Who killed Cristina Wycliffe?

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Who killed Cristina Wycliffe?

by Kiya

Summary

Wycliffe Haven, 1937. Beneath its glittering skyline, power wears two faces. The Wycliffe dynasty shapes the city's wealth and politics, while the Danilovs rule the North's elegant underworld and the de la Vegas hold the South through fear. Between them stands Lorelei Filipovic, a formidable businesswoman who keeps their fragile peace.

Then Cristina Wycliffe is found murdered following a lavish family gala.

The city demands justice. Prosecutor George-André Ward offers a suspect: Lorelei. For years he has tried to bring her down. Now, with evidence against her, she refuses to defend herself.

But his daughter, Evelyn, notices a flaw in the case, one small enough to dismiss, and dangerous enough to unravel everything. Determined to follow the evidence, she enters a world where enemies speak more truth than family.

Meanwhile, Bastien Wycliffe, an heir drowning in debts and expectations, struggles to survive a ruthless succession war. In the shadows, Olivier Danilov, an assassin trained never to question orders, begins to discover that some secrets are written in blood.

In Wycliffe Haven, everyone has something to hide. And somebody has killed to keep it hidden.

Notes

Hi everyone, and welcome to my little corner of hell! :)

First of all, this is my very first time publishing my own work, so I'm both incredibly excited and a little nervous to share this story with you. Please bear with me as we embark on this chaotic journey together! T_T

Now, a few things before we begin!

Who Killed Cristina Wycliffe? is a VERY slow-burn psychological thriller, with multiple character perspectives, extensive world-building, complicated relationships, and a rather large cast of morally questionable individuals.

And when I say slow burn, I mean SLOW BURN. Both the mystery and the romances will take their sweet time developing. Some chapters will focus more on the characters, their

pasts, and the world around them rather than the investigation itself. But I promise, everything has its purpose. TRUST THE PROCESS!! 😭

There will also be plenty of F×F and M×M relationships, forbidden romances, enemies-to-lovers dynamics, and emotional disasters. Just give everyone a little time to ruin their own lives. ♡

A little content warning: Later chapters will explore darker themes, including homophobia, physical and sexual assault, abuse, addiction, manipulation, and psychological violence. I'll try to provide additional warnings whenever a chapter contains particularly sensitive material.

AND NOW, THE FUN PART!!

I want you to become detectives alongside Evelyn!

This story is intended to be an interactive whodunit experience. Pay attention to the smallest details, questionable alibis, suspicious behavior, and contradictions between perspectives.

Form your theories. Suspect everyone. Trust absolutely nobody.

I would LOVE to read your deductions in the comments! Who do you think killed Cristina? Who is lying? Who has something to gain? And, most importantly, can you solve the mystery before the truth is revealed?

Remember, just because someone is guilty of something doesn't necessarily mean they're guilty of murder. ;)

Thank you so much for giving my little story a chance. I hope you'll come to love these deeply flawed, occasionally insufferable characters as much as I do.

Enjoy the investigation, my dear detectives! ♡

And please, for the love of everything, TRUST THE PROCESS. T_T

Chapter 1: Friday – 08.10.1937 – 8:56 AM – Evelyn

Autumn had officially begun. Wycliffe Haven appeared not to have noticed. Morning sunlight poured between the skyscrapers, catching against limestone façades and bands of steel-framed windows until the city seemed to manufacture light of its own. Gold fractured across office windows. Passing cars flashed silver beneath it. From a distance, everything looked almost clean.

Below, the city had already begun its usual machinery. Cars crowded the avenues. Trains emptied people onto platforms. Shoes struck pavement in hurried, uneven rhythms. Somewhere between the towers, a delivery driver shouted at someone blocking an alley, a horn answered from the street, and thousands of people continued toward offices, shops, courtrooms and construction sites with the unquestioning certainty that morning meant work.

Wycliffe Haven had always been good at movement. Money moved. People moved. Information moved faster than when someone wanted it badly enough. To anyone looking from the outside, there was nothing remarkable about that morning.

Evelyn knew better.

The difference was not in the traffic, or the sunlight, or the crowds spilling through the streets. It was in the small deviations from routine: the newspaper photographers and newsreel cameramen already gathered near the courthouse, the reporters occupying the steps hours too early, the additional security at the eastern entrance. People lingered where they normally passed straight through.

The city was waiting.

Today was the hearing.

And after weeks of speculation, sealed documents, carefully worded statements and promises that the prosecution would eventually show its hand, George-Andre Ward finally would.

Evelyn had been waiting the same for weeks. Her bedroom had surrendered most of its usable surfaces to the case sometime around Tuesday. Carbon copies occupied one end of the desk. Witness statements had migrated onto the floor beside it. A legal pad rested across her knees, its margins crowded with dates, arrows and questions written in increasingly smaller handwriting. At the center of it all was one name.

Cristina Radoslav-Wycliffe.

If the prosecution was right, today might finally begin correcting the wrong done to her.

Evelyn disliked the thought almost as soon as it occurred. If the prosecution was right.

Justice did not begin with a conclusion. Her father had taught her that much. She searched for the case file again.

There were few surnames in Wycliffe Haven that required no introduction. Wycliffe was one of them. The name sat on buildings, trusts, charitable foundations and old plaques people passed every morning without reading. Generations of Wycliffe money had helped shape the city into what it was: limestone towers beside old stone, private estates overlooking districts their companies had once developed, wealth so old that most people had stopped wondering where it began.

