

"Letting go means to come to the realization that some people are a part of your history, but not a part of your destiny." Steve Maraboli

XXIII.

To dance every dance was near impossible, as Claire quickly realised. She had thought she had escaped the first period of her pregnancy relatively unscathed as she had not experienced the nausea that Grace had. However, her energy levels were not quite what they had been. A er two dances in a row, Claire was quite exhausted, and Jack happily retreated from the dance floor with her.

Claire found herself looking upon her husband with, what felt like, corrective spectacles. How had she not seen Jack properly? She had looked upon him a hundred times, and yet it suddenly felt like the first. Claire was only glad that Jack had not noticed Claire staring at him as she would have blushed terribly.

Claire was clinging to his arm quite closely, partially for support over her weary figure, but even through the fine wool of his coat, she could feel the strength in his arm. Jack led her over to where Adam and Grace were standing, near the entrance of the assembly hall. A quick search for the duchess surprised Claire, as she spied Cecily sitting down with Mrs Denham in deep conversation.

Susanna was taking advantage of her mother's distraction and was now dancing with Mr Andrews, Ashwood's grocer. Claire knew that Cecily would never have approved such a pairing, but Susanna seemed to be enjoying herself, even if her partner was too old for her. Mr Andrews would have a story to tell down at the tavern that he had danced with the beautiful LadySusanna.

"I did not attend the assembly last year as Perrie was ill, and now I cannot dance this year. What once was an enjoyable date on the calendar is quickly becoming a disappointment." Grace muttered teasingly to Claire as she and Jack joined them. "You looked to be enjoying yourself, though," Grace observed with a smile.

Claire managed to control her blush. "Yes, Jack is a very fine dancer," she complimented.

Jack chuckled. "Likewise, my dear." Before he paused. "Perrie was ill last year?" he repeated, a sound of alarm in his tone.

Both Grace and Adam nodded.

"I am sure I wrote you," Adam recalled.

"You most certainly did not," retorted Jack. "What was wrong with her?"

Claire, who was still holding onto Jack's arm, felt it tense.

"It was just a little cold," replied Grace. "We had been out in the garden and it had started to rain. We kept watch to ensure it did not become lung fever and she bettered in a day or two." She spoke calmly, like a seasoned mother, and Claire wagered it would be the same tone Mrs Denham would use when she spoke of her children's past ailments.

"Well, how o en does this happen? Do children always sicken so easily?" Jack demanded to know, panic evident in his voice.

"Jack," said Claire coolly, but he ignored her.

Grace glanced at Claire knowingly. She knew that Claire was expecting herself and that Jack's reaction was not solely out of concern for Perrie.

"I'll tell you what," Jack said determinedly, turning to look down at Claire. "Any child of ours will not be allowed outside if it is raining. Or at all if it is the least bit chilly."

Jack's statement made Adam laugh. "Well, I am afraid you live in the wrong country, brother," he joked. "You've seen how well Perrie is, and she loves to play in the garden."

Jack was simply vexed, and Claire couldn't help but smile. Jack was concerned for their child. It wasn't even born yet, and the man Jack knew to have sired the child was standing in the same room, and yet he knew the baby was his own. Claire realised that this was indeed the first time that she had thought of her child as theirs. It was not her own, and it was certainly not Arthur's.

Oh, but if God could work wonders to give their child Jack's kind eyes, she would never miss a Sunday sermon.

"I mean it, though," Jack muttered, only for Claire. "There will be no bloody lung fever on my watch."

The music finished and the dancers applauded the musicians once again before they began to prepare for the next dance. Cecily was still engaged in conversation with Mrs Denham, and Claire watched as Susanna slyly moved to the edge of the dance floor waiting to be asked to dance again.

Claire saw it happen before anything could be done. Her eyes had unwittingly connected with Arthur's, and he was once again looking upon her with a vengeful expression. But then he smiled. Wickedly

He stood up tall and put on his most debonair grin as he strutted up to Susanna, greeting her with a bow as he bestowed a kiss upon her gloved hand. Susanna, who, despite being two years Claire's senior, was still remarkably sheltered, flushed in her cheeks as she accepted Arthur's attentions.

"Jack," hissed Claire. "You need to stop it!"

Jack followed Claire's line of sight and his face filled with rage. But it was too late. To intervene now would cause a scene and would only embarrass Susanna.

God, Arthur wouldn't dare. Would he? Would he really go a er Susanna to spite Claire? Or would he do so, trick Susanna as he had done Claire, to secure Susanna's money? That, a er all, was what Claire had lacked.

Susanna deserved so much better. As did Claire. Claire knew that she deserved better, and she hoped that she could deserve Jack.

Jack and Claire were not the only ones to have noticed Susanna's new partner.

"You have not introduced Susanna to Arthur Slickson, have you, Adam?" Grace asked curiously, a tense stare directed at her sister-in-law. Grace had always maintained a fervent dislike of Arthur, and Claire now realised that her sister had always been right.

"No," replied Adam. "And I doubt Mother would have, either. She would not have Susanna acquainted with anyone here."

"I am not one to insist upon separate classes as it would be utterly hypocritical of me, but a man, whether or not he is a gentleman, cannot approach someone of Susanna's rank without a formal introduction!" Grace murmured angrily. "Least of all someone as vain and as intolerable as Mr Slickson."

"I am not very familiar with the man. Is he as bad as that?" Adam asked curiously.

"Worse," growled Jack involuntarily.

Adam glanced at his brother. "Are you acquainted with him, Jack?"

"Well enough," muttered Jack. "When this dance is over, you need to go and get Susanna. She ought to keep as far enough away from that man as humanly possible."

Adam frowned, but nonetheless agreed.

