

"One man scorned and covered with scars still strove with his last ounce of courage to reach the unreachable stars; and the world was better for this." Joe Darion oDon Quixote, Man of La Mancha

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XVII.

After the troubling and revealing first night of their honeymoon, Jack and Claire managed to find a middle ground for the remainder of their time in London.

Even conversations that seemed to be about nominal interests turned into revealing conversations. A week after their night at the theatre, Jack and Claire had taken a picnic lunch in one of Ashwood's curricles to sit in Hyde Park. The weather demanded it, and as sunny days in autumn were few and far between, an outing was necessary.

Claire enjoyed people watching in London. Everyone always looked as though they had places to be and people to see. They were always dressed in their very best clothing, and each woman seemed to be wearing a more brilliant bonnet than the last. Certainly, Claire had never seen so many people before in her life.

Her entire world had been the Ashwood parish, and it was fulfilling to learn that there was so much more to the world than just the little village main street.

She looked up at Jack when she heard him chuckling. He, indeed, looked just like the other gentlemen. Extraordinarily dapper in his form-fitting coat and matching top hat.

"What?"

"I like seeing this city through your eyes," he said with a smile. "What an extraordinary talent you have for seeing the good in anything ... and anyone."

After wandering through the beautiful park, or promenading as Jack called it with a roll of his eyes, they found a nice area in which to sit and eat their delicious cut sandwiches. They both settled after eating, enjoying the privacy of some trees in order to lie back on the blanket and relax in the sunshine.

Claire watched as Jack pulled a book out of the picnic basket, and she wondered when he had snuck that in there. She spied the cover of the thick book and read Don Quixote. Jack seemed to tear through books, Claire noted. He never seemed to be able to sit. He preferred to read. He loved to read. It was evident on his face as he flipped open to wherever he had been last.

"Can I ask you something?" Claire wondered aloud.

Jack snapped the book shut immediately. "Of course," he said earnestly.

"What is it about reading that you enjoy so much?" she posed. Claire did want to become a better reader herself, only she'd never had the time to dedicate herself to finishing a novel.

Jack thought for a moment, before he smiled. "A book has the power to take you to a place far from where you are in reality. They are filled with adventure and conflict and romance, and anything is possible. Don Quixote, for example," Jack noted, holding up the book, "has gone mad, and believes himself a knight and endeavours to serve his country and put right all that is wrong. And while he may be mad, this book teaches me that being mad is to be right. Is a man who is dissatisfied with society, and empowered to do something about it, so wrong?"

Jack paused and sat up, twisting himself to face Claire, who in turn sat up as well.

"I have never been happy in my reality," he said quietly. "I would have gone quite mad myself without the solace of books. If I was reading, I was somewhere else, and not some place where I would let someone down."

As much as they had been talking this past week, Jack had not divulged his deepest demons to Claire. She didn't like to pry anything out of him, and they had been enjoying sharing what they had been comfortable to share.

Claire brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them as she listened.

But instead of sharing, Jack laughed, albeit quite nervously before he looked away.

Not yet, Claire surmised. "Have you ever thought about writing yourself?" she wondered, so lightly changing the subject.

"Yes," replied Jack, "before I quickly discovered I was rubbish at it. Show me a career in reading and I shall be a successful man."

Claire laughed. "I'll think on it, shall I?"

Jack placed the book down beside him as he turned back to look at her. "Tell me a memory you have, a memory where you were truly happy beyond anything."

Claire was startled at the sudden question and frustrated when her mind immediately went to her liaisons with Arthur. But Jack had asked for a time when she was truly happy. Though she might have thought it, she was not truly happy with Arthur.

"Nine years ago, this November," Claire decided, a smile teasing her lips.

"What happened nine years ago this November?" asked Jack.

"I was eleven," began Claire. "My sisters were fifteen and seventeen, and it was the first winter assembly my parents had allowed them to attend. I was furious. Always younger. Always left out. Always thrown together with my brothers as one of the little ones." Claire laughed. "I remember Grace being allowed to go, and Kate whining until she got her way. The same tactic did not work for me."

Jack listened intently.

"My mother did not have much sympathy for me, and rightly so. I was still a child. But my father –" Claire's breath caught in her throat as she remembered the utter kindness she always saw in her father's eyes, "– he danced with me, my very first dance, in our kitchen. I was on his toes as I did not know the steps. We laughed and he held me, and I felt like a princess. And I know I was truly happy. I never got to dance with him at my wedding, but we did dance together."