Naturally, that kind of power came with enemies. Evelyn had never found hatred particularly interesting on its own. Powerful families accumulated resentment the way old houses accumulated dust. Employees who had been dismissed. Business rivals who had lost contracts. Political opponents. Former lovers. People ruined quietly enough that newspapers

never learned their names.
Motive was easy.
Killing a Wycliffe was something else.
Killing Cristina Wycliffe was stranger still.
Evelyn opened the folder.
The photograph clipped inside was not the crime-scene image. She had moved that one farther back weeks ago, not because it disturbed her, she told herself, but because staring at a body rarely produces information that an autopsy report could not provide more precisely.
This photograph had been taken years earlier. Cristina stood between her two children, Lorenz and Cordelia, both now near Evelyn's own age. She was elegant without appearing explicitly interested in being noticed: pale hair cut neatly around her face, pearls at her throat, one gloved hand resting lightly against Cordelia's arm. The sort of woman newspapers described with words like gracious, devoted and private because they had very little else to say.
Evelyn had noticed that early.
There was remarkably little written about Cristina Wycliffe that did not first describe somebody she belonged to.
Frederick Wycliffe's wife.
Lorenz and Cordelia's mother.
The second Mrs. Wycliffe.
A society patron. A hostess. A familiar figure beside her husband at events, foundations and charity dinners.
Very little Cristina.
Evelyn turned the photograph over, although she already knew there was nothing written on the back. She had married Frederick more than two decades earlier, young enough for their age difference to become gossip and respectable enough, eventually, for the gossip to become history. She was not his first wife. She was, however, the wife whose image had become inseparable from his later public life.
And now, she was dead.
Evelyn slid the photograph aside and pulled the crime-scene report toward her.
Wycliffe Gala. Hundreds of guests. Staff moving through the estate all night. Security at the entrances. Family, politicians, executives, acquaintances and enough champagne to make half the witness statements less useful than they should have been. Yet sometime during all of that noise, Cristina Wycliffe had disappeared. She was not officially found until approximately half past two in the morning. A member of the night staff had crossed the sculpture courtyard and noticed something wrong beneath the second-floor balcony.
Cristina lay below it.
The centrepiece of the courtyard was an enormous statue of Poseidon; his trident raised toward the sky. One of its prongs had gone through her. Evelyn's eyes remained on that sentence a moment longer than necessary. Not because it was gruesome. Because it was conspicuous.
A woman had vanished from one of the most heavily attended nights of the Wycliffe social calendar, fallen from her own home, and died on a monument large enough to be seen from half the estate. And somehow, for nearly half an hour, nobody had found her.
Evelyn pressed the tip of her pen against the paper.
2:30 AM – body discovered.
She underlined discovered once. Discovery was not the same thing as death.
Evelyn let the thought remain on the page for several seconds before turning it over. There

was another file beneath Cristina's.
Lorelei Filipovic.
If Cristina Wycliffe's death was the question occupying half the city, Lorelei Filipovic was the answer George-Andre intended to give them. At least, according to the prosecution.
Evelyn opened the folder.
Understanding how Cristina had died was ultimately a matter of reconstruction: injuries, timing, position, witnesses, physical evidence. Difficult, certainly. But facts had shape. Enough of them placed correctly would eventually produce an event. Motive was less obedient.
Why would Lorelei Filipovic want Cristina Wycliffe dead? And perhaps more troubling, why, if the accusation was wrong, was Lorelei doing almost nothing to stop it?
Evelyn had returned to that question more often than she cared to admit. People defended themselves. Innocent people defended themselves because they were frightened. Guilty people defended themselves because they were frightened. They lied, protested, explained, redirected, blamed, bargained. Even silence usually had some visible purpose behind it. Lorelei's did not.
Through weeks of questioning, searches, statements and increasingly public accusation, she had offered almost nothing. No competing timeline. No dramatic denial. No furious declaration of innocence. No convenient suspect offered in her place. She answered what procedure forced her to answer and seemed perfectly content to allow everything else to remain unanswered. It irritated Evelyn more than hostility would have. Lorelei Filipovic was not stupid. That much even her father had never disputed.
Depending on whom one asked, she was either one of Wycliffe Haven's most accomplished businesswomen or one of its most sophisticated criminals. Publicly, the Filipovic name belonged to companies, properties, logistics, investment and expensive rooms in which difficult people somehow reached agreements. Less publicly, the same name surfaced around information, disappearances, protected witnesses, illicit transactions and people who became remarkably difficult to locate once Lorelei decided they should not be found.
Nothing ever seemed to reach her cleanly. There was always another company. Another intermediary. Another person who had technically made the decision.
George-Andre had spent years trying to close that distance.
It had become something of a civic joke.
Ward found a crime.
Filipovic found the space between knowing and proving it.
He would produce accounts, witnesses, transactions, names. Lorelei's lawyers would dismantle association into coincidence, implication into inference, suspicion into something no judge could safely call evidence. Then everyone went home.
Until the next time.
Evelyn had grown up with her name that way.
Not Lorelei.
Filipovic.
A name mentioned over cooling coffee and files brought home too late at night. A name capable of making George remove his glasses, rub the bridge of his nose and become very quiet before saying something unkind in unusually precise language. He had never spoken of Lorelei as though she were merely troublesome. He believed she was guilty.
Perhaps not of every rumor attached to her. George hated lazy accusations almost as much as he hated criminals. But guilty of enough.
And her father did not arrive at certainty carelessly.

That belief had been one of the foundations of Evelyn's childhood. George-Andre Ward was not admired because he was loud. He was admired because he rarely needed to be. In court, he could take several hundred pages of contradiction and reduce them to the sentence nobody else had thought to ask. He had sent powerful men to prison and walked away from cases he believed could not be proved, even when the public wanted blood. He had taught Evelyn that certainty was not evidence. That reputation was not evidence. That wanting someone to be guilty was certainly not evidence. Those rules had shape nearly everything she believed about justice. Which was why Cristina Wycliffe's murder should have been precisely the sort of case George handled best.

It was also the sort of case that could destroy a career. A Wycliffe had been murdered inside the Wycliffe estate, during the Wycliffe Gala, with half the city's political and financial elite somewhere inside the house. Every newspaper wanted an arrest. Every radio commentator wanted a theory. Every Wycliffe wanted certainty.

A weak prosecution would be humiliating.

A wrongful one would be unforgivable.

George knew that better than anyone.

And yet, Evelyn had never seen him more confident.

The investigation had given him what years of pursuing Lorelei never had: physical evidence that did not disappear neatly behind corporate structures or intermediaries. Access. Blood. Contact with the scene. A sequence of movements the prosecution believed it could establish. For the first time, George did not have to prove that Lorelei Filipovic was a criminal. He only had to prove she had committed this crime.

Evelyn closed the folder halfway. There was something almost indecent about how satisfied he had seemed these past few days. Not really happy. Her father would never have called it happiness. Vindicated, perhaps. Like a man who had spent years pointing toward a locked door, while everyone else insisted there might be nothing behind it, and had finally been handed the key.

