

"Toxic people attach themselves like cinder blocks tied to your ankles, and then invite you for a swim in their poisoned waters." John Mark Green

VI.

Jack was successful at procuring a license from the archbishop. How he had managed it, Claire hadn't known, but she was glad of it. A license meant that their impending marriage was not subject to the traditional three Sundays of banns. She could not afford to wait three weeks.

That success, however, did not mean that their engagement was not announced to the parish. The announcement was made just as soon as the license was procured, and the news spread like wildfire, as often with marriages did. Theirs was even more astounding given their dramatic differences in situation.

Just how had another one of those Denham girls done it? Such was the question on every curious villager's lips.

It was the Wednesday after Perrie's second birthday, and the wedding was scheduled for Sunday. There was to be no grand affair, with only a wedding breakfast provided for their immediate family. Claire couldn't stomach the idea of onlookers watching her every move and suspecting something was wrong. What was bad enough was Grace already knew something was wrong, and Claire had not yet confessed it.

She never could. Claire sat at the small dressing table in her bedroom, the tired mirror resting on the tabletop. She had stopped brushing her hair to stare at herself, almost astonished that she barely recognised the face staring back at her.

Had there been a day in the last three years when she was not smiling? The muscles in her face seemed to have forgotten how. Smiling seemed like the hardest thing in the world, and yet she knew an even more troubling feat lay ahead on Sunday.

Bless Jack Beresford. She would pray that God blessed him for his decency. But never could she have predicted she would be marrying a man she did not love, or even know.

Her eyes, which had always been bright and wide, were startlingly icy and hollow, the shadows underneath indicative of the trouble she was having sleeping. Despite the fact she was growing, or would be, her face looked thinner, as though in the days since Arthur had revealed himself, she had lost weight. Claire realised that she had barely eaten anything, food having since lost its lustre.

Claire was startled by a knock at the door, and her mother appeared soon after. She struggled into the room on her cane, and Claire leapt to her feet to assist her.

"I'm alright," Mrs Denham assured her, holding up a hand to stop her. "Jack Beresford is here," she revealed. "Downstairs. He has come to ask you to walk with him. I have given him permission." But as she looked upon Claire's face, she frowned with concern. "Oh, Claire, what is it? You look tired. Is it nerves?"

Mrs Denham had not disapproved of the match at all. Nor had she questioned it. Perhaps she believed Claire romantic enough to not ever accept a man without love, and so she believed the tale of their secret correspondence. Claire hated how much she had lied to her mother. Not only with regards to Jack. Really, Mrs Denham had not known what was in Claire's heart for a long time.

"Yes, Mama," confirmed Claire breathlessly. "Just nerves."

Mrs Denham smiled. "Everyone is a little nervous before their wedding," she assured her. "Even those who have been concealing their attachments," she chided teasingly, bending over to kiss Claire on the cheek. "Come now, let me help you to ready yourself as the poor man does not want to wait forever."

"I thought I ought to call," Jack said quietly as he and Claire walked together down the main street of the village. He kept his voice low as everyone they passed looked upon them inquisitively. "I know our engagement was only announced yesterday, but how would it look if I did not call between then and our wedding?"

Claire involuntarily shuddered and she hoped that Jack didn't notice. If he did, he certainly did not say anything. "No, quite right," Claire agreed. "Very astute of you."

"Then, perhaps you might take my arm?" Jack lifted his forearm and Claire jumped, before staring at it for a moment. "You are going to need to stop flinching away from me as though I have leprosy, Claire," Jack uttered dryly.

"I am sorry," muttered Claire as she took Jack's arm.

"Your sister won't speak to me, you know," Jack informed her as they continued to walk. Claire's eyes widened. "What?"

"She doesn't believe the lie, and she thinks me some sort of villain who had pressured you. She has not said any of this, but it is quite simple to deduce," Jack continued.

