

Chapter 23

One and a half hours later and Evelyn leaves the room, her winnings tucked down her corset. It was surprisingly easy to collect the amount she needed with Mathew's 15% and a little bit extra for herself. Despite the game being entirely unnecessary, she found Lawrence Jordan's comments into her ear between games to be highly amusing and she found herself genuinely laughing for the first time in a long time.

She swings the bag on her wrist as she walks down the stairs, the ball is in full swing and people dance to the swelling music. She slips into the room through a small door and edges around the room looking for Mathew. She spots him talking to Jane in a corner and the sight almost makes a smile rise to her lips. It is true she doesn't really like the arrogant lord, but with Jane, she can see that the outside appearance fades away. She waves him over and he quickly leaves his betrothed and walks up to her. They stand side by side and pretend to watch the dancers as they talk out of the corners of their mouths.

"Finished already?" He asks.

"I am not one for time-wasting," Evelyn says, thrusting the heavy bag into his hand. His eyes widen as he takes hold of the full weight but he doesn't look at her.

"Have you taken your share?" He asks confused.

"Of course I have." She murmurs, "That's yours."

"Damn." He whistles, "You are a miracle."

Evelyn has to smirk at that, she knows he wishes he has her talent.

"Thank you for this." She says honestly. Mathew grunts in response.

"I expect an invite to your wedding," She whispers before slipping into the shadows. She decides that trying to escape this ball through the ballroom in this dress is going to be near impossible therefore she slips out of a side door and manages to find the main corridor that connects to the exit. She passes a few people who give her stunned looks but she keeps her head up high and doesn't deter when she sees her cousin standing with her brother at the main door to the ballroom. They see her and their faces drop to pure astonishment but she pays them no heed even though her heart begs her to. She is almost out of the house when a hand curls around her wrist and roughly pulls her back.

"What are you doing?" Blackmoore's black eyes roam over her face, if possible they darken even more when they take in the full effect of her appearance. She tries to wrench her arm free but his punishing grip is relentless.

"I am leaving." She says, not willing to deal with him. He frowns at her harsh tone.

"I thought we agreed not to draw attention to each other." He hisses, forcing her to the side of the emptying corridor.

"We never promised each other anything." She glares, she tosses her hair. "And wasn't it you who said that what's worse than drawing attention to yourself is being forgotten?"

"For the sake of both our reputations we need to be careful." He says.

"How can I care about my reputation when I am helping a member of the Diabolus est syndicate!" She spits the Latin in his face. Blackmoore freezes and steps back from her, letting her wrist drop to her side. He lets out a sigh and runs his hand over his face, he tries to study her face but she is expressionless, just waiting for him to speak.

"So this is your last bid for a legacy? Drown yourself in gold?" He asks, mirthlessly.

"If I wanted a legacy that bad I would just shoot someone." Evelyn bites back. He advances on her.

"Who told you?" He demands, "Who did you see?"

"Why does it matter? You make a game out of making wives stray, you ruin marriages!" She hisses.

"I am not a member." He says darkly.

"How can you have the audacity to deny...." Evelyn is in disbelief.

"I founded it." Blackmoore murmurs, so quietly that she almost missed it.

"What?" She gasps, taking a step backwards but her back hits the wall. He looks away from her, almost ashamed, almost.

"I got bored, being a man of leisure is dull when you have nothing that gives you that excitement, that rush of adrenaline." He says, "The idea has been around for decades, creating a competition out of making married women cheat has cropped up in many works of literature, so I put it into practice."

"Lady Tremontane was a mark!" She accuses, everything clicking into place.

"Of course she was." He says. "She's pretty."

"Why didn't you tell me?" She asks.

"Because no one from my club is going to kill me, it seemed irrelevant." He says carelessly. "And you are the only other person that knows about my club."

She scoos, folds her arms and puts her chin in the air.

"Don't act like your better than me." He hisses, "Unless I am mistaken that is money shoved down your corset, been gambling again?" He runs a finger over the slight protrusion in the material. She shoves his hand away.

"We are nothing alike." She hisses. He advances upon her until they are almost nose to nose.

"Keep lying to yourself, I dare you." He whispers sinfully. She shudders and uses both palms to shove him back.

"This is your dark secret then? This is your worst?" She asks.

"Miss Wright." A voice calls from behind her and her heart skips a beat. She turns slowly.

"Mr Jordan." She says. He hurries up to her looking incredibly dashing in his haste, Blackmoore steps closer to her and stands at her side.

"I've been looking for you." Mr Jordan says with a dapper smile.

"You have?" Evelyn says surprised and a little bit pleased. He looks from her to the statue like man at her side and his grin falters into polite interest.

"Oh, may I introduce Duke Blackmoore." She says, and then to the duke, "This is Mr Lawrence Jordan."

"From America." Mr Jordan says cheekily and she has to let out a little chuckle. The men shake hands, one more obviously happy about their introduction than the other.

"Were you going somewhere?" Mr Jordan asks, Evelyn quickly looks to the open door and nods.

"I am feeling tired."

"That is a pity," He says, looking honestly disappointed. "I won't keep you any longer then, I bid you goodnight and look forward to our next meeting."