He had even begun smiling more. That, Evelyn thought, was considerably more alarming than the murder photographs. Her eyes dropped back to Lorelei's file. A woman intelligent enough to avoid her father for years. A woman with lawyers, money, influence and enough connections to make half the city answer a telephone call. A woman who understood perfectly well what a murder conviction meant. And she was saying almost nothing. Evelyn tapped the edge of the folder against her knee. Why?

Fear did not fit. Ignorance certainly did not. Perhaps arrogance. Perhaps Lorelei genuinely believed the prosecution could not touch her and had decided silence was safer than supplying them with anything useful. That was possible. It was also an assumption.

Evelyn hated those when they belonged to other people. She liked them considerably less when she found one in her own reasoning. Her gaze moved back to the note she had written beneath the discovery time.

2:30 AM – body discovered.

2:10 AM – Lorelei found leaving the estate.

Two questions now sat beside one another. When had Cristina actually died? And why was the woman accused of killing her refusing to explain what she had been doing there?

Evelyn checked the clock. 9:24. "Damn it." The hearing began at ten. Whatever elegant arrangement her bedroom had once possessed vanished as she began gathering papers. Cristina's photograph went carefully back into its sleeve. The reports followed. Witness summaries. Her notebook. Two pens, because arriving at court with one pen was an invitation to discover it had stopped working at the worst possible moment. She shoved everything into

her bag and stood.

Her father had left hours earlier. George considered arriving merely on time to an important proceeding a character defect. By now he would already be at the courthouse, documents arranged, arguments reduced to their sharpest form, probably pretending he had eaten breakfast. Evelyn crossed the hall and pulled on her boots near the door, nearly lost her balance, caught herself against the wall and decided nobody had witnessed it and therefore it had not happened. Her coat came next. Keys, Bag, Gloves. She stopped with her hand against the door. For one brief moment, the house was completely quiet.

George's coffee cup was still sitting beside the sink. It was such an ordinary thing that Evelyn almost smiled. Outside these walls he was George-Andre Ward: prosecutor, institution, the man, journalists had been waiting all morning to hear. Here, he was still the man who repeatedly forgot cups in rooms they did not belong in.

Evelyn locked the door behind her. She wanted to speak to him before the hearing. Not because she had doubted him, not yet. She simply wanted to hear how he intended to execute the parts that still were a mystery to her. And her father always had an explanation.

The walk to the station took six minutes if Evelyn did not stop at the crossing and eight if the light decided to make a personal enemy of her. That morning, it chose eight. By the time she descended the stairs into the underground, she had 23 minutes until the hearing began and a train that, according to the station attendant, was already running four minutes late. Around her, commuters watched the platform clock with the particular hostility of people who knew perfectly well that staring would accomplish nothing and did it anyway.

Evelyn pulled her coat more tightly around herself. The chill followed her underground. She told herself the uneasiness in her stomach was simply irritation at being late. It was not her hearing. She was not presenting evidence. Nobody would ask her to speak. She had no professional reason to be nervous. Her body appeared unconvinced.

The train finally arrived with a metallic shriek and a rush of displaced air. Evelyn stepped inside with everyone else, found a place beside the window and settled her bag against her knees. She lasted approximately thirty seconds before opening it again. Her notebook came out first. There was something Evelyn had always liked about timelines. People lied. Memory deteriorated. Witnesses confused sequence with significance and filled missing minutes with whatever made the story feel complete afterward. Time itself was considerably less sentimental. She turned to the page she had been working on that morning.

12:15 AM - Cristina Wycliffe returns to the estate. Confirmed.

A bodyguard had seen her entering through the guest wing rather than the main gala entrance. Evelyn had circled that twice. Where Cristina had been immediately beforehand remained unclear. More importantly, after that sighting, certainty deteriorated rapidly. There were statements.

Someone thought they had seen her near the east corridor. Someone else remembered her speaking to a guest whose own testimony placed the conversation almost forty minutes earlier. A member of staff believed Cristina had gone upstairs. Another was certain she had not. None of it survived comparison particularly well.

Then: approximately 1:45 AM - Lorelei Filipovic enters Wycliffe property.

And: approximately 2:10 AM - Lorelei Filipovic leaves.

Evelyn rested the end of her pen against her lip. Twenty-five minutes. That was the prosecution's cleanest window. Lorelei had been there. Cristina had died.

Lorelei's fingerprints were on the knife recovered inside the house. Bloodstains on material associated with Lorelei had been found to match Cristina's blood group. Lorelei had left without contacting the police. She had then refused to explain what she had been doing there

at all. Individually, none of those facts were comfortable. Together, they looked terrible. But looking terrible was not the same thing as proving murder. Evelyn lowered her pen.
The medical report could not establish a precise minute of death. That was hardly unusual. Bodies were not clocks. Temperature, blood loss, environment, injury and dozens of other variables turned precision into estimation remarkably quickly. The examiner had given them only a broad estimate. The prosecution had narrowed it using witness statements and its reconstruction of the night. Probable death, according to that reconstruction: 1:50 - 2:20 AM.
Evelyn stared at the three lines.
1:45 AM - Lorelei arrives.
1:50 – 2:20 AM – prosecution's estimated death window.
2:10 - Lorelei leaves.
At first glance, it fit beautifully. Perhaps too beautifully. Lorelei entered five minutes before the earliest estimated time of death and left ten minutes before its latest. The prosecution had described that overlap repeatedly as opportunity. Fair. It was opportunity. But somewhere during the investigation, opportunity had quietly begun behaving like chronology.
Evelyn went back through the summary. The murder occurred during Filipovic's presence at the estate. Her brows drew together. No. The evidence did not say that. The evidence said Cristina could have died while Lorelei was at the estate. Those were not interchangeable statements.
Evelyn wrote beneath the sentence: How do we know the death occurred before 2:10?
She paused. Then beneath it: How do we know it occurred after 1:45?
The train plunged into another tunnel. For several seconds, the window beside her became a black mirror. Her own face stared back. The problem widened.
If Cristina died at 1:52, Lorelei would have had seven minutes after arriving to kill her and then remained on the estate for another 18 minutes. Why?
If Cristina died at 2:05, Lorelei could have killed her, needing only 20 Minutes to prepare the killing.
If Cristina died at 2:18 -… Lorelei had already left.
The prosecution's reconstruction did not exclude it. And if Cristina's fatal injuries had begun before Lorelei arrived, then the blood, the knife, even Lorelei's presence could mean something considerably more complicated than the prosecution was allowing. The missing timeframe from 12:10 up to 1:45 AM were crucial to know, to deduct whether Lorelei had killed her.
Evelyn stopped herself. No. That was inference. She drew a line through the last sentence. She had no evidence Cristina had been injured before Lorelei arrived. But neither did George have evidence that she had not. That distinction remained. Evelyn turned backward through the file.
The knife bothered her too. Lorelei's fingerprints were there. That was certain. Lorelei had therefore handled the weapon. Also fact. Lorelei had stabbed Cristina with it, Inference. Lorelei had then pushed Cristina from the balcony, Inference. The fall had definitely killed her, supported strongly by the pathology. Lorelei had caused the fall? Assumption.
Evelyn sat slightly straighter. There it was, not innocence, not even reasonable doubt. A structural weakness.
The prosecution possessed evidence of contact and had converted it into evidence of sequence. Those were different things. A person could touch a weapon before it was used. After it was used. While moving it. While taking it away from someone else. Fingerprints answered who touched this? They did not answer why? The train emerged briefly into daylight between stations. Wycliffe Haven flashed past the window: stone facades,

