Through the Looking Glass

by Trixen

Summary

dthis is what happened, from the beginning.
in dreams,

Caitriona's body is a whip of electricity.

Her body is sweat, silt, mud, lightning, animal.

Her body,

it could move fire

And she tastes salt, the copper of pennies - of blood - and he is biting her lip, sucking it back into his mouth, till she feels swollen all over. Between her legs, her breasts, the nape of her neck, the places behind her knees. Everywhere is tender, and snaking hot

when he is inside, finally, the relief sends her reeling

the sharpness of that relief, like a hurting note of music.

She clutches at his hair, wants to rake his back with her nails, wants to savage him like he is savaging her. His cock, the grind of his pubic bone, the hair there rubbing rough against her until she could scream, could shatter pianos with the sound of her orgasm, the wet rush

and still, it is all relief.

It all comes back to that, to knowing.

Because in dreams,
Caitriona knows who he is.

When she wakes, his face eludes her. His name is muddled, smeared like condensation on glass.

When she wakes, she turns over.

She stares at her husband, sleeping beside her, lost in his own wanderings, and

she grieves.
once upon a dream.

When she looks back, years later - Caitriona cannot believe that she didn't have some sort of premonition. Not a prickle at the back of her neck, a skitter along her arms, or even a tug behind her breastbone. Her traitorous heart failed to warn her, and her body -- her body always knew. Always sensed the irrevocable.

She likens it now to a train hurtling toward her. She imagines herself standing on the tracks. Feet braced, dress whipping with wind, rain in her hair and steel in her heart. The tube of machinery and clicking engines and roaring wheels arrowing across dark, molten earth.

It was being driven, not toward her, but into her. **Intent** on her.

And yet, she stood.

She waited.

She would still wait, come to that.

Because despite everything, despite it *all* ... she would not, could not, change a single thing.

Not for all the world could ever offer.

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"This place is like a utilitarian nightmare," says Karolina, brandishing her menu like a weapon. "What if those pipes burst."

Ciara sniffs her drink. "This is all gin."

"They have vegetarian food for our Caitriona," says Therese. "Would you stop whining, we're supposed to be celebrating."
"I'm not--"

Caitriona listens to the conversation fizz and pop around her, a small smile playing on her lips. The back of her neck is damp and she feels floaty, almost detached. The girls convinced her to order something besides her normal vodka tonic, and the cocktail stings with grapefruit; tart and delicious. It hurts her mouth and warms her belly.

"Are you nervous?"

She looks at Ciara. "What's to be nervous about? I reckon I'll smash it."

"She's nervous," Therese confirms, without looking up. "You'll be fine, babe. They saw your audition tape."

"Christ," Caitriona answers, taking another long drink. "Don't remind me."

"Of what?"

"Of the fact that I have to audition for that... that thing."

"Okay, we're out for dinner because..." Therese pauses. "God... what the fuck could it be, oh okay - - Ciara finally had sex with someone."

"With a MAN!" she replies, with her usual bawdy laugh. "He didn't even jackhammer."

Caitriona relaxes again, settling in. Ciara likes to talk about dicks when she drinks. The girls had called her earlier and dragged her out to Akasha in Culver City, Karo muttering about giving the area “happy vibes” before the audition.

There's that word again, and it pulses through her like a heart.
She's been trying not to dwell too much, but it's only SEVEN DAYS AWAY and she's still well aware that this is the kind of role that could -- make things happen.

Things.

Like, money. Of which Caitriona has some, but not quite enough. Fame? But then, she doesn't truly seek that. So fleeting and fulsome and a bit twatty, when it comes down to it. The chance to inhabit a character -- something she's only tasted briefly before. That sends a spark through her. The idea of climbing inside another body, zipping up its flesh, unpacking the little bits that make that person tick, or thrum with tears or snap into a rage, rattlesnake-fast.

Claire Beauchamp Randall.

Embarrassingly, she's never read Outlander - not being one for romance, but she'd skimmed it on the weekend. Overlong, perhaps, but some of it was quite engaging, and if she got the part - a big bloody if, Balfe - she's pretty sure it won't be any great hardship to dive into.

Caitriona stands up and grabs her purse. "If the waiter comes again--"

"That's what she said."

She slants Karo a look. "I'll have the quinoa. With the pickled beets."

In the loo, she pees, washes her hands. She strikes a pose; sucks in her cheekbones. Could she really play a damsel in distress? A warrior maiden? Could she anchor something as huge and sprawling as a television show? Or would she plummet ten stories into despair when they told her the inevitable - that she's not good enough and never was?

"Oh Christ, get a grip Balfe," she says and purses her lips. "Stop whinging."

Her reflection looks back impassively. The lighting is harsh and unforgiving, exposing the hollows of her collarbones. Her hair, drawn back in a sweaty knot. It’s so hot today, and she feels it all over herself. Sweat in a thin chain around her bellybutton, trickling down the bowl of her lower back. Between her legs, behind her knees.
The shadows of her nipples show through the filmy white of her top. She turns slightly, examining the bum of her shorts, wondering (not for the first time) if she's a bit tall and weedy for this role. Bloody bloody bloody fucking stop it and she tugs the tie out of her hair, shaking it out, mussing it with her fingers and a bit of water. It's springy and soft beneath the tips of her fingers, damp with sweat and the salt of her nerves, her huge silly hopes.

"You'll have to do, I 'spose," she says, sticking her tongue out and applying a bit of red lippy, because why not? She needs a mask to hide behind. Big hair, plush mouth, long bare legs. Like everything in Hollywood, it's a disguise.

Caitriona hears her friends before she sees them. Loud, raucous laughter. She giggles a bit to herself, rounding the corner by the bar and narrowly avoiding a server with a tray of crystalline martinis. The liquid is diamond-bright, studded with green olives on toothpicks. Her mouth waters, and then-- oh, then.

Her eyes lock with his.

She stops.

As suddenly as that, she stops. Or does the earth? She's not sure. Her heart thuds in her ears, an angry juddering beat, like a drumming song. Oh, God. She has to move, but.

Has anyone ever had eyes that blue?

He's standing by the door, with a group of mates. She can tell, because they all keep punching each other, as men are wont to do. His hair is dark-- wait, no, it's a bit blond. Like burnt butter. His arms are bare. She can see the polish of his shoulders, the long roped muscles, the veins on his forearms. Normally, she doesn't even notice but-- something. There's just something. His eyes. They blaze back into hers.

He's looking at her.

In that, she can see everything. The hot push of his cock between her legs. The strength of his drives, the way his hips would move. She can taste his tongue in her mouth. Feel how his stubble would irritate her nipples, send them into stinging life. She can see --
he's imagining it all too.

He can see everything.

Caitriona thinks for a moment that she's going to lose all control and walk forward, straight into the centre of that throng, press her face against his neck, behind his ear. Where he is secret and tender. The smell there-- she can imagine it, and her mouth waters again. She swallows carefully, overcome with desire. She knows, if she goes over there, she will bite him. Sink her teeth into his skin and claw at his back.

"Oi! Kitty!"

She jerks, hears Ciara's cry from across the restaurant. Her nickname from the girls, for ages. Kitty. Started eons ago when the models in Paris took the piss out of her for not waxing her upper lip. *You'll get whiskers, comme une petite chatte*. She realizes she's been standing in the middle of the room for god knows how long. Her face feels unbearably flushed, and she tears her eyes away from his, embarrassed and raw and eager down to her bones.

"What the fuck were you doing," Therese says.

"Thinking," Caitriona says, a bit breathlessly. Her back is to the door. She doesn't even know if he's still there. "Lost the plot for a moment."

"We ordered for you."

"And--"

"Yes, we got wine."

She smiles. A reflex, really. "You lot know me too well."

"Cheers to that," Karo says, and they lift their glasses.
Caitriona glances behind. Trying to be subtle. It's all for nothing.

He's gone.

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The morning of the audition dawns as bright and clear as a day at sea. The sky is as pale as oceans are pale, as white as white-capped waves, as jewel-iridescent as the necklace she lays against the hollow between her collarbones. A single ruby, unfinished and rough, hanging from a chain she'd brought at a market stall in Cape Town.

She'd haggled for ages, because the chain was a bit manky - but when she'd brought it home, it polished to a mirror shine. The ruby she'd bought when out with T, wandering in and out of vintage shops in Brooklyn. Said she needed it. In a violent way she couldn't quite articulate. Seeing it there, blood-dark and almost pulsing.

He'd planned to have it shaped as a gift, but Caitriona loved how it was slightly prickly. Undone.

He hadn't understood.

But then, he doesn't sometimes.

That reminds her, so she calls him as she'd promised to do. He wishes her luck, tells her he loves her. She murmurs it back, and stares down at the book of poetry open in her lap. Adrienne Rich.

She repeats the words as she drives to the studios.

"A woman with a certain mission
which if obeyed to the letter will leave her intact.
A woman with the nerves of a panther
a woman with contacts among Hell’s Angels
a woman feeling the fullness of her powers."
The nerves of a panther.

It runs like an anthem through her as she shows her pass to the guard at the gate. Parks haphazardly because she is bollocks at driving in general, parking in particular. Couldn't they go everywhere by train like normal people?

She checks herself out in the rear mirror. Her hair is curled (because Claire's is a mess or so says the book), and her mouth is stained with just a touch of tea-rose pink (because they surely wouldn't have had much access to different shades of lipstick during the war?). She's wearing a loose ivory blouse, tucked into high-cut trousers. No heels, in case she towers over her acting mate.

God, let her not do that.

She didn't bother with a bra while getting dressed. It's her one concession to superstition. During auditions, she's had the most success braless. Perhaps it's the hint of looseness? Of uninhibited sexuality? That hint of darkness beneath her top. The suggestion of movement. Of something unbound.

Like the ruby, glowing at her throat.

The receptionist checks Caitriona in, gives her a pass, and sends her to the bank of elevators. All the while she swallows against the nausea boiling in her belly. Buck up, Balfe. Nerves of a panther. Adrienne's words whisper in her ear, all the way down the hall and into the waiting room. It is nondescript, cramped and smells of salt and copper pennies.

All of the other Claires stare at her and she stares back, wanting - absurdly - to laugh. But instead she smiles serenely. Takes a seat. Wonders if she is supposed to take a number. None of her other auditions were ever to this scale, and it clenches her suddenly, snaps her up, how big this is. The Sony studios. Important people watching her. A fucking television show.

"They saw your audition tape," she murmurs to herself, repeating Therese's words from a week ago. "They saw your audition tape. You can't be as rubbish as you think."

As far as pep talks go, it's about as much as she can muster, being Irish. She wishes - for one insane moment - that she was American and could tell herself she's awesome and the best ever but it escapes her, that kind of bald self-esteem.
When the door at the other end of the room opens, heads tilt all over the place. Like a band of meerkats, Caitriona thinks, and stifles a giggle. So much for decorum. The girl leaving looks crestfallen - no doubt already playing over everything she believes she's done wrong. It's no one Catriona recognizes, but she's ridiculous gorgeous, with wild dark hair and a small, curvy body. The kind of arse men like. She'd even dressed in plaid.

Bloody hell, she looks exactly like Claire.

Perfect.

"Caitriona Balfe?"

She looks up. The woman pronounced it Katieronia Ballfey. Also quite perfect. She senses now might not be the time for corrections (she doesn't want to be remembered as "the bossy one", after all) and stands, gathering the file with her resume, head shot, and a copy of the audition tape on disc in case they've lost it.

"Hi," she says, shaking the woman's hand. "I'm Caitriona."

She winces. "I fucked that one. I'm Sophie - Suzanne's assistant. Come on in."

"Thanks."

The room isn't large, but it is intimidating. Caitriona takes it in, in tiny increments. Not wanting to overwhelm herself or break out in hives (something she'd done once in front of an agent, who handed her some aloe vera and told her to get a grip). At the end is the big white backdrop, the camera and sound equipment. All familiar, and she breathes out once, scanning the rest of the area.

Facing the backdrop is a long table filled with people. They're all chatting, sipping drinks. They have notebooks and pens and look frightening and official. The cameraman is fiddling with something, and Caitriona thinks it might be her acting partner talking to him. Sam... something. Heughan, that's it. Sam Heughan. The first person cast; lucky sod.

His back is to her, and she has a vague prickling of recognition. Something about the slope of his
back and shoulders. The colour of his hair like-- what?

Her view is blocked suddenly and she blinks as a hand is extended to her.

"I'm Suzanne, the Casting Director!" she says enthusiastically. "We just loved your tape."

"Thank you," Caitriona answers, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. "I really appreciate the chance to--"

"I heard Sophie screwed the pooch with your name."

She almost chokes. "Well it wasn't a huge deal--"

"It's spelled so beautifully."

"Irish," she shrugs, hoping to move on. Poor Sophie. "No one here can pronounce it, truly. Here's everything you need--"

Suzanne takes the folder with a smile. "Perfect. Well, should we get started? We're on a tight schedule today-- everyone actually showed up for once. You've got the sides you'll be reading?"

"Yes," Caitriona replies, following her over to the table.

She shakes their hands. Tries to remember names. Ron, David, Maril, Elicia, Toni. She's never read with so many people in a room before, and yet - they all seem chill, relaxed. Cracking jokes. Making her feel comfortable, thank Christ. The smell of the coffee they're drinking is intoxicating - spiced with something sharp and woody.

She clutches the script, though she doesn't need it, having spent ages practicing. Channeling the spirit of Claire Beauchamp Randall Fraser - even dreaming of her once; a shadowy dream, in a forest, with dark inky skies and tall arrowing trees. In the dream, she could feel someone watching her and the hot feeling in her stomach stayed with her when she woke.
As she makes her way over to the backdrop, toward the man who will be playing Jamie Fraser, she wonders again -- why does he look so ...

And then he turns.

"Oh."

The word leaves her lips before she can stop it, and hangs there between them. Like a crack of lightning on an otherwise quiet day. His mouth opens too, as he starts to smile and then stops. It flares in his eyes. The recognition.

It's him.

The man from the restaurant.

The man with burnt butter hair and the kind of eyes that can fuck someone from across a room.

The man she pictured when she was home that night, in the darkness and heat of her bed, alone. As she ran her hands down her body, feeling every bone and blush, and the wet between her legs. Just from the memory of his stare. Just from the memory of his mouth, the glimmer of his teeth as he grinned, the dampness on the nape of his neck. The neck she wanted to bite and grasp. The mouth she wanted to savage with her lips, until she could taste nothing but him.

That man is in front of her, looking at her with the same shock. But he recovers quickly, and she trembles as he steps forward again, holding out his hand to her. His fingers are long. There are little freckles on his knuckles. Hair on his forearm. She can see the veins beneath his skin, throbbing with blood.

"Hi," he says, his accent thick. His voice only shakes a little, just a hint of what he is thinking, feeling. What he might have dreamed in the secrecy of his own bed during dark, dark nights.

"I'm Sam."
Her ass feels like it's on fire.

It's an unfamiliar feeling. Caitriona has never been one for excessive exercise, and yet here she is, with a throbbing bum and wrists sore from constantly yanking the reins (with Jackie, her reluctant trainer, screaming in the background GENTLY GENTLY CAITRIONA FOR GOD'S SAKE).

Horse riding is clearly not for the faint of heart. Or the weak of arse, she thinks ruefully.

She gives her head a little shake, and curlicues of hair escape from her ponytail, exploding around her face. "Jesus H Roosevelt Christ," she says out loud, testing the phrase in all of its ridiculousness. A few people on the High Street look at her -- they actually side-eye her -- and she winks at one in particular, a young woman with long and luxuriant hair and the kind of black leather jacket that Caitriona might just kill for. Back in her modeling days, she would have done more than just wink, but-- well.

"Married lady, now," she murmurs, looking down at the plain gold circlet on her left hand. It's always looked... not wrong, really. But.

It didn't fit, somehow.

Even after a bloody year. Shouldn't 12 months of matrimony be enough to --

"Cait!"

The shout ruptures her guilty thoughts, and she's grateful for it. Even if the nickname still annoys
her. "It's Caitriona," she says underneath her breath, remembering when she first heard it, and from who.

~

*Los Angeles.*

After the audition, she had trembled for a full hour.

She'd said, "Hi, I'm Caitriona."

He blinked. "That's how ye say it?"

And she smiled. At a number of things. That the man who looked at her from across the restaurant had a Scottish accent so sweet that it rolled over her like velvet. That he looked befuddled. That he hadn't said anything about seeing her. That maybe, oh God just maybe, he didn't remember.

"Yes, that's how you say it."

They'd gone straight into the scene after that. A trick that many actors used to slip from reality to fantasy without a hitch. If you chatted for too long, you might get a bit comfortable. It was better to just dive in, like tearing off a plaster or wading into the cold salty ocean.

She knew she had it during the fight. There was a moment that it shifted from acting into -- a *volcano*. His fingers bit into her arms as he yanked her close. There was fire on his breath and in his eyes. Her chin wobbled and tears stung the back of her throat. They were lost in it, breathing in each other's breaths. She could taste the mints he'd obviously eaten. Sticky. His body was giving off heat that made her thrum inside, down deep in the secret places only she knew.

"Ye're tearing my guts out, Claire," he murmured, the Scots lilt so much more pronounced. He'd *become* Jamie, in a way she couldn't fathom.

And as she stared at him, the dawn of forgiveness in her eyes, she wondered how she'd survive this.

If she *could.*
After, she thought they might turn to her and - with tears in their eyes, natch - say "you're exactly what we need, Katieronia!"

But instead, she got a handshake, and a push out the door, and it was all so anti-climatic that she couldn't even concentrate on her desire for the part.

She couldn't concentrate on anything but that moment.

When she'd realized this was something she could not control.

For three weeks, she waited. Her agent told her they were interested. And yet, she wondered -- and as she wondered, she worried the band on her finger. Turned it 'round and 'round until her flesh reddened and she had to put hand cream on, all the while cursing herself for letting the girls drag her out for lunch. For going to the bathroom that exact moment. For wasting time pursing her lips and fixing her hair.

She might have missed him.

And really, wouldn't that have been a blessing? At least then they could have "met" in normal circumstances. She could have seen him as Sam. As Jamie. Not as the stranger with burnt butter hair and a neck that she imagined smelled of cinnamon toast and apricots and boy.

Three weeks was longer than most people thought. 21 days. 504 hours. However many minutes (she couldn't do that sort of math). And then finally, she got the call. Louise was trying to be calm, but her voice shook, and Caitriona knew. It was only a few moments later that it sunk in, when she received a text.

*Congratulations, Cait! I'm looking forward to working with you.*

(a few moments later)

*This is Sam, btw.*
She laughed and frowned all at once, quickly typing a reply. Cheers! But it's Caitriona. And how did you get this number? ;-) 

I have my methods.

I'll remember that.

Fancy a pint to celebrate?

The flush that came to her cheeks with that message told her it was a bad idea. She knew it, but fuck it, was she supposed to ignore him? When they'd be working together for months? Maybe years? Her body trilled at the thought. Fucking hell, her life as she knew it was ... obliterated.

She should call Tony.

Make it wine and you're on.

Sorted. Do you know Ugo?

Back to Culver City, eh?

Felt right. 9pm?

See you then.

She agonized over the period. An exclamation mark felt too cutesy. Her customary 'x' too intimate. Goddammit, it was just a text message.

She should call Tony.
She looked through her closet instead, Eddie purring at her side. Black skinnies, she decided. The kind that came up to her waist and made it look tiny, made her legs look miles long. A white top, tucked in at the front. No bra, because why mess with a good thing? A blush of red lipstick. Her hair, she left loose, just tying a few pieces back by her ears - figuring she should enjoy it while she still could.

"Earrings or no?" she asked Eddie.

She yawned, stretching out on her back. Her paws came up, as if to say you're thinking about this too much.

"Too right, but still. Earrings?"

Eddie sniffed, licked herself twice, and then got up and left the room. Caitriona took that as a solid 'no', and slipped her feet into flat leather loafers, no socks. She felt loose, sublime. Buzzing with the news, that she'd told no one yet. Soon enough, but for now, she wanted to keep it to herself - like a delicious dessert, to savour and cherish. Just hers, just for the night.

Ugo's outdoor patio was packed, but she still saw him straight away. He was casual, in jeans and a white t-shirt. His hair was longish at the back; he'd let it grow a bit, and she could see the beginnings of curls at the nape of his neck. Her weakness. She steeled herself, and gave him a little wave.

"Thought we'd sit outside," he said by way of greeting.

"Lovely," she returned, proud of herself for not showing even a hint of nerves. Even when he kissed her on both cheeks. Chaste, quick. His lips were warm. He smelled just as she'd imagined.

Of course he did.

"I didna know what ye might fancy, so I ordered two," Sam said as she sat down.

Caitriona laughed. "Well done, you. I like any wine though."
"Really?" he looked skeptical.

"Yes. But it's not overly warm tonight so I'll have the red."

"McManis Petite Sirah," he said, a bit formally. She had the urge to giggle. "The chap at the bar said it was quite good."

Once he'd filled their glasses, Sam raised his. "A toast? Congratulations."

"To Claire," she said softly. Their glasses met. Clink clink. "And Jamie."

"I already got to toast to mine," he protested.

"Not with me."

"Aye, that's true. Okay then, well... to new beginnings."

"I'll always drink to that."

After a few sips, nerves seemed to dissipate and they were chatting normally. Though neither had brought up the restaurant and she thought they might never. Hoped. It was so embarrassing. So ridiculously inconvenient. Of all the gin joints in all the world.

