

"To say that one waits a lifetime for his soulmate to come around is a paradox. People eventually get sick of waiting, take a chance on someone, and by the art of commitment become soulmates, which takes a lifetime to perfect." Criss Jami, *Venus in Arms*

IX.

Though the gathering may have been small, the dinner given at Ashwood House was as grand as there ever was. No expense seemed to have been spared, and Claire could not help but worry about such matters being a ruse to fool gossiping servants who may have relayed any other oddities to their neighbours and friends in the parish.

If the younger Lord Beresford and his bride were not celebrated properly, ought that be something to be suspicious about? As it was, the vicar's wife was in attendance, and Claire knew that if she were not anything but a perfect bride, the whole village would be whispering.

Jack played his part brilliantly, effortlessly so. He kept a guiding hand on the small of her back when they were standing for conversation and positioned their chairs towards each other ever so slightly when they were seated. Claire could not help but feel as though things were under control when she was near Jack.

"It will not be long until we can retire," murmured Jack quietly as the servants took their dessert dishes away.

This comment, having meant to put her at ease, did quite the opposite, in reminding Claire of what was expected of her.

She did not have more than twenty seconds to compose herself before she felt a touch on her forearm. Claire twisted to look to Grace.

She was seated beside Claire as her matron of honour, though Claire had barely spoken three words to Grace since the whole engagement was announced. Grace was too inquisitive, and Claire was far too fragile to keep up her charade.

Her sister was paler, upon closer inspection by Claire. Grace's usual perfect complexion seemed to have been marred by interruptions to her sleep. Perrie, Claire thought, was quite independent in the nursery, so Claire attributed it to her own folly.

"Are you happy?" Grace whispered, so quietly so only Claire could hear her.

"Why do people keep asking me that?" Claire retorted thoughtlessly.

"Because you ... you don't look..." Grace pursed her lips. "I had only hoped to see a different expression upon your face on your wedding day is all."

Claire wasn't cross. How could she be? Grace only cared. Claire cared about Grace's opinion perhaps more than anyone. "Jack is a good man," she promised, only wishing Grace knew just how decent he was.

Grace mulled over Claire's words for a moment before she nodded, accepting them. "Perhaps, one day, you might tell me about the Jack that you know," she probed. "I should like to know the sort of man who could win your heart."

Claire prayed her smile was still firmly in place and convincing. Oh, how Grace already knew and disapproved of the man who had first won her heart.

"It will be announced while you are on your honeymoon trip, but I wanted to tell you quietly now ... I am with child." All apprehension and exhaustion seemed to vanish from Grace's eyes as she revealed the happy news.

Claire did her best to retain her composure as she beamed at her sister. "Oh, what happy news!" she whispered excitedly. "Does Adam know?"

Grace nodded. "Yes, we were to announce at Perrie's birthday, but ..."

Claire bit down on her lip. She could not imagine returning her sister's news and receiving the same warm reaction. If Grace's news was announced at the table now, there would be a champagne toast.

If Claire's news was announced ...? Not even Jack could save her then. The dates would simply not add up.

"No matter, no matter," Grace assured her. "The longer we delay in telling anyone, the longer I avoid Cecily telling me all the tricks to ensure the child is a boy." Grace winked. "They worked wonders with Perrie, now, didn't they? Though I know both Cecily and Adam would never trade Perrie for a son."

"What are you two whispering about?" Cecily called across the table to Grace and Claire. "There seems to have been something jovial we have all missed out on."

Claire lost her tongue, realising now that her mother-in-law had just addressed her for the first time. Grace was much more practised in how to navigate the waters with Cecily Beresford. But it was Jack who spoke first.

"What is more jovial than a wedding, Mother?" he ordered firmly.

There was a sudden tension about Jack, and it put Claire on edge.

"Well, what a terrific offering. You shall have to give our compliments to Mrs Reynolds, Cole," Jack spoke to the butler coordinating the footmen by the servants' door.

"Certainly, milord," Cole replied, bowing his head.

"If it pleases everyone, I should think my bride and I would like to retire." Jack stood up from his place setting and held his arm out for Claire. She followed suit, nervously placing her arm in his as he began to lead her away to the choruses of well-wishes.

Jack silently led Claire upstairs to the family bedrooms. On the odd occasion she stayed at Ashwood, Claire always slept in the opposite wing. They passed the bedrooms she knew, before stopping at a door she didn't, and could only assume belonged to Jack.

