Untouchable
by EndoftheLine72

Summary

No real plot, no real lives. Just an imaginary look into a life that will never be, but is the type that everyone wants - eventually. Slow burner.

RPF Fiction - No events, facts, names, family history or timelines are real apart from the stated real person's name.

Adult audiences only - There could be anything in this stuff so be warned now.

Notes

I don't know these people. I will never know these people and I don't want to know these people. I see them as characters. Kinda like reading a brief description of someone and filling in the blanks yourself. I saw a picture of Caitriona Balfe and filled in the blanks. A character in a story and nothing more that that. I could have just made my own character, but I'm lazy so I picked someone real that you all can google, saves me getting you to imagine what they look like or sound like.

I chose not to use the usual ship in this fiction because in this fandom, the Outlander fandom, shipping acts like a bat signal. It draws out bullies, trolls, has beens and attention seekers from their dark corners who are never content to let people fan/ship / do whatever they want without attacking them. That behaviour is wrong and it has destroyed the fandom and left a void which I thought was a real shame, because at the heart of it all, was a central belief of two people falling in love with each other. That can never be a bad thing, even if the outcome wasn't what we expected.

So I decided to fill the void left with a pairing that could never be destroyed. I control this little ship, I can steer it wherever I want. I don't expect you to be a passenger if you object to the destination.

Mouse clicks are cheap, move on.
This is pure fiction, not real. I have manipulated timelines, facts, names, ages, places, countries, in fact, pretty much everything other than what Caitriona Balfe looks like and that she is an actor in Outlander.

This whole ship is fictional. Got that? NOT REAL.
I in no way, shape or form want/expect/project any of this onto any living person. It's just writing on a page that occupies my brain sometimes. Someone suggested I post it here, and so I have. I don't write to share, I just write because I write. If you like it, that's great, if not, then don't read it. Simple really. No disrespect is intended.

Just a reminder : This is not the normal ship, so please, don't read it with any expectation of the normal relationship pairing.

I will also be posting this as snapshots, so the story eventually will be linear, it will be posted as snippets from taken through time, not necessarily in order. It just depends which part of their life I have written about.

And so it begins.........................Welcome to Untouchable
Bruised But Not Broken

She couldn’t decide whether it hurt more to breathe or to think.

Caitriona tried to take a deep breath and instantly answered her own question as a searing pain shot through her abdomen. She blinked and tried to focus. White. All white. Cold and, her brow wrinkled, a strange smell. Slowly her eyes began to focus, though the throbbing in her head didn’t make it any easier. She was still in the car. Some good news at least. The windscreen was entirely covered with snow. The airbag had deployed and the engine was off. Perhaps deciding in anger to drive from Seattle to New York, instead of flying with everyone else wasn’t her best idea. Her left leg was throbbing. Caitriona tried moving it but stopped instantly as a stab of pain raced from foot to knee, white hot in its intensity.

She let out a stifled scream, trying desperately to breathe, waiting for the pain to subside. Clearly moving was not an option. Gingerly she reached for the door, sucking in pained breaths as her sore body protested. The door was jammed shut. Terrific. She undid the seat belt and carefully leaned over. Her handbag was laying in the passenger foot well, momentum having flung it there when she’d misjudged the corner and side slipped into a drift. Christ, it was cold. Fingers could just reach the edge of the long strap that had tangled itself around the handbrake. Tugging at it, she finally maneuvered the bag within reach. She scrummaged through the oversize bag, hunting for her phone. “Shit.” She held it up. Of course, no friggin service. She tried the key. The engine so dead it didn’t even pretend to roll over. “Well if this fucking day can get any worse, I’ll be surprised.” She closed her eyes, leaning against the headrest. What a hideous mess. She’d smiled through that damned convention despite the utter feelings of betrayal that were assaulting her from every possible side.

Him.

Her.

Both of them.

All of them.

No one was escaping without being hurt this time. Not Tony. Not Sam and most definitely, not her. It had started with her walking in on Tony with not one, but two press whores, one male and one female, in the shower of her hotel room and had ended with Sam telling her he loved her and kissing her in his hotel room. It was bad enough, she had to suffer through a very public event afterwards, seeing fans, smiling, being around both of them. She’d barely managed. Camera’s she knew. Being on display she knew. So, she shut down, hit the automatic pilot button she’d developed in her modelling days and just gotten the job done. Getting on a plane with both of them, in a somewhat private setting was absolutely out of the question for her. She needed space. Time to think. Time to figure out what the fuck to do now. How the hell to get out of the mess she’d landed in.

Her head, like the rest of her body, was aching wickedly. Part hangover and part accident she figured, shivering as the cold began to seep into the air around her. She tried to move her leg again. Eyes clamped shut, immediately regretting the decision as agony ripped through her. She decided to focus on her breathing, willing the pain to stop. Moving was clearly not an option. Suddenly the car seemed to lurch, a sinister cracking heard through the snow caked windscreen. Caitriona was forced to grip the wheel and brace herself as her body fell forward. The nose of the car sloping down.
A cold burning made itself known around her feet, slowly working its way up her calf. Her heartbeat jumped at the sight. Water. Ice cold, frigid, deadly water. Now the panic began to set in. The water rising quickly, already half way up her shin. She shouldered the door again. It refused to move, even a little. She reached down, frantically searching, probing, trying to move the seat. If she could just slide it back, maybe she could get her leg out somehow. Bracing her good leg and taking a deep breath, she pushed, straining, willing the seat to move. She slumped forward after a few moments, panting in exertion.

The water began to lap the bend in her knee, her teeth already chattering. Her hands white, the blood being shunted inwards, her body’s natural response to the impending hypothermia. She tucked her damp hands underneath her armpits, trying to warm them, yelping when cold skin met warm, frantically trying to think what to do next. Another cracking sound heralded a change in angle, as the car slid further into the water. She was trapped. She tried the seat again with pressing urgency as the water crept higher, her thigh becoming wet with the icy water seeping into the car’s interior. Her heart was fairly pounding in her chest, panic rising just a steadily as the water. In desperation she shoved at the door, yelling, pushing, straining as the water continued to rise. Without warning tears began to course down her cheeks as the reality of the deadly situation began to set in.

Was this how she was going to die? Out here in the middle of nowhere? Alone? Drowned in icy water? By the time the water was lapping at her stomach, the cold and sheer panic had consumed her. Insidious frigidity was seeping into her mind, numbing it, enticing her to shut down, to calm, to relax. So much so, that the sound of the back window shattering and a cold blast of artic wind rushing through the cabin, barely even registered.

A deep male voice sounded beside her ear, “Can you hear me?” It said. Almost in slow motion she turned her head. Deep blue eyes, framed by a handsome face looked intently at her, “Can you tell me your name?”

“Caitriona.”

He smiled, neat white teeth and a gentle expression greeted her, “Alright, Caitriona. I’m Johnathon.” He glanced down at the water now half way up her chest then back to her face, “We need to get you out of here.”

“My leg..” She stuttered, her teeth chattering so badly it was difficult to form words.

“I know.” He said calmly, eyes locking with hers, “I’m going to move the back of the seat and then we are going to slide you out of here. Okay?” He began to shift, her hand gripped his arm, pulling him back. She tried to speak but the words were caught in her throat, hypothermia ceasing muscles and thoughts. His larger warm hand covered hers, “It’s alright. I won’t leave you. I’ll be right here. I just need to move this seat Caitriona.” He nodded at her and slid around. He knew he had minutes only to get this woman out of this car before it slipped the rest of the way into the lake, taking them both with it. He gripped the seat low down, his arms strongly objecting to being submerged in freezing water. Fingers searched until he found the weak joint in the seat mechanism. He’d seen it a hundred times in the road accidents he’d attended. Most seats failed at a particular point in many of the head-on collisions he’d been called to when he’d worked in rescue. He knew the weakness usually lay in the teeth mechanism that connected the seats together. If he could manage to move either one of them, changing the seat angle, that should be enough to try and slide the woman out. Bracing his feet against the base and gripping as low down as he could, almost putting his head under the water, he levered his body against the seat, muscles strained, his back arched as he pulled, shaking the chair back and forth, not stopping at her cries of shock and surprise. He couldn’t, there wasn’t time. It was now or never. He took a deep breath, the water covering his
head as he knelt on the floor of the car and levered with all the force he could muster, straining the very fibre of every muscle group he had until, almost through sheer force of will the chair mechanism split. It didn’t sheer off completely but it moved. He hoped it was enough as he broke the surface, sucking in deep breath and shoving the back of the chair down. He reached over the back of the seat and grabbed her under the shoulders and tugged her backward. She screamed, but thankfully, her body came free and in a matter of seconds he had an arm around her waist and was dragging her across the back seat, bodily hauling her out the back window.

The wind hit her like a twenty-tonne truck, taking what little breath she had, icy fingers seeming to seek out the very last vestige of anything that remotely resembled warm anywhere in her entire body. They both landed with a sodden thud on the iced surface of the lake. She’d have screamed if she’d had the breath for it, as it was she barely had time to think before she found herself being dragged across the ice. “Off the ice to the car.” He shouted over the wind and driving snow as they finally reached the shoreline.

Caitriona was really shaking now, uncontrollable and savage, her limbs ached, her head felt distant and light. She suddenly felt tired, so very tired. Arms slipped under her legs, a wave of confused dizziness washing over her as he hoisted her up, cradling her against him as he slogged through the knee-deep snow, face into the biting wind. Get her to the car. Get her warm. His mind was already working on what he needed to do next. He felt her relaxing, felt the grip of hyperthermia lulling her to sleep, to shut down, “Hey!” He yelled, jostling her, her head snapping back and heavy eyes opening, “Keep your eyes open Caitriona.”

“So tired..”

“Stay awake.” He urged as he struggled up the last drift, back to the road and thankfully a warm truck. Johnathon set her down, wedging her between his body and the car, taking her weight as he quickly opened the door. “Almost there now.” He spread a blanket across the seat then lifted her in as best he could. She screamed as her ankle twisted, pain chasing the sleep temporarily from her system. He wrapped her tightly in the blanket and shut the door. The truck was warm, having been left running, the heated seats and the warm interior air chased the chill from the air and she slumped back into the softness of it. Her head rolled back and she was vaguely aware that they were moving. She tried to focus, but her eyes refused to follow any instruction her brain was giving, blurring and urging her to close them. Warm air was blowing in her face in stark contradiction to the cold she felt deep in her body. Dark brows knit in confusion, but try as she might, her mind refused clear. She just wanted to sleep.

“Hey,” A hand on her shoulder roused her, “Tell me your name again.” He needed to keep her talking, once she was in the cabin and warm, he’d let her sleep, but until then, “Come on.” He shook her harder, hard enough to cause her lidded eyes to open and shoot him an outrageous glare, “What’s your name?”

The eyes blinked slowly then cleared, “Caitriona.” Her voice wavered slightly, her teeth still chattering, her body still shaking with deadly hypothermic cold, “Caitriona Balfe.”

Johnathon’s focus turned back to the road, dodging drifts, straining to see in the growing dark and driving storm. The weather was worsening by the minute, with snow and wind this hard, there was no way the road would still be open. Returning to the cabin was the only real option. In any case, town was a four hour trip on a good weather day and there was no way that this woman, whoever she was, would make it that far, even with the gentle warmth of the car’s interior and shelter of a wrapped blanket. “Alright Caitriona, tell me about your family.” He flicked a glance at her, at least her eyes were still open.
Dark brows knit in confusion, “What?” Her fingers and toes were beginning to burn as they slowly warmed.

“Your family.” His voice was deep, soft and steady, “Tell me about them.” Keeping her talking would keep her conscious. Apart from the cold, her foot was clearly hurt badly. He wasn’t entirely sure it wasn’t broken, but the woman had been in a car wreck and he was concerned there could be other injuries not visibly obvious. He prompted and prodded, getting her to relate the names of her mother, father and siblings, what she did for a living, where she’d been driving to. Her answers had been clear and articulate, if not punctuated by spasms of uncontrollable shivering and more than a good amount of exasperation aimed solely had him, particularly when he’d asked about a husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, partner and children. Then the answers had been coloured with varying degrees of anger, frustration, sadness and a distinct hint of none of your business.

She was an actress who had been travelling from Seattle to New York for work, her parents and family were in Ireland, she had no children and her boyfriend was in New York, though something about the way she reacted to that didn’t quite sit right. He suspected there was more to that story but wasn’t really in the mood nor the situation to care extensively about it.

“Where are we going?” She asked, breaking through his introspection as she exhaled deeply trying to stifle the shaking.

“Cabin. Not far now.” He pointed through the windscreen at a dark blurry shape not too far down the track or road or whatever it was that he was following. She squinted her eyes, she wasn’t even sure there was a road, though she could see the structure he was pointing to, “A place to get out this storm.”

She nodded, suddenly aware of the situation. Having deliberately taken the backroads to give herself more time to think, she now realised the price of that decision. She was in the middle of nowhere, and worse no one knew she was here. When she failed to arrive, yes, someone would raise the alarm, but she wasn’t due in New York until late tomorrow night and it was a long time between now and then. A long time for, she glanced at the man beside her, a long time for anything to happen to her.

He looked like a decent type of a guy, but isn’t that what they say about all serial killer types, they look like your normal everyday nice guy, except they kill people for kicks. Scenes from the movie Misery flashed through her mind and she fumbled in the damp shirt pocket. Shit, her mind cursed as her fingers closed around her phone, instantly feeling the icy wetness covering it. Hands trembling she pressed the button. Nothing. No light. No power. Nothing.

“No signal up here anyway.” Her head snapped to one side to find the most ocean blue eyes she’d ever seen watching her quietly, “but if you want to try, you can use mine if you know the numbers you need.”

She accepted the phone, glanced at the screen then handed it back. No service. “There no landline? At this cabin? Either?”

“No phone, but this storm will blow itself out in a day or so and then its only 4 hours or so to town.” The car stopped moving, the headlights illuminating a bigger cabin than she’d been expecting, “Wait here in the warm. I’ll unlock and then come and get you.” He opened the door and several snowflakes blew in with the icy wind.

She watched as he leapt up the half a dozen or so in no more than two strides, disappearing from her view behind a solid wooden door. She glanced down at the keys, hanging in the ignition, the engine purring softly in the background. If she wanted to, escape would be easy right now. Apart
from the fact that she didn’t really know exactly where she was, where the road was, where the
town was and couldn’t reliably see more than two feet in front of her. Serial killer or not, she
wasn’t going anywhere without his help. Another wracking series of shakes rattled through her
bones, the phone slipped from her fingers, landing with a thud on the floor at her feet. She bent to
retrieve it and immediately regretted it. She let out a strangled yelp and sat back. Definitely not
going anywhere without his help.

The help returned presently, toting a second blanket. The door opened and a snow dusted blond
head leaned over her, wrapping a second blanket around her shoulders, “Hold on to me.” She look a
breath, steeling herself against the pain as strong arms slid under her knees and she was lifted from
the car. She wrapped an arm around his neck, feeling the instant solidness of him, holding herself
steady as he crossed the threshold, kicking the door shut and setting her gently down on the edge
of the large bed. He knelt down at her feet, nodding towards her boots, “I’m going to try and get
these off,” Blue eyes looked up at her, “It might hurt, but we need to get you warm and see what
we’re dealing with here.” She nodded mutely and curled her fingers into the softness of the covers.
He unzipped the side of her leather boot on the good ankle and slipped it off without a single
sound.

The second boot was not as simple. “Almost there.” He murmured in sympathy, having heard the
stifled gasps, yelps and at least one bitten off scream. She’d decided half way through the
procedure to try and focus on something, anything other than the sharp stabs of pain running up
her leg. He had strong shoulders, she observed, muscles clearly defined beneath the shirt, flexing
and relaxing as he moved. His hands were large and warm, gentle in their strength as one gripped
her calf. Gentle yet steady and sure. There was no hesitation or nervous shake in the grip, in his
actions. He pulled the boot free. This time she did scream, white hot agony raced up her leg and
fingers involuntarily gripped the covers, knuckles white with tension. The ankle had swollen to
well over twice its size, her foot puffed and slightly red. The ankle joint itself had already started to
turn shades of purple. It could well be broken, but with no real way to tell, at least not yet, all he
could do was wrap it, keep it still until he could get her to town.

“Is it broken?” Her voice wavered and he looked up to see tears escaping the corners of her eyes.

“I’m not sure Caitriona.” He shot her an apologetic look, knowing how much these type of injuries
could hurt, “What I am sure off,” He stood, “is that you need to get warm. Start by getting out of
those wet clothes.” He untucked one edge of the blanket, “Can you do that by yourself?”

“Yes.” She nodded, not at all sure she could, but unwilling to strip off in front of a potential serial
killer if she could help it. But he was right, while the uncontrollable shaking had eased, the
occasional bone rattling shake still shivered through her body without warning.

“I’m going to go and get something dry to put on.” He reached up and pulled a curtain from its
ties near the head of the bed, “Try these.” The hand tossed the clothing onto the head of the bed, then disappeared.

With a great deal of awkward maneuvering, trying not to bend or topple over, her fingers white and
stiff, she finally managed to wiggle out the jeans and underwear, covering herself with a blanket.
She was starting on the sodden shirt buttons when she heard his footsteps followed by a grunt and
a noise which she imagined was him depositing heavy bags onto the floor. Her assumption was
further reinforced when she heard the unzipping of one of the cases. She had her shirt undone when
his voice startled her. A long arm poked its way through the curtain, “Try these.” The hand tossed
the clothing onto the head of the bed, then disappeared.
a semi naked woman. She looked down at her bra clad chest and shrugged, especially since half the world had seen her naked on television. She reached over and inspected the pile of clothing. A large navy blue sweatshirt, that she was sure she could fit four of herself inside, and a pair of long grey sweatpants. Not a fashion statement to be sure, but they were dry and, she thumbed the soft fleecy material, should be warm enough. She flicked the long legs of the pants out and gingerly slipped them over her own legs, lifting her backside to pull them up, tying the drawstring in a bow before slipping the sweat shirt over her head, settling the soft folds around her. She sighed softly, it was utter bliss to be dry. She took a small breath, the clothes smelled clean and fresh and held with them the slight scent of men’s aftershave. She decided she liked it and took a deeper breath. A move she rapidly rethought as a sharp pain reasserted itself, stabbing her left side. She let out a yelp and closed her eyes.

“Everything okay?” a deep voice sounded from beyond the curtain. Blond brows knit a moment, then he shrugged, a decision made, he poked his head through the curtain. She was sitting very still, her hands clenched in the blanket. He moved to her side, concerned there had been greater injury than he first thought. Tossing three elastic bandages on the bed, he touched her shoulder, “Where is the pain Caitriona?” There was a gentleness to his voice, tinged with more than a hint of urgency.

She finally swallowed and opened her eyes, looking up into similar ocean blue ones. “My side.” Her voice wavered.

