

"Snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look what they can do when they stick together." Vesta M. Kelly

XVI.

Claire awoke with a start when she heard a loud bang one that made the walls, and the picture frames that hung on them, shake. The small crystal chandelier that hung above the sitting area of the duke's bedroom began to move, with the pieces making a light twinkling sound.

Were marauders in the house? Claire leapt off of the sofa, seizing hold of the candelabra from above the mantle as a weapon.

Only a moment later did the bedroom door open and a dark, stumbling figure practically fell over the threshold. He was being supported by another imposing figure.

"There you are, sir," mumbled a deep, almost frustrated voice.

No sooner had she heard the voice did Claire's nostrils fill with the stink of ale. Wherever Jack had been, and whomever he had been with, had been filled with hours of nonsensical drinking.

"I thank you muchly!" cried Jack, giggling at his slurs.

Claire abandoned the candelabra and seized the oil lamp that she had left on the side table, turning up the dimmed flame so that there was light in the room. Jack was in a total state on the floor, and the man accompanying him Claire did not recognise.

She was in her bedroom, in a nightgown, with her only means of protection inebriated beyond recognition. She dared not approach. Oh, God, why had she tossed away the candelabra? Claire felt her heart hammer in her chest and she filled her lungs with air ready to scream.

But the man, who wore a plain black coat, the coat of a tradesman, spoke first. He looked up at the hesitating Claire and asked, "He yours, miss?"

Claire nodded silently.

"White's, the club on St James's Street, had shut him out on the street. I only picked him up because he said he could pay me. I helped him inside because I didn't want him being sick in me hackney, miss. Pardon the intrusion." He politely tipped his hat, and Claire relaxed a little, feeling slightly guilty for judging the man so harshly.

Claire had never heard of White's before, but she hated to think what went on inside. Money. That was what she needed now. Money, money, where would Jack keep his money? Claire spied several of the drawers around the bedroom, but seeing as it was not Jack's usual bedroom, she doubted many of his things were inside. Instead, she stepped forward and knelt down beside her drunken husband and opened his coat to check his pockets.

"Claire!" he giggled.

Claire winced as she caught some of his breath, before she found his leather purse. She stowed the lamp on a table near the door and looked up at the hackney driver. "How much does he owe you, sir?"

"Five pennies, miss," replied the driver.

Claire nodded, before opening Jack's purse. However, she soon realised that he did not carry such small change. The smallest denomination she found was a shilling, and she handed the coin over to the driver. "Thank you for bringing him home," Claire said gratefully.

The driver's eyes widened at the coin before he clasped his fist around it. "Much obliged, miss." He tipped his hat to Claire. "I can see myself out. You enjoy that now," he said, nodding to Jack on the floor before he turned on his heel and headed back towards the stairs.

Claire shut the bedroom door when she heard the driver leave through the front door. She turned to look at Jack who had managed to sit up, though his head hung between his knees. She had never seen a man this way. She had never seen anyone this way. What on earth had happened to make him drink to such an excess?

Was Jack a drunkard? Was this something that she ought to have known? Mr Andrews, the senior Mr Andrews who used to be Ashwood's grocer, was well known to drink until he was unconscious. It was the drink that killed him, at least that was what everyone said, and the doctor declared his cause of death to be a bleeding ulcer.

"What did you do to yourself?" Claire wondered sofly as she knelt down beside him.

"I don't feel well," Jack grumbled.

"No, I should imagine not. May I fetch a glass of water?"

Before he was able to get up of the floor, owing to the fact that Claire was far too small to lift him herself, Jack drank two tumblerfuls of water and promptly brought up his stomach contents into the wash basin. Claire blocked her nose as she tossed it out the window, before Jack was finally able to stumble his way towards the bed, groaning as he went. He stepped out of his boots and breeches and abandoned his coat and waistcoat on the floor, leaving only his shirt.

He climbed in the side that Aisling had turned down for Claire and threw his head back lethargically on the pillow. Claire didn't know what else to do. She wanted to send for a doctor, but she knew that was an overreaction, but then she had never cared for a drunk person before. What if he was sick in the night and she didn't hear him?

In the midst of her worries, Jack surprised Claire immensely. He began to sob. Sob His face contorted as he wept, and he slapped his hands to his face to shield himself. "I'm sorry," he wailed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I ruined everything. I always ruin everything. That's why ... that's why ..."

"Why what?" pressed Claire gently. She came to sit beside him on the bed and placed a hand on his forearm. It was cool and clammy.

"I wonder why, don't I!" Jack stammered and slurred, still covering his face. "Every time I wonder why but I don't give them any reason to ... any at all ... why would they? How could they? I certainly don't! And you certainly won't ever!"

"Jack, what are you talking about?" asked Claire, a little more firmly this time.

But as soon as the question had been asked, Jack's sobs ceased, and they were replaced with snores. His hands flopped to his sides and he was fast asleep. As much as she was worried, angry even, at Jack's state, she couldn't help but see that underneath the mask, the man, was someone who felt deeply. Those were honest fears, and though they did not make any sense, Claire felt her heart reach for him.

Claire dragged one of the armchairs from the sitting area over to beside the bed. She placed the wash basin on the floor beside the bed before she curled up in the chair with the blanket that she had taken from the bed earlier. She was not five feet from him. If he was sick, then she would awaken.

"Thank you. That will be all. Lady Claire and I are taking this morning to ourselves."

Claire's eyes fluttered open as she heard the bedroom door shut gently, before she heard the soft rattle of a silver breakfast tray. She was still curled up on the armchair, hugging her knees to her chest. Her eyes found Jack instantly as he was setting the breakfast tray down on the table beside the tray that she had the previous night.