advertisements, office towers, a fragment of river catching the now-clouded morning.
Evelyn barely saw any of it. She returned to the timeline. Cristina disappeared from reliable witness observation long before Lorelei arrived. That bothered her most. The prosecution's story made Lorelei the center of the night because Lorelei was the accused. But Cristina had existed for more than an hour before Lorelei entered the estate. She had gone somewhere. Spoken to someone maybe?
Perhaps several someones.
There were nearly two hundred people at that gala and considerably more already inside the Wycliffe household. Why did the important part of Cristina's final night begin only when Lorelei Filipovic arrived?
Evelyn wrote the question down. Then stared at it. Her father could not have missed this. George might overlook a misplaced file. He might forget breakfast, leave coffee in ridiculous places or fail to notice that his daughter had been speaking to him for several seconds because he was reading. He did not miss flaws in arguments. Especially not this kind.
She knew that better than almost anyone. So either Evelyn had misunderstood something, which was entirely possible, or George possessed information she had not seen yet. A witness. A forensic clarification. An entry in the gatekeeper's log? Something capable of closing the gap between could have happened and did happen.
He had to.
The alternative was that her father had taken the presence of the woman he already believed guilty and allowed it to determine the shape of the murder around her. Evelyn disliked that thought enough to close the notebook. The conductor called the next station down the carriage. Two stops. She checked the time. 9:43. Wonderful. She shoved the notebook back into her bag and rose before the train had fully stopped, one hand closing around the rail as momentum shifted beneath her.
George would explain it, he always did. She simply needed to ask him what she was missing.
The doors opened. Evelyn stepped onto the platform with the crowd, already moving toward the stairs. But one sentence followed her all the way up.
A gap in the evidence could contain a murder.
It could not tell you who had put it there.

Chapter 2: CHAPTER ONE: Friday – 08.10.1937 – 7:34 AM – Bastien

It was too early to get out of bed. Too loud to even form a coherent thought, and far too bright to greet the day with anything resembling human decency. Even the birds outside his window seemed determined to make the morning unbearable. Their high-pitched chirping slipped through the curtains and drilled themselves straight into Bastien's aching skull until he seriously considered whether throwing something through the window would make them shut the fuck up.

His head hurt. A lot.

A persistent pressure sat behind his temples and stretched across his forehead, pulsing along with every beat of his heart. Even breathing too deeply seemed to make it worse. Bastien lay sprawled across the bed, still dressed in most of what he had worn the night before. His white shirt was wrinkled beyond saving; half untucked from his trousers and opened several buttons down his chest. One shoe had somehow made it beside the bed. The other appears to have vanished entirely. He couldn't remember taking either of them off. Actually, he couldn't remember getting home either.

There were pieces of it somewhere. The car, perhaps. Someone holding a door open for him. A staircase that had seemed far more difficult to climb than stairs had any right to be. After that, nothing. Somehow, he had managed to find his bedroom and collapse onto the mattress without killing himself along the way, which, considering the state he had been in, was achievement enough. The rest of the night still clung to him. Alcohol had soaked itself into his clothes, mixed with expensive cologne and the faint remains of cigarette smoke. His carefully combed hair had long since surrendered, dark strands sticking out in every direction and falling across his forehead. His mouth tasted vile.

He had drunk too much.

Probably.

Bastien closed his eyes tighter. There had been champagne first. Then whiskey. Someone had ordered vodka later, though he couldn't remember who. Three bottles? Four? Perhaps that had been between the table and not entirely his responsibility. He certainly hadn't been the only person drinking. There had been women too. Of course, there had been women. Otherwise, there would have hardly been any point in staying until whatever ungodly hour he had eventually left. One of them had been particularly pretty. Mariam? Marina? Polina? He frowned into the pillow. Had he even asked her name?

He remembered dark hair. A hand resting against his chest. Red lipstick close to his ear while she whispered something he had apparently found very funny at the time. Bastien tried to reconstruct her face and found himself unable to decide whether the mouth and the eyes he remembered even belonged to the same woman. Maybe there had been two.

That sounded more plausible. He would have killed to have one of them lying beside him now. Someone warm and preferably naked, if only he had something more pleasant to concentrate on than the sensation of his skull slowly splitting open.

Except there wasn't anyone. No dress abandoned on the floor. No heels beside his bed. No unfamiliar perfume on the sheets. Bastien stared at the empty side of the mattress for several seconds. Had there even been a woman last night?