He crouched down, “Can you lift this shirt a little?” he asked quietly looking up with one brow raised in question. Sniffling back traitorous tears that threatened to fall, she nodded slowly, then gripping the bottom of the shirt lifted the edge, high enough for uncover her ribs, stopping just short of the underside of her breasts. His fingers were warm and gentle as they carefully probed her stomach and ribs. “Sorry.” He said, when he touched a particularly tender spot, “I don’t think there’s any real damage or breaks, but you’re going to be bruised and sore for a few days.” He reached for one of the bandages, “This will help, but it’s going to hurt for a bit.” He unfurled an arm’s length of bandage and knelt in front of her, “Put your hands on my shoulders,” He looked up and shot her an apologetic smile, “Squeeze as hard as you need to and try and keep breathing.”

His shoulders were broad, strong muscles sloping down from his neck. She gripped them hard as the bandage was applied, tighter than she was expecting. “Breathe Caitriona.” His movements were precise, quick and sure and Caitriona realised that he’d done this before. “All done.” He said softly, sliding the hem of the sweat shirt down but remaining kneeling and still, “Just breathe.” She focussed on the simple instruction a few moments until her grip relaxed with the gradually easing pain, “Better?” His voice was gentle, deep in its timbre and seemed to match those deep blue eyes perfectly.

“A little.” She was suddenly very aware of the warmth of the muscled flesh of his shoulders beneath her palms and immediately dropped her hands into her lap.

“Well,” He said standing up, “Sorry to be the bearer of more bad news, but we need to get you in bed.” He stopped a moment and flashed her a smile, “Not what it sounds like but you know what I meant?”

She couldn’t help but smile, “I know what you meant.” She conceded and held out her hand, “Can you help me up first, I need to…” She hesitated then flicked a glance towards the bathroom.

“Oh right.” A slight flush of red coloured his neck, “Put your arms around my neck.” He bent over and waited until she was ready, then carefully lifted her behind the knees, carrying her to the bathroom and setting her down on the floor, letting her lean against the towel rail, “Let me know
when you’re ready okay?” He slipped outside, closing the door behind him. He moved the fireplace and started to stack the kindling and logs, striking a single match, gently coaxing the flames into life. Next he moved to bed and flicked the covers down. He was about to set the pot on the stove, when he heard the bathroom door open.

It took a lot less time that he’d thought to get her settled. She’d endured the painful wrapping of her ankle bravely, and was now reclining, wrapped in several blankets, a warm mug of chicken soup in her hand, foot carefully elevated on a pillow, back propped against the headboard, listening to soft sound of the water running in the shower.

In the confusion of it all, Caitriona had completely forgotten that he’d been submerged in that cold water as well. He emerged a few minutes later, dressed in similar clothing to what she now was. They fitted his muscular form far better than hers. She studied him quietly over the rim of the mug. Tall. He was tall, taller than she was. Square shoulders, her eyes drifted down, strong back, narrow hips, long legs, all in all the perfect picture of a very attractive man. Not to mention, those eyes.

The object of her musings glanced her way. They were blue, deep blue like crystal water of a tropical ocean, darker than her own. “Pain easing off a bit?” He asked as he bent to feed another log into the gently crackling fire.

“Yes, some,” She responded as he straightened and walked towards the large bed she was comfortably ensconced in. Johnathon picked up a large grey blanket from long couch and with an efficient motion, flicked it open, letting it settle down over her body, carefully holding one corner and laying it ever so gently over her ankle, “Enough to be bearable at least.”

He seemed to consider this a moment, then moved to the stack of bags. He opened a smaller one, studied a small box a moment then walked to the kitchen area. The entire cabin was one large room consisting of a largish kitchen and dining area, a comfortable lounge and two easy chairs in front of a large open stone backed fireplace and a large raised platform that contain the massive bed she was resting in. He swung around, a long glass of water in his hand and return to the bedside. “Try this.” He offered her two oblong shaped capsules, “They aren’t very strong but will help some.” In truth, he wanted to give her something far stronger, but the only medication that would have the strength he needed would also have the unwanted side effect of making the taker excessively drowsy, something he was trying to avoid. The shivering had stopped and Johnathon was reasonably happy that she was warming slowly, gradually coming back to a normal thermic range. Still, he’d keep her awake for another few hours, then assess the situation again. “Thank you,” She said, swapping the cup of hot soup for the glass and pills, “I’ll take anything that might help at this point.” She swallowed the medication and took a long drink of water, handing back the empty glass and accepting the mug, “Thank you for the soup as well.” She took another mouthful, “It’s really good. Where did you get it from? All the way out here? I mean, the nearest town is …?”

“In good weather? 4 hours away,” He finished for her.

“Right, so you keep a stock here just for rescuing stranded drivers?”

Johnathon chuckled softly, a small smile crinkling the sides of his handsome mouth, “No. I made a pot full when I first got here.” He nodded towards the cup, “That is the last of it though.”

“What about you?” She glanced at the cup, suddenly feeling guilty at taking food from his mouth. He shrugged, “She’ll be right. I’ll knock something up from the staples I always leave here.”

Caitriona’s brow knitted and she cocked her head to one side, “Where are you from Johnathon?” He had an accent, similar strength to her own, but very different in both tone and lilt. It was easy to
listen to and seemed to suit him perfectly. It was also different to anyone she’d ever met or heard, but she decided she liked it.

He smiled that smile again and Caitriona found herself smiling back, “Well,” He stood and walked toward a large wooden cupboard, “Definitely not from Ireland.” His deep voice held a cheeky note as he spoke over his shoulder, blue eyes meeting hers in silent accusation. He opened one door and standing on tiptoes, reached up and hoisted down yet another blanket.

“No. Not from Ireland, I know what that accent sounds like.” She met his gaze, raising her own cheeky eyebrow over the rim of the cup, “So?”

“Australia.” He said, leaning over her and putting the blanket over her shoulders.

“You’re a long way from home then?”

“A bit.” He straightened and moved to the window, leaning on strong arms and surveying the blizzard outside. “I could say the same about you Caitriona. There is a few thousand miles between Ireland and the US.” Johnathon turned, crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the sill.

She lifted her eyes to his, “Can I assume that ‘a bit’ means you don’t live here?” She glanced around the cabin. It was clear he didn’t and that had her wondering why he was here. It was also clear that he’d deflected her question.

“No.” His blond head shook, “Just a bit of a getaway that I visit now and again. I was on my way back to civilisation when I happened upon your car tracks.”

“Lucky for me,” She answered, swirling the last of the soup around the cup, “If you hadn’t come along, I’d be at the bottom of that lake with the car.”

He pushed off the sill and held out a hand, gesturing for the now empty cup, “As soon as the storm lets up, we’ll have to let your family know that you’re not in that car before they raise an alert and send someone out looking for you.”

She handed the cup over, “My phone was soaked, but it didn’t have a signal anyway. Does yours have service?”

“Nope, not in here anyway.” Johnathon wandered to the kitchen and started filling a stainless-steel kettle, “It does if I stand on the top of the hill out there,” He pointed at the window, currently completely white, snow flurries and wind occasionally rattling the panes.

“You can’t go out there.” She stated practically.

He smiled and took down two cups from their hooks, setting them on the counter, “Not at the moment, no.” Caitriona watched as he bent and fossicked around in the cupboard under the bench, “But I will when it’s not so hectic.” A large container and a spoon was dropped on the counter, “So if you can remember the numbers of your boyfriend and family, you can write a few texts and they will send the second I do manage to get service out there.” He spooned two large heaps of light brown powder into each cup, then added boiling water. He stirred each cup vigorously, then walked to the bedside and lowered one cup, one brow raised in silent question. The rich scent of chocolate wafted up into her senses as she gratefully accepted the cup, sniffing appreciatively at its contents. Johnathon dug into his back pocket and handed her his phone, “Texts will send quicker with less signal than trying to make a call, but if you’d rather, I can try and call it in to the local police and have them contact whoever you want.”
“I know the numbers I think,” She took a sip of the hot liquid, deliciously sweet and thick, “Texts will be fine.” More than fine, she had no real desire to actually verbally speak to Tony again yet, nor Sam, nor production. She’d send a text to them and to her family so if Johnathon, she turned her head and looked at him. He was sitting quietly in a chair, cup in one hand, a laptop propped on his knee. If he turned out to be the crazy serial killer type, they would at least know where she was and she guessed, he was right. The last thing she wanted was to worry her family and cause someone to have to be out in all this searching for her. She started with a text to each of her sisters, stopping periodically to drink the hot chocolate. “How long do you think we’ll be stuck here?” She queried, “I should tell them when to expect me.” She indicated the phone.

He paused, looking at the storm, clearly considering before answering, “I’ll have another look in the morning, but storms like this tend to blow themselves out in a day or two.”

“So,” She calculated, “Thursday sometime?”

“Start with that and if it changes,” He put the laptop on the table and stood, stretching slightly, “We’ll try and get the message through. Okay?” She nodded her agreeance, watching as he crossed to the kitchen and started digging around for more supplies she assumed. She flicked the screen of his phone, noting its plain background. No pictures of family or, she glanced over to see him put two pots on the stove, no significant other. Caitriona idly pondered that for a few moments, narrowing her gaze to his hand. No ring, and no marks where one should have been. Not that that was any indication, her mind warned. Many men didn’t wear rings and marriage wasn’t the only indicator of relationship status. She looked at her own hand, conspicuously devoid of any such adornment. That had never meant that she hadn’t been attached to someone. She shook her head, clearing the uncomfortable memories and set back to her task. Next came her mother and father, clear messages, short and sweet, similarly with production and her agents, all business and professional and then a simple, “Don’t worry. I’m fine,” to Sam and Tony alike. She pressed send for each of the messages, automatically queuing them. A long list of messages displayed on screen. A history of his texts. She couldn’t help herself, she ran a finger over the few messages he had stored there.

Most were to someone called Jackson Porter, various others to several police inspectors, detectives and, her eyebrow rose a little, special agents, FBI, CIA and MI6. Who was this man, James Bond? Should she be concerned? She flicked a nervous glance at her rescuer. It occurred to her that he hadn’t volunteered any information about himself, but had gotten her to spill details about her family, her job, her travel plans. The key question now became was this by design or by coincidence? Only one way to find out. “Johnathon?” Clear blue eyes looked up from packet he was currently studying, “What about your family? Won’t they be expecting you home? You said you were on your way when you found me.”

He leaned on the counter, “No one is expecting me anywhere, not now.” He shrugged, mentally wiping the reasons for that away, “I was on my way to New York to consult on a case there, so I’ll let them know I’ll be a few days late.”

“Consult on a case?”

‘That’s right.” He opened the packet and tipped it into one of the pots, “I consult with a few different law agencies occasionally to help them solve cases.”

That seemed to fit what she’d snooped up. “So you’re a detective, special agent or something?” She asked, finishing the cup of hot chocolate.

He opened the freezer and pulled out several frozen items, “Something like that.” He smiled and began dumping the items into the pots, already gently starting to the steam.
“My father is, or was a police inspector in Ireland, he’s semi-retired now.” Caitriona offered, “actually,” She thought on that, “They only call him in now when they need him. But then again that could be their way of easing him out the door, he’s 65 now, should have probably retired years ago if you ask Mum.”

Johnathon stirred one of the pots and added more water, putting the lid on and turning back to her, “Did your father specialise in any one area?”

“No. He was the inspector of a small village station.” She reached over and put the cup on the bedside table before leaning back against the headboard and readjusting the blanket around her shoulders, “What about you? Do you have a particular type of case you consult on?”

“Varies.” He answered honestly, “Missing people, serials, homicides, vice occasionally, cold cases generally.”

“What case am I keeping you from now? The one in New York I mean?” Caitriona asked as he poured what she thought was rice into the second pot.

“You’re not keeping me from anything major.” He said with a gentle smile and wandered over to the chair and picked up the laptop, “It’s all right here.” A long finger tapped the screen, “A thirty year old cold case, a missing teenager.” He set the machine down on the coffee table and wandered to the bed, “Disappeared from a roadside outside of Vancouver, his mother lives in New York now,” Johnathon held out a hand, “Better que up a text to them.” She obligingly handed over the phone. He tapped out a few messages, pressed send and then dropped the phone onto the bedside table closest to her. “In case you need to send other messages,” He clarified in answer to her questioning look. Caitriona smiled at him, realising that he could have taken the phone, erased the messages and no one would be any the wiser. Instead he had allowed her to snoop and provided her with a convenient way to check her messages were still queued. That is not to say that he couldn’t delete them at the first opportunity when she wasn’t around, her untrusting mind sounded. Caitriona grimaced as a lingering cold shiver worked its way through her recovering body. “Still cold?” He asked, a concerned look flashed her way.

“No. I don’t know where that came from,” She tightened the blanket around her shoulders.

“Shock.” He commented, rising and putting another log in the crackling fire, “It’ll take a little while for your body to work through that,” He straightened, “But in the meantime, plenty of blankets and no sleeping for a while okay?”

“Alright.” She agreed amiably. A small silence fell between them, Caitriona leaned back against the headboard, watching as Johnathon moved quietly around the cabin, stacking bags into the corner, stirring the pots on the stove, stoking the fire, checking the windows, moving things from freezer to fridge, finally settling with long glass filled with ice and ginger ale, which had also been offered to her, minus the ice. He dropped into a large lounge chair, feet crossed at the ankles, laptop resting on his thighs. The dim white screen lit his face, clicking here and there, sipping on the drink. He was naturally quiet, Caitriona mused, comfortable with silence, not seeking to fill it with small talk or white noise, just content to let it be. She watched his blond brows draw together, squinting and leaning forward to study something on the screen. Whatever it was, he evidently found it disagreeable, shaking his head and with a click of finality, he leaned back. If he was a serial killer, he was the most attractive one she’d ever seen, in both looks and nature. She considered the phone, sitting on the table. Should she check? Did she need to? Probably not, but, she sighed softly, she’d trusted Tony and look where that had landed her.

She reached over and collected the device, flicking through the start screen. All the messages were still there, queued and waiting to be sent, along with the three more recent ones of Johnathon’s. She
glanced between him and the phone. She normally wasn’t one to snoop, but this was far from normal circumstances. Mentally shrugging she flicked a fingertip over the messages. The first was to an Australian police detective telling them that Johnathon had would look into some case. The second was in reply to a real estate agent, the message having been sent almost a week ago, she looked over at her cabin mate who was still reading quietly. Why, she wondered, had it taken him over a week to reply, particularly when the reply consisted of exactly four words – no, sell it all. The last message was to Jackson Porter, telling him to make a start without him and to notify the local police that he’d found a woman named Caitriona Balfe in a car wreck. She took comfort in that message, confirming her thoughts that this man was indeed not a serial killer. They tended to not want to inform law enforcement of their plans. The serial killer in question had wandered over to the kitchen. A delicious smell, meaty, rich and strangely comforting, wafted from the pot he was stirring. Johnathon rapped the spoon on the side of the pot then turned and placed something Caitriona couldn’t quiet see into the oven beneath the cooktop. A particularly vicious gust of wind rattled the windows closest to her, the small flicks of snow and sleet hitting the glass with a muted tinging sound. Far from easing, the storm seemed to be increasing. Caitriona returned the phone to its resting place, “Do you think it’ll get much worse?”

“Tough to tell,” Johnathon commented, watching the trees outside bend and flex in the windy onslaught, “Certainly isn’t pleasant out there for sure.” He glanced at her, a worried expression washing over her attractive face, “Not to worry though, this cabin has been through worse storms with no worries at all.” The laptop chimed, drawing both their attention. Johnathon walked over and inspected the screen. It was low on power and he wandered over to the bed’s opposite side, dropped the machine onto the surface of the bed, then knelt, plugging in the charger into the wall socket. He stood for a moment, clearly thinking, then began pulling over a chair. He sat down, long legs rather uncomfortably tucked under the chair and pulled the laptop onto his thighs, concentrating on the documents on the screen. She smiled at his chivalrous antics.

The resident serial killer didn’t want to sit on the bed beside her while his laptop charged. She took the opportunity to quietly study him. Blond hair, combed neatly back, longer at the front, shorter at the back, following the contours of his skull. A small furrow in his brow as he concentrated, blue eyes, bright with a thoughtful intelligence, the light of the cabin casting a slight shadow on the high cheekbones and straight line of his nose, the grooves of the philtrum leading to his upper lip, the bottom fuller in the centre than the top. A large hand lifted, long fingers idly scratched his chin, the dark blond stubble rasping softly in the still air. The fingers folded into a fist that tucked against his cheek, leaning on it as he continued to read. She followed the lines of his neck, his adams apple, bobbing as he swallowed, neck muscles strong and defined, sloping down to his shoulders. He was certainly extremely attractive, she reflected, swallowing and laying a hand on her stomach, a warm feeling tingling just below the surface of her skin. He ruggedly handsome in a totally different way to the carefully sculptured, trimmed and manicured look that frequently surrounded her. She almost laughed out loud as her mind compared the look of her rescuer to man she currently assigned in her mind as her significant other. Tony, with skin whiter than her own, dark hair always looking unruly, left far too long, smaller in frame and height.

Though, her mind added, she strongly doubted that Tony would ever have been seemingly content wearing trace pants and sweatshirt in anyone’s company, even a stranger. No, he would have worn a designer shirt and pressed pants, a precise example of an urban business man with an ex model come actress as a significant other. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, she guessed. It was almost a prerequisite he dress that way given her profession. In fact, it had come in handy more than once since Outlander had started to gain traction. There had been plenty of press the flesh and “networking” dinners, lunches and cocktail parties to attend along with an assortment of press junkets and TV talkshow appearances. She’d been glad of a friendly face and Tony had fitted in well with the meet and greet crowd. He had proven to be an excellent plus one, seemingly happy to
spend hours small talking with complete strangers. While she made connections with directors, network heads and other actors, he connected with people who were cashed up and always looking to invest in someone or something.

Not a bad situation for a man trying to start a bar and club franchise in greater London. She thought on that for a moment. Was that all their relationship was? No, surely, it had to be more than that. Afterall, Tony was a friend, a good one. He never argued about her decisions. They liked similar things and while the sex, what little of it there had been, hadn’t been earth shattering, it hadn’t been completely disastrous either. They weren’t highly affectionate, but that suited her. She lived in her apartment, he lived in his. The romantic side of her brain told her it wasn’t an ideal situation or the fairy-tale that everyone hopes for. Though, her mind warned, any situation would have been better than LA. That cruel deception had almost broken her and she was determined to never go there again.

Ever.

That is precisely why the shower scene she’d walked into in Seattle had triggered a response. Caitriona closed her eyes and leaned her head against the headboard. She’d run. Run because she’d been afraid. Terrified. Not of a relationship ending. Terrified that she fallen into the same trap and had allowed someone else to deceived her so very badly again. Despite all her safe guards, all her promises to herself, all the rules she now followed, was it happening again? Everyone knew that lightening never struck twice.

No, the common thread was her.

Was she partly to blame for the whole mess she found herself in? Her occupation, her choices, her rules, her past? Was he only that way because of her? In a relationship that really wasn’t a relationship and more of an agreement between friends of mutual advantage? She sighed out loud as that realisation set in.

The answers were all yes and the thought of that suddenly made her feel cold, a reflective shiver passing through her.

Cold and very, very alone.

