

Chapter 10

The gunshot slices through the air and Evelyn silently screams, falling to the floor and covering her head with her hands. Her blood races, and her heart pound violently. The shot sounded like it had come from just behind her head. She squeezes her eyes shut and her body shakes on the wet grass. She lifts her head slightly and her eyes are drawn to the couple under the tree. The woman who was leaning against the tree is slowly sliding down the trunk until she flops to the ground, completely lifeless. Evelyn covers her mouth to stop herself from crying out, even from her distance away, it is clear to see that that woman is dead.

The man steps away from her and looks around, panicked. He scans the surrounding area and she ducks her head down. She watches him turn on his heel and flee the scene, he sprints away from the woman and around the far side of the house. Evelyn can feel the moisture from the grass soaking through her dress and settling on her skin but she doesn't move a muscle. The shock and fear keep her paralysed on the ground. Once she has regained control of her shaking she sits up and tries to calm her breathing but there is a rustling behind her and she freezes. There's a louder rustling and then a figure rises from behind a taller bush.

She shrinks into her bush but luckily they don't see her as they move towards the body. The figure moves swiftly and silently like a panther, watching every leaf and twig that moves around them, ready to pounce. Evelyn watches, transfixed. Her body alive with terror and excitement. The figure takes something from their jacket and lies it by the body. They look around once more and then scarpers, the night swallows them up quickly.

Evelyn gets to her feet and moves out from behind her bush, she staggers towards the body. In the distance, she can hear the shouts of a number of people. They must have heard the gunshot. Her mind is foggy and she falls to the floor, staring at the blank face of the dead woman. Her eyes are open, glassy and unseeing and her ruby red mouth is parted in slight surprise. Her hands cradle the hole in her chest, the blood pooling from the fatal wound has spread over the expensive material of her bodice and is dripping into the grass. The sight of the dark scarlet blood covering the dead woman causes bile to rise in Evelyn's throat but she forces it down as she crawls forward, her legs too weak to support her. The mysterious object that lies by the body gleams in the moonlight, it taunts her with a shiny barrel. Her eyes widen as they take in the pistol. Two neatly engraved initials can be seen on the varnished handle.

V.B

Her hand hovers above the weapon, shaking. Kneeling on the grass, she lets out a small sob as indecision wrecks her mind, she wipes the tears from her face and takes several shuddering breaths. Loud voices float from not far away and she drops her hand to her side. Tears drip down her nose and splash onto the ground.

The voices are just around the corner when Evelyn picks up the pistol and sprints away. Her feet hit the ground hard as she runs. The pistol in her hands seems to burn into her skin, setting her palms on fire and causing a prickling sensation to run up her arms.

She skids to a halt as she rounds a corner and catches sight of a group of men, all drivers, sitting around a small fire. She manages to pull herself back to the cover of the trees before anyone spots her. She places her back to the tree and looks up at the sky. The sky is a deep navy with tiny pinpricks of light winking at her, the only witnesses to her secret. She pants and hugs the pistol to her chest, her mind works furiously. The drivers laugh and talk around the fire, beer bottles are clutched in their hands.

Holding her breath she maps out her path around the fire through the cover of trees. She steps from one to the other until she is at the front side of the house. She edges along the house, sticking against the stone until her aunt's carriage comes into sight. She dashes forward, yanks the door open and throws herself inside. On her knees in the carriage, she looks around for a place to stash the pistol. She runs her free hand along every surface, searching for a small space, she groans in desperation.

She drops the weapon and fiddles in her hair for a pin, she pulls out the pin and bends the metal back. She runs it along the back seam of the leather seat, the sharp point cuts through the stitching and frees the leather cover. She neatly rips the leather back and slides the pistol between the springs of the seat. She tucks the leather back and uses more pins to securely hold the leather taught like it used to be. Evelyn wriggles out of the carriage and quick as a fox she moves to the door of the house. She tests the handle and it swings open. Praying that all the servants had also been distracted by the shot, she hurries inside. The hallway is open and she crosses it with ease. The ballroom is mostly empty except for a familiar face slumped against the wall, his hair is plastered to his red face. Her heels click on the floor as she walks over to him.

"Hey." She kicks his foot and he opens his eyes. "What has happened?"

"Someone's been shot." William slurs. "Where've you been, little sis?"

"That's none of your business." She snaps, sitting down next to him. She smooths her skirts out, her breath catches in her throat as she sees a splash of crimson on the hem of her dress. She crosses her ankles and tucks the stained part of the dress behind her legs. The backdoor is open and the cool air swirls around the room, it makes the hairs on the back of her neck stick up.