"So what'd you do before this, then?"

"I was a model," Caitriona replied. "Which is about as prestigious as it sounds."

He cocked his head. "Fair bit better than me, slaving away in a bat suit."

She snorted. "Oh my-- you played Batman?"
"Well, I didn't play Robin at least."

Caitriona couldn't stop giggling. "I might need photographic proof."

"Those go with me to my grave, lass," he chuckled and picked up the menu. "Shall we split a pizza or... do ye have to get home early?"

Her left hand twitched beneath the table. "Only for my cat. Eddie. She--"

"She?"

"Edwina. She's lazy as all hell though. She won't miss me."

"Always thought cats chewed your socks and things while you were out. Y'know, in punishment."

"She's too lazy even for spite."

He laughed. "Pepperoni? Or--"

"Margherita okay?"

"Suits me," he said, signalling for the server.

Once ordered, they settled back, and he grinned. "Canna believe I'm going to get paid to wear a kilt."

"Beats a bat-suit," she said.

He nodded gravely. "Does, at that."
"I can't believe I have to read those books."

"I already have."

"What? You swotty bastard."

Sam blinked at her, biting his lower lip. "How else do ye think a blond bloke got the part?"

"You've read all of them?"

"Do ye think I'm crazy? I read the first one."

"What happens to me?"

"Ye're a bit of a slag if I'm honest."

She choked on her wine. "It's not a bodice ripper, is it?"

"You have a fair amount of fun, let's just put it like that."

Caitriona considered his words. "With...?"

"Me," he said low.

Her belly curled in on itself. "You mean Jamie."

"Oh, we're indistinguishable at this point Sassenach."
It was her turn to blink at him. "Is that some sort of... pet name?"

"Ye need to read the book, Cait."

"It's Caithriona."

"I prefer Cait." He looked at her innocently. "Yer name is too complicated. I canna wrap my brain around the spelling."

"Your feeble Scottish brain, you mean?"

"Aye, exactly. Thanks for seeing my side of things."

She couldn't help it; she laughed. "I suppose Sam is short for Samuel?"

"Och, no. Thank Christ. Just plain Sam."

Plain. How little he knew. She looked at him there, in the dim glow of the outdoor lamps. The flowering vines above him. His t-shirt thin from many washings, almost see-through. Glass in his hand; mouth stained a faint red. As if she'd left her lipstick there. She knew what he'd taste like. They were drinking the same wine.

Caithriona thought again about calling Tony. Going home. Curling up in her bed, safe and sound.

She talked to Sam until midnight instead.

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“Cait!”

She turns at the second shout. It takes all of her acting ability not to smile, and she’s grateful for the fierce Scottish wind that explains away the roses blooming in her cheeks. He walks toward her, grinning. His hair is auburn now (burnt strawberries rather than butter), and curls at the nape of his neck in the way she feared it would. He’s wearing a beanie, and a leather jacket. His jeans look old,
and hang off his hips a bit.

“Hallo,” she says, waving at him. “Where’ve you been?”

“Finally got a moment to see a few mates,” he returns, stopping about a foot from her. “Want to get a coffee? It feels like days since — well, since we talked at all.”

“We’ve only been here a week,” she reminds him, surreptitiously moving her ring to her right hand.

“Thought we’d be working together a bit more,” he says, in the Sam-way he has of expressing everything honestly. Without reservation. It’s disarming in its innocence.

“Mmm, I’ve been busy,” she replies. "They’re trying to beat the Irish out of my voice.”

“And?”

“I fear it might take some sort of torture,” Caitriona admits, falling into step beside him. “Costa okay? There’s one I saw ‘round the corner there.”

“Fine.” He pauses and darts a glance in her direction. “So they gave ye the perm, then?”

She winces. “Yesterday. You noticed?”

Sam snorts and then laughs. It sounds vaguely like he’s choking. “I’m— oh. I don’t know what to say? It’s certainly … I mean, it’s curly. Ye know, like it’s supposed to be.”

“Just shut up.”

“I’m taking the piss. It actually looks quite— nice.” He leads her around a group of teenagers lolling on the fountain outside Costa Coffee and opens the door for her. “I’m serious, Cait. I like it. It makes ye look like Claire.”
“Claire is five four and has tits,” she raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think it’s the hair that attracts Jamie.”

“He’s a Renaissance man.”

“He’s still a man.”

“True enough. Do ye fancy sitting down and I can bring over the coffees?”

“You don’t know what I want.”

He smirks. “Yes I do.”

“Oh, really? Go on then.”

“Flat white. With cinnamon. And ye want a gluten free brownie but you might pretend you don’t.”

Caitriona purses her lips. “Why are you such a swot?”

“All part of the charm, Balfe. Sit down and I’ll be a gentleman for once.”

“That would be a change,” she says tartly, and walks away, trying to find a table without scads of people around it. Tucked away in the back, around from a shelf stacked with books *(Honour System: 20 p or replace it with one of yours!)*, she finds the perfect little nook. Two squishy chairs, and a tottery table that she ends up sticking a paperback under to balance.

Caitriona settles in, wishing she’d wore something more exciting than skinnies and a sweater. She catches herself then, in the ebbing tide of that thought, with her ring on the wrong hand and her co-star about to bring over her favourite coffee order (that he memorized apparently), and she thinks —
the smart thing to do would be to walk out the side door.

Dip back into the bustle of the street. Into Glasgow’s heart.

Save her own heart.

“There you are,” Sam says, rounding the corner with a tray and a scowl. He’s taken off his beanie hat and stuck it into his pocket. “I had to repeat my order about fifty times. The bloke said I sound American.”

She tilts her head. “There is a touch of Yank to you.”

“Bollocks to that, there is not.”

“Wait… did you just say ‘y’all’?” she asks sweetly.

He chuckles, taking a large bite of his sandwich. Caitriona blinks at the tray, noticing he’s also bought himself two peanut butter biscuits and a piece of Victoria sponge.

“Feeling peckish?”

He shrugs, pushing the brownie toward her. It’s wrapped in cellophane and shouldn’t look quite as delicious as it does.

“I’m learning to sword fight. Hard work, that.”

Caitriona leans back, sipping her coffee. It is dark and aromatic and only faintly sweet. She cups her chilled hands around the warm mug, sighing with the simple pleasure of it; a cozy cafe, a lazy afternoon.

An excuse to look at him.
“Didn’t they tell you that you’re over-training?”

Sam eyes her cagily. “Where did ye hear that?”

“Around. They said you take the sword home with you.” She pauses. “Does it keep you warm at night, Sam? Safe?”

“I tried to cuddle with it,” he says. “Wee bit sharp though.”

She giggles. “It’s all so wild, isn’t it? Sword fighting and horse riding and learning how to speak like a proper Brit.”

“Old life does seem very far off,” he agrees. “But it’s what I’ve wanted, so…”

“Oh, me as well. I mean, I thought it would take longer but— it’s what I hoped for. A chance.”

“This is more than that, I think.”

There is a biscuit crumb on his lower lip. She fights the urge to wipe it away, touch his mouth with her fingers. Watches as he licks it off; just a glimpse of pink tongue and his straight, white teeth.

He continues speaking, oblivious. “Don’t ye feel that too? People have waited over twenty years to see this on screen. I dinna think we’re quite ready for what’s to come.”

“That’s very dramatic,” she teases.

“I am an actor, Balfe,” Sam replies, finally settling back and drinking his own coffee. “So, what’s your story, then?”

“Story?”
“Aye, I’m being nosy.” His voice is deceptively casual but there’s… *something*. “I just wondered. Are you dating anyone or do ye have triplets or…”

“Can you imagine?” she shudders. “I don’t think I could have kids and do this kind of job. Could you?”

“Well, I’m a bloke and it’s a sight bit easier for us to ‘have it all’, so to speak,” he says. “You didn’t answer me though.”

“I didn’t?”

“No. Stop avoiding the question.” He sips his coffee and regards her over the rim of his cup. Those blue eyes. She feels speared in place; waiting, aching. “Are you… are you seeing anyone?”

“I’m…” Caitriona looks away and laughs a little. It’s all she can do. “I’m married, actually.”

“Married?”

“Yes. Is that so surprising?”

“No.” He swallows and places his mug back on the table. His hand shakes almost imperceptibly, but she sees it. Oh. “Not surprising at all. I just didn’t — you don’t wear a ring.”

“Were you looking?” she teases, regretting it almost immediately but what else is there? She has to stop this before it starts. Stop it with every atom of her body until it’s nothing but the glimmer of dust and blood and memory. “Very cheeky, Heughan.”

“Can’t blame a lad for trying,” he jokes, but he won’t look at her. His voice is faintly hoarse and he clears his throat, concentrating very hard on the slice of Victoria sponge; the yellow custard and sugared cake. He’s gotten some on his t-shirt; a smear of strawberry jam over his breastbone. “You don’t talk — I mean, I don’t even know his name. Bit funny really, that’s all.”

Caitriona feels that like a slap. The sting of it. How true it is, how stupidly true. “I… I’ve always been a private sort of person. My Mum used to say I was like a locked cupboard.”
“Mine used to say the world was written on my face,” Sam says quietly.

Her breath catches. His words steal what she had been about to say next. Something light. And you? Are you shagging anyone special? It feels wrong somehow. The jam over his heart, like a drop of blood.

So fragile, like the freckles on his cheeks from the sun. Beneath his eyes, where the skin is thinnest. And they sit there, oceans away from their previous lives, sipping their coffee. The world reflecting back on her, writing itself over his face.
we've never been in this place before

Glasgow.

All Caitriona is, is salt.

Sweat pools in the hollow of her belly as she lies flat, listening to the yoga teacher extol the virtues of Savasana. Sweat gathers in the curls of her hair, rivers around the teacup shape of her breasts, winds down to her legs, behind her knees, her toes. She feels wreathed with it, gathered up within it, held in the hot arms of her own wetness, and she wants to laugh, shout, breathe until her body dissolves.

"Concentrate only on breathing," the teacher says. "Let your thoughts come as they will, and then let them go. Do not dwell."

Oh, if only it was that easy.

It's been ... three point five days exactly since she told Sam about her marriage. It's been... three point two days exactly since he spoke to her outside of Costa as they went their separate ways. Well, spoke more than just "hello" and "got your coffee?" and "think someone sent some scones if you fancy one."

They'd passed each other in the halls of the 'castle', as they'd taken to calling the studios where they trained on horses, had voice lessons, costume fittings, learned about 18th century Scotland. They'd run into each other at craft service. They'd waved when Terry was strapping her into a corset and Dale was getting him suited up in something that resembled a painter's smock.

But she wondered if the knowledge that she was married had -- changed something.

Something intrinsic that even she hadn't been aware of.

Did he remember the restaurant? Had he thought, in that moment, as she had - that there was a current between them? It sounded ridiculous, and Caitriona didn't really believe in anything other than maybe lust-at-first-sight, but when she'd turned and his eyes fixed on her.
Jesus, oh.

It was as if they'd both been switched off, and suddenly, a knife had touched the socket, and the bulbs came to sudden, startling life.

She squirms on her mat, exhausted, mind whirling, body aching with its own mad longings. *Let go, Balfe. Let the thoughts go.*

Nope.

Last night, Tony on the phone. "You seem distracted."

"Just shattered," Caitriona replied, settling back on the bed. She missed Eddie. This was such utter bullshit. "They have us going a mile a minute. I never catch my breath."

He made a non-committal sound. "What time is it there?"

"Past midnight." She yawned. "How's the set-up going?"

"We should be ready for opening day," he replied. "Council keeps putting up roadblocks though. I swear, sometimes I think they don't want any more bars to open in Manhattan."

"Perhaps too many tipsy tourists?" she teased.

"Fucking politicians," he said. "Shall I let you get to sleep then? I 'spose you have an early wake up."

"Dawn, probably," she said, yawning again. "Sorry T. I'm just not with it."

"S'okay. Just get some rest. I'll let you know how things go tomorrow."
"Text me, I have fittings and then Maril is making me do some sort of torture yoga."

"Sounds about right. Love you."

"Mmm, night."

She fell asleep almost immediately after, tumbling through the inky spools of her mind, directly into the dark wood of her dreams. There, the trees pierced the sky. Her heart thundered beneath her breast, anchored by nothing, heavy and wanting. She ran and ran, her feet bloodied by pine needles, branches, the wildness of the forest.

It was strange, for she knew she wasn't running from something. Not exactly.

But she could feel ... what?

There was someone else there, among the leaves and animals, the wind and the suggestion of rain. There was someone watching her, and it didn't frighten her. She felt the gaze along every bump and hollow of her body. On her breasts, her nipples, the long line of her spine and the soft skin of her inner thighs. He was waiting for her.

He was waiting.

When she woke, Caitriona felt bereft. She could taste the forest on her lips.

Now, she can taste her own sweat, her own fears. Everything flows out in yoga. Right through fingertips and toes. Though Savasana is supposed to be a time to let go, to forget, to just be... for Caitriona, it just isn't possible. She sinks into the mat, and yet still feels the weight of memory, of time.

How did she get here?

If someone told her it had all been a dream, she wouldn't be the least bit surprised.
She might thank them.

"What'd you think?"

She blinks, turning her head to look at Maril. "I think ... I think we have the same hair now."

"That was always the plan, bun." Maril pauses and flops back, laughing. "Ohmigod, I feel so good."

"I'm stuck to this mat."

"Gross."

Caitriona squeaks. "You did this to me."

"A boss's prerogative."

"You're not my boss." She pauses. "Are you?"

"I don't know," Maril shrugs. "Let's go get coffee."

"I don't need coffee. I need a brush and a nap."

"Brushing it will just make it worse."

"How could it possibly get any worse?" Caitriona sulks. "It's like a bird decided to nest on my head."

"Quit bitching, you're going to be famous."
"That sounds awful."

Maril laughed out loud. "You poor bb. Okay coffee please, I'm going to collapse."

As they're grabbing lattes at a little hole-in-the-wall next to the studio, Caitriona's phone pings. She thinks about ignoring it, not able to muster the energy to care about planning permissions and other growing pains of opening a bar in New York City of all bloody places.

*Bad wife,* she thinks, inwardly slapping herself.

But it's not Tony.

*Where you at, Balfe?*

She smiles before she can stop herself. Steps away from the line, so she can properly look at his message. Before she can type any sort of reply, the three little dots appear.

*I'm gagging for a pint.*

*Sounds like a medical issue.*

*What are u doing*  

*Went to yoga with Davis.*

*my invite got lost*

*It was a girl thing.*

*And?*
Too right. We might braid our hair later if you care to join

**I will be balls deep in a pint**

She chokes with laughter and puts her phone away before she's tempted to say something naughty. Dangerous, dangerous.

"I got your coffee," Maril says at her side. "Talking to Tony?"

"Um... yes." Caitriona takes the cup. "Thanks hon. How much do I owe you?"

"Can't a boss treat her minions every once in a while?" she asks innocently.

"So where's my muffin then?"

Maril smirks. "It'll go straight to your ass."

"That's what I'm hoping."

~~

She's back at the block of converted flats the studio is putting them up in, and not thirty-three minutes after she walks through the door, her phone makes that sound again.

He's at the other end.

Caitriona knows full well she shouldn't answer. But fuck it.

**I'm at the pub. Alone. People are staring.**
Maybe they recognize famous Sam Heughan??????!! OH MY GODDD it's SAMMMMM

You're quite amusing Balfe

It's a natural gift

It's called The Doublet. Get over here.

Is that an euphemism or

FFS I need a drinking partner, this is getting sad

Keep your knickers on. How close is it?

You can walk. I'm upstairs.

I'll just look for Billy No Mates

I'm wearing a name tag obviously

She giggles, then panics. She's had a shower, but her hair is a tornado, and she hasn't bought any of the products that Maril recommended. FFS, indeed. She yanks on a pair of old skinny jeans. The type that are soft from too many washings and cling to her bum. An ancient black t-shirt. Her favourite loafers. She grabs at her hair, finally tying it all back in a rather fetching knot.

"At least with the curls, it looks nice and full," she says to Eddie, before remembering she's not there.

Caitriona swallows back the wave of homesickness and stuffs her wallet in her pocket as she pulls on an old leather jacket. She sticks out her tongue at her reflection, crossing her eyes until she feels
sufficiently brave to leave the house. Acting like a toddler always does the trick.

It's a short ramble to The Doublet. She finds him - as he said - upstairs all by his lonesome. A glass of whisky in front of him, gleaming amber in the muted lights. A bottle of red wine waits across from him, with one long-stemmed glass nearby. The fact that he anticipated her arrival makes her belly feel funny, and she regards him for a moment. Shadows beneath his eyes, an old beanie on his head, and that damn hair curling at his nape. She breathes out before sliding side-ways onto the booth and plonking herself down.

"You look done in."

He grins, a bit startled. "I reckon I was sleeping then."

Caitriona pours herself some of the purplish wine. "Cheers! Here's to being too knackered for just about anything."

"Almost anything," he says absently, and she curses her instant blush. "How'd the voice lessons go this morning?"

"I think I've got it, actually" she replies in Claire's voice. "What do you think?"

He blinks. "That's a bit freaky."

"I know," she giggles. "I sound like a right knob."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," he says. "And yoga..."

"Sweaty. What did you do?"

"Kilt business. Y'know, it's actually..." he hesitates. "I like it. I might have one made."

"For what?"
"Scotsmen always wear kilts at their weddings."

She raises an eyebrow and echoes his text from earlier. "Oh, did my invite get lost, then?"

"I'm not getting hitched." He scoffs at her and sips his whisky. "But it'd be smart to be prepared, I think."

"Because men are always planning their weddings," she agrees.

"Didn't Tony?"

Caitriona stops. "How did you... did I tell you his name?"

"Maril mentioned it. I don't think she thought 'twas a state secret."

"It isn't," she says, forcing a laugh. "I was -- anyway, no. We just-- we went to the courthouse. In Manhattan. It wasn't exactly a grand affair."

"Why's that?"

"It..." she shrugs. "I've never been one for big weddings."

He looks at her over the rim of his glass. "I dinna think that's true, somehow. What's the real reason?"

"Oh for..." she trails off and scowls. "You're a nosy bastard."

"I know."
"I'd just... I hadn't been too long out of my last relationship. I felt a bit like I should keep things ... relaxed."

"How long out of it?"

"A year or so."

"That's ages."

Caitriona smiles at this boyism. "We'd been together over a decade."


"Yes, wow," she replies dryly.

"Why did you... I mean, that's just-- what could even break you up after ten years?"

She looks down, snares her lower lip with her teeth. "Ehh, nothing major. Just the usual."

Sam refills her wine. She can tell he doesn't believe her, but doesn't press. She feels absurdly grateful. "What about you?"

"Oh y'know, the usual." He half-smiles. "A few ex-wives. Crazy girlfriends. The lot."

"So you're a virgin."

"Good as."

She laughs. "Poor Sam. Is that why you're here drinking on your own?"
"Maybe it was just a ploy to get ye out and about."

"Oh, I'll bet. I'm such exciting company."

"God, you're right." He absorbs her punch and chuckles. "But let's face it, it's the two of us now."

It's a strange phrase, and he looks quite proud of himself. She shakes her head. "You're an odd duck."

"Ye really, really need to read the book."

"I'm reading it now," she says tartly. "But it's quite long."

"That's what she said."

"Penetrating the text is hard work."

"Don't give me them. I should have to work for it."

The landlord comes along and lights the fire in the grate. It crashes and roars with dry kindling and a wealth of old newspapers. Caitriona gets up to warm her hands for a moment, staring into the confusion of flame. They order another bottle of wine, and a few packets of crisps. Prawn cocktail for Caitriona, and salt and malt vinegar for Sam. He extols the virtues of vinegar based products.

"Super healthy." She reads the ingredients list and the calories, fat, salt and sugar back to him. "It's bollocks, Heughan." His long fingers grasp the empty packet and he gets up to toss it away by the bar, grumbling all the way.

Politics is an easy one. Both registered Labour. Both committed to the same things; fair pay, women's rights, access to health care. He mentions how relieved he was when Barack Obama was re-elected. "I didn't go to bed till I was sure," Caitriona admits. "Though it all happened rather quickly."
"CNN were acting like we'd be sitting there at Christmas, still wondering," Sam remembers. "I had a gin and tonic and got my popcorn ready and they'd announced the bloody thing."

"You made popcorn?"

He flushes. "I like popcorn."

"I like popcorn too," she says. "But it wasn't a film."

He throws a crisp at her. "Tell me what you'd be doing if you weren't an actor."

"Professional fencing," she says.

"No shit, are ye serious?"

"No, you twat."

It turns out Sam would have been a polar explorer or a mountaineer. "I love glaciers, that sort of thing." His face goes a lovely shade of red and she's charmed, a bit tipsy. "I like those crampons they wear."

"Tampons?"

"Crampons," he repeats. "It helps them balance, get traction."

Caitriona tells him about how when she was a girl, she found an old film her grandmother had been in as a teenager. "It was this shoddy black and white production. They needed extras for a dancing scene. My granny was only fifteen. They had her dress up and put this spray starch in her hair. She told me all about it. It was the most thrilling day of her life." She feels herself go sort of puddly, soft. "It's what made me want to be an actress."

He watches her without speaking for a moment. His eyes are unfathomable. "So this was always it."
"Yes. For me, yes."

"She must be over the moon for ye, then."

