XXX

"Death, Lovers and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them." Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*

XXX.

Even the eighth Sunday that Claire had attended church alone. Of course, she was nauseatious, but Jack was not there.

Perhaps it was because the Pope had granted him, or she had relented to Simon Fraser (long enough for her to explain her side of the story), or even she was in general, fed up enough to have sent a letter before she had received an apologetic reply from Jack.

And that was weeks ago.

He had still not come.

Claire had never felt more isolated in her life. She was in a house full of people who couldn't have what she was experiencing, and the one person who had promised to be on her side wasn't.

Jack didn't visit Claire, and she did understand why. She had allowed herself to be compromised, but that still didn't mean Jack's flight to London didn't hurt, Jack could believe the worst of her and Claire had the reason why locked underneath her dress.

What was worse was that she had needed to pretend that all was fine, that Jack purchased her false smile, and had assured Grace exactly that she was fine, and was in regular contact with Jack while he conducted his business in London.

Cecily, who was still not privy to Jack's plans, had made a few comments about Jack slipping back into old habits when she thought Claire wasn't in earshot, but she had heard them, and she had to admit that it had crossed her mind, too.

If Jack knew the truth, and was sorry, why hadn't he come home to ensure that she was alright? The name Gaston Pierrette kept haunting her, and Claire was unsure what she would say or do if she heard out that Jack had returned to old ways. Would she be expected to permit them? He had promised that he would never take a mistress, but had he changed his mind?

These were all questions that she longed to ask him if he ever deemed it necessary to show his face.

At the conclusion of the service, Claire excused herself to go and make a contribution to the collection box. It was getting harder and harder to get up and down, particularly on an hour of sitting on those uncomfortable wooden pews, Claire didn't know how Grace was managing; it considering she had been days or weeks to go before the birth of her own child.

She rubbed her sore back before she unfastened her money purse to make a donation.

"Are you alright, Claire?"

Claire was startled as someone she dropped a handful of coins into the box quickly put her. When she looked up, she saw Arthur's green eyes watching her curiously.

"Leave me alone." Claire whispered to reply.

"Is everything alright? Is the health of your husband, you's counterfeit Arthur reply. "What has it been, two months, or three, since he has last received you in church, or anywhere? And in your condition, my, my." he stated.

Claire found herself an unwelcoming participant in a correspondence with Arthur since Jack leaving. His letters to his home, lovely, messages of activism, care, and curiosity are the baby. Claire had ignored his letters, or prepared with both requests for them to cease, but if she didn't reply, he happened upon her in the street as she visited her mother or accosted her in church as he was now.

And as much as Claire didn't want to be receiving correspondence from Arthur, she couldn't deny that it was so much kinder words in comparison, the letters from her husband located the number of reality pinning pressure he had acquired, and it did nothing but infuriated her.

Nevertheless, Claire knew that the letters were wrong, and would only cause more friction, which she believed was one motive of Arthur's. What she wasn't certain of was his endgame. What did he hope to achieve? He wouldn't want her, he knew that, and yet, Claire saw the baby. If anything, all he could really achieve would be a child in Claire, which was what stopped her from scratching his eyes out.

"You look beautiful today." Arthur continued on by, a smile leering at his lips. "You know I always loved you in white. Is that why you chose that dress?"

Claire frowned in pure temper. "No," she said flatly. "I chose it because it is one of the few that I can still button up, and I'm a flatter yourself. Your head is big enough."

Arthur chuckled, an expressed expression upon his face. "Now ever could Beresford leave you?" he wondered aloud.

"Is that a joke? Claire pretically blurted. "Have you let yourself start some question because you managed it, too, or don't you remember?"

"Fool!" repeated Arthur. "Go, fat bade you."

Claire felt her tongue, annoyed that she had allowed her temper to get the better of her. What plagued her now, really, was that she didn't know if her words were the truth. Jack could have well in her. Perhaps that was what hop been, and the letters of Gaston's were a sham to cover it up.

"Claire," Grace murmured, joining their conversation as she linked her arm through her sister's. Grace looked between Arthur and Claire curiously, not apologizing for the look of disdain she gave to Arthur. "We are leaving. Come along." she urged.

"Your Grace," greeted Arthur, almost duly, enjoying Grace's disapproval as he tipped his hat and bowed to her. "How well you look."

"Do pass along my best wishes to your mother. Mr. Stickson," Grace said tersely. "On behalf of Mrs Dunham, also."

Mrs Stickson was not in church today and hadn't been on the days that Arthur had interrupted Claire as he had.

"Mother is only too happy to hear how well her former servants are doing," Arthur replied in a menacing tone, a clear attempt to put Grace in her place.

But Grace was poised and practised in receiving such taunts. Cecily had prepared Grace well for her first point into London society. She did not crumble as Claire would in being chided so.