Claire said nothing but was upset at the fact that Arthur had once again done something to spoil their evening. What did he honestly hope to achieve? Nothing could be done, even if Claire wanted something to happen. She was married, and that was that. He could never have her.

As soon as the dance finish, Adam politely brought Susanna back over to their party. She was aglow, her face flushed from dancing so many dances.

Jack startled Susanna by seizing her arm. "What did he say to you?" he demanded to know.

"Who, Mr Slickson?" Susanna gasped, frowning deeply. "Nothing! He introduced himself and asked me to dance, that is all! I was not engaged."

"You are nevert o speak to that man again!" Jack ordered under his breath, a furious intensity to his tone. "Promise me!" Adam, Grace and Claire had huddled around them so as not to draw attention to the would-be quarrel.

Claire understood Jack's anxiety over this subject, but she knew he would be drawing attention to a feud that Adam and Grace knew nothing about, and would no doubt spark their curiosity.

"Alright!" snapped Susanna as she shook Jack's hand o f her. "Whatever did he do? Shoot your horse or something?"

Claire paled. No, she thought, he impregnated your brother's wife

"Pardon me."

As if her heart had not already been through enough that evening, it stopped altogether. All five of their party turned around to see Arthur Slickson standing before them, his hands behind his back.

"I am sorry to interrupt. I am merely here to state that the waltz is next, and the lovely Miss Claire promised her hand at the beginning of the evening." Arthur smiled charismatically as he extended his hand to Claire.

Arthur knew it was a supreme act of poor manners to spurn a dance partner, and he was counting on the fact that Claire to spurn a dance in front of her family. He was also counting on the fact that Jack would not reveal his true hatred in front of his family, so as to protect Claire. Arthur was deliberately goading Jack, and it made Claire sick to her stomach.

But Claire wouldn't stand for this. She felt so ashamed to think of what she had stood for over the years. She had allowed herself to be used, to be so ill-treated that she doubted her own worth. She had believed Arthur to be so much better than her that she could never hope to aspire to be good enough for him. But not anymore.

"I am terribly sorry, Mr Slickson," Claire apologised facetiously before Jack had a chance to explore. "But as you can see, I have no dance card, and therefore, I have not promised any dances." Claire held up her wrist to show that she had none. "You must have me mistaken with someone else. Clearly, I think, as I am no longer miss. But Mrs. And the only man to whom I have promised myself is my husband. I wish you a good evening."

Claire smiled, and it was not forced at all. She smiled at the look of astonishment on Arthur's face as she curled her arm through Jack's and led him away. As soon as they were past Arthur, Jack brought his other hand across to hold hers.

"You did not need to do that for me," he murmured quietly.

"I didn't," replied Claire honestly. "I did it for me."

By the end of the evening, Claire had managed to forget Arthur's feeble attempts to spoil the assembly, and she and Jack had finished the winter assembly with smiles on their faces.

Claire was not at all certain what time it was, but she would not be ringing the bell for a servant at this hour. As soon as she and Jack had made their way into their bedroom, Claire kicked o her slippers which had become mighty uncomfortable a er dancing and standing for so long.

Jack walked over to the trunk at the end of their bed and sat down as he began to untie his cravat. He was smiling thoughtfully, as though he was mulling over something enjoyable, and once again, Claire found herself staring at him.

Their room was dark, save for the lamp that Jack had ignited upon entering the bedroom, and so the so glow of light was flicking across his face. Claire felt her heart flip again, and those all too familiar nerves beginning to settle themselves in her stomach.

But something else began to wash over her, and it was beginning to eclipse any feeling of apprehension. It was desire.

Before she knew it, Claire had crossed the room to stand in front of Jack at the trunk. His face was level at her collarbone, and he looked up at her questioningly.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Will you stand up?" Claire asked quickly.

Jack frowned, but obliged. He stood up, and Claire watched as his height quite overtook her own. He was now gazing down at her, wondering.

"No, I changed my mind," Claire stammered. "Sit down."

Jack chuckled as he obeyed. "Am I to hop on one leg next?"

But Claire didn't answer him. She looked into his eyes, and she saw the humour vanish, and a similar look of longing appear. He swallowed, and his tongue wet his bottom lip instinctively.

"Don't move," Claire whispered, as she bent her knees slightly and closed the distance between them. She pressed her lips to his so ly, testing the feel of his closeness for a moment, before she kissed him more firmly. Jack was still, just as she'd asked, and Claire was grateful, as she was unsure her heart would be able to take it. Could he hear it thundering in her chest? Claire brought her hand to Jack's cheek, feeling the prickle of his stubble against her fingertips. She leered, him, allowing her lips to tingle on his so ly as she exhaled.

Claire then stepped backward from him, feeling her nerves return with a vengeance as she flushed crimson red. She covered her face with her hands, but in an instant, Jack was standing before her, pulling them away with his own.

"Don't you hide your face from me, Claire," he said tenderly. He was smiling at her reassuringly, and he leaned his head down to rest his forehead against hers. "I understand what a leap of faith you just took, and I promise, and I have promised, that I will never force you. But I have wanted to kiss you from the first moment I saw you, on this night three years ago. Can I move now?"

And Claire melted into his arms.

Nawwwwwwww, I just hope nothing bad happens :(

But I hope you enjoyed it!

Went into my classroom yesterday with the first truckload of my stu . Doing the big move and set up on Saturday so I'll upload pics to my Instagram (littlelo62) when they're done. I bought this garden arbour to put in my reading corner that I'm covering with vines and wisteria so it's really like a secret garden. I can't wait! When my kids walk into their first ever day of school I want them to think that their learning space is magical :)

Vote and comment!