

"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words in them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Year's Day." Edith Lovejoy Pierce

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III.

Jack stayed in the dining room for much of the party, definitely indulging in the treats that had been prepared, but mostly in an effort to avoid a public confrontation with his mother.

His brother, the good supervisor that he was, stayed with him, but when he was taken in conversation by his guests, Jack's mind did stray. Lord, it had been a long time since he had laid eyes on Claire. Adam and Grace's wedding day to be exact.

While he had only ever spoken to her a handful of times since their first meeting, someone as lovely as Claire certainly did leave an impression. A wound really, on an already terribly bruised ego. It was not the first time he had been rejected, and it would certainly not be the last. Claire had been a beautiful young lady, and of course he was not her first choice.

Of course, she was still a beautiful young lady, though he would agree with Grace. Something was definitely amiss.

Jack, however, did not see Claire again for the remainder of the evening, and Grace had seemingly given up searching for her at the behest of Adam, who seemed to be hovering a little whenever she joined them. Adam convinced Grace that Claire must have returned home, and that if something were really wrong, she would have told Grace.

Grace acquiesced, though Jack could see she was not settled. Towards the end of the party, the guests all gathered, and Perrie was carried into the dining room by Cecily.

While Jack wanted to focus on his niece, he couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding. He had not met with Cecily yet. He always felt as though he were eight years old around his mother, and that nothing he could do would ever please her. It was entirely demoralising.

Perrie was dressed in a pink dress, covered in frills, flounces, and ribbons, with ribbons fixed in her dark hair. She yawned, clearly tired, and rubbed her eyes with her little fists. She was very delicate and sweet and was very much like her mother in looks.

Jack watched as Grace and Adam flanked Perrie, cooling over her as Perrie was toasted and the cake was served. He couldn't help but smile at the sight. His brother was so happy, and he definitely had what he deserved.

Yes, Jack realised. This was what he envied. He wanted that. He wanted a family of his own. A wife who chose him, who wanted him, who loved him. A child, children, to whom he would be a loving father. Never would he allow a child of his to feel less than beloved.

Jack's eyes flicked back to his mother, and he noted how she had not changed much in appearance in the few years he had been away. She was dressed as elegantly as she always did, though she was wearing something Jack was entirely unused to. A smile, Cecily did look genuinely besotted with Perrie.

Could she ... perhaps ... have changed?

But she had never written him. Jack, in turn, had not written to her either. For better or worse, he supposed he was about to learn.

The guests began to filter out, saying their goodbyes around sundown, and the servants were quick to return the dining room to its usual state. The footmen set the table for a normal meal, and Jack soon found himself standing in the same room as his immediately family.

It was not long after the cake was served that Cecily had noticed Jack, and she had given him a nod and a smile in acknowledgement. Jack had managed to return the gesture silently.

When it was finally just family, Adam held Perrie in his arms and brought her over to Jack. In seeing her from this close, Jack could now see how large her blue eyes were. They were like saucers and were focussed entirely on him. Jack suddenly felt nervous. He had never really been around a young child before.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack could see that Mrs Denham was distracting Cecily in conversation, and Jack thanked God for her in that moment.

"Perrie, this here is your Uncle Jack. Uncle Jack, this is Perrie," introduced Adam so ly.

Jack couldn't help grinning. "You're a father," he observed, almost in disbelief.

"I know, we cannot get rid of her. We tried putting her outside, but she kept coming back," Adam said teasingly, and Jack nearly snorted, and it felt good to feel a spark of amusement.

"You're horrid," accused Grace in false admonishment.

Perrie, meanwhile, stared at Jack curiously. Adam moved his hands to under Perrie's arms and held her out to Jack, motioning for him to take her. Jack, who had never held a child before, awkwardly replaced Adam's hands with his and took the sudden weight of Perrie.

The moment her father released her, Perrie started to wriggle and complain, her lip trembling as though she was about to start crying and moaning. Jack panicked and thrust her back at Adam.

"Oh, she doesn't like me," he noted quickly.

