XV

"Between what is said and not meant, and what is meant and not said, most of love is lost." Khalil Gibran

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XV.

Jack's head about exploded as the servant rather awkwardly departed their box. He was already annoyed. Claire had said something utterly ridiculous, and Jack was certain that he had heard it correctly.

Where on earth she had got the idea that he didn't want to be seen with her, he had no idea. Were they not in the most visible box in the whole bloody theatre? The whole idea was to be seen!

But to have that incompetent servant interrupt them to pass on such a sensitive message without at least asking for a private word … oh, Jack needed another drink. Claire had only sipped her champagne, and Jack had half a mind to take it from her.

Claire had been so excited to come to the theatre and Jack had been enjoying being able to give her such an experience. What had changed? She had appeared rather ashamed and embarrassed after she had told him to dismiss her comment, but now, after the servant's message, she looked completely humiliated.

While not a worldly woman by any stretch of the imagination, Claire could deduce what that message meant, and Jack was not being invited back to the actress' rooms to congratulate her on her performance. Claire's cheeks were bright red and she had turned away from him, keeping her eyes focussed on the stage.

Claire minded. If he could deduce anything from her reaction, it would be that much. Jack had no intention of visiting with Giulia, but the knowledge that Claire cared did help him a little.

"Claire," Jack began softly, trying to steer away from the outraged tone he had just been using with her.

"Hush," she replied quickly, not turning to look at him. "It's starting."

Jack uttered an expletive under his breath as the orchestra began to play and the curtain was lifted, revealing a beautiful set, and the performers ready to sing the opening aria. No sooner had the first tenor began to sing, Claire gripped her chair from underneath and began to shuffle.

Jack was about to ask her why she was moving away from him when he saw that she was pulling it closer to the edge of the balcony. Perhaps she couldn't see over, he surmised. She was not very tall. Claire further surprised him by forgoing the perfect posture of a lady and resting her arms on the balcony edge, knitting her fingers together before she leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands. She looked as though she were in a dream-like trance as she watched the performance.

Claire wanted to enjoy herself, and Jack did not want to spoil one minute of her first theatre experience by talking about Giulia Panetta. There would be plenty of time after the performance to explain that, as well as to find out whatever had made her believe that she was embarrassed to be seen with –

It suddenly dawned on Jack. Oh, of course. It was plainly obvious. He had sent her inside when he had gone to greet Tourney, Chamberlain, Hastings and Yeardley. She had inquired after them casually when he entered the theatre to meet her and he had been dismissive.

The very idea that Claire could believe that his shame was directed on her. Jack stared at Claire, wishing that she would turn around so that he could see the happiness in her eyes. Certainly, she would believe him now that his shame was his own after the servant's damning message.

Jack found watching Claire far more amusing than watching the performance. Her shoulders tensed during moments of suspense and she tapped her feet excitedly when she was enjoying a song. But as much as he liked seeing her enjoy herself, Jack felt as though he was missing out on her company. He knew all was not well.

During the intermission, Claire excused herself to the ladies parlour, and passively refused his offer to show her the way, electing to ask a servant. She did not return until the curtain was being lifted for the second act, and she resumed her seat right by the edge of the balcony.

Jack wanted nothing more than to shout an apology at her, but he was determined in his conviction to allow Claire to enjoy the opera.

Giulia performed the opening aria of the second act, and it occurred to Jack that he had not been paying attention to the show one bit. What made him greatly uncomfortable was the fact that Giulia was looking up at his box quite frequently with a smile on her face, before she put on her dramatic mask once again. Jack prayed Claire did not notice. She did not know who Signorina Panetta was.

When the final note was sung, the curtain finally closed, and the final applause was heard, the show was over. Claire clapped animatedly, before finally sitting back in her chair.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asked Jack quietly.

Claire turned back to look at him with tears in her eyes, making the blue of her irises appear like oceans. "Oh, it was wonderful!" she gasped. "I … I did not understand a thing, and yet I felt every word."

Jack could not help but smile, and truly wish that he had but an ounce of Claire's appreciation and wonder.

But as the hum of the audience returned, and people began to leave their seats for the foyer, Jack noticed Claire's expression fade. Now was the time.

"Claire." Jack stepped towards her, standing not a foot from her. "I could *never* be ashamed to be seen with you. You must understand that," he told her vehemently.

Claire's eyes fell as she spoke. "I would understand," she replied softly. "I know I am not the sort of woman who would –"

"Stop," he instructed. "I won't hear you disparage yourself. Believe me, I was sparing you an introduction earlier this evening. If I were proud of such connections, you can be certain that I would have had you on my arm."

Claire exhaled and nodded, seeming to believe him. "Thank you for explaining," she uttered. "I … I am glad to know that you are not embarrassed to be seen with me."

