

"No person, trying to take responsibility for her or his identity, should have to be so alone. There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors." Adrienne Rich, Sources

XIX.

"Do you suppose we can sneak in through the kitchen?" Jack whispered to Claire as their carriage pulled through the gates of Ashwood House.

But they both knew any hope for a quiet entrance was too late as the front door opened and a parade of footmen, led by Cole, spilled down the stairs.

"We don't need to lie when they ask us questions about the honeymoon trip," Jack continued quietly. "Through ... you are welcome to tell anyone about my ... er..." he trailed awkwardly.

"I won't tell anyone about the a ermath of our trip to the theatre," Claire assured him. "If they ask, we have plenty of anecdotes to share. It was a wonderful trip."

Jack chuckled, though clearly relieved. Claire could see how anxious he was, still, and it did anger her that a man with so much good in him could be perceived so incorrectly by one who should love him unconditionally. Though he claimed it a lost cause, winning his mother's approval did mean a lot to Jack, Claire observed.

When the carriage pulled to a stop, the door was promptly opened and Claire was assisted out, closely followed by Jack.

"Good a ernoon, milord, milady," the butler greeted formally, with a bow of his head.

"Good a ernoon, Cole," replied Jack. "I suppose all of this will need to go up to my old room, then." He motioned to the trunks, and the shopping boxes that they had accumulated while in London.

"The duke took it upon himself to have your things moved to the south wing, milord," reported Cole. "A belated wedding gi . Privacy. There is a proper suite of rooms waiting for you and Lady Claire."

Jack frowned. "Are you speaking of the Rose Room?" he clarified.

"Yes, milord." Cole nodded.

"Great, just when my mother didn't already want to kill me," he hissed under his breath. "Brilliant. Thank you, Cole." Jack took Claire's arm and swi ly led her away from the carriage and up the stairs.

"Is there something wrong with the Rose Room?" Claire asked as she practically ran up the stairs alongside Jack. Personally, she liked the idea of privacy. She was worried that Grace might enter into Jack's bedroom unannounced and notice their odd sleeping arrangement.

"Oh, no, it is palatial and perfectly luxurious, or so I'm told," replied Jack. "My mother loves those rooms. Personally, I have never been inside. No one has. We were told as children never to snoop in there as they were reserved for royal guests."

"So, Adam has gi ed us rooms fit for royalty?"

"Yes. I don't know what he's playing at."

Claire couldn't believe that Adam was playing at anything. Surely, he was merely being kind and o ering Jack rooms fit for a married man, and not a bachelor. Considering Claire had spent the best part of her life sharing a bedroom, and a bed, with her two sisters, she was quite excited to see the room that was supposedly fit for a queen.

As they walked across the marble foyer, Jack suddenly stopped and turned to Claire. "Are you alright?" he suddenly asked, his brows furrowing.

Claire was nervous, certainly, but she knew that everything would be alright. She trusted Jack. Claire nodded.

Jack checked the time on his pocket watch briefly. "I am going to go and see my brother in his study. Why don't you go into the drawing room and ring the bell for some tea and get the servants to tell Grace and Susanna that you are there."

Jack quickly le her and climbed the stairs out of sight. Claire stood in the middle of the foyer as the footmen began to bring their trunks inside. She quickly moved out of the way and thought about what Jack had said. He wanted her to summon a servant. She had never summoned a servant before. Not even while they were in London. Aisling had always been there to service her needs. Claire did not even have to ask. She was entirely unused to being waited on.

Cole saved her the job of finding the bellpull in the drawing room. "Might I see to some refreshment, milady?" he asked. "Perhaps a tray of sandwiches?"

As if on cue, her stomach grumbled, as it seemed to be doing more frequently. Claire had noticed an increase in her appetite, and she nodded. "Yes, please," she agreed. "And would it be any trouble to tell the duchess that I have returned? Or, if you tell me where she is, I might go and visit with her."

"It is no trouble. The duchess has become fond of tea and a light meal in the a ernoon, owing to her condition, of course." Cole showed Claire to the drawing room and closed the door, leaving her inside.