He looked awful, though was decidedly more human than he had been the night before. His shirt was dreadfully creased and evidently slept in, and his only other clothing were his breeches, which were indeed pulled on quite lazily and were not buttoned. Claire could see fatigue on his face, and he had not regained his colour. His hair, which always had a lovely, natural curl to it, was sticking up and pointing in every possibly direction.

Claire watched as he made two cups of tea, adding in the one- and one-half sugar cube he liked, before adding a splash of milk to both cups. The moment he finished, he looked up at her, and appeared surprised to see her watching him. His surprise quickly changed to remorse and he crossed the room to her side in what seemed like two bounds.

"I am so sorry," he apologised sincerely, kneeling down before her. Claire saw fear in the hazel depths of his eyes. "My behaviour ... it was unacceptable. I was a boar last night, I know it."

Claire straightened her posture and stretched her still legs out to rest her feet on the floor. She looked down at Jack with a furrowed brow. The man he had shown her since he had learned of her situation had been one of good, kind character. Something had flipped in him last night, and he had become someone unrecognisable.

Of all that she could disapprove of, she had to share with him her worst fear. "You put me in danger last night, Jack," Claire whispered, her voice a little hoarse from sleep.

Jack's eyes widened.

"You sent me away unaccompanied," she continued sofly, "with no explanation. And when you returned, at God knows what time, you were perplexed in this bedroom by a strange man. You were on the floor incapacitated and he was standing right there!" Claire gestured to the door of the bedroom. "I was in danger and you, my only protection, were voluntarily incapacitated."

Jack, who was already pale, went white as a sheet. Claire could see every one of his fears in his eyes. "Good God, you weren't ..."

"No," Claire answered quickly, "Thankfully, the hackney driver who kindly brought you home was a decent man. But that did not change the fact that I felt afraid, Jack!"

Jack's head dropped until it was resting on her knees. He placed his hands either side of her on the arms of the chair. "God forgive me," he seemed to utter in prayer. "Claire, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. ... He repeated his apology twice more. "That is unforgivable ... I cannot believe I did that, I put you in such a situation. How could I be so foolish, so selfish?"

But Claire had forgiven him. She realised it as he apologised in a tone that reeked of self-hatred. She could feel it emanating from Jack, and slowly, his rambles from the night before became a little clearer. "What did I do to make you leave me to travel home alone?" Claire asked calmly, placing her hands on either side of Jack's head so that he might lift it to look at her. "If I did something to offend you, then I do not want to repeat it, and have you end up in such a state again."

Jack quickly captured Claire's hands in his before he looked up at her. Claire saw an entirely different man before her. A vulnerable, hurting man. "Claire, you did nothing wrong," he promised her quietly. "I wish I could tell you that was the first time I have behaved in such a way, but it isn't. Whenever ... whenever something happens ... something that angers me or frustrates me ... I choose to forget and I all but annihilate myself." He looked so regretful. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

Claire nodded slowly as she learned that alcohol was how Jack coped, what he turned to when he became overwhelmed by something. Whereas she might have talked to her sisters, about any subject other than Arthur, Jack talked to the bottle. "But something must have happened to upset you," Claire pressed. "If it is something I did, please tell me."

She watched as Jack hesitated, and Claire realised that she had done something.

"Please," she urged, "speak plainly."

Jack took a deep breath. "I never went to visit Signorina Panetta." He spoke very quietly, but Claire could still hear him. She heard him swallow as he battled to maintain some composure. "It angered me a great deal that you were so at ease with the idea of me visiting her. You were practically pushing me toward her."

Claire sat back in the chair as her eyes widened. Why, she thought she had done the right thing! Was that not what most husbands of his rank did anyway? But it had angered him, and Claire wanted to know why.

"I thought you would want to," whispered Claire. "I thought I would be taking away any guilty obligation you had towards me, and I did not want to prevent you from carrying on with your life as it was. I did not want you to think that I expected your faithfulness when it is not a true marriage."

"It's a true marriage to me," Jack spoke so forcefully, so firmly, that it made Claire jump. He immediately squeezed her hands soothingly. "Claire, what part of last night tells you that the life I was living is worth carrying on?" he asked helplessly. "I made vows and promises, and I intend to keep them. I will not see or keep other women, the same as you will not carry on with another ... man." He forced the last word. "I don't want to be the man I was, the man I was two weeks ago, the man I was last night. That man is not worthy ... no one could ever ..."

"Love you?" concluded Claire gently.

Jack's eyes bore into Claire's, and she knew she had chosen the right words. Jack didn't believe anyone could ever love him. Claire was quite certain that he did not love himself. But in that realisation, Claire learned exactly what Jack needed, and what he wanted from her.

Jack wanted Claire to love him.

Just like Claire, Jack was quite heartbroken in ways she did not yet understand. He was not a perfect rescuer, but a man who so earnestly kept behind a mask of charm. She believed she had seen his heart in his kindness since their meeting in the library, but Claire now knew that his heart was hurting quite like hers.

Claire did not know if she was capable of falling in love again, and so soon after Arthur. One heart could only go so far, and hers had been ripped out, trampled on, and shoved back in her chest bleeding beyond repair.

"You asked me never to lie to you back in Ashwood," Claire reminded him. "The same goes for you. For us both. We need to talk to one another, to know each other properly. To go beyond how we each take our tea."

Jack nodded in solemn agreement.

Hope you enjoyed it!

I was only planning on writing half of this chapter tonight and finishing it tomorrow but before I knew it, the chapter was done and it's 2am! These late nights kill me. I keep saying that, but every night I get into bed and I end up writing because I'm inspired.

But I'm off to bed now!

Vote and comment xxx