

"When a man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women." Fulton J. Sheen, *Life Is Worth Living*

XIII.

"If you hate them so very much, they can just go back in the box, it is quite alright," Jack uttered soothingly.

How Claire wished she was not hysterically crying right at that moment. Everything had just suddenly overwhelmed her. Jack was being so very kind and honest with her. She had loved walking about the house with him, and she truly was interested in the stories that he had been sharing about his time spent in this house.

But she still very much felt as though she was playing a role, the role of wife. To be offered such an expensive and precious heirloom was one thing, but to hear Jack refer to her child as their daughter, to hear him so casually discuss the possibility of her inheriting things from him, was another experience altogether.

It was so normal. Something that a father would do if he possessed fabulous things to pass onto his children. It was right. It was what a father should do. Perhaps it had not occurred to Claire until that very moment that Jack was going to be the father of her child. Perhaps, until that moment, she still somehow pictured Arthur in that role.

But Arthur would not be her child's father. Arthur had abandoned her, abandoned them Jack had not. He had stepped up into this role when he had absolutely no need to. He could have returned to his life in London after Perrie's birthday and lived the exact same life had been living. He did not need to burden himself with a wife and a child so young. And yet he had. And he did not seem at all resentful.

Even now, he was looking upon her ridiculous state with sincerity and concern. For how long had she been looking into Arthur's beautiful green eyes and believing she saw sincerity there? Now she knew what sincerity was, and she much preferred Jack's dark shade of hazel.

The betrayal was still there. The pain she had felt, she still suffered from keenly. As much as she did not want to, Claire did grieve for the happiness, the innocent happiness she had once felt.

But she knew that if she did not try, not only would she be making herself miserable, but she would be making Jack miserable as well, and he did not deserve that. Perhaps she would never experience love again, but happiness and contentment could surely be found.

"I love them," Claire stammered, finding her shaky voice. "I am terribly sorry for crying at you."

Jack hesitantly held out the jewellery box once more and this time, Claire accepted it. "Claire, are you alright?"

Claire nodded helplessly. "Yes," she said breathlessly. "I just want to tell you that I am sorry ... for flinching away, for curt words, bad moods, any ounce of ungratefulness that you have perceived from me. I promise my mother did not raise me to be rude."

Mrs Denham did not raise Claire to fall victim to a rake and become with child out of wedlock, either, but that was an entirely different issue.

Jack smiled, and Claire observed that he had a very sweet, a very genuine sort of smile. Of course, he could display devilish grins, but his normal smile was very nice indeed. Claire suddenly had a memory flash to the front of her mind of the first time she had made such an observation about Jack. It was while they were dancing at the winter assembly that first night they had met.

For a brief moment, Claire wondered what her life might have been like now had she accepted Jack's offer for a second dance, rather than leaving him to dance with Arthur.

"You are not rude," assured Jack. "You are nervous, and rightly so. I am really a stranger to you, just as you are to me. But I appreciate your apology all the same. As I was saying before, I want you to be comfortable around me, and I want us to use this time to get to know one another."

Claire and Jack enjoyed a delicious dinner early that evening. They managed to stay quite happily in each other's company, and Claire found that she did not seize up or retreat within herself. Though not always perfectly at ease, she did find it quite simple to relax into familiar topics of conversation.

They found themselves chatting about their siblings, as Jack found it absolutely fascinating that Claire grew up with five siblings in a small home.

"And all three of you shared a bed?" Jack exclaimed in disbelief.

Claire nodded. "We could not very well fit three beds in the one bedroom," she countered. "When I was very small, I slept in a drawer and my sisters shared the bed, but I outgrew it quite quickly. Of course, when I entered my teenage years, my sisters and I did quarrel some about who was taking more than their fair share of room. Thankfully Kate got married when I was sixteen, so that allowed Grace and I a little more room. And, of course, when Grace went to work at Ashwood House, it was heaven." Claire popped a small piece of the sirloin into her mouth. "I suppose either Peter or Jimmy will take my bedroom now that I am no longer occupying it."

She watched in amusement as Jack enjoyed her story. Really, it was not a very odd phenomenon. She would wager most families in the Ashwood village had similar sleeping arrangements, but Jack would not be used to such things with such a luxurious sleeping chamber as his norm.

After dinner, they both needed to change for the theatre, and Claire realised this would be her first foray for want of a better word, into society. Thankfully the season was long over, but it was still highly likely that the people in attendance that evening would be important men and women of influence.

Claire did not own a formal ballgown. Even her wedding gown had been a simple one that she had worn before. But it seemed that both Adam and Grace were on the same page, as hanging in the dressing room of the duke's chambers were five different, yet beautiful, ballgowns.

Claire had remembered to ring for her maid, which was something that she had never imagined she would need to do. Jack was reading himself in the bedroom, and Claire was privately closed away in the dressing room, one of two in the duke and duchess' suite.

