

"My husband and I have never considered divorce... murder sometimes, but never divorce." Joyce Brothers

XIV.

The King's Theatre was quite busy for an October evening, and before they even stepped out of the carriage, Jack recognised several of the gentlemen, and the not-so-gentle men, of whom he regularly socialised with. They were not his friends, per se, but they were gentlemen in the same circle, who frequented the same clubs and parties. These were men he drank with, gambled with, and who knew every unmentionable detail about him. His mother already thought him about as well as rat poison. He could not bear to change the mind of someone who seemed to think well of him.

Jack felt the need to warn Claire, to remind her of his plea that she not believe everything she might hear, but he could not take away any of her excitement. When he looked to her, sitting beside him in the carriage, her blue eyes were wider than he had ever seen them, and she was terribly excited for her first theatre experience. Jack knew that he needed to get her from the front of the theatre to the duke's box as swiftly as humanly possible.

When the carriage stopped outside of the theatre, Jack heard the footman jump down onto the road before racing around to open the door for them. He let the step down and Claire was the first to eagerly climb out. Jack quickly followed her and watched as she smoothed out the skirt of her dress from the journey.

"Come along, let us take out seats," urged Jack, holding his arm out to Claire while keeping a keen eye on the gentlemen by the door.

"Are they ready for us?" asked Claire. "Everyone seems to be gathered at the door, or in the foyer."

"They will be ready for us," Jack assured her. "The estate pays enough for the bloody box," he added under his breath. Jack pulled the brim of his hat as low as he could without it looking ridiculous and walked with Claire on his other side so that his body was between her and the laughing men. They made their way through the crowd towards the doors, which were being manned by attendants in an emerald green uniform. No sooner had they taken a step over the threshold Jack froze.

"Beresford?" shouted one of them in question. "Beresford!"

"Wait for me inside," Jack instructed, and quite firmly indeed, to leave Claire unescorted, but he would only be a moment.

Claire appeared a little startled, but she obeyed him, stepping through the doors and looking back at Jack over her shoulder. Much to Jack's chagrin, Claire did not go into the theatre properly, but she turned left, waiting for him by a closed door that was entirely made of glass. She was fully visible through the door to him and was watching him with a frown.

"God help me," Jack breathed as he turned back around and painted on a smile. "Gentlemen!" he called, taking confident strides toward their gathering. As soon as he reached the four men, he was met with jovial greetings and shakes of the hand. "Fancy seeing you here."

Lord Henry Tournay, a long-time acquaintance of Jack's, grinned wickedly. "Well, we imagined you were still out of town, Beresford," he chuckled. "Thought one of us might have a chance at the signorina without having to compete with her favourite."

Jack suddenly knew that here was indeed a God, as Claire could not hear this conversation. He could feel her eyes, but thankfully not her ears. The signorina in question was Giulia Panetta, the famed soprano, and the lady who would indeed be performing tonight. Jack was well acquainted with her.

"I will not be visiting the signorina this evening, gentlemen, fear not," murmured Jack uncomfortably.

"Whenever did you get back? We must have you at White's tomorrow evening," exclaimed Frederick Chamberlain. "You all but cleaned me out a fortnight ago and I have not yet had my chance at revenge."

"Tournay," said Charles Hastings, ignoring Chamberlain's question, "all is not lost. It seems that Beresford is already spoken for this evening."

He motioned for the men to look behind them at the window where Claire was waiting. The moment the men looked at her, Claire averted her eyes nervously, wrapping her shawl a little tighter around her shoulders.

Philip Yeardeley slapped Jack on the back in congratulations. "Oh, well done Beresford!" he exclaimed. "I thought I saw her on your arm just before. Wherever did you find her?"

"And why did you bother dressing her up when you know you are just going to un--"

"Finish that sentence and I might just cut out your tongue, Hastings," snapped Jack icily, shooting the man a warning glare. His warning did not seem to affect them one bit. The noises of appreciation they were making were vulgar, and Jack felt as though his skin were crawling.

