

Chapter 26

Evelyn spends the rest of the day with her aunt planning the move of her belongings and clothes to 104. Henrietta has cheered up from the morning and is actually helping Lucile to plan days out and events for the next week. She keeps a bright smile on her face which is putting particularly when she complements a confused Juliet on her hair. The whole house edges around the oddly happy girl, waiting for her to crack and revert back to being a brat but she doesn't, even at dinner when William shows up and snaps at her, she simply apologises and moves to her seat.

The family eat their way through a delicious meat and potato pie and the conversation is light and warm despite William only grunting in response when addressed. Evelyn can't quite believe her fortune in the current situation, she has a future to look forward to, a future without the stress of her cousin and brother. It may only be for a few months but it enough to keep a smile on her face.

"And then he asked me to dance again." Henrietta tells Lucile, "I couldn't quite believe it, I know it could be classed as improper but I couldn't say no."

"He is a very handsome gentleman is he not?" Lucile asks.

"Yes," Henrietta says emphatically. "He..."

"Excuse me, ma'am." Juliet appears in the doorway, "But there is a man that has been asked to deliver a letter directly to Mr Wright."

Everyone's eyes swing directly to William.

"He's insistent that he delivers it into his hand." She says, fidgeting on the spot.

Lucile looks nervous but she nods to bring him in.

Juliet curtsies and disappears to fetch the mysterious stranger. No one says a word, Evelyn grips the folds of her dress under the table to keep control of her calm exterior. She would never assume that any contact of her brothers would come simply as a courteous act.

The man that enters behind Juliet is dressed in a long black trench coat and his face is rough and rugged. He bows to everyone but says nothing. He strides over to William and produces a thick letter from the folds of his coat. He places the letter into William's shaking hand.

"With the Crown Courts best wishes to your friends and family." The man says, he waits for William to acknowledge him or the letter but he doesn't.

"Thank you," Lucile says a few minutes of awkward silence. The man gives another bow and then he turns on his heel and leaves. They hear the door open and then shut, Evelyn lets out a breath she didn't realise she had been holding in.

William stares at the letter in his hand but makes no move to open it. Around the table no one speaks, even Henrietta seems to understand that now is the time to be silent.

"Open it then darling," Lucile finally says. William shakes his head fervently.

"I can't," He whispers.

"Why not?" Evelyn asks harshly. She fears she knows what's stopping him. He glares at her and chucks the letter across the table, it lands in front of her.

"You open it." He says, fumes at her. She looks at him with an unreadable expression but she picks up the thick paper and turns it over. Juliet appears at her shoulder with a letter knife that Evelyn slides neatly across the top. She unfolds the letter and scans it. Her blood freezes in her veins and then rushes to her head. It's her turn for her hands to shake.

"You have been requested to become a supporting prosecutor on Lady Tremontane's murder trial." She chokes out. The table explodes in a multitude of exclamations.

"Are you sure?" William asks, standing up. "I thought I was being expelled!"

"What?" Lucile cries.

"Can we be in the trial?" Henrietta questions.

Evelyn stares at the words, written in black ink, it is irrefutable. The payment shocks her but it's what is written at the bottom that horrifies her. She drops the letter and jumps to her feet.

"Excuse me." She gasps before racing from the room. She pushes past the butler and pulls the door to the street open as her dinner threatens to make a reappearance. She staggers down the stairs, gripping the rail to keep herself from falling. Bile rises into her mouth and she retches several times. Acid travels from her unsettled stomach to the back of her throat and she spits it out. Tears stream down her face, she takes great heaving breathes to calm herself. She uses the rail to slide down into a sitting position on the bottom step. She leans her head forward between her knees, she stares at the concrete ground not really seeing.

"Evelyn?" Lucile calls from inside the house, she spots her through the open door. "Evelyn?" She walks down the steps and puts an arm around the girl. "Why are you out here?"

Evelyn grips her aunt's hand tightly and slowly sits back up. Lucile sits down next to her and is shocked to see the number of tears and the terror in her niece's face.

"What's wrong?" Lucile asks, brushing tears away and smoothing her hair back. Evelyn opens her mouth to speak but she can't find the words. She leans onto her aunt's shoulder and hugs her closer.

"There, there," Lucile says, a bit shocked at her niece's actions and sudden need for comfort. They sit like this for a few moments, not speaking, Evelyn hasn't felt this cared for since her mother was alive. She leans away from her aunt once she finds her voice.

"I am on the witness list for the prosecution." She says, the realisation settling in.

Lucile looks surprised but not worried, "That's nothing to be concerned about, there will be many people on that list, many people, that like you, saw nothing. They just want to know as much as they can. You know this from working with William." Lucile squeezes her hand, "I know talking in front of the court must seem scary but you are helping to put a dangerous and despicable man face justice by telling the truth."

Evelyn nods, and she hopes she is convincing. "Would you mind if I took the carriage to see a friend?"

"Of course." Lucile stands up too, "If you want to talk about this more though we can."

"I feel much better now, thank you." Evelyn smiles, "You are right, I have nothing to be scared of." Except for taking a trip to the gallows because I lied in court she finishes in her head. She gives her aunt a quick hug and then darts back inside and up the stairs. She rushes around the room taking books and chucking them into a small bag, she pulls on a pair of shoes and hurries back down the stairs. She takes the nearest coat and pulls it on while shouting goodbye to her aunt.

She hastens out of the door and luckily the carriage is already there, the driver is just adjusting the horses' harnesses. He bobs his hat her as she puts the bag inside first and he looks surprised when she tells him the address. It takes a few minutes for horses to be ready and Evelyn impatiently taps on the floor, waiting. Finally, the carriage pulls away from the house.

