Chapter 33

Blackmoore leaves 104 feeling a little lighter than when he went in. He mounts his horse and trots on towards the centre of town. On his way he has many run-ins with lords and ladies, who stop to insist that they never thought he was a murderer and how sorry they are that it has affected his life. They even manage to turn the subject to new business ventures and dinner invitations. He bares the conversations with gritted teeth, it amazes him how much people change when there's something to be gained.

Town is quiet and there seem to be fewer people out and about in the heart of the city. Fancying a stretch his legs he stops by Charing Cross and dismounts. He leads his horse to the side of the road and begins to walk down the pavement. The horse patiently trots beside him. As he nears his destination, he spots a young boy in ragged clothes and bare feet, loitering by the entrance to a dark alley. The lad notices the duke and shrinks back into the shadows as he gets closer.

"Boy, I'll give you a sixpence if you hold my horse." Blackmoore calls. The boy hesitates but then jumps at the chance of earning money and eagerly dashes forward. He takes the reins from Blackmoore and stands perfectly straight and still.

"I'll look after him good mister," The boy promises.

"I am going to the bank around the corner," Blackmoore says, "I won't be more than 10 minutes."

The boy gives him a salute and he chuckles. Blackmoore marches down the street, his cane tapping the pavement as he walks. Looking back before he turns the corner, he sees the lad stroking the horse's neck and whispering into his ear.

The duke walks down the street lined with popular stores selling expensive wares until he reaches a small bank set apart from the main square. The front of the store blends into its dull surroundings but when you walk through the little green door you are greeted with the utmost decadence. Walls made of white marble sparkle as they reflect the shiny gold edging of solid pine desks that are positioned in the entrance. Large candelabras hang from the ceiling and gold gates, guarded by two burly men, lead to the vault room. Two servers, in matching green suits, sit behind their desks but they stand as soon as Blackmoore enters. He is immediately greeted by the bank's manager who comes running over from behind a larger desk to the side. The manager is a small man with slicked dark hair and a well-oiled moustache, he wears the same green suit but a black pin on the left side of his chest signifies his higher position and a hoop of keys jangles at his waist. He clutches at a clipboard.

"Good morning Duke Blackmoore, how may I be of assistance today?" He asks, the moustache twitching.

"I need to take something out of vault 17," Blackmoore says. The manager nods, looking down at the clipboard. "I can see that the late Dowagers Duchess Blackmoore's vault hasn't been opened since her death."

"That is correct," Blackmoore says.

The manager scans across his papers, "As you have not inherited by direct succession there are some papers to sign." He gestures to a nearby assistant who scurries forward with a thick wad of documents.

Blackmoore eyes the thick documents with distaste, he doesn't have time for this.

"How about you sort this paperwork out and take an extra 10% on your bill for something to make the wife smile?" He says with a convincing smile, looking at the ring on the manager's hand.

"You are......very kind, your grace." The manager says faltering at the generosity, he produces a pen from his jacket, "If you could sign here and then follow me."

Blackmoore quickly scribbles his signature and then follows the man through the gates, past the guards and into the back where they walk down a corridor of square vaults built into the wall. They stop at number 17 and the manager takes a key from the hoop at his belt and unlocks the door. The heavy iron door swings open to reveal heavy necklaces, giant pearls and glittering jewels.

Blackmoore reaches in and takes a small black velvet box from the back, he tucks it into his suit pocket. He pauses but then takes another velvet box, red this time.

"That's it." He says to the manager. "Thank you."

The manager nods his head and relocks the vault. Blackmoore walks back through the bank and says goodbye to the manger before heading back into the street. Outside he takes a deep breath of fresh air and smiles. He walks back the way he came, a new spring in his step. The boy is still waiting with his horse as he rounds the corner.

"Finished mister?" The boy asks handing the reins over.

"For today." Blackmoore takes a coin out of his pockets and tosses it to the child. "For your services, buy yourself some new clothes and food."

He climbs onto his horse and tips his hat to the boy before trotting off. The boy stares at the duke in amazement as he leaves, a half-crown in his dirty hand.

Blackmoore arrives home around lunchtime after taking the long road back to give himself time to think. When he enters his house, he immediately notices an unfamiliar coat hung on the coat stand and a top hat and scarf placed on the side table. The house is quiet, and Claude isn't to be seen. He moves further into the house, his cane held up, ready to strike. He edges inch by inch towards his study, ears intently listening for any sound.

"What are you doing?"

Blackmoore whips around, heart racing, cane in the air, to see Jasper appearing from around the corner, a cup of tea in his hand.

"Hello..." Blackmoore says slowly, lowering his stick.

"You look ridiculous, did you think I had broken in?" Jasper walks over to the sitting area by the window and perches himself on the small chaise lounge.

"I don't know what I thought." Blackmoore leans his cane against the wall and removes his hat and shoes, his elated heart rate hasn't depleted

"I received a message that you would be visiting me so I thought I would save you the trouble."

