

Chapter 22

Evelyn's dreams are haunted by the twisted faces of her family and the cruel words that have passed between them. Juliet lightly shakes her awake at five, concern written all over the maids face. However, Evelyn's attention falls directly onto the large ribbon tied box that sits on the side table. She stretches and swings her legs o the bed.

"Is that it?" She asks, running a hand over the expensive red ribbon.

"Everything as per your request," Juliet says unsure, "I had to guess on a few things...."

"Thank you." Evelyn interrupts, "I am sure it'll be perfect."

Juliet looks at her mistress's poker face, the lack of emotion is unnerving her.

"Are you feeling alright miss? Can I get you something tea perhaps?" She asks.

"Quite well thank you," Evelyn replies, picking up the box and placing it on her bed. "Tea would be perfect and I will need you to do my hair in an hour."

"Very good." Juliet recognises her dismissal and leaves with a last concerned glance. Evelyn unties the red ribbon on the box and li s the lid. She unfolds the protective layer of paper to reveal an array of glittering jewels sewn onto a lace-trimmed corset. She li s out the spectacular corset and lets the heavy skirt flow free.

"Perfect." She murmurs.

An hour and a half later Evelyn puts down her cousin's powder and stares at her reflection, she has applied a light layer of rouge to her cheeks and lined her eyes with black. Her lips have been painted cherry red and stand out against her pale skin. Although the makeup is heavier than normal it still looks natural and e ortless. Her silvery blonde hair has been pinned in curls that have been twisted into a large bun on the top of her head while the rest hangs down in thick ringlets and splits down the two sides of her neck. A hairband made of gold in the shape of ivy has been pinned in front of the bun, like a small tiara.

She gets up from the vanity table to stand in front of the mirror. She braces herself against the frame and Juliet begins to pull on the ties of the new dress, she pulls them tighter and tighter until Evelyn can almost breathe before they are neatly tied in a bow.

Evelyn straightens up and gazes at the sparkling woman in front of her. The entire dress is made from dark champagne silk that catches all light and plays with it in glowing reflections. The neckline of the dress is square but draws your attention to the elegant line of her neck. Gold flowers cover the corset in sparkling swirls and the end of the sleeves appear to be dripping in gold diamonds. The skirt blooms out at the waist in a mass of shiny material edged with the same gold flowers as the corset.

"Thank you, Juliet," Evelyn says, slightly twirling to see the skirt glide smoothly with her.

"You look like something out of a book," Juliet says in awe. Evelyn lets a small smile come to her face at that comment as she has to agree. She looks like something out of a Shakespeare creation, a mysterious creature drenched in gold, a fairy to enchant, a queen to rule, a woman to seduce.

Juliet passes her a tiny pair of diamond earrings as her only jewellery. Once she has put them in, she slips on a pair of slippers that cannot be seen under the heavy skirt. A small spray of sweet perfume and Evelyn stands in front of the mirror, ready. She studies every inch of herself, it doesn't look like her, it doesn't feel like her but it is her. She stares at her face, a cold beauty stares back. A smile rises to her lips, for tonight, this dress is her protection, for tonight only.

"Gold is the colour of everything that will always matter." She murmurs to herself.

"Your friend is here," Juliet says so ly.

"Oh." Evelyn takes a sharp breath. "Thank you."

She turns away from her reflection and slowly walks out of her room leaving Juliet staring a er her. The house is as quiet as this morning, with no one around to stop her. She takes the stairs slowly, not wanting to trip but in truth, it is the apprehension that is making her hesitate. The front door to the house is open and the butler stands by it, holding a coat for her. She sees the carriage waiting for her and she knows it is too late to second guess herself. With one foot in front of the other, she confidently walks passed the butler ignoring the garment in his hand. A small footman helps her into the carriage a er an admiring look at her. A man sits opposite, dressed to the nines, money is practically wa ing from him.

"I wasn't expecting this." He says, "You look stunning."