"She died a few months ago," Caitriona says quietly. "My mum sent me a box of her things - I s'pose she'd left them to me. I should go through it, but. I don't know. It feels a bit raw still."

"Is it with ye in Scotland?"

"No. But I could ask Donal to send it."

He hesitates. "Not... is it not with Tony?"

"He lives in New York," she says lightly, pouring them both the last of the bottle. "The box is in LA. Another?"

"Aye, go for it."

She gets sparkling, for a change. The bubbles tickle her nose and she takes large sips, burping softly. "We should get chips."

"I don't know if they have chips to be--"

"With Madras curry sauce," she says dreamily.

"Are ye Welsh suddenly?"

"Don't tell me you don't like curry sauce."
"I don't dislike it," Sam replies, looking amused. "When did you go to Wales?"

"Once for a modelling gig." And she tells him about her time in Cardiff. About the long, flat bay. About the cultural centre, with its enormous carved inscription on the front. In these stones, horizons sing. How tears had stung her throat - ridiculously - and Adrian took the piss out of her in a relentless fashion for the rest of the trip. The rugby match they went to, and how she was sure she spotted Prince William in the crowd. "He had a bald spot. It shone."

"Poor Wills," Sam laments.

"The rugby players had legs for days."

"Sounds like someone I know."

Caitriona lifts her chin. "Genetics, darling."

He bursts out laughing. "Ye're so modest, Balfe."

Sam disappears to go to the loo, but when he returns, he has two large paper bags in his hands. They are stained with grease. She claps her hands. "Oh my Godddd, did you--"

"What the lady wants," he says genially. "I'm sad to say they'd never heard of curry sauce."

"Fucking heathens." She tears open the bag and covers them in salt and vinegar. "For the health benefits."

He nods sagely. "You know, I think ye should send for that box."

"You do?" she asks around a mouthful of chips, and winces. "Sorry."

"I reckon we'll be a lot closer than that soon."
It's her turn to throw food at him. "Just carry on, Heughan."

"It feels right, I dinna ken why but..." he pauses, his accent thickened with drink, and as melodious as a river. She feels drunk and happy, happy to be looking at him and out, having fun and eating white potatoes. It's as simple and as complicated as that. He continues, "I just think it would be good for you."

"How would you know what's good for me?" she asks, gentling the question with a grin.

He shrugs. "Probably I don't. Not yet. But I feel it -- don't ye ever have ..."

"Premonitions?"

"Instincts," he corrects, and eats a handful of chips. "Maybe it's learning about the past. Or perhaps it's reading the book - not that you'd know anything about that..." He dodges another chip missile. "It feels like maybe if we examined things, we'd get better at the present. I'm no doubt talking nonsense, but..."

"No doubt," she teases. "I see what you mean though. Maybe that's what Claire is supposed to teach me?"

"Do ye think they're going to teach us?"

"Only time will tell," Caitriona whispers.

Sam looks at her for a long moment. Until she feels self-conscious, aware of the roses in her cheeks from the drink and the food and the company. Aware that she isn't wearing a bra. Aware that she should have gone home ages ago. Aware that just like in the cafe, she is taking risks with the fragile meat of her heart.

"What?"

He tilts his head slightly. "Do ye think Tony would mind?"
Caitriona swallows hard. "Mind what?"

"This..." he waves his hand. "Us being out. Some blokes can be jealous."

"Are you?"

"Yes," he says, his voice low. A bit rough. "So, do ye think he would?"

"No," she says firmly. "We're married. It's a different thing."

"I see." He is a study in blankness, sipping his wine. "Is it?"

"It's legal," she jokes, though she's never felt less like it in her life. "He can't get away."

"And neither can you."

"That's the whole idea."

"How often do ye talk?"

"What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?"

"Just curious. So...? How often?"

"I mean, we try once a night. A few times a week? We've never been the clingy sort of couple."

"Most blokes' fantasy come true, I expect," he says.
"But not yours?"

"No," Sam says quietly, as they sit there, in the slow night of the pub, wine between them, their eyes flickering like the fire in the grate. "No, it isn't."
Glasgow.

The phone trills, sending its sonar across the Atlantic, all those miles of cold, white-wreathed ocean.

Brophy here. Leave a message and I'll give you a bell when I have a moment.

Caitriona can't help but smile at the sound of his voice. The familiarity of it, in this strange place.

"Hi hon. Listen, can you do me a favour while you're in LA? Drop by my place and grab that box Mum sent me with my Granny's things? It's in the very top of my wardrobe. Fed-ex it special and I'll re-pay you in vino."

--

The egg shell splits with a satisfying crack and Caitriona pours the yellow yolk into the buttered pan. It sizzles slightly, joining the whites she's scrambling. There's toast in the oven. Coffee spilling its scent into the air. Music plays from her phone; something Sam sent her. The Lumineers, maybe? She feels blissful and relaxed, clad in leggings and a snuggly sweater. Bare feet, messy hair. Her only plans are food, perhaps a walk. A read of her scripts.

She needs to relax.

If she doesn't, she's going to keep thinking about her dream from the previous night.

In it, she had no name.

She wouldn't have known it if someone shouted it in her ear, if they'd cut the letters into her skin. She was all body, all feeling. He came to her. There, in the forest, with the wet leaves and the dry rush of birds overhead. His arms snapped around her and his hips pushed forward, and she was captured, caught, a wild trapped thing.
She remembers biting him. Her teeth on his neck, where he was soft. The hiss that came from his throat. His touch, on the tips of her fingers, between her legs, behind her knees. His tongue, shocking and hot inside of her mouth. The taste of him, as deep and dark as whisky, as deep and dark as the trees and the wolves and the dirt on her back.

When she woke, she was coming.

And it hadn't been her husband in the dream. Normal, maybe (or so Freud would undoubtedly say) but who was it? Who had made her feel in such a way that she can still taste the orgasm on her lips?

Not to mention the email that popped into her inbox this morning. Even the memory of it makes her grit her teeth.

From: dmdmdmdm@gmail.com
To: msbalfe@yahoo.co.uk
Subject: this thing still on?

Not sure if you're still using this address. What with the worldwide fame and fortune. Congratulations, Kitty. I'm chuffed to beans for you (yes, I still use the phrases you taught me). Came across some stuff of yours the other day. Made me think of all the good times. Perhaps to you, there weren't too many of those... or what happened erased all of it?

I hate that I hurt you so much, you know that. And I know you're hitched, but I'd love to have a friendly drink at some point and catch up.

What do you think?

D

What did she think?
Caitriona looks down at the egg in her hand and wants very dearly to throw it at the wall. Or perhaps his head. Why did men think they could carve out your heart and then calmly ask you out for a gin and tonic? Her phone pings, and she looks across at it. If it's another email from Dickhead, she's going to--

but, no. It isn't. And a smile alights on her lips, as quick and flash as a firefly.

**Balfe you home?**

**Yes?**

**I have the afternoon off.**

*That sounds like a personal problem.*

**Oh come onnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn**

*lol. All right.*

No sooner has she sent the message than a key turns in her front lock, and she whirls to face Sam. He's holding his gym bag over his shoulder and has a shit-eating grin on his face. She raises one eyebrow.

"That key was for emergencies, Heughan."

"This *is* an emergency, Balfe," he says innocently. "I'm bored."

She laughs and waves her spatula. "Fine but I'm not going to the - torture camp or whatever it is that you do."

"Already been," he says, lobbing the bag down by the door and taking off his trainers. He's wearing an old t-shirt and sweats; his hair damp at the nape. "Some of us like to keep in shape."
"I have good genes," she murmurs, going back to her frying pan. "Fancy some toast?"

"Go on then." He pauses and launches himself at her couch as is his habit. He lands with a snuffle and a sigh, settling in and picking up the remote. "Any avocado?"

"No."

"I can't have dry toast."

She sighs. "How about scrambled eggs then?"

"Aye that sounds ahhmazing," he drawls and winks at her. "Ye really do know the way to a man's heart, Cait."

"I don't want to know the way."

He laughs softly and she does too, her stomach fluttering a bit.

Reminding her.

*Be careful, Caitriona.*

They eat in front of the television. Her in the squashy chair she found on the High Street for twenty quid. Sam sprawled on the couch. She tells him - a bit shyly - that she called Donal to get her grandmother's things. He seems quietly pleased, but doesn't ask her too many questions. Sometimes he senses when things are tender for her, and he doesn't press. It's surprising and still surprises her, how perceptive he can be.

How gentle.

"I got an email from my ex this morning," she blurts out. Decidedly not gentle, that kind of
exclamation. "Sorry, I'm just so hacked off about it."

He blinks. "Ye know, this might be the first time you've ever volunteered information to me, Cait."

"I'm a private person."

"A locked cupboard," he says, echoing her mother's phrase with a faint smile. "What did he email about?"

"Oh, some shit about wanting to get together," she replies, sipping her coffee.

"Maybe he does want to get together."

She rolls her eyes at the simplicity of men. "He wants to ride my coattails, more like."

"I sense some bitterness."

"Not bitterness, exactly but... well, haven't you ever had one of those mad relationships where you look back and think... just... what in the bloody hell was I thinking?"

"Not to that degree, no," Sam says, putting one arm behind his head. "But I ken what you mean. I haven't had too many serious... things."

"Things?" she repeats, lips quirking. "Really, I wouldn't have guessed."

"Hush, Balfe. I'm still a growing boy."

"Mmm hmmm." Caitriona shakes her head. "Well, you and Dave would get along famously."

"I have a feeling ye don't mean that as a compliment."
"He's... oh Christ, he's just a typical musician. I should have known better. But I was young and he was older and I thought wiser, and it was just such a mess."

"So what happened?"

"The dirt, you mean?"

"Aye."

She shrugs. "The usual. He shagged someone else. Got her pregnant."

Sam coughs, choking a bit on his coffee. "Is that the... usual?"

"Isn't it?" she teases. "I'm over it, I 'spose. Though... well, the girls think I got married a bit quickly."

He doesn't look at her, simply studies his mug as if fascinated. "You'd know better than me, I'm sure."

"Right. And Tony ... well, he doesn't -- he doesn't demand anything of me. Which is perfect. I feel like this show could really upend things, and it would be awful if I had to worry constantly that my husband or boyfriend was going to have a fit about it." She feels like she's rambling, but can't stop the torrent of words. "But anyway, enough of that. Tell me -- tell me your dirt, Heughan."

"I don't have any."

"Give it up, you have loads."

So he tells her. Caitriona sits back and listens to tales of his secondary school girlfriends. One, named Penny, had stolen his lunch when he snogged a mate of hers, and then put laxatives in his tea. "Bloody psychotic, she was." He tells her how he went for two years without a serious date, and how eventually he'd been a bit desperate. "I needed a good seeing to, let's just leave it at that."
And soon, she's curled back in the chair, as the sun begins to sink on the horizon, listening to the rambles of his childhood. The converted stables where he lived. The green, green grass and the cerulean blue sky.

How he'd pretended to be King Arthur, acting out the part by himself, as well as all the Knights of the Round Table. "No mates close by; was a bit sad really." The pub where he had his first drink of cider. His dreams of being somewhere else, and yet, not wanting to leave at all. A road trip across the United States, with a few crumpled bills in his pocket. "I tried to find Route 66 but it's such a fucking big country, ye know?"

They agree on what they both miss the most about the US (good sushi) and what they miss the most when they're away from the UK (chips, being understood - "you'd think I was speaking Swahili," moans Sam), and where they'd go if they had some time off (Thailand, for a swim and a tan and some goddamn sun).

"Wine?"

He yawns and sits up. "Christ, how long have we been nattering?"

"Hours. Do you fancy a takeaway? Those eggs were the last of my rations."

"Aye and I think it's my shout."

"You brought money? I thought you were skint."

He throws a pillow at her. "I'll have ye know I'm a generous bloke."

After much debating, they order from a nearby Persian restaurant. Both starving by that point, so it comes to quite a bit. When it arrives, neither of them can stop giggling at the amount of food. Pillowy, golden hummus swirled with fresh tahini. Bowls of fat olives and torshi - the delicious mixed pickle that Caitriona tells him he'll soon be addicted to. Rich vegetable pakoras, still shiny with oil. Some sort of mint chicken for Sam. Garlic naan bread that smells divine, and spiced rice studded with currants, which they both end up picking out.

They set up on her coffee table and sit cross-legged on the floor. Caitriona pours them glasses of wine to the brim, and they clink, trying not to spill between sips.
"I wonder when we'll have to shag," she says.

"Block two," he answers without missing a beat. "Or so I'm told."

"I've never really--"

"Me either."

She relaxes. "I've kissed a few, but. I don't know. I'm pretty comfortable naked though."

He coughs. "That's ... that's a relief."

"I bet most actors just kiss to get it over with."

Sam looks up from his naan bread. "Ye mean off camera?"

"Yes." Her heart thuds in her ears. "Don't you think?"

"No, I don't." He hesitates and half smiles. "That would get rid of the tension."

*Oh.* That stops her in her tracks and Caitriona flushes horribly, horribly pink. She takes a large gulp of wine. "I didn't even think of that."

"I 'spose they want to capture the first moment."

"Agreed," she says hurriedly. "I get it. I mean, that makes complete sense."

Frantic now to change the subject, she drags out their scripts and talks through a few issues with him. They've had a couple of read-throughs (which dissolved into laughter and taking the piss -
Maril was the worst for it, which shocked them all) but it's all a bit muddled. Out of order. She points out one scene, in Castle Leoch.

"The blocking for this seems like it will be tricky," Sam agrees. "Here, stand up--"

He seems to towers over her, even in bare feet. Caitriona stares down at the light freckles on his forearms. The veins there, swollen with exercise, the blood thundering just beneath his surfaces. His flesh is tanned from too much hiking; chapped from Scottish wind and rain. She can see the shadows of his nipples through the whisper-thin material of his shirt, wonders about the hair there. Is it the colour of burnt butter?

She'll know, soon enough, and that sends something through her. Almost a hurt -- but, not. Like electricity or a bolt of heat, low in her belly.

"So yer supposed to be checking my wound like a good little nurse," he teases, tossing the script down on the table.

"It's just a bit close that's all," she answers, her voice only slightly wobbly. "I don't understand the way we're supposed to show our faces and still stand so near."

"I forget you're an acting newb--"

"Watch it."

He chuckles. "Here."

Sam takes her hands in his, and places them on his chest, just beneath the hollow between his collarbones. He shows her how to stand, and talks her through where the cameras would be, how they'd capture every glimpse, every time her teeth snagged her lip, every movement of her fingers.

"A bit like a dance, really," he whispers. His voice is rough, like he needs to clear his throat. "And then ye notice me looking at you and--"

She looks up then, and he's *Jamie* - of course he's Jamie, but--
Their eyes lock. His are hooded, dark. It's almost as if they aren't blue any longer.

As if they've been through some strange alchemy, transmuted into fire.
the white enchantress.

Loch Rannoch, Scotland.

There is always that moment, every day. No matter the weather or how perfect the conditions.

Caitriona has learned quickly how to spot it. Even after only a fortnight of filming, she's adept at figuring out the exact second that someone frowns or holds up their palm or says "um, sorry just one thing." It might be the lighting director. It could be the second cameraman, squinting into the lens and raising an eyebrow.


She grabs a blanket from the runner and eases surreptitiously past Metin and his gaggle of assistants. Glimmering like thousands of silver snakes, the moving surface of Loch Rannoch follows her path as she escapes from the crew, escapes from the bustle and noise; the grinds and clicks of equipment and machines, the tunnel of the cameras, capturing everything, revealing all and nothing.

Her heart, so raw and foolish. It feels especially tender now, these days, as she inhabits Claire's body.

Be careful, Caitriona. Be careful, now.

Her hair is a tangle and she yawns more than she breathes, but the sun widens the horizon and she can hear skylarks calling to their mates from the wilds. There is a lovely squishy spot beneath a flowering cherry tree, dry and grassy, with a view of the loch and a soft breeze from the east. It brings the smell of reeds, the metal of the water, like a lake of nickels. Sharp, stinging, perfect in its incongruity. Caitriona smiles - it's unbidden - but it's a smile of pure, shocking happiness.

Scotland is a revelation.

After so many years flitting over the map, exploring nooks and crannies, it amazes her that she can still be so surprised by a place and what it offers. When it opens its arms, and covers you in its muds and rains, in its spells of sunbeams or its smoky pubs, a place that could so freely welcome
you, and all that you are. Let you laugh until your tummy hurts, drink till you trip over your feet, scream yourself hoarse at rugby matches.

Make friends so dear that you feel as if you've always known them, always carried them somewhere inside of yourself, in those secret, secret countries of blood and bone that only you know.

Yesterday, her granny's things had arrived. Taped with wide swathes of ribbon by Donal, and accompanied by a note.

*Petite Chatte, you owe me many, many bottles of wine. The ladder you have is shite and I almost broke my ankle trying to get up in your closet.*

"Well why didn't you email me you wanker," she'd muttered.

*I didn't email because it's more dramatic in the written word, rather than on screen, n'est-ce pas? Back to NY tomorrow. I'll tell your hubby you said hello. If that's still going on?*

*Bisou Bisou xx*

"If that's still going on," she had repeated. "Oh, you complete tosser."

It was true that Donal was a bit suspect of her relationship with T. He thought she'd rebounded from Dave and launched straight into something new like a missile, uncaring of the damage left in her wake. Maybe that was true. Maybe.

But how else does a person stitch up their life after someone so carefully and thoroughly dismantled it?

She'd texted Sam that the box had arrived and that she was going to go through it. He was on set for once without her; sent a text back almost immediately.

**Good luck, Cait & take notes, I want to know if there's any of the above: naughty pix, liquor, or cigars. I don't smoke but I think we could make an exception???????**
Naughty pics of my Granny?? That's a bit out of your age bracket Heughan

She was young once. She probably looked like you.

I'm leaving this conversation now

Seriously did she?

...

Are you really gone?

This is bullshit. Come back.

At least tell me how it goes.

I will.

Thank you.

When you've grown up. xx

FFS.

At least she had been smiling as she went through the box. She didn't look too closely at anything, needing time for that. But she was able to get a rough idea of what it contained. A few photographs (none of them even remotely naughty), a faded train ticket, two rings (one an iridescent opal, and the other a large ruby that reminded her sharply of her necklace from Cape Town), a bundle of letters secured with twine, and a smaller box, stuffed to the brim with objects that Caitriona
couldn't even begin to sift through, given her imminent call time.

Today, by the loch, it all seems so far away. Another age, another epoch. Now, all she feels is Scotland, its winged embrace, its birdcall and the *thrushhh thrushhh* sound of the reeds. She sighs deeply, closes her eyes.

"Coffee?"

Caitriona sighs again, this time with gratitude. "You found me."

"Ye had that look on your face," Sam says.

She sits up to reach for the cup and he settles down beside her, back against the trunk of the cherry tree. They sit and sip in silence, beneath the flowering branches. Lost in thoughts, in dreams. She looks over at him, at his auburn hair, aviator sunglasses, the freckles on his cheeks.

"This place is... you must've been bloody bonkers leaving Scotland."

"It's not like I lived on Rannoch," Sam reminds her. "My parents weren't millionaires, ye ken."

"Jamie speak," she laughs. "You sound like a right gallant Scot."

"It helps me to keep it."

"We're just riding horses."

"I was flirting with someone earlier," he says shortly. "She liked it well enough."

*That* stops her. Caitriona fumbles over another laugh, but even she realizes it sounds weak and faintly stupid. "Which one?"
"I'm not telling ye, you'll just make fun of her."

"I will not, I'm very supportive of your quest for a good shag."

"Perhaps I'm after more than that."

"Because men are always on the lookout for heavy relationships," she says mockingly.

Sam looks at her. "And you're judging this on what experience? Yer marriage? The decade-long relationship?" He picks a blade of grass and throws it in the general direction of the loch. The winds catch it in mid-air and flutter it away, a ribbon of green against the blushing sky. "No offense, but you're not exactly an expert on dating, Cait."

She swallows. "I was just taking the piss, Heughan."

"So am I," he says lightly. "Neither of us are really in a position to be giving advice. Anyway, I meant to ask if ye managed to look through your Granny's things yet?"

"Oh, I --" she digs out her phone. "I didn't get a chance to go through them but I did find a letter she wrote to me." Caitriona frowns. "The strangest thing. Like a covering letter... or a warning. Anyway, I took a picture of it so you could see."

His voice is low. "Ye want me to look at it? Are ye sure..."

"Of course," she says, and the immediacy of her reply - the eagerness of it - makes her flush. "Is that odd? It's just... I thought you were the one who--"

"No, I want to." Sam holds out his hand for her phone. "I'm just ... I don't want to make ye think you have to show me. I know it's private."

She doesn't want to state the obvious. That it hadn't even occurred to her not to show him. That he'd quickly become a friend in the way that someone gets beneath your skin, becomes part of your every day thoughts. Someone who knows you want a coffee before you do. That simple, and that precious, and that dangerous.
She wonders when they will inevitably get tired of each other. She wonders, and she watches him read her grandmother’s letter, written not so long ago. Smudged ink, crackly paper. The smell of lavender, of ashes. She'd lifted it to her lips, pressed them over her words.

My darling Caitriona,

Quite obviously, if you're reading this, I’ve died. It's okay to laugh (she had) - what a terrible joke all of this is, really! I can't believe I'm writing such a letter, but here we are. I've left you a few things, and my will is very specific. As I've made clear, these are to go to you, or be burned.

