

"Though we adore men individually

We agree that as a group they're rather stupid!" Richard M. Sherman
& Robert B. Sherman, *Sister Su ragette*

XXXII.

Claire did not know what Jack said, or what he had done, but the letters from Arthur soon ceased as er Jack's return from London. Shortly a er their reconciliation, Jack had le to call upon Arthur, though Claire knew it would be anything but a social call.

Claire and Jack spent the following four weeks finding their place in the other's life again. The ease of the friendship that they had shared did not magically reappear, and before there could be familiarity, there was awkwardness and uncertainty.

But Jack did try. He was attentive and present, and he never, not once, walked out on a conversation. He invited Claire to speak about Arthur, and a er some convincing, she had divulged exactly what had transpired over their three years of supposed courtship.

Claire told Jack of her infatuation with Arthur, beginning in childhood. She told him how she used to dress especially nice for church when she was but ten years old in hope that Arthur would notice. Claire explained how this infatuation had become her silly idea of love, and how it had culminated in Arthur kissing her for the first time on the night of that fateful winter assembly.

Arthur had convinced Claire that it was a courtship, and that it must be kept secret. His mother wouldn't approve, and if she were, she needed time. Claire was too naïve to understand that chaperones needed to be present during a respectful courtship, and that what she was engaging in was a reputation ruining trust. Claire had fallen head over heels in love with Arthur, or what she had believed to be love at the time.

Over the years, he would tell her that he doubted her love, or that he needed to be convinced, and Claire believed him completely, fearing for his insecurities. This was how he had convinced her that she needed to prove herself in a more intimate way. Claire had known it was wrong to be engaging in such a airs outside of marriage, but Arthur had always told her that they would be married when he had convinced his mother.

The moment she had revealed her pregnancy, Arthur had spurned her, and Claire realised that she had been monumentally fooled. And that was why she could not understand why Arthur refused to leave her alone. If he didn't want her, why did he keep interfering?

Jack dutifully listened to her tale, even though Claire knew he hated every moment of it. She couldn't know exactly what he was thinking, but she truly hoped he was not wondering how on earth she could be so persuaded.

But he never said any such thing. Instead, he brushed her cheek with the backs of his knuckles and uttered, "I am so very sorry this happened to you. There is a special place in hell for men who illtreat women."

Claire and Jack began sharing a bedroom again shortly therea er, and slowly they began to return the friends that they were before Jack had le for London. Although, Claire did sense something was di erent. She found Jack hesitating at times, o en before he spoke, or if he looked to be thinking over something. It was as though he had something on the tip of his tongue and couldn't yet say anything.

Claire feared asking him what was on his mind. Jack had refused to tell her what has transpired between himself and Arthur, and she worried that Arthur had been cruel. She didn't want to hear that Jack was doubting the trust that he had put in her.

By Claire's calculations, she was in her eighth month of pregnancy when it came time to christen Lily. She felt as big as a horse, and she found her dress to be entirely unflattering, and yet she was forced to attend as Grace and Adam had asked her and Jack to be Lily's godparents. Of course, Claire was honoured and would carry the title with pride, only she wished she did not feel so much like a peddler pushing a heavy cart.

April had been unseasonably warm thus far, and Claire felt quite hot and bothered as she tied her bonnet ribbon under her chin. Her skin was glistening with sweat.

Jack appeared behind Claire in the mirror and smiled. It immediately annoyed her just how dashing he looked in his fitted coat and breeches. He certainly did not look like a whale.

"Why must you look like that?" she hu ed.

"Like what?"

"That!" insisted Claire. She turned around to look up at him. "You are very handsome, and you know very well."

A sheepish grin appeared on Jack's face as he received Claire's backhanded compliment. "My, I am sorry. Though it is nice to hear that my wife does not find me abhorrent."

"My cheeks are chubbier," complained Claire as she covered them self-consciously. In fact, everything about her person felt swollen. Even her fingers. Perhaps this was her punishment for escaping the nausea that Grace had su ered through.

"Claire, you are very beautiful, and you know very well," Jack countered, using her own words. Claire so ened momentarily before he spoke again. "Even if there is a little more of you," he added teasingly.

Claire gasped, but could not help but laugh as she swatted him playfully. "I do not think there is much longer to go," she revealed. "Some weeks, I think, and then he or she will be here."

"And yet we are still to decide on a name for a girl," murmured Jack.

"I know you have a favourite. Only you refuse to tell me," accused Claire. Something else that they had resumed since Jack's return was their little game in which Jack wrote names he liked on her belly and she attempted to guess them. It was something she was glad for, and it greatly made her feel close to Jack despite her fears. Feeling such a closeness to him was unlike anything she had ever experienced, and she had not realised just how much she needed him until he had returned.

