## XXXIV

"For long the two enemies looked at one another, Hook shuddering slightly, and Peter with the strange smile upon his face.
"So, Pan," said Hook at last, "this is all your doing."
"Ay, James Hook," came the stern answer, "it is all my doing."
"Proud and insolent youth," said Hook, "prepare to meet thy doom."
"Dark and sinister man," Peter answered, "have at thee." J.M. Barrie,
Peter Pan

## XXXIV.

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Jack waited in the clearing, the one where he had followed Claire to months earlier during their brief engagement. He had sent a trusted servant the night before with a letter for Arthur, instructing him to meet Jack here.

Jack had taken a mahogany box from Adam's study, containing pistols which had once belonged to his father. As the challenged, Arthur had the right to choose the weapon, and Jack had come prepared. Jack did not take Arthur for a swordsman.

He had no second. Jack knew that he should have brought his brother, but that would mean telling him Claire's truth, and he wasn't prepared to share their secret. Jack would negotiate. He would allow Arthur the chance to repent. But if he refused, then Jack would go through with the duel.

Claire had asked him not to fight, and he had told her he wouldn't. But he hadn't promised. A lie was surely better than a broken promise. Jack had everything to fight for. Claire had told him as such when she had confessed her love for him. She would never comprehend what that meant to him, to know that someone loved him, preferred him, chose him. Jack would protect her with his life, and if that meant facing a pistol to stop Claire's harassment then he would do it.

Jack watched as the sunrise shone through the trees, and the fog began to li in the clearing. He hadn't slept the night before. He had been watching Claire, memorising her, before he had written a will, leaving everything he had to her. The will was on her writing desk, and Jack truly hoped that he would return before she even woke to hide it so that she need never see it.

Jack's horse, which was tethered to a nearby tree, li ed its head as the faint sound of galloping hooves echoed through the woods. Jack could only hear one horse, and he wondered if Arthur, too, was alone. a

His question was soon answered as Arthur entered into the clearing on horseback, his green eyes settling on Jack coolly as he dismounted. He was alone and dressed in his best finery.

"No second?" called Arthur as he tied his own horse to a tree branch.

"Likewise," replied Jack. "But I will o er you the same courtesy." Not that he deserved it. "I demanded satisfaction from you, and if you do not swear on your honour this minute to leave my wife in peace from this day on, then I will have you face me, or you will forevermore be known as a coward."

Arthur chuckled and shook his head as he all but strutted towards Jack. "I won't apologise for claiming what is mine."

It was meant to be a taunt, but Jack could not be goaded. As he stared into the cold depths of this man's eyes, Jack saw no threat. He saw a weak, reprehensible man determined to secure a plaything. Jack felt no jealousy, and instead looked upon Arthur Slickson with pity. He was a man who resorted to cons to trick women into favouring him. He could o er nothing of substance from within himself. He had nought but a handsome face to o er, and even then, it was bruised terribly courtesy of Jack the previous a ernoon.

How many women had he preyed upon as he had Claire? How many children were stashed across the country? Was Claire the first to reject him?

"She is not yours, Slickson," uttered Jack. "And she never will be again. You make a mockery of yourself every time you attempt to contact her. I will say again, repent, and you leave here as you are."

"What will you do if the child looks like me?" jeered Arthur. "Will you drown it? Drop it? Pretend it came to untimely end with an infant illness?"

A cold chill ran down Jack's spine at the very thought. The very notion that Jack would everharm his child was unthinkable. His son

