

"You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams." Dr. Seuss

XXXVI.

Claire awoke with the start when she heard her baby crying. Jack, too, who had been sleeping while sitting upright beside her, nearly fell on the bed in fright at the sound.

Claire was not at all certain of what time it was, but it was very dark in the bedroom. Jackie had been placed in the basinet beside the bed, the one that both Perrie and Lily had used.

"Don't you get up," Jack urged, as he leapt out of the bed and raced around to the basinet. Claire watched in admiration as he had a rather pleased smile on his face as he collected Jackie from her basket. Jack appeared to be handling delicate china as he lifted the baby with his good arm, slowly bringing her grizzling form over to Claire's waiting arms.

Claire took her tiny child into her arms and admired her briefly before starting to feed her as her mother had shown her earlier. As she suckled, Claire enjoyed the feeling of Jackie's soft, fine hair tickling her arm. It nearly appeared silver in the darkness.

Claire then realised that this was the first time that she had Jack had been alone with their daughter. Throughout the day, there had always been one family member or another present to offer advice or to teach her what to do. As much as Claire appreciated their help, she did want time alone with Jack in order for them to get to know their child.

Furthermore, she wanted time alone with her husband to talk to him. Childbirth had not prevented her from noticing the bloody shirt he wore when he had entered the bedroom. He had been shot.

"Claire, I am so proud of you, you know," murmured Jack as he watched them, returning to his place in the bed beside her. "I don't think I've ever been more terrified in my life before today."

Claire glanced at him. "I know exactly what you mean," she replied. Those few moments when Jackie had been blue had felt like hours. And she would never resent the sound of her baby crying. "But my fear began much earlier this morning."

Jack nodded slowly, grimacing.

"Jack, you promised me you wouldn't fight," Claire whispered.

"No, no," replied Jack quickly. "I never promised. I told you I wouldn't, but I didn't promise."

Claire frowned deeply. "Are you trying to tell me you are without guilt because you merely lied?"

"No," sighed Jack. "I lied to you, and I apologise. I should not have told you I wouldn't fight when I had every intention of going." Jack leaned back against the bedhead. "Claire, he dishonoured you ... and for the last time."

Claire felt the blood leave her face, and she was thankful for the darkness. Was Arthur dead?

But Jack seemed to sense her horror. "We both fired," he continued, "his shot landed, as you see. I fired into the air. I demanded satisfaction and I received it."

Claire was genuinely shocked to hear that Jack had fired into the air, but at the same time, she was incredibly relieved. Duels were a barbaric practice, and she saw no honour in them as many gentlemen did. But the idea that Jack could have fired at someone on her behalf was sickening.

"I think I could have lived with it," Jack decided quietly. "Had he accosted you, touched you ... I think I could have lived with it had we simply moved to London had begun our lives as the three of us. But I went because not only did he dishonour you, I did as well." Jack so lightly brushed some hair out of Claire's face and tucked it behind her head. His hand then dropped, briefly grazing her collarbone before landing beside her. "I doubted you, and I hate that my first reaction was to doubt you."

"Did you believe that you owed me a sort of debt?" whispered Claire. "Claire, I owe you everything," Jack said vehemently. "And at the first test of my honour, I failed."

Jackie pulled away and fussed quietly, and Claire quickly covered herself as she brought the baby up to her chest and began to rub her back as her mother had instructed.

"You owe me nothing," Claire assured him. "If there was ever a debt, it is mine -"

"Oh, Claire," hushed Jack, shaking his head. "I mean what I say when I claim that I owe you everything. When I think about the sort of man I was, the path I was on, even the day before we met again at Perrie's birthday ..." Jack tailed off, unable to finish his thought coherently. "I can be proud of the man I am today, and I never thought that ever possible. My mother ... my mother is proud of me."

Claire could hear the pride in his voice, even though he sounded as though he was in disbelief. It pleased her greatly that Jack's mother could see him as he was, and not who she believed him to be.

