

"To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless." G.K. Chesterton

XXXI.

Jack entered the bedroom tentatively, and Claire observed that he was holding Perrie, for perhaps the first time. She had never seen him hold her. He carried his niece on his hip.

His expression was reserved, and Claire didn't know how to feel for a long moment. He was returned. She had seriously considered, up until receiving his letter regarding the house, that he might very well elect not to return to Ashwood. Up until she had broached the subject of Arthur, they had been such a pair, such a team, and Claire had truly felt as though it might be different.

She knew very well what he wanted from her, and Claire believed that she would one day be able to give that to him. But whether Jack liked it or not, Claire had a past, and a very painful one, with Arthur, who at this point in time, was making it very difficult for Claire to have a future. She had never shared any of her experiences with Jack, and perhaps that was what had been holding her back from fully trusting him. Ought not she be able to share these experiences with her husband?

But the moment she had even mentioned his name, Jack had assumed the worst of her, and he had abandoned her. Claire decided that Jack could call it business all he liked. But she had been alone these two months with nobody to talk to. Her world had shrunk exponentially since becoming with child, and though that was not Jack's fault, leaving her without the chance to properly explain was.

Jack had left, and Arthur had fully taken advantage of that fact. It was attention she no longer wanted or desired, and it was something that her husband ought to know. But what would happen if she brought up the subject of Arthur again? Would he publicly disgrace her as a whore this time?

Jack did not trust Claire. He had made that perfectly clear. But now, Claire feared, she did not trust Jack. And she was loathe to feel such a way, for up until that argument, Jack had been her perfect champion.

Jack's hazel eyes settled on her, and he offered her a small, yet well-meaning smile. Claire did not rise to greet him. Partly because she had been supporting her sister for hours and hours with a weight the size of a large pumpkin under her skirts, and partly because she was angry. Mostly because she was angry.

"Jack, when did you return?" Grace asked lethargically. "You never told us you were coming back today. Did he tell you, Claire?"

"No," Claire replied quickly.

"No, I didn't tell anyone I was returning today, though I am happy to have made it back for the birth." Jack placed Perrie down on the bed, and she immediately crawled across the bedclothes to her mother.

"If you delayed much longer, you might have missed the birth of your own child," Cecily said disapprovingly.

"I would not have missed the birth of my own child, Mother," retorted Jack.

"Enough," ordered Adam, as Perrie began to peer over the blanket that her sister was wrapped in.

"What is it?" Perrie asked curiously as she extended her index finger to poke the baby.

Claire couldn't help but smile. Her sister was in absolute raptures, and Adam appeared to be the proudest father there ever was as he looked over his two daughters, and the wife he adored.

"She's a baby," answered Grace softly. "She's your sister. You must be very gentle."

Perrie obeyed her mother, and gently stroked the top of Lily's head, seemingly enjoying the feeling of the tuft of dark hair.

"You are the oldest now, Perrie. You will always have a little sister to look after," Adam told his daughter tenderly.

Claire could not help but look up at Grace then and knew that her own parents must have said the same thing to her when she and Kate, and even Peter and Jem were born. Grace always endeavoured to look after her, and it was now ... now that she was feeling wretched and alone, that she wished she could run to her older sister like she had done so many times over the years.

"Can you give Lily a kiss?" Grace prompted, lifting Lily a little higher to Perrie.

Perrie leaned down, and very softly placed a kiss on Lily's forehead, prompting a big smile and a very sweet giggle.

"Alright everyone," Cecily said to the room. "I think it time we give Adam and Grace a little privacy with ... Lily." She almost whimpered as she said the name. Claire really admired how touched the duchess was for such a gesture.

"Would you like us to bring you anything, Grace?" Mrs Denham asked. "Something to eat or drink, perhaps?"

"Oh, yes, I wouldn't mind," Grace replied, nodding her head.

"I'll see to that, Mrs Denham," Ruby interjected, before the maid turned back to Grace with a smile. "Congratulations, Grace."

"Thank you, Ruby," said Grace appreciatively.

As Ruby left, everyone but Adam and Perrie moved to follow. Kate claimed Claire before Jack had a chance to, and she helped Claire to her feet. Claire quickly slipped her arm through her sisters and walked with her out into the hallway, purposefully avoiding her husband.

"I can't wait to have another child," Kate whispered to Claire. "I hope it does not take as long as it did for us to be blessed with James."

Claire recalled it had taken nearly three years of marriage, perhaps a little longer, before Kate had announced that she was finally with child. "I am sure it won't take so long next time," she assured her.

Kate smiled, and rubbed Claire's forearm. "Nevertheless, it is your turn next. And at least you can be certain that Grace did not choose the name you wanted." She lowered her voice. "Something tells me that your husband would never approve the name 'Cecily'."

Claire asked, "Don't be wicked," she scolded, albeit playfully. "I think Grace chose well." Claire, on the other hand, really had no idea what she would name a daughter.

Cecily arranged for a late supper, though Kate needed to excuse herself to get home to feed her baby. Without her sister as protection, Jack deemed it safe to approach Claire.

Claire's arms hung listlessly at her sides as Jack met her on the landing.

"Might we talk?" he asked quietly, and only for her ears. "Perhaps in our bedroom?"

Claire merely nodded, and Jack excused them from supper, before they walked silently in the direction of their bedroom. Jack opened the door once they had finally reached it, and Claire's nose immediately turned up at the slight musty smell.

It had been two months since she had shut the connecting door, however. She had been sleeping in the adjoining room. She had not wanted to be in this bedroom alone.

