

## IV

"And it's funny how when somebody saves you, the first thing you want to do is save other people. All other people. Everybody. The kid never knew the man's name. But he never forgot that smile. "Hero" isn't the first word, but it's the first word that comes to mind." Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke*

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IV.

"Please," begged Claire suddenly. "Please, you mustn't say a word." Claire could not believe that she had opened her mouth thus. How could she have been so foolish? And to confess such a thing to a gentleman?

The walls of her life were already caving in, but Claire felt as though she were about to be buried under the rubble. It would be moments, mere moments before her mother, her sisters, the whole family found out the truth. They would know what she was, and Claire felt petrified at even the thought.

In a panic, a grief-stricken panic, she had unburdened her heart onto Jack Beresford. Logically, Claire knew that she could not keep such a secret hidden for long, but surely, she would have a little more time. She needed to come up with a story, and excuse, for her pure and utter stupidity at believing ... Claire could not even finish the thought. Thinking about him, seeing his beautiful, cruel face in her mind, hurt her very soul.

For a brief, a very brief moment, Claire believed that she, Grace, and Kate were all going to be happily wed mothers. To have three daughters married and settled, Claire knew that her mother would be so proud to have achieved such a feat without the assistance or dowry from their late father.

Oh, he dear papa. Claire knew that in years to come, she would be glad that her father was not alive so see her like this. But her mother was, and this would kill her. She would die for the shame. Claire was going to disgrace her entire family ... and in a matter of moments.

Claire dared to look up into the hard, hazel gaze belonging to Jack Beresford. She couldn't see his thoughts but for the fixed scowl on his face, and Claire immediately wanted to vanish, to fall through the floor. What he must think of her. He had to be thinking about her stupidity. She was another foolish girl to be so easily deceived into believing a man so far above her might actually be in love with her. Oh, Claire felt wretched and she couldn't look at Jack for another minute knowing what awful things must have been going through his mind.

She was not oblivious to what Jack Beresford got up to in London. Grace worried about him all the time because Adam worried about him all the time. He, no doubt, probably knew all about girls like her.

"Please," she begged again. "Please, I know what you must think of me," her voice broke, "but you cannot say a word. I will tell them ... but you mustn't out me ... not yet. I need to ... to ..." To what, she didn't know.

"You need to be married. Immediately."

Jack's tone was sharp, quick, determined. So much so that it all but made Claire jump backward in surprise. But it made Claire want to cry again. Yes, that had been what she thought would happen! But he, Arthur, had no intention of marrying her.

"He won't have me," Claire whispered, heartbroken. "No one will. Not now."

"Will you marry me, Claire?"

Claire was quite certain that her heart had stopped beating, her brain had all but melted, and her ears had deafened, for she certainly had not just heard a proposal from Jack. She met his gaze again, staring up at him in utter disbelief.

While Jack's eyes were still hard, Claire did believe that she saw concern and sincerity beyond the anger. Perhaps ... could it be ... that he was on her side?

Was he ill? Why on earth would he offer his hand to her when he could have anybody? He could have a proper lady, and not a foolish village girl who fell for the first handsome man she had noticed.

As these thoughts crossed her mind, Claire became quite certain that she had misheard him, or her had misunderstood her. There was absolutely no possibility that a man like Lord Jack Beresford would ever offer to marry a girl like Claire, even if she were not in the family way.

Grace was the exception, but Adam had been hers since the schoolroom.

Jack was not in love with her.

"You misunderstood me," she insisted. "I asked you not to say anything," she repeated fragily. "I promise, I will tell my family, but I cannot have you out me, please."

Jack frowned, his brows knitting together. "Out you?" he repeated.

"Claire, I am offering to marry you," he repeated. "You need a husband, and I am not married."

Claire needed to sit down, and for the lack of sofas in her immediate vicinity, she sank to the floor, her hands out in front of her. She clung onto the pile of the rug for fear she might float away.

What in the world was happening? This had to be a sort of joke, a trick. Claire felt as though she was being hoodwinked for the second time that day, and her poor heart could not take it. "This is not funny," she said, meaning to whisper, but her voice sounded more like a vicious hiss.

She saw Jack sink to his knees, before crossing his legs on the floor as he sat down in front of her. Claire looked up at him, wanting to find falsehoods in his eyes, but she doubted her ability to spot them. She had already failed dismally in this area.

He looked so like his brother. The eyes, the shape of the nose and his mouth, the strength in his shoulders. His hair was darker, slightly curlier, than Adam's, and a few wayward curls fell into his eyes as he peered at her. He was a handsome man, one whom could have any woman of his choosing.

"I am not laughing," murmured Jack in reply.

"I am carrying the child of another man." She had not meant her words to sound like an insult. Really, they tasted horrid on her tongue. It was astonishing to believe her capable of such a truth.

"Yes, I am aware. You told me. I understand how human biology works, Claire," Jack replied dryly.

"Why then?" she asked in disbelief. "Why would you ever want to marry me?"

Jack was quiet for a moment, and Claire held her breath. She had met Jack Beresford all of a handful of times and had not seen him since Grace and Adam's wedding nearly three years ago. What sort of man offered to marry a woman with whom he was so little acquainted?

"What do you gain?" Claire pressed, before Jack answered her. "My family have no money. Adam married Grace without a dowry. I have nothing for you. My mother's house will go to my brother ... I have nothing!"

