drink expensively imported whiskey," William emphasises. His sister rolls her eyes but he is not phased.

"I may even find a suitable girl to marry." He says, thinking.

"Now you have gone mad," Evelyn concludes.

"Am I not to dream of such things?" He asks. Evelyn jumps on the swing and it flies back and almost hits him.

"You are to dream, but any more and I shall fear for your sanity." She says, brushing her hands on her skirt. William snorts and throws his apple core in the mass of scratchy thorns.

"You'd do well to take a page out of my book and start thinking of marriage." He says, "I know there are plenty in Darlington that would gladly take you so best you find a grand lord in London to keep you away from this hole of a place."

Evelyn snaps a twig from an outstretched branch and twists it around her hands. She turns to her brother with a thoughtful expression that turns bitter as she throws the stick at him. He throws his arms up before it can hit him in the face.

"Watch it brother, or it won't be a twig I throw next time and I won't be aiming for your face." She says, her silver eyes flashing. She marches away from him, her skirts graze upon the frozen path as she walks, he calls a her but she doesn't turn around. She slips on the steps back inside and grasps onto the window ledge to keep her balance. Inside she sneaks a roll from the cook before heading towards her room.

On the way upstairs she spies Juliet coming out of Henrietta's room with a tray of tea and biscuits. Her hands shake as she balances the tray on one hand and closes the door with the other. "Here," Evelyn says as she takes the tray from the girl, who smiles gratefully and shuts the door firmly.

"Thank you, Miss Evelyn," Juliet says taking back the tray. "Miss Henrietta asked that fetch her a fresh pot even though I just made this one." She sighs tiredly and blows away stand of brown hair that has escaped her hat.

"My father wants to see you in his study," Evelyn informs her, stealing a shortbread from the tray.

"Oh thank you, Miss Evelyn, I shall attend to him as I fetch Miss Henrietta's tea," Juliet says with a small smile.

"You are not her servant," Evelyn says. "You don't need to bow to her every request."

Juliet smiles painfully, "Your father hired me to look after his daughter and his niece so I am, and Miss Henrietta is rather loud in her requests."

"I can't stand her hears either," Evelyn admits, "She could cry for England if she were allowed."

Juliet says nothing but a twinkle appears in her eye. Evelyn sighs.

"I'll take this." She says taking the tray, "You go to my father and I'll deal with my cousin."

"Thank you," Juliet says. She curtsies and hurriedly hops down the stairs and disappears from sight.

Evelyn presses an ear to Henrietta's door, from inside there is the residual banging, Henrietta Buxley is only spoiled daughter of Evelyn's mother's sister who's husband decided when his wife died that life on the sea was not a suitable place for a debutante and decreed that his wife's sister's widower take the child and raise her alongside his own girl. It is safe to say that Evelyn and Henrietta have never been sisters in any form of the word. Henrietta was 14 when she was put into Mr Wright's care and although she received the same love and care as Evelyn, she is now more spoilt and imprudent than ever.

Evelyn balances the tray on her arm as she turns the handle. A slipper flies through the air and hits the door frame as she enters.

"I said leave me alone!" Henrietta cries from a pile on the bed. Evelyn surveys the room: dresses and undergarments lie strewn across every inch of carpet, shoes are sticking out from under the mass of material and on the bed, underneath several cashmere blankets, lies Miss Buxley.

"It's me, cousin." Evelyn shuts the door with her foot. The covers fly on the bed.

"Oh cousin, how delightful," Henrietta says, she spots the tray and an ugly smirk covers her face. "Did I miss you in joining the serving staff?"

"Not quite," Evelyn hinders, placing the tea on one of the clothes chests. "Juliet was needed elsewhere so I said I would take your fresh tea to you."

"Oh well splendid," Henrietta says, clapping her hands together. "I need a good chat with my dear cousin and I must say serving suits you."

"Must you?" Evelyn sits in the least covered armchair. "Then I must say that hiding in blankets suits you."

"Oh don't tease me," Henrietta lets out a dramatic sigh. "I am in distress that I am still stuck in this miserable place and all my efforts to take us all to London."

"It is indeed a pity," Evelyn agrees, looking out of the window.

"I fear I shall waste away in this bleak and dull countryside, I see no attraction at all." Henrietta's says with a pout.

The rolling bright green hills and towering oak trees that surround the house, in Evelyn's opinion could never be described as "bleak" or "dull" as they contain many mysterious forgotten long ago and the sparkling brooks that twist down the mountainside give life to so many.

"Then I shall not disturb you any longer." Evelyn gets to her feet.

"No, you must." Henrietta grabs one of her cousin's wrists as she passes by the bed. "I am inconsolable, I fear nothing will ever make me smile again."

Evelyn struggles to free her wrist from the clamp-like grip. "That would indeed be a pity." She says but her wrist remains trapped.

"Then my aunt's invitation to London must be sure of no consequence to an inconsolable soul like you."

"London?" Henrietta releases her wrist, excitement coursing through her face "We are to go to London?"

"It would appear so."

"Oh." Henrietta's face is a picture of glee, "Oh this is the most delightful news. The parties in London shall be grander than anything this place has to offer, I have no suitable dresses but how I shall dance and..."

"I thought you were looking forward to the officers coming down from Newcastle." Evelyn reminds her.

"Evelyn, you cannot compare the elite of London to the Officers of the Newcastle regiment," Henrietta says, aghast.

"You can't see them are just men with more or less money than the one before," Evelyn replies.

"That is preposterous." Her cousin says, a hand on her heart "London houses Dukes and Lords, who knows who we shall meet." She takes a big dreamy sigh, "Maybe I shall find one to marry."

"Because every duke in London is looking to take a penniless daughter for his wife," Evelyn says sarcastically. Henrietta stifles and pushes back a chestnut curl.

"We weren't always poor." She sniffs.

"But we are now, and that is all they shall see," Evelyn says. "Two penniless cousins and one idiot brother but it will be fun, I am sure."