or daughter would be raised in spite of the man who had sired him.	đ
"What is your weapon?" growled Jack.	
Arthur smiled. "Pistols. I trust you brought them."	
Jack fetched the pistols and shoved one of them into Arthur's hands. Both men stood before each other, watching the other load. Jack's heart was racing, in fear, and in anger. But his mind shi ed to Claire as both men began to pace away from each other.	d²
How he loved her. If he lived, if he was allowed to live, how he would love her, and love their child. He wouldn't let any harm come to them, especially, Jack thought, as he turned to face Arthur, him.	
"On the count of three," Jack shouted across the field as he raised the barrel of his pistol. He noticed his hand shaking with the energy of the moment. How he wanted this man gone, but could he take a life? "One –"	a
But the sound of his opponent's pistol blasted through the air, and Jack felt a burning sensation rip through his arm. The shock of the blast knocked him on his back. As Jack craned his neck to see his arm, he saw that his white shirt was stained with blood. He inhaled a staggered breath as he saw Arthur start towards him pistol raised, as he prepared to take a second, more fatal shot.	2 <sup>4</sup>
"Coward!"shouted Jack with as much might as he could muster. "You could not face me like a man?"	්
At the mention of cowardice, Arthur stopped, and his le eye twitched. Jack pushed himself up, climbing to his feet, though his injured le arm hung uselessly beside him. Jack raised his pistol, his chest heaving as pain radiated through his body. Arthur waited, watched, all but glaring at Jack as he stood motionlessly.	
Arthur had taken his shot. He could not take another until Jack had fired, lest he be labelled a coward. And if a second shot proved fatal before Jack had fired, it would be murder, and Arthur would be hanged.	å
Jack cocked his pistol and aimed, before he pointed his gun in the air and fired into the morning sky. An expression of genuine shock	á
Jack couldn't do it. He couldn't stare into a man's eyes and take his life, no matter who he was. "I could have killed you," he stated quietly. "I could have killed you, and it would have been lawful." In a sense.	a
Arthur had quickly paled, and Jack believed that he realised this. Arthur had just realised that he had, all of sudden, come mere seconds from meeting his maker.	u
"I won't fire into the sky again," promised Jack. "My aim will be true, and I will not show you mercy. From this day forth, my wife is a stranger to you. You have no reason to ever approach her or my family. You do so, I will see you right back here. Do I make myself clear?"	Æ
Arthur's eyes dropped to Jack's arm. Jack could feel the blood seeping from his wound and running down his arm, and he wasn't sure for how much longer he would be able to stand with conviction.	a
"Are you satisfied?"	ส์
"Am I?" countered Jack.	
"Have her then," sneered Arthur, as he promptly turned his back on Jack and swi ly fetched his horse. No sooner had he climbed atop his steed, did a third man join them in the clearing. Arthur did not stay, as he immediately kicked in his heels and forced his horse into a quick gallop.	
As soon as Arthur was gone, Jack fell to his knees weakly as his brother practically leapt o his horse. Adam was half dressed and entirely in anguish as he raced to the ground beside Jack.	
"Oh, good God, I'm too late," hissed Adam as he inspected Jack's torso for injuries, before his focus settled on his bloody arm. "Why would you not tell me about this?" Adam snapped as he positioned his arm around Jack's waist to li him. "I would have been your second! Or I would have bloody stopped you." Adam heaved Jack to his feet, and Jack felt as though he le his stomach on the ground. He	
felt very faint and Adam did not pester him with any more questions. "I need to get you to a doctor."	å
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Jack was not entirely certain how he made it onto the horse, but he and Adam rode for the doctor's house nearby. He charged he y fees for some of the parishioners, which was why they o en had to seek alternative care from nearby London. However, the doctor was not at home, and it was his wife who answered the door.

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Jack couldn't hear what was being said, but Adam had managed to convince her to allow them inside. She was a good, dutiful woman who assisted them with water and bandages. Adam assisted her in cleaning Jack's wound, before he packed it with cloth and bandaged it tightly until they could see the doctor for proper treatment.

The bleeding had stopped, and although Jack still felt quite nauseous, he did not feel as though he was going to faint. A er a spoonful of laudanum to manage the pain, Adam paid the woman for her charity, as well as her discretion, and he and Jack le the house. Once Adam had assisted Jack back onto the horse and they had

started back towards Ashwood House, Adam spoke.

"Tell me at once what this was about," Adam demanded to know. "Claire came into our bedroom this morning absolutely hysterical demanding that I stop you from fighting. She seemed to think that this was because of her."

In his blood loss haze, Jack hadn't questioned as to why his brother was there. How had he known where to find Jack? He hadn't le a note.

"How did you find me?"

"I was riding towards the Slickson's home before I heard the shots. I rarely have poachers on my land, so I knew it had to be you. What is going on between Claire and Arthur Slickson? I know that Grace was suspicious about your union in the beginning, and I know she grossly dislikes the man."

Jack hadn't meant for Claire to find out he had fought, though with his arm wound, it was now inevitable. She had sent Adam a er him, and Jack knew that her sister would be asking the same questions that Adam was now asking. Claire would have told the truth. Jack felt certain of this. It was almost startling how certain he felt that Claire would confess their secret to save him.

"You are not to breathe a word; do you understand me?" Jack made his brother swear.

Adam frowned, but nodded. "You have my word."

As they rode, Jack confessed everything, right from the very beginning. From discovering Claire crying in the library, to proposing to her, marrying her, forging a friendship and a partnership, and everything else that had happened to get them to where they were now.

Adam listened intently, an expression of pure shock on his face as he took in every part of Jack's story. "You ... the baby is not yours?" he managed to say a er Jack had finished relaying his tale.

"The baby is mine in every way that matters," Jack said with conviction. "Do you understand that, Adam? I won't everhave anyone doubt that this child is mine. No one will ever treat my son or my daughter as anything less than a beloved member of our family."