Her words spoke forgiveness, but her tone said otherwise. Before Jack could even explain or apologise, Claire continued.

"Now, don't you have an appointment to keep?"

Jack's mouth resembled a flytrap.

Claire took a step backward, clasping her hands together in front of her as she looked upon him expectantly. Raising her eyebrows, she added, "It is not polite to keep a lady waiting."

When Jack didn't respond, Claire's cheeks blushed deeply.

"Really, Jack. I know I am naïve, but I am not so ignorant as to how a man of your position conducts himself." Despite her red colour, Claire spoke remarkably plain. "Granted, I have heard my information from Ashwood House, but know I do not expect you to miraculously abandon your life. I understand gentlemen marry, not for love as we, and keep the women whom they prefer in comfort. I … I once overheard your mother telling mine this. I was not supposed to hear but know I do not think ill of you for behaving normally." Her voice shook a little as she lost some of her confidence. "I hope you do not feel as though you need my permission, but if you do, you have it. Please, go to her. If she was the soprano with the golden hair, then you have … very beautiful … taste."

Jack could not quite believe what he was hearing. Claire was granting him permission, permission, to visit with a mistress, to have *mistresses*. She did seem to mean the plural. She didn't mind. She understood.

It was the first day of their honeymoon.

Love or not, what sort of man did she believe him to be?

But his thoughts could not translate to coherent sentences. Instead he became angry, bitter, annoyed, *frustrated*. She didn't care as he had previously thought in hope. No, she was practically lighting the way to Giulia's rooms for him.

Jack furiously knew there was a reason, one reason why Claire did not care. She preferred the man who abandoned her. He wanted to shake her. What hold did that man have over her? Jack was second, once again, and he always would be.

Second best, and the spare that nobody needed or wanted.

Jack was seeing red as he practically dragged Claire out of the theatre. Claire could barely keep up with him, and he knew that they appeared without a shred of decorum, but he could not have cared less in that moment. Claire did not protest, nor ask what he was doing.

Their carriage was waiting for them, and the footman was standing beside it with the door open. As soon as Claire was inside the carriage, Jack slammed the door shut behind her. He heard Claire gasp with surprise from within and she looked back at him through the window.

"Take her home," Jack barked at the driver, still absolutely furious, and using a tone he would never normally use when speaking to an Ashwood employee. Jack turned his back on the carriage when he heard it away, and stalked over towards a hired hack, one of many which were waiting to take theatre goers home. Before pulling on the door, he snapped. "Take me to White's, St James's Street."

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Claire flew to the other window of the carriage, watching as Jack furiously stormed toward a small black carriage. She didn't know who it belonged to, but he climbed inside after saying something to the driver.

Why was he angry at her? Claire thought she had done the right thing, but by the look of pure shock and horror on his face, she clearly had not. He had returned from London not even two weeks ago! Claire was certain that he was living a life very similar to the one she had just assured him that he could still. Jack's family were well aware of his reputation. Why would he not see it as a good thing that Claire did not expect him to give up everything for her? He had already given up his chance of marrying a woman of his choosing. She thought that he would be pleased if she did not prevent him from spending time with a lady who was clearly known to him.

All she was trying to do was to make this strange situation a little easier for him. He had done so much for her already … going so far as to sleep on the settee on their wedding night and not demand things from her that she was not prepared to give. He was a man and, as her mother had explained to her the night before her wedding, they *expected* certain pleasures.

But what confused her further was that he was not inside this carriage yelling at her for offending him. He had sent her back to Ashwood Place alone while he went God knows where. Did he and *Signorina Panetta* have a secret rendezvous meeting place? Why would he be angry when he had gone off to do what she had just encouraged him to do?

Claire couldn't know. All she did know was that her husband was furious with her, and he was currently, if not now then soon, spending the first night of their honeymoon in the arms of the woman he preferred.

Claire felt an odd twisting sensation in the pit of her stomach. At the same time, her throat tightened, as though she was having a hard time swallowing that knowledge. Her eyes filled with tears as she realised that the very notion of adultery made her uncomfortable. She did not begrudge Jack, not one bit. He deserved to do what he liked, and she knew she would have to get used to it. But when she pictured her parents, their loving union that she had watched as a child, she felt cheated. Grace and Kate had both been similarly blessed with husbands who worshiped the ground they walked on. For the last three years, Claire had been certain she would join them with an equally joyous union. But now, she knew she had to accept that this was going to be normal.

By the time the carriage reached Ashwood Place, Claire had managed to stop herself from crying, and she had tried her eyes and face with her handkerchief.

