## XXVII

"Men can be relentless," she agrees, "when they think a woman belongs to them." Rae Carson, Walk on Earth a Stranger

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"Claire, you needn't have spoiled me thus!" Mrs Denham cried as she wrapped her new satin shawl around her shoulders. "Oh, my, I do not think I have ever owned something so fine!"

Claire had chosen the shawl as her mother's Christmas gi at the dressmakers in London and had been saving it. She smiled widely at her mother's delight.

Claire and Grace had travelled to Mrs Denham's house on Christmas Eve to give their gi s to their family. The Denhams were, of course, joining the Beresfords for Christmas dinner, however Cecily tended to spoil Perrie beyond anything and gi s for others were quite lost. a

Claire liked this, however, as it felt like home to be with just her family. Except for Kate. Claire wondered if she ought to run down the street to fetch her. This had been a rather impromptu visit, and so an invitation had not been extended.

"Peter, this is for you," Grace announced, handing their brother a small gi wrapped in brown paper.

Peter frowned bashfully as he accepted the present. He undid the string before removing the paper to reveal a fine, leather box. He opened the box to reveal a steel tipped pen, and a very fine one, indeed. The pen itself was wooden, with gold filigree decoration.

"Adam ordered one of those pens from London for his study," explained Grace, "and he finds it so much more e icient than a quill. You don't need to sharpen them every five minutes. They are not easy to come by, but I thought you might like it."

Peter removed the pen and he ed it in his hand, a small smile of admiration spreading across his face. "I don't really need a pen if I'm going to be a blacksmith," Peter said quietly. đ

As he held the pen, Claire could see the soot that was caked underneath Peter's fingernails. He was nearly finished his apprenticeship with Jim. He would indeed be a blacksmith very soon. He would be able to open his own forge and earn a living with the trade.

Had their father lived, Peter would have no doubt learned Edward Denham's trade as a tailor. But Grace knew, as they all did, that Peter had a cleverness inside of him that went beyond what was expected for his life. He was quiet when it came to his intelligence, and he never advertised a desire for anything more, most likely out of respect for Jim. a

Had their father lived, Claire was certain that Mr Denham would have seen Peter's potential and found a way for him to attend a proper school, a day school or somewhere he could stretch his mind. As it was, Peter was educated at the church like the rest of his siblings. He was lucky to have such natural intelligence.

"What you use it for is entirely up to you," Grace replied, "but I hope you get some use out of it." đ

Peter wouldn't say it, but Claire could see that he was monumentally pleased with his gi . She truly did hope he found some fulfilment with it. a

As the gi exchange concluded, and Jem had already run o to find a friend to use his new tennis racquets, Claire happened to follow him by looking out the window. She gasped, and was thankfully quiet, as no one asked her what was wrong. Standing across the street, leaning nonchalantly against a wall, was Arthur. a

What on earthwas he doing? How had he known she would be here? What did he want her to do? As these questions flooded through Claire's head, she suddenly realised that any one of her family members could look out the window and see him. Especially Grace. A er what had transpired at the assembly, she could not have Arthur hanging around and arousing Grace's suspicions. Claire needed to get him to leave, but in order to do so, she needed to leave the house for ď

a legitimate reason.

Kate Of course.

Claire suddenly got to her feet, drawing her family's attention. "Mama, I am going to run down to the forge to fetch Kate. It is not a family gathering is she is not here." Of course, Jem had already abandoned them. Claire had not asked. She was married now, and she did not need her mother's permission.

That did not mean there would not be any objection.

"We'll send the carriage on," Grace decided. "It's far too cold to be walking."

Claire blasphemed in her mind. "It's a five-minute walk, not a fivemilewalk," she protested. "Besides, I like the winter air. It's refreshing."

"In your condition?" Mrs Denham added disapprovingly. "I think not, Claire. I think sending the carriage is a fine idea."

Claire wasn't about to be told. "I will return shortly with Kate. I have made the walk a thousand times, even in winter." She walked stubbornly over to the cupboard where her coat had been stored.

"Peter, go with your foolish sister," insisted Mrs Denham reproachfully.

"No!" cried Claire, a little too quickly. "I am perfectly capable of going by myself. A baby does not prevent me from walking. I will return soon." And Claire le before she could hear any further protestations.

The Ashwood carriage was waiting outside of the Denham house for Claire and Grace. Claire smiled at the driver and the footman politely before she continued on her way down the street towards the forge. She wrapped her coat tightly around herself to keep out the intense chill of the wind and stole a glance sideways to make certain that Arthur was following her.

