

"Until you realize how easy it is for your mind to be manipulated, you remain the puppet of someone else's game." Evita Ochel

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Jack surprised himself with how easily, and how quickly, he formed a plan to make such a union believable. With every word he spoke, he felt himself reaching toward something, a future unknown, but one that had to be better than the endless abyss he was currently living in.

But he only needed to look down at Claire to convince himself that this was the right decision. She was so hurt, so vulnerable, and she needed him. Jack could not recall ever being needed, and a er years of walking in circles, this could well be his first honourable decision.

"Wait!" cried Claire, her voice barely above a whisper as they approached the dining room together. She seized Jack's forearm to stop him mid-stride. "No, this is madness."

She was trembling. Jack wondered if she was going to go into shock. "Claire," he said so ly. "Everything will be alright," he promised.

"But what if they hate me?" Claire worried, and Jack could see in her eyes that she genuinely thought her family would hate her. Hate her for getting married? Or hate her for marrying him? Jack didn't know.

Either, or, Jack knew that Claire would never be hated by her family. They were loving, decent people. He had always envied Adam's friendship with Grace as a boy. Not because he wanted to be her friend, but because Adam had an open invitation into the Denhams' house. Theirs was a true family home, and it was no wonder Adam spent so much time there.

"Your family could never hate you, Claire."

His family, on the other hand ...

Jack knew his brother would never give up on him. Adam was terribly persistent. Susanna saw the best in him, though she was innocent enough that she did not know half of what he had been up to in London. Their mother, however, knew all. Jack knew that he had not done much to endear himself to Cecily Beresford, but ... once in a while ... being given the benefit of the doubt by that woman ... well, it would mean something.

Claire nervously nodded her head.

"For God's sake, smile," he urged, his voice so . "You're engaged. We're happy."

Claire exhaled shakily as she forced herself to smile, though it looked more like a grimace. Jack reached up tentatively to brush the tears from underneath her eyes away with his thumbs. He didn't react when Claire flinched at his touch, though he couldn't deny that it was a little disheartening.

But he knew this wouldn't be simple. He didn't know if it would ever be simple. Would they one day have the sort of bond that Adam shared with Grace? Jack didn't know. Perhaps that was a once in a lifetime miracle.

"Alright." Claire nodded, exhaling, her voice decidedly less shaky. She curled her arm around Jack's, trying to make the movement as natural as possible.

Jack pushed open the door to the dining room, and he heard the sounds of silverware hitting plates as the diners viewed the sudden intruders.

Jack's eyes met with Adam's immediately, as he was sitting directly opposite him at the head of the table. He was slumped in his chair was a foul expression on his face, though the moment he saw Jack, he straightened his posture. His expression grew cautious when he saw that Jack was leading Claire into dinner.

And he was not the only one.

"Claire!" cried Grace. "We had wondered where you'd got to." She rose to her feet, and Adam did as well. Jack could see the look of concern on his sister-in-law's face.

"Mother has something to say to you, Jack," Adam said next, clearing his throat and motioning for Cecily to speak.

But Cecily's perceptive gaze was focussed on Claire's arm, and how it was wrapped around Jack's in a familiar way.

"Everyone," announced Jack. "I have asked for Miss Claire Denham's hand in marriage and she has accepted."

Jack did not think he had ever seen a room full of jaws collectively drop before, though he had not entirely imagined what this reaction would be in the twenty minutes between discovering Claire in the library and announcing their engagement.

Adam was truly astonished. Grace was in utter shock. Mrs Denham was less so, though her bewilderment was less so. She appeared to be ... pleased perhaps? Cecily looked furious, and Jack could not have predicted anything less.

Susanna, dear Susanna, leapt up from her chair to come over to them, kissing both Claire and Jack on the cheek.

"Oh, my warmest congratulations!" she cried. "How ever did you both keep such a secret?"

"Yes, I should like to know," Cecily almost growled. "Considering how you have been carrying on in London, one would have never guessed an engagement was on the horizon. And to Miss Claire no less."

Jack glared at her. He did not know if that was a slight against Claire, or indeed him, but he knew that Cecily was displeased. She and Mrs Denham had become friends, of sort, before he le for London and he wondered if she would openly insult her youngest daughter. If not, then it was directed towards him.

"Claire and I have been corresponding in secret ever since I returned to London," lied Jack coolly. "We both agreed that upon my return for Perrie's birthday, that we would discuss marriage. And luckily for me, Claire agreed. We want to be married right away, and so I plan to seek a special license."

They burned the letters so as not to be discovered prematurely before anything was decided. That was the next answer should anyone inquire a er the correspondence.

But they didn't.

They continued to simply stare in shock.

"I am ... very pleased," Claire said, speaking for the first time since entering the dining room. Much to Jack's chagrin, she sounded less than pleased. He willed her to make it more convincing. "I was nervous upon coming here today, knowing that my possible betrothed would be here. I am sorry for keeping this correspondence a secret." The latter part of the speech as slightly more convincing.

Though Grace did not appear fooled at all. Her brow was deeply furrowed as she studied her younger sister. Jack wanted to step in front of Claire to stop this assessment lest she discover the truth.

"Well, Jack," remarked Adam. "I am bemused as is much of our party this evening, I believe. However, you have certainly made a fine choice, and I am pleased that you are taking such a positive step forward. I o er you congratulations." He nodded approvingly.

Much to his surprise, Jack felt an odd sense of pride at receiving such an approval. He stepped forward with Claire on his arm as Adam called for champagne. Jack pulled out her chair before sitting down beside her.