"She just doesn't know you yet," replied Adam, accepting Perrie back. She settled immediately and chirped something to him about a doll.

Perrie was put to sleep a little while later, and Jack found himself seated at his family's dining table. He sat between Adam, who was at the head, and Susanna, strategically, he thought, and Cecily was seated opposite Adam at the other head. The Denhams filled the remaining chairs, though Claire was an obvious omission.

Jack heard Mrs Denham quietly grumble to Kate that she was going to give Claire a stern talking to when they returned home. She was clearly displeased with her failure to appear, and perhaps had not seen Claire's state when she had been in attendance at the party.

Jack hoped that whatever the reason, Mrs Denham showed her mercy.

As dinner was served, and Jack speared an asparagus stalk with his fork, Cecily finally broke her silence, and it set Jack's teeth on edge.

"So, Jack, are you permanently returned to Ashwood?" she asked nonchalantly.

Jack met her eyes briefly. "I don't know," he replied. It was honest.

"Mother," Adam said tersely.

"What?" exclaimed Cecily. "It was a simple question. Are you not curious?"

Adam jaw tensed.

"Jack was finding himself in London, you see, Mrs Denham," explained Cecily, in a condescending tone that Jack knew all too well.

"For God's sake," hissed Adam under his breath. "I asked for one day."

"Adam," Grace uttered as she placed her hand on top of his to calm him.

Jack knew that Cecily would not approve of his behaviour, and she would never understand his motives. Even if she had changed by including families like the Denhams into their circles, she was a well brought up lady and Jack was a well brought up disappointment to her.

"Oh, well, London," said Mrs Denham awkwardly. "Now, I have never been. Is it exciting?" she asked Jack.

"Terribly, Mrs Denham," confirmed Jack quietly.

"Though I do not believe that you would frequent the establishments that my son familiarised himself with while in town, Mrs Denham," interjected Cecily as she sipped her wine. "We lived there for some years, after all." Cecily's eyes flicked to Jack. "I have many friends, and by all reports, Jack spent little time studying or bettering himself. I do not quite understand how one finds their purpose when their tongue is inside a --"

"Mother!" shouted Adam, standing up from the table, causing the crockery to rattle and the table to shake.

Jack couldn't take that. He threw his fork down on his plate, creating a loud clatter, and he shoved his chair back so forcefully that it fell over behind him as he stormed out of the dining room. Behind him, Jack could hear Adam scolding Cecily, but Jack was not going to listen to her protests.

His legs took over his racing mind and brought him to what once was his place of refuge. The library had not changed much at all, and the smell of books was instantly comforting. The library was dark, save from the glow of the fireplace, and the few candelabras that were lit.

Just as Jack was about to go over to the shelves and choose a title to lose himself in for an hour before he found the willingness to show his face again, he heard a whimper.

"Who's there?" came a soft, female voice.

Jack turned his head towards the voice, and he saw a small, shadowed figure lean out from behind one of the sofas. "Jack ... Beresford," he replied quietly. "Who are you?"

When she stood up, the glow of the fire illuminated her face, and Jack realised that this was where Claire had disappeared to. Even from where he stood, he could see that her eyes were swollen from crying, and her face was flushed with emotion.

"Miss Claire," Jack realised so ly. "Would you like me to fetch Grace? Or your mother?"

"No!" cried Claire, so loudly that she clapped her hand over her mouth quickly after. "No," she said again, adjusting the volume of her voice. "No, please, do not say that you have seen me ... I can't ..." A sob suddenly ripped through Claire's chest and she buried her face in her hands.

Jack went to her, not knowing at all if it was the right thing to do, or if he should ignore her wishes and fetch her sister. All he could think to do in that moment was to pull a clean handkerchief from his pocket and touch her arm gently so that she might look up and see it.

Tears streamed down Claire's face as she accepted the handkerchief. She immediately wiped her eyes, though they were red and raw.

"Are you ill?" Jack pressed. "Do you need a doctor? Please, Miss Claire, what is wrong with you?"