“Caitriona?” His deep voice sounded like warm liquid honey, trickling down her spine and into her hearing, not altogether unpleasant.

Blue eyes opened to regard him, “It’s alright Johnathon. Not asleep. Just thinking.” Should he ask? Not really his business, but, he could see that shadow. The shadow of sadness lurking back there in the clear pools of blue.

Not his business he reminded himself then leaned forward and lifted the laptop on the bed, “Just a few more hours then you can sleep a bit.” He stood and walked over to the oven, pulling the large glass open. The warm smell of freshly baked bread wafted out, and Johnathon placed a small loaf on a wooden cutting board. He turned then and pulled out two bowls, spooning steaming rice into one of the bowls, then covering it with a delicious smelling thick beef. Not bad for a freezer meal and ready to cook bread, he mused, infinitely glad that he’d cooked double earlier in the week and left half in the freezer. He looked up at her, “Would you like some?”

“No thankyou. I don’t eat red meat or gluten.”

“Don’t or can’t?” He queried, cutting two thick slices of the bread and sitting them on the edge of the bowl.
“Don’t.” She watched as he walked back to the bed, sat down quietly and began eating with
definite intent.

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” He commented around a mouthful of food, a half grin of
his face, “Sure I can’t tempt you?” He offered her the bowl, one eyebrow raised.

“No thanks,” She smiled softly at him, privately thinking that the meal did indeed smell and look
delicious, “Besides, I just finished soup and hot chocolate. I’m full.”

“Is your appetite down or that’s about normal?” He balanced the bowl on his knees then attacked
its contents with enthusiasm, running the crust of the bread around the bowl sopping up the last of
the stew.

“How close Johnathon?” She asked quietly. He looked over at her, one eyebrow raised in question,
soapy suds dripping down his forearms, hitting the dishwater in large drops. “At the lake. How
close was it? How much time did I have if you didn’t happen by?”

“As long as you needed I reckon.” He said cryptically then turned back to the sink and finished off
the pot setting it dry.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen a lot of close calls. I worked in emergency rescue for a bit,” He commented wiping his
hands on a tea towel then coming to resume his seat beside the bed, “You’d be surprised what
strength people find when they are fighting to live.” Blue eyes focused on hers, “And you were
fighting. That’s all that matters really.”

“Sounds to me like you’re down playing the role you had in all this,” She held his gaze, half
intrigued by his personality and half wanting to just keep him talking to hear his voice, “We both
know that door wasn’t opening anytime soon and without you, I couldn’t have gotten the seat belt
off. So, how long did I have really?”

“Not long.” The deep voice was soft and gentle and matched the steady gaze, “Five minutes
maybe.”

“Five minutes.” She blinked and swallowed, dropping her gaze as the thought of how close she’d
really come to dying hit her. Five minutes and she’d have been no more. Her eyes closed, a lone
tear escaping from beneath long lashes and trickled down her cheek. Five minutes, not time enough
for a coffee. A warm hand curled around her wrist, “Hey, it doesn’t matter if it was five minutes or
five hundred minutes.” the strong fingers tightened, “Car is at the bottom of the lake, you’re not.”

She opened her eyes to study his, “Thanks to you.” She said quietly.

He leaned back and shrugged, “Thanks to poorly designed seats and an application of suitable force.”

“Suitable force originating from?” She challenged gently.

“From a simple physical lever system.”

She laughed softly, “A lever system? Called Johnathon?”

He flashed her a lopsided grin, the corner of his mouth making a small dimple in his cheek, “Called it doesn’t matter because it all worked out.”

“That must be awkward to write when you’re filling out forms.”

He smiled broadly at that, finding the intelligent humour behind it intriguing, “Only when I have to fill them out in triplicate.”

Caitriona laughed and conceded defeat. He wasn’t going to accept what she understood all too well he had done.

Johnathon Chase had just saved her life.
Acceptance is the First Step

Her eyes blinked open, slowly adjusting to the low light of the cabin. The fire had burned down, barely a dull glow in the large stone lined fireplace, a solitary light in the kitchen chasing the shadows into the dark corners of the room. Caitriona took a breath, one hand resting against her tightly wrapped ribs. They were still sore but the savage stabbing pain of yesterday had eased significantly. She took that as a good sign. Johnathon had told her he didn’t think she’d broken them, more than likely just bruised. Given the ache at the time, Caitriona wasn’t sure she’d agreed with that assessment, but the dozen or so hours of rest she’d had were proving him right. Speaking of her cabin mate, she scanned the room, a brief spark of concern igniting at his absence, until her ears realised the sound of the shower running.

She relaxed into the comfortable warmth of the bed and listened to the gentle sounds of movement, idly reviewing her situation. Caitriona tentatively wriggled the toes of her injured foot. She sucked in a breath, slamming her eyes shut. Her ankle was as painfully sore as it had been the night before. It took her several long minutes before the offending limb settled again. Clearly, she wasn’t going to be able to move under own steam anytime soon. She glanced towards the window. From her vantage point, it did look as though some of the storm had eased overnight. Branches on several of the tall pine trees outside still shuddered and shook with an occasional gust of wind but they no longer flexed and bowed under the constant strain of the overnight gale. It was still snowing, but not quite as heavily as it had been. Even if the road was open, the thought of jolting and jarring along in a car with her foot the way it was, was enough to leave her feeling slightly lightheaded.

Caitriona knew she had to go back sometime, even if she really didn’t want to face what waited for her there. And, her mind added, it wasn’t right to keep Johnathon from his work and family either. She turned her head and studied the closed bathroom door. He’d sat with her for a long time the night before, waiting until he was sure that it was safe for her to sleep. They’d passed the time in superficial conversation at first and then later he’d showed her the case he was working. She’d found his work supremely interesting, almost as interesting as the tall man’s thought process which she’d gotten an insight into as he’d patiently answered her questions about some of the details. He was extremely intelligent, that much was perfectly clear. Intelligent and, from what she observed, he tended towards the logical rather than the creative, which made sense to her given his occupation.

He was also persistent. The case he was working on had been stagnating for over 15 years. It was not just cold, it was downright frozen. There was so few clues and evidence leads to follow it was staggering to her that Johnathon had any hope that he could solve it. To her untrained eyes, it appeared absolutely impossible, but there he was, stubbornly working through it, refusing to give up. Caitriona smiled to herself. Intelligent, stubborn and a predilection for adhering to some pretty darn high moral codes. She recalled a specific conversation from the night before when the need for sleep had made itself present. Caitriona had tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Johnathon of the stupidity of sleeping cramped up on the couch, when there was a perfectly decent unoccupied side of the bed opposite her. Johnathon had stubbornly maintained that the he would be fine where he was and had continued to argue the point even as he settled on the couch, two long legs sticking out well and truly over the end of the chair, his blond head pillowed awkwardly on the arm rest. She chuckled at the thought. He had looked ridiculously uncomfortable, like a teenager trying to fit into clothing five sizes too small. She’d said as much in one final attempt to sway him, but the tall man had smiled at her, quietly saying it wouldn’t be right and had settled the best he could into the couch. In truth, she secretly found his attitude not only charming but refreshing. He been the perfect gentlemen, if there was such a thing, politely but firmly refusing her offer. If he did turn out to be a serial killer, psychopath or otherwise social deviant, he would be the most morally polite
one she’d ever heard off.

Johnathon Chase was certainly a distinct contrast to the other men, both friends and lovers, that had drifted in and out of her life. Most would have climbed over each other in the race to jump into bed with a woman, regardless of her innocent intentions. Dave had, without a single hesitation, Sam would have because he wouldn’t want to turn down the invitation for fear of offending the woman, and Tony, well Tony, she mentally paused, Tony probably would have slept there and then thought about how it he could use it to benefit himself. Her harsh critique caused her to scowl. Was that fair on him? Was it all his fault? After all, wasn’t that exactly what she was doing also? Using him as plus one, an uncomplicated relationship that required very little energy to maintain? She let out sigh, as her mind accepted her own complicity. Granted, she hadn’t done what Tony had in that shower in Seattle, but she hadn’t immediately stopped Sam when he’d started to test the boundaries of friendship all those months ago. She’d willingly and openly danced on that fine line with Sam. Complicit under the excuse of work and good PR. Never openly crossing it, but going about as close as one could in the process. This entire situation had gone on this long, partially because Caítriona felt good around Sam and partially because Tony had seen it all happening and had said nothing. He hadn’t shared one complaint with her, not even a hint of discomfort. Wasn’t that what she had told Tony she wanted? A relationship that was simple with no drama. She couldn’t go through L.A. Not again. Not ever. She didn’t have the strength or time for it, not with her work on Outlander. Low maintenance, low commitment, private, just there to support each other. That was the only relationship she thought she had wanted. Lately however, the cost of keeping that relationship up and running was anything but low maintenance. If the horrendous events in Seattle did nothing else, they had certainly brought to the surface some very uncomfortable feelings of guilt, uncertainty, anger and a level emotional upheaval that Caítriona felt woefully unprepared to deal with. It would be easier to come to terms with it all if it was just Sam, or Tony alone that were the problem. The more she thought, the longer she digested it, the clearer it became. She was just as much a part of the problem as they were. A tear escaped her eye and trickled down her cheek. It hurt to admit that. It hurt even more to realise she had no idea how she was going to fix this. The only thing Caítriona really understood now was that she had to do something.

Something had to change.

She wished she knew exactly what that something was.
She’d give him another ten minutes. Just ten more, then after that, she would let the panic that she’d been talking herself around for last two hours take control. The light was fading, the wind had doubled in the last half hour and the snow was now falling so heavily that Caitriona had trouble seeing more than a few feet out the window and he still hadn’t returned. Johnathon had left earlier in the day to climb the small mountain in an effort to get signal on the phone and alert the outside world of her whereabouts.

The weather had been reasonably good then and Johnathon had explained it shouldn’t take him more than a few hours. That was four hours ago and Caitriona was really beginning to worry. If anything happened to him what on earth would she do? She could barely hobble more than a few feet, even on the crutches that Johnathon had found tucked away in the attic. If he was hurt out there, she had no way of helping him or of even helping herself. She glanced at the clock. Eight minutes. Flicking the blankets back and mentally bracing herself against the anticipated pain, she slowly lifted her leg, swinging it over the edge of the bed and fumbling for the crutches. She sucked in a breath as her foot hung down towards the floor, the blood throbbing painfully to the joint. “Breathe.” She murmured, her mind recalling the gentle instruction Johnathon had quietly spoken to her earlier that day when he’d wrapped her ankle again, “Just breathe.” If she concentrated hard enough, she could almost hear him, the deep timbre of his voice, soft patience in his clear blue eyes, the warmth of his hand on her arm as he’d knelt before her, waiting with her for the pain to pass. Now, like then, the pain began to ease with each breath, at least to the point where it no longer left red streaks darting behind her eyelids.

Six minutes. Shaking hands gripped the crutches and Caitriona awkwardly hauled herself unsteadily to her feet. Breathe. After every small step she was forced to stop, wait for the pain to ease, then take another wobbly, off balance step. It took every bit of concentration she had not to topple over. Fortunately, concentration seemed to take priority over panic, every step helping her to calm herself. Three more steps and she’d be level with the kitchen bench. Step and breathe. Four minutes. She was almost there when she heard them. The distinctly heavy thud of boots on the front porch. The door pushed inwards bringing with it a gust of frozen air and the snow dusted blond head of Johnathon. Worried blue eyes met his, taking in his tall, solid form. “Thank God.” She said on a long breath as her eyes slid closed. The relief of seeing him, alive and in one piece, flooded through her, hands shaking as the crutches absenty clanked to the floor. In an instant he seemed to be beside her, a strong arm wrapping around her waist, holding her steady, “Think you better sit down before you fall down.” His deep voice was calm and flowed like honey into her mind, smoothing the sharp edges of nervous worry that had been grating on her for what seemed like hours. Caitriona gave up trying to speak and instead mutely nodded, laying an arm across his coat covered shoulders, leaning into him, letting him half carry her as together, they hobbled towards the couch. Johnathon slowly lowered Caitriona into the seat, “Foot up.” He bent, chilled fingers gently gripped the back of her leg, causing her muscles to tense slightly. “Sorry.” He lifted her ankle, resting it on a cushion and reaching for one of the folded blankets, holding one edge, flicking it open then tucking the edges of the blanket around her legs, “Better?” He asked quietly sitting back on his haunches, blue eyes searching hers.

She nodded, “What happened Johnathon?” Her voice was slightly uneven, still coloured with equal measures of concern and relief, “I thought you were only going to be a few hours. It was getting dark, the weather was getting worse and I didn’t know what was going on.” It came out faster than she wanted it to. She took a breath in an effort to stop the cascade of what she was sure must sound like inane babble, tumbling from her mouth. “You could have been hurt and I would have been useless to help.” She dropped her gaze, hating herself for sounding like an irrational fool, staring at
an errant crease in the blanket instead. He was little more than a stranger, there was nothing between them and yet the utter relief of seeing him safe had made her crumble like a deck of cards. Just one more log on the emotional fire of confusion that seemed to be constantly raging inside her mind lately. She lifted an unsteady hand and brushed the hair back from her forehead, “I’m the one who should be sorry. This is the last thing I’m sure you need to be dealing with after hiking through a storm to send my stupid messages.”

“It’s alright.” He offered her a soft smile, “The storm last night caused a lot of timber fall on the trail. It took me longer than I thought to get up there.” He dug into his coat pocket and retrieved the phone, “All the messages sent though and,” He shot her a lopsided grin, “Once I got decent signal up there, the phone wouldn’t stop buzzing and ringing.” He passed the offending object over, “Seems you were most certainly missed. A couple of calls came in while I was speaking with the local police. They went to voicemail, so you’ll have to wait until we get signal tomorrow to hear them.”

“Tomorrow?” She looked up at him as he stood up and shucked out of the coat, looping it over his arm.

“Tomorrow. Apparently the road is opened closer to town, but they are expecting heavy snowfall to arrive sometime in the next two days.” He perched himself on the coffee table beside her resting foot and began untying his laced boots, “We’ll head for town as soon as it’s light tomorrow.” Johnathon pulled one foot free with a slight grunt, “See if we can’t get out of here before the next storm comes through.” A second boot joined its mate, “Sound okay?”

“Can we get through after the weather today?” Caitriona glanced towards the now dark window, the wind blowing the occasional white flake against its clear surface.

“We’ll give it go. Might be slow going, but worth a try.” Johnathon said standing ,tossing the boots in a reckless pile beside the log basket, “But in the meantime, I’m going to have a hot shower and get dry clothes.” He started walking towards the bathroom, untucking his shirt on his way, “You have a few texts there that you might want to look at.” Then he was gone, the bathroom door clicking shut, an empty silence settling over the room.

Tomorrow. She would have to face up to all of this for real tomorrow. No more thinking, no more pondering and considering. It would all come rushing back in full force. Tomorrow. Sam, Tony, production, the whole outfit. If her ankle was broken that would push filming back. She still had a four week break left of the hiatus but if recovery was to take longer than that, an expensive delay would be inevitable. All the crew who depended on the show for a job would be forced to wait, not to mention the stress a delay of wages would mean to them. Production and crew would be pissed off at her and rightfully so. Going on a road trip because she was upset wasn’t exactly the smartest idea she’d ever had. It ranked right up with there with deciding to go to Sam Heughan’s room after witnessing your significant other entertaining two guests privately in your own hotel room.

Caitriona glanced at the phone in her hand, wondering if either of them had anything more to say about that whole debacle. She swiped a finger across the screen, unlocking it and looking at the message folder. “Oh holy Christ!” She cursed aloud. A few messages? She shot a dark look at the closed bathroom door. Johnathon Chase, the lord of the understatement. There were precisely 84 unread messages and ten voicemail notifications. She decided on production as her first target. They were organising transport of her family and retrieval of the car, along with a medical specialist that she would be required to visit in New York. Depending upon what their diagnosis was, she was scheduled to fly out back to Glasgow as soon as possible to begin costuming for the upcoming season. That got rid of 14 of the 84 messages. So far, nothing too bad.

Her family was next. There were three messages from her mother and father, which in itself was fairly novel. Both parents steadfastly refusing to text, claiming that if they wanted to talk to someone they would call them up or go and see them. They were preparing to fly out from Ireland when these messages were sent, which would mean that by now they would be well and truly on
their way. Her parents would, according to several of the messages be accompanied, by her eldest sister, Sarah, who had also recruited another sister, Deidra, currently working in New York. The plan, as far as Caitriona could decipher from the mixture of message senders, was for her family to unite in New York and then travel to her. That cleared out another 15 messages. Maybe things wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

On the other hand, she sighed loudly, recognising the next number in the line of messages as Tony’s. Mentally bracing herself, she opened the texts. All of messages, just seven of them, centred around a common thread, that being Tony attempting to explain what she’d seen in that Seattle hotel. First, it was under the guise of a misunderstanding, then as a mistake on his part, and finally, landing the blame squarely on her own shoulders. He’d done it, according to this theory, because she had been busy and distant towards him. Busy, yes. She agreed with that whole heartedly. It was part of the job, part of her responsibility as the star of this contraption. She did take exception to the insinuation that they had become distant. ‘Become distant’ implied that they had, at some point, been something other than that. As far as she had been able to tell, things were exactly the same as they had always been. They hadn't become that way, they always were that way. Point and case was before her very eyes. She had left furious, fallen off the grid with no contact and the best he could do was offer justification? There was no are you alright Caitriona, or anything resembling something along the lines of I’m glad you’re okay. Just avoidance and blame. She deleted the messages from the phone as she read them, wishing her mind was similarly configured. She could press a button on a phone and the words disappeared, lost forever into the emptiness of cyberspace ether, never to see the light of day again. Her conscience however, didn't possess such a button and left to its own devices, in the quiet stillness of the room, fueled by guilt, guided by regret and driven by uncertainty, it tended to think in circles. Maybe she was reading too much into this. After all, she tried to reason with herself, things had been going okay before that night in the hotel. If the relationship was really as toxic and unfulfilling as she was more recently considering, wouldn’t she have detected it before? She didn’t like to think she was that stupid and oblivious, but right now, in this moment, she wasn’t so sure. Had the signs been there this whole time? Had she, in an effort to not repeat LA, fallen headlong into something that was just as bad? Circle complete. It was maddening to her. She scowled and shook her head, hoping to physically dislodge the uncomfortable thoughts from her mind. It didn't work, instead her mind made another connection as her eyes read the number of the next sender. Sam. 51 messages. Most of the messages contained some variation of him professing his feelings for her, several, in quite graphic details that left her face warmed with embarrassment and her quickly pressing the delete button. Some were trying to convince her that their professional relationship didn’t have to change even if their private one happened to. A moot point, she argued with herself. Things had already changed because of it. She couldn’t even begin to process how awkward work would be right now. It was one of the main reason’s she stopped him and was determined to not go there. She was being professional. This was her shot. Maybe her only shot at this business and she had no intention of screwing it up with an off set relationship. Caitriona needed Sam to be able to do this job well. Needed the actor, not the man. Things may well be difficult now, but a relationship that went bad with her on screen lover would be a show ending, possibly career killing mistake. She knew it, even if Sam thought otherwise. She had to be the adult, even if Sam wasn't.