Evelyn makes a small noise in the back of her throat but doesn't reply.

"I can't deny I was surprised when I received your message." He continues lightly.

"I need to see whether you were alive," She replies, smoothing out her skirt.

"I know you don't care about my life," Mathew gives her an amused glance, "Let's skip your manipulation of me and just tell me what you want."

"I need to play tonight," She says and when he doesn't answer she speaks again. "I'll give you 10%."

"I didn't think you were desperate." He says, intrigued.

"If I was desperate you wouldn't be who I'd go to." She says, Mathew mocks hurt with a hand on his heart.

Well?" Evelyn raises her eyebrows.

"20% and a kiss," Mathew says. Evelyn laughs at his daring.

"15 and I don't ruin your face for Jane." She counters.

"You are ruthless," He sighs and shakes his head like he is already regretting his decision. "You got so dressed up for the occasions how can I say no?" He o ers his hand but retracts it when she goes to shake. "This is the only time." He vows. "Use it wisely."

She meets his dark expression with a light smile and shakes his hand with a nod. Mathew grins and leans back, looking at her dress.

"Blackmoore is paying o on you, I never thought I would see Miss Evelyn Wright looking like society's golden girl again."

"I am no one's golden girl." She says quietly, the carriage begins to slow nowhere near Hardwick Manor. "Why are we stopping?" She asks as they pull up at a tall manor house.

Mathew ignores her question and gets out of the carriage but he shuts the door so she cannot follow. She shu les up to the window and peaks behind the curtain. She spies Mathew talking to an older couple. He then takes the hand of a young girl who is standing behind them and leads her back to his carriage. Evelyn moves back to her original seat as the girl is helped up by Mathew. The girl takes a seat opposite her and Mathew sits next to her. Her excitement is evident.

"Hello." The girl says, giddily "I am Jane Monroe."

"Evelyn Wright," Evelyn says smiling at the bright-eyed girl. She has light russet coloured hair that has been neatly curled around her face that is smattered with tiny freckles. She wears no makeup and a simple purple and white lace dress that does nothing for her slim stature. However, itis her charmingly innocent smile that shines the brightest and captivates.

"I know, Mathew has told me about you." She says happily, "I didn't know who you were first but I remember you came to my coming out ball."

"I did?" Evelyn tries to remember attending such an occasion out of the many she has attended.

"You wore the most beautiful cream dress with red and white roses, I was so jealous."

"Oh." Evelyn doesn't know how to respond. "Your dress is lovely tonight."

Jane shrugs definitely and entwines her hand with Mathew's. "My parent's don't approve of big dresses but Mathew has promised to buy me hundreds of gorgeous gowns when we are married."

Mathew kisses the top of her head, "You look wonderful in anything."

Jane giggles and wraps both her hands around his arm.

"He dotes on me." She tells Evelyn happily, "I just can't wait to be his wife."

"You make a sweet couple," Evelyn says, her eyes on Mathew.

"Thank you," He says, his eyes dart to hers and back to Jane.

The rest of the carriage ride involved Jane passionately telling Evelyn everything about her engagement and her plans when she is married."

It is obvious the way that Mathew stares at his fiancée as she chatters like an excited chipmunk, hat he is besotted.

"We are here!" Jane announces excitedly, pointing out of the window at Hardwick Manor. The tall building is wide and grand, the lights twinkle at them from inside and people are slowly walking into the entrance. The three companions step out, Jane's parents, who travelled in a carriage behind them, step forward and reclaim their daughter.

"I'll find you for a dance tonight," Mathew promises her and he kisses her hand

"It was lovely meeting you," Jane says to Evelyn who returns the courtesy and promises to call on her soon. The Monroe's whisk their daughter away and Evelyn and Mathew watch them walk inside to greet the host.

"Don't say a word." Mathew murmurs to her, gesturing for her to follow him.

"She's sweet." Evelyn chokes out, picking up her skirt so she can navigate the grass and rough stone more easily.