"Whatever the circumstances that saw us join together, Claire, I can say vehemently that I am eternally grateful for you," declared Jack. "Even more so as I never thought it would be possible for me to feel as I do." Jack turned his torso to look on her intently and Claire's breath hitched in her throat.

At that very moment, they both laughed when they heard Jackie, with her beautiful timing, release the gas from her belly. She made a satisfied sound and Claire began to settle Jackie in her arms.

"I am certain you must have felt it, too, one time or another, when you looked upon Adam and Grace. My brother, oh, how I envied him. Not Grace, of course, but I envied his clarity, his certainty that Grace was his future." Jack smiled. "I hoped for us, of course I hoped. But I never thought it would feel quite like this. I don't think there is anything I would not do for you and our baby. I love you endlessly, with the certainty I have always wanted. And the minute I heard Jackie's cry; I was lost to her. I will never fail you again, I swear it to you."

Claire felt his sincerity in every word, and she knew that she would never have to fear the sort of abandonment she had felt all those months ago. Jack loved her properly, the way a man ought to love a woman, wholly, passionately, and faithfully. For how many years had she longed to be loved this way? Claire didn't know.

Claire lessened the distance between them but stopped just shy of Jack's lips. Instead, she uttered, "I can take a lot, Jack. I have done. But I won't be lied to. You lied to me before, and that can't happen if we are to enter into this together." She spoke with a smile on her face, but she did mean every word. She wondered if Jack would remember the words he had said to her during their brief engagement, when they had made an agreement to be honest with each other.

Jack exhaled a breathy chuckle. "Touché, he agreed. "No lies," he promised. "If I plan on doing something utterly foolish, I will forewarn you."

Claire rolled her eyes as she pressed her lips to his, enjoying his closeness with nothing between them. They were husband and wife, with their daughter between them. After everything they had been through, Claire felt as though their life was about to begin.

"You are the first man I have ever loved," Claire declared when they parted. "And you will be the last."

"You are the first woman I have ever loved," replied Jack, "but I am afraid you are not the last." With a wicked grin, he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to Jackie's forehead.

The news of Jackie Beresford's birth spread around the village like wildfire, as news of any kind tended to do. Cecily was instrumental in describing the traumatic and dramatic scenes of Jackie's early arrival, and Jackie's tiny size at her first church appearance supported Cecily's claims.

Claire never heard a word in question, though she would wager nobody would dare go against the dowager duchess.

In the weeks that followed, in between the sleeplessness and the feelings of incompetence at three o'clock in the morning, Claire and Jack settled into parenthood well, and were more than ready to move their little family to London, much to the dismay of their entire family.

Claire had to admit that she was sad that Jackie would not grow up in the immediate vicinity of her cousins, but their adventure in London was important to Jack, and he was ready to establish his publishing house. Claire thought, however, that even if Jackie could not grow up seeing Perrie and Lily every day, that she would have to make do with the siblings that Claire hoped to give her, and soon.

Claire and Jack were to leave for London at the same time as Cecily and Susanna. Susanna's foray into society had been delayed due to Jackie's arrival, but Cecily would not keep her at home any longer.

Susanna was now three and twenty, and Cecily was determined to have her married by the season's end. Susanna was a prize, and could afford to be choosy, but her age worried Cecily. Susanna, however, did not care a wit. She, like Jack, had grown up with a brother who showed her how a man ought to love a woman. Susanna would not settle, and Claire completely understood. She did wonder whether or not Susanna would meet someone in London this year. But Claire hoped that if she did, he would love Susanna as she deserved.

"Jack, you cannot bring all of your books to London," Claire scolded as she rocked Jackie back and forth.

They were in the library with an open trunk, and Jack was going through the shelves choosing which titles to take with them. Their new home had a library, though it was not as well stocked as Jack would have liked.

"Think of the poor horses," she appealed. "They cannot tow such weight."