Life wasn’t meant to be easy, but no one ever warned her it would be one shit storm after another. Worse, no one ever told her about the way this would make her feel. Like she was failing at everything and everyone. She hated it. Hated doubting herself and hated that feeling of uncertain dependence most of all. She'd tried to be independent her entire life. She'd left home early, left the shelter of her family, needing to do things her own way. She'd been successful at it as a model. Caitriona hadn't expected that to change when she'd left that insipid lifestyle behind, taking a chance on acting. But it had changed. She gone from entirely independent and in control of almost everything, to relying on Sam for her job, relying Tony for her plus one at events and now, even
relying on a practical stranger in Johnathon Chase, to get her back on her feet. Dependent and helpless to control anything right now. She couldn’t even walk ten steps on her own for Christ’s sake.

Caitriona ran a frustrated hand through her hair and tossed the phone on the table, letting her head fall back against the chair. Her mind was about to continue its frustrating contemplation of her situation and life in general, when a mark on a sheet of paper caught her eye. It was laying on the table, beside the phone she’d angrily tossed there moments ago, the silver of a set of car keys stark against the white background. A neat black script, indicating her name decorated the top of the paper. Her dark brows drew together as she sat up and reached for it.

Caitriona, the letter read,
Here are the keys to the ute and a map with the road marked that will get you to town. The red circle is the section of the road where you’ll get signal for the GPS and the ute's two-way radio signal to call for help. It’s about ten miles from the cabin but it should be doable once the snow stops enough to be able to see where you’re going. There is spare water and food in the ute and plenty of blankets. Don’t worry about me or anything else, wait for the weather to clear and get yourself back to your family. I know you can do this if you have to and if something happens, just stop, breathe and wait for the pain to pass. It always does.

Johnathon

P.S. Pro tip: Stay clear of sharp corners and icy lakes.

She glanced at the bathroom door and smiled, shaking her head at his smart ass post script and sniffling back a tear. ‘I know you can do this if you have to’ , he had written. The context between his thought and her situation was slightly different, she recognised that but....

She took a deep clearing breath and let it out.

Stranger or not, Caitriona hoped Johnathon Chase was right.

Could she do this?

Tomorrow she would find out.
She winced as a bump in the uneven road momentarily jarred her ankle. The road conditions were atrocious but, with another winter storm due in the next day or so, they had decided to try for town as early as they could rather than possibly be isolated for another three or four days in the least. Caitriona flicked her gaze to the driver, his brow tight in concentration as he slowly turned, dodged and maneuvered the 4WD ute through the drifts and snow falls on a very slick road that at times became no more than two wheel tracks.

“Half way there Caitriona.” Clear, blue eyes met hers in a gentle apology, “Need a break?” He knew some of the bumps and jolts he’d been unable to avoid were hurting her but there was nothing he could do about it. It was either drive through it or end up a ditch or not get through at all.

She shook her head, “No. It’s alright. Not so bad really considering the road.” Even she could see that anymore snow and ice on this road and it would truly become impassable. His hands tightened around the wheel, trying to navigate the twists and turns of the mountain pass road towards the small town in the valley. Half an hour later, several unsteady slides and slips behind them, the road finally began to level out, eventually widening, after they crossed a long single lane bridge spanning a partially frozen, deep river, rolling rapids near its stony banks.

Ordinarily, she would have viewed it as a scene of natural beauty, but not today. Today, her mind was in turmoil and the mountain surroundings were lost on her, replaced by the emotional upheaval she’d been struggling with before the crash. She felt like a pendulum in large grandfather clock, swinging back and forth, one arc determined to change her life, change her relationships, change the future. The other looping arc bringing such a feeling of guilt for her part in all this, that change seemed like a fanciful dream rarely spoken of much less realised. Looking out at the rippling water of the flowing river, she knew that once the natural scene faded, connected civilisation would come charging back at her. Tony, Sam, production, even her family. It was all waiting for her. Production she could avoid for little while longer, but her family, they were already there. She suspected Tony might even be there, but was silently hoping that he wouldn’t be. She wondered idly as the road once dirt and snow, gave way to slate grey paved surface, smooth and wide, what would he expect from her? Forgiveness? Acceptance? She mentally sighed and tried erase the memory of what she’d seen in that hotel room. She’d accepted her part in all of this. She had never really showed anything other than a passing interest in him, at least publicly. Privately, they had spent some time together, not particularly intimate time, but time none the less and Tony had indicated to her that he was as okay with that so long as she was. It had been wrong of her to do that, expect that. Clearly it hadn't been as successful as she'd thought it had been. That didn't mean that she had been at all prepared to face an open betrayal trust. Trust. Unspoken but expected. Maybe they had been on different pages all along. Caitriona wasn't entirely sure what it was anymore. Whatever it had been, in her mind, it had never included screwing other people. She shook her head. Trust to betrayal was a just one second ride. The journey from betrayal to trust took a life time, no matter who was to blame.

They crested one last small rise and there it was. A small town, looking very much like a postcard that you might see in a shop, a typical small mountain town, a single street down the centre, a bar, a gas station, a grocery store, a diner, several agricultural and outdoor stores and at the end of the street a larger building, the medical centre. Here, there seemed to be an incongruous amount of cars and assorted vehicles. Busiest place in town, her mind mused as Johnathon stopped the car under the overhang. The words, 'Emergency Entrance' emblazoned on the red and white doors. “Let me get you a wheelchair.” His voice though quiet, suddenly seemed a million miles away. She nodded absently at him and watched as he strode across the walkway, slipping for a few steps on an icy
section before steadying himself and disappearing inside the red and white doors.

Johnathon returned a few moments later, wheelchair out in front of him, two large blankets hanging over one shoulder. A cold wind blew in as he opened the door and offered her his hand. She looked at it a moment, unsure if she wanted to leave the car, knowing that this was it. The end of the sheltered peace and quiet. It was here, it was upon her. Blue eyes looked up to his, nervous and unsure. He blinked slowly at her, then he half crouched, leveling their eye lines, letting her eyes search his.

She wanted to run. Johnathon could see it in her eyes, circulating round and round in the soft pools of blue. Run from what had brought her here in the first place. He knew the look. He’d seen it in his own face. He’d run, hid himself away, until the wounds had scabbed over, the healing far from done, but at least now, the bleeding had stopped and he could stand again. Or at least, he thought he could. He’d had a week in that cold damn cabin, alone, slowly recovering. She’d had three days. She was afraid, unsure. Was she ready for all this? His head tilted slightly to one side but those blue eyes held hers a moment. She would have to be ready, turning back now was not an option.

He let his eyes flick from his waiting hand and back to her face. He raised a blonde eyebrow and gave the smallest of nods then waited. She took a deep breath then closed her fingers around his. His grip was sure as he helped her out of the truck and into the wheelchair, tucking a warm blanket around her knees then standing and draping one across her shoulders. She looked up at him and reached for his hand, “Johnathon?”

“He’s okay.” Handsome features studied her as she spoke, “For everything. Just..” She swallowed back a lump in her throat but unsuccessfully stopped an errant tear drop rolling down her cheek, “Just thank you.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze then reached up and thumbed the tear from her face, “You’re welcome Caitriona.” Her eyes closed at his touch for the smallest moments before the warmth disappeared as he stood up straight. “Best get you inside, your family will be waiting for you.” He gripped the back of the chair and moved it to face the large admittance doors, “Ready?”

She took another deep breath and nodded. The doors opened and a large nurse met them just inside the doors, “I’ll take her from here Mr Chase.” She nudged the tall man out of the way and took over the driving of the chair, “The doctor would see you straight away,” She addressed Caitriona, “and your parent are already here.” She pointed through a large set of double doors that lead to the examination rooms and started to wheel her away. Caitriona looked back over her shoulder as the large doors opened.

He was standing, hands in his pockets, blue eyes watching her. Johnathon gave her a slight nod of his head, one corner of his mouth curling into a soft half smile. She tried to smile back, warm tears sliding down her cheeks as she watched the doors slowly swinging back together, eventually closing with a soft click, “Goodbye,.” She whispered, then squared her shoulders and turned to face the immediate future, whatever that might be.
She’d never really thought about how noisy a hospital really was. You tended to think of hospitals as quiet places, where death roamed the hallways, soundless, silent, unforgiving. Not this hospital, small and provincial that it was. From where she was lying Caitriona could hear any number of sounds, primarily the half muted conversations of her family, who weren’t known for their reserved natures. They’d already been into the room once. Her mother and father, doctors, two of her sisters. All of them talking, all of them holding her hand, touching her, asking her questions, telling her how worried they were. She’d smiled, accepted the hugs, the kisses, patiently answered what she could and all the while wishing for nothing more than the quiet of the cabin and calm, unobtrusive presence of its attractive owner.

“There’s no real need for you to stay overnight,” the doctor was explaining to her “You can go home, so long as you stay off the ankle as much as you can for at least two weeks and attend some physical therapy.” He was young but seemed reasonably competent, “Just sign these release papers and you’re all set to go.” He handed her the clipboard with a smile, “I’ll tell your family you’ll be out soon.” Caitriona thanked him quietly then leaned back against the pillows for a moment. Once she left this room, the peaceful solitude of the last three days would evaporate like mist in the midday sun. In truth, it hadn’t seemed like three days. If it hadn’t been for the nagging pain of her still very swollen and bruised foot, the time in the cabin would have verged on enjoyable. She had surprised herself at the level of companionable comfort that she’d felt around the blond man since their meeting. He was quiet and non-assuming, had given her the respectful distance she hadn’t even realised she’d needed.

Not an easy task given the size of the cabin. He’d taken care of her, both before and after finding out who exactly she was and what she did. While her face wasn’t as well known as some others in her industry, fame had recently started to catch up with her and with that came the distinct possibility that some people only wanted friendship because of who she was, what she could do for them. She’d experienced some of that in the height of her modelling career and had learned from it the hard, painful and devastating way. Now, she was very careful about who she let into her life, perhaps overly careful and sometimes that defensive wall was mistaken as aloof distance or worse, some form superiority. It was one of the reason’s she’d been involved with Tony. He’d known her a long time, having come into her life after her modelling but before Outlander. She’d felt reasonably safe with him. Safe that what she had become wouldn’t matter to him. Safe that they had at least a solid foundation of respect between them even if their relationship wasn’t as romantically intimate as it perhaps could have been. Coming to the realisation that he wasn’t as safe as she’d thought. She wasn’t going to lie to herself and say that the relationship she had with Tony was soul deep sensually intimate love that she played on screen. It wasn’t. It had never been and would never be. She’d settled for safe practicality. The sting in the tail had been not that Tony was having sex with other people, but that he hadn’t even bothered to tell her that he had wanted to. She wasn’t overly attracted to him physically, that was true and they didn’t behave particularly closely or have a very active sex life, it had become something of a low priority, but she did at least believe that he would be honest with her. Instead he’d done the opposite. It had left her feeling that there was absolutely no one around her that could be trusted. So she’d run. Run from them all and ended up here.

She looked at the empty doorway then down at her foot. She’d gone for x-rays on her ankle, which had proved Johnathon’s diagnosis to be entirely accurate. It was a sprain, a severe one, a painful one, but a sprain none the less. Running wasn’t really an option now was it, she mused ironically. She carefully lifted the moonboot encased foot onto the wheelchair footplate, released the brake and wheeled for the door. Caitriona had barely cleared the threshold when her mother and father
appeared. Her father immediately accepting the responsibility of steering the chair, her mother taking the paper bag filled with the clothes she’d been wearing upon arrival. She smiled at the both then her eyes fell on Tony. He was standing behind the family group, an empty expression on his face, a cup of coffee in his hand, watching her as they wheeled towards him down the long corridor. As she drew close, he bent, “Let’s get you out of here shall we?” he said quietly, kissing her cheek and nodding towards the door, “I’ve already gotten us a room at the only motel in town.” She nodded and half smiled, fully aware of her parents watching the entire scene. At least he seemed to care enough to have flown in with her family. Maybe she was judging him too harshly.

After signing the last of the necessary papers, Caitriona found herself sitting in a car, Tony beside her driving the short distance to the motel for the night. She presumed her mother and father would take one room, Sarah and Deidre another and, as uncomfortable as it may be, her and Tony in their own room. Her family knew nothing of what had happened in Seattle. She had a great relationship with all the members of her family, but that didn’t mean she was open book, not even to them. She had always been private about certain aspects of her personal life. Caitriona had only introduced Tony to them because word had filtered around through social media, pervasive press that were digging deeper around her and incidentally, through well-meant inquiries from friends and acquaintances, that she had been seeing someone and, her father being the ex-policeman and ever protective of her no matter what her age or her consternation, had point blanked asked her about him. She couldn’t lie to her father and so, she’d reluctantly admitted she was seeing Tony, but that it wasn’t serious. That had been over a year ago. Was it serious? Had it ever been from that point to now?

The car stopped and she was helped into the small, though surprising well appointed room, a large double bed set in the middle of the room. Sitting down on its soft surface, she let out a sigh as her mother carefully lifted her injured foot on the bed.

“Is there anything else you need sweetheart?” Her mother fluffed a pillow and elevated her daughter’s foot.

“No Mum, It’s okay. Really.” Caitriona offered a smile as her mother kissed her forehead. “Thank you but I’m fine.”

“Had enough of the fuss already have you?” Marie patted her daughter’s cheek. Some things never changed, she thought. Children may grow up and think they are different people, but, she looked at the strong independent woman who had always gone her own way sitting there, and knowing without a doubt it was the same strong willed, high spirited child that she'd watched over all her life.

“Just a bit tired.” Caitriona said somewhat apologetically, knowing her parents had come a long way, suffered a lot of stress over concern for her safety. She didn’t mean to brush that concern off, and it certainly wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate them, but it had been a very long day, she was hurting, she was tired and she glanced over as Tony carried in two bags and sat them on a low formed bench, there was still that to deal with.

“Been a bit of day.” She reached up and took her mother’s hand, “Thank you though, Mum. For being here. You and Dad both.”

Her mother smiled and squeezed her hand, “Speaking of your father, I had best go and get him sorted. Heaven forbid he try and get something out of our suitcases. I’ll be three weeks sorting out the mess.” She straightened and walked to the door, “If you need anything, be sure to call for me Caitriona.” She gave her a daughter a no nonsense look, “No matter what time, if you need me, call.”

The door closed, leaving just the two of them in the awkward stilted silence. Tony leaning against the counter, quiet, almost twitchy with clear tension. Caitriona looked at him, a neutral expression on her face. Neutral because that is what she felt. Nothing one way or the other. Not anger, not regret, not anything. What were they to each other now, she wasn’t sure. Realistically, had there ever really been a committed relationship in their future together? Could they have continued the way they were for an indefinite amount of time and been happy? Had she ever really been happy?
She watched as he pushed off the bench and came to sit beside her on the opposite side of the bed. He looked pale, dark hair a little disheveled, it’s typical normal state. Tony looked over the rim of his glasses as he spoke, “Do you,” He cleared his throat then continued, “Do you want to talk now or just..”

Caitriona looked down at her hands resting in her lap then back to his face, “What do you want to talk about?”

“Us.”

“Us?” She looked up at him, mentally trying to erase the memory of what she’d seen in that hotel room. Tony half bent over in the shower, some stranger’s cock buried to the hilt in his ass and some blonde woman’s mouth wrapped his own cock, moans, grunts and the wet sound of bodies slapping against each other. Tony’s head had turned and for a moment they’d locked eyes before she’d turned on her heel and left, slamming the door with all the force she could muster. They hadn’t spoken since. He’d called her several times, she’d ignored them, and stupidly spent the remainder of the night drinking, ending up in Sam’s hotel room. That had only served to complicate matters to whole other level. Then she’d run. Gotten away from all of it, from them both, even from herself, by driving. That been working pretty damn great until she’d run off the road and almost drowned in a frozen lake.

“Us Caitriona.” Tony reached for one of her hands, “I know you’re angry with me but,” He squeezed her fingers as he spoke, “It was a mistake and it won’t happen again.”

His touch was cold, almost clammy, weak and unsure. “A mistake?” She queried, surprisingly calm, “Did the two people you were having sex with in my hotel room have the same opinion?”

“Caitriona, please,” He begged, his dark eyes misting over with tears, real or imagined, she didn’t know which, “It was a one time thing. I just,” He stopped and swallowed.

“You just?”

“Look babe,” Tony explained, dropping his gaze, unable to stand the scrutiny of her eyes any longer, “It’s just been so hectic, what between the your show, the travel and awards circuit. It’s been a lot to deal with is all.”

“Has it?” She challenged, her voice coloured with disbelief, “I thought you were okay with it? You seemed to enjoy the parties. You told me it was great networking for you. When did that change?”

“It was, it is, I am Caitriona.” He ran a hand through his unruly hair, the dark brown curls splaying out from the arms of his glasses, “I didn’t mean that I don’t like what you do.”

“Then what exactly is it that you don’t like Tony?” Her voice came out louder and sounded harsher than she wanted it to, “Me? Is that what that little exhibition in Seattle was supposed to tell me? That you’d rather do god knows what with whoever the fuck they were, then to have the common decency to speak to me like an adult?” This was it. She wanted it all out there. She wanted to know, needed to know. Enough pussyfooting around, out with it.

“That is not fair Caitriona.” He stood, slowly pacing back and forth along the edge of the bed, “After everything that I put up with.”

“Everything you put up with? Like what? Canvasing investors for your club at some of the most exclusive events in the world? Staying in seven star hotels, travelling first class around the world? Getting regular access to fortune 500 company directors and executives? Is that what you have to put up with Tony?”

It was true. All of it. He suddenly found himself caught off-guard by her frank admissions. In face of the truth, he went straight to his fall-back position, Sam Heughan. “No Caitriona, what I have to put up with is every social media site, gossip column and entertainment press site constantly informing me and half the world that you are currently fucking Sam Heughan. And before you try and deny it, do not sit there and tell me you haven’t noticed him fawning over you all the time?”

This was her soft spot and he knew it.

“I don’t control Sam or the internet. You know damn well there is nothing between Sam and I. Christ Tony, you were there when I made that decision, when I first started Outlander. I told you I wasn’t going to get involved with anyone in this business!” Her eyes snapped at him, her voice
short and clipped, “I haven’t. I wouldn’t do that to you or anyone else I was seeing.”

In truth, he didn’t give a rat’s ass if she was fucking Sam. Tony was more than happy to stay out of the spotlight when it suited him. After all, he was under no illusions what it was they were doing. She needed a beard and a companion to do the Hollywood networking with and he needed to make connections through the network opportunities that she provided. She was also a real boost to his ego. She was beautiful, talented, highly intelligent and opened doors that would normally be shut. He was nothing more than ordinary, his business endeavours were in serious danger of slipping into obscurity, not to mention bankruptcy. Clearly the benefits of being her, whatever he was to her, was far more advantageous to him than being without her. He had to try, he strategised, try and at least stay with her. He knew her well enough to know that with her already thinking of leaving, there was only one way to stop her.

Guilt.