He bows slowly then smartly turns on his heel and disappears into the crowd. Evelyn watches him go with a tiny grin on her face that vanishes when Blackmoore's furious eyes meet hers.

"Don't." She spits, then she marches away from him and into the night. She squints in the darkness but can see the clear outline of the stable by the side of the house. She needs a horse for the next part of her plan, however regrettable that may be. Her dress catches on the ground but she doesn't stop until she stands in front of the stable door. She tries to open it but it remains firmly shut. Crouching down she takes a pin from her hair and begins to wiggle the hair accessory in the lock.

She hears a rustling in the trees behind and she whips around. There's no one there. Only a tall oak tree and some grass, no living creature in sight. She rolls her eyes at herself and goes back to the lock. She feels it click and the padlock falls away, she stands up and goes to push the gate open.

"EVELYN GET DOWN!" Blackmoore bellows. She turns to see a figure stepping out behind the tree and aiming a pistol directly at her chest. She screams and drops to the floor as the stranger pulls the trigger. The bullet flies over her head as she shields it with her hands. It hits the wooden gate.

Evelyn waits to hear the next bullet that will surely be her death sentence but it never comes, she raises her head to see the duke brandishing a sword at the figure who no longer has a gun in their hand. Blackmoore uses his sword to unfoot the person and they go tumbling to the ground. He then kneels on the back of them and forces their hands behind their back. He raises his sword to deal a deadly blow.

"NO!" Evelyn screams and he pauses. She struggles to stand and then wobbles over to them. She kneels in front of her would-be attacker and puts her hand underneath their chin before forcing it upwards. In the fading light from the house, she can see that he is only a boy.

"Let him up." She says to Blackmoore who looks at her in alarm.

"He tried to kill you." He protests. "I will do no such thing."

"Someone is going to have heard that shot." She says irritated.

Blackmoore grumbles but pulls the boy to his feet and drags him into the shadows. He forces the boy up against the dark side of the tree. Evelyn creeps over the grass after them. She stands in front of the boy, looking him directly in the eye.

"What's your name?" She asks the boy.

He spits in her face. She grimaces and wipes it away but her face drops into an expression of icy determination.

"Let's try this again," She forces his chin up until it is obviously uncomfortable. "You just attempted to kill a duke as a witness. You might just be a boy but the sentence is still hanging. Now I happen to know that the bodies are given to the mortuary who have scientists that like to cut up said bodies and there have been reports of people who have arrived on their table still breathing...." She lets that sink in, under her arm the boy has turned white as fresh snow.

She smiles coldly, "Now we don't want to send you there but we will if you don't tell us what we want to know, starting with your name and why you tried to kill me."

The boy whimpers and his rough Scottish accent comes out feeble. "M...my na...m...me is Robert."

"Very good Robert and my other question?" She asks.

"I've got notin against you, some random man in the street offered me two guineas to kill someone for him, he was wearing proper posh clothes, he took me to this party, let me in the carriage and then came out and said to kill the women in the gold dress."

"What did this man look like?" Blackmoore asks.

"I couldn't really see, he was tall and wore a big hat." The boy starts to sob, "Please don't let them cut me open!"

Evelyn stands and gestures for the duke to get of the crying boy. The boy falls on the wet grass sobbing his little heart out.

"What if he tries to kill you again?" Blackmoore whispers to Evelyn, not trusting the child.

"I won't, I promise, I won't." Having heard the comment the boy throws himself on her feet and proceeds to beg. "I won't kill anyone!"

Blackmoore scoos in disgust and turns away from him.

"Here." Evelyn takes a coin out of her corset and puts it into his wobbling palm. "Now get out of here."

The boy takes a final frightened look at her and the duke before scampering to his feet and running away. Evelyn lets out a large sigh and staggers on her feet, the magnitude of the situation hitting her through the pounding in her ears. Blackmoore catches her shoulder and pulls her to him, she doesn't resist as he wraps both arms around her. She leans her head on his chest and closes her eyes. His criss jacket is cooling against her flushed cheeks.

"Thank you for saving my life." She whispers. He squeezes her tighter and rests his chin on her top of her head. His hand becomes her left shoulder and he freezes. He lets go of her and forces her to spin.

"What are you doing?" She asks as he runs a finger down her shoulder. Twisting her neck she sees a long scratch down her shoulder with tiny pinpricks of blood.

"I must have caught it on the gate." She says. She breathes in sharply as he carefully touches the bare skin, his eyes glued to the mark.

"I think you'll survive." He says wittily, "No need to bandage."

"Whatever you say." She retorts with a smile. She faces him and looks into his dark eyes, they are wearing an unreadable expression.

"I need to go somewhere." She says. "I have a plan..."

"I figured, I'll take you." He offers, "This party is a bore anyway."

"Have you even been inside?" She questions.

"I have a feeling." He shrugs, "Come on."

He wraps an arm around her waist and leads her to his carriage. The driver bows his head to both of them as they approach.

"Where to?" Blackmoore asks. Evelyn tilts her head, accepting that he is about to become an unforeseen addition to her plan.

"The Deer and Hound on Carpenter's Yard." She says. His eyes widen but he nods to the driver and helps her inside.