

"There is nothing more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends." Homer, *The Odyssey*

XI.

Claire had not expected to cry as she farewelled her family. It was not as though she would never see them again. After all, the plan for the honeymoon journey was merely a fortnight. But it was the first time she had ever left her family. Perhaps that very thought was why Mrs Denham kept dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief as well.

Ashwood's most stately coach had been ordered for their use, and Claire had never been inside something so grand. Really, there was room enough for Jack and Claire to have their own wide bench, but for the purpose of appearing as blissful newlyweds, they were seated beside each other. The bench opposite was occupied by a brown leather bag dutifully packed by Mrs Hayes, filled with anything they might need on their journey.

"We are to stay at Ashwood Place," murmured Jack once they were away.

Claire had not given much thought as to where they would stay. But, of course, the Ashwood Estate reached further than their Hertfordshire village. All society families had homes in London. She then recalled that the Beresfords had spent over a decade living in London, so they most certainly had a fine home. Claire could not envision Cecily living in anything less.

"Where is it?" she asked, as though she had any idea at all of the geography of London. He might have told her the Moon and she would have been none the wiser.

"Mayfair," replied Jack.

Claire had never heard of Mayfair, but she would have wagered it was terribly fashionable. "Do you live there always?" she continued to inquire.

Jack shook his head. "No. I have not lived there since ... well, ever really. When my family moved to London, my brother was sent to Eton, and I away to a formative boarding school before I could join him there. We had school holidays and Christmases at Ashwood Place, but it was never home. No, I live ... well, I keep an apartment for myself nearby."

Claire noticed Jack's tone change as he mentioned his apartment, as though it was something shameful to mention. She could not think of anything shameful about one's dwelling ... unless ... perhaps he was not the apartment's only resident.

"It must have been difficult being sent away to school so young," Claire decided to say, leaving that topic of conversation be.

"It is what's expected, I suppose," said Jack simply.

Claire felt her arm snake discreetly over her belly as the thought of her own child leaving home so young to go away to school filled her head. Surely, they didn't have to. Her brothers were educated at the church school. Peter ... well, Peter was terribly good with numbers, and he might have liked to study further, but Jem was just as clever as any other young boy.

Jack surprised her by chuckling. "Claire, if our child wished to be educated at home, I would take that as a personal compliment. It would mean that we have created an environment so positive and enriching that he or she would not want to leave. Trust me, that is the sort of home I would want to raise a child in."

"You seem to have mastered the talent of reading my thoughts ever so quickly," observed Claire.

"I am glad of it," replied Jack. "It saves me time when you will not share them with me freely ... yet."

The carriage travelled up the main street of the village purposely, at the behest of the vicar. Many parishioners had gathered to wave the newlyweds off on their honeymoon, just as they had gathered for the wedding of Adam and Grace. Claire found herself smiling, looking out the window, and waving to the people who had known her all her life. As they passed what was her home, Claire noticed a tall, blond man standing outside of it, leaning against the stone wall in wait.

Arthur's stare was cold and piercing, and it was enough to frighten her away from the window. Her reaction drew Jack's attention, and he noticed Arthur's presence just before they were too far away.

Claire watched Jack's jaw clench, much the way it had this morning when she had confessed her original thought to name her child after his or her blood father.

"I didn't know he would be there," Claire whispered. "I promise."

Jack surprised Claire by putting his arm around her shoulder, almost cuddling her into his side. Such an action surprisingly settled her. "I know, Claire," he uttered. "Listen, I must confess something to you."

Confess? Claire wasn't sure she liked that word.

"My life is in London," Jack told her firmly. "Well, how I live my life is in London. My residence, the clubs I frequent, the people I socialise with ..." He sighed. "London can seem like a very small city at times, and the news that I am wed will, I am certain, spread quickly. I imagine it will draw much surprise and commentary ... given how I," he paused, trying to find the right words, "spent much of my time."

Claire nodded slowly, understanding his meaning, and not exactly knowing how to feel.

"I have already asked you this, but I will say it again. Please, don't believe everything you hear," he implored. "I hope I have shown you much of my character. It is very easy to fall into a pattern in London, when everything is at one's fingertips. I often seek ... well, what I seek, I look for in all the wrong places." He shook his head shamefully. "Underneath, my intentions are good, but ... my behaviour ... I am not proud of myself. I know I am capable of more ..." Jack seemed to be getting tongue-tied, unable to finish a sentence coherently.

Claire surmised that Jack's reputation was, perhaps, more sordid than she was aware of. She did not doubt that he indulged in drinking, gambling, and women. He was an aristocrat, and that seemed to be normal. The fact that he felt guilt, however, was not.

