

"The day I found my smile again was when I stood in my own storm and danced with my tribe." Shannon L. Alder

XXVI.

Claire walked with Jack out of the parlour and back towards the drawing room. Jack looked shaken, and Claire clung onto his arm tightly to let him know that she was there.

Jack stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway, nearly causing Claire to stumble at the sudden loss of momentum. "Nobody has ever stood up for me like that before," he said gratefully, looking down at Claire. "Nobody has ever said such kind things on my behalf, especially to my mother. Claire, did you mean it? Did you mean what you said?"

Claire's mouth opened with surprise as she saw the genuine uncertainty in Jack's eyes. He truly didn't know if Claire was sincere. "Oh, Jack," she breathed sympathetically. "I meant every word," she promised him. "You have nothing to prove to her," she insisted. "But she will see her folly when you start your business," she added confidently. She placed a hand on his cheek. "I know you will take care of me, and of our child. I have unwavering faith in you."

Jack stared at her in awe for a moment. Claire could see something in his eyes that was being left unspoken, but only for a moment before his gaze dropped and his lips captured hers in a searing kiss. Claire completely lost her footing in the moment and Jack's arms wound around her waist and supported her completely. Claire felt passion from Jack, as though he was giving her everything he had.

When he pulled away, Jack hovered a mere half inch from her face. A shadow cast itself across his face and his eyes looked so very dark and fiery. "You cannot know what it means to hear you say that," he murmured quietly.

Claire quickly realised she was quite out of breath. She exhaled shakily. "We are a team, are we not? I will always find the courage to fight dragons for you ... not that I am likening your mother to a dragon -"

But Jack interrupted her thought with a fit of laughter. He then pressed his lips to Claire's temple and kissed her so ly.

"Oh, Lord, do you think she heard?" panicked Claire. They were not so far from the parlour.

"So, what if she did? It's my turn for the next dragon."

The Winter Assembly was always the last social gathering before the winter months set in. Ashwood, like most of England, grew freezing with icy winds and endless rain. Any snow that fell was washed away and would most likely resist sticking to the ground until January.

Before anyone knew, it was Christmastime, and Claire estimated that she was about five months along in her pregnancy, though as far as anyone else knew, she was approaching her fourth month. She was showing noticeably now, though she did try to disguise her size as best she could with heavy winter dresses and sitting at particular angles.

Only Jack had witnessed her proper size. It was something that she had felt she would feel awfully uncomfortable doing, but the more the child grew, the more it felt like Jack's. Whenever Claire pictured the baby as a young boy or girl, she always saw lovely curly hair, dark like Jack's, and beautiful hazel eyes. Though she knew it was impossible, it only made her excited for any future children they might have. And as soon as that thought had entered her mind, it was hard not to think about just how a child was created. She only knew too well.

But as much as Claire could delude herself into imagining that the child she was currently carrying would look like Jack, she found herself increasingly worrying how Jack was feeling. And these worries had begun to make her resistant to a action. Truth be told, as soon as she was beginning to visibly show her pregnancy, she felt guilty every time Jack tried to touch her. Of course, he was never forward or forceful, but she couldn't help but feel ashamed at what he would think if he kissed her and could feel the protrusion of her stomach.

Claire knew that if she asked, Jack would give her an honest answer, but she simply couldn't bring herself to ask him, "Do you ever feel repulsed by me?"

And she certainly would not blame him if he did. Surely the thought had to cross his mind now and again that she was this way as a result of another man.

But every night, without fail, Claire had become accustomed to wearing a pair of flesh coloured pantaloons underneath her night dress as Jack liked to see her stomach. Perhaps it was an answer to her question, but to Claire this felt different to a action.

A few nights before Christmas, Claire and Jack were lying in their bed, and Claire showed the skirt of her night dress up and over her stomach but making sure her chest was modestly covered. Her rounded belly felt the warmth of the crackling fire and Jack leaned up on his elbow to look at her.

As they already had a name picked for the child if it was a boy, Jack had invented a little game to choose a name for a girl. Using his index finger, he would write a name on her stomach and Claire would try to guess it. She was quite good at the game, though she had rejected all of Jack's suggestions.

"I've been thinking of names a lot today, actually," Jack informed her as his index finger brushed her skin lightly, leaving a trail of goosepimples behind it.

Claire shivered. "Oh?"

"I've finally settled on a name for the publishing house."

Jack had been tucked away with Adam for weeks working on the establishment of the business. Jack told her quite a bit of what was going on, but some of the technical terms were foreign to Claire. Jack was planning on travelling to London in the new year to look at potential locations, which meant that at some point, they would be relocating to London, an idea that excited Claire greatly.

"What did you choose?"

"Beresford Press. What do you think?"

Claire smiled. "I like it. It is simple and professional, and bound to be on the inside cover of every fantastic novel ever written in the nineteenth century."

Jack chuckled. "I admire your optimism."

He liked to dismiss praise, but Claire knew Jack was excited. He had purpose, and it was gaining momentum. The rest of the family were still in the dark about Jack's plans at his behest, but Claire could see Jack's growing confidence every day.

"Now, the other names I have been thinking about." Jack began to draw on Claire's belly, causing her to giggle as he brushed over a ticklish spot he had discovered.