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long," Blackmoore says taking a seat opposite his guest and crossing his legs. "I wouldn't have minded the journey."

Jasper sighs, "Don't breathe a word of this, I love my wife, but I can't seem to do anything right at the moment. I fancied a break from the house, this seemed a good excuse as any."

"I see," Blackmoore reaches for the bell that sits on the wooden tea table and he rings it several times. "More tea?"

"Please," Jasper says setting down his empty cup in front of him. "So, what is it you wish to discuss?"

Blackmoore puts the tips of his fingers together and leans forward, "I am clutching at leads here and I have no evidence or proof of anything. However, I was wondering what you know of the gentleman named Lawrence Jordan?"

"My wife is the best person for this type of inquiry," Jasper says frowning.

"I know she has extensive knowledge of the people in London, but you are interested in trade..."

"As a hobby, nothing more," Jasper interrupts.

"Still. All I know is that he is an American and works in trade." Blackmoore says, "Have you heard anything worth knowing?"

Jasper crosses his legs and taps his thigh as he thinks. Claude appears with a tray of tea; he puts it on the table and begins to pour it into floral china cups.

"From what I have heard he is a prominent figure in expanding trade between England and America, he is a hard worker, and everyone speaks highly of him," Jasper says accepting a cup from Claude. "I am afraid Jordan is normal and boring."

"I was afraid you'd say." Blackmoore says, frustrated, "That's all everyone can say about him."

"Jordan sir?" Claude speaks suddenly, pausing from adding sugar to the tea, "Not Lawrence Jordan?"

Both gentleman frown at the butler.

"Yes, Lawrence Jordan." Blackmoore says, curious, "You know him?"

Claude nods, folding his hands behind his back. "He visited the house when you were out, about a month ago. He was looking for your father, he needs investors for his port, I quickly explained you were the wrong Blackmoore," Claude explains. "Many people make that mistake, so I thought nothing of it."

"And that was it?" Blackmoore asks. Claude hands him his tea and clears up Jasper's old cup. "He never returned?"

Claude picks up the tea tray as he thinks, "He never returned, although I have heard a rumour that there was a recent flirtation with a maid here, but nothing came of it."

"See! I knew it! He has deceived Evelyn with his charm!" Blackmoore cries, jumping to his feet, tea sloshing out of his cup and onto the carpet. "He's a good for nothing scoundrel!"

"This man is acquainted with Evelyn?" Jasper questions, looking unimpressed at his friend's antics.

Blackmoore grimaces, "You may go, Claude, thank you." He says to the butler. Claude bows and retreats. Blackmoore turns to Jasper.

"Evelyn spoke to Jordan once to my knowledge but they seemed too friendly for it to be the first encounter."

"And you naturally assumed that he is a dishonourable man?" Jasper says, eyebrows raised.

"No, but I simply want to ensure that I've looked at every possible lead." Blackmoore's voice turns defensive, "I have to look into everyone."

"Have you looked at me?" Jasper grins, drinking his tea.

"Why? Do you have something to confess?" Blackmore says wryly.

"Not today." Jasper chuckles, "Eliza would kill me."

"I am not surprised."

"Speaking of my wife, are you coming to the ball tomorrow?" Jasper asks. "It is "of paramount importance" that we go apparently." He rolls his eyes as he quotes Eliza.

"What ball?" Blackmoore scratches his chin.

"Lady Edith's, you should come, it might cheer you up a bit." Jasper suggests, "It's a masked ball. A night of dancing and ridiculousness may stop you from pining for Evelyn."

Blackmoore glares at him.

"Or," Jasper says, "You could just bring her back."

"Would you bring Eliza back if it were her?" Blackmoore snaps. When the other man doesn't reply, he crosses his arms. "That what I thought."

"All that I am asking is that you be reasonable," Jasper says, drinking the last of his tea and setting it down.

"I appreciate your advice in this time," Blackmoore admits begrudgingly. Jasper waves his hand.

"Think nothing of it, I don't want you dead." He stands. "I should go, Eliza will be wondering where I have escaped too."

Blackmoore nods, rising to his feet. "Till tomorrow." He holds out his hand.

"Till tomorrow then," Jasper says shaking his hand. He collects his coat, scarf and hat, he puts them on before opening the front door and leaving with a tip of his hat. Blackmoore shuts the front door and groans. His head feels heavy and full of nothingness as though he has been drinking all day. He shakes his head trying to clear it.

"Can I get you anything?" Claude appears, a concerned expression on his face.

Blackmoore raises a hand to the boxes in his jacket, he feels their weight in the pocket. He shakes his head and disappears into the study, locking the door behind him.

He spends the day locked away, he doesn't eat and doesn't make his way up to bed until a good twenty minutes past midnight. Claude watches him sorrowfully climb the stairs and disappear into his bedroom. The butler has never seen his master like this, and it breaks his heart to see the man he knows become nothing more than a shadow of who he is.

