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Chapter 13 - "It Was An Accident"

Lady Ruth took up the receiver. Some instinct seemed to have prompted her to close the door of the study.

"Who is there?" she asked. "Who is it that wants me?"

A thin, unfamiliar voice answered her.

"Is that Lady Ruth Barrington?"

"Yes!"

"Is it--Mademoiselle Violet?"

The receiver nearly dropped from her hand.

"I don't understand you," she answered, "I am Lady Ruth Barrington! Who are you?"

"You are Mademoiselle Violet," was the answer, "and you know who I am! Listen, I am in Mr. Wingrave's rooms."

She would have liked to have rung off and gone away, but it seemed a sheer impossibility for her to move! And all the time her knees were shaking, and the fear of evil things was in her heart.

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

"He brought me in himself," the thin voice answered. "Can you hear me? I don't want to speak any louder for fear anyone else should be listening."

"Yes, I can hear," she answered. "But how dared you ring me up? Say what you desire to quickly! I am going away."

"Wait, please," the voice answered. "I know why you have been angry with me. I know why you have kept away from me, why you have been so cruel! It was because I failed. Was it not, dear Mademoiselle Violet?"

She had not the breath or the courage to answer him. In a moment or two he continued, and there was a note of suppressed exultation in his tone.

"Listen! This time--I have not failed!"

She nearly screamed. The receiver in her hand burned like a live thing. Her eyes were set in a fixed and awful stare as though she were trying to see for herself outside the walls of the little room where she stood into the larger chamber from which the voice--that awful voice--came! Her own words were hysterical and uncertain, but she managed to falter them out at last.

"What do you mean? Where is Mr. Wingrave? Tell me at once!"

The voice, without being raised, seemed to take to itself a note of triumph.

"He is dying--on the floor--just here! Listen hard! Perhaps you can hear him groan! Now will you believe that I am not a coward?"

Her shriek drowned his words. She flung the receiver from her with a crash and rushed from the room into the hall. She brushed past her maid with a wild gesture.

"Never mind my wraps. Open the door, Parkins! Is the carriage waiting?"

"Yes, Milady! Shall--"

But she was past him and down the steps.

"No. 18, Grosvenor Mansions," she cried to the man. "Drive fast."

The man obeyed. The servants, who had come to the door, stood there a little frightened group. She ignored them and everything else completely. The carriage had scarcely stopped when she sprang out and crossed the pavement in a few hasty steps. The tall commissioner looked in amazement at her. She wore an opera cloak--she was a bewildering vision of white satin and diamonds, and her eyes were terrible with the fear which was in her heart.

She clutched him by the arm.

"Come up with me to Mr. Wingrave's rooms," she exclaimed. "Something terrible has happened. I heard through the telephone."

The man dashed up the stairs by her side. Wingrave's suite was on the first floor, and they did not wait for the lift. The commissioner put his finger on the bell of the outside door. She leaned forward, listening breathlessly. Inside all was silence except for the shrill clamor of the bell.

"Go on ringing," she said breathlessly. "Don't leave off!"

The man looked at her curiously. "Mr. Wingrave came in about an hour ago with a young man, madam," he said.

"Yes, yes!" she cried. "Listen! There's someone coming."

They heard a hesitating step inside. The door was cautiously opened. It was Richardson, pale, disheveled, but triumphant, who peered out.

"Mademoiselle--Mademoiselle Violet," he cried. "You have come to see for yourself. This way!"

She raised her arm and struck him across the face so that, with a little moan, he staggered back against the wall. Then she hastened forward into the room towards which he had pointed and the door of which stood open. The commissioner followed her. The servants were beginning to appear.

The room was in darkness save for one electric light. A groan, however, directed them. She fell on her knees by Wingrave's prostrate figure and raised his head slightly. His servant, too, was hurrying forward. She looked up.

"Get me some brandy," she ordered. "Send someone for a doctor. Don't let that young man escape. The brandy, quick!"

She forced some between his lips. There was already a spot of blood upon the gown which, a few minutes ago, had seemed so immaculate. One of the ornaments fell from her hair. It lay unnoticed by her side. Suddenly Wingrave opened his eyes. She saw at once that he was conscious and that he recognized her.

"Don't move, please," she begged. "It will be better for you not to speak. The doctor will be here directly."

He nodded.

"I don't think that I am much hurt," he said slowly. "Your young friend was a born bungler!"

She shuddered, but said nothing.

"How on earth," he asked, "did you get here?"

She whispered in his ear.

"The brute--telephoned. Please don't talk."

The doctor arrived. His examination was over in a few moments.

"Nothing serious," he declared. "The knife was pretty blunt fortunately. How did it happen? It seems like a case for the police."

"It was an accident," Wingrave declared coolly.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. He was busy making bandages. Lady Ruth rose to her feet. She was white and giddy. The commissioner and Morrison were talking together at the door. The latter turned to Lady Ruth.

"Do you think that we had better send for the police, your ladyship?" he asked. "It was the young man who came in with Mr. Wingrave who must have done this! I thought he was a very wild-looking sort of person."

"You heard what Mr. Wingrave said," she answered. "I don't think that I should disobey him, if I were you. The doctor says that, after all, it is not very serious."

"He can't have got far," the hall porter remarked. "He only slipped out as we came in."

"I should let him go for the present," Lady Ruth said. "If Mr. Wingrave wishes to prosecute afterwards, it will be easy for him to do so."

She stepped back to where Wingrave lay. He was in a recumbent position now and, although a little pale, he was obviously not seriously hurt.

"If there is nothing else that I can do," she said, "I will go now!"

"By all means," Wingrave answered. "I am exceedingly obliged to you for your kindness," he added a little stiffly. "Morrison, show Lady Barrington to her carriage!"

She spoke a few conventional words of farewell and departed. Outside on the pavement she stood for a moment, looking carefully around. There was no sign of Richardson anywhere! She stepped into the carriage and leaned back in the corner.