

"She has craters you didn't create and darkness you don't deserve. She's as stunning as the moon on a cloudless night, but it may take millennia for her to find and manifest her own internal sunlight."

Curtis Tyrone Jones

----

VII.

Jack had started away from Claire, but something inside him was pushing him to turn around. Perhaps it was his conscience worrying over the fact that he had said something unintentionally rude. And the minute he had, he saw Claire scampering away into the woods, and not toward the forge as she had claimed.

She had lied to him.

The very notion unsettled him greatly. Jack wondered in the moment, perhaps, if that was hypocritical of him, considering that they, together, were lying to both of their families.

But they were not lying to each other.

Jack followed Claire quietly, hesitantly curious as to what might have persuaded her to attempt to deceive him. When accosted with the sight of his fiancée in the arms of another man, Jack realised that he should have been able to guess her motive.

He stood frozen, hidden by brush, watching as a man he recognised ravished Claire. She was not an unwilling participant. How ... how dare she? How dare he? Who was he? Jack knew him. What was his name? Where did Jack know him from?

When the man pulled away from Claire, Jack was about to intervene, shout something, do anything, but his legs would not move. He didn't know quite what he was feeling in that moment, but a burning fury was igniting in his belly.

"I'd wager your fiancé doesn't kiss you like that."

The man's words were cold, taunting, and possessive, like those of a scorned lover, and Jack knew for certain that this blackguard was responsible for Claire's condition.

He was responsible ... he had let her ... he had made her cry ... and yet she still went to him? What wicked spell had this lout cast upon Claire?

"What do you want?" Claire asked, her voice as soft and hesitant.

Jack watched as she looked up at him in an attempt to be brave.

Lord, he wanted to go to her, to take her, but he needed to see this. He needed to see what hold this man had over her. Claire was entirely at his mercy.

His voice whipped her like a cat on nine tails, as he seethed, "How dare you! How dare you flit into bed with another man."

Shock filled Claire's face at the false accusation. She was silent, and Jack yearned to know what she was thinking.

But he continued. "I don't think I meant it before, but I can see now that I was right. You would open your legs for anyone. Only, don't you know the stories, Claire? Don't you know his reputation?"

In and amongst his fury at hearing such an accusation made, Jack suddenly remembered where he had last seen this man. The winter ball three years earlier. It was where he had first met Claire ... and he was the man to claim her for the dance after Jack. He could remember seeing the look of elation on Claire's face as he accepted defeat and stepped away from her. This was the man she had spurned him for, if that was what it could be called.

Was this how long their tryst had been going on? This man had spent three years seducing an innocent young woman, only to leave her when it mattered?

"I ... I never," stammered Claire. Her voice was frightened, fragile, and filled with emotion. "What do you want from me? You sent me away. You laughed at me. You broke my heart!" Her voice finally cracked, shattered. "You fooled me into thinking you loved me. I thought you would marry me, but you let me. Arthur, you are dishonourable."

Arthur. That was it. Arthur Slickson, Jack recalled. That cruel, evil, lying ...

Jack continued to listen to their conversation until he couldn't anymore. He listened as this man laid another layer of manipulation into the web of dishonesty that he had spent three years weaving in Claire's head. Somehow, he had made a once bright and innocent young girl believe that she was deserving of this treatment.

Jack snapped, quite literally as a twig broke under his foot as he lunged out, when he heard Arthur utter, "You would do anything for me. I know from experience."

Arthur's hands were on Claire's face, but her wide, reddened yet expressive eyes were on Jack.

"Kindly take your hands off my fiancée, or the next time we meet, you shall be staring down the barrel of my pistol from twenty paces away."

Jack meant it. With the pure and unadulterated fury he felt, he would have challenged the man right then and there. Now knowing what he did, knowing what he had done to Claire, Jack knew that he ought to challenge him for Claire's honour, to force him to marry her.

But that couldn't happen. Claire did not deserve to be his victim forever. Jack wouldn't allow it. She deserved a good marriage, and a good man. Jack did not know if theirs would be a good marriage, but he hoped that he was a better man than the scoundrel who was standing between them.

To Jack's surprise, Arthur's hands fell, and he turned his body to properly face Jack. He had not changed much in his appearance in the three years since Jack had last seen him, perhaps only the smug expression was new.

"So, you have learned Claire's scandalous little secret?" taunted Arthur.

Jack's eyes looked past Arthur at Claire, who seemed to fold into herself, as though she was trying to appear as small as possible.

Jack could not bother replying to such a remark. "Claire," he said with quiet authority. "Please come."