Caitriona, you were always my favourite. Not politically correct to say, is it? Not very Irish either, but you have been the very light of my life. So beautiful - yes, of course - but what is behind your eyes is much more important than the fleeting nature of shining hair and a nice figure. You have intelligence, and drive, and spark, and a good head on your shoulders. Most girls are too frightened to leave their home’s shores, but you took that step and I couldn't have been prouder at the news.

You might wonder why I'm telling you now instead of when I was alive (the semantics of this are a bit tricky, aren't they?), and well, it was never in my nature to be too open with my heart. But my darling, it is you who have been the greatest joy of these waning years, and as the light begins to dim and the shadows beckon, I see that I must share my truths with you.

I believe you will understand. And more than that, I believe you need to know.

Please accept an old woman's memories and don't judge me too harshly.

Grá a bheith agat do

Your Granny x

Sam clears his throat. "What does..."
"I love you," she whispers. "I mean, that's--"

"Aye, I figured as much," he says, handing back the phone. "Why would ye judge her?"

"For what she left me, I guess," she says. "I'm a bit freaked out really. But she obviously wanted me to see these things, so... it's not as if I can not look."

He stares out over the water, his eyes flickering. "What does Tony think?"

"I don't know." Caitriona hears herself, and bites her bottom lip. "I haven't -- I mean, he's opening a bar and it's been such a bollocks bureaucratic exercise. I didn't want to bother him."

"You're his wife."

"And?"

Sam's mouth twists. "Nothing, really." He points at her phone. "Nice pic of that rainbow."

"Nice answer back."

A ghost of a half smile graces his mouth. "Had to complete the circle."

"People already think we're dating."

"Bound to happen," he says, his voice low and blank. "Just gossip."

"Tell that to my husband," she replies, only half joking.

Sam makes a sound in his throat. "Ye could just admit you're married."
"I..." she pauses. "I don't want anyone to have an invite into my life."

"I ken that, but it's either tell all or deal with the chatter."

She winces. "Good thing T stays off social media."

"Not an Instagram chap, then."

Caitriona giggles. "The idea... no. He can't stand it. Perhaps that's why we work so well. He's not seeking fame."

"A prerequisite, is it?"

She darts him a glance. "Wouldn't it be for you?"

"Not sure. What if she was famous as well?"

"Ah," she says, staring determinedly at the loch. "You think you're famous, eh?"

"I knew ye were going to say something about that."

"Opened yourself up, Heughan," she says, sipping her coffee serenely. "Sorry to change this fascinating subject--"

"That you introduced."

She ignores him. "But you need to distract me or I'll fall asleep."

"Why don't ye just--"
"I'll be too sleepy later," Caitriona protests. "Pleeeasssseee..."

He chuckles. "Och, fine. Do ye see over there -" he points, "to the west of the loch?"

Sam's voice deepens as he tells her about the Rannoch moor, its remains part of the ancient Caledonian Forest. "Twas a rainforest. Covered most of Northern Scotland. It was where King Arthur fought one of his Twelve Battles. They called it *Cat Coit Celidon*. The forest was the place where madmen retreated, to hide or find their sanity."

As he describes the picture books he found in the old attic of the stables, its drawings of brave men and sorcerers, the felled horses and lightning bolts, their hands drift together, until she feels his index finger, so soft, against her palm. Caitriona's hand falls open a bit, and she doesn't open her eyes, doesn't allow her breathing to change. The hot pressure of his skin. She feels him slide his finger down over her life line, the bluish place beneath her thumb, where her veins lie.

Thinks he must be able to feel her pulse, throbbing wildly at her wrist.

Thinks he must be able to hear it. It rivers in her ears, an insistent, selfish, violent rhythm. But she doesn't move away, doesn't dare stir.

He isn't looking at her, and he continues. Talks of Arthur, and Guinevere. How Lancelot was driven mad by his jealousy. "He left Camelot, rather than watch her with him," Sam says quietly.

All the while, his finger traces her hand, and he presses down hard enough that she flinches, remembering the smear of jam on his breastbone, thinks now of that stain, like blood, such fragile things. A drop of blood, a heart.
the clocks are ticking now.

Glasgow.

can you make me dinner

Who is this?

Ha Bloody Ha

I suppose it's futile to ask what you want?

balfe i don't dream things up, i just eat them

...

i'll take that as an enthusiastic and quite hearty YAZZZ and i'll be over at 8 or so

...

you're such a star balfe. i don't deserve this much kindness but will gladly accept.

just bring wine or you're staying outside.

netflix and chill

you do know what that means?
essentially. I think?

*look it up heughan. that's your task for the day. I know you won't be working.*

*I would resent that comment if it wasn't so accurate*

*goodbye I'm going to cook*

*wait I need you to talk to me I'm bored*

*cait*

*balfe*

...*are you really gone or just messing with me*

*it means watch netflix and shag?*

Caitriona throws her phone on the side table and rolls over in bed, stretching. A full day off, it's almost unheard of. Her bones seem to ache within her body, as if they've been - not broken exactly, but - manipulated. Her body, that she used to know so well, is now a strange thing that throbs and roars and hisses at her, quick as a snake and just as pissed off to be woken from sleep. She groans, massaging her own arms and tummy, feeling every purplish corset bruise and every thump of the saddle.

Yesterday, Sam had accidentally (right) knocked her on her bum, and that hurt a fair bit too. Although she *had* gotten her revenge by making him remove the most gigantic spider either of them had ever seen from her living room. He'd complained that he could feel them everywhere afterward, and that she'd woken him up, *and* that she hadn't even provided pie.
"You whiny wanker," she'd muttered, pushing him out of the flat.

"Not even key lime?" were his words as the door closed.

Caitriona feels that first flush of missing him now, and closes her eyes against it, forcing the feeling back into the locked cupboards of her mind. Her palms cup her ribs as she remembers the tales of Arthur and Guinevere, and Sam tracing her hand. It seems like it happened just yesterday, or mere minutes ago, not three long weeks.

The hot pressure of his thumb. The way he ran it lightly over the veins at her wrists. The juddering of her heart. The lightning branching from her hand to her nipples, between her legs.

How they hadn't spoken of it at all. Just gotten up, dusted off the dirt, and strolled back to work, looking out over Loch Rannoch and the day of rainbows. Joking. Talking. And all the while, she could feel the incessant, insistent, neverending want. Inhabiting her like a living thing.

Inhabiting her like madness.

Something separate, with its own blood and muscles and intentions.

~

She sits cross-legged and snuggly on the couch with her Granny's box by her side, the afternoon waning and waxing. The groceries for dinner rest on the counter top, next to bottles of ruby wine (he always forgot, said his memory was like a sieve). There's a glass in front of her, half-drunk. Lipstick on the rim. Darkness begins to flood the sky, staining the day with its ink.

Caitriona thinks about the nature of desire, of memory. Why could Sam not remember a simple thing like a bottle of wine but recall her favourite coffee order after hearing it once? Why was that day by Loch Rannoch punched into her skin like the scar she'd got from a vaccination long ago? Glowing, permanent.

Why had human beings been given so much... space to fill?
The letters rest on her lap. They had been tied with twine. One had a splotch on it, like a coffee stain. But they'd been preserved with obvious tenderness. She'd only read one so far. The words in it felt like burning, and she realized now why the Balfe girls had haunted hearts.

How could you not, coming from women that lived with ghosts?

_Deirdre,_

_The snow falls here, day in, day out._

_From where I stand, I can see out across the back garden, down to the river. It's frozen. A thin spool of ice. The girls want to get out their skates, but of course Pippa said no. She said they'd catch cold._

_Perhaps, they would. But I couldn't help but imagine you lacing them up, covering their heads with hats and bodies with coats, sending them out to try their best. Shouldn't children be children, you'd say. Who knows, maybe it would be me who'd fuss and worry and try to get them to stay inside by the fire._

_I dreamt of you last night. You came to me. I held you down, and you moaned into me and I woke up shaking and hot, remembering the feel of you, the taste. In books men say their lovers have skin like honey or sweet, but you - you taste of salt, and you hurt my mouth._

_My Deirdre of Sorrows, I miss you so. It's constant, irreversible, like that river outside._

_Nick_

Caitriona lifts the glass again to her lips. Her hand shakes, and she gets up to cook, unpacking the groceries, re-filling her wine.

_Her granddad's name had been Thomas. He had been a builder. Kind, but a man of very, very few words. She couldn't imagine him ever writing a letter like that._

_She cuts kale into ribbons, dreaming of her Granny, of Deirdre, of how she looked as a young girl._
Her hair, glossy and dark, cut so that it fell to her collarbones. They were winged, like Cait’s, extending all of the way to her shoulders in one long bone-curve. She can remember her eyes, almost violet. Her mouth, always lush with lipstick. She liked to wear tea dresses that swished beneath her knees, and the kind of shoes that Claire Beauchamp Randall might have enjoyed in the 40s.

She and Caitriona would have long talks when she was a teenager. About the war, about movies, about books. She never once mentioned a love affair. Strangely, all she feels now is a keening sense of loneliness. Of wishing her grandmother could have prised that part of her heart out, held it up to the light.

But she was private.

A locked cupboard.

Her throat stings and she cuts up red pepper, plump garlic. She sautees the vegetables along with the kale for a few minutes, until they are bright and tangly. She grills corn tortillas and grates cheddar, makes zingy pico de gallo and bright guacamole. The quesadillas are simple to assemble. For good measure, she finds a brick of briny feta (sufficing the "extra protein" Sam is always whingeing about) and crumbles it in with everything, along with juicy kalamata olives.

It's all a bit... sexy? And she can't help but feel it, clad only in tight black leggings and a tiny t-shirt. The nape of her neck exposed, her feet bare and her arms prickled with goose bumps. The memory of his hot touch on her hand, and the food so salty and alive.

When Sam finally arrives, he lets himself in. He's been to the gym and damp with his shower. Caitriona ignores how he smells - like sandalwood and apricots and fresh, clean sweat. Ignores how his hair curls around the collar of his t-shirt. He has the kind of shit-eating grin on his face that usually spells trouble and when she raises her eyebrows, he shrugs.

"Brought ye a wee gift."

"Tequila?" she laughs, startled. "Really, are we doing freshers week again?"

"I never did it."
"Me either," Caitriona says, resigned. "I 'spose we better make up for lost time. Stick it in the freezer."

"Yes Ma'am."

He flops onto her couch and picks up the remote. "Channel 4?"

"See if they have any trashy documentaries on."

"Sorted."

They watch something terrible about people who are attracted to ferris wheels. Caitriona brings over the toasty quesadillas, spotted with oil and with cheese dripping out the sides. Sam's eyes light up.

"Christ those look fantastic."

"Like little artery clogging miracles," she agrees.

"And ye made guac!"

She has to smile at his little-boy excitement. "Only the best for you, hon."

They eat ravenously while they watch BBC News, an episode of *The Office* and finally, a rerun of *Friends* where Chandler insists on eating Funyuns and grilled cheese sandwiches for Thanksgiving. After a spot of Googling to find out what Funyuns are, Caitriona gets up to grab the tequila. She slices juicy limes, finds her Himalayan salt and digs two frosted shot glasses from the freezer.

"Bottoms up?"

The first shot makes them both gasp. It's like swallowing ice fire. The second goes down easier. They clink their glasses and sit with the coffee table separating them. Caitriona is cross-legged,
with her back against the ottoman. Sam has his legs spread to the side as is his habit, and his one arm slung over the couch. He rests his other elbow on a tower of pillows.

"Have you taken every decorative pillow I have for that?"

"Aye, seemed right."

As they drink, they talk. About how filming is going (good, but not great - it's difficult doing things out of order), what Cait thinks about living in Scotland (magical), what they're reading (Sam is knee-deep in eighteenth century history books about the Gaels, and Caitriona is reading *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan). Sam is a bit suspicious of her choice. "A bit dry, I would think?"

"Not at all..." she says, rooting through a pile of journals and finding the one she'd scrawled in while reading. "Ann Druyan--"

"Who?"

"Carl Sagan's wife," she says. "Look --"

And she reads to him, softly, softly. "When my husband died, because he was so famous and known for not being a believer, many people would come up to me-it still sometimes happens-and ask me if Carl changed at the end and converted to a belief in an afterlife. They also frequently ask me if I think I will see him again. The tragedy was that we knew we would never see each other again. I don't ever expect to be reunited with Carl."

"This is uplifting," he deadpans.

"It's gorgeous, listen: 'But, the great thing is that when we were together, for nearly twenty years, we lived with a vivid appreciation of how brief and precious life is. We never trivialized the meaning of death by pretending it was anything other than a final parting."

Caitriona pauses and her throat clogs with tears, sudden and unsettling. She skips to the end, unsure of her ability to read further. "The way he treated me and the way I treated him, the way we took care of each other and our family, while he lived. That is so much more important than the idea I will see him someday. I don't think I'll ever see Carl again. But I saw him. We saw each other. We found each other in the cosmos, and that was wonderful."
Sam stares at her. His eyes are unfathomable. "Do ye think love like that exists, then?"

"I don't know," she says honestly and looks down at the page. The words blur slightly. "Do you?"

"That's a cop out, Balfe."

"It isn't," she says. "I don't know."

"Jamie and Claire would be verra disappointed in you."

She giggles, her voice still a bit wobbly. "That's just fiction. In reality, Jamie Fraser wouldn't have bathed more than once a year and be missing several teeth."

He chuckles. "Such a romantic."

"You didn't answer either."

"I'm the same as you. I don't know."

He pours them both some more tequila. "So let's drown our sorrows, aye?"

_Clink clink_ and they're off again. The night is dark and blustery, and her flat is a warm island in the middle of a storm. They light a fire, after much discussion about the best way to stack the logs - and how much paper they need - and do magazines work or are they dangerous? The internet tells them they are, so they settle for crumpling up newspapers and bits of fluff from the dryer. It finally gets going and hisses and spits at them, reminding Caitriona of Eddie when she has her arse up about something.

It's when they are watching a horrid soap opera that Sam squirms and takes another shot. "Christ, that looks unfamiliar."

_That_ is apparently sex. The couple on screen are writhing in ecstasy. She can't help but laugh, even though she thinks she might be blushing. "When you shag someone it looks like that, does it?"
"The problem is that I'm not shagging anyone," he returns dryly. There is a faint tinge of red on his cheekbones. "Not as if you're in a different boat."

"Not as if you're some God of Sex."

"Do ye really want me to answer that?"

"No."

"Go on then, Balfe. Shock me. Strangest place you've ever shagged in."

Caitriona considers this. She needs to stop drinking, clearly, because she's actually going to answer him. "An alley in New Orleans." She pauses. "During Mardi Gras. To be fair, I was off my face on God knows what. You?"

He shakes his head. "Wait, if we're going to do this, none of it can leave this room."

"Of course not."

"There's no 'of course' about it," he says, mimicking her voice. "We need to seal it with something."

"That--"

He hurries along. "Get your head out of the gutter, babe. I meant something ceremonial." He picks up the salt shaker and gestures to her. "Give me yer wrist."

"I don't think so."

"No arguing for once."
So, she doesn't, against her own better judgment - holding out her right hand. He pours tequila in their glasses and readies the lime wedges. The salt sticks to her skin, damp already. He does the same to his own and then winks at her. "All right then."

When his tongue touches her skin, Caitriona almost closes her eyes. Careful now. His mouth is hot, and his stubble burns her a bit. He sucks briefly, ever so lightly, and it's where her veins throb at her pulse. She can feel the scrape of his teeth. Everything in her turns hot and white, and she watches as he swallows the tequila, his throat working. The lime leaves his lips wet.

"Your go, Balfe," he says, his voice low and rough.

She almost thinks better of it. But she licks off the salt. His skin tastes of it. He feels flush, as if with fever. And the alcohol stings, but she downs it all. They don't look at each other for a moment.

"Back of a cab," he finally says.

Her eyes dart to his, and he wiggles his nose. She bursts out laughing. "That is just... trash."

"Aye but I was a bit of a lad back then."

It shatters the ice that had been forming like a thin skin between them. And he tells her about his first time - awkward and yet somehow better than anything he'd ever tried. Hers had been strange and wonderful, the bloke smelling of cigarettes and coffee. They'd smoked afterward actually, and Caitriona remembers how terribly French she'd felt, alluring and mysterious.

Though they disagree on favourite positions, both of them are firmly in the camp of sex toys being awesome (he only goes a violent shade of pink once during the discussion), and that while porn has its uses, mainly it's just a vehicle for heightened expectations and disappointment.

"Wildest place in the past two years?"

"I'm married," she says primly.
"Afraid it'll stop being true if ye don't say it enough?" he asks, raising one eyebrow in her general direction.

"You tosser. All I meant was that I don't -- it doesn't come into it as much."

"Then you're doing it wrong," Sam says quietly. "Or he is."

Caitriona's belly twists and it feels almost like a cramp, but not. She's hot, anxious. Neither of them say anything for a moment and it's like a living thing in the room. As permanent and unpredictable as a wolf in a forest. She thinks of her dreams, of the wet leaves and her wet thighs, the tongue between them.

His tongue on her wrist.

Her phone is vibrating and she reaches for it, almost knocking over the bottle.

"Oh, hi T."

Out of the corner of her eyes, Caitriona sees Sam stand up and take the glasses to the kitchen. She covers the receiver with her palm. "Where are you--"

"I'd better go," he says, grabbing his jacket and bag.

"Oh... I mean, there's no need if--"

"Aye, there is." He smiles briefly. "We've an early start tomorrow. I'll get the coffee."

She watches him go, vaguely aware that Tony is speaking. "Who was that?"

"No one," she whispers.
Listens to him talk about his day, about the upcoming opening. Wine orders and food orders and red tape. Something about his voice sounds wrong, and it's not because she's listening to an electronic interpretation. Or is it? Is that what is making it sound so alien and unnatural? Her body slides down until she's flat against the carpet, staring up at the ceiling. A long swathe of white, like an empty canvas, ready to be brushed into being, into existing.

She thinks again of the dark night of her dreams, the salt on her mouth. The trees punching through the sky like that long-ago needle had punched through her skin. She touches the scar again, remembers the shock of pain. All so she could journey to another country, all so she could voyage across the earth, searching - and for what?

What had she been trying to find?

Ann's words echo -- *but I saw him, we saw each other* - as Caitriona lies there, listening, the cosmos going on and on, all around her.

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when the world ends.

New York.

In her dream, Caitriona is running.

She is wearing a long dress, and it catches on branches, rocks, the mud and the trees. The bark snags the fabric, makes it rip. Her feet hurt, scratched and sore. She keeps tripping, and she braces herself for each fall that never comes. Her hair streams behind her, a dark ribbon of curl and wild. The sounds of the forest ring in her ears; each howl and cry, each hoot and scream, each _thrrshhhhh_ of leaves in the wind.

He is behind her.

When he finally grabs her arm and whirls her around, their bodies meet. They both gasp, and his mouth seeks the hollow at the base of her throat. Her moan is one of relief. His hands are on the bowl curve of her lower back and his teeth score her skin; hungry sounds come from his throat.

"Please," she keens. "Please show me your face."

The darkness stitches shut like a zipper, that quick and that resolute, and she tumbles from sleep, gasping and shuddering.

"Jesus," Caitriona murmurs. Her face is warm with sweat and she turns over, sees T still sleeping, undisturbed.

Outside of his flat, the sounds of Hell's Kitchen are muffled but distinct. Car horns, someone drunk and shouting, the clang of the pots and pans from the Chinese restaurant downstairs. She fancies she can hear the underground trains, like arrows tunneling through dark earth. Feel the steam rising from the grates. But it's just pipes gurgling somewhere in the walls; a toilet being flushed, taps being ran, water draining.

Caitriona scrabbles for her phone and gets out of bed. She pads through to the small kitchen to grab a bottle of fizzy water, and then down the hallway to his living room. It's not much to speak of, but he does have a squishy couch that she forced him to buy. The old leather one had stuck to her thighs and made squelching noises when she stood up in the summer. Disgusting. The new one is
pleasantly noiseless and deep enough that even her giraffe legs can stretch out.

She still feels loose and flushed from their night out with Donal and the girls. T had eaten something horrid and Caitriona had browned butter pumpkin gnocchi with crispy sage and pillows of fried goat cheese. Ridiculously decadent and so delicious that she'd begged the kitchen for the recipe, until Tony told her to stop (he said she was embarrassing him and that she'd had too much to drink) As if. The wine was ice cold and clung to her tongue.

Donal pulled her aside for all the details - the show, Scotland, the cast, Sam. She'd been as remote as she could be. Not telling everything. And he seemed to see straight through her.

How predictable and humiliating. Donal the Devil, always knowing - as if he did have some sort of supernatural knowledge. And yet, wasn't it good that at least someone saw her?

Knew her?

Afterward, she'd stumbled home with T and they'd fooled around and it felt ... strange? Like she was not in her own body.

And it had hit her mid-way through, as she was pretending to enjoy it, that she was homesick.

For what, she didn't know.

Caitriona's throat closes with the memory, and she leans back, staring out the window, thinks of the quote from Michael Ondaatje. Do you understand the sadness of geography? It is snowing very, very lightly. White curlicues of frost on the panes of glass. The city gathered in arms of crystal, before morning, when it will become dirty and slushy. The puddles with their thin skins of motor oil and car exhaust. And yet, just for now, it's perfect. The hot blocks of colour that are people's lights on across the way, the snowfall, the Christmas bulbs he's strung along the curtain rod.

