

Chapter 20

The morning saw Henrietta reluctantly dressing to accompany Evelyn despite her pure delight the night before upon the news that they would be attending Hardwick Manor. A er much deliberation and fussing Evelyn and Henrietta le 104 at around 10 and headed into the very heart of town. The clouds are hanging low in the sky and the sun lingers out of sight. Evelyn felt a shi in the air yesterday a er her talk with Blackmoore. Although he endeavoured to scare her away from pursuing the truth behind his dark past, her head is overruling her heart on this occasion.

"What's Edward like?" Henrietta quizzes her cousin as they travel through town. Evelyn tilts her head and considers her reply.

"I have never found fault with his character." She lies.

"And he is unmarried?" Henrietta presses, leaning forward in her new frilly peach day dress.

"As far as I am aware," Evelyn says.

"I am surprised you have so many rich friends, I would have renounced knowing you the minute you lost everything." Her cousin says primly.

Evelyn purses her lips but doesn't respond. Bringing Henrietta is a risk that she has been forced to take, she hopes that her cousin's ignorance and fascination with the rich will prevent her from discovering the real reason behind this impromptu house call.

The carriage stops in a less busy street than the ones they have passed, tall houses with light grey stone and high open windows elude faded grandeur.

"This is his house?" Henrietta asks, stepping down and running her eyes from the polished door in the pale frame to the top chimney.

"I believe so," Evelyn says, stepping down to her side. An unsettling feeling swirls around in her stomach. She walks up the steps and raps lightly on the door. She waits with bated breath, Henrietta seems reluctant to join her. Evelyn taps her foot on the ground, she waits, listening for any sound within. Henrietta frowns and crosses her arms.

"What's taking so long?" She asks impatiently.

"L..." Evelyn begins but the door swings open and a man with thick eyebrows, a sharp chin and pointed moustache. A cup of tea sits in his right hand while his eyes roam up the woman standing on the doorstep and over the lady hovering behind her.

"May I help you?" He asks, taking a sip of tea.

"I am here to see Edward?" Evelyn says unsure, hoping the man in front of her is not that man.

"I am Anthony Tremontane." He says, "My brother is busy I am afraid."

"Your brother is a friend of mine, he's asked to see me." She lies smoothly. He gives her a look of disbelief and his eyes fall on Henrietta.

"She's my cousin." Evelyn smiles politely and looks expectantly inside. Anthony glances back to her before nodding, standing back and allowing them into the house. He shuts the door and says for the two cousins to follow him through the carpeted hallway. As they walk, Evelyn notices that there are no servants or maids around and that a thick layer of dust rests upon the surfaces. Anthony stops at a door, he raps smartly and pokes his head around it.

"Brother." He says. "A friend for you." He steps back and lets Evelyn slip into the room. She walks in confidently with her head held high. The room is small but what catches her eye is the number of animal heads the adown the walls, she wrinkles her nose in distaste. The man behind the desk in the corner of the room moves from his chair to face his visitors. His little eyes roam over her but his expression hints at no surprise or confusion.

"Edward, it is has been so long." She says quickly, moving towards him. Edward smiles, his face isn't as thin as his brothers and the lack of facial hair makes him more appealing to the eye however he exudes an air of arrogance and smarminess.

"Too long." He says shocking her as he kisses her hand like an old friend. She smiles and turns to see Henrietta looking around at the dead animals with obvious disgust. Anthony is watching her with interest.

"Why doesn't Anthony take you on a tour of the gardens while Edward and I catch up?" Evelyn proposes. Anthony shi s but doesn't say a word, his face closed.

"I do feel slightly faint," Henrietta confesses turning away from the nearest deer head.

"Shall we?" Anthony o ers her his arm. She accepts it gratefully and is quickly whisked away. Evelyn walks over and closes the door, she hears Edward move closer to her and she freezes.

"A lady has never tried quite so hard as to lie about a connection with me," He says in her ear, "I am flattered."

She turns around, back to the door, her face a breath away from his. "That was not my intention, I assure you." She murmurs. His eyes roam over her face and linger too long on her lips.

"Are you going to o er me a drink?" She asks, meeting his eyes determinedly. He smiles at her, takes a silent minute but does move away from her. Evelyn lets out a quiet breath and moves to a chaise lounge as he pours them both a tumbler of amber liquid.

"You obviously know my name and therefore I am at a disadvantage." He passes her a glass and taking a seat opposite.

"I am Evelyn Wright." She says taking a slip "I apologise for my method of obtaining an audience with you but I wanted to ask you a few questions for a friend."