Claire complied immediately, walking straight past Arthur without daring to look up at him. She came to Jack's side, and he instinctively stepped in front of her.

"Go and wait for me by the forge," Jack instructed.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered, so quietly that even Arthur might have missed it.

"Go," he repeated, and this time, Claire did not question him. She turned and let them standing there.

"Do you want to kill me?" Arthur mocked when they were alone.

"I won't deny that the thought has crossed my mind in the last quarter hour or so," replied Jack steadily. He stepped forward, close enough to Arthur that should he have reached out his arm, he would have brushed the lapel of Arthur's coat with his fingers. "But I will tell you that you have spoken with Claire for the final time." Jack found that his voice took on a new tone, a dark, authoritative tone that he had not heard from himself before. "You are never to come near her again."

Arthur let out an amused exhale. "You confuse me," he murmured. "You could have anyone. Your connections, your name, your rank ... and yet you settle for my spoiled goods? Didn't your father ever teach you that you bed those sorts of girls, Beresford? You don't marry them."

"Somehow, I do not think civilised conversation is going to get my point across," realised Jack.

Just as Arthur's brow furrowed, Jack's clenched fist connected with his jaw, projecting such force that Arthur flew back a few feet before hitting the ground. Jack shook his hand out and flexed his fingers, checking for injury, as he watched a dazed Arthur try to sit up.

As he spat blood, and perhaps a tooth, Jack leaned over him. "Come anywhere near Claire again, and I will end you," he threatened, before turning on his heel to walk away.

As he did, Arthur shouted at her in a voice marred by slurs, "You'll always know I was there first! You'll always know her bastard isn't yours!"

Jack kept walking.

He found Claire by the forge, where he had told her to wait, pulling at her handkerchief nervously. When he joined her, she gasped. Had she not been expecting him to return?

"Are you alright?" Jack asked patiently.

Claire nodded helplessly.

"Good." Jack inhaled. "I can take a lot, Claire. I have done. But I won't be lied to. You lied to me before, and that can't happen if we are to enter into this together."

"I know," whispered Claire.

Jack wanted to say a lot more. He wanted to ask her why she accepted that. He wanted to ask her if she believed she deserved his cruelty. He wanted to ask how she could love a man who treated her so ill. He wanted to ask if she knew that she was being manipulated. But it was not the time.

"Why don't you scold me?"

Claire's question caught Jack off guard, and yet it really should not have. It was what she expected, what she thought she deserved. Did he scold her? He probably told her she was stupid if ever she made a mistake, among other ungentlemanly manners.

"Because you are not a child," Jack replied, "and I am not your possessor. All I ask is honesty and transparency. It is vital if this charade is to work."

"I ... I can't believe you will still honour your proposal," said Claire tentatively. "I ... I am such a fool ... I can't believe I let him fool me again ..."

What must it have been like, Jack wondered, for Claire to tell the man she had been secretly ... courting perhaps was the right word, that she was with child, only to have him laugh at her? He had seen how very broken she was in the library the other night, and she was still so now. Jack would need to tread carefully.

"He fooled you, yes," agreed Jack, "but you saw the best in him, or at least you wanted to. And that is a very good quality, indeed. To have someone view us as our best selves is quite the ideal."

Claire dried her fresh tears with the handkerchief that she had been pulling apart. Jack reached into his pocket and produced his own. Claire accepted it with a grateful whimper.

"I will take care of you, Claire. Of you both. But you must promise me something. I ask only one thing in return."

"Yes?"

Claire's hands were trembling as she wiped her eyes, so Jack covered them with his own, helping her to dry her face.

"You cannot ever see him again," he said calmly.

If Claire was ever to be seen with Arthur Slickson, their entire marriage story would be discredited. The child outed. Their families ruined. And Jack ... well, Jack did not know if he had the stomach to ever view what he had just seen again.

"I accept your condition," Claire promised, nodding her head as her eyes watered over once more.

How protective he already felt. He could not fathom what he would feel if Arthur somehow managed to snake his way back into Claire's head. Considering his stomach had already contorted itself into painful knots, Jack wondered if he ... if they ... would survive it at all.

----

**Hope you enjoyed it! Sorry it's a bit shorter than normal. It was either a short chapter tonight, or you had to wait. I posted on my message board earlier, but basically I'm really anaemic right now and I have to have an intravenous iron blast thing to get my energy back. I have been severely fatigued, like to the point where I feel like I'm going to be sick. I could sleep for ten hours and wake up feeling worse. It just sucks.**

**But I have one more week to get through of school before it's summer break! I. NEED. REST! Alright, my eyes are half closed as I'm typing this. I need to sleep. Night guys!**

**Vote and comment!**