"Bollocks," he groaned hoarsely. He rolled onto his back and immediately regretted it. The

room shifted around him, slow and unpleasant, forcing him to squeeze his eyes shut again. His stomach followed a second later. He should not have taken the cocaine.
That much he could admit.
The drinking was one thing. Drinking was hardly unusual. Everyone drank. Everyone worth knowing certainly did, and Bastien wasn't about to become one of those miserable bastards who spent an entire evening nursing a single glass of whiskey as though self-restraint made them interesting. The cocaine had perhaps been unnecessary. The first line had been fine. The second had been reasonable. The third? Well. The third had been there. What exactly had he been expected to do? Refuse it?
He had considered it. For perhaps half a second. There had even been that quiet little thought somewhere at the back of his head telling him that he had already had enough, that he should go home, sleep it off and wake up before his mother had another reason to look at him as though he were the latest embarrassment attached to the families name.
Then somebody had pushed the little silver tray closer. The white line had sat there beneath the dim light of the club, neat and waiting, and his fingers had already started itching before Bastien had properly decided anything at all. Okay, he had wanted it, but he still hesitated. In his mind, at least. For half a second.
Bastien rubbed one hand over his face and let it fall heavily onto his chest. His heart still beat a little too quickly beneath his palm, though whether that was the cocaine, the alcohol or the simple irritation of being awake at seven thirty in the morning was anybody's guess. He had simply enjoyed himself. That was all. There was no need to turn it into some pathetic little tragedy. So, he had drunk until most of the evening became pleasantly difficult to remember. So, he had taken another line when his thoughts had started becoming irritating. So what? It had been a party. That was what people did at parties.
It certainly had nothing to do with the fact that every time the room grew quiet, his mind started wandering toward things he preferred not to think about.
The company. His father. Viktoria -
Bastien's jaw tightened.
No. Absolutely fucking not. He wasn't doing this now. He had gone out because he wanted to go out. He had drunk because he wanted to drink. He had taken the cocaine because he could. Simple as that.
There was no hole he was trying to fill and no miserable little voice inside his head whispering that perhaps everyone around him had finally begun realizing what Bastien already suspected on his worst nights. That he wasn't enough.
His fingers curled slightly against his chest. Ridiculous. Bastien Wycliffe was not a failure. The thought came almost angrily now, as though somebody else had accused him and he merely had the misfortune of being the only person awake to defend himself. He was 28 years old. He was a Wycliffe, for God's sake. He had money, position, women and a surname half the city would happily sell their dignity to possess. He walked into rooms other men spent their entire lives trying to enter. People knew who he was before he bothered learning who they were
Failures did not live like this.
Failures weren't Bastien fucking Wycliffe.
He could drink however much he wanted. He could gamble however much he wanted. He could fuck whoever he wanted, and if he wanted another line at three in the morning, he did not need anyone's permission to take it.
His father would probably call it a lack of discipline.
His mother would call it humiliating.

Bastien called it none of their fucking business.
Satisfied enough with that conclusion, he finally forced his eyes open. He regretted it immediately.
Morning light poured through the gap between the curtains and struck him directly in the face. Bastien recoiled against the pillow, squinting at the offending brightness as though the sun itself had personally decided to antagonize him.
“Jesus Christ.”
Had the room always been this fucking bright?
Bastien reached blindly for the nearest pillow and dragged it over his face, pressing it against his eyes until the morning disappeared beneath feathers and expensive cotton. Better. If he couldn’t see the day, perhaps the day would eventually lose interest in him and go bother somebody else. He needed another three hours of sleep. Four, preferably. Possibly death. At least death sounded quiet.
For several blessed seconds there was nothing but the muffled pounding inside his skull and the distant chirping of those godforsaken birds outside. Then he heard the heels. Bastien went still beneath the pillow.
Not now.
The sharp clicking came from somewhere beyond his bedroom, faint at first against the polished floors of the corridor. Then closer. Faster. Each step landed with the familiar, merciless precision of someone who had never once had in her life needed to hurry and nevertheless expected the rest of the world to move out of the way.
He knew those steps.
He had grown up hearing them.
They had followed failed examinations, school complaints, drunken teenage mornings, disastrous parties, photographs that should never have reached newspapers and approximately every decision Bastien had ever made that his mother considered beneath the dignity of their surname. Which, lately, appeared most of them.
He pushed the pillow harder against his face. Maybe she would keep walking. The footsteps stopped outside his door. Naturally, they fucking did. God had never liked him that much.
The doors swung open with enough force that Bastien heard one strike the stopper against the wall. He didn’t bother looking. He could already picture the scene perfectly well: Margaux standing in the doorway, one hand probably still resting against the handle, staring at the disaster that was her firstborn son and mentally calculating how many generations of de Chanteracs had rolled over in their graves because of him.
“Bastien Fredrick Wycliffe.”
Her voice had been calm, which was worse. Bastien slowly lowered the pillow just enough to look at her through half-open eyes. There she stood. Already dressed.
Margaux looked as though morning had asked permission before touching her. Her short silver-grey hair sat perfectly sculpted away from her face, not one strand having apparently suffered the indignities his own had overnight. A sharply tailored brown suit followed the clean lines of her narrow frame, softened only by a rust-coloured silk blouse beneath it and the gold at her throat and wrist. Even her glasses seemed judgemental, resting elegantly against her nose while cool hazel-brown eyes regarded him from behind them.
Seven thirty in the morning and the woman looked prepared to acquire a company before breakfast.
Bastien looked like the company had collapsed on top of him. Laughable.
“Are you aware what time it is?”
He considered several answers. Unfortunately, none of them seemed likely to improve his

morning. So Bastien said nothing. Margaux's gaze travelled slowly across him. The wrinkled shirt. The open buttons. The stubble that had gone from deliberately maintained to merely exhausted. His hair. The abandoned jacket. The single shoe beside his bed. The smell of alcohol drifting through the room. Her mouth tightened. "Apparently not."

He pushed himself upright against the headboard, immediately regretting the movement when another pulse of pain rolled through his skull. He rubbed a hand across his eyes and tried not to visibly wince.

Margaux crossed farther into the room. "You were expected downstairs twenty minutes ago?"

Bastien laughed in his mind. Twenty minutes my ass. He was glad to even have woken up at all. Or probably not. "I must have missed the invitation" His voice came out rougher than intended. Her expression didn't move. "Considering the state of you, I imagine you missed several things last night." He let his head fall back against the headboard. He would kill for a painkiller. Did he even have some left in his drawer? Probably not the good time to look through it, when his mother was standing there, already dissecting him alive. "Your step-grandmother has been murdered. A woman has been arrested for it. Your family is appearing publicly at her hearing this morning, and you have somehow decided that this was an appropriate evening to disappear until dawn."

Oh, yeah. That was also a thing. The murder. He almost forgot about it. Perhaps imagining his mother gone instead, was not the wisest decision right now. Then his head throbbed again and destroyed whatever amusement had been forming in his imagination. Margaux eyes narrowed slightly. "How much did you drink?"

As it seemed, not enough, he thought to himself. "Judging by your appearance, considerably more than enough."