She picks up her phone and dials without thinking.

"... 'lo?"
"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Well it's 5am or so."

She winces, even though she can tell he's smiling. "Shouldn't you be off being disgustingly fit somewhere?"

Sam chuckles sleepily. "Happy Christmas to you too, Balfe."

"Oh, you're right."

"Is that why you rang?"

"Not really," she pauses. "I forgot actually."

He fully laughs now, and the sound comes from his belly. Just as she loves it. "Must be past midnight there. Are ye okay?"

"Can't sleep."

"So ye wanted to make sure I couldn't either?"

"That's about it, yeah."

He huffs a bit and she can hear him moving, getting comfortable. It unnerves her. The fabric rustling. She can see him with his back against the pillows. One elbow up maybe, supporting his head. The dark hair beneath his arm. His eyes heavy with sleep.

"How's your hols been?" he finally asks, his voice low.

"Actually quite relaxing on this end," he says.

"Well I'm happy for you." She's unaccountably stung by how breezy he sounds. How... unconcerned. "And your trip went okay?"

Oh goddammit.

She'd been so intent on not saying a word about it. Not until he brought it up at least. But now the words sit between them, like unexploded bombs and she just waits, breathless, because she has no right to ask. None at all. But.

"Fun," he says easily. "Did all the touristy shite that they tell ye not to do. Felt like a proper git snapping photos of everything. I ate lots of steak, drank lots of wine. Abs enjoyed it too, I think."

She's stuck for a moment, unsure how to proceed. "Sorry, what was that name?"

"Oh right, Abbie-- an old mate from the theatre days. She lives in London so we met in France." He yawns, and Caitriona wishes for a moment that she could find a way to reach through the phone and slap him awake. "No one else could drop things at such short notice."

"I'm sure," she says, a bit acidly. "Why did she need to wear a mask? She's not famous, is she?"

"Nah, just a thing the hotel did. Thought it was quite clever, myself."

It strikes her that there's something different about him. Caitriona can't put her finger on it, but he sounds ... well, different and she's frustrated with it. Not sure how to bring it up or even if she should. So she plows forward, because maybe he's just tired, maybe he's irritated she woke him up, maybe they are oceans apart.

"Well, spill it Heughan. Is this une affaire de coeur?"

"You are so nosy. It's none of your business."
"Did you bonk all over Paris?"

"As it happens, we did."

That shuts her up. And even as she wonders if he's serious, she feels it, like a bitter tide. The taste of it in her mouth. Stinging, like the acrid taste of headache pills. She wants to tell herself to stop, because she's married and whether or not she thinks about fucking him is beside the point.

He's her coworker, for Christ's sake.

He's off limits.

She's off limits.

"I'm proud of you," she finally says, quite a bit more proud of herself for managing to say it. Especially in such cool, even tones. "Must have felt like a drowning man spotting a life raft."

"Ha bloody ha," he returns. "Speaking of people desperate for a shag, how's the husband?"

So, they're off. He tells her more about Paris. She talks about seeing Eddie. How her baby had ignored her for the first few hours, clearly furious. But then, in a gesture of sublime and pure affection, she'd stalked over, batted Caitriona with her paw and then curled up on her lap. One contented sigh and she'd fallen asleep. Leaving her again had been worse than the first time and Caitriona's heart squeezes just thinking about it.

"She'll be fine," Sam says quietly. "Animals don't ken time the way we do."

"I hate myself for leaving her."

So he cheers her up with tales of a Glaswegian Christmas. The whisky he drank the previous night. His plans for New Year, and the fact that he is planning to run a marathon soon. "Well, not very soon," he says hastily. "Perhaps when we're on break again." He asks after her family, her friends.
She asks after his, and slowly, slowly, he begins to sound more like himself. She begins to feel more like herself.

"I thought about you today."

He clears his throat. "Did ye?"

"Yes."

She had been doing some last minute shopping in Bergdorf's, trying to think what to buy T, when she'd seen the cuff links. They were made from black onyx and exquisitely intricate, with diamond swords fanning out from the middle of the circles. The inscription read, 'the knights of the round table'. Like a ghost from her past, whispering in her ear, and she smiled involuntarily. King Arthur and the forests of Caledonia, hiding wizards and the mad, the lost. Sitting at Loch Rannoch, with his fingers hot on the skin of her palm, both pretending, eyes closed, drifting in their own feverdreams.

What had he been dreaming? What had she?

She still wondered.

The cuff links were $5,495, and she bought them without even blinking.

"Finishing up my shopping."

"What did ye buy me?"

"Not a thing."

"You liar."

"I'm not--"
"Please, I can tell yer nose is growing from here, Pinocchio Balfe."

She giggles. "Stop being so bloody greedy."

"Well I bought you something," he says, clearly aggrieved.

"More fool you then," Caitriona says tartly.

"Ye seriously didn't get me anything?"

"Oh for fuck's sake, yes I did. But you're not having it till we get back."

Sam crows with delight. "I KNEW IT! I knew ye wouldn't forget about me. So what is it?"

"Keep this up and I'll sell them on ebay."

"Them?" he repeats.

"You'll see when we're back in Scotland."

He sighs. "Wish we were now, y'know? I'd rather be working."

Caitriona is startled. "I thought you said--"

"I know." His voice is sheepish. "I didn't want ye to think I'm a knob--"

"Bit late for that, I think."
"Ha ha. I just... eh, it's like-- I'm glad of a break. But I miss the whole mess of it. I miss being busy and miserable and cold. I miss..." he trails off, and the word that he doesn't say echoes between them, like the sounds of the forest. Clanging, as deeply and as resonantly as church bells. Just as sacred and sweet.

You.

She breathes out and thinks very carefully. How can she not tell him? How can she hide the yawning emptiness that's been at the centre of her life since they wrapped filming for the year? But how can she, at the same time. It seems like admitting too much.

"I miss it too."

And she fancies that they are floating on an island, just the two of them. As if they are the only survivors of some great apocalypse or disaster (Eddie is fine too, of course), and the world is awash with darkness, but for their island. A golden disk in a flat black world, and all they can see are stars, thousands upon millions of them. The Cosmos, their Cosmos. His voice travels across the telephone wire, his Sam voice, the voice she thinks she'd know anywhere.

"I forgot to say," she whispers, as they both begin to fall asleep again. Dawn is flooding the sky with its winter fire, and the snow continues to fall. She imagines him there, in the place she misses more than she ever thought possible, beneath the wildness of the skies, his hair smelling of heather and wind.

She imagines him, and she smiles, already on the edge of slumber, miles away but oh, she's there.

There in the country of her heart.

"What's that, Balfe?"

"Happy Christmas to you too."
what if no one's watching?

Los Angeles.

"There's an egg in your drink."

Sam eyes her just as she snaps the pic. His eyes are startlingly blue. She laughs, loose with the thought that they are done for the day, that it's almost the weekend, that the night stretches on, like a spool of ribbon. Unspoiled, full of possibility. She quickly Instagrams the photo, adding a few hashtags for good measure.

They're at a bar in LA. Not far from the beach. Caitriona fancies she can smell the salt in the air, hear the waves crashing and then crashing again, as they have done - and will do - for millennia. When they walked in (his hand achingly close to her lower back), the breeze was warm, and the sky scattered with stars. The bar is cozy and dimly lit. They opted to sit on the stools closest to the alcohol. It's been a long few hours of interviews and promos and pretending and truthfully, they both want to get shit-faced.

Sam also wants to order snacks, but neither can agree on what to have. So they argue for a while about it, until he gets tired of her throwing pistachios at his nose and takes matters into his own hands. "We'll have anything with cheese."

They're brought platters of charcuterie. Whispey slices of proscuitto, that the chef has seared a bit, so the edges are crunchy and salty. A small bowl of hummus, with rivers of golden oil and plump cloves of roasted garlic. On the side are crackers studded with dates. Pickled peppers and onions. Salami and rare beef and truffled potatoes. A plate of greasy kalamata olives, de-pitted and such a deep purple that they shine like amethysts. Ripe tomatoes that smell of Italy. Chevre chaud tartines, so light and delicate that they look like long, thin cookies. A hunk of runny brie, and another of crumbly parmesan. The server sets down another carafe of vino, and a plume of sticky balsamic syrup.

It's almost too much, really. They both hesitate, not sure where to begin.

"We're not in Glasgow anymore, lass," he says seriously.

She giggles and sips her wine. "Christ, we must've looked hungry?"
"Starving," he agrees.

As they eat, they talk about their New Year's. Caitriona drank whiskey in Ireland with her family, and played board games long into the night. Sam went out with his mates and got splendidly drunk. "I'd already snogged everyone when midnight came 'round," he admits. "It was a bit of a letdown."

She resists the urge to ask if "Abs" had joined him in the revelry. Instead, she tells him more about her grandmother's letters. "It turns out she was kind of a Claire," she says.

"Properly filthy?"

She hits him with the side of her foot. "Well, she was having an affair, I think. I don't have her letters, only his. He asks her to burn them, but she never did." Caitriona pauses. "Maybe they meant too much. I always thought she loved my granddad but..."

Sam's eyes soften. "Aye, and I'm sure she did. People can love more than one person at once. It's not as if it means their marriage wasn't happy or..."

"But it wasn't complete, was it?" she counters. "The letters... if you could see them. They're almost-too intimate. It was as if he knew her in a way that no one else did."

He clears his throat and looks away. He fusses with the edges of the platter. "Well..."

"He called her Deirdre of Sorrows."

"That was her name?"

"Yes." She pours them both some more wine. "I mean, not the Sorrows bit. That was an Irish play. I looked it up."

He chuckes her chin affectionately. "Course ye did."

She tells him of Deirdre. Exquisitely beautiful, promised in marriage to an aging king. Willful
Deirdre escaped with Naoise, a son of Usna, and his brothers to a remote island, where they lived for almost a decade.

"She knows the prophecy that she will be the doom of Usna's sons, but she goes anyway. She elopes with Naoise. The island is her sanctuary - it's there that she finds true happiness. True contentment. But the king comes for them and Naoise is murdered in battle. Deirdre takes her husband's knife and stabs herself with it, falling into his grave. In the end, everyone is left with nothing."

Sam isn't looking at her. "Sounds mightily cheerful."

"It's awful. All cautionary tales are." She fidgets, suddenly uncomfortable. Her cheeks feel hot. "Anyway, I just don't know why she wanted me to see them."

"What does Tony think?"

"I haven't told him."

"Not even over Christmas?"

"It didn't come up." She knows her tone is defensive and tries to smile. "We didn't spend much time alone, at any rate."

"How did ye meet him?" he asks abruptly.

She's startled and blinks at him. "Why?"

"Curious."

"The usual way."

"Tinder?"
"Ha ha. Through friends." She pauses. "He was just a sort of mutual acquaintance for a long time. And after Dave and I split up, we drifted into things. Actually, I don't even really remember when it started. Isn't that funny."

"Not really," he says shortly, and gets up. "Be right back."

Caitriona watches the long lines of his body as he moves through the tables, dodging the servers and the drinks staff. He's wearing a pair of dark trousers. They hug the slimness of his hips, the muscles of his thighs. His shirt is green; the colour of gemstones in fairytales. She traces his shoulders with her eyes, the breadth of them. His back, the way it tapers to his waist. Looks at his hair, curling at his nape. Her mouth feels wet and and she licks her lips, trying to ignore the tug in her lower belly, the constant, constant burn there.

She feels frustrated with herself. For some reason, she'd thought the break over the hols would alleviate some of the ... tension? Animosity? Feverishness? between them. If anything, it's worse. She's had crushes before on people she's worked with - men and some women - but it's never felt so... insistent.

A crush? It sounds so juvenile, when this is -- violent. She just doesn't understand.

Why she wants him so much. Why she can't seem to buck up and think of him purely as a friend. She's known better looking men, objectively speaking. And in the end, looks have never meant much to her. She's not sure if it's something to do with being a model, but it's made her aware of the transient nature of aesthetics. How a pretty face is just that, and it means precisely nothing.

And yet, she's so painfully, utterly aware of him.

Her body feels attuned to his. His movements, sighs, breaths. When he scratches the underside of his chin, where he often gets a touch of razor burn. The smell of him before a shower. Sharp and stinging with wind and salt sweat and the musk of his secret places. Between his thighs and beneath his arms. The hair there, she imagines, the colour of burnt butter.

And him stalking off just now... she's not sure what to make of it. He's rarely short tempered. If anything, he has a bit too much patience with most people. As a rule, he isn't a fan of talking about Tony - but then, neither is she - and they tend to avoid subjects like that. It's as if -- and it shames her to think it -- it's as if those other people don't exist at times. Hollywood truly is a bubble, but she had no idea how much of one it was. Not until Outlander.
It feels more like her real life than the one she left behind.

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It's as if someone foraged deep into a mine, took a handful of diamonds, and shattered them against the sky. It glitters with thousands upon thousands of stars, an ocean of them above, as deep and as unfathomable as the one below. They've taken a cab high into the hills overlooking the Pacific, where the smog lifts and the air is clear, crisp, sweet with cold.

Sam has a rucksack with a bottle of wine, plastic cups, and a plaid blanket he stole from the set long ago. He pays the driver, asks him to stay close-by for an extra tip at the end. It's a service they both use in LA; reliable and discreet, as all the best are. The two of them traverse the bluff, stepping over hillocks of grass and mountainous flowers and Caitriona stares up at the dark night, the clouds buffeting the moon.

"It's as if we're the only two people on earth," she says, remembering Christmas Eve. The island of her fantasies.

"Perhaps we are," Sam says, leading the way down - looking back often to make sure she's still there, and safe.

They'd both changed from their glad rags to casual clothes. Cait into leggings and a fleece, with a thermal top underneath. Sam had thrown on jeans that hung loose on his hips, and a cuddly-looking blue sweater. Her hair is a riot of curls; unmanageable and frankly, un-fucking-fit. His, of course, looks perfectly burnished with auburn against the backdrop of ocean and wild.

It's so ridiculously unfair, and she wonders why Claire couldn't have been a character with smooth locks and huge breasts. They'd joked about that once. Sam had asked if she would get a "tit job" (so charming, hon, she'd replied) for the part. She hadn't ruled it out, because she thought it might be quite nice - hypnotizing men by way of her nipples.

When the ocean finally glimmers beneath them, Sam stops and lays the blanket down. It's huge, and scratchy wool, with a cushioned underside that provides comfort from any stray rock or pointy branch.

"I remember this," Cait says with a laugh. "My bum loves this rug."
"I know, that's why I nicked it," he says, winking.

He pours them wine, and they clink the plastic glasses. She sips slowly, enjoying the warm glow in her throat and belly. His face is milk-pale in the moonlight. They aren't touching, but she can feel at every point where they could be. Can feel the heat from him, see his feet stretched out. He's wiggling his toes a bit in his trainers.

"Scotland soon," she murmurs.

"Aye and thank Christ," he says. "Not sure I'm cut out for LA."

"But you've spent time here before."

"Was skint then," he says simply. "It's a bit different with dosh in my wallet."

"True," she answers. "Speaking of going back... I was looking at the scripts. Quite graphic."

"Block two," he says. "Told ya that's when we shag."

"I know but our first scene is like-- well, it's..."

"Fucking as opposed to making love," he says, his voice blank. "Aye, I saw that."

Caitriona's whole body clenches at his words. She's not sure why. Is it hearing him say fucking with that Scots lilt and knowing he means... well, what he means? She's heard him say it before loads of times of course, but he says it differently when it comes to sex. There's something rough about it. Like the act itself. A hint of sloppiness, of heat.

As if he's imagining it.

And he isn't looking at her. His eyes scan the landscape, the rolling bluffs and ocean in the
distance. Waves breaking in spools of white. She thinks of what is beneath. The hills of sand, of salt. The mermaids and sea kings. Undulating weeds, currents, eddies and tidal migrations.

She squirms, drinking more wine. She changes the subject. "Sorry for rabbiting on about my granny earlier."

Sam darts her a glance. "Why should ye apologize for that?"

"Oh... just, I'm sure it's boring for you."

"I'm interested," he says. "Anything you have to say is interesting to me, Caitriona."

It's her turn to look at him, and she can see that he's blushing a bit. His ears have gone faintly pink.

"You flatter me, Heughan," she teases. Her stomach hurts with the effort because what she would like to do is to tell him how purely kind he is and how no one has ever said anything to her like that in all of her life. Anything you have to say is interesting to me.

But how can she, when she's married and he's sitting there, innocent of what's going through her mind?

When he sees her as a friend, a co-star, someone to hang out with between takes, or nights like tonight, when they've been working all day and need to unwind. He thinks of her as someone who is effectively excised from romance. As if the ring on her finger makes her invisible, untouchable.

And she can't bear him to know the real truth. That her body is a traitor, and it wants and wants and wants. That the ring is no barrier. That she wants him so much that sometimes, she's afraid to be alone with him.

She's afraid to look in his direction.

Afraid he'll touch her hand again.
"She had this secret life," Cait says, before she does something stupid, like utter her thoughts out loud. "It's weird, she was this while other person."

"Aren't most, though?"

"I guess," she shrugs. "But it's more than that. It's like-- she was acting?"

"When?"

"When, what?"

"When was she acting."

Caitriona blinks. "What do you mean?"

Sam shifts on the blanket and sips more wine. His throat works as he swallows. "I just mean... was she acting when she was with you? And your granddad? Or when she was with this Nick bloke? If he was the one she truly wanted to be with, and she had to pretend for her entire life, it must have been a relief of sorts... to write to him. To be her true self."

The words are like punches, and she feels every one, deep down in her stomach. "I... I never thought of that. But you're right. She must have been so tired of pretending."

"I think anyone would be," he says quietly. "It must be lonely, I think. Being with someone who doesn't ... see ye or know ye. At least not the part of ourselves that we keep hidden most of the time. Especially since everyone thinks they've got ye pegged and they ken every thought you're having. And really they haven't got a bloody clue." He pauses. "I've always thought maybe that's why I became an actor. I remember you saying it was cause of that film you saw of your granny, and I wish it was like that for me. But I wanted to get lost in characters. Like when I was a kid, playing King Arthur. I never really wanted anyone to know me, or at least... at least not someone I didn't invite in first."

Her throat feels thick and she clears it, pouring them both some more of the rich, dark wine. The waves continue to resound below, an endless drumming beat against rocks and cliff. She edges a bit closer, so their sleeves just touch.
She waits, and after a few moments, he continues. "I remember going to see my Dad before he died, and I realized quite quickly that he'd had this whole life that I knew nothing about. It's like I thought he existed in a bubble or something but he hadn't -- he'd been in love and had hobbies and built his own home. It felt like a gift to be sharing it, and an awful thing too. Because I hadn't known anything of it until it was too late, really. I guess what I'm saying is that if your Granny could find someone who knew her heart, and loved her for it, that canna be a bad thing, Cait."

"No," she whispers. "It can't."

She moves closer still, and if by some silent agreement, they both lie back. She gasps a bit as the stars seem to swim before her eyes, so close it's as if she could reach out and grasp them between her fingers. The sky is a bowl above them, circling them in their own private universe; the same sky that so many see, but different somehow, their sky, their stars.

Her hair brushes his shoulder, and he dips his head so that his forehead presses against those curls, softly, softly. A ghost of a feeling, of a touch. She closes her eyes, so she can imagine, and dream, just a little longer.

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it hit her like a bullet in the back.

Scotland.

Her trailer smells of the coffee on the nightstand. Rich and dark, like soil and trees in the night. It smells of girl sweat and tears, of old books and heavy silk and the sweet stink of antique corsets, skirts, velvet gloves. Her costumes lying in a heap where she’d dropped them, Terry be damned. Caitriona is lying flat on her back, head cushioned by the carpet, staring up at the ceiling.

It’s as if her brain is on fire.

She’s listening to Mazzy Star, in that kind of mood, like a teenager. She needs her black lipstick, CD player. Candles burning, the wicks guttering from the breeze of the open window. A teenager, brimming with the kind of ardency that is never supposed to return.

*Till my hand shook, with the weight of my own fear.*

She’s remembering the skies above them in Los Angeles, high on the bluffs, with the waves playing their own strange music below. Remembering them in her flat in Glasgow, and after, with T speaking in her ear, the constellations and cosmos whirling around her. The universe, opening itself, beckoning. Her heart squeezing shut, like a clamshell, sealing itself against the stars and what they might mean.

His breath stirring the curls of her hair.

This morning, they’d filmed the first sex scene. Her whole body feels as if it’s a bow stretched taut to accept an arrow, every line of her as tight and as aching as a weapon never fired. She’s felt the hot pull of his mouth on her nipple. Felt his hips driving against hers. His naked chest. The rasp of his hair there. She rode him, saw him looking at the swell of her breasts; a line of wet down her stomach from his tongue.

No, not him. Jamie. The name hammers into her. It was *Jamie* and she had been *Claire* and nothing about it had been real. *Get a grip, Balfe.*

She *is* acting like a bloody teenager, Christ. She’s supposed to be an actress, able to separate fact from fiction.
Staccato knocks spill across the small room, interrupting Sister Hazel wailing from her iPod. Her eyes feel red and sore, as if she’s been crying. Swiping at them with the backs of her hands, Caitriona drags herself up and over to the door.

“I was sleeping,” she says.

Sam shrugs, grinning. “Nah, you weren’t. With that racket? Get dressed, we’re going out.”

“Where?” she asks suspiciously. He’s energetic. “You look much too pleased with yourself.”