The minute the door was closed behind them, Claire's heart began to race as she noticed the trunk of her things that had been brought over from her house in the village. All of a sudden, her life was combined with another's, her husband's

Her husband, who was already unbuttoning his wedding coat and discarding it on the back of an armchair.

"You can change behind the screen if you like," Jack ordered, motioning to the privacy screen which stood in the corner of the room.

Claire didn't need to be told twice. She flitted to her trunk and seized a nightgown, before racing behind the screen. No sooner had she got there, she realised that there were about twelve buttons fastening the bodice of her dress, and they were quite out of reach. She silently gasped, feeling a panic set in. She could not well ring the bell for a servant. This was supposed to be her wedding night, and surely any dexterous male was capable of unfastening buttons. But then her only option was to seek assistance from Jack, and that would not do well on her nerves, which were already wreaking havoc on her poor heart.

"Jack!" she all but squeaked.

"Are you alright?" he called out.

"Would ... would you ... could you ..." Claire hurried with embarrassment. "My buttons ... I ..."

Claire clamped her eyes shut the moment she heard Jack come behind the screen. His hands moved with perfect ease and expertise as he unfastened her buttons from their loops, as though he had done such a thing many times before. He said nothing when he finished, merely leaving her alone.

Claire opened her eyes and quickly undressed, freeing herself from her gown and undergarments, before dressing in a clean nightgown. She pulled all the pins that she could feel within her hair and held them in the palm of her hand as she took a deep breath.

Claire could do this. She told herself it would be alright. It was expected. It was part of being married. She was the one who had gotten herself into this mess in the first place. Jack was her husband and he could demand certain things –

Claire froze when she re-entered the room. Jack stood over the settee, dressed in his own nightshirt, pulling cushions away so that he could neatly tuck in a sheet that he had taken from the recently disturbed bed linens.

"What are you doing?" The question escaped her lips before she knew what she was saying.

Jack stopped to frown at her, an expression of confusion on his face. "I thought I'd bake a pie," he said facetiously. "What does it look like?" he wagger this old sofa is a lot more comfortable than a fifty-year-old rug." When Jack saw that Claire was not laughing, he took the time to inspect her frightened and oh, did you think ...? Claire, I am not an ogre about to impose myself upon you."

Claire could have cried with relief as an enormous amount of anxiety melted away. "I would not have blamed you ..."

"Despite what you may hear about me, especially in London, know I am not a brute, especially when it comes to women." He spoke seriously, his voice low, as though he wanted Claire to believe him, to comprehend his words.

And Claire did believe him. In witnessing his kindness, she suddenly felt foolish to have thought he would take advantage of any marital rights one might have deemed he had. "Well, I ought to sleep there," Claire protested. "This is your bedroom as well."

Jack laughed again. "You will sleep in the bed and I will not hear of any arguments. Go on," he urged. "We are away in the morning. You need your rest."

"Thank you," whispered Claire, not knowing if Jack could truly appreciate the meaning behind her words. She darted across the room and climbed underneath the bed clothes.

"Oh, there is one thing we need to do," Jack said, as though he suddenly remembered something.

Claire watched him curiously as he opened and fished through the drawer beside his bed, before he produced a dagger. Of all the objects he might have presented her with, that surprised her the most. She gasped as Jack pulled back the bed clothes with one swoop, forcing Claire to quickly cover her legs with the skirt of her night dress.

Jack sat down on the edge of the bed and rolled up his sleeve. He scratched as he suddenly pressed the blade to the edge of his wrist, and Claire nearly turned green as a steady stream of bloody began to pulse outwards. Jack did not bind the wound immediately, but he held it over the clean, white linen.

The blood dropped, one, two, three, four times, before it collected in a small stain. It was then that Jack wound a fresh handkerchief around his wrist to stop the bleeding.

"These sheets will be changed tomorrow ... the maids will see the blood," Jack explained. "When we announce that there is to be a child ... well, now there will be no suspicion."

Jack turned his back on her and went back to the settee to lie down. Immediately Claire noticed that he was too tall for the small sofa, and his feet hung off the end of it.

Claire pulled back the bedclothes, covering Jack's little bright spark on ingenuity. Lord, she hoped his plan worked.

"By the way," Jack uttered, "you were a beautiful bride. I just wanted you to know that."

Hope you enjoyed it!

This will be the last chapter before Christmas, so I hope you all have a safe and happy holiday! I know many of you are having to spend your Christmas away from family this year. First, I commend you for making the choice for your community. Second, I don't discount how hard it must be.

We are really lucky in Australia to be able to see our families and our hard lockdown and I'm so thankful for that. What a year!

Vote and comment xx