Jack seemed to smell it as well, and he immediately went to one of the large windows and pushed it open, letting in a cool breeze from the clear night outside. "That's better," he murmured. Then he finally turned around.

Claire was still standing by the door rather awkwardly. Aer not being in this room for so many weeks, she suddenly felt like a guest. Though, a guest not having seen her husband, either, for so many weeks, she feared feeling like a stranger.

"Claire ..." he began, rather helplessly. Jack's brows furrowed, and she could see the appearance of shame upon his face. But he didn't continue.

But Claire wouldn't listen to an apology he couldn't even begin. "Arthur has been writing me," she interjected instead. "Some weeks I have received a letter every day. Some are every other day. Love letters, letters of admiration, letters inquiring after my health and the health of the child. And when I do not reply, he finds some place to happen upon me. In the street, in church, and I do not know what he wants or expects from these interactions, but I wanted to tell you in full before you run away again thinking I am some sort of frigid, inconstant whore." Claire spoke quickly, her voice thick with emotion, and shaking quite considerably.

Jack flinched at the last word, though he looked very pained to hear her entire speech. But he didn't interrupt, and he did listen.

"I haven't known what to do," Claire continued vulnerably, her voice breaking as her eyes involuntarily filled with tears. "He won't leave me alone and I don't know what he wants from me. But I haven't had anyone to help me. I have had nobody to talk to because ... because ..." A sob escaped Claire's throat. Claire took a deep breath in an attempt to compose herself. "Jack, for three years of my life, Arthur was my whole world, and I thought myself in love with him. Even though I know now it wasn't real, that does not mean the pain vanishes, and ... and I want to be able to talk to you. I thought you were on my side, but the moment I needed you, the moment I tried to be honest with you, you thought the very worst of me. And, believe me, I can understand why you would think the worst of me, as I know the condition you found me in was less than respectable, but I thought ... I thought you held me in higher regard."

Claire wiped her eyes with her sleeves as tears fell.

"I have no excuse," murmured Jack, holding out his hands. "I was a jealous cad, and the moment you mentioned his name, I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd lost you to him and I was furious, furious with you, furious with myself. I should have listened to you, I know. The moment I read your letter, I knew what an utter fool I had been."

Jack anxiously rubbed his hands together as he took a shaky breath.

"I was jealous," he said again, his eyes finding her with an ashamed sincerity. "I've always been jealous of him; from the bloody moment he took you away from me at the first assembly. And I couldn't bear to listen to you speak about him for fear you would tell me that you wanted him. I couldn't hear it. I couldn't survive it. It's a fear that has lived in my mind this whole time that you would leave."

"So, you left instead?" Claire uttered.

Jack hung his head, supporting it with his hands. "I do not think you a ..." but he couldn't say the word. "Claire, when I saw the guilt on your face when you tried to tell me about ... him ... all my fears were realised. I thought I'd lost you to him, and I knew I would always be second best."

Claire knew that was Jack's innermost fear and insecurity, and she did understand how it would be so affected by Arthur's constant presence.

"Why has it taken you so long to come back?" Claire demanded to know, her voice stronger. "I wrote you weeks ago."

"Because I am afraid," he stated. "I am a coward and I am afraid." Jack exhaled as he closed the distance between them, standing not four feet from Claire. He did not reach for her, however. "I was, and still am, afraid that you would leave me now that I am returned. I almost felt as though I was delaying the inevitable.

"You have never told me that what you felt for him wasn't real," Jack continued softly, "and I realise that I have never allowed you to speak of him, of your experience, without making you feel awful or uncomfortable. Had I set my pride aside, I would have known this. Claire, I cannot tell you how sorry I am for leaving you. I am sorry for leaving you alone, and for leaving you unprotected. I am sorry for abandoning you, and breaking your trust, and for allowing my own stupid fears to affect you so."

Jack surprised Claire by sinking to his knees and looking up at her.

"I have unburdened myself on you time and again, and you have listened to me and comforted me, defended me, My God, Claire. Can you ever forgive me? I will be better, I promise."

Claire's lower lip trembled uncontrollably. She believed Jack's sincerity. But did he trust her? She had just confessed everything to him, and he had not said a word. "Do you trust me?" she whispered.

"Yes," breathed Jack, "I do. I trust you, Claire. And I hope that I can once more have your faith."

"And what about Arthur?"

"You will leave him to me," said Jack firmly. "And I will do what I ought to have done months ago when my first message did not sink in. But Claire," Jack reached out for her hand, and was very relieved when Claire did not deny him, "I want you to talk to me. I want to you feel as though you can tell me anything. I make you a solemn vow, here and now, that I will never walk away from you again."

Hope you enjoyed it!

I hope everything will be alright now ... I just hope the author of this damn story will give us all a break and quit the drama and just let everyone be happy but I think she's determined to torture us all! If I was a betting woman, I'd say she's got one more big one up her sleeve just to really make us all sweat! She's evil, I tell you!

Hahahaha I'm just kidding ... or am I?

Anyway, I'm back at work! I've had two days of assessments with my kids where they've been coming in for a session with me one at a time, so I've met twelve of them so far and they are the CUTESTTTTTTTTT. They are SO excited to start school. They're already my babies.

But my babies from last year started Year 2 on Friday! I have our class picture hanging above my desk and I hope their teachers are loving on them as much as they deserve!

I love my job. Seriously, it's a privilege. For one year, I become one of the most constant figures in these kids' lives. It's a responsibility I don't take lightly, and one that I love. I've got so much planned for these kiddos and I can't wait to get started.

Alright, this evil author needs some shut eye.

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