“I’m taking you on a walk.”

“I don’t want to go for a walk.”

“Yes, ye do.”

“I don’t. I’m tired.”

“This’ll wake ye up. As my Grandad used to say. There’s nothing like a good blow.”

Caitriona arches her left eyebrow. “A bit of a filthy bastard, was he?”

“Mind out of the gutter, Balfe. Means blowing the cobwebs away. Get your kit on, I’ll wait.”

~~

She watches him as they hike. He’s ahead of her, dressed ever so appropriately in jeans and a blue nylon zip-up jacket. He’s wearing a beanie hat, and his hair curls at his nape, unruly and the darkest red. Burned strawberries. The wind howls, but the sky is washed with gemstones, and in the distance, she can see the glimmering sea. The air is so clear and cold that it hurts her lungs, sends shivers of pleasure through her body.
He’d taken a long look at her when she’d descended the trailer steps. Her snug jeans and black jacket. The scarf knotted at her throat, loose hair and high-heeled boots. “This isn’t a catwalk, Balfe.”

“It’s just a little walk.”

“Who said anything about little?”

Pride stopped her from changing, and now here she is, on a rutted track that climbs into grass and bramble. One of the ancient roads. Pilgrims might have come this way hundreds of years before, in their endless walk toward God. She can hear the ghosts of the old country whispering around her, thousands of words and songs and the clop clop of horse’s hooves, the clanging of church bells, the way that light came only from the sun, or flame. The glittering eyes of a fox in the darkness.

“Ye can really feel the history here, can’t you?”

His voice startles her, and she looks to her right. He’s come back to walk beside her, his cheeks flushed from exertion and the bracing winds. Her mouth quirks a bit and she nods.

“I was just thinking that actually.”

“Great minds, Cait,” he says, and taps the side of his head. “How’re the feet holding up?”

“Fine,” she replies tartly, and it really isn’t a lie. “Years of modelling. I don’t have any feeling left.”

He chuckles. “Ye just don’t want to be shorter than me.”

“It’s a relief, actually. Like if a giraffe found someone taller.”

“Lies.”
She smiles serenely. “For someone who thinks they’re so confident, you spend an inordinate amount of time talking about your height. Compensating, Heughan?”

“Never. Don’t need to.”

It’s the casual way he says it that punches her low in her belly. *Brain on fire.* Everything is blank and hot for just one single second. She’d felt his cock against her during the scene. Of course she had, it came with the territory - so to speak - but she hadn’t been prepared for the physicality of it. The heat. The pulse of it. His blood throbbing in his body. If they’d been alone, what would she have done?

There was only a thin layer of fabric. She hadn’t bothered with the modesty contraption. It looked like a pain to assemble. But as they were filming, she’d wished so much that she’d used it. He must have been able to *smell* her.

“At a loss for words, Balfe?” he teases.

“Hardly. I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“Hiatus.” It’s not strictly a fib, as she’d been ruminating on it earlier that morning, still clumsy from sleep and dreams. “How weird it’ll be not to be filming.”

“True enough.” He pauses. “Do ye have any plans?”

“Ummmm…. my agent actually sent me a few scripts,” she says sheepishly. “God I sound like such a twat.”

“I forgive ye, but it’s not half as fun as what I’ll be up to.”

She takes the bait. “Which is...?”
“I’m going to run the marathon.”

Caitriona waits for a moment. “And the fun part would be?”

“Ha ha.”

“I wasn’t joking. You’re mad, you know.”

Sam stops and looks out over the horizon. The sun is setting against the ocean, casting pale panels of light over the still water. As if the rays are curtains waiting to close. Ahead of them, Caitriona can see the crest of the hill, with a stone monument like a pinprick against the sky. She exhales, glad for the stop, for the chance to rest her legs and her racing heart.

Sam’s arm is against hers. She can smell him; clean sweat, sandalwood, boy. He looks down at her solemnly, and she has the urge to laugh, to break this moment that is building, ever so slowly. He chucks her chin and then grasps it lightly, turning her face so he can look into her eyes. It makes her breath catch in her throat.

“What?” she asks, her voice only trembling slightly.

He considers her for a long time. His eyes are so perfectly blue, and she remembers that day at the restaurant, the afternoon by Loch Rannoch, his finger tracing her palm. And still, she waits, can not - will not - break away. But he shakes his head, and taps her nose.

“I dinna know, I ’spose. Thought you had something on your face.”

“And I don’t?”

“No,” he says, roughly. “Let’s crack on. We’ll be at the top soon.”

~~

Forty minutes later, they are. It’s a wide swathe, with benches that have names inscribed on their
flanks and some sort of cairn, which he takes her picture against. The landscape is so brilliantly rendered, her smile so unforced (he’d said something dirty to make her laugh) and he thinks and thinks over the hashtag. “It has to be something they’ll like,” he says to her, with utmost seriousness. “I want it to be funny.”

“Aren’t you the social media guru.”

“Part of our life now,” he says, frowning. “You’d best get used to it.”

He can’t come up with anything, so they take another Insta, over by the stone. It’s inscribed with something cheesy, and they both love it. Sam holds up her heels, showing the world. “Classy climber,” he says. “That’s it.”

Later, he puts out the blanket he nicked, and unpacks his bag. She laughs and laughs at the abundance. A bottle (a litre bottle) of good French red wine. Two plastic cups from craft service. Cellophane wrapped cheeses, and gluten-free crackers. A container of plump green grapes, and ripe figs. Cold pizza (also from craft service, and Cait wrinkles her nose. “I hope you’re joking.”) He appeases her with Sainsbury’s organic hummus (the absolute best) and pita from a takeaway in the town over from them.

“You carried all of this?”

“Aye?”

Caitriona can’t stop giggling. “I tottered up in my heels and you were carrying half of Britain on your shoulders. All right, serf, feed me.”

He bows. “As you wish.”

They feast, and get a little tipsy on the wine.

“Quite a scene today,” Sam says.

She wrinkles her nose. “Don’t be creepy.”
“You scared the shite out of me with that knife.”

“Intentional.”

He laughs. “So what did ye think about our first shag, then?”


“What did ye expect?”

“I don’t know,” she says honestly.

“That’s what happens when you ignore the blocking.”

She shrugs. “I thought it was best to go with it.”

“That’s why we plan though,” Sam says. “So nothing’s unexpected.”

“How boring.”

They talk more about the future scenes, and how much he’s dreading the bits with Black Jack. She says she can’t wait to meet Father Anselm, and fight the wolves. He tells her about the documentary he watched the night before. About ice climbing, and the men and women who scale mountains that are so high they brush the jet stream. “Can you imagine the air at 27,000 feet?” he asks, looking awed, and a bit envious. “It’s so thin that they have to carry bottled oxygen. These people, they have something that regular blokes don’t. Some sort of fire in their bellies.”

“You have it too,” Caitriona says quietly.

“Nah, if I did - I’d have done it. I wanted to climb glaciers.”
“I remember.”

“And what did you want? Besides being an actress, I mean.”

She considers that. “I thought I’d be a poet, maybe. Or an artist. I always wanted to create stories, or tell stories. A lot of modelling is that, in a way. You have to use yourself to show off the clothes. You can’t be the focus, not really. The clothes have to be the thing that shouts.”

“With that body? Come on.”

She giggles. “Cheeky sod.”

He leans back on his elbows. “We’re quite lucky though, wouldn’t ye say?”

“Oh?”

“Look around and tell me we’re not.”

She does, and he’s right. He’s right. Scotland is achingly beautiful. Their lives are achingly beautiful. What they have, what they all have and what they’ve discovered here. What they’ve foraged, from words, from someone’s story. Spilled from pages, from ink and trees, into their minds and lungs and legs. The livid blister beside Sam’s thumb from training with the weapons. The purplish swellings across her torso from corsets. How the story has changed them.

How the story has changed her.

“If we’re so lucky, why can’t we get Toby laid?” she whispers, because she can do nothing but joke, nothing but lighten every moment between them until they are infinitesimal, spun to stardust.

Sam scrunches his nose and laughs, looking straight at her. And suddenly, she feels everything bloom within her body. She remembers something she’d read in a book once. About the way fire starts. Tetrahedron. The fire diamond. What flame needs to ignite, the book had said, is heat, fuel
and an oxidizing agent. Usually oxygen, but there are others. She thinks this is a mistake, seeing him here, in his element.

This is the agent by which she ignites.

His dreams, her sensibilities, his body and strength and the way he looks here, against the wilds. How he’ll glance at her on set and know if she’s unhappy. Know if she needs a cup of hot coffee or a moment alone, or a second to breathe and re-group. The way he brings her books that he finds at coffee shops (“I always leave 50p or a quid,” he says with a grin) and teases her mercilessly for shopping online. How he knows every wi-fi password so that she’ll never be without, and texts her when he’s plastered (normally just strings of emojis).

How he brought her hiking today, because he wanted to be with her. For friendship, or whatever else, but it’s the simple act of caring, of packing the bag full of her favourite foods, of going to get the pita and the hummus, of coming to her trailer and taking her up the hill to show her where he belongs.

Breathing alongside her.

Touching his forehead to her curls. Anything you say is interesting to me, Caitriona.

How she missed Scotland over Christmas, but. Oh.

Not like she missed him.

She almost says it then. Almost. The words she can taste on her lips. I think I may be in love with you. What a relief it would be. What a terrifying, towering relief. To speak that selfish truth and let the train barrel down her middle, take her with it, take them all with it.

But she looks at his face, at the smile there, the way his eyes glow, and she knows she can’t. Because what could she follow up with? What could she ever offer?

So she laughs with him, and she looks over his shoulder, at the thin stone.
Thinks of Lot’s wife, who was turned to a pillar of salt by the angels. For turning back, for remembering, for being the one who ignited the fire.
now hear your heart beating, beating.

Scotland.

Caitriona is splendidly, magnificently, obnoxiously drunk.

Not as trollied as the boys, but of course that goes without saying. It's been one of those evenings where she's felt loose and rangy, like she could run outside, do snow angels on the grass, shout up to the heavens. Watch the stars fall where they may. It's hot in her flat, and every surface is covered in glasses. Half-filled with wine and whisky and champagne. Marked with lipstick or the imprint of mouths. The air smells of possibility, of things that have not happened but might, of clean, sharp sweat and the candles Maril brought her back from California.

They are as black as volcanoes, and reek of peppercorns and night blooming jasmine, of the darkest woods and of orchids that crawl up the sides of windows, like bougainvillea in paradise. She's lit them on every counter top and bookcase, the little flames juddering with the breeze from open windows and passerby. Outside, Glasgow teems with its own particular nightlife. Car horns and the catcalls of lads on the pull.

"Perhaps we should go out," Toby says against her ear, steadying himself against the cooker with one hand.

"Watch it, you'll get singed," Caitriona yelps and shoves him back. "I thought you wanted chips."

"Forgot, I do."

She sighs and laughs. He might be the worst off of all of them. When Maril suggested they get together, she hadn't expected quite such a gathering piling through her door. All the men, Ron and Terry (though they'd scarpered ages ago), a whole gang from wardrobe, Laura, Nell and a few cameramen who'd seen Cait in the altogether more times than she cared to remember. Now, the only brave souls left were Toby, Sam, Maril and Matt, and Matt had demanded frankfurters ("American ones") and then Menzies had jumped on the bandwagon and assumed her freezer held food that could be deep fried and that she had a deep fryer.

"Battered stuff, y'know," he'd said, holding up a glass of red wine in her general direction. It wobbled alarmingly. "Like sausages. Or chunky chips."
Caitriona had raised her eyebrows. "You do realize, gentlemen, that the reason I myself am not chunky, is that I do not have chunky chips in my flat."

"Ye do," Sam said, slinging his arm around her shoulders. He pressed his lips to the side of her forehead. His mouth was hot with whisky and he smelled of burnt amber and the wind. "Left some over here last time we --"

"Shagged," Maril called from the couch.

"That too," Sam replied.

He'd then run out to the corner shop and came back with things he didn't typically recognize as 'food' - being disgustingly and horridly fit - but seemed to want while drunk off his face. So that's how it came to be that Caitriona is cooking chips she hadn't even known were in her house, and stirring a pot of some vile concoction Maril insists is "cheese sauce" but looks more like a nuclear experiment gone awry. For herself, Cait is also baking chevre chaud on toast (her typical concession to the munchies) and assembling a platter of garbage they could all feel shite about eating tomorrow.

She feels quite cheerful about it if she's being honest. Feels quite cheerful to be having the night off with mates, and being tipsy, and being in Scotland.

Being home, really, though she'd never admit that out loud.

"Come and get ittttt," she trills and piles the coffee table with plates and napkins and bowls.

"You're a star," Toby mumbles a moment later, mouth already full.

"She is that," Sam says and raises his glass. "Shall we have a toast to our Balfe, who looks after us so well?"

"Here, here!" they chime in and there is much clinking and revelry and shouts of Sláinte! and Caitriona blushes, munching on her toast and looking everywhere but his eyes.
They are too blue, she reasons, with a drunk person's certainty. They hold too much. In them, she sees Loch Rannoch, and the wild forests. She sees the Pacific rolling beneath them, the coffee shop where he knew exactly what she drank, and the restaurant where she first stumbled across the train tracks, awaiting the arrow through her heart. And then, sometimes, she fancies she can see what he sees. What he wants.

Her nipple in his mouth.

His fingers, bruising her legs, holding them apart.

The smell of him on her sheets.

Or is it her own desire reflecting back on her?

Her traitorous heart; what she'd do if she knew no one would ever find out. Caitriona's stomach cramps and she covers her face with her one free hand, almost missing Toby's pronouncement.

"If we're playing Truth or Dare this is quite honestly the best night of my life."

"Wait, what?" she asks.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," Sam says. "Menzies had a brilliant idea for once."

"For once?"

She cuts in. "Stop bickering or just bonk it out, you two."

"That's the next block," Matt says sleepily. He's tugging on the ends of Maril's curls and then letting them spring back into place. "So who's going first?"

"I'll go!" Sam says, with a bit too much enthusiasm. "BALFE."
She gazes at him warily. "Yes?"

"TRUTH OR DARE."

"You don't have to shout," Toby says mildly.

Sam looks befuddled. "I wasn't. Was I?"

"I'm now deaf," Matt says.

"Truth," Caitriona says. "And yes, you were shouting. Why can't Scottish lads hold their liquor?"

He chooses to ignore her, or maybe he wasn't listening. "Worst shag you've ever had."

The answer that immediately pops into her brain is the one she blurts out. "First time with Tony."

They all stare at her. She stares back. Maril is the first to break the silence with a giggle and immediately looks remorseful. "Sorry, oh God."

"It's okay," Cait says. "I can't believe I just admitted that, actually."

"The first time with the man you married was the worst of your life?" Tobias asks. "You're going to have to explain that, love."

"It was..." she pauses. "We were... oh Christ, I dunno, it was just awkward and nothing seemed to fit--"

"So he has a huge dick then, at least there's that."

"Matthew," she replies. "It wasn't -- oh nevermind. It just wasn't good. I mean, we worked at it and it's gotten obviously better but ... it was the worst at the time and I wish I'd never opened my mouth
okay? What is wrong with me?"

Sam clears his throat, blinks once and then shrugs in her general direction. "What isna wrong with ye, Balfe?"

"Oh hon, you have no idea how much you're going to regret that. Truth or dare."

He eyes her for a moment. "Dare."

“A little scared, are we?” she asks sweetly. "Fine. Go outside and sing *Sit On My Face* from Monty Python in your best falsetto. Oh, and take your trousers off while you do it."

And away they go. A few hours later, and about a dozen questionable decisions made, everyone's headed home besides Sam. Caitriona's been aware that as others have left, he's stayed, but now that they're alone, it seems to be the only thing in the room - the space between them, the space that separates their bodies, hands, mouths. She busies herself in the kitchen, tidying up the glasses and plates, scraping leftover food into the bin.

Sam isn't helping, which is unlike him. He flicks through channels on the television, one arm propped behind his head. She keeps catching him looking at her, and the air seems to vibrate, as if fired with some strange electricity.

And finally, he says it.

"Bit of an awkward moment earlier."

She laughs. It's forced though, and they both know it. "Which one?"

"Anyone would think ye hated the sight of me."

"Maybe I do."

"Ha ha," he replies. "It was just a wee bit odd, that's all."
Caitriona closes her eyes by the sink, her hands plunged into hot, soapy water. She thinks back to when Toby looked straight at her. "Truth or dare, Miss Cait."

"Dare," she had said confidently. There wasn't much she wasn't willing to do at that point in the game.

He cocked his head and chuckled. "Give your leading man a snog, then."

"You think you can handle it?"

Toby raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't talking about me."

It was as if she'd jammed a knife into a light socket. The hair on her arms stood up and she just stared at him. Aware that everyone was looking. Painfully, achingly aware of Sam to her left. She glanced at him and he had a small smile playing on his lips. His lips. Tobias wanted her to just... what? Go over and kiss him like it was... a game. Nothing. Like it was nothing and maybe it was the champagne or maybe all the bad food but Caitriona felt unreasonably panicked. Cornered. Like an animal sighted in the woods.

"I..." she faltered. "I'll change mine to Truth."

"You can't do that!" Maril protested. She was slurring her words ever so slightly. "No fair, missus."

"Oh and you wrote the rules I suppose?" she asked tartly. "I can't go around kissing people. I'm a married lady."

Tobias said it slowly, carefully. "You were ready to kiss me, though."

Oh.

And that was the actual 'truth', wasn't it? Caitriona flushed, a deep and violent pink, and she could not, would not look at Sam, or anyone else. She picked up her wine glass and walked into the
kitchen. Never more aware of her body or of the way it existed in the same space as him.

Him.

And he was looking at her. She could feel it. Like fire on her back, and she really was panicking now, her breaths little whoops of air coming from her mouth. Her hand shook as she picked up the wine bottle and re-filled her glass to the brim. The liquid was a rich, dark red, and she imagined it glowing in her throat. Imagined going over, taking the dare. Filling her mouth with the taste of him instead.

Her voice sounded strangled. Wrong. "I wouldn't have kissed you either, Tobias, so stop being such a git."

His laughter broke the moment cleanly in two.

She was off the hook.

Or so she'd thought. She continues washing the dishes with the kind of fervour she normally reserves for more enjoyable activities. "I just didn't think it was appropriate, Sam," she says lightly.

"But ye were willing to snog Menzies." His tone is even, but she can sense something beneath it.

"No I wasn't."

"Aye, ye were."

Caitriona starts a bit, because it's as if he's right behind her suddenly. How did he move without her hearing him? She can't turn around though, mustn't. If she does, everything will be there in her eyes and he'll know.

"Why are we arguing about this?"
"Are we?" he asks quietly.

"It feels like we are."

"Balfe, turn around."

"I can't, my hands are all soapy."

"Then rinse them."

"I..." she trails off and looks down at the sudsy water. Her left hand, with the circlet around her ring finger. "Let's not fight."

"This isn't fighting," Sam says, low. "Ye'd know if we were."

He's so close now that she can feel the heat from his body. She trembles with the desire to step back against him, let his arms enclose her, feel his hot mouth at the nape of her neck. All it would take would be one single movement. She could end this. Find some relief. God, she's shaking with it. Can almost feel what it would be like.

Being held beneath him in the darkness. The hot rasp of his beard. His thighs straddling hers. His palm closing over her pussy. Please she thinks. And then his hand is at her elbow. A whisper of a touch, but she feels it all through her body. Like lightning splitting the sky, and she breathes out in a rush.

"Caitriona, I can't..." he says roughly.

But she doesn't get to hear the end of the sentence.

For at that moment, in the gleaming pre-dawn, a key turns in the front door lock, and her husband steps into her flat.
god only knows what i'd be without you.

Glasgow.

Maril raises her glass and the table quietsens, even as the thrum of the restaurant swells outside of their private room. Caitriona's hand shakes ever so slightly as she tips up her wine, watching the blood-colour catch in the light of the shuddering candle flames. For some reason, it sounds as if Maril's voice is coming from under water. As if she's listening to it with her ear against train tracks, and somewhere far down the line - in the next county or cosmos - something is coming, and it doesn't care that she's lying belly-down against the earth.

That her body is a fragile thing, so easily hurt.

It doesn't care, and she can't bring herself to get out of its way.

"So I just want to say, welcome to Scotland, Tony. We know how much our bun misses you, and we couldn't be happier to have you here."

"Sláinte!" echoes around the table, and the deja-vu hits her hard, straight between the eyes. That evening, only six days ago, when they played Truth or Dare and she pretended her life was a different one. They ate until they felt sick (food that she'd cooked), and they sent each other out with stupid missions, and Sam's hand had been against her elbow (like that afternoon by Loch Rannoch, dreaming of mad kings and dark woods) and then the front door opened, and it was as if the life she'd constructed had been splintered.

No, cut.

Cut with a very specific blade, and she's been dismembered. Left to try and remember what pieces go where.

"Okay, darling?" T asks, whispers really, against her ear.

"Lovely!" she says and winces at the false frivolity in her voice. "Fish good?"

"Bloody amazing," she says, although in truth, she's barely tasted it.

The *al dente* bucatini is swimming in a lemony white wine sauce, with capers and fresh herbs, pillows of soft goat cheese and buttery spinach. It should be decadent. And it is. But she hasn't been able to manage more than a few bites. Her belly feels like a hot stone and it's as if her entire body, from the hollows of her collarbone to the dip behind her ankles, just *aches*.

