

"Any woman who is sure of her own wits, is a match, at any time, for a man who is not sure of his own temper." Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*

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XXIX.

"On the ground floor there is a very comfortable drawing room and sunroom, a dining room, a parlour, and a sizeable study and library. There is a master's suite of rooms, as well as three additional bedrooms above stairs. Downstairs boasts a generous kitchen as well as servants' quarters."

Jack looked around the Mayfair townhouse with admiration. It was, of course, not as large as Ashwood House or Ashwood Place, but it was a sizable family home in a desirable and safe part of London that he could afford. The rooms were large and bright, and the location was ideal, and very close to the space he had leased for his publishing business.

The house was comfortably furnished, but there would be some pieces that Claire would need to choose. The minute his mind naturally shifted to Claire, Jack felt a pang of guilt in the pit of his stomach.

"I think this will do nicely," Jack told the leasing agent. "And it was two hundred guineas per annum?"

The agent nodded. "Yes, milord. I shall have the contract drawn up for you post haste and sent to Ashwood Place."

"Thank you." Jack was led out of the house and the agent locked the door behind him.

The two gentlemen separated, with the agent climbing into a hired carriage and Jack walking on foot back towards Ashwood Place. Jack hoped that the news he had secured a home for their relocation to London would please Claire. He needed to return with good news, or something that would endear himself to her.

He had been a right coward for nearly two months now. In fact, it was now March, which meant that it had been two months since Jack had seen Claire. Jack had written to her, of course, and had received some brief replies, but he knew he had done wrong.

Jack had been in London for business. He had spent the last eight weeks procuring equipment, renting his business space, hiring a few printers, and finally securing a home. While it was only a thirty-mile journey from London to Ashwood, Jack had been reluctant to make the trip knowing he had let Claire poorly. Poorly was perhaps an understatement. They had quarrelled for the first time, and Jack had been a right ogre to Claire. He had stormed out of the house that very hour.

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January 2, 1810

Two months earlier

Jack had observed Claire's odd behaviour for nearly two full days. She seemed on edge and nervous, anxious even. He would have attributed it to her condition, however whenever they talked of the baby, she never seemed afraid.

Something else was bothering her.

Before dinner that evening, when everyone had gone upstairs to change, Jack let himself into Claire's dressing room. She was alone and had not rung the bell for a servant to help her. She was sitting at her dresser fiddling with something in her hand. It was small and silver, and as it moved, Jack heard a soft tinkling sound, as though there were small bells attached to it.

"Claire?"

Claire had obviously not heard him enter the room, and she jumped from fright. She turned in her chair to face him and she placed a hand on her chest as though she was trying to settle her pulse.

"I do apologise," he uttered. "I should have announced myself."

"No, no, don't be silly," Claire assured him. And she smiled at him in earnest, and Jack felt his chest tighten.

Lord, she was beautiful when she smiled. She was beautiful all the time anyway, but he loved to see her smile. He had realised some time ago that he loved everything about her, only he had not yet mustered the courage to tell her. That all too frightening fear of rejection plagued him. He teased it, though, often writing it on her belly during their name game, but Claire could never work it out. She was trying to spell a name and was quite convinced that Jack was writing something in Ancient Greek.

But her smile was not as full as it would usually be, and this brought Jack back to his senses. "Claire, what's wrong?" he asked tentatively. Claire stowed whatever it was she was holding on the dresser, and Jack looked upon it quizzically. It looked like a rattle, perhaps. It had been many years since Jack had seen one. The last he could recall was Susanna's when she was an infant. Had Claire sent away for one?

"There is something I need to talk to you about," Claire began so lightly, planting her hands in her lap.

Jack felt his stomach seize as he sensed a seriousness in her tone. "What?" he asked nervously.

"Please, don't be angry," Claire begged, her voice breaking as she looked up at him, and her eyes quickly became glassy with tears.

A sickening feeling of dread fell over Jack as he thought the very worst. He could see it all over her face. Guilt she had done something to feel guilty about, and Jack already knew what she was going to tell him. She had gone and done it. She had gone and done it and now she was going to leave him.

"What?" he asked again, though this time, however, he spoke through gritted teeth and nearly spat venom.

His change in tone made Claire flinch. "Please," she said again desperately. "It's Arthur, he --"

But that was enough for Jack. He heard that man's name, he could see the guilt all over Claire's face, and he knew what had happened. How? When? What? A thousand questions flooded Jack's mind, all bringing with them an overwhelming feeling of absolute irate fury, all of them making him feel violently ill.

"Do not finish that sentence!" he ordered furiously, and Claire began to cry.

"Jack, please!" Claire cried. "Arthur --"

"Stop!" hissed Jack. "I won't hear it. I won't hear it!"