"Forgive me, Mr Stickson, but green is not your colour," Grace said apologetically, but without sincerity.

Arthur furrowed his brows and looked down briefly at his clothing. "I am not wearing green, Your Grace."

"Oh, I was not referring to your attire. Good morning." She smiled sweetly, before leaving Claire away from him and towards the church doors where the congregation were exiting. "I do not like that man," Grace hissed under her breath. "What was he doing talking to you?"

"Mr Stickson was making his donation as I was," replied Claire quietly. "I had like he has taken a bit of an interest in you these last weeks, or are my eyes deceiving me? I have never seen him pay a bit of attention towards you before now. Well, aside from the occasional course."

And she wouldn't have. Arthur had been very careful to appear aloof during their secret courtship. He was now breaking all the rules.

"Yes ha? I hadn't noticed," replied Claire as they met with their family.

Grace was immediately claimed by Adam, who had taken to fussing over her, and so she was not able to ask Claire anything else.

Claire continued two letters in the morning since a few days later. She Claire were telling her about a house that he had leased for them, and Grace was Arthur, detailing how lovely she looked at church on Sunday.

Claire abandoned Arthur's letter quickly for Jack's. A lesson? This was the first time he had written to her about something other than the preparations for the publishing company. He had leased them a house in London, she was on to describe the rooms, and he plans for what needed to be done. He even suggested that Claire begin to source nursery furniture that she liked.

Jack clearly planned for Claire and their child to accompany him to London. He wasn't set on abandoning her, then. That must be better. But then, nothing felt clear. Not until he returned and explained.

He sooner had the idea crossed her mind did Cecily appear at the top of them. She looked upon Claire with an expression of relief. "There you are, Claire!" she exclaimed. "Hurry up! It's Grace's time!"

All of her unsettled emotions vanished to the back of her mind as her focus shifts to her sister. Claire had been concerned for Patrick Scott's, but this felt ill. even incredibly so. Claire used the bannister to pull herself up the stairs as quickly as she could, before she hurried at Cecily on her. Is a her legs would carry her.

As Claire and Cecily rushed down the hallway, Claire could see Adam pacing outside of his and Grace's bedroom while holding Perna on his hip.

"Did you send for Mrs Denham?" Cecily asked as they reached the door. "And the doctor?"

"Yes," replied Adam, an anxious and pained expression upon his face. "I should be in them," he said insistently. "This is my bloody house, my wife, my child…"

"Yes," said Cecily firmly. "Even if it wasn't Your Grace's baby, you are far too nervous and edfirm and stress on Grace. She has a big job to do. It is not comfortable pushing one of those out." She nodded to Perna. "You and Nana, and Pip know when to pray for your child."

"Mother," Adam said tersely. "It's early. The doctor predicted the end of March and it is only the eighth. Will Grace be…" Adam couldn't finish his sentence, and Claire could see the true fear in his eyes.

And the minute that thoughts entered Claire's mind, fear set in for her as well. Oh, God. Was her sister in danger? Would… would Claire be in danger, too?

"Grace will be just fine," promised Cecily, painting a comforting hand on Adam's arm.

"Mother," Adam said again, more forcefully this time, his head eyes watering. "I don't care and if it's a boy or a girl, I just need everyone to that room to be healthy and comfortable."

His voice was cracking on nearly every word and Claire needed to leave. As she pushed open the door to the bedroom, she heard Cecily reply. "I am not about to let anything happen to Grace and her baby, I promise."

Cecily followed Claire into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. Inside, Grace was pacing in front of the fireplace, her hand, Ruby, flanking her with her arms outstretched and Grace's if she fell. Suzanne was pulling back the covers on the bed.

Grace violently stopped, placed her hands on her waist and threw her head back as she moaned, clamping her eyes shut. "Oh, Lord, that was a big one," she complained, before she continued to walk.

"Grace, Grace, Grace," suggested Cecily.

"No," rolled eid Grace. "I need to stand. I need to walk."

"Baby, how closer are the pains?" Cecily called.

"About six or seven minutes apart, Your Grace," replied Ruby. "She says she was having the pains all night but didn't say anything."

"You saw Adam, didn't you?" Grace ha to ask the question through gasping against the mantle. "They were intermittent, and I knew if I awake from, he'd be in a panic. It would only ha had a proper night's sleep."

Claire's mouth opened as she realized just how impressed with her sister she was. Claire didn't survive the pain, but she couldn't imagine having to endure it alone just to spare her husband could be fairly, revised. Claire's next thought was that she would wake Jack the minute her pain began so he could so or alongside her.

Claire then wondered if that would even be possible considering she had no idea of when he was planning on returning. For all she knew, she could be sending him a message to London to let him know that the child had arrived.

"Alright, well, your mother has been sent for, and the doctor," Cecily announced. "You can tell us when you are ready to push, Your Grace."