"She is." Mathew agrees, walking around the backside of the house to a small side door.

"You're di erent with her." She continues. Mathew whirls around and glares.

"That's what I meant, don't say stupid stu like that."

"Scared?" Evelyn taunts, folding her arms.

"What?" He bites out, not opening the door.

"You're afraid to admit that Miss Monroe's innocence and goodness has caused you to become a better person." She says.

"What are you on about?" He steps towards her.

"I've seen you around a lot of di erent women Mathew, you've never treated one like that," Evelyn says, not backing down. He lets out a frustrated grunt and kicks at a pile of earth, he takes out a key from his jacket and unlocks the side door without a word.

"The is game is in the library. Go up the first staircase and it's the first door." He snaps, "Here, remember 15%"

He hands her a pouch of coins, she takes it from him and smiles.

"Who's playing?" She asks, tucking the money into her skirts. He shrinks and hands her a special chip.

"I can't make it that easy for you." He says smugly, standing back to let her past.

She gives him a rueful grin, passes him but pauses to whisper in his ear.

"Loving her isn't a weakness."

She strides away before Mathew can say a word. She follows his directions and walks up the first staircase before she sees the door she catches sight of a butler in front of the door. Immediately she becomes the girl that is wearing that gold dress.

"Can I help you?" He asks her as she walks to the door.

"I am Mathew's guest." She says, letting her voice become higher and more feminine. She hands him the chip and he inspects it thoroughly but when he cannot fault it, he allows her to glide through.

The library is a smaller space than she is expecting, it is dark and only lit by a few candles on the walls. At one end of the room is the fireplace with a single seat by a circular table. Up against one of the windows is a large polished oak table with seven men sitting around on high backed chairs. The men all look up as she waltzes confidently towards them and takes the only vacant seat.

"You're Lord Mathew's guest?" One of the men asks, astonished.

"Yes," She says breathily.

"Mathew's has a stellar reputation, shame he's not playing tonight." Another one says.

Evelyn has to roll her eyes, that stellar reputatio is courtesy of her not him, he is a decent player, blackjack being his preferred game but he lacks the skill and accuracy of herself. She keeps her eyes down, feigning demure as they talk about him, it might be unusual for a person of her sex to be playing in these games but all that matters to these men is the money.

She scans her opponents through her lashes, the man next to her right she recognises as Lord Percy, a friend of Mathews, next to him is the oldest man, who she believes to be an ex magistrate of the crown court. Then there is the man that looks the youngest and as though he has just come straight from the country, or rather he is one of Mathew's players, set up to trap Lord's and their egos. Another Lord and two dukes who Evelyn has seen at a few of Mathew's parties.

"Would you like a drink?" The man on her le asks in an American accent. The question catches her o guard but it is the leap in her stomach and the flutter of heart that derails her act.

"You're American." She says without thinking. The man laughs a little and o ers her a charming smile that greatly complements his sharp features but it is his eyes that a ect her. They are deep pools of pale olive with flecks of brown and they draw her in.

"What gave it away? The accent?" He jests with disarming wonky smile. The joke snaps her out of her gazing and she quickly looks at the table.

"I am so sorry, please forgive me, that was rude." She says hastily, trying not to show how much he has a ected her.

"Nothing to forgive." He says kindly, he o ers his hand. "I am Lawrence Jordan."

She slips her hand into his and he presses a light kiss to her knuckle.

"Evelyn Wright."

"A pleasure." He says, "Now, that drink?"

"Whiskey, please." She says.

"Daring, I like it." He replies, he clicks his fingers and the butler places g glasses of whiskey in front of them.

"Shall we play, now that we are all acquainted." Lord Percy says, irritated. Evelyn blinks and turns her attention to the cards and chips in front of her, she cannot be distracted from her plan and there is no American with a sharp jawline and sinful eyes in her plan.

"Ladies choice."

