

"Once you embrace your value, talents and strengths, it neutralizes when others think less of you." Rob Liano

XVIII.

Jack watched as the familiar sights of London slowly started to disappear and their windows became greeted by a sea of countryside. Not even his book, which was sitting opposite him in the bag filled with essentials for the journey, would distract him. And that was indeed a first.

Never once had he been happy in that house save for these last two weeks with Claire. They truly were in their own little world, and Jack was entirely anxious for leaving it.

"When shall we announce the pregnancy?" Claire uttered quietly, breaking the silence with a question that she already knew the answer to.

They had discussed this a few days earlier, but Jack was grateful for the distraction.

"We agreed in a fortnight, yes? A er the assembly. By your calculations, you will be nearing three months into your pregnancy. When the child is born, we will just say it is an eight-month baby, or perhaps we might even return to London for the birth and mask the date of birth."

"I should like to return to London," agreed Claire. "I ... I had such a marvellous time, Jack. I never thought I would be able to have such fun, but I did."

Her wording caused Jack to look down at her, and in her eyes, Jack saw the same anxiety. Claire was nervous, extremely so, and she had every right to be.

"They won't doubt," he promised her quietly. "We will ensure that they do not." Jack covered her hand with his and held it tightly. "I am glad you enjoyed yourself. Truth be told, I have never had a finer time in London, either."

"Do you think ..." Claire began, but then she stopped herself.

Jack frowned. "Do I think what?"

Claire looked down. "No, forget I said anything. It is really not my place."

Jack's curiosity was indeed intrigued, and anything was better than thinking about Ashwood House and its residents at that moment. "Tell me," he pressed. "It is your place as my wife to ask me whatever you like."

Claire took a breath. "Do you think, now that you are married, seemingly settled, your mother will be kinder to you?" Claire looked as though she regretted asking the question the minute it escaped her lips, and Jack couldn't help but let his shoulders roll forwards in disappointment as her question did not serve as a distraction.

"No," he replied simply.

"Because she does not approve of me?" Claire guessed.

"It is highly likely that she does not approve of you, but a wife is inconsequential to my mother's approval ... unless, of course, I wed a princess or something." Upon seeing Claire's disappointment, Jack clarified, "It would not be a personal slight, Claire, I assure you. I am certain, in time, my mother will like you very well. She certainly gets on with Grace, it appears. But I would still wager that if my brother felt inclined to wed an heiress with a dowry the size of Susanna's, she would be singing from the roo op."

"She frightens me," confessed Claire. "I do not know how Grace manages her."

Jack chuckled. "Grace humours her, or at least from what I have seen. She listens to Cecily's lectures and advice before going behind her back and doing whatever she likes."

"You trivialise her, and yet I know she affects you," observed Claire. "I promised myself I wouldn't pry, but seeing as we are both going back into the lion's den, won't you tell me anything?"

Jack rested his head back against the glass of the back window. The movement of the carriage making his head tap against it lightly. "It's not prying," he assured her quietly. "Every great family, and I say great without the positive meaning, must preserve their legacy through siring sons. My father used to make it sound like a bloody stable, and I hate that I cannot think of it otherwise." He h u ed.

"There must be an heir, of course. The lack of an heir is tricky. Lawyers are brought in and heirs are located outside of the family. Once influential families can be ruined without an heir. But there must also be a spare. A second son must be produced, an insurance policy in case bloody lung fever or something gets the first. If a couple is so inclined, a third son would be classed as a bonus, but many couples, like my parents, well, they couldn't stand to copulate any further a er the third attempt became Susanna."

"I suppose when I was younger, I was quite the hellion. I never received any attention, but then most children in our sort of family don't. My mother became obsessed with Susanna becoming a lady. My father invested all his time into Adam. And I was le behind. I misbehaved on purpose, I talked back, I was disrespectful, and ... really, quite unendearing."

"My father did, occasionally, spend time with me. He taught me to ride, fence and shoot. But my mother ... my mother severely disliked me. By the time that I realised my behaviour wouldn't do me any favours with her, it was too late. She had no use for me, and certainly no time. She would say things to me, things that a son would never forget from his mother."

Jack did not remember how old he was when he first started taking himself o to the library, or wherever he could find a quiet corner to read, but it was soon a er Cecily Beresford declared that her second son was good for nothing.