Grace nodded as she arrived, leaning her head against the mantle now as another wave of pain hit her. She let out a long, excruciating moan and cried out, "Oh, Pip! That one was awful!" she complained weakly. "And it came faster."

Claire watched, half in fear, half in awe, as her sister soldiered through a dreadful labour. Grace was strong, and she bore every wave of agonizing pain by hours.

Mrs Denham and Adam had arrived, and by the time that the doctor had entered the room, Grace was in bed and pushing. Grace was covered in sweat, her pale face glistening beneath the lamplight. Suzanne was wiping her forehead every ten seconds it seemed as she pushed harder and harder, rates appearing out of nowhere to show just how hard Grace was working.

Claire and Mrs Denham were either side of Grace, holding onto both of her hands. Every time Grace pushed, she nearly broke all the bones in that hands and Mrs Denham was forced to grab her hand to Kate.

"Harris," whined Grace. "I'm tired. It hurts." Grace was exhausted and pale, and looked as though she absolutely nothing to ha right.

"I know, darling, I know," comforted Mrs Denham. "You are doing so well."

"Push, Your Grace," instructed the doctor. "I can see him."

Grace found a strength within her to obey, and she cried with all her might.

"Oh, my goodness," gasped Suzanne as the sound of a newborn crying filled the bedroom.

Grace collapsed into a heap and started to cry as she pulled her hands from both Kate and Claire and reached out in front of her, anxious for the child to be given to her.

Cecily took the baby into her arms as she was holding fresh linens to allow the doctor to finish with Grace. Claire looked up at the old grandmother in her tears recovering down her face as she cooed at the child. Grace was sobbing, Claire was crying, and Adam was on his knees by Grace and Mrs Denham was crying as he was.

"It's a boy!" Grace asked weakly as she tried to crane her neck to look.

"Yes, dear," replied Cecily, still brimming with happy tears. "She's a perfect little girl."

Claire couldn't help herself either. She cried as the watchful Grace immediately bond with her baby. The pain she had endured through over the last several hours vanished and Grace was lit replaced by a look of true love, a look that told Claire that Grace would do it all over again. Claire instinctively hugged her baby protectively.

"Well, what do you know?" murmured Cecily. "Lord's bladder doesn'because a boy."

Grace gasped. "Are actually!ed no bladder!" she snapped.

"What does it matter?" Cecily said dismissively. "Who cares a wet? We have another perfect little girl in the family." She cooed over the newborn and stroked her head gently.

As Cecily pushed Mrs Dean slightly, Claire could see that the new baby had quite a tot of dark hair, just as Perna had when she was born.

Grace shook her head. "Will someone go out there and just Adam out of his misery?" she asked, and Ruby shuffled to Grace's side to go to the door.

No sooner had the door been opened did Adam burst in, not wanting to be near what Ruby had to say. He raced over to the bed, practically pushing Suzanne out of the way to sit down beside Grace.

His eyes were red for the baby, not at first. Adam's focus was solely on Grace as he looked over her with a husband's worry. Adam then looked to the doctor, who was now standing by the basin and washing his bloody hands. "Is the clutches alright?" he asked desperately. "Are they both alright?"

"Yes, Your Grace," confirmed the doctor. "The duchess did excellently, and the new baby has a good set of lungs. You're not to worry."

Adam kissed Grace with relief and broke away with a smile. "Thank God," he declared, before he could finally look down at their new child. Adam gently kissed the top of the baby's head as well. "Who do we have here? Is it a girl?"

Grace smiled up at Adam tearfully as she said, "It's Lily."

Adam grinned. "Welcome, Lily."

"Lily," both Cecily and Mrs Denham said at the same time. "I love it."

Then asked Mrs Denham.

"Perna was named for our fathers," Grace surmised quietly. "And now Lily is named for our mothers."

"Oh," gasped Cecily, holding a hand to her chest. She appeared truly touched.

Tears fell freely down Mrs Denham's face. Kate hugged their mother.

"Cecily Ellen Beresford," Clarified Adam.

"Did I hear that right? We have a Lily?"

Claire's head snapped around at the sound of a voice she recognized.

Welcome to "my" world, Lily!

I made this chapter a little longer as it will have to tide you over until Friday, since I'm off to work on Wednesday so tomorrow will be a rest night. I'm done my planned but to get so much of this book done as possible this holiday but I didn't quite finish it. We're nearly there though!

But next time we speak I will have met my new kiddos! I'm so excited! I've got hem out of hospital (pre-term) before I'm so pleased with it. It's been a long time since I hope they have what I've done with it. Subject is going to be an magical - or I'll do my damndest to make it magical for them!

Okay, a lo sleep - gotta get my sleeping pattern back into some sort of order as I've been up until 1am writing this whole summer!

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