There was something almost impressive about the way she said it. No disgust in her voice. No anger. Margaux rarely wasted either emotion when disappointment could do considerably more damage. Bastien looked away. The curtains were suddenly fascinating.

"At some point," she continued, "you are going to have to understand that being born a Wycliffe does not make public humiliation any more charming."

Bastien gave a tired huff through his nose. His mother moved toward the discarded jacket and picked it up between two fingers, examining it with the same expression she might have worn upon discovering something unpleasant beneath her shoe.

"Do you know where you were photographed last night?" Shit. His eyes returned to her. "A Danilov establishment. A newspaper editor telephoned the house before breakfast."

Ah. That.

Bastien leaned his head back again. God, he needed the painkillers right about 4 minutes earlier. "So?" he murmured with less effort. "So?" Margaux repeated quietly.

He hated when she did that. Repeated a word as though she wanted him to hear how stupid it sounded coming from his own mouth. "You are already carrying enough embarrassment without allowing people to photograph you stumbling out of a Danilov club at four in the morning."

Him? Stumbling? Bastien frowned. He would have argued, if he had any knowledge what had happened last night. But he couldn't remember, so he let her have this moment. Margaux dropped the jacket onto the chair. "And judging by your pupils yesterday evening, alcohol was not the only thing involved, was it?" His jaw tightened. There was no real accusation in the sentence. She probably suspected enough. Bastien looked at her properly now. "If you are going to accuse me of something, mother, at least have the decency to actually accuse me."

Margaux studied him for several seconds. Then her gaze softened, barely. Not enough to become kindness. Perhaps that was what hurt most. "I don't need to accuse you of anything,

Bastien. You are sitting in front of me."
He looked away first. Fucking headache. It was pissing him off too.
His head hurt, he was exhausted and he did not have the patience to sit here while Margaux dissected him before breakfast. She stepped closer and pulled one of the curtains open. Sunlight flooded the room. "Jesus fucking- "
"Get up."
"Close that."
"Get up."
"For fucks sake, Mother."
"You have twenty minutes."
He squinted at her through the brightness. "Twenty?" he sounded horrified. He was horrified. Twenty minutes to do what?
"To shower, shave, dress and do whatever else is necessary to make you look as though you have not spent the night poisoning yourself."
He stared at her. She stared back at him. He knew that look too. There would be no negotiation. Margaux rarely entered an argument she had not already decided she was going to win. "And please," she added, glancing once more around the bedroom, "try to remember that your surname is attached to people other than yourself."
Right. That was it. Again. The Wycliffe name.
Always the fucking Wycliffe name.
As though every drink he swallowed somehow stained Frederick's portraits downstairs. As though his shirt being wrinkled threatened stock prices. As though the entire dynasty might collapse because Bastien had the audacity to wake up looking like shit.
He gave her a lazy salute.
"Yes, Mother."
Her mouth tightened. She knew perfectly well when he was mocking her. "Twenty minutes, Bastien. Do not make me repeat myself." She turned toward the door before stopping.
For half a second, he thought she might say something else. Something about whether he was all right. Whether he had slept. Whether the drugs had made his heart feel like it was attempting to break through his ribs. Stupid thoughts.
Margaux glanced back at him.
"Wear the charcoal suit. You look less exhausted in darker colours." Then she left. The door closed behind her. Bastien stared at it. He laughed once beneath his breath, though there wasn't much amusement in it. "Good morning to you too."
The silence returned. So did his fucking headache. He sat there for another few seconds before forcing himself to swing his legs over the side of the bed. The floor moved unpleasantly beneath his feet when he stood. Bastien grabbed the bedpost. "Fucking hell." He waited for the room to remember where it belonged. Eventually it did.
Mostly.
The shower helped, though not nearly enough. Cold water dragged some of the fog from his head, leaving the pain behind with irritating clarity. By the time Bastien stood before the mirror again, towel hanging low around his hips, he looked marginally more human.
'Marginally'. He studied himself.
Warm olive skin had lost some of its usual colour beneath the bathroom lights. His hazel-green eyes were red around the edges and slightly sunken from a night without proper sleep. Dark blond hair, still damp, fell in loose waves over his forehead until he pushed it back with both hands. The carefully maintained stubble along his jaw couldn't quite disguise how tired his face looked. He looked older after nights like this. Like someone had taken Bastien

Wycliffe and erased some of the polish.
He hated it.
He reached for the little case holding his glass contact lenses, stared at it, then decided his eyes would probably stage a revolt if he attempted to fit the wretched things over them. Glasses it was. Fantastic. Nothing said irresistible like a hangover and corrective lenses. He pulled a clean white shirt from the wardrobe and smelled the collar before putting it on. Clean enough. He buttoned it slowly in front of the mirror, fingers fumbling once near his chest. Stupid tremor. He fastened the next button.
By the time the charcoal trousers were on and the waistcoat followed, the man in the mirror had begun looking more familiar. Tailoring was useful that way. Enough structure around the body and people stopped wondering what was happening inside it. His mother understood that better than anyone. Bastien adjusted the collar, pushed his damp hair properly into place and reached for the charcoal jacket Margaux had so graciously selected for him. He did look presentable. Not good, but presentable.
For the Wycliffe's, apparently, that was the difference between personal collapse and acceptable family behavior.
"Let's get this fucking day over with." He shrugged into the jacket. Then stopped. There was absolutely no chance he was sitting through hours of lawyers talking in circles while sober. Bastien opened the lower drawer beside his wardrobe and reached behind a stack of folded sweaters nobody ever touched. His finger found the familiar glass bottle hidden against the back. Whiskey. Blessed fucking whiskey.
At least somebody in this house knew how to solve a problem. He took the silver hip flask from the same drawer and unscrewed the cap. Amber liquid poured quietly into it, the smell alone making something inside him loosen. He filled it nearly to the top. Then reconsidered and added the rest. Preparedness was important. His mother would approve of that principle, surely. Bastien slipped the flask into the inner pocket of his jacket, adjusted the fabric until nothing showed and regarded himself once more in the mirror. Charcoal suit. White shirt. Expensive watch. Signet ring. Hair fixed. Shoulders back.
There he was. Bastien Wycliffe had returned.
Nobody downstairs needed to know what it had taken to put him together.

