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"Don't look now, but that's my ex over there."
Surely I'm not the only one who takes "don't look now" as "there's no
better time than now." I looked.
"Bad, Ali!" Another slap to my arm. "Bad, bad, bad Ali! Have you no
self control?"
Gena Showalter, Alice in Zombieland
XXI.
Claire's ballgown arrived early Saturday morning, and the timing
could not have been more fortuitous seeing as the winter assembly
was that evening. What was notfortuitous, however, was that her
measurements were not what they had been a few weeks earlier.
Even with the slight give of the fabric, Claire felt as though she had
grown rather voluptuous for her small frame, and the neckline did
nought but display it.
The fabric was a beautiful white silk, with the bodice and sleeves
adorned with Chantilly lace and pearls. Claire would have wanted to
wear the diamond ear bobs that Jack had gi ed her, but on top of the
gown, Claire would not have felt right wearing such riches in front of
people she knew so well.
"I don't suppose you could lace me in a little tighter, Ruby?" Claire
asked her sister's lady's maid. As Claire had no maid of her own yet,
Ruby had been attending her as well. "I seem to have indulged a little
at luncheon," she lied feebly.
A er knowing what the servants discussed downstairs, Claire knew
that Ruby was aware of the true reason her gown was a little snug.
But she didn't say anything as she tightened Claire's corset. Claire
prayed her chest did not appear inappropriate.
Ruby had fixed Claire's hair immaculately, and she had once again
donned rouge. Claire felt the prettiest she had ever been. Once her
gown was buttoned, and appearing semi-decent, her gloves were on,
and she had stepped into her slippers, Claire departed her dressing
room to find Jack waiting for her on the bed.
Reading, of course.
Jack hadn't noticed her for a brief moment, and Claire couldn't help
but smile at him. He was slouched against the pillows, his head
cocked to the side. His dark hair, which needed a trim, was curlier
than ever as it fell across his forehead. He had an expression of deep
concentration, though she could see the excitement in his hazel eyes
as he read something gripping. It was though she was staring at
innocent wonder, and there was great beauty in it.
Claire cleared her throat and Jack looked up, a wide, appreciative
smile spreading across his face. It was the smile she liked, the one
that touched his eyes, and the one that o en seemed to vanish at
times in this house.
As he stared, Claire quickly became self-conscious, and would have
no need for the rouge. "It is a little tight," Claire uttered nervously,
attempting to pull up her gown from the neckline. "I did not realise
how quickly expectant women expanded."
Jack laughed quietly as he abandoned his book and climbed o of
the bed. "You are beautiful. You are the standard of beauty all women
aspire to, for true beauty shines from within."
Claire's lips parted in surprise as Jack reached her. She could feel that
he meant every word with the utmost sincerity, and he was gazing
upon her with what could only be described as desire. Claire was
instantly reminded of what Jack wanted from her, and she felt a
nervous flutter of apprehension in her stomach.
Claire forced it aside, hating that her natural reaction to a ection had
become suspicion. She wanted to enjoy their evening, their first as a
married couple in the Ashwood parish.
Jack seemed to sense her hesitance and he smiled sympathetically.
"Did you know it is three years tonight since we met?" he asked.
Claire's eyes widened. Indeed, it was. Three years since their first and
only dance together.
It was also three years this evening since Claire had begun what she
thought was a courtship between herself and Arthur. Would he be in
attendance? For certain he would be.
She had managed to get out of attending church since returning to
Ashwood by feigning fatigue, and Jack had been only too happy to
stay home as well. Grace had sincerely been su ering with bouts of
nausea and was o en feeling poorly in the morning, and so the
Beresfords had not been in regular attendance. But Claire's
complaints were in e ort to avoid the inevitable.
What would she do? What would she say? Claire knew she ought to
do and say nothing, but what if he approached her? Jack had
forbidden her from ever seeing him again, and Claire meant to keep
that promise, but Arthur's cold words from whence they last spoke
haunted her.
Claire wondered if she should tell Jack of her apprehension. "I
suppose it is high time we danced a second, then," Claire managed to
reply with a small smile.
"Well, if you recall, I did ask you, but –" Jack stopped himself, and
Claire's eyes flashed to his.
She knew exactly what he was going to say. But she had spurned him
for Arthur. And Jack couldn't say it. Wouldn't say it, more like. And