Jack smirked. "Well, I shall have to buy my favourites again, won't I?" He restored the books that he was deliberating between back on the shelf as they were interrupted by a knock on the library door.

Both Claire and Jack turned to see Peter standing rather awkwardly in the doorway. Claire smiled at her brother but looked upon him quizzically. He was dressed very nicely, indeed, and it was not even a Sunday. He perhaps looked as grown up as he ever had, despite being only nineteen. His dark hair was combed, and his hands, which were normally caked in charcoal, were scrubbed clean, and holding what looked to be a new hat.

"Sorry to disturb," he said apologetically.

"Not at all, Peter," replied Jack, abandoning his task. "Did you need something? Or are you here to visit with Claire?"

Claire had received Kate that morning already, in what had been a farewell tea. "Shall I bring for some tea? Or some sandwiches, are you hungry?"

"No, no, do not trouble yourself," refused Peter. "I actually came to speak with Jack." Peter fidgeted with his hat nervously.

Claire frowned. "Do you want me to leave?" she asked.

Peter shook his head. "No, it's alright."

"What can I do for you?" Jack asked curiously.

Peter took a deep breath, bit his bottom lip for a moment, before uttering, "You could give me a job."

Both Jack and Claire stared at Peter openly, and colour filled Peter's cheeks.

"Right," he uttered bashfully, "well, you would react like that." He shook his head as some conviction returned. "Don't get me wrong, I am grateful to Jim for his time and effort in training me as his apprentice, but you both know I fell into that position because of his charity. I have a brain in my head, and I've never had a chance to use it. Tell him, Claire," Peter urged. "I did well in school until I had to leave. I am very good with numbers, I understand arithmetic better than anyone ... and I thought that with a new business, it might do to have someone who knows numbers well enough to manage the finances."

"I can do more than ... I am capable of more ... I want more for myself. I've wanted an opportunity like this ever since I had to leave school, and I never thought it would come. I am no fool, and I have the ambition to succeed. Please, I want to come with you to London. I want to be a man of business ... I know I can do it."

Peter returned to looking thoroughly embarrassed, and Claire could not shield her pride. What it must have taken for her brother to come here today, to leave Jim when he had been so good to him. Claire had always known Jack was clever, too clever to be in a profession where his mind wasn't inspired. When Jim had taken Peter on, it was because the Denhams had not been able to afford an apprenticeship for him.

Had their family had the finances, Peter would have done very well in university.

Claire looked to Jack and nodded eagerly. "He is right," urged Claire. "Peter is terribly clever -"

But her appeal did not last long as Jack interrupted her. "It just so happens, Peter, that I am rubbish with numbers." Jack grinned as relief washed over Peter. "I'm honoured that you've come to me, and if you are willing to work as hard as I am, then I will be pleased to have you at the helm with me."

Peter nodded, quite awestruck. "Yes, of course," he promised.

"And there is a bedroom in our house in London for you, so your mother will not have to worry about you in bachelor's lodgings."

Peter beamed. "London ... I'm going to London." He practically skipped in the air. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "Thank you. I will not let you down."

"You ought to pack, Peter," urged Claire, "and break it to Mama." And Jim, she thought sullenly. Perhaps Jem could take Peter's place?

Peter nodded, grinning, before turning on his heel and hurrying from the library.

Jack and Claire exchanged an amused look, and Claire smiled widely. "Thank you."

"Are you ready?" posed Jack.

"For London?" queried Claire.

"For forever."

Hope you liked it!

We concluded Jack and Claire's story AND set up Susanna and Peter's (separate of course hahaha)

I've been seeing so many guesses for Susanna in the comments and nobody has even come close. You will not guess what I have planned for her hahaha. I'm an evil genius, remember?

We're out of lockdown as of 11:59pm tonight!! I'm so relieved! We're back to school tomorrow wahoooooo.

Anyway, better go, laptop is about to die.

Epilogue will be up usual time on Saturday.