

"I am" is reportedly the shortest sentence in the English language. Could it be that "I do" is the longest sentence?" George Carlin

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XII.

In the heart of Grosvenor Square sat one of the finest homes in London, and it just so happened to belong to the Beresford family. As the carriage pulled in through the black, wrought iron gates, Jack observed the household sta assembled to welcome them.

Jack did not recognise many of them, save for the under butler, Warwick. Of course, whenever Cole was taking care of Ashwood House, Warwick served as butler. Jack quickly realised that he had not been inside this house since ... well, perhaps his Cambridge days. He would have returned here for Christmas to be chastised about his reports from tutors, lectured about bills for damage a er a night spent irresponsibly, and admonished about the company he kept. His mother would do the shaming, and then his father would pour him a port and privately congratulate him for sowing his wild oats.

Jack shook o thoughts of his father. He did not like his thoughts to linger on the late duke. It was too painful. "Welcome to one of your new homes, Lady Claire," murmured Jack with a wry smile, enjoying the look of astonishment and excitement on her face.

Footmen dressed in black livery came to attend the carriage as soon as it pulled to a stop. The door was opened, and the step let down, and a hand was o ered to Claire as she exited first. Claire stepped out of the carriage with her neck craned upwards, taking in the full view of the grand house. Jack suddenly thought it a pity they were in deep autumn. He would have liked Claire to have seen the wisteria vines in full bloom.

Jack jumped down a er Claire, and quickly claimed her arm, leading her up to the waiting butler, who promptly bowed.

"It has been quite a while, Warwick," commented Jack, smiling at the portly, but proud butler.

"Too long, milord," replied Warwick. "Welcome back."

"I thank you," replied Jack. "May I present my wife, Lady Claire Beresford." Another first. Using Claire's new name. He could see in the look of surprise on Claire's face that she, too, was experiencing a similar shock at hearing it.

"Welcome to Ashwood Place, milady," greeted Warwick, bowing again.

Jack nearly laughed when he saw Claire go to curtsy herself, before she quickly stopped herself, and disguised the movement poorly as stretching. Her cheeks flushed. She had noidea of her new rank.

"Thank you," hu ed Claire bashfully.

"We were all so delighted to receive word from the duke of your nuptials, milord," continued Warwick, his round cheeks swelling. "He made sure the house was properly opened for you, and there is a delicious menu for your supper this evening."

Bless his generous brother. Jack knew Adam's intentions exactly. Jack did not doubt that Grace had shared her reservations about the match with her husband. Whether or not Adam believed them, Jack did not know. Adam had certainly not breathed a word. But Adam's idea of fixing Jack did start with a wife, and so his brother was positively elated with Jack's marriage, and only too happy to ensure that their honeymoon journey was as comfortable and luxurious as it possibly could be.

"The duke has also secured his box for you and Milady this evening at the theatre," added Warwick, only too pleased to report his master's generosity.

"Oh!" cried Claire. "I have never been to the theatre!"

Jack was well familiar with the duke's box. He frequented it o en. The last time being not a fortnight ago ... when he had farewelled a certain acquaintance, promising to return shortly.

Damn Adam.

"Splendid," muttered Jack.

"Milady, allow me to introduce you to the household, and the maid who will be looking a er you, as I see you have not brought one of your own."

Jack watched as Claire informally greeted each one of the maids and footmen, repeating their names as though she were committing them to memory. She was friendly and accommodating, and had smiles for everyone, and for a moment she looked completely natural.

Until Jack would inevitably say or do something that would cause her to retreat right back inside herself.

The house was exactly as he remembered it, with one significant change. The grand staircase, which was situated directly opposite the front door, now featured a new portrait. Jack supposed it wasn't new. His father looked ten years younger and two stone lighter in the portrait that now hung in the place that was once occupied but his great-grandfather. The painting had been moved from the drawing room to a rightful place of honour, and Jack found it suddenly confronting to be looking into the eyes of his father. He had to look away.

"The duke arranged for you to have his chambers for the duration of your stay, milord," Warwick announced as he directed the footmen who were carrying their trunks inside.

Jack wondered if the only rooms in the entire house which were not open were the duchess'. If this was the case, Adam was a sly man indeed, and he had certainly been speaking with his wife.

"Come on," Jack urged, "I will give you a tour."

Jack showed Claire the drawing, dining, parlour, sitting, and sunrooms, all of which made up the ground floor. Claire was amazed at every turn and kept making comments about whether or not they were allowed to be in the rooms. It made him laugh each time.

She did not remove her arm from his for the entire tour, something that Jack particularly enjoyed. If one were not privy to their circumstances, they looked like proper newlyweds, exploring their new home.

Jack saved the library for last. The double oak doors were enormous, and thick enough to block sound. AlmostThat was the excuse that he had used as a boy to pretend he had not heard his mother shouting for him.

Though not as large as the library at Ashwood House, it was a great, rectangular room lined entirely with bookcases, save for large window which gave a view of the small front garden and the road.

"I suppose you spent much of your time while in residence in this room?" Claire guessed, letting go of Jack's arm for the first time to step properly into the room. She did an adorable sort of twirl as she peered up at the ornate co ered ceiling before her blue eyes settled back on him.