she knew she couldn't say anything about what she might feel upon
seeing Arthur again. She didn't want to upset Jack.
"The waltz, I think," decided Jack. "At the very least. I would love to
dance a waltz with you."
***
"Mother, I am two and twenty. I can dance with whomever I please,"
Susanna insisted with a hu.
"You could be two and fortyfor all I care," Cecily replied, equally as
displeased. "The last thing you want to do is dance with the sort that
will start the whispers in this village. We are already returning to
London next year for your thirdseason," Cecily tsked. "You have two
brothers ... and I suppose the eldest Denham boy. He is a sort of
brother now."
Susanna scowled as Jack and Claire exchanged an awkward glance.
They had been lucky enough to share a carriage with Cecily and
Susanna while Adam and Grace travelled in the larger carriage to
collect Mrs Denham, Peter, and Jem, the latter of whom would be
attending his first assembly. Claire could not hide her annoyance at
the fact that her mother was allowing Jem to attend a ball when he
was a full two years younger than she had been her first time out.
Yet another of the many privileges that came along with being a part
of the male species.
Nevertheless, it meant that Jack had been very quiet while they
listened to Cecily lecture Susanna. To Cecily's credit, since they had
returned from London, Claire had not heard her say anything
particularly cruel to Jack. She did not say anything in particular to
him at all. They were an odd pair really, who treated one another with
indi erence, and exchanged barely a word or two a day.
Claire supposed though that this was what culminated of an
existence of lectures, and now Susanna bore the brunt of it. Claire felt
bad, really, considering she was two years younger than Susanna,
and yet because she was married, she was held in higher esteem.
"Mother, a dance is not some sort of devilish tryst, 'Susanna snapped.
"I am not the sort of stupid girl who could be duped by a man with a
few nice words for me. Really, should I be insulted at how thick you
think me?"
Claire was thankful that the carriage was near dark, as her cheeks
flamed red. Jack subtly reached for her hand and held it in his, saying
nothing.
"Oh, Susanna, you know not of these things. Villages like these thrive
on such scandals. Nothing ever happens and their lives are so dull
that they livefor a girl's stupidity," Cecily retorted. "And it is never the
man who faces reprimand and ostracism. You dance with a sweet-
looking butcher and the next thing you know you will have a rumour
floating around about you and he, oh, I don't know, that he was
ravishing you or something."
Jack squeezed Claire's hand.
"Ravishing," repeated Susanna slyly. "How marvellous."
Claire knew that Susanna was normally not so antagonistic, but she
so wished that their line of conversation was not so close to Claire's
own stupidity, as they so described it.
"Watch your tone," said Cecily tersely, "or I will have Mrs Hayes put
you over her knee again like she did when you were a child."
"I never get to have any fun," complained Susanna. "The only men
you allow me to dance with are the stuy, boring ones in London out
for a rich wife to put on their mantle. How lucky you are to have
married for love, Jack."
Susanna's address startled Jack. "Oh ... yes," he said awkwardly. "I
know," he added, with a little more composure.
"I shall make it a personal goal of mine, I think, to one day dance with
a man Mother deems so inappropriate, she will faint. How I will
laugh," Susanna declared, and Cecily glared at her.
"Would you like me to send you home?" Cecily threatened, raising her
eyebrows.
Susanna rolled her eyes subtly. "No," she sighed.
The carriage pulled to a stop outside the assembly hall, and they all
got out into the brisk, chilly air. The other carriage arrived shortly
a er, and their party entered into the assembly together, with Claire
hearing herself being announced to a ballroom as Jack's wife for the
first time.
All eyes were on the Beresfords as they descended into the ballroom.
Grace refused a dance card owing to her pregnancy, but Claire
accepted one slipping it onto her wrist. She doubted she would be
asked o en as she was now married, and she was not experiencing
the same ailing symptoms as Grace.
Susanna, too, in spite of her mother, very boldly accepted her dance
card. Adam, Grace, and Cecily were quickly claimed by the vicar and
his wife, and Mrs Denham o ered Claire and Jack a quick greeting
before being helped over to a chair by Peter and Jem.
Claire decided to focus her eyes on the musicians, willing herself not
to look around the room for fear she might see him. Anyway, she had
nothing to worry about while standing with Jack. He certainly
wouldn't dare approach her.
"Oh, no one is going to ask me to dance," Susanna hissed in