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Claire avoided Grace's inquisitive gaze for the entire evening. Slowly but surely, the entire party seemed to accept what had transpired. Congratulations were o ered, plans were made, and before Claire knew it, it was quickly decided that they both should spend their honeymoon in London before making their home at Ashwood.

Jack was better at this than she. Deception, that was. He seemed to lie easily, to convince his family of falsehoods. Claire, really, ought to have been better at it as well considering she had been telling her own falsehoods, but she supposed to motivation of what she thought had been true love had helped her along. Tonight, it was better if she kept her mouth shut and nodded whenever someone asked her if she was happy or excited.

Claire wondered why Jack was so practised in falsehoods.

Weddings were exciting affairs, and there was much to organise in such little time. Claire could see that her mother was getting more excited by the minute. She imagined that Mrs Denham truly believed that she had been lucky enough to have three daughters marry for love. This morning, Claire would have thought this to be true.

Oh, the horrid thought entered her head without her realising, and Claire was minutes away from bursting into tears. She willed herself to think of happy things, but her mind was still filled with her own pain and heartbreak.

Regretfully, Claire knew that her lapse in control had been noticed by Grace.

At the end of the evening, Grace would not hear of a carriage been called, and insisted on them all staying the night. Claire knew her sister was normally kind enough to make such an o er, but she also knew of Grace's ulterior motive.

She feigned severe fatigue a er such a day to deter her mother's entering into her bedroom for a debriefing, but no such excuse would work on Grace. Claire was alone in her bedroom for all of three minutes practising her responses before the door was opened rather forcefully.

Grace had not even changed out of her gown. She must have come straight from the nursery.

"What on earth is going on?" Grace demanded to know, shutting the door behind her.

Claire looked at her eldest sister and prayed that her expression was neutral. She had always looked up to Grace. Grace was six years older than Claire, and always making decisions for the benefit of others. When their dear father had died, she had taken it upon herself to support the family. Claire could only ever aspire to be like Grace.

And how was she to know that her very own love story, one that would mirror Grace's marriage to Adam, would end in utter ruin? Claire then supposed she should have known, but she could never confess such foolishness.

Not to Grace. Not when she had been the one to speak against Arthur Slickson from the very beginning. But had Claire listened? No. She certainly had not. She had merely convinced herself that she saw something in Arthur that Grace couldn't see.

"I don't know what you mean," uttered Claire as nonchalantly as she could muster.

Grace shook her head, but she wore a sympathetic expression as she crossed the bedroom to join Claire. "Claire, I am worried sick about you right this minute," Grace stressed. "Where did this come from? You can't have been corresponding with Jack all this time. We would have known."

"No, you wouldn't have," retorted Claire. They hadn't known she had been seeing Arthur all this time, and so that was not a lie. "We kept it well hidden. You needn't be worried about me."

Grace scoo ed. "Claire, be serious," she appealed. "Even you have to admit this is sudden. And a special license? You are not even having a moment to think about this!"

Claire did not have moments. Every day that passed was a day further into her pregnancy.

"Claire, I'm terribly worried about you, and I do not like that I am feeling this concern. When you arrived, it was not nerves that I saw on your face. Darling, I have known you your entire life. I know your every expression. I know when you are happy, and I know when you are sad, and I know when you are in pain. And Claire, my dear, Claire, you were in pain today." Grace grabbed hold of Claire's hands and sat down with her on the edge of the bed.

Claire was holding her breath. Every fibre of her being wanted to confess the truth to Grace. She wanted to confide in her. But she knew what Claire had done ... if she knew how far Claire had fallen ... she could not disappoint Grace.

"You can tell me, you know," Grace urged so ly. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Claire wouldn't cry. She willed herself not to cry. Not this. She couldn't tell Grace this. "I'm sorry for not telling you about Jack," she uttered quietly.

Grace's face fell, and she recoiled slightly. Claire heard her swallow loudly as she thought of what to say next. "Claire, my eyes were not deceiving me. Something isn't right," she persisted. "If you are in pain, I want to know. I want to help you. I don't understand how you can be in pain one minute, and then engaged the next. You don't look happy. How did this happen? Will Jack make you happy? Is this what you really want? Because if you have changed your mind, it is alright. I will help you whatever it is." Grace was rambling in her concern, firing question a er question.

"Jack is a very good man," Claire said, with as much confidence as she had had all evening. She vehemently believed these words. "And marriage is what I want."

Marriage to whom? However, was a di erent question altogether.

Grace wasn't satisfied. "As much as the duchess can be very good, you know how she can be quite blunt. She speaks the truth, though. Darling, Jack has not led a chaste life in London. Are you aware of this?"

"I am aware of the follies of men, Grace," Claire murmured.

All too well.

Grace frowned in disbelief. "Well ... well, how can you accept it?"

"Perhaps you and I are di erent, Grace," Claire remarked, knowing her sister could never know how di erent they were.

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**Hope you enjoyed it!**

**Ugh, I can hardly keep my eyes open tonight. I will be crashing in a minute but I had to finish this o for you!**

**Before I go, I need to share the funniest thing that happened in my classroom this week. One of my kids has a younger brother called Charlie and she came in and went, "My brother bit my finger this morning!"**

**And I said, "Charlie bit my finger!" in the British baby voice and she stared at me like "Wtf is wrong with my teacher?" and that's when I realised that YouTube has been ruined and today's kids will never know the iconic videos that made the platform hahahaha**

**BUT PLEASE TELL ME OTHERS GET THIS REFERENCE BECAUSE HERE'S ME LAUGHING MY HEAD OFF AT MY OWN JOKE IN FRONT OF MY KIDS WHILE THEY STARE AT ME LIKE I'M A LUNATIC!**

**Vote and comment!!**