

"He will be sorry for the way he treated you. Don't you worry about that. Focus on your growth and watch his eyes gaze in sorrow as he knows, he was the bastard that made you strong." Nikki Rowe

XXII.

The waltz. The dance Jack had specifically requested. Claire panicked as she looked over at Jack, finding him still on the dance floor with Susanna. Had he seen? Claire quickly supposed that Jack would have flattened Arthur with his fists and caused a scene had he been aware of Arthur approaching her.

Should she tell Jack? Claire stressed in anguish. He was bound to find out when Arthur claimed her. His name was on her dance card. She could hardly refuse. To do so would be the height of rudeness. To forget or forgo a partner was simply not done and was indeed a great slight.

But the real question was would Jack believe that Claire had not invited his attentions? She had hardly realised what was happening before Arthur had finished scribbling his name. Indeed, his penmanship was very ill, and spoke of someone in a rush.

Claire quickly retreated towards her mother, not wanting to draw any further attention towards herself. Mrs Denham was sitting alone, as both Jem and Peter had already selected partners. She was watching the festivities with a smile.

Claire sat down beside Mrs Denham, and her mother turned to her. "I cannot believe how grown up you look in that gown, Claire. You are a vision, to be sure."

Claire managed a small smile for her mother. "Thank you, Mama. Jack was really too generous in London."

"A fine man, indeed," noted Mrs Denham. "Do you know, I do not believe his mother gives him enough credit, but that is between you and me," she added quietly.

Claire could have laughed. Her mother didn't know the half of it. "I have never known anyone more decent," she promised.

"Was that Arthur Slickson I saw you speaking to just then?" Mrs Denham asked casually, her voice seeming to rise half an octave in curiosity.

Claire feigned interest in the dancers. "Yes," she said casually, or as casually as she could muster. "He came to offer me congratulations on my nuptials." Another lie. Another sin. When would it end?

"Strange," Mrs Denham thought aloud. "I've never known Arthur Slickson to think of anyone beyond himself in all the years I have known him."

A chill ran down Claire's spine. It seemed a natural defence of hers to speak for Arthur, to tell her mother of a virtue that only she could see, as she had done before their clandestine courtship. But Claire managed to stop herself from telling another lie. She had not always believed they were lies. Claire had obviously been very talented at fooling even herself, along with her family. Arthur Slickson possessed no virtues.

And he certainly deserved no courtesies.

"I quite agree, Mama."

Claire saw Mrs Denham's eyes widen in utter shock. "My!" she remarked. "I know your little attachment ended some time ago, but I never thought I would live to see the day when Arthur Slickson was anything less than a king in your eyes, my dear!"

Claire felt an utter fool and was truly embarrassed by her own ignorance. How ashamed she felt to have sung that man's praises, to have believed his tales so easily. She felt every bit as stupid as the girls Susanna and Cecily had described in the carriage.

Claire could no longer live under his spell. She could no longer lend any piece of herself to the memory of what she thought she have experienced with Arthur. It certainly wasn't love.

Love wasn't cruel. Love wasn't dictatorial. Love didn't come with conditions.

The entire reason she was compromised was because Arthur had led her to believe that physical intimacy was what she needed to do to prove her love for him.

Claire wasn't certain what it was she had experienced, but it wasn't love. She had never been in love, but she did want to be. She wanted to love properly, and she wanted to know what it was like to be loved properly.

Claire watched as the musicians played their final note and the dancers applauded. Susanna was so happy to have danced, and she hugged her brother gratefully. Jack smiled, one of his wide, crinkly smiles that she so enjoyed. She recalled her realisation from the first night of their honeymoon.

Jack wanted Claire to love him.

Though this realisation was only a month old, Claire knew that at the time, she had still believed herself in love with Arthur. She had not thought herself capable of loving another man, even one so good as Jack.

But she could love Jack, Claire thought hopefully. If she tried, if she allowed her heart to feel again, she could love him, and perhaps, be lucky enough to experience love in return.

"I would honestly prefer never to think of Mr Slickson, Mama," murmured Claire. "A childhood fantasy that belongs in my past."

"God help the woman who marries him is all I'll say," Mrs Denham replied. Her tone changed as she tapped the top of Claire's leg. "Now, am I to see you dancing tonight?" she asked.

"Absolutely," enthused Jack, who had joined them from the dance floor.

Claire's heart, which she had thought was quite dead, suddenly flipped in her chest, sending a deep, crimson blush to her cheeks and a flutter of apprehension to her stomach. Claire looked down so that Jack couldn't see the embarrassing colour of her cheeks, and she suddenly realised that she was nervous.

Her husband was making her feel nervous.

"Claire, are you alright?"

Much to Claire's humiliation, Jack knelt down in front of her and led her chin with his index finger, bringing her eyes to his. Her heart all but stopped when she realised how close they were, and she couldn't breathe a gasp.

How had she never noticed just how handsome Jack was? His hair was divine, the colour of glossy chocolate, and she longed to tease her fingers in his ringlet curls. His eyes were large and expressive, and the most beautiful shade of hazel. Gold was scattered throughout the iris, while a thin line of green surrounded his pupils. His eyelashes were thick and long, and the sort any woman would long for, and his strong brows were knitted together in concern. His full lips were parted and would reveal a dazzling smile were he not worried. His jaw was angular and strong, reflecting the broadness of his shoulders and the strength in his arms.

"You look hot. Dear Lord, you aren't feverish?" Jack quickly pressed the back of his hand to Claire's forehead to feel her temperature and relaxed slightly when he felt there was none.