Claire bit down on her bottom lip. Jack didn't deserve that treatment. Not at all. "I am sorry," she said again, only this time much more sincere. "Grace, she—"

"She is a protective elder sister, fear not," interjected Jack. "I have been called much worse than the words that are floating around in her head."

As much as Claire did not want to say the next words, her conscience wouldn't allow her to stay quiet. "It's not too late, you know," she said sofly. "If you didn't go through with it ... you don't have to. You don't deserve unkind treatment from my sister, from anyone. You deserve more than ... well, me."

Jack stopped, his abrupt movement drawing attention from observers. He seemed to notice that, and so he kept them moving. "I will not abandon you," he promised. "I knew the moment you confessed this to me that this was the right thing to do. But, if it makes you feel better, I suppose I have realised my motives are not entirely altruistic."

Claire frowned. "How so?" she asked.

"Well, as you must know, my mother and I do not share a particularly loving relationship. Pigs will fly before that woman found anything to approve of with regards to my life." Jack's jaw clenched for a moment as he brushed off the tense emotion he felt. "I know she has plans for my redemption. In hereyes, of course. My marriage to some extraordinarily rich and insufferable debutante. I know that you would not be her choice for me. And I suppose that pleases me a little."

Claire could believe that, certainly. Grace had spent months, years really, afraid of that woman. They seemed to have formed an understanding in years past, but she was definitely a tricky woman to please.

"I don't know what the future holds, but we are both uniquely motivated to make this choice," Jack continued, his voice trailing off a little, giving Claire an impression that there was something that he was leaving out. "Don't question me." It was not a demand, but an appeal, and Claire nodded. "Now, I don't want you to take this as an insult, but you look tired, thinner even. Are you well?"

They were now insight of the forge, and Claire wondered what Kate would have to say now that she had had a few days to mull over the idea of Claire's sudden engagement. No sooner had the thought popped into her head, she noticed a very familiar man leaning up against the side of the forge.

Arthur looked as though he was waiting, glaring, and as soon as he had captured Claire's attention, he walked off into the wooded area behind the forge, motioning for Claire to follow him.

Claire froze.

Jack tensed immediately. "Really, I did not mean it as an insult," he insisted. "I apologise. I only wonder after your health, and the health of ..." he trailed off.

Claire felt her heart, her stomach, and everything else inside of her tense, squeeze, and then shatter all at once as the overwhelming pain, shock, and grief that she had been trying to conceal bubbled to the surface, threatening to explode.

Arthur wanted her to follow him. What could he possibly have to say after he had treated her so ill? Did he have more cruelties to sling at her?

Or ... or ... did he want to apologise? Did he realise his mistake? Did he want to make amends?

"Please," Claire whispered. "I need to go and visit with my sister. She lives just there at the forge." Claire pointed ahead.

Jack looked very remorseful, truly believing he had offended Claire. "Allow me to escort you," he offered. "Perhaps I could meet her and her husband outside of a tumultuous Beresford dinner party."

"No," Claire said, all too quickly. "I can manage." She removed her hand from Jack's arm.

"When I said 'tired', I meant ..." Jack sighed, placing his hand on his forehead. "Tell me I have not dreadfully offended you."

"You haven't," promised Claire, her voice shaking, and giving her anxiety away. She was nearly breathless as the nausea rose in her throat in anticipation. "Please, I can manage. My brother-in-law will see me home."

Jack nodded, seeming to accept her words of assurance. He bowed his head, and uttered a goodbye, before turning and walking back up the street they had walked down.

Claire waited until he was well up the street before she turned on her own heel and hurried after Arthur. She bypassed the forge and entered into the woods, scanning her surroundings desperately, her heart growing with longing every second that passed.

Claire nearly yelped with fright as her hand was grabbed from behind her, and she was pushed up against a tree before she had had a chance to breathe. She barely saw the green of Arthur's eyes before he kissed her deeply enough to take her breath away.