Claire concentrated, and was quite certain the name started with an M

A... that felt like an A. R... and Y?

Mary. The Virgin. Claire thought the she might be struck by lightning if she so much as considered the name. "Mary," Claire guessed. "No."

"What's wrong with Mary?" protested Jack, before he quickly got over her rejection and set to writing another name.

Claire correctly guessed and rejected Agatha, Anne and Emma. None seemed quite like the right name, and she couldn't put her finger on why. She supposed she could only hope the baby was a boy so that she wouldn't have to choose a girl's name.

"Alright, I have one more," Jack said finally.

A straight line. I. But then the letters kept going. Was that an O? V? And going. Y? What sort of name had this sort of combination of letters? U. Claire was certain the last letter was a U.

"What on earth was that?" Claire exclaimed. "I am quite certain you just chose a random assortment of vowels to vex me."

Jack laughed again and shook his head. "No, I assure you, it spelt something."

"What?" Claire asked impatiently.

Jack shook his head. "I thought you were clever at this game," he reminded her.

"You are telling me that you actually just wrote something coherent? In the King's English?"

Jack nodded with a sheepish smile on his face. "Absolutely."

"Well, then! Tell me!" Claire demanded. "What if I like it?"

Jack grinned and extended his arm across her torso as he leaned in to kiss her. The feel of him touching her stomach as he leaned into her caused Claire to flinch, and that horrible feeling filled her stomach. Jack stopped immediately, before laying back down on his pillow. Claire sensed the game was over, so she pulled her nightgown back down over her stomach. "I truly hope you do like it," he replied, "but I'll tell you another time."

"Sorry," murmured Claire.

"Don't apologise," he assured her quietly. "My brother ... he told me that this time can become very uncomfortable for women and that is why ..." he trailed off.

Claire felt terrible. Jack had not asked her about her reluctance or expressed any particular feeling over it for weeks. This was the first time. And he thought it was because she was feeling physically uncomfortable. And she was, though not in the way that he believed.

Claire had been so worried that Jack would feel disgusted by the feel of her if he tried to kiss her, that she had not stopped to consider any other way he might be feeling.

Say it quickly. Claire willed herself.

"I don't want you to be repulsed by me!" Claire nearly shouted all in one breath.

"What?" Jack appeared dumbfounded.

Claire forced herself to take a deep breath and found the courage to say, "I don't want you to be repulsed by me."

"Repulsed?" repeated Jack in an alarmed tone. He sat up in the bed, turning properly so that he could look upon her. "Wherever would you get an idea like that?"

Claire flushed crimson.

"Claire, please," begged Jack. "If something is bothering you, tell me."

"Well, I ... I can't help but feel awful every time you try to kiss me, and you feel this." Claire touched her hands to her stomach. "That you might be thinking ... oh, I don't know ... about the stupid girl who has the very evidence of her stupidity poking you every time you try to be near me."

Jack frowned deeply, going as far as to close his eyes and pinch the bridge of his nose with his thumb and fore finger. "Claire, I can swear to you on my life that the last thing I am thinking about when I try and touch you is that you are stupid. And I would certainly never refer to my unborn child as 'evidence of stupidity'."

Claire felt incredibly foolish, though it was not a foreign feeling. She needed to get that through her head. Perhaps her delusions of imagining the baby would look like Jack would help.

"Will you tell me what the last name was?" she asked quietly.

"No," retorted Jack, a smile teasing at his lips. "I'll tell you another time."

Claire sighed. "It better be beautiful and not something dreadful like ... Frederica."

Jack laughed. "Oh, blast. How did you guess it?"

Claire playfully swatted Jack's arm. But he returned his hand to her belly and rested it there for a moment, before he leaned down to kiss Claire so ly. She didn't flinch.

At that very moment, she felt a flutter against her hand. Grace had told her that babies kicked inside the womb. Was that what this was? And this time, Jack was the one to flinch.

"What was that?" he asked, alarmed.

"I think the baby moved!"

"Oh my God, is it supposed to do that?" Jack stressed. "Do I summon a surgeon?" He had already leapt out of the bed before Claire could sit up. "Where are my bloody breeches?" he shouted as he tossed a pile of clothes over his shoulder.

"No, no, be calm!" exclaimed Claire. "Grace told me it happens! The baby is big enough to start moving around."

Jack froze as he dropped the clothing that he held in his hand. "That's normal?" he checked.

"Yes," nodded Claire.

"Oh, God, my whole life flashed before my eyes." He slumped down on the trunk and Claire started to laugh. Jack frowned at her, amused. "Just for laughing at me, her name is going to be Frederica, I hope you realise."

Hope you enjoyed it! Thought I'd give you something nice before I ...

***insert "Laura is evil" comments here* ----->**

Anyway, so I spent the day in my classroom today finishing up my reading corner with an arbour which looks AMAZING! I'm so glad when my vision comes to life. I've popped pics up on my Instagram! I still have so much to do though gahh

Okay, next chapter will be Thursday or Friday. I have actually work on Thursday so we'll see what my energy levels are like. If no chapter pops up at the usual time, that's why, and you'll see me Friday :)

Vote and comment!