"What is right with me?" Claire miserably countered in disbelief. "I thought everything was right ..." She blew her nose, the tip of it becoming pink. "If Grace knew ... if my mother knew ... oh, but they will," she worried to herself in a shaky, frightened voice. "Everyone will know ... and Grace will have been right. What will she think of me? Oh, she will hate me! Mama will hate me!" Claire was practically trembling, and Jack didn't know what to do or say to stop it. All he knew was that something terrible had happened and Claire was terrified. What could possibly scare her so much?

"Claire," Jack said firmly, placing a hand on her upper arm to steady her. His tone brought Claire out of her thoughts and her frightened blue eyes looked up at his. Lord, he could see her fear as clear as day. Jack felt an overwhelming urge to take it away, however he could. No woman should be as frightened as this. "Tell me what has happened to you," he demanded, quite forcefully indeed.

Claire's lower lip trembled, and her brows furrowed as her eyes filled with tears once again. "I ... I ... I am with child!" she whispered fearfully, helplessly.

Of everything that Jack might have considered, this was certainly not what he had expected. But as soon as Claire said the words aloud, he understood her terror. She was a young girl, compromised ... unwed. Her reputation would disintegrate ... her family shamed ... his family, too. This would be a scandal that would never leave her, and she would never marry, if she did, it would be disastrously beneath her. Her life was over before it had even begun.

As the images of society headlines le Jack's mind, his attention resettled on the frightened girl before him, shaking so much she might have damaged her teeth. She was not the only one at fault here. A man, whenever he may be, was responsible for her.

"Mama will never speak to me again," realised Claire, her voice so quiet that Jack barely heard it. "Grace will never speak to me again. Kate will never speak to me again. Both of them married with children of their own, and I ..."

"Who is responsible for this?" Jack demanded to know forcefully. "Tell me so at once." No man, no decent man, allowed such a series of events.

"I can't," stressed Claire. "He ... he won't ... he has ... abandoned ... he doesn't love me." She looked to have shocked herself with her own words.

Jack had to let go of Claire's arm as he felt his hand clenching and he didn't want to hurt her in anger, but he felt his blood boiling. She wasn't attacked. She was tricked. Claire's innocence had been preyed upon by a lecherous scoundrel and he had left her in this state. A vile blackguard indeed!

"For God's sake, tell me his name!" Jack demanded, though Jack did not know whether he would force the rake to marry her, or if he would challenge him to a duel with how angry he was feeling.

"I can't ... he said ..." but Claire couldn't finish her sentence.

Jack did not need her to. He had imagination enough for what the bastard might have said. He tried to push his anger out of his mind so that he might begin to think about what to do for Claire. She was in a very serious, very precarious position. He had never before seen a woman so afraid in his life, and every fibre of his being wanted to take her fear away.

"I thought I could face them, but I can't," whispered Claire. "I can't have them disappointed in me. I can't know what that feels like."

A pain from deep within Jack throbbled.

"I don't know what to do."

Claire's eyes were closed as Jack looked down at her frightened face. He knew the exact pain she feared, and yet Claire was going to be faced with far worse than her family's disappointment. Her life would never be the same again, and this man, the man who was responsible for this, had threatened her, most likely, and would get away with it. Jack had lived for a very long time with his woes, his troubles that he could never seem to mend properly. Nothing he seemed to do was right.

Except for this. This was right. Claire was an innocent, a victim of a dishonourable man. She would be disgraced for believing the lies he told her. He could not in good conscience allow Claire to fall. Jack had the power to take her pain away, and maybe ... perhaps by the grace of God, it might take his own pain away someday, too.

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**Hope you enjoyed it!!**

**I started to put my Christmas decorations up today. And by started I mean I hung the wreath on the door haha. But it's two weeks earlier than normal, but I decided why the hell not? I also wrapped all the presents I've bought so far.**

**I've told you guys this over the years, but I usually write code names on my presents to stop my brother from unwrapping and rewrapping his presents. I've used Austen characters, Star Wars characters, Audrey Hepburn characters, Marvel characters ... and this year, we're going with an Office theme.**

**I hope you're all having a nice weekend!**

**Vote and comment!**