

"Men are what their mothers made them." Ralph Waldo Emerson

XXV.

Claire felt three inches tall and all sorts of ashamed as she sat frozen on the settee opposite the duchess. Why else would she pull them aside if not to reveal that she knew their secret.

But how? How could she have learned the truth? And what was she going to do? Was there a clause in a marriage certificate that meant unions could be nullified if a wife bears another's child? Would Cecily throw her out?

Oh, dear God, her mother would learn of her shame. Her mama would never look at her in the same way again.

And Jack, dear Jack, who had only tried to help her ... well, she hoped that she would bear the brunt of the trouble here. How Cecily could find fault with Jack's honour, Claire didn't know.

Claire prepared herself, braced herself, more like, and attempted to condition herself not to cry. She couldn't cry in front of Cecily.

"A serious matter?" repeated Jack. "What, pray, have I done now?" he muttered angrily.

Claire wished she could shout at him not to taunt her. Maybe, maybe if Claire begged her, Cecily might keep it a secret.

Cecily rested her hands in her lap and took a breath. "Do you know, I do not appreciate your tone, young man. I am your mother," she said firmly. "And what you have done is precisely why I wanted to speak to you both. Though, I suppose, Claire needn't be here, but I was never privy to these conversations with your father, and I resented it. I thought you might appreciate being in the know, Claire."

Cecily had just directly addressed Claire, but she had no air in her lungs to formulate a coherent response. Claire had no idea what the duchess was meaning, but she nodded, and prayed it was the right response.

Cecily arched an eyebrow as she looked upon Claire. "Good Lord, dear," she said distastefully. "You look as though I have just strangled your cat."

Claire sucked in a shaky breath in an attempt to regain some of her composure. Jack took her hand in his.

Cecily shook her head and focussed her attention back onto Jack. "Jack," she began, "I know you and I have never really seen eye to eye. You are very different to how I imagined you would grow up, and you are living a life far from the one I meant for you."

Cecily paused, and Jack blinked expectantly.

"Indeed, Mother, I might drown in your warmth. Please, don't trouble yourself," he murmured facetiously.

"Hush," snapped Cecily angrily. "I am well aware that the time for a warm relationship between us is passed, and believe you me, I have mourned."

"You have mourned me?" Jack scoffed in disbelief. "Mother, if I wanted to witness absolute rubbish, I'd go down and look at the slop bucket in the kitchen."

Claire could see that Jack was furiously angry, and his anger was not solely fuelled by this one conversation. He had years of pent up pain and suffering inside of himself, which was bubbling to the surface, threatening to erupt.

"Charming," hissed Cecily. "Honestly, why can't you be more like your brother? At least he listens long enough for me to make my point!"

Jack's head snapped, as did something inside of him. Claire winced as she knew exactly what Jack was thinking in that moment. He hated comparisons to his brother. He hated being considered the spare, second best, and not good enough.

"Then make your point," Claire announced forcefully, in a tone entirely foreign to her. She gripped onto Jack's arm and held him tightly. "I will not hear insults directed at Jack that are completely unfounded and unnecessary. If you have something to say about me, then say it!"

Jack slouched back in the settee and glared at his mother, while Cecily looked upon Claire with an expression of surprise. Claire swallowed and braced herself, willing her rush of gumption to stay.

"I may not have always appreciated this, but I do admire you Danish girls. All three of you are very loyal," Cecily noted calmly. "And the two sons of mine who have been so fortunate as to secure your hands are very lucky indeed." She directed the latter part of her statement to Jack tensely.

Though Claire was unsure of what Cecily wanted to speak to them about, her nerves settled a little as her fears of the duchess knowing her secret settled. Surely, she would not pay Claire a compliment if she knew the truth. Indeed, it was the first compliment, and the first real conversation, that Claire had received from or shared with Cecily.

"Though you and Grace do share something in common, Claire," Cecily continued.

Hair colour, eye colour, height. Claire ran through the similarities in her head quickly.

But Cecily did not leave her wondering for long. "You are both, sadly, extremely poor."

Claire's mouth dropped open and she recoiled slightly. Poor? That was her objection? Did it warrant such a scene as this? Claire already knew that. Grace had been through this already and everything had worked out fine. Before Jack and Adam's father had passed away, he had consented to Adam and Grace's marriage!

"So, this is about money," Jack realised with a scoff.

"Yes, this is about money," retorted Cecily. "You receive a courtesy income from this estate, Jack, but that is not proper means. If your brother felt so inclined, he could suspend it! And he might have to one day in order to provide for his own children. Perrie will need a dowry one day, and Grace has no estate or dowry of her own to facilitate such things. How do you think dukes and earls and marquesses come up with dowries for their daughters? A sum like thirty or forty thousand does not magically appear in one's hand if one so desires it.

"God forbid this next child is a daughter and Adam will need to facilitate two dowries. He's a clever man, your brother, and I don't doubt he knows what he needs to do to ensure this estate remains prosperous, but there is a reason why marrying for money is sometimes a necessity."

"Do not misunderstand me, as I am pleased that you have found some felicity in your union." Cecily gestured between Jack and Claire. "Believe me, I understand desiring that felicity better than you think." Cecily paused and exhaled. "Jack, I say this with kindness, but you may interpret it how you wish. You are a second son who studied a useless degree from one of the best universities in the world. You wasted every opportunity that I served to you on a silver platter in favour of reckless behaviour. Your one chance was to marry rich to create some sort of sustainable life for yourself, but you chose Claire. And now you are to become a father. Do you even comprehend the gravity of this situation? You are living in your brother's house. Every bill, every drink, every woman's paid for by this estate. But this is a living, breathing, child, Jack!" Cecily exclaimed. "A son who will have nothing to inherit, or a daughter with no prospects because she has no money to marry well!"