"No, I am quite well," she managed, her voice as soft as a whisper. How could she tell him that the reason she had collapsed into schoolgirl embarrassment was because she was finally realising that she liked the way he looked?

"She is a blushing new bride, Jack," Mrs Denham declared, to which Claire willed the floor to open and swallow her. She glared at her mother.

Jack chuckled, though Claire could see that he did not believe Mrs Denham's assessment. A pang of pain his Claire as she realised such a reaction was her doing.

"Does my bride feel well enough to dance with her husband?" Jack asked, playing along.

But as he reached for the dance card on Claire's wrist, an audible gasp escaped Claire as she instinctively snatched it away. Her swift reaction shocked both Jack and Mrs Denham, and she saw an expression on Jack's face that she recognised. It was one of rejection. He stood up and stepped away from her.

"Claire, really!" exclaimed Mrs Denham in a scolding manner.

"No, no, it's quite alright, Mrs Denham," said Jack calmly, in a tone of acceptance, another that Claire recognised.

No, she couldn't stand for this. She wouldn't stand for this.

"I'm hungry!" announced Claire, jumping up from her chair and meeting with Jack so quickly that she bumped into him. He quickly righted her by placing his hands on her upper arms. "Might you take me into the dining room?" she asked.

Jack stared at her quizzically. "Whatever you want," he accepted, allowing Claire to take his arm. He led her away from Mrs Denham and toward the dining room.

The tables were laden with food, as they always were at this assembly, but Claire had no desire to eat. As it was so early in the evening, the dining room was not heavily occupied, and so they had some semblance of privacy for a quiet conversation.

"What strikes your fancy?" asked Jack. "Sweet or savoury?"

"Neither, I'm not hungry," Claire said quickly as she dismissed her dance card in her hand before turning to him. "I'm sorry for flinching," she apologised.

Jack saw the dance card in her hand before an expression of understanding appeared on his face. "Claire, I should be the one to apologise. I should not have presumed. I would never take liberties with you."

Her heart flipped again. "No, I promise you it's not that," she assured him. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to quell her nerves, Claire endeavoured to be honest. "Promise you won't be angry."

Her request caught Jack off guard, and he frowned. "What would I be angry about?"

Claire knew her meagre attempt was unjustified. One could not ask such a thing when one knew the topic of discussion would result in a reaction. "While you were dancing, Arthur came and spoke to me," she told him quietly.

Jack's entire body tensed, and he stared down at her with hardened eyes.

"I didn't ask him to, I promise," Claire insisted. "I was dismissive, and I had no desire to speak with him. Before I knew what was happening, he signed my dance card and that is why I didn't want you to see it. I didn't want you to think I had accepted him." Claire opened the dance card and showed it to Jack.

Claire could hear Jack grinding his teeth in anger as he read Arthur's name on her otherwise blank card.

"I am not going to dance with him," promised Claire. "Really, I have no desire to dance with anyone but you." Jack had no idea how much she meant those words. "Please, do not let this spoil our evening," implored Claire. "Do you believe me?"

Jack forced himself to take a breath, and then another, before he said, "Yes." He then added, "I am going to kill him."

"No!" cried Claire, a little too loudly. "No," she said again in a hushed tone. "Please, I don't want anything to do with him!" she declared. "I don't want any thought of him to occupy yours or my mind. I told you because you asked for honesty. But when we walk back into the ballroom, I don't want you to be thinking of issuing him with a demand for satisfaction." Claire shuddered at the very thought.

Jack swallowed as he tried to regain his composure. "Honesty, Claire. I was not intending on killing him honourably," he muttered truthfully. "Honesty, Claire. Do you mean it? You don't want anything to do with him?" He was watching her, looking for any hint of a falsehood, any sign of hesitation.

But as nervous as she was, Claire could emphatically say, "Yes."

Jack's shoulders released some of his tension. The tension then led from his facial muscles, and she even saw the beginning of a smile. "If I ask you to dance, will you flinch away from me?"

Claire smiled as she slipped her dance card off her wrist. Taking it between her hands, she ripped it in half, an action resulting in a hearty laugh from Jack. "Would you look at that? I have no awaiting partners. I am free for every dance this evening."

"Every dance?" Jack arched an eyebrow. "Challenge accepted, my lady."

Jack led Claire back into the ballroom where the couples were assembling for the next dance. Claire spied Susanna standing with Peter, and Jem with a young lady she was not familiar with. She also saw Arthur joining the dance with a lady from the neighbouring parish. Arthur noticed Claire immediately, and looked upon her union with Jack with a sneer.

Had she always thought Arthur handsome? Claire shuddered to believe that she had once thought Arthur beautiful. But now, all she saw in his place was a very small, very bitter man, who had no idea how to behave like a gentleman.

For he so lacked manners, then so could Claire. Height of rudeness be damned. She held up her dance card so that Arthur could see it, before tossing it over her shoulder as she took her place with Jack.

Some of you doubted my girl but I hope she did you proud!

Did anyone else start singing the "Ten Duel Commandments" when I wrote "demand satisfaction" or was that just me?

... Number one! The first, demand satisfaction. If they apologise, no need for further action ...

It was so hot yesterday so I just had a chill day, swam, made the most beautiful looking charcuterie board, and chilled some more.

I'm heading into work tomorrow to start setting up my classroom and transporting my truckload of junk. You can't get into my lounge room at the moment because it's so filled with all my classroom furniture. And I've actually bought myself a new ergonomic chair that I need to assemble so I have even more furniture to transport.

But as always, I'll be uploading pics to my Instagram when it's all set up so you'll see it up there in a short while :)

But no chapter tomorrow because I'll be wiped, but I'll see you on Thursday normal time :)

Vote and comment!

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