Claire was helped out of the carriage by the stoically silent footman, and Warwick awaited her at the front door, curiously watching as she entered the house alone. He cleverly did not inquire after Jack.

"Might you like some warm milk, and perhaps some biscuits, up in your bedroom, milady?" he offered politely, a hint of sympathy behind his voice.

Claire looked out at the darkness behind her, and saw that Warwick was holding a candle to illuminate the foyer. The house was clearly abed, though the offer was extraordinarily tempting.

"Might you show me down to the kitchen?" Claire asked instead. "I can manage from there, I assure you. I do not want to wake anyone."

Warwick stared at her as though she had just asked him how to fly to the Moon. Claire did not want to have to reveal that she had spent the best part of her life up until her marriage cooking, cleaning, and maintaining her mother's house. She had warmed hundreds of saucepans of milk in her time.

"Nothing is too much trouble, I assure you, milady," Warwick replied.

Claire smiled, albeit sadly. "No, I am sure it isn't," she said gratefully, "but I am going to have to insist."

Claire had been right to assume that the house was closed for the evening. As Warwick led her downstairs into the kitchen and servants' dining room, Claire could see that everything was spotless and put away, ready to be done all again tomorrow. She spotted the saucepans immediately stacked neatly on a shelf near the stove. She stood up on her toes and reached to fetch the smallest one. When she turned around, Warwick had dutifully fetched her a pitcher of milk and a silver tray. She knew the kindly butler would not allow her to carry her own tray, even if she was to prepare her own drink.

"I don't suppose you know how to light a stove, milady?" murmured Warwick, in a tone that suggested to Claire that he did not concern himself with cooking matters.

"Do not worry. I know how." Claire checked the firebox for wood and kindling and saw that it was freshly prepared for tomorrow morning. Once she had the fire going, she shut the firebox and adjusted the vents to control the flame. She could feel the heat coming from the stove as she placed the saucepan down and poured in enough milk for the two of them.

Claire watched the milk like a hawk, stirring it with a spoon she found, and checking the head of the milk by pressing her knuckle to the back of the utensil. When it was heated, she suffocated the flame and put out the stove, bringing the saucepan of milk over to the bench where Warwick had placed a wine glass.

"And one for yourself," she urged.

"Oh, no, thank you." Warwick shook his head.

"Please," encouraged Claire.

"You are kind, milady." Warwick smiled as he fetched a glass for himself, though Claire noticed it was not as fine as the one he had laid out for her.

So she thought when she took any guilt of her husband's away in seeing –

Claire shook off the thought as she poured them both a glass. Warwick did carry her tray upstairs to the duke's bedroom, and dutifully handing it off to Aisling who had been waiting for Claire since she had arrived home. Claire immediately felt guilty in not bringing Aisling a glass. She was wholly unused to people waiting on her and attending to her needs.

Aisling set the tray down on the breakfast table and Claire picked up one of the butter biscuits, before offering one to dish to Aisling. With the insistent look on Claire's face, Aisling gratefully accepted one.

"Did you enjoy the theatre, milady?"

"Oh, yes." The performance had been one of the most brilliant things Claire had ever seen. The rest of the night, however, was entirely a mess.

Like Warwick, Aisling did not ask after Jack, and she assisted Claire quickly and quietly with getting out of her gown, letting out her hair, before turning down the bed and leaving her to herself.

Claire sat back down at the breakfast table and sipped her milk, bringing her knees up to cuddle them to her chest, letting her heels rest on the edge of the chair. She could see Jack's abandoned copy of *Robinson Crusoe* on the bed where he had discarded it upon seeing her in her dress earlier that evening.

Save for the candle on the table, she sat alone in the dark, and she began to cry again. Fear rippled through her as she longed for comfort and security. Her mother, her siblings … and Jack. How quickly he had become security for her. Claire didn't know what she had done wrong, but she hoped that something could be done. She needed Jack as her ally, as her friend, for she could not go through this alone.

When she was thoroughly exhausted, Claire pulled a blanket and a pillow off of the bed and relegated herself to the settee. She was far smaller and would certainly fit better … and she hoped that whenever Jack returned, *if* Jack returned, he would be pleased.

Anyone else's lactose intolerance just not even coping with the THOUGHT of drinking milk? Ugh, can't deal.

Hope you enjoyed!! If you think that's the only drama I have planned … heh heh heh ;)

I hope you all enjoyed a lovely new year! I celebrated with my family and had a chill games night. Yes, I won Trivial Pursuit. In the two times I have played in my life, I have a 100% winning streak hahaha. Rung in the new year with sparklers and a toast, and here's hoping 2021 brings good fortune to all.

I was supposed to be celebrating New Year in Cornwall, England this year, but alas! Hopefully I might get to the UK this December instead.

Vote and comment xxx

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