

Chapter 6

At five past ten, William comes staggering down the stairs, scru illy dressed but thankfully not smelling of stale liquor. In the time it has taken for him to get ready Lucile has called the carriage and her butler now waits at the door. Henrietta has also managed to sigh dramatically more times than the number of spiral curls on her spiteful head and decide to wear white gloves rather than yellow.

"Finally." She snaps shut the powder compact and marches to the door. The butler opens it and she waltzes down the steps to the open carriage. Lucile follows but Evelyn hangs back so she can walk with her brother.

"We have been here one day and you have already become acquainted with our aunt's whiskey cabinet." She murmurs disapprovingly as they walk down the steps into the busy London street.

"Oh we became more than acquainted." William flashes a bad boy smile before sliding into the carriage. Evelyn accepts a hand from the footman and moves in a er him. Lucile's carriage is bigger than her father's and the four companions can comfortably sit inside without jostling someone every time they move. Evelyn regretfully finds herself sitting next to her cousin as Henrietta's skirt bulges out and provides Evelyn with little leg room. The door is pushed shut and the horses jump into a trot.

"Madame Olive's is where all the young girls about town get their dresses from." Lucile says, excitedly. "I cannot remember the last time I went there."

"How long does it take to get there?" William asks, shielding his eyes from the sun the pours in through the thin curtains. He might be clean and dressed but there is no mistaking the dark bags under his eyes and the fact he is cradling his head.

"About half an hour but we will drop o at Sir Jackson's on the way so I estimate we will be there about a quarter to 11." She replies.

"What is this Jackson like?" Evelyn asks, intrigued, having not heard of him before.

"He's a nice sweet sort of boy, bless his little heart," Lucile says fondly.

"Great," William mutters, disappointed. Evelyn kicks him so ly, he looks at her questioningly.

"He sounds like a nice man." She says pointedly. He forces a fake smile and nods.

"Indeed," Lucile says, unaware of the silent communication between the siblings.

"I think I need five party dresses and seven-day dresses," Henrietta says, bored of discussion this irrelevant stranger.

"What about the new dresses you had made at home?" Evelyn asks, aware that their local dressmakers recently fulfilled an extensive order that her cousin has not worn every item of yet.

"You can have them," Henrietta says, she thinks for a moment, "And two riding habits."

"You can't even ride," William says frustrated, "You refuse to go near horses."

"But those habits will really show o my waist and figure." She says, fluttering her eyelashes.

William opens his mouth to speak but the carriage stops in front of a big house with golden windows and bright white stone. The footman opens the door and pulls the steps down.

"Sir Jackson's residence." He says, not looking at anyone. The travellers lean forward to take a better look at the house. It's a pleasant type of house with marble steps and wide gaping windows.

"We shall call on the way back but I am sure Sir Jackson will lend you transport if you need it." Lucile says.

William shoots an unimpressed look at his sister before clambering down. The footman li s up the steps and he shuts the door on the three women. Evelyn catches sight of the door of the house opening and William walking inside before the carriage pulls them away.

"Now it's just us girls," Lucile says ardently. "I do so love girl day outs."

The carriage pulls up in front of the dress shop half an hour later and Henrietta eagerly steps out of the carriage and rushes up to the window of the shop. Nestled in the middle of the street the shop doesn't seem to be that big but it has a neatly painted sign and vibrant window displays.

Evelyn steps down into the bustling London street and many dormant feelings come hurtling back. The smell of the city, the electric feel. A small smile reaches her lips as she looks around at the market sellers boasting their products, all the people in the city stopping to chat with each other, the way the buildings around them are taller than mountains and seem to loom like giants over the people going about their business.

"Hard to forget, isn't it?" Lucile says quietly at her elbow. The smile drops from Evelyn's face and she shoots a "don't go there" look at her aunt.

"Hurry up," Henrietta shouts from the doorway of the shop.

Evelyn moves away from Lucile and a er her cousin who has opened the door and purposely marched inside. Evelyn stops to look at the window displays, beautiful dresses of bright and rich colours hang on mannequins that are draped in hats and jewels. She walks in and her eyes travel over every wall that groans over the number of fabrics it is supporting, silks, velvet, ta eta, wool, chi on, all in gorgeous colours. Then there is the wall of buttons, all shapes and colours in clear glass jars, rolls of ribbons and lace trim. Henrietta hasn't stopped to admire anything but has stormed up to the counter and hit the bell, hard. The high ringing makes Evelyn cringe at the antics of her cousin. Lucile shuts the door and stands next to her.

A young girl in a pink chi on dress with pu sleeves immediately appears from behind the wall of buttons and slowly walks up to the counter.

"Good morning, how may I help you?" She asks, her voice is light and musical.

"I need dresses, lots of them, the best naturally," Henrietta says, peeling o her gloves and handing them to the girl before looking around the shop.

"Do you have an appointment?" The girl asks placing the gloves on the counter and following her customer around the shop.

"We don't." Lucile interjects, "We just came with the hope that you could fit us in."

"I will have to check with Madame Olive." The girl says so ly. She disappears behind the wall and then Henrietta turns with a troubled frown having been invested in a hideously bright pink fabric bolt.

"Where did she go?" She asks, "Where did that little mouse go?"