Chapter 3: CHAPTER ONE: 3 weeks ago – 2:43 PM – Lorelei

Days like these were meant for foul-tasting cigarettes and good jazz. A dimly lit room, a band playing just loudly enough to render conversation unnecessary, and couples swaying beneath the amber glow of the chandeliers. Perhaps a pretty, daring little thing nestled against her side, stealing the occasional drag from her cigarette. A glass of something strong within reach, and not a single soul demanding anything of her.

Yes, Lorelei could think of considerably worse ways to spend an afternoon. The one she was presently enduring, for instance.

She sat behind her desk, surrounded by an increasingly tiresome collection of documents, her attention wandering somewhere far beyond the neatly typewritten pages. Absentmindedly, she reached into the inner pocket of her jacket for another cigarette, only to find the packet empty. Again.

The second packet she had purchased that week, and it had disappeared nearly as quickly as the first. She turned the flattened packet between her fingers, regarding it with mild irritation, as though its contents had personally conspired to abandon her. With a weary sigh, she tossed it aside and pulled open the desk drawer, retrieving the pipe she kept for precisely such inconveniences. If she was determined to shorten her life, she might as well do so comfortably. The prospect of an eventual death by tobacco seemed infinitely more tolerable than enduring another hour of this paperwork without it.

She packed the bowl, struck a match, and drew upon the pipe until the tobacco caught. Then, reluctantly, her attention returned to the document before her. The words were perfectly legible. That was the irritating part. The sentences were neither complicated nor particularly demanding, yet she found herself reading the same passage for the third time without retaining so much as a fragment of its meaning. Her eyes followed the lines dutifully. Her thoughts, however, had long since wandered elsewhere.

For several moments, she continued the pointless exercise, until at last she let the document slip from her fingers and settle upon the desk.

Enough.

Lorelei leaned back in her chair, allowing her head to rest against the leather. A thin stream of smoke escaped her lips, curling lazily toward the ceiling before dissolving into the stagnant afternoon air.

She watched it disappear.

The documents could wait.

For once, she simply had no desire to make sense of anything.

Her moment of peace lasted precisely three knocks.

They came in quick succession, followed almost immediately by the turning of the door handle. Fiorella Vitale had never been particularly concerned with waiting for permission, especially when she believed someone had committed an offense against basic arithmetic.

“—and I refuse to approve another one of these reports until somebody explains where the rest of our profits have gone.”

She swept into the office with a collection of documents tucked beneath one arm, a fountain pen gripped between her fingers like a weapon. The door had scarcely closed before she resumed her complaint. “The returns on the warehouse investments are down again. Again, Lorelei. And do you know what those imbeciles in accounting have decided to call it? A

temporary adjustment.” She gave an indignant little laugh. “As though dressing a loss in prettier language might somehow make the money reappear.”
Lorelei watched her over the rim of her pipe, saying nothing. Fiorella paced before the desk in short, impatient circles, occasionally consulting the papers in her hands before launching into another grievance. Her chestnut waves bounced against her cheeks with every sharp turn, and a faint flush had begun to spread across her otherwise delicate features. Such a pretty little thing, Lorelei thought, to possess such an extraordinary temper. There was something almost delightful about the contradiction. Fiorella had the sort of sweet, feminine face that encouraged strangers to underestimate her. An unfortunate mistake, really. Beneath those soft features lived a remarkably sharp mind and a temperament that could reduce a roomful of seasoned businessmen to apologetic schoolboys.
Lorelei had witnessed the spectacle often enough to consider it one of the more rewarding privileges of employing her. A charming little firebrand.
Under ordinary circumstances, she might have encouraged the performance with a deliberately foolish question, if only to watch Fiorella’s indignation reach new heights. Today, she merely smoked.
Her eyes followed the younger woman’s movements, though little of what she said managed to hold her attention. Something about delayed payments, revised figures, and an accountant whose continued employment Fiorella evidently considered a personal insult.
The smoke rose in pale, languid ribbons between them. “—and if they expect me to overlook another discrepancy simply because—”
Fiorella stopped.
For a moment, she stood perfectly still, her pen suspended in the air. Her gaze had settled upon the pipe resting between Lorelei’s fingers. From there, it wandered to the overflowing ashtray, the discarded cigarette packet, and finally to the disordered collection of papers lying untouched across the desk.
Then she looked at Lorelei herself.
The faintest crease appeared between her brows. “What on earth has happened to you?”
Lorelei raised an eyebrow, mildly offended by the implication that anything particularly remarkable had occurred. Fiorella, evidently unimpressed, stepped closer.
“For the past three days, you have been behaving like a woman who’s died twice and been dragged back against her will.” Her eyes narrowed, the pen now pointing accusingly in Lorelei’s direction. “You have already smoked through an entire packet today, and now this?” She gestured toward the pipe. “Since when do you even smoke that thing?”
Lorelei glanced down at the offending object, regarding it with the same mild curiosity one might afford an unfamiliar piece of furniture. Then, with an absent flick of her free hand, she dismissed the concern. “Oh, dear. I doubt a little tobacco will be the end of me.”
Fiorella looked unconvinced.
Naturally.
Lorelei had never employed her for her willingness to accept a poor explanation.
Fiorella had just opened her mouth to deliver what promised to be another thoroughly indignant lecture when the office door flew inward, its brass handle striking the stopper with a sharp crack. Dante Vitale appeared in the doorway.
For once, the man looked decidedly less presentable than his usual charmingly disheveled self. His chestnut hair had been pushed back carelessly, his waistcoat sat slightly crooked, and the expression upon his face was one Lorelei seldom had the displeasure of witnessing.
Uncertainty.
How curious.

Dante was not a man easily unsettled. He possessed the remarkable ability to navigate disasters with the same easy composure he brought to an ordinary conversation. A missing shipment, an unfortunate business arrangement, an unreasonable client—he generally had three solutions prepared before anyone else had finished identifying the problem.

Yet here he stood, apparently having misplaced both his composure and his considerable talent for speech. “The police,” he managed, catching his breath. “They’re here.”

Lorelei’s brow rose ever so slightly. Well, now. Perhaps the afternoon was not entirely without its amusements.

“The police?” Fiorella repeated, turning sharply toward her older brother. “Good heavens, what do they want this time?”

Dante opened his mouth, but his sister had already begun answering her own question. “Oh, for God’s sake. Do they genuinely have nothing better to occupy themselves with?” She threw up her hands; the fountain pen still caught between her fingers. “Tell them to leave. Unless they have suddenly discovered something worth investigating, I refuse to entertain another one of their ridiculous little excursions through our accounts.”