The door from the duchess' room opened and Aisling Kelly, the maid she had been introduced to earlier, entered with a curtsey. Claire was certainly not used to being curtsied to. Perhaps this would be a line of questioning for Grace. She had gone from being a housemaid to the mistress.

"Have you chosen what you'd like to wear, milady?" asked Aisling in her thick Irish accent. She was a spry young lady, though Claire was not much taller than her. Her hair was more auburn than red, and she had dark brown eyes.

Claire had not even thought to choose. She was far too fixed on the fact that she had just pulled a cord for a servant to attend to her. "Oh, no, I haven't." The gowns were Grace's. She never wore such things often, save for when she attended balls or assemblies.

Aisling inspected the dresses, looking back at Claire as she deliberated between each one, before settling on a lovely blue gown. Claire remembered this gown as being one of Adam's Christmas gifts to her. It was in his favourite colour. "I think this will look just grand on you, milady."

Claire felt like quite the doll as Aisling helped her into the beautiful dress, holding the sleeves for her arms and buttoning up the back with care. She held the white gloves as Claire popped in her arms passed the elbow, before she stepped into the matching slippers. Claire and Grace were quite similar in their measurements, however, if this gown had been made for her, it might have needed to be half an inch tighter at the bust. She supposed in a few weeks she would not have the same issue.

"Have you ever worn rouge before, milady?" asked Aisling curiously as Claire sat down at the dressing table.

Claire shook her head before looking at her own pale reflection.

"The duchess has packed some for you. Perfect for a special occasion, no?" Aisling picked up a little porcelain pot and dipped into it with her finger. She then gently blended it into the apples of Claire's cheeks. Claire was amazed how she suddenly had the look of a healthy flush, without having to aggressively pinch her cheeks. Aisling added the smallest amount to Claire's lips, reddening them slightly, before setting the pot down. "You must have a similar complexion to the duchess, milady," Aisling noted. "That colour suits you beautifully, if I may say so."

Claire blushed, and there was suddenly no reason for rouge. Aisling must not have ever met Grace before. "The duchess is actually my elder sister. We are actually three sisters, and we all do look quite similar."

"I'm envious, ma'am," replied Aisling as she began to take out the pins of Claire's hair in order to style it for her for the evening. "I have seven brothers."

Claire merely chuckled, remembering what she had told Jack about her quarrels with her sisters about their sleeping arrangements.

Half an hour later, Claire would not have recognised herself. Gone was the pale, thin, dowdy village girl, and in her place was a lady, one who looked like she might even belong on the arm of a man like Jack. She had never felt so glamorous in all her life, and her excitement for that evening's festivities began to build.

Claire could forget everything tonight and enjoy herself.

Once Aisling had left, Claire wrapped a silk shawl around herself and walked back into the duke's bedroom. Jack was ready, sitting on the bed, dressed in a formal black coat, an ivory waist jacket, with shining brass buttons. His breeches were the same pale shade, and his ankles were crossed. His boots were beside the bed.

Claire realised this would be a regular occurrence that she would walk into a room and find Jack reading. He was leaning up against the bedhead, nearly all the way through Robinson Crusoe. My, he read quickly.

His eyes flicked to her momentarily before settling back on the book, before he stopped himself, snapped the book shut, and looked up again, staring this time.

Claire smiled, though she could not keep his eye, and found herself bashfully looking down.

"Don't tell Adam, but I think cornflower blue suits you more than it does Grace," Jack said in a hushed voice, as though Adam might overhear them.

Instead of feeling embarrassed, Claire laughed, and felt at ease. "Oh, you mustn't tell Adam that! I would be near blasphemous!"

Jack swung his legs out over the edge of the bed and pulled on his boots while laughing to himself. Once they were on, he joined Claire's side, before cocking his head a little. He lifted one of his hands, and lightly touched one of the earbobs that were clipped onto Claire's lobes. A smile of satisfaction spread across his face before he offered Claire his arm.

"Shall we?"

Gee, I hope nothing bad happens at the theatre ...

Thank you guys so much for your excitement on the last chapter! I'm so glad you're pumped for more books. I get asked a lot how I come up with ideas or plan books, and I did see that question again, so I thought I'd answer it. For me, it always starts with a name. I get obsessed with a name and a character and story forms around them.

I've had Susanna's story planned for ages. The hero of that story name actually started with his surname. I was watching the football and heard the commentators say one of the player's surnames and it just got stuck in my head and he became the guy for Susanna.

Same with Peter's heroine. I'd been trying to think of who to write for him, and I got her name from one of my kids as they were talking about this name and again, got stuck in my head, and I planned that story during my lunch break.

And Jem's heroine came yesterday. I heard the name on TV, and I saw her in my head, what she was like, what her story was, and the plot flowed from there :) I've actually liked the name since I was a kid and used to watch The Worst Witch and The New Worst Witch, and I heard it again yesterday and went YES THAT'S IT!!

Probably not the best way to plot, but that's how I do it.

Vote and comment xxx