With some women, it was money, some it was the hope for love, with Caitriona it was guilt. Guilt could lead her make very questionable decisions. He was already up to his eyeballs in debt with this latest club and badly needed high end investors in the next month or so or face total financial ruin. Caitriona wasn’t the only way to get out of this type of trouble, but, at this stage, she was easiest. An appearance or two at one of his other clubs would boost revenue enough to tide things over until the new club was on its feet. He needed her, needed where she could take him. There was a time when he’d genuinely felt bad for using her like that, but somewhere along the way, rightly or wrongly, he’d come to view it as payment for services rendered. “Look,” Tony softened his voice, “I know you wouldn’t Caitriona. I know it’s what you need to do for this job, the narrative, the press, production. All of it, I get it. I do.” He sat back down on the bed beside her. “It just hurts sometimes to read that stuff you know?”

She did know. Sometimes it hurt her to read some of things people wrote about her, but she understood all too well why they wrote it. To the outside world it DID look like she was fucking Sam Heughan. Sam didn’t help matters, constantly pushing the boundaries in the name of promoting Mr and Mrs Outlander, and after that fiasco in his room in Seattle, was she really in a position to throw stones at Tony? Yes, she understood alright. Understood she was part of this whether she wanted to be or not, whether it was true or not. Press was press and Caitriona and Sam made press. Production actively encouraged the whole thing, almost ordering it. It was good for business, it kept their show in the spotlight. It also meant that while the spotlight was on her and Sam, the rest of her life was left alone, something she was determined to make happen. So, she’d played along. It was act, part of the job. What she hadn’t done was look at it from Tony’s point of view. It can’t be easy and if the roles were reversed, would she be as understanding?

“Caitriona,” He squeezed her hand, “Please. It won’t happen again, I swear.” He turned his body towards her, “Can we just forget it ever happened? Please?”

Could she forget? Did she even want to? She guessed she at least owed him a chance, after everything, all the events, the parties she’d dragged him too, the months during heavy filming when they would barely see each other. He was right, the constant press innuendo that she was having a more than professional relationship with Sam Heughan would be hard to swallow on top of everything else. A chance then? Couldn’t she give him that, owed him that? Tony lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, “Can we please just go back to the way we were Caitriona? I don’t want to lose this. Things can be different. We will really try this time, yeah? Forgive me please?”
Johnathon watched as Caitriona was slowly wheeled away, disappearing as the hospital doors swung shut with a gentle sense of finality. That was that. He’d gotten her back safely, back to her family, back to her life. He turned, giving the door one last look and walked quietly back to the car. He hoped she would be alright now.

He yanked opened the car door and slid into the seat, resting his hands on the wheel. He gazed at the hospital building, wondering if whoever had hurt Caitriona, hurt and made her run, would be there with her in that hospital. Probably come in with her family, he surmised. Johnathon hoped that whoever he was, he would at least be a man and either fix the situation or make sure Caitriona came out of it all still standing. She hadn’t told him the details and he hadn’t pressed her, but clearly someone, somewhere had done a number on her.

Still, it wasn’t really any of his business. They may have spent three days in the same cabin, but neither of them had really engaged in what anyone could call in-depth conversation. They had both been too busy dealing with their own particular demons to even consider that. There’d been long stretches of silence and some polite conversation but that was about the extent of it. Blond brows knit as his mind drifted back. It hadn’t really been anything one thing the tall woman had said to him, but rather an overall feeling the subject of her quiet introspection had been of a personal, rather than professional nature.

Not his business reminded himself again as he leaned back and started the engine. It wasn’t like he didn’t have his own share of problems to deal with. He turned the car down the road towards the motel. Deal with wasn’t really the correct term, more like overcome, he pondered. The time in cabin had helped, he felt that, but it was still there. The fresh hurt of it all, simmering just below the surface. Johnathon hoped Katherine was at least happy, though for the life of him, he couldn’t imagine that she would be. Not with Stephen of all people, but that decision wasn’t Johnathon’s to make. Katherine had been pretty clear about exactly what she thought about Johnathon now. She’d made her decision. There was no turning back. She wouldn’t and he couldn’t.

Johnathon parked the car, squeezing his hands against the cold leather of the wheel. It was done, the invisible tether that bonds two people, severed. The damage so severe that not even love could help either of them now. Love, he shook his head introspectively, most dangerous substance on earth. Johnathon had faced a lot of hurdles in his life, but this, he took a deep breath, this was taking some defeating. He let out a long slow breath and went to see about organising a room, only to find that he had taken the last available room, the whole place booked out with a mixture of press, Caitriona’s family and management apparently. She’d told him she was an actor in some cable show. He’d never heard of her or the show, not that that was unusual. Television wasn’t something he’d ever had a lot of time to watch, in fact, apart from the occasional sports broadcast and, of course the news, he wouldn’t have the first clue about actors, television or celebrities in general. Though, he opened the door of his motel and set his bags down, if Caitriona had been some type of A list celebrity, he’d have though her name would have triggered some type of recognition at least. Still, her temporary disappearance from mainstream society had been enough
to warrant a small contingency of press. Caitriona didn’t behave like most of the celebrities he’d had the misfortune to meet or been assigned to. He smiled, though she did have a stubborn streak. That was a general attribute most celebrities seemed to have. In any case, he reflected as he decided to go and hunt down some dinner, this sleepy little town was about to get its own dose of celebrity, complete with press and corporate shenanigans. He closed the door and started to walk down the main street to the bar. It wasn’t far and Johnathon be able sit, have a drink and get some food. Maybe, he’d occupy himself with people watching. It was habit that had become automatic behaviour. Part of his job. One he was good at. He’d taken leave from that job for the first time only a week before. He’d had to. His mind had been turned inside out and victims’ families deserved to have someone who had their entire mind on the job. Deciding some time away might help, he’d taken a week off and disappeared off the grid.

Into the mountains.

Into solitude.

Trying to find answers and finally realising that there were no answers to find.

Just endurance.

He ordered a scotch and sat down at a table facing the street window. Endure or give up. He sipped the cold liquid, a pleasant warmth starting in his belly. He could never give up, it wasn’t in him and so, endure it was. Tomorrow he would head back. Back to the world and all its problems. Back to, he took another sip, back to no one now, not her, not them, not anything. Just work. The finality of it all was still raw. Her leaving hadn’t been a sudden thing, he reflected, swirling the amber liquid around the glass. It had started that first night. That night he’d arrived back from Boston to find her, sitting in their living room, graphic photographs splayed across the glass surface of the coffee table, tears coursing down her cheeks, a look of such profound hurt, anger and rage all rolled into one on her face that it had driven the very breath from him. “What have you done?” She’d asked him.

Such a simple question.

The answer was equally as straight forward, but one she ultimately couldn’t accept. Couldn’t then, didn’t now, never would. The truth never had a leg to stand on, like an eyewitness that wasn’t even in the room at the time of the offence, the truth had become irrelevant. In the end, the only thing that had mattered was what she believed. No, he corrected himself, it hadn’t been what she’d believed that had been the determining factor, it had been what she didn’t believe.

Him.

She didn’t believe in him anymore.

He understood her reasons and had accepted the she had acted on what she thought was necessity. It had taken another two months before the inevitable end had come. The bags stacked neatly beside the door, the last hints of her perfume as she’d kissed his cheek goodbye, then turned and closed the door. He could still see the entire scene if he closed his eyes. Even now, it was burned in exquisite detail on his mind’s eye. Every move, every look, every sound. He had loved her. That had never been in doubt. The doubt had centred around trust and without trust, there was no point in continuing. No point in trying to prove who was right or wrong. No point in fighting for something that had been lost a long time before either of them realised it. Broken beyond repair. The end of what had been. No way back, the way forward littered with memories and pain of what would never be. Like a wave a high tide, washing higher and stronger with each passing minute, the feelings of loss and emptiness had grown to almost overwhelmed him, threatening every
morning and throughout every long night alone to drag him in the dark endless ocean of nothingness. It was a feeling of utter despair that was so deep, Johnathon was terrified. Terrified he’d never be able to swim hard enough to break the surface to breathe.

The fear of it all had made him run. Run to a place Katherine had never been, to a time before he had known her, to somewhere that had sheltered him once before when his world had fallen around him. A sanctuary. A private place, hidden from the world, to recover strength, gather courage, take that one breath that would lead to another. He finished his drink and set the heavy based tumbler on the table. That was how you survived. That was how you endured.

“As god is my witness,” A young blond haired woman, an apron around her sizeable midrift smiled broadly and walked towards him, a plate in one hand, filled to over flowing with a burger flanked by an inordinately large amount of fries that smelled good and made his mouth water, reminding him that he was hungrier than he thought, “If it isn’t Johnathon Chase. Local hero. Cape not needed” She deposited the bounty on the table, grinning insufferable and opened her arms. 

Johnathon stood, accept the enveloping embrace of the woman, “Hello Susannah.” He kissed her cheek which was slightly flushed pink with exertion, “Think you better sit down.” Johnathon yanked out a chair for her and helped her settle into it, the large swell of her very pregnant belly making the process longer than it normally have been.

“Thought the hero could do with some food before he sucked down any more of my whiskey,” She lifted hand and caught the barman’s eye, “Why is it the first I hear of you in town is news that you’ve rescued some Hollywood superstar from the wicked depths of Larson’s Lake? From those pack of vultures, I mean welcome patrons?” She lifted an eyebrow and nodded towards a small pack of photographers and press reporters sitting at the bar, “They are at least good for business.” She commented, with a small groan, one hand absently rubbing her rounded stomach. 

Johnathon glanced over at them. He hated the press with a rare passion, but, it was better they be here drinking than poking around Caitriona and her family. It was one extra pressure Johnathon reasoned the tall woman could do without and he privately wondered how long it would be before word filtered around the press group that a first hand source of information about the whole ordeal was sitting less than twenty feet away. “Don’t worry hero,” Susannah leaned over, as if having heard his thoughts, “Davey over there,” She indicated the barman, “has already been telling all about this Johnathon Chase person.”

“Oh really and what exactly is Davey telling them?”

“Johnathon Chase is a mad trapper like guy, roughly 60, though no one knows for sure, that is ugly as a patch of prickles in at picnic, with a glass eye and three missing front teeth.” They were interrupted as a waitress, placed a fresh glass of scotch in front of Johnathon and a tall glass of water in front of the host. “Oh and he only comes to town once a month to buy liquor.” She took a long drink, barely able to contain her glee at spinning such a tale, “Incidentally you’ve already left town by the way, back to the mountains and your hunting traps. Johnathon laughed, “Only in this place would that even be remotely believable.”

“I know right?” Susannah smiled conspiratorially, “Oh and Mike, who is Davey’s brother, works at the motel, so, I wish them luck finding out that you are staying there. But I’m betting you’ve already taken care of that?”

Johnathon nodded, “I have.”

“And who are we today?”

“Alexander Mason.”

“Fancy.” Susannah chuckled, though she knew the name well. It was his middle name and the maiden name of his grandmother, “Now, to more serious matters, what are you doing here? You’ve been away so long I’ve almost forgotten what you look like. Where’s Kate?” She cast an eye around the room, searching, not giving him time to answer.

“She is in New York.” Johnathon stated, immediately brushing the question aside, “Moved there
just over a month back.” The emotional neutrality didn’t go unnoticed and Susannah cocked her head to one side, eyeing him as she took a good drink of the cool liquid. She’d met Katherine Carmichael last year, when her and her husband, Charlie, had been passing through town. They’d all had a wonderful lunch together and Susannah had liked the tall dark haired doctor, having left with the impression Johnathon’s relationship with the woman had been extremely serious. In fact, she’d been expecting news of an engagement. To hear that they had split was unexpected to say the least and her curiosity was screaming at her to find out what had happened.

“You’re not moving there with her?” Assumptions aside, Susannah thought it at least prudent to find out if in fact they had split. Johnathon sipped his drink, “No.” He leaned forward and picked up his cutlery. His appetite had left him but he figured with a mouthful of food, it would be harder to answer any questions. He knew, he better get used to that, at least for the next little bit. Anyone that had known them as a couple would be asking the exact same questions. He would have to face it sooner or later.

“Oh.” So split it was then, “You’re not going after her?”

“No.” Johnathon finished a mouthful, his eyes flicking around the bar, refusing to meet hers, afraid she would see, see the disappointment festering there, “She decided that New York was the best place for her.”

“I see.” She paused, wondering who or what the third party was. In her experience, there was always a third party in situations like this. Sometimes it was a person, sometimes it was blind ambition, sometimes it was a memory from long ago, usually it was alcohol and one, two or a series of bad judgement calls. She suspected that wasn’t the case here. Johnathon wasn’t a big drinker and his ingrained sense of honour and loyalty usually meant that bad judgements couldn’t get traction with any situation he was involved in. “And what’s in New York then?” She asked. Johnathon gave a soft snort of derision, “Not me for one and Stephen Cross for the other.” Well, that answered that, third party mystery solved. Another man. “Are you sure about this Johnathon?” She already knew he was from the look on his face. He had walked away and not looked back.

“Somethings just can’t be repaired.”

“Everything can be fixed. A certain hero type man told me that once.” She still remembered that night, in her darkest time, when it had all seemed too hard and she’d cursed god, Charlie, the factory, anyone that she could think off. She’d been buried so far under the strain of a new marriage and recovering husband from a life altering accident, six months pregnant, that it had just seemed to hard. Everything had just seemed too hard. Johnathon had sat with her, all night, offered a strong shoulder, let her blame the world, listened to her spill every problem she faced, every fear that crossed her mind, every single doubt she had about the future. When she’d finished explaining, Susannah had expected agreeance, an absolution that it was alright to walk away, to give up on someone she loved, on a life that she thought was broken. But it hadn’t come. Instead, he’d told her that everything can be fixed if she wanted it badly enough. Johnathon looked at her honestly, “You can only fix something when everyone pulls in the same direction.”

“If you need the extra muscle, I’m your girl.” He dredged up a half smile, “It’s not your muscle I need.” The smiled faded, “I can’t fix this. It was her choice Susannah. I may not agree with it.” Johnathon crossed his arms over his chest, a physical representation of a clam closing to protect itself, “But I’ll respect it all the same.” No matter how much it hurts, his mind added silently. He’d tried explaining his innocence. Tried to tell her that he hadn’t done what she’d accused him of. Tried to tell her the truth. In the end, she hadn’t been able to hear him over the sheer volume of what she was sure was proof, hitting her for every direction.

The final straw had dropped on their backs after the latest phone call from a nameless woman claiming she knew Johnathon. Katherine had told him that she thought him a liar.

Just like that, it was done. In the immediate aftermath, he thought about proving to her that he had
never lied about anything in his life, that he hadn’t cheated, that his integrity was the same as the day she’d met him. He was a detective, a good one, with enough resources to work at finding all the proof he needed. It was then he realised that no amount would ever have been enough. He loved her, more than anyone he’d ever loved before. He had wanted to spend his life with her. But trust had been broken. Her’s in him and his in her’s.

He could have begged, fought for her to believe him. Tried to make her stay when she couldn’t, tried to make her believe when she couldn’t. The problem was that Johnathon Chase could no more force something on someone he cared about than tear out is own heart. It was the way he was made. Trust was shattered between them and without trust, love cannot survive.

It hadn’t died quickly, but had withered and by the end, Johnathon wasn’t even sure Katherine felt anything for him. That didn’t mean her leaving didn’t still tear at him or that it hadn’t rend his heart into hundred pieces that he wasn’t sure would ever go back together.

Innocent or not, broken was broken and it hurt like blue blazers.

Susannah saw the emotion behind his blue eyes and reached out a hand to him. She’d known him a long time, having been at college with him ten years earlier. He was at her wedding, he’d been there when her world had fallen from beneath her when Charlie had been hurt in an accident at the factory. Given her a place, a home, rescued a husband from something she’d been unable to help with, effectively saving her marriage, been their friend though it all and had never once, asked a single thing in return. For god’s sake, this bar, her family’s livelihood was partially his, though the world would never have known it. He’d bought it for them, her and Charlie, when things at been at their worst. Bought the place, floated it financially until she’d been able to run it. He’d come up here, every other day for months, being the muscle and the legs for a husband that had been crippled, physically helping to build their home with them. All the while Johnathon had worked, studied and lead his own life. When it had all been finished, Johnathon had quietly signed over the bar to her. It had been all Susannah could do to talk him into being a silent partner at least. He had done all that for no other reason than friendship. There was nothing Susannah could do now to ease what Johnathon was feeling. Nothing at all. Except be here, the way he had been for them. She leaned forward and took his hand, “For the best then?”

He didn’t answer, just nodded and took another drink, swallowing slowly, inspecting the scalloped edges of the glass. Susannah squeezed his hand sympathetically, “It will get better. Just give it some time.” She waited until the blue eyes lifted to hers and blinked, until he could get the hurt pushed back down into its dark corner. “Now, if you’ve quite finished rescuing Hollywood types in the middle of winter, we have a not so comfortable pull out couch that you’re more than welcome to inhabit for as long as you need. Charlie and Georgina would love see you.”

“As appealing as that sounds, I have an early flight tomorrow.”

Susannah’s brows knit, “A flight? Hate to tell you but the strip has been closed for a week and will likely be so for another week at least.”

“Helicopter flight.” Johnathon clarified, “Tom’s doing the flying.”

“Oh sweet baby Jesus,” Susannah crossed herself. Tom was the resident helicopter pilot and while perfectly safe, tended to not give his passengers the calmest of flights. “You will be calling in here for breakfast, do you hear me? You can see Charlie and Georgina. I’ll cook you up something special or at least something that will look colourful when you spew it back up.”

“When you put it like that, how could I turn down such an invitation.” Johnathon smiled softly, if for not other reason than he appreciated the fact that Susannah was trying to lighten the mood and make him forget what was just below the surface all the time.

If only forgetting was that easy.

It will be better.
If only it was.
Almost

Caitriona looked at Tony, sitting there, begging her for another chance, an invisible cloak of guilt settling over her slender shoulders, its oppressive weight, pressing down the desire to leave, to change, to walk away, crushing the urge until it was nothing more than a passing thought.

She slowly took back her hand, resting it in her lap, “Alright,” Her voice was soft and tired, “We can try Tony. No promises, but we can try, I suppose.”

“Thank you Babe.” Dark eyes studied her from behind his glasses, “You know we’re good together. You and I.” Tony tentatively smiled at her then leaned over and kissed her cheek, "We're in this together right?" Caitriona nodded, hardly even hearing his words, the sound nothing more than a low drone in her ears. He straightened, standing beside the bed, trying to appraise if the crisis had been averted or was still impending. He'd come to learn with Caitriona that it was always best to have it out with her, right there and then, rather than to let that intelligent mind of hers mull whatever it was over for long periods of time. Particularly when you wanted her to see things your own way and even more so when your way didn't necessarily equate to the way things actually were. “Now,” He decided that alcohol might help his cause, " How about a drink? I’d bring you dinner, but, we probably won’t find much in this place for you to eat.” She tried to focus on whatever it was he was saying, the smallest traces of his Scottish accent tinging the very edges, the sound once comforting, now irritating to her ears. Caitriona's eyes drifted closed a moment, wanting him to just stop talking, wanting to shut out the noise, craving the peace and quiet of the last few days. The quiet of the cabin. The quiet of Johnathon.