## He was.

Claire felt sick as an awful feeling of guilt filled her stomach. What was she doing? Oh, what would Jack say if he knew what she was doing? Claire knew she was only trying to protect her secret from her family, but why did it feel so wrong?

Her legs seemed to have a mind of their own as she walked, and they took her o into the woods before she could reach the forge, towards the spot where she had once rendezvoused with Arthur. She could hear his footsteps now, the sounds of twigs snapping following along behind her. ď

When they were concealed from the road, but not so deep into the woods, Claire turned on him. "What do you think you are doing?" she snapped angrily, doing her best to stare at him with hard, nononsense eyes.

Claire had expected Arthur to smile at her, to say something wicked or suggestive, but instead, he stood quite defeatedly, and a safe distance from her. His expression was pained, and his green eyes were sad.

"I am sorry," he uttered, in a way that suggested he was sorry for a lot more than merely waiting for her outside her mother's house. ď

## Claire was startled.

"Claire, you cannot know how sorry I am," Arthur continued. He didn't move from where he stood, keeping the same level of distance between them. "Haven't you ever made a mistake? This is, without a doubt, the biggest mistake I everwill make. Because of it, I lost you. And I should be angry with you, I know it. I should be angry that you couldn't wait five minutes for me to comprehend what you had told me before you went and got yourself married..." Arthur trailed o, the frustration in his voice rising. đ

Claire closed her eyes to stop herself from shouting out an expletive so loudly that everyone in the village would hear her. "No," she practically growled. "I will not be blamed in yourapology. That is not how an apology works."

Arthur nodded, conceding. "Yes, yes, you are right, of course. I am sorry," he apologised again. "It is not you I am angry at, but myself. I lost you, Claire, and I cannot fathom it. You were mine and I let you slip through my fingers."

Claire searched in desperation for any hint of falsehood, but she couldn't find it. Arthur appeared truthful, and genuinely remorseful, and her eyes involuntarily welled up. Just because she was angry, it did not mean it did not still hurt.

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And it also didn't mean that she did not care. She couldn't eliminate her compassion. The moment those feelings began to settle in her stomach, Claire ceased to trust herself. She couldn't understand what was happening, and even if Arthur was sincere, she knew it was wrong to be conversing with him. Jack would be furious. He hated any mention of Arthur, so much so that Claire had never really told him about what had happened to her. But she would tell him this. She had to, didn't she?

"Oh, Arthur, I cannot hear this," Claire exclaimed, exasperatedly. "I cannot trust you. I cannot trust a word you say. I don't know what you

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want from me. Do you want me to forgive you? Or do you want me to betray my husband?" a Arthur didn't answer, instead he pulled a small, wrapped package from inside of his coat and extended it out to Claire. "I never got to congratulate you," he murmured. "Please, take it. Happy Christmas." Claire tentatively closed the distance between them for the briefest of moments before she flitted back to her original position. For a small

parcel, it was weighty, and Claire was curious. Arthur had never given her a Christmas present before. He had never wanted to draw suspicion from his mother. What was this for?

"Open it, please," Arthur urged.

Claire spied him cautiously before unwrapping the present. Inside the paper was a black, leather box, not too dissimilar to the one that Peter had just received, except instead of a pen, inside the box was a beautiful silver rattle. The handle was moulded like a flower stem, and the two bells hung o of silver rose buds. It was, without a doubt, one of the most beautiful things Claire had ever seen. a

She could not mask her delight at the gi , and Arthur took a step towards her.

"There is a place to engrave the child's name," he explained. "Of course, if you would like, you could return the rattle to me when the child is born, and I will have its name put on there for you. I wanted you to have it now as a token."

"A token of what?"

"Friendship," replied Arthur simply. "We were always good friends, weren't we?"

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Claire's momentary pleasure dissipated as she closed the lid on the box. "No, Arthur. We were never friends. I was ..." she paused, struggling, "I was hopelessly in love with you, and you knew it. You preyed upon me. We were never friends." Taking a breath, Claire added, "I cannot accept this." She held the box out to Arthur. She really didn't understand what he was trying to do. For all she knew, he could be sincere, but Claire did not have enough trust le in her to believe in the good.