It was impossible to believe that she was now a resident of this fine house. The last time Claire had been in this room, she had been wearing a gown that had been made by their mother for Grace nearly ten years earlier. Now, she was wearing yet another gown of Grace's, only its value was quintupled.

The drawing room had a beautiful view of the garden through its large window, which caught the last delights of the a ernoon sun. A book had been le on one of the canary yellow settees, as though someone had been reading in here recently.

A portrait of the Beresford family hung above the fireplace. Peregrine, the late duke, sat in the centre, his wife beside him. It must have been painted some years ago, as Susanna appeared no more than eleven or twelve. She was seated in front of her parents, and behind them were their two sons. Adam stood proudly, but Jack ... somehow the artist had managed to capture Jack's genuine discomfort. Why could Cecily not see how wonderful Jack was?

Jack had mentioned that he knew his mother had a heart, and Claire believed him. She had seen it, too. Cecily was an odd, doting sort of friend to her mother. Mrs Denham entertained the duchess regularly for tea and received invitations from Cecily personally just as o en. She was also a very proud grandmother, and Claire had watched these last two years as she fawned over Perrie. Why could she not bestow the same love on her own son?

If she could, if it were possible, Claire would have swallowed her fear and marched right up to Cecily to tell her what Jack had done for Claire.

"... I've heard that eating the eye of a lamb can ensure an unborn child is a boy, or is it the bladder...?"

Claire spun around the moment she heard voices approaching the drawing room, and she recognised the loudest as the duchess. The door was opened for them by Cole and Grace, Cecily, and Perrie were announced.

Perrie toddled in ahead of her mother and grandmother, and excitedly ran to Claire with her arms extended when she saw her aunt. Perrie was wearing white today, with a blue ribbon fixed in her dark hair. She giggled as Claire picked her up, and for the first time, Perrie's giggle thrilled Claire from deep within.

"I missed you, dear one," she said, kissing Perrie's temple.

Grace was quick to collect them both in a hug, squeezing Claire tightly. When she pulled back, Claire noticed how perfectly rosy Grace was. Claire could see, poking out from underneath her skirts, was a perfectly noticeable protrusion.

"I missed you more," insisted Grace. "How are you? How was your journey?"

"Let the girl breathe, Grace," tsked Cecily. "Besides, I need to finish telling you about these lamb's bladders. I've had it on good authority that -"

"Cecily!" cried Grace, in a tone that Claire would never be game to use, not for a hundred years. "I am not putting a lamb's bladder in my mouth!"

"It would not be raw!" protested Cecily. "I'll have Mrs Reynolds pop it in a stew. You would hardly notice it!"

Claire remembered Jack telling her that the reason Grace managed Cecily so well was because she humoured her. Considering the bladder of an animal seemed one step too far for Grace. Personally, Claire could not imagine anything more foul.

"How are you, Your Grace?" Claire said politely, her voice a little shaky. She immediately chastised herself. How on earth did she ever believe herself capable of swallowing her own fear when it came to this woman?

Cecily sighed, arching an eyebrow as she looked over Claire was a sudden, intense, scrutiny. "Well, I would be better if my daughter-in-law would take on the advice of a woman who birthed not one, but two sons."

"If you swear to God and tell me that you consumed bladder while pregnant with either Adam or Jack, then pray, boil one for me!" declared Grace.

Cecily's eyes narrowed in her displeasure. "Well, at least we can be certain that any child your sister may have conceived while on the honeymoon journey will be a boy."

Claire's cheeks suddenly flamed crimson. In her embarrassment, she quickly put Perrie on the floor and turned toward the window. How could she possibly know that? Was ... was she carrying a son?

Grace, thankfully, read Claire's mind as asked the question. "How could you know that?" she asked.

"An autumn conception, dear!" Cecily exclaimed, as though it was obvious. "Everyone knows that a child conceived in autumn is likely to be a boy. Had you and my son only waited but a few weeks more, I might have saved the servants the trouble of sourcing a bladder for me."