Cecily stopped, her shoulders slumping as she looked upon Jack helplessly, and Claire got that very impression from Cecily. She felt helpless. She truly didn't know the man Jack was, and she felt helpless to assist the man she thought him to be.

Claire turned to look at Jack, expecting a snide retort, but her heart broke to see him. Gone was his anger and frustration, and in its place was shame and humiliation. He looked ten years younger. He was entirely slumped on the sofa, looking down as though he couldn't meet his mother's eye, accepting that she was right. He wouldn't fight because he accepted what his mother said. Jack had been reminded of his worth by his mother at his every turn, his every failure, and was never taught that it was alright to make mistakes.

"Don't you see what you do to him?" Claire asked accusingly, finding her gumption in spades. "You say you speak in kindness, and yet all you do is call him a failure."

Cecily stared.

"Jack is the kindest, fairest, most decent man I have ever met," Claire declared fervently. "You have spent so long seeing him as what he is not that you have denied yourself the chance to know who he is. He is not a clergyman and never will be! Quite frankly, I could not imagine a more boring existence!"

Claire hurried, feeling her veins flow with a fire that she never knew she was capable of.

"Jack loves to read, and I think devoting himself to one book for the rest of his life would have sent him stark raving mad! Do you know that about him? Do you know he loves to read? Do you know why he loves to read? Jack teaches me lessons that he learns from books. He tells me his interpretations and he understands the written word in a way I will never be able to.

"Jack is selfless, and he cares for others deeply, and the way he cares for me ought to make you proud. He cares for you, and for what you think, Your Grace. You should be proud of him."

Claire realised that she was standing up and had not realised that at some point during her speech she had leapt to her feet.

Cecily was sitting still, a stoic expression on her face. Her lips were pursed as she breathed deeply.

Claire sat back down beside Jack and stole a glance sideways. He was shielding his face from Cecily with his hand, but he was looking at her with an expression of utter disbelief.

"You are right, Claire," Cecily said finally, nodding her head. "I have spent many years thinking about what Jack has not achieved. As I said before, do not mistake me in believing that I have not mourned for him."

"But he's not dead!" protested Claire. "He is sitting right here!" She did not need to mourn him!

"Oh, for God's sake!" hissed Jack, standing up from the settee swiftly. "I am not a boy anymore, and I will not hear you tell me that I have failed you for the thirty thousandth time. I will not sit here and be belittled in front of my wife." Jack turned to Claire and silently asked for her hand to leave with him, but Claire hesitated.

No. She wouldn't leave it like this. She couldn't. Claire didn't understand why this relationship was irreparable. She felt as though Cecily was meaning to be remorseful, and yet all she did was further remind Jack of his failures.

"Jack, I appreciate that I do not know the man you have become as well as I should. Had you been home in the last three years, I might have had the opportunity!" Cecily said tersely. "And I do sincerely believe Claire's assessment of you. I have never believed you to be of ill character. It does please me that your wife respects you, that she loves you. However, please do not change the fact that a child will be delivered into this world to a father without means to support it. As it stands, you have a wife whom your brother's supporting."

"What am I supposed to think when you consider how you have conducted yourself in years gone by?" Cecily challenged. "I am worried about you! Worried for you! Worried for your wife and your child! If I did not care, I would not have bothered to discuss this with you!"

"Discuss what?" challenged Jack. "You have not offered any solutions. All you have done is explained in excruciating detail what a sack of bloody cow dung you believe your son to be. Do you expect a thank you?"

Claire wondered what would happen if she locked Cecily and Jack in this parlour together, but then feared one of them would light it on fire. Jack hadn't told his mother, or anyone, about his plans for his publishing company. Claire knew that was on purpose. If it failed, as he had a legitimate fear of failure, he didn't want anyone to know.

Cecily hurried angrily. "The solution I was going to offer, darling, is a portion of my trust set aside for your child. Education for a son, a respectable dowry for a daughter. I had my trust earmarked for Susanna, but if I can get her married, and married well, I would happily have a solicitor draw up a new will for me. I won't have my grandchild growing up as a pauper."

Claire looked between Jack and Cecily as they stared at one another. Jack looked a wreck, and Cecily appeared beyond frustrated.

"Tell me, Mother, do you have any faith in me whatsoever?" Jack's voice was suddenly very soft, very fragile, so much so that Cecily recoiled from it.

Cecily remained silent. Her lips parted, but she said nothing.

"Father did," Jack continued quietly. "You may do what you like with your money, but I will take care of my family."

Gahhh, will they ever understand each other?

At least Cecily hasn't discovered the secret yet ;)

Sorry, just teasing you or am I?

Ah, I thrive on your panic and frustration hahahaha. Scrolling through your comments the morning after I post makes me laugh when I see how I vex you hehe

I know Cecily is coming from a good place, and she is genuinely happy that Jack has made a love match (or so she believes) because that was what she wanted for herself. She is just a practical woman of her time and understands that money makes the world go round. She just can't communicate for shit. I hope one day she and Jack will find some middle ground.

Next chapter will be Tuesday night :)

Vote and comment!