

Chapter 34

Evelyn sinks to the floor on the other side of the door and hugs her knees. The hollow feeling is still present in her stomach, it seems to be clinging to every part of her being and crushing it. She doesn't speak as she tries to process what has just happened. Her mind is telling her she should be sad that Lawrence is going but her heart is bleeding for another.

"Where is he going?" Lucy asks, crouching down to look at her mistress's face, when she meets Evelyn's eyes, she is surprised to see tears sparkling in their depths.

"He's going home." Evelyn smiles, "For a month."

"He'll be back, I know he will," Lucy reassures, "He adores you."

"Oh yes, most likely." Evelyn almost laughs. Lucy sits onto her knees and edges closer.

"If you know that then why are you upset that he's going?"

"I am not upset about him," Evelyn admits, a small sob escaping.

"But he just left..." Lucy says, confused. "I thought you liked him?"

"I do like him, he's a lovely person but he's not for me," Evelyn says, taking deep breaths to stop the tears, "I am sad he's going home but I am not upset, he has a duty to his family."

"But...how? What? He's handsome, charming, foreign and interesting! He's perfect!" Lucy cries a bit too loudly.

"Shh!" Evelyn whispers, placing a finger to her lips. "True, he is a good friend, but I know he's not mine,"

Lucy gapes at her, struggling to say a word.

Evelyn wipes her tears away. "Tonight, when I was watching the village girls dance with him, I saw undeniable happiness on their faces. My undeniable happiness is not here, or with him." She explains, "Even if I wanted him it is so obvious, he is not to be with me. I tried to make him something I wanted but he is not what I want."

Lucy nods, finally understanding, "Do you know who you want?" She asks tentatively.

Evelyn's heart breaks a little as she thinks about the duke, living his life in London without her.

"I am not sure. He makes me not perfect...and I love it," She says quietly, more to herself than anyone else.

"Could he be your undeniable happiness?" Lucy wonders, hope in her eyes.

"I don't know," Evelyn says honestly, "But I want to be his."

"It sounds like you are rather sure of your feelings," Lucy says.

"I think I could be 100% sure of my feelings and still not act upon them," Evelyn says, "But regardless Lawrence reminded me that I have a duty to my family and running away from feelings isn't a justified reason to abandon them." Being wanted for murder is she adds in her head. "I need to go back to London as soon as possible."

"Of course, I can arrange a carriage for 8 am. Shall I send a letter to London, so they know you are coming?" Lucy asks, getting to her feet.

"No," Evelyn says quickly, "And with the carriage, nothing too expensive, a basic one will do."

"Whatever you wish miss," Lucy says, "I'll wake you for breakfast."

"You are an angel," Evelyn says as she stands and hugs the cook. Lucy pats her cheek affectionately and then disappears down the servants' entrance.

Evelyn looks around the entranceway, the prospect that this time tomorrow she'll be in London is terrifying to her but the idea of seeing her family and Blackmoore again overrides the fear in her throat. The risk has suddenly become worth it. She slowly makes her way up to her bedroom, taking in every inch of the house, she has a strange feeling she won't be coming back here again.

After 7 hours of restless sleep, Evelyn dresses and has a light spot of breakfast. She has no need to pack clothes so when the clock chimes 8 am, she pulls on a coat and climbs into the carriage that waits outside her house. It is quite shabby and one of the wheels looks close to breaking however it is perfect to keep out of sight in.

As the horses pull the carriage away from the house Evelyn turns around to see Lucy and Lydia waving from the front door, she waves back until they are no more than dots in the background. She settles into the leather seats and rests her hands on her lap. Her heart pounds in her chest, fear and tension warp around her throat and her hands start shaking. She takes a deep shuddering breath.

"I can do this."

Evelyn watches the countryside go by for the first few hours until, despite the stiffness in her neck, she falls asleep, her head resting against the window. She remains asleep for a few hours until the carriage jolts her across the seats as it hits a particularly rough patch in the road. She picks herself up from the floor and has a peak out of the window. The sun is shining brightly in the pale sky and the fields they pass are buzzing with the promise of an early spring.

Evelyn opens the curtains wide and lets the sun pour onto her face. Despite her nap, she feels like she hasn't slept in weeks so the sun on her face is a welcome warmth. The book she has brought from the house lies on the opposite seat, she picks up the worn novel and starts to read. The simple pages of the romantic novel wash over her and she becomes absorbed in the trials of the heroine.

The carriage makes no stops except to change horses and to have lunch, but Evelyn remains inside the carriage for this rest, with all the curtains tightly shut. When the driver asks her if she is in need of anything she manages to squeak out a reply and he leaves her alone. She tries to read her book as their journey continues but the nearer she gets to London the tenser her body becomes. She rereads the same paragraph three times before giving it up.

Ten minutes after they pass the city's boundaries, she starts to hear the familiar sounds of metal, machinery and working people. The noise gets louder and more intense until her head is full of the heavy working sounds of London.

She risks a peek through the curtain, but no one bats an eye at the rickety old carriage. This reassures her but does nothing to calm her racing heart. She starts to feel faint as they cross familiar roads and trundle past her favourite shops. She recognises more and more people the further in and her hands grip tightly on the fabric of her dress. She raises a hand to her chest and tries to take deep breaths, but they catch in her throat.

When the carriage starts down the very familiar street and 104 is in sight Evelyn puts her head between her knees to stop herself from throwing up. Throughout the entire journey she thought she would be prepared to step out of the carriage and face the consequences, but as the carriage stops outside the house, she feels more afraid than ever before. The driver jumps down and opens the door.