“Caitriona?” Tony’s voice was insistent and invaded her mental space, “Drink? Pain killer?”

She opened her eyes and shook her head, “No. I think I’m just going to go to bed and rest,” she nodded towards the door, “But you need dinner. I’ll be fine here.”

“I won’t be long.” Tony grabbed his coat, “That is, if I can find anything that is worth eating in this god forsaken place.” He turned his collar down and straightened his clothing, “I swear, it’s like civilization has regressed 50 years. Not sure how you survived it for three days.” He reached for the door, “You sure you don’t want anything? Bottle of red wine might take the edge off? Help you relax? They don’t have your usual but they might have something drinkable if I search.”

She shook her head, “I’m sure. You go on.”

Tony watched her a moment, hoping he'd read it right. Hoping he'd done enough to make her commit this time. He thought he had, but with Caitriona, he could never really be certain. She wasn't an actress for nothing and she'd spent years practicing, refining the art of presenting a certain picture regardless of what was bubbling away under the surface. “I won’t be long then.” He gave her a half hearted smile then left, closing the door with a soft click behind him.

Relief.

Relief was the only real emotion she felt.

Relief that he’d finally left her alone.

She didn’t want to fight with him, really she didn’t. On top of everything else, he was right. She was as much to blame as he was in this whole mess. Giving it a second go seemed like the reasonable thing to do, seemed like the adult thing to do.
Seemed only fair.

Probably easier to do than to change anyway, her mind sounded wearily. So, she sighed, she would.

Try.

She did owe him that at least. She didn’t enjoy hurting people and had no desire to inflict pain if she could possibly avoid it.

There.

She’d found at least one reason to stay with him.

He was after all her friend.

There was another reason.

He’d been dragged to event after event because of her work.

Another reason.

Sam Heughan and all that entailed.

Another reason.

The list in her mind grew, trying desperately to rationalise her own decision. Change had seemed so easy in the cabin, when it had just been her and her thoughts. Face to face, change seemed a good deal harder.

Her stomach grumbled and she laid a hand on it, smoothing the folds of her shirt. Maybe dinner wasn’t such a bad idea. Caitriona realised she hadn’t really eaten anything since very early this morning. She’d woken to find that her tall cabin mate had busied himself and gotten them breakfast to have before leaving. He’d cooked her two eggs with some type of beans and onions which, on the surface of it, sounded horrendous and looked even worse, but had, surprisingly, tasted absolutely divine. Caitriona gave a small chuckle, loud in the quiet room, recalling the discussion which had ensued. Her, trying to guess the ingredients and him refusing to give up his ‘culinary’ secrets. Later he’d confessed that the whole thing was simply an onion and a can of baked beans cooked in a pan together. Johnathon, she smiled at the thought of him. Introverted and quiet, and yet, companionable and comforting. A soothing presence without being overwhelming. She wondered where he was tonight and what he was doing. Probably on his way to New York. He had no real reason to stay in town any longer than he had to. He could have continued to drive, through the night, if he wanted to. She knew he’d said he had work commitments that he needed to get back to. Work but no family, no girlfriend, no partner, no one in particular.

Caitriona looked at the closed motel door. Maybe she should have just stayed in the car with him. New York was as good as place as any to begin the commute back to the UK from. The small issue of her foot would have been the only sticking point. Nothing a few good injections of morphine couldn’t handle and the way she was feeling right now, a drug induced haze may well have been more than worth it. Her stomach growled louder this time, far more insistent than the first. Now, she was certain. She should have asked for dinner, but like a lot of things in her life at the moment, it was too late to think of that now. She had her chance and didn’t speak up before Tony had left.

She sighed and decided to get changed into something more comfortable and then settle down in bed with a bottle of water and the TV remote, wouldn’t be the first time in her life that she’d substituted water for food. Carefully and somewhat precariously balancing on the crutches,
Caitriona hobbled over to the large, black bag Tony had brought with him. She unzipped it and flipped open the lid. It was filled to overflowing with the rest of her clothes from Seattle. In her haste to leave, she'd thrown a few things in a bag, frantic to just get away. Those were now at the bottom of the lake. This was the remainder. Caitriona scrunched through the clothing, most of it formal and those that were casual were not really comfortable for sleep.

She pulled out a pair of jeans and a grey t-shirt, the best of a bad lot. Caitriona unfolded the jeans, skinny legged. “For fucks sake...” She shoved the offending items back into the case and held up the shirt. At best, it would come to the top of her thighs. It would have to do, she guessed. She closed the bag with a little more force than strictly necessary. It teetered on the edge of the rack and threatened to fall for a moment. She couldn't have cared less if it did. What was one more thing to go wrong. She was more than entirely frustrated with just about everything at this point. Caitriona let out a sigh then set her crutches to lean against the counter. At least getting undressed should be successful. Thankfully the skirt was relatively easy. A button and a zip and slight shimmy of her hips and it lay in a puddle around her feet. She grabbed the small shirt and bent to retrieve a bottle of cold water from the small fridge that served as the room’s mini bar. Tossing the bottle and the remote onto the bed, Caitriona turned and reached for the crutches. A crumpled brown paper bag, tucked under her makeup case catching her eye.

She let out a small breath and tugged it out, a smile already drifting across her features as she uncurled the rolled lip of the packet. Her eyes closed in absolute pleasure as her fingers reached inside, finding the soft material of a blue sweatshirt and grey oversized track pants. The clothing Johnathon had given her, that she’d worn in the cabin. Caitriona hummed appreciatively and held them up to her face, breathing in the clean scent. In all the upheaval and fuss, she'd forgotten the clothes been taken from her at the hospital, exchanged for first a hospital gown and then a set of her own clothes. She threw the small shirt away, a broad smile on her face as she made for the bed. Shirts, bras and underwear rapidly joining the other useless apparel, tossed with satisfied rejection into the far corners of the bag rack, blissfully replaced by warm, soft comfort of the cabin clothing. Caitriona was just settling herself back on the bed when soft knock at the door sounded, “Caitriona?” The familiar voice of her older sister Deidra drifted through the door.

“Come in.” Caitriona voiced, watching as the door swung open, admitting the tall dark haired form of her sibling.

“Hey sis,” Deidra smiled, closing the door and taking a seat on the edge of the bed, “Nothing like a bit of excitement to spice up a weekend,” She leaned over and kissed her sister’s cheek, “Might want to brush up on those driving skills.”

“Ha Ha,” Caitriona retorted, “You’re one to talk after that episode with the roller door at that apartment complex.”

“Oh no,” She scoffed, waggling a finger back and forth, “That was not my doing, ” She settled herself beside Caitriona, "That bloody remote went haywire. How was I to know the door would come down like that!”

“Several times from what I heard.”

“The car stalled, can’t help that.” Deidra chuckled in memory. A small silence fell between them, “So Caitriona..” She bumped her younger sister’s shoulder gently, “What’s really been going on then?”

Caitriona twisted a small section of the oversize shirt around a finger, “What do you mean? I slid on a corner, hit a drift and the car ended up in a lake.”
“I know all that,” Deidra waved a hand dismissively, “What I don’t know, is why you weren’t on the plane like everyone else? Spontaneous road tripping is not really the first thing that comes to mind when I think about you.”

Caitriona shrugged, “I just needed a bit a space away from it all.” The fabric twisted tighter.

“I see.” Deidra commented, nodding slowly as if in deep thought, “Space away from it.” She paused, “It being?”

“The public, the production, Sam -”

“Tony?” Deidra supplied artfully.

Caitriona sighed, letting the fabric in her hands go, “Our relationship isn’t the source of ALL my problems. There are other things in life apart from that to complicate matters you know.”

“Oh please Caitriona,” Deidra swiveled around, crossing her legs at her ankles and leaning back against the headboard beside her sister, “You can’t tell me that after all this time you haven’t figured out ways and means of dodging the public and as for production, you love acting, love this job and this role right?” Caitriona nodded her agreement, “You’re managing being the face of this show and all the carry on that comes with it yes?” Another nod, “So that just leaves, by your own list, Sam and Tony. And if it’s not Tony,” Deidra counted down on her fingers, “that leaves…” She nudged the shoulder closest to her again, “So what’s going on with him ?”

“Sam?”

“No.” She deadpanned sarcastically, “The other hot and handsome co-star that is wants to screw your brains out.”

“Nice.”

“Well it’s true.” Deidra defended, “Anyone with eyes can see that Caitriona. He’s made it so bloody blatantly obvious.”

“And you think I haven’t made it blatantly clear that I don’t want to go there?” Caitriona snapped back with more venom than she realised, “Kissing me isn’t going to change that.”

“Sam kissed you?” Deidra’s brows almost raised to hairline, eye going wide with surprise.

“In Seattle.”

“And?”

“And nothing,” Caitriona’s hands dropped to her thighs, “He kissed me. I left.”

“You left?”

“Yes, I left. I told you, I needed some air, some space.”

A knock sounded and they both turned towards the door. It issued inwards and Sarah, Caitriona’s younger sister, closed by age and closest in relationship stepped inside, “Who’s kissing who?” she queried, smiling at the mere prospect of romantic gossip, “How are you feeling by the way?” Sarah leaned over, kissed her sister’s cheek then sat down.

“Sam kissed Caitriona.” Deidra looked around Caitriona at Sarah, who had taken up her position on the opposite side of the bed, quickly and efficiently providing her sibling with all the
“Sam kissed you?” Sarah settled back, thoroughly intrigued, “Please tell me you kissed him back?”

“No.” Caitriona let out a breathe of frustration, “I did not kiss him back.”

“Why not?” Both sisters asked at the same time.

Caitriona shook her head, dark brows knitting, “Apart from the fact that I am with Tony, something you two,” She waved a finger between the pair in question, “Seem to have conveniently forgotten.” Both sisters rolled their eyes in almost perfect unison as she continued, “I have a rule about not dating people at work. I had it when I was modelling and I’m sticking to now, because I’ve seen first hand the damage that can be done when a romantic relationship at work goes to hell. I can’t afford for that to happen to me, not now. I need to have a solid working relationship with Sam to be able to do what this role needs.”

“Oh right, the rule..” Deidra nodded, “Rules are mean to be broken you know and Tony doesn’t count.”

“Exactly, ignoring the Tony factor for the moment,” Sarah added, “Sam is good looking and seems like a great guy Caitriona, plus who’s to say a relationship there would go to hell? Sometimes things do work out you know. If there was ever a time for breaking rules.”

“How can Tony not count? We are together. You two are actively encouraging me to cheat on him?” She shot them an outrageous look, “Really? Come on, both of you.”

“Okay, let me get this.” Sarah, nodded to Deidra, deciding she would be the one to grab this particular bull by the horns “First of all, dear sister, you may be with Tony, but you are not together. You have never been together and if you are going to sit there and argue that with me then we need to take you back to the hospital and have your head checked.” She held up a hand, forestalling Caitriona’s protest, “Together, implies a relationship. A close, loving, intimate relationship. Generally one requiring the other to actually show some form of physical closeness at some point, or in your case, any point.” Sarah was on a roll and decided to keep going, buoyed by the knowing nods of agreement from her partner in crime sitting on the opposite side of Caitriona, “I can’t even remember the last time I saw you two kiss, hell, even hug with real feeling. At this point I’d even settle for a look between the two of you that suggested you might want actually be around each other for more than ten minutes. That is not a ‘together’ Caitriona.” She emphasised together with her own brand of air quotes and a raised eyebrow, "I'm not sure what on earth it is to be honest. You can call it 'together' if you want to, but that is not actually being together and you know it. Hence, Tony factor is zero. If anything, we should mark him down in the other column, under reasons why you SHOULD go there with Sam.”

“Are you finished?”

“Not quite.” Sarah drew breathe, “Discounting the fact the man is about as interesting as watching paint dry. Honestly Caitriona, the last time we all went out to dinner, I kept wanting to poke my fork into his hand to make sure he was still alive. I would be able to accept this thing that you are claiming as together in some aspect if the vibes between you and Tony weren’t colder than a brass seat on the shady side of an iceberg. In fact, this thing, whatever it is, has now got you driving around the mountains to Bumfuck USA in the middle of winter rather than get on a plane with any of them.” Sarah held up a hand, “Yes, yes, you can spare me the malarkey about you needing time away, and the guff about you decides to go for a ‘drive’. I’m calling bullshit right there.” Sarah turned and gripped her younger sister’s hand, ducking her head and forcing Caitriona to look at her, about to drive home the closing points of her argument, “We’re not encouraging you to cheat on
anyone Caitriona, because we don’t think there is anyone to cheat on. Tell me we’re wrong if we are Caitriona. You tell us right now that you love Tony, that you’re in love with him, that you want him, that he makes you happy and there is no one else you’d rather be with and you won’t hear another bad word, utterance or comment about it from any of us.”

Caitriona’s eyes searched her sister’s, flicking back and forth, knowing she should defend him, defend them, but at the same time, feeling powerless against the truth, hanging right there in the air. “Tony is,” She hesitated, knowing the truth was written on her face, “Tony is here.” It was non-committal and sounded empty, but it was what it was and all she had to give at the moment, “He’s here and Sam isn’t.”

“No Sarah,” Caitriona eyed them, pinning each of them with a stubborn glare, “You need to hear me on this and then both of you agree to leave this alone?”

Silence, followed by reluctant nods of assent from both sisters. What had started out as jovial conversation had turned into something far more serious. Caitriona really didn’t want to talk about any of this, but, Sarah was like a dog with a bone and she wasn’t about to let this go. Now was as good as time as ever to hit this head on, once and for all. If she was ever going to make it work, this had to be done.

“First,” Caitriona cleared her throat, “You’re right about somethings. Sam is great guy. He is and we’ve become close friends but Sam is just a friend and that is all he will ever be. Not because he doesn’t want to be something more but because I don’t want to be. I can’t date him and I’m not going to.” She stopped them from interrupting with sharp look, “And not just because of my rules either. When I first started Outlander, I thought for a small time that maybe, there was a possibility. But there just isn’t. It’s, we,” This time she did hesitate, thinking how to explain this in a way they would understand.

Sarah tightened her grip on her sister’s forearm, “You don’t feel it?”

Caitriona sighed and shook her head, “Sometimes I think there might be something, but then other times, not at all. When he kissed me, I felt nothing more than I do on set. Work. Just work. I wish sometimes I did feel something more, for his sake as well as my own, because he is genuinely a nice man, but,” She took a deep breath and straightened, “But it’s not there, and I can’t make appear there so, he’s my friend and co-star. I’m not,” Caitriona stopped and swallowed, “I’m not going to screw up this job for any reason. So, friend, co-star and nothing more. I am going keep do what production tells me and keep my head down and work. Make this work. All of it.”

“So why the drive Cait? Sounds to me like the Sam kiss wasn’t what sent you driving into the night? Or at least it wasn’t the only thing?” Deidra tilted her head and watched her sister carefully, genuinely surprised at the candor of her sister’s honest admission. They all be worried when Caitriona had gone missing. Worried because it wasn’t in her character to up and take off. She was more likely to stay and thrash whatever was bothering her out. They had feared that this time, something was really wrong with their sister.

“It wasn’t, at least not entirely.” Caitriona reluctantly acknowledged, “Tony and I, we, there are some things that we are working out.”

“Working out?” Sarah’s queried “What do you mean working out Caitriona?” If that weasel of a man had hurt her sister in any way shape or form she would take great pleasure in tearing him apart. She’d seen how devastated Caitriona had been after L.A. The entire family had witnessed firsthand just how deeply Caitriona had been emotionally hurt with that entire fiasco. While it
wasn’t the first time in history that someone in a committed long-term relationship had been unfaithful resulting in pregnancy and it most certainly wouldn’t be the last, that didn’t negate the level of pain Caitriona had dealt with. It had been severe and, Sarah suspected, it aftereffects were still playing a part in how Caitriona approached those aspects of her life now. Maybe that was why Caitriona was willing to stay with Tony? Because he was safer than most other men. At least on the surface. Safe because, let’s face it, her mind stated, no one in their right mind would be lining up to steal him from Caitriona, making the chances of LA happening again with Tony were zero to none. It certainly went a long way towards explaining Caitriona even being with Tony in the first place and a lot towards explaining her reluctance to try somewhere else. Landing a role in Outlander had been more than a blessing in disguise. It had given their sister a reason to get the fuck out of LA and return closer to her family here and more importantly away from that devastating situation. Safe or not, if Tony thought for one second she would stand by and let her sister go through that again then he was sorely mistaken.

“We are working on some things. Things that are really none of your business Sarah, or yours Deidra and anyone else’s in the family either. I needed some time to think, so I drove a car. Nothing earth shattering, I just need a moment to, “She stopped, tried not to smile at the memory of the deep voice sounding in her head, “I just needed a moment to breathe.”

“The Sam thing, okay I maybe agree. If it’s not there, it’s not there. I get that, boy do I ever. You don’t end up divorced before you are thirty not understanding that,” Sarah eyed her sister seriously, “but really Caitriona, this thing that you’re doing with Tony, whatever it is, whatever you’re working out with him, is it really the relationship that you want?”

“You deserve to be happy Cait,” Deidra added her two cents worth, “At the end of the day, you’re right, it’s not our business who you hook up with, “ Deidra shot a warning look at Sarah, who was already gearing up to refute that opinion, “Providing and this is a big providing Caitriona, that you are safe, healthy and happy.”

Was she happy?

Not really.

But she wasn’t unhappy enough to leave.

Settle for two out of three? It would have to do. She’d given her word, she’d try. She owed him that.

“You can all stop worrying.” Caitriona glanced from sister to sister, “Really. I’m fine. We’re going to be fine. Everything is fine.”

She wondered if she kept saying it, if it would make it true.

Her reasons were after all, rational and perfectly logical.

She almost believed it them.

Almost.
Endure

It was almost dawn, crisp, cold and thankfully clear. Johnathon hoisted a bag into the back of the truck and opened the door. He was surprised at the amount of activity surrounding the motel particularly given the early hour. He looked down the row of rooms as he climbed into the cab. Almost of all of them were alight with the soft glow of lights, the odd person opening a door here and there, cars being loading with belongings, occupants making preparations to leave. Not at all a bad idea. With predicted storms due to roll in sometime during the day, it would be important to get to the main highway before too much snow fall caused an impasse. While Johnathon himself, didn’t have that concern, he was keen to get out just like everyone else before the onset of the weather.

Storms like this, often tended to roll in with the day. With any luck, the early flight would get away on time and he’d manage catch the calm window that existed somewhere between dawn and midmorning, hopefully dodging any storm related turbulence. He’d already had a very early breakfast with Susannah and her family, as promised the night before. It had been good to catch up with Charlie and their young daughter, Georgina, who taken a bit of a shine to Johnathon and entertained them all with incessant questioning and talking during their meal. He’d said goodbye, even accepted a sloppy kiss on the cheek from little girl and headed back to the motel to pack. Blonde brows contracted, wrinkling in thought.

Wallet.