It seems to take all the time in the world to travel to Duke Blackmoore's house and when the familiar house appears Evelyn wastes no time and hops out before the carriage can even slow to a stop. She sprints up the front steps and bangs as hard as she can on the door, the bag swinging from her arm. She hits the door again when it doesn't open quick enough.

Claude opens it looking disgruntled but she spares him no explanation. She pushes past him and runs down the corridor. She gets to the study door, she tries the handle but it doesn't open. Frustrated she bangs her fists on the door and starts shouting.

"Blackmoore, open this door, this is an emergency!!" Her voice echoes around the space. "You better come out right now or a swear to."

The door opens and the duke stands there, shirtless, a smirk on his face, touselled wet hair and a devilish smoulder.

"I dare you to finish that sentence." He drawls. Evelyn blinks, lost for words, trying not to stare at his chest

"You aren't wearing a shirt." She says. He looks down at his bare chest and then back at her pink cheeks.

"Would you look at that." He smiles, enjoying her embarrassment.

"No." She cries, smacking her palm to her forehead. "Be quiet."

"Evelyn..." He begins to laugh but she cuts him off.

"Listen to me" She yells, he frowns at her but she doesn't care, "My brother has been requested to be a supporting prosecutor on Phillipa's murder." She says. "There was no mention of the defendant but...."

"What?" He looks confused, "Does this mean they have a case?"

"This means someone is going to be arrested in the next few hours." She says, "And I am going to have to testify against them, I am on the witness list."

"What?" He snaps looking furious and bewildered in equal measure.

"It was in the letter my brother received, I am on the list."

"I thought you said your testimony would mean nothing?" He asks.

"In defence: yes. In prosecution? You could but a whore on the stand and everyone would take it as gods law!" She says. "They want to prosecute that is what is so iniquitous about this legal system, they want you to be guilty."

He runs his hand down his face. "How long do you think I have?" He asks.

"Not long at all, I would say." A stern voice calls. They whip around to see a group of men standing with a peeved Claude. The one that spoke steps forward. His uniform is neatly pressed and his beard is trimmed along the curved line of his jaw, his nose looks like it has been broken once or twice by the way it sticks out. His voice is gravely and holds an authoritative undertone.

"I am Detective Rawson, lead on the Tremontane murder."

Blackmoore smiles politely, he steps around Evelyn. "If you will allow me the decency to put on a shirt before you arrest me I would be most grateful."

"What?! No!" Evelyn grabs the back of his arm and tries to pull him back. "You aren't guilty."

Blackmoore turns around and prizes her hand off him. "It's alright, I don't mind. I have committed a multitude of sins that I deserve to pay for."

"What?" She panics, "You can't."

"My only request is that I can put on a shirt," Blackmoore tells Rawson but the detective shakes his head.

"That won't be necessary Duke Blackmoore." He clicks his fingers and two of his men stride towards them, "I am here to arrest Miss Wright."

"I beg your pardon?" Evelyn says shocked. The two men shove past Blackmoore who is frozen in shock and advance on her as she backs up. They seize an arm each roughly, she struggles, hitting them with her bag but they easily overpower her. She kicks at them but they drag her forward.

"This is ridiculous." Blackmoore cries. "Let her go."

"I am afraid there is countless evidence on my desk that says that Miss Wright here, shot Phillipa Tremontane in cold blood and for that, she will hang." Rawson says simply.

Blackmoore looks around in wild panic realising they are actually going to take her away. Rawson bows to him, Evelyn continues to struggle but their hold is brutal. The duke turns to leave and the men holding her move to follow him. The duke acts without thinking, he punches the man nearest him as hard as he can. His fist makes a sickening crunch as it collides with the man's jaw, the man staggers to the side and falls to the floor clutching his face. His friend releases Evelyn's arm to attack Blackmoore but he gets a violent kick in the stomach before he can even raise his fists, he goes sprawling backwards into the wall. Rawson spins around when he hears the cries of his men, spotting his men on the floor he starts yelling at the remaining men.

Evelyn has shrunk herself against the wall to avoid the blows, she shoots the duke a frightened look as he grabs her arm and practically throws her into the study. She stumbles through the doorway and into a table. She falls over the little circular table and onto the carpet with a winded huff. Blackmoore scrambles in a few seconds and slams the door on the approaching men. He keeps his weight against the wood as the men try to force it open. Evelyn crawls to her knees, holding her ribs, she meets his eyes and he nods to the lock.

"Key, now." He grunts. Evelyn scrambles forwards and turns the gold key in the lock. He reaches up to the top of the door and slides across the two bolts. The men on the other side still try to break the solid wooden door but to no avail. Blackmoore's panting slows down as he slides down the door into a sitting position. Evelyn shuffles along the carpet to sit next to him.

"OPEN THIS DOOR NOW!" Rawson bellows but it doesn't seem to be directed at the two people locked in the room.

"I am sorry sir." Claude's calm voice replies, "But I don't have a key to that room, the duke is a very private person..."

"A very private person...I don't think you understand servant...." Rawson sneers, "The woman is a murderer and whore, who your master has idiotically decided to aid."

Evelyn opens her mouth in dismay and protest but Blackmoore covers it in time to hear Claude's reply.

"I know that Miss Wright is not capable of such heinous actions nor stupid enough to commit them, however, what you need to understand Detective Rawson is that I do not have a key to this room and therefore cannot open it."

Rawson groans and there's the sound of wall meeting hand.

"And furthermore," Claude continues, "If there was a spare key I would never give it to supposed officers of the law that treat their betters as such."

There is silence. Evelyn and Blackmoore hold their breath, there is the sound of footsteps nearing the door.

"I want you to know that I will find you, Miss Wright." Rawson's voice whispers through the lock, deadly quiet. "And you will swing from the noose before the first flower of spring blooms."