Surreptitiously, she looks to see if T is distracted (he is; chatting with Matt) and she checks her phone. Nothing new. Their thread of messages that is normally clogged full of texts and emojis and snaps, is just... depressing. The last message before T stepped through the door was from him, obviously sent during the evening.

**Baaaalllllfeeeeeeep me that food and no one gets**

She thinks he meant to add 'hurt' but obviously got distracted. The past week, she's embarrassed to see it's been mostly her.

*Hey! (that pathetic exclamation mark makes her cringe now) Sorry you had to leave in such a rush. I had no clue he was coming early.*

The next day, midnight. *Me again. I call coffee.*

The morning after, 6am. *I didn't know you were out on location??*

*Yeah.*

*Okay, He of Few Words. Tired?*

*Yeah, been a long drive.*
Sorry hon. Especially cos there are cinnamon danishes today...

A few hours later. *How's the shoot going?*

**Busy. Can't talk.**

**Okay.**

That sad little 'okay'. She can remember the particular flush of humiliation she'd felt at his terse comment. Was he...*angry* with her? Had he felt what she did in that kitchen? Teetering on the brink, as if they'd been balancing on a tightrope. His hand at her arm, like a ghost. And yet, electric. The way she knew if she stepped back, he'd rest his forehead against her shoulder. Lift the sweaty hair away from her nape. Press his mouth behind her ear, where she was secret and tender.

She'd tried to corner him when he got back from the wilds of Scotland, but he had managed to avoid her since. Any time she popped by, he was at the gym or training or on set. She wants to scream, if she's honest. She can't even see him at the table. He's chosen to sit a ways down, with Nell and the girls from make-up. She can't catch his eye. She can't seem to make him *recognize* her.

And T is here. Her husband. Around every corner in her flat. Eating her food from the fridge. Drinking her green juice before she can get her hands on it. Never checking to see if her feet need rubbing or if she wants a coffee or if she craves anything from the raw bakery down on the High Street. If he does check, it seems like he doesn't *really* care and the worst part is, it's not any different from how he acted before.

He's always been quite laconic and they've never felt a particular craving to be solicitous toward each other. It just isn't in their nature. It isn't in their marriage. Independence has always been the watchword. But now, she wonders why that has seemed to be enough?

What ice had crawled into her heart after Dave took an axe to it all those years ago?

And how could she ever explain to her husband that she's changed?

Or why?
Caitriona can examine the way she's behaving in a rational manner and know that she's being horrid. Cruel. Cold. Stupid. The most awful kind of human being. She can't think or feel or eat or do anything but desire, and it feels like she might disintegrate.

"Are we off anywhere later?" Tony asks.

"Hmmm? Oh, not sure. The young ones might be."

He chuckles. "Don't tell me Glaswegians haven't worked their magic on you. You must have had a few wild nights with this lot."

"I'm always exhausted," she says apologetically. "I've never kept up this kind of pace before."

He looks skeptical. "Well you're not on tomorrow. Let's see if we can find a proper bar. I'd like to compare their set-ups with mine."

"Sounds lovely," she replies.

It doesn't.

She closes her eyes, and goes back to the previous night, when she dreamt that a mirror appeared in the corner of her bedroom. It was a dream within a dream within a dream. Thunder woke her, but the sky outside of the window was dry and the clearest dark, like untouched spools of black paint. She felt the mirror before she saw it. The pull of its centre seemed to reverberate through the room, sending a hot glow down into her belly. Caitriona walked toward it, and saw that the storm was inside the glass. If she reached out, would rain wet her fingertips?

There was no reflection. She could not see her face, pale and alight with wonder. Beyond the glass were rolling seas and forks of lightning arcing across a pitiless sky. When she touched the glass, it puddled around her hand, inviting her inside. Compelling her.

Her feet were naked. She felt rough and unpolished from sleep. It seemed that perhaps she should think before she leapt, before she did something so out of character that it defied description.
But instead, she lifted her foot, stepping through the glass.

If only she could remember what had been on the other side.

"Caitttttttt."  

Her eyes snap open and she looks across the table at Toby. "What?"

"Nothing love, just thought you might be asleep."

"Wouldn't the kinder option have been to let me continue?" she asks sweetly.

"Practicing my Black Jack," he says, lifting his glass. "Usually you hold your booze better than this."

"Hold on a minute, this has nothing to do with--"

"At least you're not as bad as Heughan," he smirks. "Look at him off to the loo."

Caitriona thinks her neck is going to swivel off her shoulders from how quickly she stares at Sam's retreating back. "I have to go too," she says to no one in particular.

As she follows him, she watches the lines of his back. The curves of his shoulders and biceps. He's wearing a navy sweater that looks like it breathes with him, it's so perfectly cut. It's easy to forget sometimes, how strong he really is. How his body has been crafted to be a machine of war, of bravery. That he pushes himself and pushes himself, never stopping. Drenched with sweat and salt, roughened by the mountains and his own stubbornness.

The hallway is dimly lit and empty. The bustle of the restaurant seems quite far away, and she realizes this isn't the way to the toilets at all. "Oi, wait up." Her voice sounds shaky even to her own ears.
His whole body stiffens, and he doesn't turn around at first. But then, his inherent politeness wins out, and he spins to face her. There's a practiced smile on his face that she recognizes from the few press engagements they've done. It's his cornered smile, and it makes her chest tighten, contract.

"Where are you going? Toby thought you couldn't hold your drink."

He shrugs. "Was just having a wander."

"You've been uncharacteristically absent this week."

Sam seems to be looking at a point above her head. "Nah, just busy."

"You said that."

He shrugs. "Tis true. And I've been shooting. It was hectic all 'round."

"I know," she says softly. "But you're not answering my texts. I wondered if you were mad at me."

"Why would I be?"

"I don't know."

Sam smiles again. "Exactly. There's your answer."

"It just feels like... well, like you're avoiding me."

"I'm not, but--"

"But what?"
"I wanted to give ye time with him," he says quietly. "You deserve a break."

"From what?" she forces a laugh. "You?"

"Aye, I think so." He pauses and finally meets her eyes. "We've been in each other's pockets a bit and I ken it can't be easy for you."

Her throat hurts and she swallows hard. "Don't be such a twat, I'd never not want to--"

"You're married, after all," he continues, as if she hasn't spoken. "And of course you're missing your husband. It must be a pain in the arse having me around so much. I wanted to give ye the time you--"

"Sam, wait--"

"So that was all," he barrels on. There's a furrow between his eyebrows as stares at the floor, looking as if he's concentrating on an exam or trying to learn lines. "It wasn't meant to be rude. I just didn't want to be in the way."

"Why would you ever be in the way? You're my best mate."

His eyes suddenly blaze into hers. "Oh, aye?"

She falters. "Well... I thought..."

"Look, I'm just in a mood," he mutters. "Got knocked in the fucking ribs during one of the fights."

"Are you okay?" she asks, instinctively stepping forward to touch him.

He rears back. "I'm fine - just-- ye know, it hurt."
"Let Doctor Balfe look," she teases.

"Go doctor your husband, Cait."

She bites her lip. "So you are mad at me, then."

He shakes his head and looks down again. "I'm being a bastard and for no reason. I'm not cross, really ... I'm just-- it's not anything you need to concern yourself with."

"What if I want to--"

"Christ, would you stop?"

He moves to push past her and Caitriona catches him with the flat of her hand. She shoves him back against the wall before she even recognizes she's doing it.

"What the fuck, Caitriona."

"Tell me."

"No."

Her mind is on fire. Her body is on fire. He's so close that she can smell his breath. He's been drinking whisky. She feels as if she can hear his heart throbbing in his chest. Like the thunder in the mirror, inviting her closer. She lets her eyes lock with his. Sees the Pacific blue that snared her that very first day, when Outlander was just a glimmer on the horizon. A ship without a sail. How has it come to this?

And yet, she knows. She knew.

"Sam..." she whispers. "I'm sorry--"
When she begins to lean in, he propels her backward in a rush of movement, until she's the one against the wall. The sound of her breathing fills the space between them. Heady and fevered. He looks furious and he pushes her palm away from his face, stops her from touching him.

As he turns and heads back the way they came, his parting words ring in her ears. As cutting as the train that could slice her in two.

"I'm not a charity case, Caitriona," he said, low and rough. "Go find your husband and leave me in peace."
what am i, darling?

Perthshire, Scotland

Her trench coat, knee-high wellies and cap feel like armour, but they’re no match for the Scottish rain. Caitriona ambles beside Loch Rannoch, kicking up mud and bramble. The long path (35 km according to the guidebooks) is pocked with loose stones, riotous leaves and even a few curious squirrels. The only thing it lacks is people, and that suits her well today. Even the foul-weather-walkers have stayed indoors, huddled over cups of tea and episodes of *Countdown*.

For some reason, she’d felt compelled to drive here from the set - wasting precious hours better spent sleeping - and wander in the wet winds, her cheeks stung by the icy air, her hands stuck in her pockets. Better to feel chilled to the very marrow than face the loneliness of her trailer. Better to watch the terns and ospreys soar above the water, their wings catching every gust and bellow from the clouds above.

Better to be here rather than there.

*There* is days spent in her little living room when not filming, watching Netflix documentaries and attempting to forget when things were very, very different.

*There* means the loss of her very best mate, a man she hadn’t quite seen coming, but who had become such an integral part of her life that she hardly knows how to dismember him from it. The fact that he seemed to have no problem doing so made Caitriona’s body throb with something akin to heartbreak. She feels this could actually be it- not the messy tears Dave left her with - but this bone-deep sorrow that snatches her breath and makes her weak, gasping, a cliche.

He hasn’t said more than five words to her since he ordered her back to Tony in that hallway. It’s been over a fortnight, and when she thinks now of leaning in, her whispered *I’m sorry*, and the kiss hovering on her lips, her cheeks still flush with embarrassment. Here she had thought he was jealous and angry, and he had just been *angry*. He had just been having a bad day. Kicked in the ribs and smarting with it. Trying to give her space to reconnect with her bloody *husband*.

Something *she* should have been thinking of, not him.

And now.
God, she’s ruined everything. Yesterday she’d stumbled across Maril and Sam, sitting side-by-side, going over the dailies in the little tent they used for everything from tea breaks to games of cards. Maril was pointing at something on her laptop screen.

“Her face.”

Sam grunted in response. Caitriona stopped dead a few paces behind them, realizing they were talking about her. How singularly embarrassing. She waited, though, because why not? This was the closest she was likely to come to Sam interacting with her (which was pathetic, but, well).

“Hey, Cro Magnon, enough with the man noises. What’s with you lately?”

He chuckled, but there was no amusement in the sound. “Naught’s wrong with me. Or nothing that couldn’t be fixed with a good shag and a pint of lager, I ‘spose.”

“Then go get laid and stop being such a grouch.”

“I’m NOT a grouch,” he protested, chucking her chin. “Just been a long few days.”

“There are some cuties around here,” Maril said. “Take advantage.”

“What are you, my pimp?”

“Well I assume you’d pick the willing ones,” she laughed. “And not pay for it, but what do I know about your proclivities.”

“My proclivities don’t run to handing over money for sex,” Sam said. “I mean, maybe during a good role play…”

“You’re being gross now.”

“Ye love it,” he remarked, leaning back and stretching. “And you also brought it up, so.”
"And regretting it more and more with each second." Maril seemed to pause and think. She finally spoke softly. “Is it… did something happen with you and Cait, Beav?”

He noticeably stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh come the fuck on, I’d have to be blind and stupid. I’m neither. Well, not the former anyway.”

“Nothing happened.”

“Uh huh. Did you guys sleep together?”

Caitriona breathed out, taking a step backward. This was getting to the point where if they turned around, it would be utterly and completely disastrous. But she halted again at his next words.

“What the fuck? Why would ye ask me that?” Sam said furiously. “She’s married.”

“This is Hollywood, babe and besides, I see the way you look at her,” Maril said blithely. “Like I said, wasn’t born yesterday.”

“That’s called acting, Davis.”

“Not on camera, Heughan.”

“Don’t start gossiping,” he said. “I don’t look at her. And she doesn’t look at me. And again, she’s married.”

“He’s kinda… like, not who I pictured her with?” Maril said tentatively. “Nice and all, but fucking dull and you can’t tell her I said that.”

“He seems a good bloke.”
“You didn’t say two words to him.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

Maril poked him. “Must’ve been weird, though? You guys—“

“Are nothing,” he finished for her. “Mates, and that’s that. I’m just in a strop cos of the weather. Bad for bagging munros.”

The talk turned to climbing mountains, and Caitriona tip-toed away, her throat sore and her heart caught in what felt like an animal trap. It tightened with every step from the tent, his word clanging, reverberating.

Nothing.

Now, Caitriona leaves the path for a moment, walking down the squelchy grass to the loch. She kicks her boot into the water, letting the droplets fly in a soundless arc until they hit the surface, rippling outward in endless spools. She tips her face up to the sky, feeling the rain running over her face, her mouth, her chin. She lifts her arms up, holds them high and shouts at the top of her lungs.

It feels so perfectly lovely that she does it again. One long cry, joining the caws of the birds and the sounds of the storm, of the earth and the cosmos, whirling above.

“Cait?”

All she can think for a moment, as she hears that accent - like a hot knife through butter - is of Ann Druyan, and Carl Sagan - we saw each other... we found each other in the cosmos, and it was wonderful. She wonders now, why she imagined - for one brief innocent moment - that she’d found that kind of love.

And yet, the cosmos go on spinning in their kaleidoscope of silly humanity and chaos and sex and creation. Unforgiving and unfailing. She wants to pretend she didn’t hear him. She wants to ignore him like he’s been doing to her. She wants to hurt him.
But she has to come back down onto the mud, she has to come down from the universe, and she lowers her arms, steeling herself and turning slowly.

“What are you doing here?”

Sam raises his eyebrows. Okay, so it was a dumb question. He’s on his bike. Wearing low-slung track pants and a zip-up jacket. No helmet, which is unlike him. His hair curls wildly and his face is wet with sweat and rain. He steps off and presses the kick-stand to balance the bike on the path. Taking a step toward her, he scrubs his hand over his cheeks and she notices the lavender shadows beneath his eyes.

“I guess we both had the same idea,” he says.

“I guess so. I love this place,” she says. “It’s peaceful.”

“Sorry to spoil it,” he says lightly.

“You didn’t.”

“Aye, I’m sure I did.”

“Well, you seem determined to argue with everything I say lately, so…” she turns slightly, staring out over the vast expanse of shimmering silver. The rain pelts them both. “Speaking of, why are you doing that?”

“I’m not, it’s just been—“ he sighs and rests his hands on his hips. “Nothing I’ll say will come out right, ye ken that.”

She allows herself a small smile, because that’s such a Sam thing to say. “I wouldn’t bet against yourself.”

“I would,” he says quickly, and smiles back. “Look, I’m sorry - how was the visit with Tony in the
“Uneventful,” she replies. “Mostly, it just felt like we both got in each other’s way. He kept drinking my juice - the fucking nerve, right? And he hated the way I was always cold. Though I thought he would remember. It’s odd really - you think you want to see people and that you’re homesick, but it turns out that nothing can quite go back the same way. I’m sure like, Julia Roberts is used to this kind of thing, but I was surprised.”

“Aye, I was warned,” Sam says. “It’s like that old saying about how ye can’t go home again. But the reverse, I ‘spose. Ye can’t bring home to you, no matter how much you try.”

“I’ve never had this problem after modelling and I was away a lot,” Cait muses. She looks across at the burnt gold trees that line the path, their leaves feathering in the breeze. “How about you, after your road trips?”

“Not really,” he says. “But I’ve never been married, so I can’t really comment.”

“It's new to me too. How are your ribs?”

He winces. “They still hurt, can ye believe it? Bruises everywhere.”

All that makes her do is picture his naked chest, belly. All the places he might have those beautifully purple contusions. All the places she could soothe with her fingers. She feels a bit sick with it - this awful longing - and shakes her head.

“You must have had someone missing you.”

If he’s surprised that she’s changed the subject back, he doesn’t show it. “Nah. It was just my Mum and I expect she was well shot of me.”

“I doubt that,” she replies softly. “I’m sure she missed you awfully.”

“She still does.”
“Like I missed you this week,” she says, and cringes. Why can’t she keep her mouth shut? Jesus Christ. Her face burns and she laughs, trying to deflect, trying to avoid running in the direction of the deepest water possible. “I know, that’s bloody sappy, but I did.”

Sam looks past her, toward the forest. It’s ghost-like in the gloom of the storm. “I’m sure ye survived.”

“Why are you being such an absolute shit?”

“I think ye know why, Caitriona.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to wreck things.”

He looks away. “It’s done. And I’m not trying to punish ye, if that’s what you think.”

“What else could I think? I never—” her throat thickens with tears and she pauses. “I don’t ever see you anymore. You avoid me.”

“It’s easier that way.”

“I miss you.”

He swallows visibly. “Ye can’t have it both ways.”

“What ways? I don’t even get to—“ she breaks off. “God, this is useless. I wish you’d consider how weird this has been for me too though.”

“For you?” he echoes. His eyes narrow. “Are you seriously going for pity right now? That’s bloody rich, considering.”

“And why not? It was a stupid mistake and now I don’t have my —“
“Best mate, aye, I remember,” he says acidly. “Well, as I was going to tell ye after that fucking game of Truth or Dare, I can’t do this anymore. It’s just too much.”

Caitriona feels the tears on her face before she tastes them in her mouth. Pure, stinging salt. “So that’s it, then? How are we going to work together?”

“Like anyone else,” he says flatly. “I just—“

“I get it,” she says without inflection. “I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you. I’m sorry. It was cruel and thoughtless and I know I’ve betrayed everyone, but I just couldn’t— I couldn’t—“

Sam’s head jerks a bit and he stares at her. “What did ye say?”

“I said I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I—“

He seems to struggle for a moment. “I thought ye were trying to… I thought you were comforting me.”

“What?”

“Because ye knew… I thought you knew.”

“Knew what?” Caitriona says, hardly grasping how the conversation has shifted. How he’s now looking at her. The air between them is hot and thick, charged. And his eyes are so very dark and so very blue. “Sam I—“

He takes a step toward her and then stops. His hand reaches out for a moment, grasping the air. His fingers are beautiful, long and red at the knuckles from training and the gym. She stares at those marks, wonders how they’d feel against her breasts. He sees her staring and makes a noise deep in his throat.

“What did I know?” she asks again, and doesn’t recognize her own voice.
“Come here, Caitriona.”

She shakes all over, from the cold and from the wind and from the earth and from the wild forest so near, and from how he is close, and she can smell him, smell his body and his secret places, smell how he must be between sheets in heated darkness, lost and fevered with desire.

He closes the distance between them first, and his hands cup her face. They both gasp at that first touch. He bends down, presses his mouth against her tears.

“Please, Sam” she keens against the heat of his throat. Her lips press there, the place that she saw that first day, and he groans, tangling his hands in her hair and then yanking her up until their mouths are a breath apart.

She’s trembling, and so is he, and then he makes a sound of pure frustration and want and he kisses her, he kisses her there, hungry and feverish, beneath the skies, by the loch and the golden trees where he traced her palm and she puts her fingers on the nape of his neck, yanks the curls there until he hisses, biting her lower lip, sucking on it.

And God, she's still desperate for more, desperate to feel him, desperate to bruise him, tear him apart, until there’s nothing left but the taste of her in his mouth.
a boy you can fear (or your biggest mistake?)

Perthshire, Scotland.

It's not unlike what Claire Beauchamp-Randall must have felt, after going through the stones.

One minute, Caitriona is lost in the hot, wet, gasping reality of it all, the taste of Sam on her lips and her fingers tangled in his hair and both of them not able to get close enough. And then, in one movement, he yanks himself away. She's left reeling, and she stumbles, almost falling backward into the water. She thinks of Claire then, lying prone by the wildflowers, ripped in two by Time. And I woke to see the world spinning outside the car windows, and the sickening sensation of falling at high speed.

All she wants to do is reach out, tug down his track pants, which are already tantalizing low. As they kissed, she could feel the sharp arches of his pelvic bones. Those jutting lines from his belly down to his cock. She wants to feel him pushing against her, his hips driving. She can picture the way he will look as he comes. She takes a faltering step and he does the same, but away from her.

Oh.

She comes back into herself, inhabiting her body again, and stares at Sam. He's sweating around his hairline and his mouth is bee-stung with kisses, and she can see her teeth marks, can feel his. A few seconds more and she thinks they would have been dragging each other onto the ground. She thinks of him naked and hot against her, and shudders again, almost reaching out.

But he had stepped away.

"Cait, I'm--" he rasps. "Jesus. I didn't mean--"

"Don't," she says. "You don't have to --"

"I'm." He stops again and shakes his head. "Christ, you're married."

She feels it then. Because she hadn't quite believed it till he said it. That what had happened, had
actually happened. That she gave in. It's too soon for the guilt that she knows is rushing like the rivers that feed the loch, but she can still feel it coming, just over the horizon. A tide of black.

"I..." it's her turn to falter. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry for god's sake?" he asks angrily. "It's me who-- fuck, I am the worst kind of bastard. I swore I wasn't going to-- but I didn't know that you..."

"Wanted you?" she finishes for him.

He looks straight at her. "Oh, I knew that."

"Sam..."

"I should go. I should've gone before."

"Why?"

"You're married, Caitriona. This was a mistake. A heat of the moment mistake. You know that like I know it."