"What do mean someone has been shot?" She asks. William opens his eyes properly and struggles to sit up.

"There was a man....big fat man, said there was a shooting in the garden." He tries to explain despite his inhibited state. Evelyn jangles her foot on the floor, she is on edge and cannot stop thinking of the woman's haunting, empty eyes. People begin to wander back inside, their faces white and shaken. Soon most of the guests are back in the ballroom.

"Oh thank goodness." Lucile cries as she and Henrietta enter the room. She hurries over to Evelyn and hugs her shoulders. "We didn't know where you were and they said that the victim is a woman!"

"I've been with William," Evelyn says, thanking the heavens that her brother won't remember anything more than the stinking headache he will have in the morning. T

"We should go." Her aunt says. Everyone around has had the same idea and the entire party is leaving the ballroom and heading home, gossip on the brain. Evelyn nods and hoists her brother to his feet. Using her as a walking stick William manages to get all the way to the carriage before he doubles over and vomits on her feet.

"Ew," Henrietta complains, skirting around the sick and holding her nose.

"For goodness sake." Evelyn strips off her brother's jacket and uses it to mop up the throw-up. The footman takes the disgusting balled jacket off her, along with her ruined shoes and goes to dispose of it. Evelyn climbs into the carriage and sits on the seat under which she has hidden the pistol. She reaches out, pulls her brother inside and plops him on the seat next to her, the carriage joins the line of leaving vehicles. Lucile hasn't stopped babbling on since they left the house, it is apparent that the shock has not worn off.

"I cannot believe such a thing....in all my life."

"Have they identified the victim?" Evelyn interrupts as her brother rests his head on her shoulder and begins to snore gently.

"Lady Phillipa Tremontane," Henrietta answers immediately.

"The Duke of Sheffield's wife?" Evelyn sits forward and William slips down with a groan. Henrietta leans forward with a scheming look.

"Apparently she was having an affair and that why she was found in the garden, she was meeting her lover." She says, her eyes lighting up. "No sign of him but he'll turn up."

"You think it was her lover?" Evelyn asks.

"Who else would kill her?" Henrietta says.

Evelyn's mind shoots right to the mysterious figure that dropped the weapon.

"I don't know." She murmurs. Lucile tuts, there is still no colour in her face.

"That's enough gossip, a poor woman has just been shot." She reprimands. Henrietta, however, looks positively glowing, a happy smile on her face. Even the shooting of a woman had not ruined her big night.

Evelyn leans into the back of her seat and her mind begins to wonder about who the mysterious V.B. is and who on earth would want to frame him.

Back at 104 Evelyn and Henrietta go straight to bed. Lucile waves goodnight, still shaking, William collapses onto his bed and his snores follow them down to their room.

Juliet is waiting for them as they enter. She stands up with a book in her hand as Henrietta bounds over.

"You'll never guess what happened." She squeals. Juliet looks lost as Henrietta begins to pull off her jewels and shoes.

"I don't know," Juliet says as she undoes the ties of her dress.

"Someone was shot."

Juliet's hands still on the final ribbon but she carries on. "Really? How terrifying."

"A man came in from the balcony, shouting that he had heard a gunshot and then we all rushed outside, and poor Lady Tremontane was laying on the ground, a hole in her chest." Henrietta shakes her curls loose and pulls on a night dress.

"That's terrible," Juliet says carrying a candle over to Henrietta's bed as the girl slips into the covers and settles into the pillow.

"It's going to be a big scandal." She tells the maid excitedly, "And to think, I was there!"

Evelyn frowns as she also gets into bed. Her dress lies at the bottom of her bed, the blood is now covered with her siblings' sick. Juliet picks up the garment and wrinkles her nose as she smells the vomit.

"William," Evelyn says as an answer.

Juliet nods in understanding and continues to pick up the underclothes, tidying away the accessories.

Henrietta sits up in bed, her excitement preventing her from dozing off. "I wonder if there shall be a trial."

"Go to sleep," Evelyn says turning to face the window. Henrietta hushes but leans back into her pillow.

"Goodnight," Juliet says blowing out all the candles. She steals the final candle before leaving the room and shutting the door with a click. Evelyn ponders whether to slip downstairs and steal the pistol from the carriage once the house is asleep but she stares out of the window, listening to the sounds of an awake Henrietta, she drifts off into an uneasy sleep. She tosses and turns all night, the gunshot haunting her dreams.