Claire didn't cry. She still did, of course, but not so much anymore. She could think of her beloved father and smile now and take comfort in the fact that he knew her last as an innocent, pure twelve-year-old girl.

"I wish I knew him," murmured Jack. "My brother practically lived with you when we were children. He could not speak more highly of him."

Claire nodded in agreement with a smile. "Same question. Your turn," she urged.

Jack chuckled. "I'll let you know," he replied simply.

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Jack tried not to laugh as he watched Claire awkwardly stand for the dressmaker. It was clear that she had never been fit for a gown in her life. She was the third daughter, and so most of her clothes had come to her made to the size of someone else, and worn twice over by her elder sisters.

Jack knew it was very uncharacteristic of a gentleman to be seated on a chaise in front of a mirror while the dressmaker measured his wife, but he had no desire to be elsewhere. Besides, he found it quite hilarious when Claire would glare daggers at him as he sniggered whenever the dressmaker would accidentally tickle her. She had blushed in the beginning to be seen in her undergarments, but she was properly covered and he had seen in her in nightgown each evening.

He'd ordered five day dresses and her own ball gown. Claire's mentioning of the winter assembly during their luncheon in Hyde Park five days earlier had reminded him that the annual dance was coming up, and so he intended to pay the dressmaker handsomely to ensure the dress arrived on time.

Claire had, of course, protested the expense. Jack was certain that Claire had never had a shilling of her own money before, and the idea that he was spending what she considered to be a small fortune on her was unsettling. Jack was quite certain that Claire had no idea the value of the Ashwood estate.

The dressmaker was discreetly advised of Claire's condition, but saw nothing more than two newlyweds who did seem to enjoy one another's company. She was to make the gowns suitable for when Claire was larger. Claire was helped to choose fabric that suited her colouring, and Jack enjoyed the excitement on her face when it came time to select the silk that would be used to make her very own ballgown.

He checked the watch in his pocket and noted that at this time tomorrow, they would be on their way back to Ashwood. The very idea put a dampener on an otherwise glorious mood. He never liked setting foot in that house.

He hardly liked setting foot in Ashwood Place. But this trip had been different. Aside from their misunderstanding, and his wholly idiotic behaviour on their first night, Jack had never liked London better. He had told Claire that he would let her know his happiest memory, and Jack was quickly becoming certain that it would include her.

Perhaps, he hoped, venturing back to Ashwood with Claire by his side would make things easier. Through their unlikely union, Jack had found an ally, and indeed a friend, and he hoped, one day, a family.

When the measurements had been finalised, the fabrics chosen, and Claire was dressed properly once again, she returned to him with rather a giddy smile.

"I have never had anything new before," she whispered excitedly. "How terribly shallow does that make me to be excited about something new?"

Jack chuckled. "Not shallow at all. I am glad to play a role in this excitement."

"I saw you looking at your watch just before. Is there somewhere you ought to be? Or somewhere you need to be?"

Jack shook his head. "No. Not this evening. I was merely thinking that this honeymoon is nearly at an end. We are to return tomorrow."

Jack could have sworn he saw the same look of disappointment in Claire's eyes as he felt when they returned. It had been quite easy to be normal in London. When they returned to Ashwood, they would need to start playing pretend. Their ruse would well and truly be underway. And the fact that he would be forced to live under the same roof as his mother, something that he had been actively avoiding since he was eleven years old.

"It bothers you deeply to be there, doesn't it?" Claire queried so lightly.

Sometimes Jack wished that he were not so transparent. "Let me settle our account and then we shall return to Ashwood Place for dinner."

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**Hope you enjoyed it!**

**I'm sorry this is a bit shorter, but I'm trying to avoid a 2am night again. A shorter chapter is better than no chapter!**

**I spent my day making clouds today, how you ask? I bought paper lanterns and cotton wool, and I hot glued that sh\*t until it looked like majestic fluffy clouds because my classroom reading corner is going to be the stuff of dreams. I've also bought a beaded curtain that I'm going to chop up to make it look like rain. I can be darn crazy when I want to be. As always, when it comes time I'll pop up some pics on my Instagram @ littlelo62 :)**

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