Jack had continued to shout at Claire for the next hour as he packed, compelling her to be quiet as she cried and tried to explain but he wouldn't hear her excuses. He couldn't hear what she did. He didn't want to live with the picture of it burned into his brain for eternity. As it was, he was livid with her, and livid with himself that he had allowed himself to get so carried away with the idea of a perfect family, and a perfect marriage.

He was always second best, and he had chosen a wife who could never love him.

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A letter arrived for Jack shortly after he arrived in London. It was from Claire, and was addressed very poorly, the ink having run from her tears. Jack was still in a foul disposition and had furiously thrown the letter into the fire without reading it.

A letter from his brother arrived shortly after asking after the situation, and Jack had written him briefly explaining that he was in town making preparations. Adam had made no mention of Claire, which Jack deduced to mean that Claire had kept their quarrel to herself. Jack wouldn't out her. He had honour even if she did not.

What he hated most of all was that his feelings were unchanged. For whatever maddening reason, Jack still felt the deepest love for Claire, which was hurt more than anything.

Claire wrote twice more that week, and by the time the third letter arrived, Jack's tore the letter open in frustration.

Jack, she began.

Seeing as you have responded to Adam's letter, I am assuming that you haven't broken your hand and are incapable of replying to me. So, I must, instead, conclude that you are still too angry with me to even listen, or read what I have to say. That will not stop me writing it down every day and sending it to you until you write back to me.

The more I think about it, the less I realise that I have done wrong. I tried to tell you the truth and you wouldn't let me speak. By your reaction, I can imagine that you believe has taken place, but I must state vehemently that this is **not** true.

What I was trying to say was that Arthur and I spoke on Christmas Eve, when Grace and I went to visit my mother to deliver Christmas gifts. He was waiting outside of my mother's house and I spoke with him so that he would leave and not draw attention. He gave me a silver rattle which I returned.

I didn't tell you about it because you asked me to accompany you to your father's tomb and I didn't want to cause you any pain at an already troubling time.

On the first of January, I received a short missive from Arthur, as well as the rattle returned. Arthur stated that he would see me again. I felt terrible that I had deceived you, but I believed I was doing the right thing in protecting you at a time of grief.

I then decided to confide in you, to tell you the truth and to ask for your help, but you immediately thought the worst of me. And I cannot blame you for that. You married me in my state, and so it must not have taken much for you to believe me capable of something so sordid.

But I am sorry I didn't tell you the truth straight away. Aside from this falsehood, I have not committed any sin.

Please respond to this letter at your earliest convenience.

Your wife,

Claire.

Jack had read Claire's letter through another half a dozen times to make certain that his fears were not realised. For the briefest of moments, Jack felt pure elation, followed swiftly by relief. She hadn't betrayed him. She wasn't leaving him.

And then reality had set in quickly after when Jack realised what a true brute he had been. He had behaved appallingly, and he had made Claire feel cheap. He had allowed his own insecurities to manifest and warp a situation that might have been easily handled.

Jack wanted to return to Claire, but he quickly became too afraid. He allowed weakness to settle in, and his insecurities to continue to plague him. Claire hadn't been intending on leaving him, but after the way he behaved, he wouldn't blame her if she did.

Jack thought that by staying away, he was letting the dust settle, and Claire's animosity cool. But he knew he was simply being a coward. If he faced her, Claire could leave him. She could declare that she would never love him after the way he'd made her feel. He wasn't strong enough to handle it. Would he ever be?

Jack had replied to her letter immediately, apologising profusely for his reaction. He had continued to write frequently as he carried on with his business in London, informing Claire of the goings on in hope that it would excite her. She had loved London, and he was praying that when he did finally return, she would be excited.

Jack sent Claire one final letter that March, telling her of the house he had secured. He described it in as exciting detail as he could, going so far as to suggest that she look in catalogues for any nursery furniture items that she might want to send for.

But as his business was now concluded, Jack knew that he needed to return home.

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**Hope you enjoyed it!**

**I wonder what's been happening with Claire these last two months? I hope nothing ... sinister ...**

**I just want to say thank you for all your wonderful suggestions on the last chapter! It has been so nice hearing which characters you would like to visit again!! I swear every book of mine was mentioned, even some massive throwbacks!! I will do a poll closer to the date for you guys to vote on to decide which book I add to. I might even throw in an extra one if I'm feeling nice ;)**

**The Q&A as well as super popular so I will do that too! Closer to the date, I'll get some questions from you guys and I'll film a video ;)**

**Tomorrow will be my last regular update as I'm back at work on Wednesday! Then we'll be going back to my normal Saturday schedule unfortunately! I was hoping to get this story finished before the summer holidays ended but we still have a little bit to go!**

**Then we can start on Susanna's story! I cannot WAIT to introduce you to who I've created for her. I want himmmmmmmmm!**

**Vote and comment!**