For a moment, for a brief, blissful moment, Claire forgot her pain. For a moment, she allowed herself to love, and feel loved. But her illusion was quickly shattered when Arthur pulled away and murmured, "I'd wager your fiancé doesn't kiss you like that."

His voice wasn't tender or loving. It was possessive, rife with jealousy and rage, and it filled Claire with a sickeningly dirty feeling that she was entirely unfamiliar with.

"What do you want?" she demanded to know; her voice as fragile as glass. She dared to look up into Arthur's eyes, the emerald eyes she'd always thought were beautiful.

Only now they were hard, wild, and unpredictable. Jealously could warp a man like nothing else. "How dare you," he accused. "How dare you flit into bed with another man."

Claire's mouth dropped open in shock, her words escaping her.

"I don't think I meant it before, but I can see now that I was right. You would open your legs for anyone. Only, don't you know the stories, Claire? Don't you know his reputation?"

"I ... I never!" Claire stammered. Her heart was thundering in her chest, and she didn't know whether to scream or cry. What was she doing? What was she doing? "What do you want from me? You sent me away. You laughed at me. You broke my heart!" Her voice finally cracked, shattered. "You fooled me into thinking you loved me. I thought you would marry me, but you let me. Arthur, you are dishonourable." How Claire wished she could sound strong and powerful as she spoke, instead of sounding like a weak, heartbroken little girl.

"Dishonourable?" repeated Arthur, a laugh escaping him.

"Dishonourable? Yet you are to marry the Rake of London?"

Claire closed her eyes to attempt to regain any of her composure. No matter Jack's reputation, he certainly was not dishonourable. But Arthur took her lapse in concentration as an opportunity, and he brought himself closer to her again, cupping her face with his hands.

"You will have to accept it, dear Claire. I will be the only man to have you, no matter who you marry." He leaned his forehead against hers.

Claire trembled, hating his words, which she knew were fuelled by jealousy and not a reaction, but loathing herself more, for missing his closeness.

"Marry him if you will, but you will always belong to me. You know that in your little head. You would do anything for me. I know from experience."

Claire's eyes were clamped shut as she held in tears, but they burst open at the sound of a twig snapping under foot, and the sudden realisation that they were not alone.

"Kindly take your hands off of my fiancée, or the next time we meet, you shall be staring down the barrel of my pistol from twenty paces away."

Ugh, Arthur, you give me the creeps. Take your hands off my girl and go to therapy.

SOOOOO the coolest thing happened today! I've been on Cloud 9 since I woke up!

A couple of weeks ago, I got a private message from Wattpad telling me that "The Secret Attachment" had been selected as a finalist in The Watty Awards, which I thought was a massive achievement in itself considering thousands of stories are entered!

The winners were being announced at 5am my time this morning, and I was contemplating setting my alarm, but I seriously thought there was no way I was going to win so there was no point, so I didn't bother.

But I woke up to the news that I was one of the winners!! AHHH!! I couldn't believe it! I loved writing that story, and those characters mean so much to me, so I am so happy that the judges felt my story deserved that accolade.

What was even cooler was when I watched the "ceremony", I heard strangers out loud for the very first time talking about MY WRITING. I've never heard someone I don't know talk out loud about enjoying my book before. It was like overhearing a conversation filled with the most heartwarming words.

I put the video in my Instagram story and on my Instagram if you want to check it out ... I'm still in disbelief!

Congratulations to all the winners on creating such beautiful stories.

But then I've also seen a lot of comments today about people who put their heart and souls into their books and they didn't win. If you were one of those people, or you know someone, keep trying! The last time I entered was 2012 and I didn't win, and I was so disheartened, so I know exactly how it feels because you don't enter unless you are really proud of what you have created.

And I let that mentality stop me for 8 years before I tried again. Keep trying, and never give up. Because if you keep creating books that you are proud of, that is the most important thing.

Thank you all for your love today. It means the world!

Vote and comment!