annoyance. "They all know Mother is such a dragon that she'd chase
away anyone who dared approach me."
"Oh, for God's sake," Jack said under his breath. "How ever did you
survive two sisters when I can barely manage one?" he uttered to
Claire. "Come on then," he urged, holding his hand out to Susanna.
"Oh, you ought to dance with Claire first," insisted Susanna. "It would
only be fair."
"Yes, but Claire is not the one whinging at me," Jack retorted
facetiously, before grinning at Claire. "Will you be alright for one
dance? You might go and sit with your mother?" Jack suggested.
Claire nodded. "Yes, go."
"Thank you, Claire," said Susanna gratefully as she accepted Jack's
o er.
Claire did not have a chance to go and sit with Mrs Denham before
she was intercepted by a very dapper looking young Jem. He
appeared to be wearing an old Sunday best of Peter's, though Jem
was quickly outgrowing it. He would be a tall man when he was
properly grown up, and even now at fi een, he stood a head over
Claire.
"You startled me, Jemmy," said Claire. "But you look very handsome."
Jem grinned proudly. "I already have my name on fourdance cards,
you know."
My, Jem was quick. "Do you even know how to dance?"
"Kate has been teaching me," he replied, nodding. "Anyway, this is for
you." He pulled a folded note out of his pocket and handed it to
Claire. "It's from Mrs Slickson. Something about a present for Mother
or something." Jem shrugged his shoulders as though he hadn't been
listening to his instructions.
And thankfully so. Claire paled as she knew that this note was
certainly not from Mrs Slickson.
"I'd better go and find my first partner," Jem announced, and with
that, he was o.
Claire toyed with destroying the note, but she couldn't help herself as
she unfolded it. Arthur had approached her brother. Had he managed
to capture Jem at a time when his mind was not preoccupied with
girls then Jem might have twigged onto his lie.
White always was my favourite on you and look how you have
dressed just for me. I have been going mad without you, my lovely
Claire.
Claire felt her heart hammer in her chest as all sorts of anger and pain
coursed within her. What did he think he was doing? In frustration she
ripped the note, first in half, then in quarters, then in eighths, until
the words would not be legible. She held the pieces in her hand in a
vice grip.
"Well, that was not very nice."
Claire froze, his voice so close that she felt his breath on the back of
her neck. "Go away," Claire whispered, her voice sounding so weak
and unconvincing.
Arthur casually stepped beside her and tsked. "Claire, you never have
such words for me. You are alwaysaccommodating to my every whim
and desire."
Claire felt her blood run sickeningly cold. They were in full view of
anyone paying attention. Especially Jack. Claire only prayed that he
was well focussed on Susanna. "You can't say such things to me. I am
married."
"Oh, darling," he chuckled condescendingly. "You know you like it
when I speak of my desire for you."
"Hush," snapped Claire in a low hiss. Had she ever liked such talk?
Much to her shame, yes, she had She had liked to hear how Arthur
had appreciated her. She had believed that such words meant he
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for being patient:) I've been seeing quite a few comments asking about my characters' ages so I thought I'd do a quick update. I am planning on adding a family tree up to the end date of this book at the end, and I'll do the same for each book in the series. I've written up my full family tree up until the end of my series with everyone's birthdate to help me keep track! (thanks for keeping me organised Kassilassie)

loved her. But now ... well, she really was one of those stupid girls

opened her dance card and scrawled in his name before she had even

a moment's time to protest. It was the first time she had looked at

him, and she saw the look of cunning pleasure in his green eyes.

Claire watched in anxious anguish as Arthur sauntered away. She

quickly opened her dance card to see where Arthur had written his

name, and she nearly lost her luncheon when she saw what dance he

Sorry I've been AWOL for a few days. Spending some down time

with family and enjoying the nice weather at the beach. Thanks

"I will see you later, dear Claire. I always claim what's mine."

In a swi , yet subtle move, Arthur had seized Claire's le hand,

Cecily and Susanna had been speaking about.

had claimed.

As of 1809:

Cecily - (b. 1761) age 48

Adam - (b. 1781) age 28

Jack - (b. 1783) age 26

Claire - (b. 1789) age 20

Peter - (b. 1791) age 18

Jem - (b. 1794) age 15

Yes, this will go down well ...

Susanna - (b. 1787) age 22 Ellen (Mrs Denham) - (b. 1760) age 49 Grace - (b. 1783) age 26 Kate - (b. 1785) age 24

Vote and comment xx

I'll do a full proper one on the epilogue:)

Continue reading next part □