Lorelei watched the exchange with a faint, almost indulgent smile. The police had become rather tedious visitors over the years. They arrived with their warrants, their suspicions, and an extraordinary confidence that this time, surely, they would uncover something sufficiently incriminating to justify their persistence. More often than not, they departed with considerably less confidence and a renewed appreciation for Fiorella’s temper.

There were few spectacles quite so entertaining as watching a young woman half their age explain, in painstaking detail, the difference between an actual criminal offense and an investigator’s wounded pride.

“I will speak to them myself,” Fiorella declared, depositing her documents upon the desk with a decidedly unnecessary amount of force. The pen, however, remained firmly in her hand. Lorelei wondered whether the girl intended to produce a legal argument or stab someone with it.

Knowing Fiorella, either was entirely plausible.

“Fiorella, wait.” Dante stepped forward, catching his sister by the arm before she could march past him.

“Let go, Dante. I have had quite enough of these people treating our offices like their personal playground.”

“Would you listen to me for a moment?”

Something in his voice brought her up short. Lorelei noticed it too. The familiar warmth had disappeared from his expression, leaving behind a strained seriousness that did not suit him in the slightest. His eyes moved briefly toward Lorelei, then returned to his sister.

“They have a warrant.”

Fiorella scoffed. “How extraordinary. Perhaps this one will prove more useful than the last three.”

“It’s not about the permits.”

“Then what?”

Dante hesitated.

A very small thing, that hesitation. Nevertheless, Lorelei found herself studying him more carefully. Dante was ordinarily economical with unpleasant information. He did not enjoy frightening people unnecessarily, nor was he inclined toward dramatic announcements. If something had gone wrong, he preferred to explain what could be done about it.

For the first time since entering the room, he appeared to have no such explanation prepared.

“They have come for Lorelei.”

Fiorella went still.
“So?”
Dante swallowed.
“It’s an arrest warrant.”
“An arrest warrant?” she echoed, incredulous. “On what grounds?”
He looked toward Lorelei again. “They’re accusing her of murder.”
The word seemed to settle upon the room with an unpleasant finality. For a moment, even Fiorella was silent. Then her expression hardened. “Don’t be absurd. Whose murder?”
Dante drew a slow breath. “Cristina Wycliffe.”
Silence followed.
Not the comfortable sort Lorelei had grown accustomed to in her office, nor the brief, thoughtful pause before a difficult negotiation. This was something altogether different. Fiorella’s pen had stopped moving. Rather extraordinary, considering that Lorelei had begun to suspect the girl incapable of holding it still. Slowly, Fiorella turned toward her.
The indignation had not entirely disappeared from her features. It remained there, caught somewhere between disbelief and the first uncertain traces of genuine alarm.
“Lorelei?”
The question neither of them had quite managed to ask. Lorelei regarded the younger woman for a moment, then lowered her eyes to the pipe resting between her fingers. The tobacco had begun to burn unevenly. How irritating.
She gave it one final draw before placing it carefully upon the edge of her ashtray. Beside it lay the matchbox she had used earlier, its lid still slightly open. She closed it with her thumb. A small, insignificant gesture. Yet she found herself taking particular care with it. Across the desk, Fiorella was waiting for an explanation. Dante, too, had fallen silent. Neither appeared particularly satisfied with her response. Or rather, her complete lack of one.
Lorelei had spent enough years dealing with powerful men to recognize the value of silence. An ill-considered remark could become an admission. An expression of anger could be interpreted as guilt. Even indignation, when offered to the wrong audience, had an unfortunate tendency to acquire a meaning entirely divorced from its intention. And George-Andre Ward had always possessed a remarkable talent for making other people’s words serve his purposes. She would not be providing him with any.
With an unhurried movement, Lorelei pushed her chair back and rose.
“Lorelei, surely you are not—”
Fiorella stopped when Lorelei reached for the dark coat hanging beside the cabinet. She slipped one arm into its sleeve, then the other, settling the familiar weight across her shoulders. Her fingers moved to straighten the lapels, smoothing a crease that scarcely existed.
It was a rather fine coat.
She had no intention of allowing the police to ruin it.
“Say something,” Fiorella demanded, though the sharpness in her voice had diminished considerably. “You cannot simply let them—”
But Lorelei was already walking around the desk. She passed the younger woman with the faintest inclination of her head, a gesture so ordinary it might have belonged to any other afternoon.
Dante stepped aside. Neither attempted to stop her. Beyond the office door, the corridor stretched toward the elevators, its polished floor reflecting the pale light from the tall windows. Somewhere, a telephone rang. A typewriter continued its steady clatter. The building, apparently, had not yet been informed that its owner was about to be arrested.

Lorelei found the thought mildly amusing.
She had nearly reached the center of the corridor when the elevator announced its arrival with a soft metallic chime. The doors parted. Two uniformed officers emerged first. Behind them stood George-Andre Ward. Ah, the man of the hour.
He was impeccably dressed, as always, his severe features arranged into an expression of professional composure. Yet Lorelei caught the slightest movement at the corner of his mouth as their eyes met.
Satisfaction.
Not quite a smile. George was too disciplined for anything so vulgar as openly celebrating before the formalities had been observed. But she knew the man well enough. He had been waiting a very long time for this particular privilege. Lorelei stopped several paces away, regarding him with an expression of mild, almost courteous interest. Then, before anyone could instruct her otherwise, she slowly raised her hands.
An accommodating gesture, really.
There was little point in denying a man his long-awaited triumph when he had gone to such extraordinary lengths to arrange it. George stepped forward. “Lorelei Filipovic,” he began, his voice carrying clearly through the suddenly quiet corridor. “You are under arrest for the murder of Cristina Wycliffe.” Behind her, Fiorella made a small, disbelieving sound.
Lorelei did not turn. She merely extended her wrists when the nearest officer approached, allowing the cold metal of the handcuffs to close around them without resistance. George watched her closely. Perhaps he had expected an argument. An accusation. Some final, contemptuous remark upon the occasion of his victory. Under ordinary circumstances, she might even have obliged him.
Instead, Lorelei offered him nothing.
Not a protest.
Not an explanation.
Not so much as the satisfaction of hearing her speak.
And for a man who had devoted so many years to finding something he could use against her, she imagined that silence must have been terribly disappointing.

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