

"Nothing manipulates people more than the desire to please." Zoe Durllock, *Silent Remains: The Caruso Chronicles*

XXVIII.

Christmas went relatively smoothly, and a good time was had by all. Even Claire managed to forget about the silver rattle which was still hidden in the pocket of her coat above stairs. But not entirely.

The day a er Christmas was a more sombre a air. Gone was the joy of the season, and in its place was a house in mourning. Of course, the house was no longer in full mourning, or even half mourning, but it was a day of reflection and remembrance

Seeing Jack deeply saddened only increased the guilt she was feeling in the pit of her stomach. But she couldn't upset him further. She could not make this day about her own foolishness. Jack had asked for her help, and by God she was going to give it.

Claire wished that she knew Jack's father, even a little, so that she might have something to say about him that might bring Jack comfort. Grace was the only one who really knew the duke outside of his family, and Claire remembered her sister telling her about reading Dante's *Divine Comedy* Peregrine during his last weeks and days.

Such an anecdote was the inspiration behind Jack's Christmas present from Claire. She had not realised the significance of the day a er Christmas, only while they were in London, she had procured a copy from a print shop. She was certain Jack had a copy somewhere, but she thought he would appreciate it, nonetheless. And he had. He had spent an hour on Christmas night reading to her from Dante's *Inferno*.

Cecily le for the tomb early, according to Adam, and on this day she wore her mourning attire. Susanna followed her mother an hour later, and Adam and Grace journeyed down with Perrie at noon.

Claire busied herself with some embroidery while Jack quietly read. She knew that he would not want to interrupt anyone, especially his mother.

"My father wanted to read this in its entirety before he died," Jack said suddenly, a er a long while of silence. "I think, as he came to grips with his own mortality, he believed that reading through the three stages of this book, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the paradise being Heaven, that it would cleanse his soul."

Claire abandoned her embroidery on the seat cushion next to her. "What a powerful tale," she murmured.

"Indeed," agreed Jack. "Did you know I studied Dante at Cambridge?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," replied Claire. "I don't really know much about him." She definitely felt very ignorant about a lot of things. Her world was very small compared to Jack's.

"Dante Alighieri is perhaps the most famous poets to have ever lived," Jack informed her so ly. He closed the book and sat up on the bed so that he could look over at her. "In his *Comedy* he writes of his final guide through Heaven, the symbol of beatific love and divinity, and her name was Beatrice. We were taught that Beatrice was a real person, a girl whom Dante met only twice, but he fell in love with her at first sight and carried his love for her always. I remember thinking at the time how could one person so ect another a er one meeting."

Claire smiled serenely. "She must have been quite an extraordinary lady for Dante to consider her so perfect."

"I always thought he must have been a little mad," admitted Jack, "but then, I didn't know until it happened to me, and I found that perhaps we all are a little mad."

Jack's eyes narrowed with a glimmer of intensity and Claire recoiled slightly. He was speaking of her. Why would he think such things about her? "How could you ever equate mewith someone divine?" Claire stammered; her unease evident in her voice.

Jack surprised Claire but chuckling. "I struggle to believe there is anyone truly divine, Claire," he replied honestly. "What I meant was I understand how meeting someone who is meant to be important in your life can change you. The night you danced with me was the night Dante began to make sense to me."

Claire struggled to believe she could have made such an impact on what was, perhaps, the most foolish night of her life. All she could think about was being noticed and ravished by Arthur that she had not taken much notice at all of Jack. It only made her wish that she could go back and force herself to listen to the warnings of others.

Claire's eyes flicked to her coat, which was still strewn across the trunk at the end of their bed. She needed to return the rattle. She should not have accepted it. She would return it and be done with it, with him.

"Will you come down with me now?" Jack asked.

Claire sucked in a breath and nodded. "Yes, of course."

The Ashwood estate was very large, but Claire did not realise just how large it was until it came time to walk to the family tomb. It was well past the gardens, the stable, and through a small wood before they came to a large pond. Claire had not realised there even was a pond on the estate. Adjacent to the pond was a large, marble cathedral, or what looked like a cathedral.

Jack told Claire quietly that it was modelled a er Parthenon, though obviously not the scale. Claire had no idea what the Parthenon was, but looking upon the tomb, she could imagine it.

It was a very serene place by the water, and Claire thought it very restful. There were no sounds around them save for the tread of their boots through the grass.

Claire held Jack's hand tightly as they climbed the few steps up to a series of marble columns. Through the columns was a heavy door that Jack pushed open. The hinges squeaked from disuse. Jack let go of Claire's hand momentarily to light a candle which illuminated the large room. It was quite plain, save for the wooden crucifix nailed to the wall. There was another set of doors which Claire assumed would lead them through to the place where Peregrine was buried.

"My father's great-grandfather had this tomb erected," uttered Jack, "consecrated, everything. I don't want to end up in here."

Jack opened the next set of doors and led Claire through, though he stopped very close to the doorway and stared ahead with a hard expression on his face. This room was much larger than the first and contained several stone sarcophagi. Cold, rectangular boxes containing the people who had once ruled over this estate.