"If you shut your eyes, and concentrate really hard, you can hear the faint screams of a duchess, shouting a er her troublesome son," murmured Jack. To his delight, Claire smiled and shut her eyes. He took a few steps towards her, and gently turned her head towards the wingback chair situated by the window. He used but the so est touch, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight of the goosepimples suddenly appearing at Claire's throat. Could ... could hehave a ected her so? "And if you squint your eyes and look over there," he whispered, "you can see an eleven-year-old Jack Beresford, nose buried in a book, pretending not to have heard her."

Claire's eyes fluttered open and she looked over at the chair. She played along, squinting. "Why," she breathed, before her eyes met his, "what do you know? There you are." Her cheeks flushed a pleasing pink colour.

It was the very first time he had seen Claire flustered. Could he hope that he was, again, the cause of this?

"When I was a boy, my father told me that there was a secret compartment in one of these bookshelves," Jack uttered, his voice almost husky. "My grandfather smoked tobacco and my grandmother hated the smell, and whenever she found his stash, she would throw it away. So, he had a compartment fitted in the library, a room which my grandmother never entered. I asked my father where it was, but he never knew. I found it on one of my summer holidays when I was a boy." Jack walked over to the bookshelf in question, and Claire followed him, almost stumbling behind him. "In it, I found an ancient collection of my grandfather's. But I claimed the box as my own. I used it to keep my treasures hidden."

Jack felt underneath the shelf for the latch, having to feel along a foot of shelf before he found it. When he released it, the compartment dropped down, and a box was revealed. Jack removed it and brought it over to a nearby table. He had not opened it in years.

Opening the box, Jack chuckled when he saw that some of the flowers, he had saved had all but turned to dust.

"Robinson Crusoe, Claire realised, gesturing to the aging book Jack had kept.

"My second copy," Jack recalled. "Susanna drew in my original. I could have throttled her."

"On purpose?"

"Oh, yes. Susanna never used to like being ignored or excluded. I was her closest sibling in age, and I remember her always wanting to play tea parties. I refused one too many times and she trashed my book."

Jack tsked. "As you can see, I am clearlyover it."

Claire giggled. "Oh, dear. I can understand poor Susanna's frustrations. My sisters were always so much older than me. They had secrets I wasn't privy to, games I wasn't allowed to join because I was too young, and I was never allowed to bother them. It can make a child want to destroy something precious out of revenge."

Jack would have laughed, but he wanted to tease Claire. "You dare take such a villain's side over your husband's?" he playfully mocked.

Much to his delight, Claire's jovial mood allowed her to play along. Her eyes flared as a wicked grin settled on her adorable face. "I wouldn't dream of it, my lord," she admonished.

"Good." Jack chuckled, as he continued to fish through his treasures. He had saved clippings from newspapers for reasons he could not remember. There were tin soldiers and ancient sweets and a school report from Eton that he had managed to conceal from his parents. "Another little titbit about my family ..." Jack said when he spotted a small, leather jewellery box. "My grandmother, Susan, never liked my mother. I can imagine why, but I don't remember her. My mother merely described her as an old witch." Pot calling the kettle black, in Jack's opinion. "She died before Susanna was born, and my father insisted that she be named a er his mother. My grandmother, apparently, liked me. She le these to me in her will, but my mother said it was simply to spite her as she had always wanted them." Jack flipped open the jewellery box to reveal two sparkling earbobs. They featured a flawless pinky pearl in the centre, and a cluster of diamonds surrounding them.

Claire gasped as she looked at the jewellery. "Beautiful," she admired.

Jack snapped the lid shut, before holding the box out to Claire. "And now, they're yours," he decided.

Claire looked taken aback and seemed to instinctively step away from his o ering. "What? Those are precious to you ... I couldn't possibly. It shouldn't be me..."

"Just for whom should it be then if not my wife?" Jack posed the question. He realised then that they had my once again reached the moment when he inevitably spooked her, and she lost all confidence with him.

Jack knew that the only reason Claire believed she should not have the heirlooms was because it was not a "real" marriage. She did not need to say it again.

"Claire," he sighed. "I want you to feel comfortable around me. I understand it will take time, but I am trying to tell you a little about what my childhood was like here ... I want you to know me, just as I would like to know you."

"Wouldn't you much rather give them to your daughter?" whispered Claire.

"Well, if she," Jack nodded down toward her belly, "is a girl, and they are to her taste, then she may have them if her mother no longer desires to wear them."

Perhaps expecting Claire to reach out and take the jewellery box was a bit too high of an aim. Instead, she stood before him, lip trembling, and she burst into tears.

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**Hope you enjoyed it!**

**So I've added two more stories to this series! Bringing it to five :D I couldn't leave this family just yet. But I thought I'd be nice (because you'll hate me in parts of this story!) and tell you who they are about.**

**Book 3 is about Susanna, and a mysterious man you haven't met. I'm in love with him, just so you know, so I'm certain you'll love him too.**

**Book 4 is about Peter, and a mysterious woman you haven't met. I'm in love with her, too, so I'm certain you'll love her.**

**Book 5 is about Jem, when he is grown up, and a mysterious woman you haven't met. I created her today while I was supposed to be cooking, and instead I was on my phone nutting out this strong young lady. I'm certain you'll love her, too!**

**I CANNOT wait to introduce you to these new characters. But I'm super happy to be writing the stories for the Denham brothers and Susanna. Whether or not there will be more, I don't know.**

**We'll see where the inxxo goes!**

**Vote and comment xxx**