She swallows hard, her throat aching. And it suddenly becomes very, very clear to her that they feel crucially different ways about each other. About what had been driving that kiss. To him, this is only about desire. About sex. And for her, well. So she nods shakily, and smiles at him.

"You're right. We really are idiots. Just-- let's forget it."

He considers her for a moment. His eyes are serious, and sad. "I don't mean-- look, let's talk later, okay? At least then we'll have calmed down a bit."

"Okay," she whispers.
Sam almost comes back to her. She can see the decisions he wants to make, playing like a film (his mother's words from long ago "she used to say the world was written on my face") but finally, he hops on his bike, nods at her once, and he's away.

~

It turns out they don't talk 'later'.

It's not even Sam's fault, much to Caitriona's annoyance. As soon as she returns (after pounding the pavement for a good 10 km out of sheer frustration), she gets urgently called away for re-shoots back in Glasgow. They're behind schedule (when aren't they) and Jill - a producer with a heart of coal, insists that it can't wait. She tries to find him before she goes, but he's doing voice over work and "isna tae be disturbed under annae circumstances", according to the crotchety (and extremely Scottish) gentleman manning the door to the studio.

Six days later, and she's on fire.

Her flat is warm and outside, the wind howls. She lies on her tummy, sorting through more of her grandmother's letters. It's a distraction tactic. She's already gone through her closet (donating almost everything, and now she's afraid she doesn't have any trousers), cleaned out the fridge, and ate so much pasta that she will be shocked if she can still be laced up into any of the dresses Terry has planned for Claire.

"Jamie likes a bit of arse," she mutters, untying a bundle of papers. It's what she plans to say to costuming to excuse the extra curves she's grown out of nowhere.

They will not be amused, but fuck it, she'd needed every ounce of those carbs.

And every hunk of cheese.

Not to mention the massive glass of wine by her side.

Caitriona picks up the first letter after taking a fortifying sip. She hasn't had the chance to read them all straight through, and she's almost afraid to touch them after looking at Nick's passionate missive. It's a disconcerting thing, realizing your grandparent had feelings - like catching your teacher snogging someone or worse, your parents shagging.
"Oh, buck up Balfe," she mutters, and settles down to read.

Nick

Geography is such a terrible thing. I do wish you'd come home. Well, perhaps not 'home' but close enough. Tommy is away too, but of course that can only be a relief lately.

The guilt is also a terrible thing.

I often wonder, why couldn't I have met you first?

It's such a painful question that I keep it locked away most days, but last night, I dreamt that we were married - not just in our hearts, but properly - and I was so happy. Of course I know there would be times you'd get on my last nerve, and me on yours, but isn't it worth it to love completely and unreservedly? To be known?

If only marriage weren't so sacred to me, and to everyone around us. If only I could abandon my own principles and you could abandon yours, and we could be what I think we could have been.

For now, I suppose what we have must be enough but I do long for you so.

Toujours vous, toujours nous.

Deirdre

Caitriona rolls onto her back, contemplating the ceiling. If she had been hoping for magic answers, she didn't get any. Beyond that affairs make people miserable. The words burn across the backs of her eyelids.

Always you, always we.
When the key turns in the lock, she gets up on her elbows. "It was for emergencies, Heughan."

"Hey Balfe," he answers. She hears him dropping a bag by the front door and kicking off his trainers. He lopes up the short flight of stairs and stops short when he sees her lying on the carpet, dressed in an emerald robe. It's tightly knotted at her waist and covers almost everything, but he swallows visibly. "This was an emergency."

"Let me guess..." she ponders, sitting up and crossing her legs. She's absurdly pleased at that moment that one of her distraction tactics was to wax her legs until they were as bare and polished as pale stone. "Out of booze?"

"Got it in one," he smirks and nods to her glass. "May I?"

"Knock yourself out. But I want my key back."

"Nah, ye don't really."

She huffs, watching him as he pours himself some of the purplish wine. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt and has no business looking as good as he does. His hair is getting long again. She still feels the kiss in her heart and her pussy and behind her breasts, and hurts with it. His mouth and teeth. She's spent too many nights wondering how they'd feel against her nipples.

He settles across from her, leaning against the ottoman. "So where the fuck have ye been then? No texts?"

"Felt awkward," she says honestly. "Which is stupid because we're supposed to be grown ups."

"Felt more like a teenager this week," he agrees. "Like being back in six form, wondering if the head girl's going to return my calls."

"Were you head boy?" she asks.

"Wasn't much of a swot. I was too busy pretending to be King Arthur, remember?"
"I thought you were like, *eight* doing that."

Heflushes. "No comment."

Shecant'stop giggling. "Oh my God, I will never let you--"

"It goes no further, Balfe."

"I promise," she says solemnly. "Knight's honour."

"The saying is Scout's honour," he says, still faintly pink. "You're reaching there."

"I'm sorry for not texting. But you didn't either."

"I thought about it. I have dozens of unsent texts if that counts."

"If that helps you sleep at night."

"Nothinghelps me sleep at night," he says, low.

Caitriona's stomach cramps, deep down, and she wants to squirm. Wants so badly to squeeze her legs together. Wants to unknot her robe and let it fall open, let him see her, how wet she is. Just from this, from his words, from the memory of his body, so big and so unlike her own body. She's never felt that before. Like someone could *take* her.

Andthat is precisely the problem. It's what terrifies her, down to the salt-wet of her blood and bone. That she wants him so much she's afraid of what she'll do. *Caitriona of Sorrows*. Someone who will burn down the world to have what she desires.

"I want to apologize, actually," she says. "I should have called. I had no right to drag you into my problems. It wasn't fair."
He hesitates and drinks his wine. Finally, he meets her eyes and raises his brows. "I didn't know ye 
were doing that?"

"By kissing you, I did."

"I kissed you."

"I let you."

Sam sets down his glass. "I'm not sure what you're saying Cait."

"We made a huge mistake. I mean, that's obvious. But-- it was mine. I'm the one who's married. I'm the one who should have ignored... this."

"This?" he echoes.

She wiggles her hand between them. "Y'know, this... the fact that we--"

"Want to fuck each other?" he asks, and his voice is so very dark, so very rough.

Everything in her is tight and hot. She can't look at him. He'll see it all, and she knows that if he does, he'll take her in his arms and that will be it. She'll be the agent of destruction. Lot's wife, turning back. Spun into a pillar of salt for disobeying the angels, disobeying everyone, for the chance to look, to see.

The chance for relief.

"The kiss was a symptom of something else. I need to fix that. I should never have dragged you into it. We work together-- I mean, this show-- it's too important to risk."

"Is it?"
"Why are you answering everything I say with a question?"

"Just trying to figure out where you're going with this," Sam says. "So I'm an experiment?"

"That's not what I said--"

"It's exactly what ye said," he says, accent thickening with every second. "You're unhappy in your marriage so you used me to see how it would feel stepping out on yer husband. That's a bit of an awful fucking thing to do but as long as we're mates I 'spose."

"Are you having fun twisting my words?" she asks acidly. "I'm not 'unhappy in my marriage'. I just meant that it was unfair of me to put this on you, when it's clearly something that I need to work on. Maybe it's the long distance, I don't know. But I didn't use you and I wouldn't. That's a really shit thing to say."

He scrubs his hand over his face. "I know. Fuck, this was a bloody mistake. We should take a step back."

"About a thousand," Caitriona says flatly. "I was trying to apologize and you're --"

"I get it," he says and his voice is blank, wiped clean. As if someone spilled a can of white paint and it covered all the nuances, all of the inflections that make his voice so very Sam. "It was a mistake. On both sides. But we're adults, so we can move on."

"Hiatus soon," she whispers, drinking more wine. She coughs slightly, turning away. "I guess that'll give us some time."

"We won't need much," Sam replies. The words feel like a punch. "It was just a kiss, Cait. We're making more of it than it needs to be. We'll just keep it to ourselves and soon it'll be like it never happened."

"You're--" she struggles for a moment and then bites down on her lip as hard as she can. The taste of copper pennies. "You're right."
"Like always," he teases, but there is little joy in it. "I should go."

"You don't have to--"

"Aye, I do. I'm exhausted. Came right here from the gym and went there from the set. I'm done in."

She feels like control is spooling away from her like a thread. "You haven't even been home yet?"

"Nope." He shrugs and grins. "But speaking of our break, I did book my ticket on the way."

"Ticket?"

"For hols," he says, standing and going over to rinse his glass in the sink. "I've decided to head to Los Angeles. My agent suggested it. Said to get my name out there. Plus, a few mates are going to meet - thought it would be a laugh."

"Have you looked at our schedule before? It's mad."

"Can't wait," he says, sounding genuinely happy for the first time. "All part of the gig after all."

"So, Los Angeles? Going to run the marathon?"

"Aye," he answers, and heads down the stairs to hike his bag over his shoulder. "Perhaps you'll-- I mean, you'll be busy I know."

"I'll be there," she says softly.

He looks back, and grins at her. But he bites his lip almost immediately, as if even that is too much at the moment. His body is tight with tension; she can feel it reverberating off him, almost like electricity. He puts her key on the small table by the front door. Neither of them say anything about the gesture, but her heart - her stupid, hopeful heart - it cracks inside of her chest.
"See ye tomorrow, Cait."

"Good night."

As the door closes, so does something else. Her mother always said her face was a locked cupboard.

Now, so is her heart.
still it haunts me, phantomwise.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Los Angeles.

"Edwina," Cait says very, very seriously. "You are going to fall off of there and blame me, aren't you."

Eddie regards her with huge, unblinking eyes. She's perched on top of the hotel's television, which is bolted to the wall. One of her paws is slipping off the edge, but she looks serene, as if she isn't on the verge of toppling over a precipice. She still hasn't quite forgiven Caitriona for her absence, and has taken to performing acts of daring not attempted since kittyhood.

"Stop being so arsey and come and read Twitter with me," she implores. Her cat is unmoved. Literally.

Caitriona huffs once - smiling all the way because what a little pudding - and opens her laptop. She's tummy-down on the soft, wide bed. Beside the wardrobe hangs her dress for tomorrow. Her belly is not so much aflutter with nerves as it is ablaze.

When she opens Twitter however, all thoughts fly out of her head. Because, what the fucking fuck?

In the video, which is making the rounds (and the rounds, and the rounds ad infinitum), Sam is in a pool, laughing. He seems to be having a grand time, and is in the midst of throwing a young, blonde girl into the water.

Caitriona reads through the tweets. Sam is persona non grata among many fans, and it's then that she learns he's been swanning all over Los Angeles, with a succession of yellow-haired women, wearing odd hats and posing strangely in front of cars. Christ, he looks... well, like a cliche? She hasn't checked his whereabouts since a week or so after the marathon, when she realized that this wasn't just a hiatus, it was a break.

A break-up.
She isn't stupid - well, at least not about this. She's heard the chatter and the gossip. She knows that a good portion of Outlander fans believe that she and Sam are a couple. Or at the very least, shagging on a semi-regular basis. She also knows that the Starz PR department finds this to be such a perfectly wonderful thing that she and Sam are to do nothing to disabuse them of the notion. It appears that Sam didn't get the memo, or at least, couldn't give a toss about it. There he is, grinning, tanned, drunk, messy - every Sam there is, every Sam she knows and doesn't know, in a succession of photos - none very flattering, and almost all *humiliating* in a way she can't articulate.

It's as if she doesn't recognize him, and when she looks back at their time in Scotland, and everything that followed, it's like it was all a dream, but a dream unlike any she's ever had. The convention, where they were instructed to act like a couple as much as possible, and had found it all too easy.

The touch of his hands at her waist. Her helpless giggles. The shrieks of the audience, and Sam being flirty, naughty, all the things he's so very good at. Interview after interview, and wanting so much to preserve it, keep him by her side, keep pretending, just a bit longer. It was as torturous as sitting above the Pacific on the bluff, feeling him lean in, almost touch the curls of her hair. As aching as the trace of his fingers on her palm at Loch Rannoch.

And beneath it all, the kiss by the water, his teeth hurting her mouth and the taste of him on her breath, like sex, that insistent and raw.

She hasn't thought of it in months.

"What would be the point, right?" she asks Eddie.

Her cat gazes at her with an expression that suggests Caitriona requires some sort of immediate medical intervention. Preferably by men wearing white coats and carrying straitjackets. She licks her paws and delicately hops from her perch, padding across the TV stand toward a ribbon of sunlight coming through the curtains.

"Fat lot of help you are," Cait says, and turns over onto her back. The memories are juddering around her now, like flotsam in the wake of a shipwreck, and she can't help seeing them over and over again.

She'd shown up for the marathon without any expectations and thought she might not even get to see him. But after a while, there he was, and she hadn't even needed to call his name. He was scanning the crowds every few moments, and their eyes had locked, held. He smiled so big that she thought his cheeks might crack. Her heart - still so foolish - sped up, until she could feel it in her
"You came!" he said, loping over to her. He was wet with sweat and radiant with exertion, his racing blood and the clicks of his muscles, his heart. He looked so familiar and dear to her in that moment that she almost reached out, almost grabbed him for a hug.

"I said I would," she said instead, grinning at him. "How're you feeling? Still strong?"

"Aye, I'm gonna smash it," he said, wiggling his brows. "I might do okay. My mile splits are insane at the moment."

"What's a mile split?"

He chuckled. "I'll explain it after over a pint. Sound good?"

"My treat."

"Won't say no to that. Take a selfie with me."

"It's not a selfie if--"

"Balfe, just shut up and snap the damn photo so I can go," he said, and they were both laughing, and it felt so much like old times that she couldn't help but hope.

Later, she sat in a cozy booth in The Wellesbourne, a bar lined with bookshelves and oak, like a slice of Britain in the City of Angels. She was wearing black skinnies and a loose cream sweater that kept falling off one shoulder. She wore no make-up or jewelry, and her hair was down, pushed behind her ears. It was as casual as she could make herself be. So casual that it was a form of armour.

The pub itself smelled of possibilities, like fire and paper and ink and she imagined all the worlds spilling out from between the pages of the books, filling the spaces around her. Witches and Kings and paupers and gemstones and the lost, the depraved, the sick and the mad. The happy. Families and car crashes and broken bodies and infamy. It was all there, surrounding her, comforting her.
Those worlds where she and Sam were married. Those worlds where she'd never met him, never auditioned.

The worlds where they were lost in bed somewhere, and he was driving her into the mattress, his cock hot and his mouth hotter, and she could still taste him down her throat.

"Christ, I'm starving." Sam said from behind her, by way of greeting.

She jumped, blushing. But if Caitriona had anything, it was the ability to rally. She turned and winked at him. "Ohmigod it's Sam Heughan!!!!"

He chucked her chin. "Don't say that too loud, there's bound to be scores of fans about."

She looked around at the empty bar; the silence almost deafening, split only by the hiss and crackle of logs in the fireplace. "I think you're shit out of luck, hon."

"Ah well, have to make do with you then." He sat across from her and opened up the menu. "Have ye ordered?"

"Was waiting for the rock star marathoner."

It turned out Sam was just as famished as he claimed. Caitriona tucked into her cauliflower mushroom risotto and bright and tangly cabbage salad while he ate three burgers and a steak and frites. They shared a carafe of reedy, ice-cold Sancerre.

"How're ye handling the break?" he asked, once he was done eating. Giving his plate to the attentive server, he wiped his mouth with a napkin and took a long sip of wine. "I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself at first."

She couldn't help giggling. "You just ate an entire fucking cow, you realize that right?"

Sam looked abashed. "I was hungry, Balfe."
"No shit, Sherlock," she teased. "Shall we tell them to anchor down this table? I'm afraid of what you'll set your stomach to next."

"I've got my eye on that chocolate mousse."

"Maybe I should take up jogging," she mused. "Does it really allow you to eat whatever you like?"

"To be honest, it just makes ye lose muscle if you're not careful," he said. "I'll have to train like fuck when we get back. Speaking of which, ye didn't answer my question."

"About..."

"How your hols are going."

"Oh." She thought for a moment. "It's... not as simple as I imagined. Remember how we said you can't go home again? I mean, right now the only bonus is seeing Eddie."

"I need to meet her."

She was surprised. "Haven't you?"

Sam blinked. "Well, no. Unless this is some sort of strange rip in the space-time continuum?"

"You have got to stop reading Reddit, hon." She sipped her wine. "I 'spose it just feels like you should have met Edwina by now. She is the most important person in my life after all."

"Oh, aye?"

"Aye," she mimics. "But otherwise, I just feel like-- I miss it. It felt like we were a part of something. And I miss Scotland. I miss the crew."
"Me too," he said. "Though it's not half bad being in the sunshine."

"With sushi."

"And avocado."

"Why does everything begin and end with food?"

He shrugged. "It's in our nature, Balfe."

The *our* made something bloom behind her breasts. "So, now that all that running shit is over with, do you have any plans?"

"Running shit, huh?"

"Isn't that the technical term?"

"I'm going to stick around for a bit. I think I told ye my agent wants me to be out and about - go to a few parties. All sounds cheesy, but he thinks it'll raise my profile." He paused. "How did I become the kind of bloke who says twatty things like that?"

She giggled. "I'm glad you said it before I could." It was her turn to hesitate. "Just be careful... it's a different sort of scene out here. I learned pretty quickly in my modeling days that it wasn't all it's cracked up to be."

"I guess those are mistakes I'll have to make myself," he said.

Caitriona flushed a little. "I wasn't saying you shouldn't--"

"And what're your plans then?" he interrupted.
"New York," she said, unaccountably stung. It was as if he didn't care about her advice - or worse, thought she was presumptuous to give it. "I leave in a few days."

Sam looked as if he was concentrating. It was his 'memorizing lines' face. He played with the stem of his wineglass and nodded. "It'll be great for you - ye know, reconnecting. I was thinking the other day -- the convention, it really brought it home how careful we need to be."

"In what way?"

"Just with the lines and how they can get crossed. It's... it felt very easy to pretend to be a couple, I guess." He laughed self-consciously. "Too easy. It's not fair to either of us or to Tony."

The name went through her like a shock. He rarely said it, if ever. "I thought we... well, we worked all that out, didn't we?"

"Aye, we did. I just mean -- it can't be a bad thing to spend some time apart. I think you'll find those issues you mentioned will disappear."

She forced a smile. "Look at you, getting all philosophical."

"Still waters run deep, Balfe."

"Do they?"

He grinned, but it didn't look the same as his smile from earlier, during the marathon. This looked practiced. Fake. "Look, I should go--"

"Already?" she said before she could stop herself.

He grimaced. "Yeah, sorry, I've got a thing with a few mates-- said I'd celebrate with them. Haven't seen them since Outlander and--"

"No need to explain," she cut in. "Go, go! Flash your medal."
"Is that an euphemism?"

"Whatever floats your boat, darling."

He stood, and so did she. There was an awkward moment where they didn't quite know what to do with their hands. Sam stepped forward and drew her in. It was careful, and slow. She felt the tips of her breasts touch his chest and breathed in, trying to stop herself from trembling. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, just beneath her hairline. Was it her imagination, or did they both inhale? He smelled of apricots and boy and the wind.

He smelled like home.

"I'll text you," he whispered against her skin, and turned to go.

He hadn't. Caitriona stares up at the hotel ceiling. She remembers thinking once that the sky was theirs, and the ocean beneath, and the rolling cosmos above, and what does it say that where once there had been so much, now there is only silence? A silence as thick and black and wounded as a dying star.

In exactly twenty hours, he's scheduled to be at a Vanity Fair and Burberry party with her. Their stylists skyped to colour-coordinate their outfits. He hasn't texted. He hasn't called. Neither has she. Soon enough, they'll be back in Scotland, filming a love affair. And she feels so very, very cold inside. The locked cupboard is tight, sealed with wax and salt and her own feverish, disappointed, silly hopes.

She thinks again of him in that bar, of how he spun around and began to speak. How his words had made her feel like Alice, stepping through the looking glass into a new world, a wonderland, where everything you thought was, wasn't. The worlds were tumbling from the books around them, but she recognized none. As the glass swallowed her, his words echoed, soft and sad.

"That day at Akasha? When ye were out with your mates?"

She stared at him, still as a statue.
"I thought ye might come over." He paused, shaking his head ruefully. "I didn't see a wedding band. I didn't see anything but-- well, it was like... lightning. Christ that sounds stupid but-- and then you walked into that audition and I was just so glad I had the chance. Because I knew I'd always wonder."

He had been watching the floor, but suddenly his head shot up and he met her gaze with such intent that she felt as if he'd touched her.

"I knew I'd always wonder what could have been."

Caitriona could do nothing. Could say nothing. She just looked at him, at those blazing eyes - the same blue as that day at the restaurant, when she'd failed to see the train rushing toward her. The inevitable. Sam shrugged then, and it cracked her heart, because she somehow knew he wouldn't text her, wouldn't call. It was as final as the key on the table by the door.

"I--"

"Don't say anything, Cait," he said, low. "There's no point. I just wanted ye to know."

"Know what?"

"That I remembered."

~

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so, so much for reading! This story has meant the world to me, and it has captured my heart how much you guys have loved it too. Your encouragement, love, silly perfect gifs, tumblr notes / anons and messages / DMs, have all been the MOST and I will never find the words to thank you all. A special shout out to Mary, for your edits, ideas (I am not killing a certain someone tho, dear) and to Ali for always reading and loving and squeeing. You girls make it allllll possible so people should probably send you gifts if they want me to ever write again.

Love you, beauties, all of you.

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