~

Evelyn sits in the corner of the town hall, a drink in her hand, watching Lawrence dance around the middle of the room with Marcy Davies. Her foot taps in time to the music and she hums along to the tune under her breath. The song ends and she politely claps along with everyone else as the dancers retake their seats. Lawrence approaches with an out of breath grin on his face, he collapses into the chair next to her.

"Tired?" She asks, amused.

"Exhausted." He replies, panting.

"Seven consecutive dances is impressive. Here." She passes him her wine, "Drink, you'll feel better."

"Thank you," He swallows the wine quickly and turns to her, "I hope I'll dance the next one with you."

She smiles graciously, "Have a rest first, I can't have you fainting on me."

The band strike up the introduction to a new tune and she watches the crowd begin to disperse and partners gather on the floor. Suddenly a girl a bit younger than herself is standing in front of them. She is blushing and her hands fidget at her sides.

"Hello." She addresses Lawrence, batting her eyelashes.

"Hello," Lawrence replies.

"I was wondering if you would like to dance?" She says hopefully, biting her bottom lip.

Lawrence looks between her and Evelyn but neither say anything.

"Do you mind?" He asks Evelyn.

"No, I don't." She says, smiling at the girl. "Have fun."

Lawrence stands up and takes the girl's hand leading her towards the other couples. Evelyn watches them dance around the room and the pure delight on the girl's face makes her feel suddenly very hollow.

As the clock strikes 11 Evelyn and her companion, who danced almost every dance, walk out of the town hall.

"I am pleased to say that I can report to my friends across the sea that an English country dance is about the most enjoyable thing I have ever had the pleasure of attending," Lawrence says as they start the walk back to the house.

"I am glad you enjoyed it so, I felt bad for you when all those girls asked you to dance." She smiles at him, "You were such a good sport to dance with them all."

"They were delightful individuals; I loved each dance." He replies as they walk past the bakery. The night has truly settled, and the stars shine bright in the velvety sky. Evelyn pulls her coat around her shoulders although the fresh air is cooling as it kisses her flushed skin.

"My feet really hurt now!" Lawrence says, laughing at himself, "I don't know how I shall ride!"

Evelyn smiles but it doesn't quite reach her eyes, luckily, he doesn't notice, and he talks all the way back to the house with her only adding a few words here and there.

When they reach the house, Lawrence stops and looks up. "It's so peaceful here, I could stay here forever."

She looks up at the sky too, "Yes, it is calming, it's beautiful."

He looks down at her, "Yes, it is."

She looks up at him, and blinking, realises how close they have become, their noses are almost touching. One small movement and their lips would touch. She stares into his eyes and waits for the spark to ignite, but it never comes.

He closes his eyes and moves forward. Immediately she steps back until there are at least three meters between them. She panics.

"If you like the country you should stay....in the country, not here necessarily but I hear that Sussex is nice." She waffles, "It's closer to your port too, or the seaside, everyone likes the sea...I think." She clears her throat uncomfortably, "I don't know what just happened."

"I don't know either." He says, scratching his head. She laughs uncomfortably and fidgets. Her mind is screaming at her to get away.

"I've had such a lovely night, it's a shame I have to leave tomorrow." He says, "I never met someone like you."

"Tomorrow?" Evelyn repeats, "You're going home?"

"For at least a month, I have to, people rely on me." He says, his face is heartbreakingly sad, "This was never meant to be more than a business trip."

She shakes her head slightly, trying to clear the jumble of thoughts and emotions. "No, but of course." She says, "You have a duty and I respect that."

"I should leave now," Lawrence says after a moment of silence.

"Now?" Evelyn asks, "It's late.

"It's for the best." He assures, his face in shadow.

"Right." She nods. She moves past him and walks to the front door. When she pushes it open, she finds that Lucy is waiting just past the stairs, her face full of curiosity.

"Would you fetch Mr Jordan's belongings? He has to be leaving." Evelyn requests, folding her hands in front of her.

"Of course Miss." Lucy curtseys and scurries up the stairs towards the guest bedroom. Evelyn and Lawrence wait in silence for the cook to return, neither speaks nor makes any effort to. When Lucy reappears, Lawrence moves forward to the doorway and takes his bag off her with quiet thank you.

"Your horse is in the stable, he has been fed and watered," Lucy says, glancing between him and her mistress. He nods his gratitude.

He tightens the straps and looks at Evelyn's impassive face.

"Well goodbye." She begins to shut the door.

"Will you be here when I return?" He asks, his eyes, sorrowful. The door stops, half-closed. Her pale face is illuminated by the glow of the moon, she tilts her head, thinking. She sighs.

"Have a safe journey Mr Jordan."

She shuts the door with a click.

Continue reading next part