Adam nodded slowly. "You are a better man than I, Jack," he decided. "I really don't know what I would do if it was Grace."

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"The di erence is that Grace has always been yours I bloody married you myself when you were children," Jack said impatiently. "Claire hasn't always been mine, and for a long time she was a victim of that man. But I knew there was only one thing I could do, only one right thing to do. Claire is safe, and I am going to love them both for the rest of my life. And by some miracle, Claire loves me, as well. We are to be a family, and I need you to treat Claire as you always have. She has not changed, save for growing into her own person. She is kind, loyal, beautiful, and she sees something in me that nobody else does."

Adam looked upon Jack with pride and o ered him a reassuring smile. "You are going to be a terrific father," he declared.

Ashwood House came into view, and their horses trotted through the open gates. Jack hated to think what awaited him inside the walls. Claire was going to be furious.

"I hope so."

"Well, you are going to find our sooner than you thought," replied Adam. "The doctor is here," he revealed. "That was why he was not at home. He was sent for early this morning by Ashwood House as it was Claire's time."

Jack's heart stopped as he aggressively pulled on his horse's reins. "What?" he hissed.

"I did not want you to ride recklessly and risk injury," said Adam defensively. "I know from experience that labouring takes hours and hours, so we did not need to rush."

Oh, good God. Was it early? Was it dangerous? Had he brought this on? Jack panicked as he leapt o his horse, not bothering to tether it to anything. He held his injured arm as he ran towards the house, bursting through the front door so violently that he nearly took it o its hinges. Jack could hear Adam racing behind him.

Jack's adrenaline helped him to bound up the stairs, and just as he was about to head in the direction of his and Claire's bedroom, he saw a housemaid racing in the other direction carrying cleans cloths.

"Are those for Lady Claire?" Jack shouted a er her. "Where is she?"

The maid turned around, startled, before she replied. "Milady is in the duke and duchess' bedroom, milord." Her eyes then widened as she saw the blood on Jack's shirt. "Oh, dear Lord, are you alright, milord?" she cried.

But Jack didn't answer her. He raced past her and ran towards Adam and Grace's bedroom. Jack knew that it was customary for the father to wait outside the birthing room, but he didn't want to. He needed to see Claire.

"Jack, you ought to change!" Adam shouted a er Jack.

Jack ignored his brother as he burst into the bedroom, immediately spying Claire in the bed wearing her nightdress. She was covered in sweat and was flanked by both Grace and Susanna on either side of đ

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the bed. The doctor was tending to her, ensuring that she was modestly covered, and his mother was standing near the end of the bed.

"Claire!"

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Claire cried out helplessly when her blue eyes found Jack, but it was Cecily who spoke first.

"Oh, thank you, God," she declared. Were Jack not positive that his mother would have preferred to drink poison, he could have sworn that she smiled at him.

"Jack, your arm!" exclaimed Susanna. "What happened?"

"I cut myself shaving," Jack muttered as he raced over to the bed, kneeling down at Claire's side. He placed a hand on her clammy forehead, and she leaned into his touch. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I'll explain everything, I promise, but it will all be alright."

Claire nodded as her face began to contort with pain and she screamed an unholy scream.

"It's moving quickly ... but ... oh, dear God," gasped the doctor from the end of the bed, "it's a footling. The child is backwards."

So I felt baddddddddd. Bonus chapter! I couldn't leave you hanging on Valentine's Day. But then I le you hanging again ... I guess I can't shake all my habits ;)

I know so many of you wanted me to kill Arthur and I did consider it, but I didn't want to make Jack a killer, even if it was in a duel. It wasn't in my plan, but I was sitting here mid sentence going "Should I do it?" But I decided "no". My true hope is that Arthur believes that Jack could have killed him, and he uses this shock to his own mortality to do some serious self reflection. Maybe he can be redeemed?

I noticed several comments on the last chapter questioning why Cecily was angry at Jack for being "ruined" or something along those lines and I just wanted to ask that you guys keep the faith. You know I have a plan for everything, and everything has a place and a purpose ;)

Day 2 of lockdown was riveting.

I cleaned out my car because whenever I got in there, there was an awful smell. I found out what it was. Watermelon oops. I found a container in my boot with watermelon I'd taken to work to eat but hadn't had time for that had fallen out of my bag and putrified.

I then finished a crossword puzzle.

Watched the tennis.

## Refreshed the Department of Health's Twitter 10 billion times.

2 new cases today. I am so worried they're going to extend lockdown. I bloody hope they don't.
Anyway, first day back working at home tomorrow. \*sarcastic yay\*
Alright. It's 12:17am and it's a school night. I need to be up tomorrow even if I don't have to commute. Only good thing is I

Continue reading next part 🗆