On the end of each was the name of the duke, his date of birth, and his date of death. Jack fell silent, and Claire took back his hand and squeezed it tightly. They walked together to the last sarcophagus, and Claire looked down at the epitaph.

6th Duke of Ashwood

Peregrine John Clarence Edmund

BERESFORD

February 6 1751 – December 26 1806

Jack was frozen still as he stared. His face was almost contorted with a conflict of grief and anger. "I don't know what to say ... what to do," Jack whispered, almost inaudibly.

"When I visit my father at the church," replied Claire, just as quietly, "I converse with him, and every time I go back, I pick up where I le o . I could be chatting to him about something banal that I know he would not care for, or I will be telling him about something important. What would you tell your father?"

Jack was quiet again for several minutes, before he suddenly said, "You will be happy to know I am finally reading the *Divine Comedy*. He actually chuckled, a laugh that was thick with emotion. "I never got through it when my professor set it, and it was through sheer luck I got through the course, but I was given it as a present by my wife, who might possibly be ..." he paused, "... ismy Beatrice."

Claire's heart swelled and shattered at the same time. She knew what those words meant, and to be privy to such a heartfelt, vulnerable conversation was important. To be seen in such a light was a deep privilege, and one that Claire knew she did not deserve. Not while she was in possession of the rattle, which, at this very moment, was still in the pocket of the coat that she was wearing. Claire knew that she couldn't hurt him. She wouldn't allow Jack to be hurt again.

She reiterated her conviction from this morning. Claire would return the rattle, and she would never be led, swayed, or tricked by Arthur again. No matter his intentions with his gi , Claire could not and would not give him the opportunity to get into her head and spoil what she had been so fortunate to find.

Jack le Claire alone later that a ernoon to work with his brother, so Claire stayed away into the lady's bedroom in their suite. She sat down at the untouched writing desk and produced the rattle, still in its leather case, and placed it on the desk beside the sheet of paper she was going to write on.

Dear Arthur Claire began, before immediately deciding against the term of endearment. She crumpled the paper, but then decided it wasn't destroyed quite well enough. Claire ripped it to pieces and threw it into the fireplace. She got out a fresh sheet and began again.

Mr Slickson,

I am writing to you to return your gi . While generous, it is unwanted and inappropriate.

I kindly ask Claire crossed out "ask", **demand** and she pressed a little too hard with her quill and darkened the ink, that you refrain from any form of correspondence or communication in the future.

Should you meet me in the street, I ask that you treat me no derent to anyone of whom you view as an indierent acquaintance and I shall do the same.

I wish you good health and happiness in your future.

Claire Beresford.

Claire's hand, she knew, was not her best, but her writing was legible, and any gentleman would receive and take heed of such a missive. She signed the letter positively because she did not want to wish harm on anyone. She did sincerely hope that Arthur may find someone for whom he would move mountains. It would not be her, and Claire had long accepted that fact.

Claire folded and sealed the letter, addressed it, and took it and the rattle box out of the bedroom. Claire entrusted the letter to Mr Cole, who was discreet when it came to the interests of the family. And the minute it was out of her hands, Claire felt relief.

It was gone, and she could move on.

Or so she thought.

The morning of the first of January, during a family breakfast to celebrate Adam and Grace's third wedding anniversary, the post arrived like it usually did. Letters and cards arrived as they always did, only this time, there was something for Claire as well. A letter and a parcel. From Arthur.

Claire rarely received letters. The last few years of her life, ever since her father died, really, had been spent tending her mother's house, and so she had never had time for friends who would write her.

Everyone was occupied with their own post. Jack, in particular, was reading correspondence from a man in London who was looking into printing presses for him, and so Claire quickly broke the seal on her letter.

The letter was short. So short, that he had only written four words.

Until we meet again.

Claire knew what would be inside the parcel, and she felt sick to her stomach to look at it.

I feel the need, a er the last chapter's comment section (side note hahaha) to ask you guys to trust me *pretext* please ;) Not that I don't love opening up Wattpad the morning a er I post and scrolling through your meltdowns hehehe. Ah, it's better than co ee (not that I drink co ee, but I suppose my comment section gives me the rush I imagine ca eine would hehehe)

This year I am celebrating 10 years on Wattpad!! Now, it's not for a little while (November), but I am planning on doing something to give love to you guys! A HUGE thank you from me for all your years of love and support!

These are the options I have come up with - but PLEASE give me suggestions if there's something you would like for me to do.

- 1. Q&A video (could be Instagram live, IGTV, YouTube etc)**
- 2. One-shot epilogue/extra chapter updated onto one of my completed stories. A check in chapter with a poll and I would upload a new chapter onto a completed story and you can see what the characters have been up to.**
- 3. A giveaway of some kind (not that I have any idea what I'd give away, but that can be up to you!)**

The reason I'm asking for ideas and giving options early is because if I have to write something, I need time to plan it and make it perfect ;)

As I said, if you have any ideas of your own, please let me know.

Vote and comment!