"To see if they can fit you in," Lucile says. Henrietta's mouth drops open for a second before snapping it shut and straightening her posture.

"They are going to have to fit me in." She says striding to the counter and hitting the bell several times with increased force.

"I heard you the first time." A middle-aged woman with sandy hair in a tight bun bustle into view holding a tape measure and a bolt of red velvet.

"I need dresses, the best you have to o er immediately," Henrietta says marching up to the woman but the woman looks past her and directly at Evelyn with an inquisitive smile.

"Lady Evelyn Wright, is that you?" She asks side stepping Henrietta.

"It's Miss, now," Evelyn says weakly, uncomfortable at being recognised.

"Well, I never." The lady exclaims happily, "Haven't you grown into a stunning young woman."

Evelyn shu les her feet. The woman places the fabric on the counter and walks over to her to get a bonnyer look.

"I knew you would, such a bonny child, bright and beautiful, I'd always look forward to your mother bringing you in." Madame Olive says.

"I did love coming here," Evelyn says. "The shop is exactly how I remember it."

Henrietta coughs and looks expectantly at the owner. Olive turns to her and looks her up and down obviously.

"And who might you be?" She asks, not unkindly.

"I am Henrietta Buxley," Henrietta announces proudly. Olive looks blankly at her, unimpressed. Evelyn feels a slight wave of satisfaction but Henrietta frowns at the lack of reaction.

"I am Evelyn's cousin." She says finally.

"I see." Olive says, "You are wanting some dresses according to Joan?"

"Several, the best possible."

"Then I would be delighted to assist." She says though there is a hard edge in her tone. "I'll have Joan take your measurements and Willow can find a few suggested fabrics."

"There's no need," Henrietta says, "I have my measurements and the fabrics I want here." She pulls out a small piece of paper and hands it to her. Olive unfolds the paper and scans the lists. She looks up.

"This all looks good." She says, "If you would like to follow Joan."

The girl from before appears and leads Henrietta to a corner of the shop that has a few chairs and a sofa around a small tea table set out for an erno tea. Henrietta sits down and takes a chocolate covered strawberry and pops it into her mouth. Lucile joins her and helps herself to a pot of tea.

Evelyn sits in the front of the shop, looking at all the materials and patterns. There was a time that all she had to say what colour and design she wanted and she'd have them quicker than a snap of her fingers.

"What are you looking for?" Olive asks as she approaches, she hands another girl in the pink dress the list and she scurries o .

"Nothing, just admiring," Evelyn says wistfully.

"Nothing?" Olive asks surprised.

"You know my family lost all it's money, just because we have returned to London doesn't mean our financial situation has at all changed," Evelyn says, running her hand along a bright gold silk.

Olive thinks for a moment before snapping her fingers. "Do you remember coming into this shop when you were about 13 and spotting a midnight blue velvet?"

Evelyn frowns. "Vaguely."

"Well, I had a dress returned in a similar colour." Olive says, "You could try it on."

"It's a kind thought, and I appreciate your kindness but I cannot a ord it and it's unlikely to fit..."

"Just needs some alterations, that's all you need to pay for."

"I can't a ord them," Evelyn says, "I thank you but not today."

"If you say so." Olive sighs, "I'd better help Willow with your cousin, she's a right little madam."

"That's one way to describe her." Evelyn replies, amused. Olive smiles and leaves Evelyn standing in front of the window. Evelyn looks outside, the street has become busier than when they arrived, many people walk in front of the shop and stop to look at the displayed dresses.

"Evelyn." Her name is screeched from the corner of the shop. She wanders over to cousin and aunt to find Willow and Joan both struggling to hold up several shades of pink silk while Henrietta tests them against her skin.

"Which do you think?" She asks, placing a slip of the brightest deepest pink against her throat.

"Why pink?" Evelyn asks, sitting down and accepting a cup of tea o Lucile.

"Because pink is the colour," Henrietta says annoyed. "So?"

"So?"

"So which one?!"

"That one is lovely," Lucile says, nodding at the one she holds.

"It is beautiful with your hair." Olive agrees.

"I knew I had a good eye," Henrietta says smugly. "So I want a big Marie Antoinette style dress in this colour with a cream underskirt."

"Marie Antoinette was executed five years ago," Evelyn says confused.

"But she was one queen who knew how to dress, unlike Queen Charlotte," Henrietta says with contempt. Evelyn stares in disbelief.

"So one dress in this shade, do you want another pink dress?" Olive asks hastily.

"Yes, I'll have a pink day dress in that shade." Henrietta points at a pale peach shade.

"Lovely," Olive says placing the pink material on a large pile. "I think that covers all you have asked for."

"Excellent," Henrietta says clapping her hands together.

"I will send a message when we are to do the final alterations," Olive says. "It should be this week."

"I look forward to it," Henrietta says not listening but gathering up her gloves and hat. She nods to all the assistants and to Olive before striding to the shop door. Lucile rises to her feet and smiles at them before following. Evelyn moves to follow but Olive places a hand on her arm.

"Think about the dress." She says. Evelyn nods and tries to smile. "It was a pleasure to see you again Lady Evelyn, I hope you visit us again."

"Thank you, Madame," Evelyn says, Olive pats her arm before she moves away and walks into the street.