"What a beauty! She looks French. Is she French?" appreciated Tournay as Jack stepped in front of their view. "You know what they say about French girls." He chuckled.

"She is not French. She is my wife," growled Jack. "You had all better avert your thoughts and your eyes this minute, or I will consider it a personal offence."

Gone were the sly, vulgar smiles and comments, and in their place were four very surprised looking men.

"Wife?" all four of them managed to exclaim at the same time.

"When did you have time to go and find a wife?" cried Yeardeley. "Did you not return to Hertfordshire to attend a child's birthday?"

"And not even a fortnight ago!" added Hastings.

"I am pleased you are so current with my schedule," murmured Jack facetiously. "Yes, it was a bit swi but --"

"Oh," realised Tournay. "Say no more. Though how you could be so foolish with a lady is beyond me. Utter moron." He tsked. "You had a bounty of women waiting for you and you could not wait?"

Jack realised that Tournay believed that he had compromised Claire. For a moment, for a brief moment, he considered this to be of benefit. When the pregnancy was announced, there would be no doubt that he was the father of Claire's child. But he quickly decided it against it. He would not have rumours floating around London about Claire when she had only just arrived. This marriage had been orchestrated to prevent rumours.

"I have known the lady, now my wife, for several years," Jack said firmly. It was not entirely a lie. "And when I saw her again, I knew I had to marry her. I am sure I will find my way to White's soon, but until then, good evening."

Jack bowed his head, offered a slight smile, before leaving them dumbfounded. He turned back around and walked through the doors. Claire stood waiting for him; her hands knitted together in front of her. Her expression was curious yet reserved.

"I am sorry," apologised Jack immediately as he reached her.

Claire managed a small smile, before shaking her head dismissively. "Friends of yours?"

Jack nodded regretfully as he claimed Claire's arm. "Acquaintances," he clarified. "Come along," he urged. "Let us take our seats."

As Jack led Claire away from the door, and into the foyer filled with people who looked every so glamorous, Claire wondered why Jack did not introduce her to his friends. They seemed to have been having a nice laugh outside and they had asked about her. She had deduced that from the looking and the pointing.

But Jack had not fetched her, nor made any mention of making the introductions, and Claire did not know how to feel about that. It was quite plain to see on his face that he was embarrassed, but certainly she did not look like a country village girl in such a gown. She could pass for a gently bred lady, could she not?

Even now, as he ushered her away from the crowd, it was not difficult to guess at the fact that Jack did not want to be seen with her. She suddenly shared in Jack's embarrassment and felt like quite the pretender in Grace's dress.

They climbed what felt like a thousand stairs, more quickly than one human ought to climb stairs, before reaching the top floor. It was quieter, Claire observed, and there were several servants in black and white livery carrying silver trays of champagne. A buffet table was laid out spectacularly with divine smelling tarts and pastries, as well as tureens filled with fresh fruit. On the opposite wall were luxuriously thick red sets of curtains.

Jack let go of her arm to collect two glasses of champagne, before leading them into the furthest set of curtains. They could not be farther away if he tried.

Claire was determined to not let this spoil her experience. What was she expecting, to be proudly shown off by her new husband? There was not a society match, nor a love match. It was a patched-up scandal hidden by Jack's generosity. He had a right to be embarrassed when he could have married someone ten times finer. Claire needed to lose her wounded pride.

When they entered the box, Claire observed there were six chairs, all adorned with rich, velvet seat cushions, and decorated with gold filigree. On each of the chairs was a golden telescope, though it looked quite small. Huge vases filled with flowers sat atop the balcony, giving the area a very pleasant perfume. As Claire stepped into the box to see their view of the stage, she saw that they were terribly high up, and very close to the edge of the stage.

Jack set their glasses down on the edge of the balcony and removed their telescopes from their chairs. "Here we are." He smiled at her, motioning for her to sit down. When she did, Jack sat down beside her, before reaching out and collecting their glasses, handing one to her.

Claire had never tasted champagne before. Her mother had never let her. She took a small sip and her eyebrows rose as the bubble tingled on her tongue. It was not an entirely unpleasant experience.