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Blackmoore wakes later up later in the day than expected. The sun that streams through his window suggests that it is vastly approaching midday. He rolls over in bed, face in pillow and groans. The smell of strong drink is in the air. He hasn't touched a glass since Jasper's first visit but last night was too tempting and instead of drinking, he ended up throwing all the liquor stored in his room against the wall. Dark stains are covering large areas of the wallpaper and many shards of glass lie on the floor. He feels slight lightheaded and his stomach rumbles with hunger, but he lies there, unmoving, in a pair of old trousers, a blanket covering his bare torso, face squashed by the pillow.

There is a sharp knock on the door.

"Not now," Blackmoore calls, his voice muffled. The person outside knocks again.

He groans into the pillow before he turns his head to the side facing the door and clearly yells, "Go away."

There's a pause and then the knock repeats.

"My word!" Blackmoore throws the coverlet and stalks to the door, he yanks it open and glares at the person on the other side. A young maid stands there, trembling, a freshly pressed dark suit in her hands.

"What?" He bites out. She looks up his bare chest and into his face, she visible pales at his fuming expression.

"I've brought you your clothes for tonight," She murmurs, "Should I...?" She looks into the room and at the mess of whiskey and brandy on the wall and floor. An alarmed look crosses her face and she takes a tiny step back.

"Place them in the next room, this one needs to be cleaned up." He says more softly, feeling bad, "I am sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

She half-smiles as she bows a small curtsy and turns to go into the next room. Blackmoore goes to close the door but stops when she pauses, a strange look in her eye. She looks at him as though she has something to say but remains silent.

"Is there anything else?" He asks. She looks around the corridor as though she is terrified at his question and expecting it to attack her.

"I don't want to be fired, sir," She whispers her bottom lip wobbling. He frowns at her reply and steps out of his room. He crosses over to her, trying not to intimidate her.

"Why would you be fired?" He asks.

"Because I've done a bad thing," She says, her eyes filling with tears and she begins to shake.

"Come now," He says, feeling awkward, "We've all done bad things."

At his words, the maid completely breaks down and falls to the floor sobbing. She drops his suit and covers her face with her hands. Blackmoore stands over her, not sure what to do. He looks around to see if there is anyone else about, but the corridor is deserted. Sighing, he drops to her level and balances on the back of his heels. He reaches forward and peels her hands from her eyes so he can look into them.

"Take a deep breath," He says, keeping his voice low and calm. She hiccups a few times but then copies him as he breaths in deeply. Once he is sure she has calmed he addresses her in a light tone.

"Now what is your name?"

"Agnes," She says, smiling.

"Agnes," The duke repeats, "What a pretty name."

She weakly smiles at him, and he takes that as a sign that she is in control.

"Now Agnes, tell me what has happened."

She slowly nods, shifting her position on the floor. She reaches into her apron. Blackmoore's blood turns to ice in his veins when he sees her remove a pistol from her pocket. The markings on the handle are as clear as day, there is no mistaking that this pistol belonged his grandfather.

"Where did you get this?" His voice is deadly quiet, he snatches it from her and turns it over in his hands. "This is mine."

"I know," The maid cries. "I am sorry sir."

"Why do you have it?" He asks, standing up to his full height and towering over her. "How do you have this?" He can't keep the harsh edge out of his voice as his anger and frustration, combined with confusion, threatens to boil over.

"He gave it to me, he asked me to look after it, but I didn't know it was yours!" She trembles and falls onto his feet, grabbing at his trousers, grovelling. "I swear I didn't know it was yours!"

Disgusted Blackmoore lightly nudges her on him, he crosses down and pins her with a furious stare. "That doesn't explain how it came into your possession. I am presuming he is a certain charming American?"

She shakes, red-faced and blotchy. "He was English gentleman sir."

"You are sure?" He asks, "It is vital you are sure."

"There's no doubt in my mind," She says, still crying.

"Alright I believe you, but how did this pistol leave my study?" He asks.

"I...Claude lets me in to clean it. This man appeared, he was leaving for you. I said that you were out but that he could leave a card, he didn't like that. He asked to see whoever oversaw the house, I tried to make him wait in the front parlour, but he was really sweet and charming and then he...he kissed me!"

Blackmoore frowns at this. "He kissed you?"

"Yes...yes." She stutters, "By the time I found Claude the man had gone! Then a few days later I was doing a shop and he appeared out of nowhere and forced the pistol into my basket. He said that if I didn't take it, he'd tell everyone I forced myself on him and I'd be hung! I was so scared, so I hid it."

Blackmoore says nothing, trying to piece together her story with his.

"I couldn't keep it to myself any longer, I know I've been stupid, but I can't lose my job, sir! I'll do anything," She pleads from her knees.

Blackmoore considers the desperate weeping girl before him. Her story complicates everything, even if she is lying.

"Go downstairs, iron my suit again, draw me a bath and clean my room," He orders, emotionless.

She nods, drying her face and scrambles to her feet. She picks up his crumpled suit and hurries towards the stairs.

"You won't lose your job," He calls after a thought, "You will work for free for a week, a job that it will go back to how it was. Let this be your only warning, any other indiscretions and I won't hesitate to throw you onto the street." He tilts his head. "Am I clear?"

"Yes sir, thank you, sir," She looks like she is about to start crying again. He dismisses her with a wave of his hand. Blackmoore goes back into his room and pulls on a dressing gown and slippers before making his way downstairs. He runs into Claude on the bottom step.

"Sir?" Claude bows, "I was about to bring you tea." He holds up the teapot.

"No time, I need the book of all my father's investors," Blackmoore instructs, "I think our killer is hiding in there."