Johnathon patted his back pocket. “Shit.” He cursed quietly and returned to the room. Sure enough, his wallet and phone were still sitting on the bench where he put it as he’d picked up his bag. He gathered them both up, sliding one in each back pocket, then glanced around the room, doing a final check before he left for good this time. Satisfied he had everything, Johnathon stepped outside almost colliding with another person. “Sorry about that.” He apologised and stepped courteously back allowing the man to continue.

The man, however, didn’t continue on his way but hesitated and turned, looking Johnathon up and down from behind a pair of glasses. He was shorter than Johnathon, the unruly mop of dark hair atop a slight build, occasionally drifted in front of his face with the light morning breeze. Dark eyes narrowed, “You’re him?” He asked with a slightly acerbic tone, tinged around the edge with what Johnathon thought was a Scottish accent. “You’re the one that was with Caitriona.” It was a statement more than a question.

Johnathon kept his face passive. He had no idea who this guy was, more than likely press and he certainly had no intention of telling him the time, let alone anything relating to Caitriona. “Think you’ve got me confused with someone else mate.” Johnathon stepped around him and put a hand on the open car door.


Johnathon shook his hand, the grip weaker than he expected. Dark eyes watched him intently, clearly expecting Johnathon to say something in return, but the blond man remained strategically quiet, not willing to provide a name to someone he’d yet to fully ascertain who the bloody hell they actually were.

“I wanted to thank you.” Tony took another step closer, “Thank you for bringing Caitriona back here to her family, back to us all.” He paused, eyeing Johnathon directly, “back to me.”

The statement hung in the air between the two of them. Johnathon searching his memory for any off-hand mention Caitriona might have made of this joker’s name. She had mentioned a Tony, but
had never supplied a last name. Was this the one? Johnathon silently assessed the man, the one that had made Caitriona take off, made her run.

Surely not.

He was thin, with a slightly weedy frame, the dark colour of his designer shirt, making his pasty white complexion appear even more unhealthy. Clearly, if he was who he said he was, he must possess several hidden qualities that Caitriona found appealing.

“I’m sure Caitriona is happy to be back with her family.” Johnathon said calmly. Still, there was something in the eyes that were still scrutinizing him that immediately set Johnathon’s teeth on edge, raising warning signals like a dog raises its hackles.

“Yes. She is.” Tony stated crisply, “Three days can be a long time to be alone. With a man. In an isolated cabin.”

The hackles were now standing on end and if this little twerp, whoever he was or claimed to be, expected Johnathon to hang around and continue this conversation, he was sorely mistaken. Johnathon put a foot on the running board, “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get going.”

“I understand that,” Tony’s voice was slightly tinny and grated on Johnathon’s hearing, “But you seem like the strong straight forward type.” He flashed a smirk at Johnathon which made the tall man’s skin crawl, “So I’m just going to ask you, man to man, what I want to know.” A slender white hand planted itself on the frame of the door, “Did you sleep with her?”

In truth, Tony didn’t really care if she had or she hadn’t. If he was going to make sure that things didn’t fall apart with Caitriona, he needed to know what exactly he was dealing with. If she had slept this man, who, Tony admitted to himself, was certainly was extremely attractive in that rugged all male type of way, then he needed to know.

All information is useful and this was no exception.

The large booted foot came down from the running board with a distinct thud and Johnathon turned, squaring his shoulders and straightening to his full height, “Listen mate,” His voice dropped to almost a growl, “I’m not sure who you think are, but I strongly suggest you show some manners. If you know who you claim to know, you wouldn’t need to ask such a ridiculous question.” He leaned towards Tony, resisting the urge to grab this guy by the collar and force him to show Caitriona some respect, “If you want to know anything else about Caitriona then I suggest you ask her yourself.” Ice blue eyes glinted in the early morning light, “If you are her boyfriend or partner or whatever you want to classify yourself as, then I would think you would be by her side making sure she was alright,” Johnathon flicked his eyes at the offending hand that had been unwelcomely placed on the truck door. It dropped instantly, Tony taking a small defensive step back.

Johnathon’s strong voice was fairly dripping with absolute finality, “Now like I said, you’ve got me confused with someone else.” Wisely choosing to retreat over bravado, Tony turned on his heel, but not without shooting Johnathon a highbrow sneer over one shoulder.

Johnathon watched him for a few steps then slid into the driver’s seat and shut the door with an exaggerated slam. What sort of bloke would even ask that? No wonder Caitriona had run. Johnathon decided he’d probably have run too if he had to put up with the likes of Tony all the time. It was now completely official. Whoever that man turned out to be, whatever he was to Caitriona, Johnathon decided he didn’t like him. Not one bit. If he was someone or something to Caitriona then this fool should drop to his knees and worship that woman, because, Jesus Christ, he was well and truly punching above his weight. Intellectually and physically and everything that came between.

It made Johnathon wonder, as he turned the key and sparked the engine to life, what it was the drew people together in the first place. What invisible thing that made one human want to be with another. Not just the physical part of that equation, though, at times, even that could be strange. What one person found breathtakingly attractive, another could just as easily find repulsive.
Relationships, he shook his head, second most complex thing in the universe.

The first being women.

He carefully reversed out of the park, turning back onto the main road and heading for the airstrip. Maybe being alone wasn’t such a bad thing. Christ, he was starting to believe that sometimes, certain people were just fated to be together or doomed to destroy each other and be alone. Children, a family, a wife, that all seemed a distinct impossibility right now, at least for him. For plenty of other people out there, Johnathon was sure it was all working out the way it was supposed to. Love, couples, happy families growing generation after generation.

But not for him. Not just lately either.

After all, his mother had died before he’d even lived a year. His father and grandmother just two years later. By the time Johnathon was three, there was precisely one person still living from either side of his genetic helix. His uncle, the younger brother of his father, the sole survivor apart, of course, from himself. Strong hands gripped the wheel hard enough to make the knuckles turn white.

His uncle.

It had taken him 10 years, but Johnathon had finally overcome that man. It hadn’t been easy and cost had been high, but he’d managed it. Justice, if you could call it that, had finally fallen in Johnathon’s favour, when at the age of 13, his uncle’s death had left Johnathon as a family of just one. No brothers, no sisters, no cousins or long lost relatives.

Just him.

Alone.

It hadn’t bothered him much early on, Johnathon had been too busy making his way in the world, but now, the older he got, the more he thought about what might never be. Was he one of those fated to be alone?

Least if you’re alone no one can hurt you.

He pulled into the driveway of the large storage shed, climbed out and unlocked the large roller door. It was just a five minute walk to the aircraft hangar from here and Johnathon always left the truck there, locked up and secure in readiness next time he was in town. He parked the truck and secured the door, dropping the key into his pocket as he flicked the collar of his coat up, his warm breath clouding in the chill air, his boots crunching the crisp snow as he walked towards the hangar. The sun was just starting to poke its way over the far off horizon, its halo various shades of red, oranges and blues, the last vestiges of night tenuously clinging to the edges. Johnathon took a deep breath, letting the fresh air fill his lungs, trying to push dark thoughts back to their shadows.

Alone or not, family or not, the sun was going to rise and set just the same.

Endure, he reminded himself.

Endure.

Survive.

There was simply no other choice.
“Careful Eddie.” Caitriona warned, the smile on her face belying any animosity towards her beloved excited feline companion. The last thing she wanted to do was fall over. It was difficult enough trying to manage a bag and a set of crutches without the added difficulty of the cat trying to thread its large body around her legs in a heart-felt, though treacherous, greeting. She made it as far as the couch, tossing her bags on the floor and practically falling into the soft cushions. “Come here you.” A warm furry bundle pounced into her lap, happily accepting every ounce of welcome affection her owner was willing to hand over. “I missed you.” Caitriona nuzzled the furry neck, the gentle purr of the feline motor filling the quiet in the still room.

She let her head drop to rest against the back of the couch, eyes staring up at the white ceiling. The peace and quiet of home. Caitriona idly stroked the silky fur of her lap mate, cradling the animal gently while her thoughts settled. The trip home had been extremely long. Long and almost as bad as she’d imagined, and she’d imagined quite a bit.

It had started with the relatively short road trip of eight hours back to a larger city centre that had an regional airport, one that was thankfully still open in spite of the weather. Then a flight across to New York which had landed well after midnight, followed by a short stay at Deidra’s apartment until they’d caught a red eye flight back to London where, Tony and the rest of her family had left her.

Tony was staying in London for business, her parents and sister, continuing to Ireland. Caitriona had flown on to Glasgow. The entire journey, apart from the short flight into Glasgow, had been tense, trending towards awkward, not to mention, utterly exhausting. Tony had been attentive, so much so it had almost verged on annoying. Her parents concern had been ongoing and overwhelming, while it had been heartfelt, it had also quickly become suffocating during the long flight, leaving Caitriona wanting nothing more to be left alone. A feat not easy accomplished in the small close quarters of a commercial aircraft. Thankfully, no one had recognised her or if they did, they had been respectful of her privacy and stayed well back. The last thing she needed was to have the internet in melt down over this whole thing. She knew there had to be some press out there, but so far, the whole thing seemed to have been kept pretty low key.

Caitriona gently scratched behind Eddie’s ears, it was definitely good to be home. She reached down and unclipped the heavy boot from around her foot, feeling immediate relief as cool air bathed her lower leg. Gingerly, she lifted her foot to rest on the coffee table, a soft sigh of appreciation escaping her lips. It, like her, hadn’t done well with copious amounts of travel either. She was seriously thinking about taking one of the pain killers she’d been prescribed, even if they did have a tendency to make her feel drowsy, when a knock sound on her front door.

“Balfe? Are ye in there?”
Caitriona let out deep sigh, eyes searching the ceiling. And the hits just keep on coming, her mind gripped. This was one conversation she’d hoped to avoid until a later date. Apparently, that was asking too much from the cosmic gods at the moment. She glanced towards the door. Could she ignore him? Another knock sounded. “Balfe?”
“Come in Sam.” She called from her seat. If she had to deal with this now, she was refusing to move to do so.

The door opened and Sam’s bulky form filled the space, hair misted with fine droplets of rain, his dark leather jacket shiny with moisture, “I was just passing by the area and thought I’d call in and see how ye were fairing.” Blue eyes flicked to hers as he hefted a plastic bag up on the kitchen counter, “Brought some dinner if you’ve a mind?”
“Thank you, but not right now.” She didn’t have the mind to at all, in fact she was feeling a little
nauseous, wanting nothing more for this to be over, for things to go back to the way they were. At least she hoped they would. There was still the danger that she’d managed to lose a good friend over a single moment of stupidity. She looked at Sam, standing there, hands bunched in his pockets nervously, “You have some if you’re hungry though Heughan.” She appreciated the peace offering for what it was and Caitriona was determined to try and at least protect their working friendship if nothing else.

“Naw, I’ll be fine.” He walked over to the couch, looking down at her, “Christ Cait! Your foot.” He bent over inspecting her elevated ankle.

“I know right,” She carefully moved the body part in question, “Got a good bruise starting to come through.”

“Damned lucky it wasn’t broken.” There was a hint of chastisement in his voice as he hesitated then sat down, swivelling to turn to face her, “Listen Cait, about Seattle,” He stopped, swallowed then reached out and took her hand, Eddie scampering away with the sudden disturbance.

Caitriona very much wishing she could do the same. Anything to escape what she knew was coming.

“It’s okay Sam, you don’t have to ex-” Caitriona shook her head, hoping to god Sam wasn’t going to say something that would make a tough situation even worse.

“No Cait, let me get this out please.” Sam interrupted her, “I know you’re scared of this, I know you are, hell I am too, I mean, no one expected this show to work out like it has,” He stood waving his arms around, “for all this,” the hands dropped, slapping dully against his thighs, “the press, the fan stuff, conventions, photoshoots, this whole thing. For everything to change so quick, you ken,”

Sam began slowly pacing back and forth, running a hand through his hair, a nervous habit of his, “I know you’re worried that things between us will be different if we were together and work might be tough because of that, but Cait,” He sat, resting his arm along the back of the couch, “We don’t have to stop being friends to be something more.”

“Sam,” Caitriona held up a hand, that sinking feeling in her stomach was quickly becoming a reality with every passing word falling from his mouth.

God. Any chance of getting out of this unscathed tonight had disappeared entirely.

If she was feeling nauseous before, now she felt downright ill. “Tony and I, we, um,” Caitriona cleared her throat, mentally squaring her shoulders as she looked at him, “We’re trying to work things out.”

The utter look of confusion on his face made her feel a thousand times worse. Sam was considerably harder to convince than her sisters. Sam had been there from the beginning, had walked with her on the red carpet, spent hours upon hours with her on sets, in rooms, in isolated location shoots. They’d talked. Of course they had, about the family and people in their lives, about the trials and tribulations that made up everyday life. They’d confided in each other, about a lot of things that otherwise might never had seen the light of day during the long hours of filming, when tiredness and exhaustion let loose inhibitions and honest thoughts that bubbled to the surface, spilling from otherwise closed mouths.

“You’re staying with him?” Blue eyes darted back forth, searching hers disbelievingly, “After what he did? You’re staying with him?”

“He made a mistake Sam.”

“A pretty fucking big one Caitriona!” He shook his head, trying for the life of him to understand what in hell she was thinking. “If you’re going back to him because of us, because of what happened in Seattle with me then,” He gripped her forearm, “Don’t Caitriona. We can figure this out, you and I. We can -”

“It has nothing to do with that Sam.” Caitriona paused, frantically trying to think how she could say this without hurting him any further, “I was upset. I had way too much to drink and what happened with you, shouldn’t have happened. I’m not blaming you Sam, it wasn’t you. It was me and I’m
It was cliched, the ‘it’s not you it’s me’ excuse, but in this case, it had more than a modicum of truth to it. There been drinking, involving a lot more liquor than sense. Liquor mixed with the undeniable chemistry that had always sparkled between them, all conspiring to lead them both down a path that could only ever end in bad judgement and regret. Chemistry or not, she couldn’t control what she felt for Sam.

And it wasn’t love.

Not the love he wanted it to be.

At least Caitriona thought it wasn’t. She didn’t want to compound the situation by pretending to think it was. Not right now. She couldn’t do that to Sam, wouldn’t do it to him.

“Caitriona please, don’t be sorry. I’m not.” Sam inched closer to her, “It wasn’t the booze talking when I said I loved you.” He waited, waited for her eyes to meet his, “And it wasn’t the booze talking when I kissed you.” He leaned in about to recreate the experience.

“Sam.” Her voice was firm, as firm as the hand she pressed against his chest, “Sam, you’re my friend and I love you, I do, but not” She tried to soften the blow but then realised that really wasn’t possible. It was going to hurt no matter what she said, might as well be out with it. “I don’t feel anything more than that. I’m sorry.”

Blue eyes blinked slowly at her, “You might if you just-”

“I won’t.”

“You don’t know that Caitriona.” Sam leaned back from her, his face going grim, “You can’t see the future and you don’t know what would happen if we just tried this.”

“You’re right, I don’t know what the future is going to be, but I do know me. And this, what you are wanting. It won’t ever be Sam,” She said very quietly, “It’s just not there. No amount of trying will change that.”

“That’s rich Caitriona,” His voice uncharacteristically sharp, “You won’t try with me, but you’ll try with that cheating asshole? Let me tell you something for free, no amount of trying will ever fix that either!”

Sam stood up, hands on hips, turning his back to her as he slowly stalked around the living room.

He was upset.

Upset with her, upset with himself.

He should have waited, waited another day, but he had been wanting to see her for days now. He worried this would be the case, wanting desperately for it not be this way.

Damn it!

He should have waited until she was rested more, over her accident and the travel and the whole fucking thing.

“I’m sorry Sam.” Caitriona apologised again. He didn’t want her apology, he wanted her. He’d thought he had at least had a chance after that spineless creature she called her boyfriend had screwed up so royally and she arrived at his hotel room, looking the way Cait always looked. So beautiful he struggled to breathe around her sometimes. Sam had wanted her then more than ever. He’d decided to lay it all on the line, put it out there. He’d told her how he felt, kissed and damn it, she had kissed him back. She had! He was certain of it. For those few glorious seconds before something had happened, he didn’t know what and she’d pulled away, she’d been there with him.

What the fuck was he to do now? Push for this? Try and talk her round?
Something, he had to do something.

“Caitriona,” He turned, eyes boring directly into her, “Can you honestly and tell me that you didn’t, that you don’t feel something more.”

Caitriona looked at him. He felt the floor fall from beneath him as read her expressive face, hope sinking to the pit of his stomach.

She didn’t have to say it.

It was right there in her eyes.

“So that’s it then?” He said incredulously, his hands falling to his sides, “You go back to him and we go back to being what?”

“We’re not going back to anything Sam.” Caitriona said gently, “We ARE friends. We have never been anything other than friends and we WILL always be friends. That hasn’t changed I hope?”

Sam turned, stalking over to the large windows, unable to look her in the face any longer. He needed a moment to think, to regroup. To prepare.

Friends.

Could he go back to hiding this? Hiding how he really felt, keeping it caged up, like an animal in a zoo. Pretending to be happy with this situation. It was one thing to present a certain picture to the public, but he’d thought they could do this privately, production and PR could get fucked as far as he was concerned.

It could work.

He knew it could.

But.

His shoulders dropped as the realisation of defeat set in.

But Caitriona didn’t love him.

What could he do with that.

Nothing.

There was nothing he could do. Friends? Of course he would be her friend, he couldn’t help it. What other choice did he have. He wanted her in his life. Had always wanted her there. If he said no right now, no to friends, he was terrified she would pull away, put a distance between them from which there would be no recovery. Not for either of them. It hurt now to hear what she’d said, but, Jesus, his jaw clenched, it would hurt a hell of lot more if she was gone for good.

“If you can’t handle friends anymore, I understand.” Her voice floated across to him, “We can just be work colleagues if that’s easier, for you.” The suggestion was filled with gentle apology and genuine concern. She cared about him. He knew that. Sam pressed his palms against the window still. He wasn’t wrong about this, he just wasn’t, he couldn’t be. There was something there between them, something more than just friends and definitely something more than work colleagues. Caitriona was far too stubborn be pushed. If anything was to ever happen, it would have to come from her. The decision would have to be hers. Pushing again now would get him no where. He had just fucking proven that. He’d pushed in Seattle, then pushed it here tonight and look where that had gotten him.
No fucking where and fast.

He let out a deep breath. If it was a choice between nothing and friends, he was always going to pick friends. Despite the icy feeling in his guts. Was else was there to do but wait. Wait for Caitriona to come to her senses.

Wait for the tide to turn in his favour.

Wait for her.

Sam turned around. Apologetic blue eyes met his, “I’m really sorry Sam. I never meant to hurt you.”

Why did she have to look at him like that? That look that made any resistance in him crumble, any harsh words die on his tongue and any thoughts of no friendship vanish, like smoke in the wind.

Friends then.