Claire did quick arithmetic in her head as she calculated that she was about nine weeks into her own pregnancy. She paled when she realised that meant a summer conception. If ... if the child was a girl, would Cecily discover the truth?

"I have never heard anything more ridiculous," declared Grace.

Claire could have kissed her sister.

"You are awfully unamenable when you are expecting," Cecily observed in annoyance.

Cole returned then, flanked by two footmen, as they brought in the tea service, and a platter of delicious looking sandwiches. Claire was famished, and Grace, too, excitedly approached the food.

"Ah, Cole, just who I wanted to speak to," Cecily quipped. "I want you to find me a lamb's bladder."

The butler appeared utterly perplexed as Grace shouted, "No! Mr Cole, she is trying to poison me!"

"Your Grace?" Cole appeared very alarmed.

"Oh, Grace, stop being dramatic. When you are cuddling your very own son and heir, you will thank me," Cecily said dismissively.

Grace glowered at the back of Cecily's head. "I am not eating anything I cannot identify," she whispered to Claire as she accepted one of the sandwiches from a footman. "Tell me about your honeymoon," she insisted, now speaking in at a normal volume.

"How is Jack?"

Now, something she could attest to confidently. "Jack is wonderful," Claire said firmly, but entirely sincerely.

As Jack approached the door of what was now Adam's study, he realised that he had not been inside it since he was perhaps ten or eleven years old, and then it had been Peregrine sitting behind the great desk.

Jack chuckled once but did not both waiting for Adam to allow entry, pushing open the door immediately a er. He stopped in the doorway for a moment, looking at his brother behind the desk. Adam had stacks of books around him, and a mess of papers in front of him with a quill in hand. A tea tray sat idly to his le .

When Adam looked up, he smiled. "Jack, you're returned!" He stood up from his chair and abandoned the quill, making his way around the desk to greet his brother. Adam hugged Jack, slapping him on the back twice. "How was it with Claire? How do you feel?"

"Do I ask you such questions about your wife?" Jack countered teasingly.

Adam rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. How was London? Was the house to your liking?"

"Yes, the house was good. I appreciate ... Claire especially appreciated the house." Jack knew she still felt terribly awkward when servants waited on her, but as someone who had worked dawn until dusk nearly every day of her life, Jack was pleased to see her relax.

Adam smiled cheerfully, yet knowingly. "I wish I had known about you two, seen it or ... I don't know. I suppose romance by correspondence is the order of the day now anyway."

So, Adam, at least, bought their ruse. "I suppose it is," agreed Jack.

"I couldn't have chosen a more lovely girl for you. Claire is very sweet and ...!" Adam paused.

Jack frowned. "And what?"

"Oh, no, it is nothing awful. Grace always used to worry, still worries, about how terribly naive Claire is. Grace told me once that she was worried Claire would fall prey to someone she fancied herself besotted with." Adam shook o the thought. "But you obviously have nothing to worry about. This was, of course, some time ago."

Jack hated that his first thought was bitter. Why hadn't Grace and her mother kept better watch over Claire? How was such a naive girl allowed to fall victim to that lout?

"I can't tell you how pleased I am to know that you have made a match for yourself, and not married someone that Mother would have chosen for you."

"Speaking of, are you trying to have me skinned alive?" Jack asked. "The Rose Room?" he prompted, when Adam looked utterly confused.

"Oh," Adam realised. "Actually, that was Mother's idea," he informed Jack. "She insisted that you needed to have proper rooms now that you are returned from your honeymoon."

Oh, Jack realised. Rooms Plural. As was society tradition. It wasn't normal for a husband and wife to share a single bedroom. He wondered if that meant that Claire would sleep in the lady's bedroom now? He had grown quite used to her snoring.

Still, he was quite shocked that Cecily would gi him those rooms. Jack couldn't help but suspect an agenda. "The rooms are not the only reason I wanted to speak with you."

"Oh?"

Hope you enjoyed it!

Took a much needed night o last night. Hope you didn't miss me too much ;)

Just a big shout out to my UK teachers and parents who went back into remote learning today. And to anyone who is still remote teaching/learning. It is hell, and I completely empathise. You've got this!

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