Some of the names were easy to guess and dismiss, but he kept coming back to the one name she could not figure out. The one full of vowels. He clearly liked that one, or else he would not suggest it so o en.

"If only you would learn to spell," teased Jack in reply.

Claire rolled her eyes. "I am convinced you have plucked it from some obscure book as it is certainly not English. It ends in a "u", does it not? What name ends in a "u"?"

"You really want to know?" Jack asked, raising his brows in question. He looked at Claire intently, inspecting her.

"Yes," she insisted.

"I couldn't bear if you dismissed this one," he continued, his voice so ening.

Claire willed herself not to make a face, hoping the suggestion wasn't awful. But her curiosity reached its peak. What name could be so important? "I am certain I'll like it."

Jack smiled, but before he could open his mouth, the mantle clock chimed. "I will tell you a er the christening," he promised.

Claire groaned.

The vicar might have had ten fireplaces burning in that church for how stu y Claire found it. She could barely concentrate enough to repeat her promises as baby Lily was baptised into the congregation.

Claire felt as though she had a river running down her back, and so the moment she could escape outdoors into the fresh air for some respite, she took it. Claire hurried around to the back of the church so that no onlookers from the street could see her desperately fanning her décolletage. She pulled o her bonnet and used it to simultaneously fan her face.

A pair of arms surprised her as they wound themselves around Claire's waist, settling on her stomach.

"Jack, I --"

"You don't even know another man's arms from your husband's?"

Claire froze as she realised it was not Jack who was behind her, holding her, and touching her. She leapt away, putting a good ten feet between herself and Arthur in a mere moment.

"What are you doing?" Claire hissed. She glared at him angrily as an all too familiar feeling of panic settled in her stomach. "Did you follow me?"

Arthur, who was always dressed impeccably, was uncharacteristically shabby today. He looked as though he had slept in his clothes, and she could smell the remnants of whiskey on his breath.

"The whole county knows the next Ashwood princess is being christened today. I hoped to see you," Arthur murmured.

"You ought to leave!" Claire insisted. "Leave me well alone! How many times must I beg? If Jack knew you were here --"

Arthur interrupted her with a condescending laugh. "What? Would he journey to my house again and try to threaten me? Words! Claire, I care about actions. You know I do. And I have had about enough of this!"

Claire took a step back from Arthur but bumped into the stone wall of the church. Arthur took a step in then, realising Claire was practically cornered.

"Claire, I miss you."

"You miss me?" gasped Claire.

"I do," Arthur confirmed, actually sounding sincere in his voice.

"These months have been agonising for me. Nothing is right without you. I love you. You belong to me, and you know it!"

"No," hu ed Claire. "No, I don't. Not anymore." The way Arthur was looking at her made Claire's knees shake. Her hands were pressed back against the porous stone of the church as Arthur neared her. He was so close that once again she could smell the whiskey that he had consumed the night before.

"I love you," insisted Arthur again. "I know you love me. I can take you away from here," he continued urgently. "I will establish you in London and we can live together. You can have the child. We can be together." Arthur extended his arms to rest against the wall either side of Claire's head.

"No," whispered Claire, her heart thundering in her chest. "I don't love you. I never have. Now, leave me alone." Claire ducked under Arthur's arm and attempted to run away, to run to Jack, but Arthur caught her arm before she was able to move more than three steps.

Before she knew what was happening, Arthur pushed Claire up against the wall of the church and pressed his lips to hers forcefully. Claire pushed against Arthur's chest, but she wasn't strong enough. As she tried with all her might to push him o a second time, Arthur disappeared.

Claire heard the crunch of fist against bone before she could even properly focus on the scene before her. Jack was there, and he had pulled Arthur o of her, throwing him to the ground with a vicious punch to the nose. Blood began to pour from Arthur's face.

Claire looked up, agape, at an utterly fuming Jack, and her heart shattered into pieces when she saw the accusation, the mistrust, in his eyes.

"Dawn, tomorrow," spat Jack. "I demand satisfaction."

One step forward, two steps back. Damn, I'm starting to think this author takes pleasure in our torture. What a nutcase. All I can say is I hope she sorts things out soon!

But cmon, we were all thinking it - IT'S THE TEN DUEL

COMMANDMENTS!

So I had my first week with my new class in the room this week. They are so beautiful, and so aggressively obedient, it's adorable. Like they are desperate to please me and I love it XD And they find anything I say hilarious. Of course, I'm that funny.

And netball started back up again today a er a year! Missed it so much! Nothing like yelling at kids on court :)

Just another friendly reminder - I work full time, and until term time is over (which finishes on Good Friday) updates will be weekly on Saturday. I wish I could write more but I need sleep. Remember it takes me about four hours to write each chapter, and I'm already three hours past my bedtime lol.

Vote and comment xx

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