"A er a while my behaviour turned spiteful," Jack confessed, "and I assure you that I am not proud of it. I was a orded the very best of educations that money can buy, and I spent my years terrorising my teachers just so my mother would get a letter about me. I really don't know what I was trying to achieve, but I couldn't allow myself to conform. I wouldn't be what she wanted me to be a er so many years of her putting me down."

"There are two, maybe three respectable vocations for a second son as he lies in wait ... waiting for his brother to drop dead of plague or waiting to be superfluous once he produces his own heir. The church or the military. My mother had always meant me for the church as she didn't trust that I was disciplined enough to serve in a regiment. To her credit, I probably wasn't. But I knew from quite early on that I was not meant to waste my life away writing sermons. And when I gave it up, she might as well have done the same to me."

"She never spoke to me save to lecture me or to scold me. If my name was on her lips, it was being hissed. She never met my eye with anything but a glare."

"I'm a failure in her eyes. I have amounted to nothing, and she detests it. She sees nothing good in me, or about me, and she can't help but point it out every time she sees me. And I think the reason why I stay away, why I avoid my family, is because, deep down, I know she is right."

Jack had never relayed that tale to another before, and once he had begun, he couldn't stop. He had certainly never revealed that he believed his mother was right about him, and he hated that he had just said such things to Claire. Jack liked, no, he loved that Claire thought well of him, and he honestly didn't know what he would do if she ever saw him as his mother did.

"I know my mother has a heart. I've seen it. But she has never shown it to me. Before my father died, he told me ..." Jack's breath caught in his throat. Peregrine had told Jack that there was greatness in him if he only found his purpose. The peace it gave Jack to know that his father saw such potential was profound, but the subsequent shame in amounting to very little nearly three years later was great indeed. "Well, I am glad he can't see me."

Jack and Claire sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of the carriage wheels turning over the stones scattered about the road. Jack stared directly ahead, unable to believe he had just confessed so much. It was a burden that had weighed heavily on him, but he dared not look down at Claire.

She surprised him, however, when she brought her other hand across to place it on top of the one that was already holding her le. "I wish my father could see you," she said quietly. "I wish he could have known you."

Jack felt a very unfamiliar feeling of swelling in his chest as his head and gaze snapped down to hers. Claire was smiling, sympathetically, warming, kindly, all at once.

"One does not need to have an extraordinarily successful career in order to be a person worthy of respect," Claire said vehemently. "My father was a country tailor and it was a good week if we were considered to be poor. O en, we were poorer than that. But that did not mean my father was not respectable. He was a good man who made the right choices about the people for whom he was responsible." She turned on the seat a little so that she could properly face him. "I do not think you realise just what you have done for me, Jack. Me, someone you barely knew before our wedding. Do you know how many men would have heard my situation and then o ered me their hand? You are respectable as a minimum and I could think of far better descriptors for you. Which is why I wish my father could have known you, because I am certain he would be glad that I married someone so incredibly kind and decent."

Jack had never heard such words from anyone before. He had never heard anyone defend him thus before with evidence of his merits. Did it matter what his mother thought if Claire thought this well of him?

"I am on your side," promised Claire, "and as much as the duchess frightens me," she shuddered, "should I hear anything about you that does not align with your true character, then I will protect you. Just as you are protecting me."

Jack had to smile as he imagined Claire, as little as she was, standing up and shouting at his mother across a dinner table. He would pay to see that. But then, he realised, Claire was willing to set aside her fears to stand up for him.

They might have journeyed to London as strangers, but they were returning as a team.

Oh, so much to come. A ball (and historically the winter assembly does serve some hot tea), two babies in the family, and then an absolutely horrible - oh ... I suppose I shouldn't spoil anything *evil laugh*

Hope you enjoyed it!

I got a question that I did answer but as I like answering you guys' questions, I thought I would pop my answer here, as well. Why do I upload so late? Well, I don't know what time it is where you are, but I upload between 11pm and 2am AEDT. Basically, I take myself o to bed and write until the chapter is finished. I upload at this time because it's the only time I have to finish myself where I won't be questioned about what I'm doing on my laptop. There you have it :)

I hope you are all okay and safe in the world and that your families and friends are okay too. When you come and visit me, I hope my books serve as a distraction like Don Quixote and Robinson Crusoe do for Jack. Georgian/Regency England is my favourite time to visit.

Vote and comment xxx