Claire knew there was much more to Jack Beresford than his reputation, and she believed that she only knew the surface of his true character.

"It would injure me greatly, indeed, if you become embarrassed ... of if I embarrass you ..."

Such a notion astonished Claire so much that she interrupted Jack. "Embarrass me?" she gasped. "Jack, if you are under the impression that I am some sort of saint, then you are most sorely mistaken. Or have you forgotten that I am ... sullied?"

"Sullied?" repeated Jack angrily. "What a foul word, and not one I would ever choose to describe you, Claire. You are my wife, and you are under my protection, and no such word shall ever be used to describe you."

His defensive tone would have been startling were it not so flattering. Claire had never heard any man speak so firmly, yet so tenderly before. "Well," she murmured quietly. "I might say the same thing to you. Are you not under my protection now, too? The man who was willing to become my husband is not deserving of the character you have just painted for him."

Jack smiled at her response, proudly so. "I like that you think well of me."

"Trust me," said Claire vehemently. "The feeling is mutual."

A sudden jolt shook Claire awake, and she straightened with a start. She had not realised that she had fallen asleep, and on so short a journey, too! It took a moment to realise that her hand was resting on Jack's thigh, and her head had been on his chest. She quickly removed her hand and Jack smirked.

"Considering the price of these bloody boxes, you would think they'd absorb the road bumps a little more," Jack tsked.

Claire put a slight space between them, but not enough to cause offense. "I did not mean to fall asleep," she said. "I have never been in a carriage this long before. I think the movement lulled me."

"I did not mind. Your back proved to be a fine armrest," Jack mused, motioning to her how he had been resting his arm. In his hand was a book. Jack looked to be nearly a third of the way through.

Claire smiled. "Are you a good reader?"

"Perhaps too good," he replied sheepishly. "I often take myself to read when I really ought to be occupied on other things."

Claire could not remember the last time she had read a book. She could read just fine, and she had enjoyed varying forms of literature during her schooling, but there never seemed to be any time to read, especially after the death of her father. If she did not keep up the house, then no one else could.

"I wish I read more," Claire stated.

"I believe Ashwood's library is one of the more convincing reasons for me to make our home in Hertfordshire," replied Jack. "I have never encountered another like it. You shall have free reign."

Claire enjoyed that little titbit of information. "What are you reading?" she queried curiously, peering at the page he was on.

Jack closed the novel and showed Claire the cover. "Robinson Crusoe! I found it in the bag." He nodded to the open brown leather bag opposite them. "Mrs Hayes knows this was my favourite as a boy. I haven't read it since I was but ten. I find it enthralling still."

"What is it about?"

"It is an autobiography, I believe, or at least a true account of a man's survival," explained Jack. "This man, Crusoe, survives the perils of land and sea, and being stranded on an island for twenty-eight years, before he is finally rescued."

"Oh, my." Claire was only twenty herself. "What an awful long time to be lost."

"I thought nothing would be more incredible than being cast away when I was a boy," recalled Jack, chuckling. "Now, however, I do not find the draw of battling a cannibal so exciting."

"What on earth is a cannibal?" exclaimed Claire. "And why on earth would one need to battle it?"

Jack tensed slightly. "Oh, you know, they are a People with a rather unusual diet," he explained coyly.

"What could they possibly eat that is so unusual?" Claire thought for a moment, trying to guess at the oddest thing a person could consume. "Do they eat grass?"

At that, Jack burst into a fit of laughter, and Claire frowned deeply. She did not like not being privy to whatever this joke was.

But her displeasure soon cleared when she realised what was suddenly outside of her window. London. Buildings, houses, carriages and people, as far as the eye could see! Oh, how had Jack ever described London as small? Claire had never seen something so splendid and grand!

"I wish I remembered what I thought of London the first time I saw it," muttered Jack, smiling at Claire and her wonder.

"It is truly the most magnificent place I have ever seen!" Claire gushed, though not a hard feat seeing as her travel experience extended only to the Ashwood parish.

Claire all but pressed her face against the glass of the window to take in as much of the sights as she possibly could before the carriage passed them.

Without turning to look at him, Claire added, "You are going to tell me what a cannibal eats later, I hope you realise."

To which Jack laughed again.

Ah, London. How I miss thee. Three years ago today I was running around London. And today I was supposed to be doing the same :(Bloody covid.

I would never leave Australia, or Melbourne, to live anywhere else. But if I had to, London would be where I chose to live. My experience was just magical.

But anyway, happy bonus upload! Now that Christmas is over, I'll be able to update a little more frequently :) I won't promise every day because doing that nearly killed me with sleep deprivation, but do check back every few days, and you might find the next chapter waiting for you!

Embarrass comment xxx