Jack downed his glass in one go. "My mother, she ..." he trailed off, before laughing with what seemed like annoyance. "Whenever we would sit down in here, she would always declare that we were the best view in the House."

Claire frowned before peering over the balcony. Certainly, they were close to the stage, but the best view? They were at quite an angle. For an optimal view, she would wager the best seat would be down on the floor.

"Surely ... surely not those seats would give a far better view, would they not?" Claire pointed to the floor down below. "We are at quite an angle here."

Jack chuckled. "No, you misheard me, Claire. I said we are the best view in the House. Aristocrats do not pay for these boxes for their enjoyment of the stage. They pay to be seen. Everyone in this theatre can see us, and they know exactly how important we are because we are in a scandalously overpriced box."

"Are you sure that you really want to be seen with me?"

The question had escaped Claire's lips before she had even realised what she had said. She quickly gasped before slipping her gloved hand over her mouth.

"What was that?" Jack demanded to know, pulled her hand away. "Am I sure that I want to be seen with you?" he repeated questioningly. "What on earth sort of question is that?"

Claire flushed red with embarrassment, and with her rouge, she was certain that she looked like the colour of the crimson curtains. "Never mind," she muttered.

"No, I mind," retorted Jack firmly. "What you said was absurd!"

The theatre was filling now, and the hum of the crowds both below and in the boxes was beginning to grow.

Claire did not have a chance to justify herself as their box was entered by a servant ... who honestly looked quite embarrassed all of a sudden as he looked at Claire.

Lord, another one?

"Pardon me, milord," he said tentatively.

"What?" Jack cried exasperatedly, his hand still on Claire's wrist. He turned his head to look back at the servant.

"I am very sorry to interrupt, but I bring you a message." He looked very awkward indeed.

"What is it?" Jack snapped. "Tell me and get out. We are in the middle of a conversation."

"Oh, uh, Signorina Panetta heard you were in attendance this evening, and asked that you join her in her rooms after the performance." He spoke quickly and bashfully. "I am sorry, she did not write this down or else I would have given you a note. I do not think she was aware that you had company this evening."

Isn't that just kick-you-in-the-crotch, spit-on-your-neck fantastic?

bonus points to anyone who gets that reference haha

Hope you enjoyed! Unfortunately no chapter tomorrow! It's NYE and I'm out :)

I've enjoyed answering some questions in my author's notes. One question I received on my last chapter, and one I get A LOT is why I include quotes and how I choose them.

Once upon a time in the olden days of Wattpad, you used to have a status bar on your profile, and I used to put quotes that I liked in there. And then when I was writing "The Unknowing Hero" back in like 2014 I think, they got rid of the status bar, so I decided to start including them at the beginning of my chapters. I started just using quotes I liked, but quickly tailored them to go with the chapter, and I've been doing that ever since.

How I choose them depends. I have a good memory, so when I'm reading, or hearing something, and I like it, I remember it. I find that other people have a knack sometimes of saying what I'd like to say, but in a way that makes you remember it, and remember who said it. Other times I see quotes on Facebook or Instagram and I screenshot them and save them for a rainy day.

I think Oscar Wilde perhaps has said the majority of my favourite quotes and whenever someone learns of this talent of mine and asks me to spout a quote, I always say, "You can never be overeducated or overeducated" - and that's why I spent so much time in university!"

I'm the same with birthdays. If someone tells me when their birthday is, I never forget it. People I haven't seen for 20 years? I know when their birthday is. Hahaha

If you want to know anything else, hit me :)

But in sad news, 3 cases in Melbourne today. AFTER 61 DAYS OF NO CASES!!!! I saw that on Facebook and I nearly cried. I cannot mentally do remote learning again. Freaking Sydney have got hotspots galore and so people are racing back into my state as we worked SO DAMN HARD TO ERADICATE IT.

I truly hope that when I'm wishing you a merry new year next year, we will have seen the back of this dreadful virus. I truly hope you are able to make the best of your 2021.

2020 can kiss my ass!

Vote and comment xxx