"So you are Blackmoore's little friend? Very curious." Edward chuckles and shakes his head. Evelyn frowns and opens her mouth but no words come to mind.

"It's all over town that the suspected murderer has been seen out of the safety of his home with an unknown friend." He explains.

"I see." She says, "Well..."

"You wish to ask me about my stepmother, tragedy." Edward sighs, interrupting her. "That's all anyone has talked about recently."

"Did you know her well?" She asks, placing her empty glass on a side table.

"She was my stepmother...." He looks at her mockingly. "I knew her like a stepson."

"Of course but..." Evelyn says frustrated.

"But that's not what you want to ask me." He says cutting her o , "Ask the real question." The dare is obvious in his eyes and his mouth smirks at her unsure expression. "Go on."

She feels a lump in her throat but she pushes it down. "Did you kill her?"

He slowly claps, looking around the room as though they have an audience. "Straight to the point." He stops clapping and glares at her, "But I did not."

"Who do you think did?" She asks.

"I couldn't care less," Edward admits shamelessly, "She was an adulteress and a gold digger, my father was blinded by her beauty and was too blind to see what was right under his nose!" Edward launches to his feet. "Blackmoore made my father a laughing stock in society, that duke, made my family a joke!"

"That wasn't just him!" Evelyn insists, "That was also about Phillipal!"

"You don't know him," Edward says spitefully. "You are just a poor girl with a need to fix other people's problems."

"What's wrong with that?" She glares. He laughs and walks over to a bookshelf, he peels a silver-bound volume o the shelf and throws it onto the cushion next to her.

"What is this?" She asks, eyeing the book sceptically.

"Why you need to let him hang," Edward says simply. Evelyn pauses as she picks it up.

"A book is the reason why an innocent man deserves to die?" She says disbelievingly, he gestures impatiently for her to look at it. She turns the book in her lap so she can read the title. Her heart stops beating for second and she feels her stomach drop as the words bounce o the cover and squeeze at her heart.

Diabolus est syndicate

"It means..." He begins.

"I know what it means." She whispers.

"And I take from your ashen face that you know what The Devil's Syndicate is?" Edward asks intrigued, prowling forward and resting on the side of his desk. Evelyn stares at the calligraphy that is sprawled across the expensive book.

"You'll find his name at the top, on the first page." He continues. "He's a prime member..."

"It's real?" She cuts him o , he bows his head and she lets out a disbelieving sco .

"I presume triumphant." He looks no longer justify defending him," Edward smirks and looks triumphant. "Phillipa isn't here to blame but Blackmoore is, and he more than deserves it even if he didn't kill my stepmother, think how many lives he has ruined."

"L..." She looks from the book to his pleased expression.

"I've seen many women look like that over Blackmoore, too many." He gloats. "Pitiful, betrayed expressions, though yours is by far the most captivating."

"I thank you, sir, for your time." Evelyn stands and shoves the book into his arms. "I'll see myself out."

"You know I am right." He calls a er her. She ignores him and pulls the door open.

"Lovely meeting you Miss Wright." His voice follows out of the room. She hurries around the ground floor of the house, throwing open random doors trying to find a door to the garden. She finally finds a tiny parlour that has a glass door into a back garden. Evelyn storms into the garden and walks down the path in the middle of the grass-lined with trees and bushes.

Her cousin's girlish giggle is the first thing to alert her to her presence, she finds them in the corner of the garden, Henrietta is clinging to Anthony's arm as they walk. They both look up from the conversation they are having as Evelyn walks towards them.

"We are leaving," Evelyn says shortly. Henrietta frowns and Anthony stops short.

"Already?" Her cousin asks, annoyed. "But...?"

"Our aunt will be expecting us." Evelyn quickly curtsies to Anthony and gestures with her head for Henrietta to follow. Henrietta lets out a tiny squeal of annoyance but she lets go of Anthony's arm and follows her a er several apologies to him.

Evelyn climbs into the carriage outside of Edward's house. The betrayal she feels in her heart is knowing of her self restraint as she attempts to keep a veil over the bitter storm of emotion that is rising the more she has time to process the recent discovery. Her hands shake in her lap, her nails bite into her palms and the storm swirls shake in her eyes.

"You didn't have to be so rude." Henrietta chastises as she takes a seat opposite, slamming the door behind her.

Evelyn pays no attention to her and stares out of the window as the carriage rolls away from the house. The pain in her heart constricts like a vice around her throat. She is used to being disappointed by her family, but she thought that the Duke, a complete stranger in peril, wouldn't have to capacity to hurt her. Now she curses her naivety and blames her newfound willingness to trust.