Arthur sighed. "Claire, please, I know I have made unforgivable mistakes. I am paying for them. I have lost you, and I understand that. But this child -" đ

"- has nothing to do with you. This child is my husband's," Claire interjected forcefully. She had never spoken to Arthur this was before, and she was amazed that her voice hadn't faltered. a

Arthur exhaled, frowning. "I understand that is what will be circulated, obviously." Arthur sucked in a breath. "Claire, I know what you think of me, you have told me as much. But I cannot live with myself if my ... if this child has nothing from me. Please, take the gi . You can tell Beresford you bought it yourself, or you sent for it. He doesn't have to know it was from me, but I will. And I hope you will see, Claire, that this gi comes with no obligation. I only hope that you will see things from my side, and perhaps we might find a friendship in the future ... one that suits us both." ď

Claire stared at him in confusion. What did he want from her? Did he wanted to be asked to Ashwood for tea? But then, Claire thought, was this perhaps a good way to make peace? Peace with her past for her future. It was hard not to associate Arthur with thoughts of her heart disintegrating, even though she had already realised that she had never truly been in love with him. That did not make the pain any less real.

"I need to call on my sister now," Claire announced, placing the rattle in the pocket of her coat. She made the decision then and there that she would tell Jack about this meeting. She had done nothing wrong, and Arthur hadn't done anything inappropriate. Jack would make what he would of the rattle. If he chose to throw it out the window, Claire would understand. "Thank you for the rattle," she said obligatorily. "It was a nice thought." That was more sincere. It was a lovely rattle; the loveliest Claire had ever seen.

Arthur smiled now. "You are very welcome," he replied. "Run along

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now, Claire. Be seeing you."

Claire moved swi ly past Arthur, looking back over her shoulder as she made her way towards the street. He was watching her with a calm smile on his face. The minute she was back on the street, she hurried towards the forge.

Having taken longer than three minutes to fetch Kate, Claire was subject to a lecture from her mother. Apparently, marriage did not make one exempt from being scolded by one's mother. But a er Mrs Denham had seemingly gotten over Claire's tardiness, they did enjoy the rest of their a ernoon.

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Claire, however, felt a burning heat on the back of her head, as though her coat was staring at her from the cupboard, taunting her with the knowledge that the rattle was inside her pocket. She felt guilty for having it, and guilty for questioning Arthur's motives. She knew it was foolish to trust him, but he had never made any sort of gesture like it before, and Claire wondered if he truly did want his blood to possess something fine.

All she knew was that the minute she confessed the day's events to Jack, all would be well.

In preparation for the festivities the following day, Claire asked for a tray to be brought up to their room for their supper. Jack was not in the bedroom yet, but Claire was not prepared to dine with her sister and have Grace ask any follow up questions as to why she had taken so long to fetch Kate.

Jack arrived three minutes a er the supper tray did and looked very pleased at the o ering. He kissed Claire's forehead as he sat down at the table beside her and helped himself to a sandwich.

Claire stole a glance over her shoulder. Her coat was laying atop the trunk. She had not yet removed the rattle from her pocket. Just as she was about to work up the courage to tell him, Jack spoke first.

"I have something to ask you."

His tone was quite sombre, and it startled Claire, as he did not sound at all pleased as he had been not a minute ago when he had seen the sandwiches.

"Is something wrong?" Claire asked involuntarily, her mind starting to race. Oh, God. Had someone seen? Had they sent word? Claire forced herself to be sensible. She was not in the wrong. She hadn't done anything to be ashamed of. And she would be telling Jack about the meeting anyway.

"No," replied Jack, "though I am afraid my request is quite morbid."

Claire frowned as she listened intently.

"Shortly a er my father died, I le for London," he started. "You know this, of course. But my father died on the twenty-sixth of December, three years ago the day a er tomorrow." Jack was staring down at his plate as a chill ran down Claire's spine. "He is buried on the estate, in the family tomb. This year will be the first that I am in residence on the anniversary. My mother will visit at some point, as will Adam, Grace and Susanna." Jack took a breath. "I want to see him," he said decidedly, before his eyes flicked to hers. "But I can't do it alone." a

Claire hadn't realised the anniversary of Peregrine Beresford's passing was so near. As she looked into Jack's eyes, she could see the raw pain, the residual grief, and the fear that he felt in asking her. Claire knew in the moment that she could not burden Jack with any news of Arthur. a

"Of course," she said, nodding. "Of course, I will go with you."

Uh oh.	a
Is Arthur being sincere?	8
Is Claire making the right decision? Or is this going to be like the	ne
first domino?	0
*le sigh* Some people drink co ee, others prefer tea. Me? My	
drink of choice is the tears of my readers ;)	a
Aside from me torturing you guys, today is a good day felt all	
around the world #46!!	а
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