Oh, how could Arthur do this? Surely, surely there had to be a mistake. Three years could not be abandoned so easily. One had to be truly heartless and she could not believe he was so! Was he scared? Claire certainly was! Did she need to give him a moment to be frightened before he came around?

"Claire, you are a victim of someone," Jack said simply, sympathetically.

The word "victim" made her lower lip tremble yet again. How she didn't want to be. And yet, Claire knew in her heart that Jack was right.

"And this is the right thing to do," Jack insisted. "I have my reasons, but you have very little choice. Your family ... well, you family may come around to the idea. They would probably be the first to come around to such an event, but stranger things have happened. But the country is unforgiving. Word will inevitably get out, and you and this family will be forever tarnished. I hate it, but it will happen. Believe me, I have had my fair share of scandals. But one like this? You shall never escape it."

Claire hated that possibility, and she knew there was a possibility that her family would never come around. "You could have anyone," she whispered.

Jack pressed his lips together. "What does it matter?"

Claire lifted one of her hands off of the rug to rest on her belly. She watched as Jack's eyes flicked down to it momentarily, and she wished she could have read his expression. "I don't believe that you, that any man, could raise another's child."

"Life is hard enough, filled with enough people to constantly remind you that every one of your choices is wrong. To then additionally punish a child with the burden of illegitimacy?" Jack shook his head. "My conscience won't have it, even if I can."

Claire knew that he was referring to Arthur, even though he did not know the identity of the child's father.

"If we marry Claire, the child will be mine. It will bear my name. Be raised as my blood." He took a breath. "No one need ever know. No one."

Whatever foolishness was left within her, Claire used it to believe Jack. She believed her was sincere, and that he would truly marry her and take responsibility for Arthur's son or daughter. Jack, by some miracle, was sitting before her, offering her a miracle on a silver platter.

And Claire knew that she had no other choice, no other option to save herself and her family from disgrace. She had to become Jack Beresford's wife. She would be one of many girls, most likely, who were forced to marry for getting into such trouble. Forced to marry men whom they did not love to prevent scandal.

Claire had spent the last three years of her life imagining what it would be like when she and Arthur could finally be wed. She had imagined a life filled with love and children. She imagined loving him until they were old and grey. Hers would be a happy life, and a happy marriage. They would be faithful to one another, and raise dear, darling children.

In an afternoon, that future had vanished, and her only option was a marriage of convenience, like so many before her. A life shared between a couple who did not love each other. A couple who did not really know each other. And what would Jack expect from her? The notion made her stomach churn.

"I will look after you, Claire," Jack promised. "Will you marry me?"

Claire willed herself not to sob again, but she couldn't help it as her eyes welled up as she nodded. She knew it was the right thing, and the only thing she could do. She only wished that the idea of being married in such haste did not make her want to curl up in a ball and never wake up.

Jack nodded once, formally. "Alright," he said. "I will have to seek a special license from the bishop in order for us to marry quickly. We will also have to come up with a story, something feasible that our families will believe."

As soon as he started speaking of plans, Claire felt numb. She wondered if she ought to condition herself to feel this way.

"Or would you rather tell them the truth, but protect yourself with this marriage?" Jack suggested tentatively.

Claire stifled. Lord, if she did not have to confess this to her family, then she wouldn't. No matter her indifference towards him, she prayed for God to bless Jack's decency. "No," she uttered. "If there is a way for me to stay good in their eyes, then I want it."

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**Hope you enjoyed it!**

**Yesterday was my 9 year Wattpad anniversary! Can you believe that?! In 9 years, I've written 22 books, not including this one (or the AWFUL ones I deleted years ago). That's a lot of words!**

**I wrote a post of my message board last night thanking you all, but I want to say again how much I appreciate each and every one of you. Every vote and comment, I see your names in my notifications, I recognise them as the loyal readers I've had for years and you take detours away from Regency England occasionally. You fill each and every chapter with beautiful support, and you have honestly been there for me in every author's note.**

**I'm just so grateful. Growing up, loving this genre, I didn't think I had anything in common with my peers. People didn't like the same books and movies I liked, and I thought that was it. But when I couldn't find the particular book I wanted to read, I began to write it, and eventually I plucked up enough courage to post it!**

**Thank you for reading. Without you, I wouldn't still be writing <3**

**A lot of my readers have followed me for years, but I have gained quite a lot of new readers of late, as I've noticed some comments questioning my upload schedule and those sorts of things, so I thought I'd introduce myself.**

**If you come into an author's note, it's like I'm continuing a conversation that we've been having for a long time and new readers might have missed the beginning :)**

**Hey, I'm Laura! I'm a primary (elementary) school teacher by day, and hopelessly romantic by night. Unfortunately, being a grown up in the real world "cries" means I have bills to pay, so I unfortunately can't write all day every day as I'd like to sometimes. I upload on Saturday nights AEDT (Australian Eastern Daylight Time - I'm an Aussie btw!) as I'm too dang tired any other time. I mean, I'm tired now, but I force myself to make sure that you guys get at least one chapter a week. On school holidays, I am able to upload more frequently.**

**I write clean stories filled with old-fashioned romance, an ode to the Austen novels I adored as a young girl. I want my books to be the kind that ANYONE can enjoy, and not just over 18s. I say this because I've also seen a few comments asking why I don't write explicit scenes. That's why.**

**So, that's me :)**

**Come for the regency romance, stay for the goofy girl who rambles on at the end.**

**Love you all. Again, thank you for 9 years.**

**Vote and comment!**