Decision made, he pushed off the window, “It’s alright Cait,” he tried to put a lighter note into his voice as he stepped around a snoozing cat and sat down on the edge of the coffee table, “You’re right about a couple of things. We make pretty great friends” He gave her a half smile, “And there may have been bit too much booze for our own good ye ken.” He shrugged, “So, shall we just chalk this one to a bad night of drinking Balfe? After all, can’t let a few drinks come between friends can we?” He felt like he’d been gut punched and given an uppercut for his trouble but he put a smile on his face made the best of it.

“A bad night of drinking sounds about right,” She leaned forward and rested a hand on his knee, “Thank you Sam.” Blue eyes met his, “For just being a bloody great friend. My friend.”

He covered her hand, “Tough job Balfe, but someone’s got to do it. Besides, we need all the friends we can get.”

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and leaned back, “Exactly. Now did you say something about dinner?”

“I did.” Caitriona got the first genuine smile from him she’d been looking for all night as he stood and wandered into the kitchen. She felt horrible and wasn’t at all hungry, but she knew he needed this. Knew that she’d hurt him, the least she could do was eat a meal with the man and try and repair the damage she’d done. Sam leaned on the counter, digging through one of the bags.

How could she go back to, to that, to him? How could she not see what was right here in front of her? He honestly thought this was his chance.

She was supposed to leave Tony. Then she’d have been free.

Free to try with him. He glanced at the couch.

Things never worked out the way you expected.

Still, friends wasn’t so bad, he guessed.

Friends.

It would have to do.

For now.
Impasse

She put the bottle on the table and sat down with a soft sigh. Her head was aching from the noise, a combination of music and hundreds of people all talking at once. Caitriona twisted the cap off the bottle and took a drink of cool clear water. The place was packed with string of Lionsgate and Sony executives, their husbands and wives and, she glanced over in the direction of the bar, at least half a dozen mistresses and or hired escorts. She’d been on her feet for hours, pressing the flesh, shaking hands, making small talk, being the face of the show. Apart from dull ache just above her temple, her ankle was really beginning to protest. It wasn’t up to standing for long periods of time in heels yet and had been sending her warning signals for the past hour that had consisted of a sharp pain shooting up the back of her leg all the way to her knee. She slipped the shoe off, lifting it to lean on the footrest of the chair opposite her. It wasn’t as good as a cushion on the couch, but it did manage to allow for some elevation and was certainly better than nothing.

Caitriona leaned back in the seat, slowly sipping her drink. She glanced around at the various assemblage of people within her immediate field of vision. Groups were slowly forming, people were beginning to gravitate towards each other, formality was loosening, she observed, with the slow passing of the night. The first few hours had been filled with formal greetings and meetings. ‘Smoozing’ was the preferred term she used, but after several hours of what industry types like to call ‘networking’, jackets were shed, ties were loosened along with the stifled inhibitions. Loud pockets of laughter punctuated the air, the chinking of glasses, the ordering of vibrantly coloured cocktails, even the occasional impromptu dance. Soon, she decided, slowly trying to roll her foot back and forth in an effort to ease the ache. They’d be able to go home soon. Though, she set the bottle back on the table, she’d have to find Tony first.

Caitriona hadn’t seen much of him since they’d arrived. Not that she minded. Sometimes it was just easier to be apart at events like this. She had to spent most of the evening with Sam by default anyway, working as the Outlander unit, Mr and Mrs Outlander. That part hadn’t been too bad, better than she’d thought it might have been actually. She’d been a little anxious about things since Seattle and their little chat in her apartment, but so far, touch wood, she reached a hand out and laying it flat on the table surface, things had been returning to normal, to their usual working friendship. Whatever else was swirling around them in their personal lives, workwise, Caitriona and Sam always seemed to work better when they were together, particularly at important industry functions like this.

At least that relationship was back on track, she reflected. She wasn’t entirely sure she could say the same about Tony. He’d accompanied her tonight, as was normal, but he’d every quickly disappeared, off to talk business proposals or some such likely thing. In fact, her brows crinkled in thought, the last time she’d laid eyes on him was when he’d been talking to a group of what she thought where Sony International execs, though she couldn’t be sure, after a while, one executive looked like the next at these things, particularly ones that weren’t directly tied to Outlander.

She glanced at her watch, that had been at least four hours ago. She couldn’t really say that she’d missed him, which in itself, was troubling. She’d hoped that things would be better between them by now. Caitriona had been working hard on them, on their relationship, making an effort, going out of her way to spend time with him, to do things he enjoyed, trying to make all pieces fit together. She wasn’t entirely sure she’d been successful. Tony had seemed happy and he’d more often than not been content to do whatever she’d suggested. Given her assessment on her own level of effort, she’d been expecting, well, more. Her eyes glazed over, going unfocused as her thoughts turned inwards. She tried to narrow down exactly what that meant. What more did she expect from him? From them? He was here wasn’t he? He was letting her do whatever she had to do
professionally without complaint or interference. No, she decided, that aspect had never been an
issue. The real issue, she concluded as she picked up the bottle of water idly toying with the lid, lay
in the fact that no matter what she did, what he did, or how hard they seemed to try, there was
always the general feeling that something was not quite right. It wasn’t something that she’d been
able to specifically put her finger on. If it was that simple she would have known how to fix this by
now and she’d have gotten them to that place she thought they needed to be.

Sometimes it seemed like they were almost there, that things were working, that they could be
happy. Just as the clouds where clearing, the persistent feeling that something was missing between
them would roll in, casting a dull pall over everything they did, everything they tried. Caitriona
wasn’t sure there was much more she could possibly do to lift the gloomy shroud. She took a deep
breath and let it out slowly. Just breathe, his deep voice sounded in her. Johnathon Chase. A smile
drifted across her face as she recalled the owner of the words and the quite peacefulness she’d felt
in that isolated cabin with Johnathon. She wondered idly what he might be doing now. She knew
he’d headed back to New York after they’d left the cabin, but surely now, almost a month later, he
would have moved on, to where, Caitriona had no idea, he’d never said where he was going after
that. Whatever it was and whatever it was he was doing, Caitriona was really on certain of one
thing. He wasn’t here.

She lifted the bottle and drained the last of the cool liquid. “Geez that’s a bit light weight ain’t it
Balfe?” A long necked beer bottle wavered unsteadily in his hands as he half leaned on the table,
“You the designated driver or something?”
She’d stopped drinking hours ago, wanting to still have her wits about her while she was talking to
prospective employers a sentiment her show partner didn’t appear to share. “Cute.” She drawled
and nodded towards the bottle, “Some of us know to indulge in moderation Sam. What is that?
Your fifth?”
“Nae, seventh!” He said proudly, the slightly flushed cheeks and semi-glazed eyes also a testament
to the fact, “And I’m gonna get to work on the next one too.” He took a healthy draw, emptying
the bottle and taking a step in the direction of the bar, “Come on how about an old fashioned or a
dram?”
“No, no.” She held up a hand, “No more alcohol for me tonight.”
“Wet blanket.” Sam said with a lopsided smile, swaying a little on his feet as he straightened, “All
the more for me.” He hesitated a moment, as if his fogged brain was stuck deciding if it wanted to
tell his feet to move or stand still. The result was a slight stumble that could have ended in a
disastrous and somewhat embarrassing journey to the floor.
“Sit down a minute Sam,” Caitriona suggested as she gripped his elbow, steadying him as he
poured himself into the chair beside her, “You can keep me company a bit while I wait for Tony.”
Clearly Sam had a case of the wobbly boots and she’d rather not have him make an idiot of himself
in front of the head of the network.
“Mmmph.” It was a guttural sound that let anyone who bothered to listen, know exactly how Sam
felt about the mere mention of that particular name, “Rude to keep a woman waiting.” He
grumbled, running a hand through his hair, “Just a rude prick.”
Caitriona sighed and shot him a reproachful look. “Sorry.” He mumbled, looking away. He’d been
so good lately at keeping his teeth firmly clamped around his tongue when that asshole’s name
was mentioned. Most of the time he tried to pretend that Tony didn’t exist, the rest of the time he
spent projecting loathing and disdain with every fibre of his being towards the man. He was trying
to accept her choice to stay with him, but Sam still wasn’t convinced that Caitriona’s decision to
stay with Tony was best for her. Right now, he was pretty damn certain it was the exact opposite of
best. The fact that the most beautiful woman in the room was sitting alone at table was all the
evidence Sam needed to reinforce his belief on the subject.
“And where is your date Mister?” Caitriona deliberately kept the tone light. A drunken Sam
Heughan wasn’t the easiest to reason with at the best of times let alone now when they were still
rebuilding things.

“Toilet.” He thought about that moment, “Or getting drinks, or something.” His memory was deserting him, having only vaguely recalling her saying something about restrooms, drinks, clubbing or something. He hadn’t really been listening at the time and had agreed just so she would shut up for ten seconds. Honestly, he’d never known a woman that talked as much as she did. Still, she was the best he could do right now without really trying. She was nice enough, he guessed, looked good enough to at least pique his interest. He thought she was studying music or something. The only thing he knew with any certainty about her was that she wasn’t Caitriona. The rest, he couldn’t care less about. As if summoned by some malevolent source, a young, long haired blond woman practically danced over to their table, a sickly looking cocktail in each hand, smiling with thinly veiled desire at Sam as she got closer. “Sammy!” She chortled in a high pitched voice that set Caitriona’s teeth on edge.

“Christ.” Sam murmured, closing one eye in a grimace at the sound.

“There you are!” She handed over one of the brightly coloured concoctions, “I texted Miranda and they are on their way to the club.” She slid an arm across Sam’s shoulders, skilfully insinuating herself into his lap, “We can join them as soon as we finished this drink.” She chinked her glass against his, finally looking over at Caitriona, “You can come with us if you want.”

Not in a million years, was what Caitriona thought, “No, thanks for the offer but we’re going to head home soon,” She said instead, ignoring the hopeful look from Sam. Why on Earth Sam persisted in dating young women like this when he clearly wasn’t that impressed with them was beyond her.

“Are you sure you won’t come Cait?”

“My foot’s definitely not up to putting you to shame on a dance floor Heughan. You go on ahead though.”

“If you say so Balfe.” He took a sip of the vivid blue cocktail, immediately regretting it, pushing the offensive object towards the centre of the table, “I need a real drink.” He started to stand, “Get off me will ya.” The woman barely had time to scramble off him before Sam found his feet, steadying himself with a hand on the table until the room stopped swaying, “See you tomorrow then?” He looked down at her.

“Course Sam. Have fun.”

“Mmph.” He grunted again, then took the woman’s arm, “Come on then, clubbing it is.” The woman wound an arm around Sam’s waist as they walked off. Caitriona gave Sam a final nod of goodbye as he looked back over his shoulder at her before being swallowed up by the party crowd. She gave her head a little shake of disbelief and made a mental note to send him a txt first thing in the morning, just to make sure that Sam at least made it home in one piece, which given his already drunken state, was not at all guaranteed. That would make the third woman in as many weeks that Sam was seeing, dating or whatever it was he doing. He was moving on, she contemplated to herself, was what he was doing. Or trying to at least.

She hadn’t meant to hurt him, even though Caitriona realised she had. Sometimes she thought it would be easier if she did love him the way he wanted her to, easier for Sam, easier for her, easier for them both. Of course, there was also the problem that it would be a lie. Perhaps it because she had been thinking more and more lately about the relationships in her life, but while she was struggling with Tony, she’d felt a definite certainty about how she felt towards her co-star. More than that, she was confident she’d made the right decision and she was sure that in time, Sam would come to the same conclusion.

Tony on the other hand. She sighed and shifted her aching foot. She’d done a lot of things in her life, some of them had been as challenging as hell, but this was really the first time she felt like she’d been caught in no man’s land. That place where you didn’t quite know what to do, which way to jump or what to do to find a way though it all.
She looked around the crowd, finally finding Tony’s form, thoroughly engrossed in a discussion with half a dozen other young men, none of which she really recognised. Probably from the business side of industry, she surmised. Tony must have felt her eyes on him because he turned, gave her a small nod and wave and turned back to the group. A few minutes later, having concluded whatever discussion he’d been involved in, he ambled over to her table.

“Hey babe,” He bent and kissed her cheek, glancing between her and a young man in the group he’d left, “Outlander all done for the night?”

“Yes.” She gave him a half smile, “My foot’s a bit sore, we could head home? If you’re ready I mean.” She added, trying to be considerate. Tony hesitated a moment. After three hours of sweet talking, some of it not unpleasant at all, he’d managed to get Chris Holdsworthy of Holdsworthy Financial to agree to come by the club and consider becoming a full financial partner. Another hour or so and Tony reckoned he be able seal the deal completely. He’d already promised that Caitriona would make an appearance to help boost publicity.

There was a time when he would have felt wrong to use her like this. Somewhere along the line that had changed. He wasn’t sure when, probably somewhere between Sam Heughan, the constant internet speculation and the yet unspoken self-realisation that he might be looking for something totally different romantically speaking. It wasn’t like he hadn’t returned the favour for her, being her silent plus one like he was tonight, not complaining when she had to openly be extremely friendly with her co-star, being content to walk that step behind while she got all the adoration and attention. He earned this, he reasoned. Earned the right to have her presence help him for a change. He’d been going above and beyond lately, to be with her, to solidify their relationship after his little slip up in Seattle. Going with her to every awards, every function. Even spending time off with her, visiting art shows, spending time with her friends, travelling with her to fashion functions. He’d even stepped up with sending signals about wanting to be intimate with her. He was trying with her, really he was. Surely, he could convince her to stay a few more hours, just long enough for him to close the deal. “Are you sure Babe? I mean I’m in no hurry. We can stay longer if you need too?”

“I don’t need to.” She winced as she slipped her foot into her shoe and stood up, leaning heavily on one leg, while the blood throbbed painfully into the joint, “I’d just rather go home. I think I’ve pushed this ankle as far as it’s going to go.” She reached out for his arm, waiting for him to step along side her, “Let’s get our coats and head home.”

“Actually babe,” He nodded back towards the group, “I’m in the middle of maybe getting some backing for the new club. I might stay on here a bit. Why don’t you head on home?”

“Um,” She blinked slightly confused, having not expected that answer, “Okay. Yes. I’ll get a cab home, I guess and go home. Unless you need me to stay?”

“No. No. I’ll be fine. You need to rest your foot and if I can get the backing for the club,” He smiled broadly and leaned over, softly kissing her cheek, as he helped her to the coat stand, “I’ll be able to move ahead with the new plans” He touched her side as he turned to go, “I call you tomorrow babe.”

She nodded and watched him walk back into the room, slipped into her arms into her coat and lifting her hair out from under the collar. Caitriona hadn’t been expecting that, but she was pleased that Tony was at least having a good time. She often felt bad that Tony had to spend hours standing around at these things so the mere fact he was having a decent enough time to want to stay longer, helped to ease the feeling of guilt.

Her breath misted in the cold night air as she stepped outside waiting patiently for the cab to arrive. The door behind her opened and a group of young men stumbled outside, the more sober of the group trying valiantly to hold up the less inebriated. Caitriona wisely sidestepped, giving them a slightly wider berth. The last thing she needed tonight was to end up entangled in a mess like that. The group, while obnoxiously loud, were at least good natured. Laughter, crass remarks, and drunken platitudes were being generously shared with anyone who cared to listen. There was
something about alcohol that automatically made people talk at least 50 percent louder than what they thought they were.

Thankfully she didn’t have to wait long before a black cab pulled up directly in front of her. The car door was almost shut when Caitriona was certain she heard a name she was familiar with. One of the younger men in the group, well dressed blond haired man that she was sure she’d seen in the group Tony had been talking too, had yelled exuberantly, something that Caitriona was sure had sounded like T Mac and the words drinks later. The door had clanked shut on the last part, so she couldn’t be entirely sure she had heard what she thought she heard.

Looking through the back window as the car had pulled away she had watched the young man wave his phone in the air and receive several back slaps from his companions. She shook her head, trying ignore the headache and a troubling spark of a thought that fluttered through her head before fading. She turned, concentrating on the buildings as they flowed passed the window and let her head rest against the cool glass of the window. Probably heard wrong, she mentally shrugged and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Just breathe.

A vision of his handsome face and those soft blue eyes painted the back of her eyelids. Breathe, memory sending his deep voice echoing around her head.

Johnathon Chase.

A smile drifted across her face as she recalled the owner of the words and the quite peacefulness she’d felt in that isolated cabin with him. She wondered idly what he might be doing now. She’d known he’d headed back to New York after they’d left the cabin, but surely now, almost a month later, he would have moved on. To where, Caitriona had no idea, he’d never said where he was going after that.

Whatever it was and whatever it was he was doing, Caitriona was really only certain of one thing.

He wasn’t here.
Caitriona looked at the closed door of the apartment and took another sip of wine, the warmth of it a distinct contrast to the chill of the room. She was sitting, cross-legged in a chair, the full length living room door was open, the breeze occasionally billowed the thin white curtain, making it snap and dance, the damp of a light drizzling rain hung heavy in the air, her blue eyes unfocussed, looking out at the bleak weather but seeing only inwards.

This was difficult. Life was difficult. Change was difficult. Love was difficult, the lack of it, impossible. She did say to Tony that she would try. She had been. Four weeks. Four weeks ago she’d made a deal with herself, levied her guilt against his betrayal and bet on them both being able to find a way thought this mess. Caitriona had tried to hope that someway, somehow, she could go back to believing that their relationship was one she could be content with, that things would work out the way they should in the end, that the difficult times would pass. That things would become easier. She thought she could deal with this type of relationship, one that took nothing to maintain because it had no substance, nothing warranting effort. It had worked before, suited her work demands and gave her emotional distance. Surely she could make it work again.

Caitriona took another sip, swallowing, letting the heat trickle down her throat, a warmth growing in her belly. She’d tried to make it work. Her word had been kept and she wasn’t blind to the fact that Tony had been trying too. After all, wasn’t he on his way over now, making the effort to see her on her only day off despite the fact that he’d had business meetings in London and would have to drive to Glasgow to be with her. She’d made similar efforts when she’d been able to, going out of her way to include him, spending time with him on her days off while her ankle had healed, making an effort to try and ignore Sam’s social media carryon’s, trying to make the greater public realise that when she was on the red carpet, it was work. If she was with Sam, it was work, even when it didn’t look like it. She tried protecting Tony from it all, tried protecting herself as well.

It hadn’t been bad, but, she reached over the edge of the chair and gripped the neck of the wine bottle, it hadn’t been particularly good either. Even their physical relationship was struggling. They’d both been trying. Trying to rebuild this thing they were doing, trying to be together more, trying to make time for intimate moments. It seemed like the harder they tried, the less things seemed to be working. Last week, she took a large mouthful of wine recalling, last week hadn’t been good at all. They’d had dinner, drunk wine, spent quiet time together, just the two of them. They’d gone to bed where things had progressed. He’d tried, she guessed, but it hadn’t quite worked. She hadn’t been close, so far from close that there had been little point in even attempting to continue. Tony had given up, dropped her hand back to the surface of the bed, resting on her elbows, forehead pressing against the pillow, eyes closed. After a few moments of heavy breathing on his behalf, Tony had pulled out of her, sat on the side of the bed, removed the condom, and then left her alone, saying something about going for a shower. When he returned, fully dressed in long pyjamas, he had turned off the light, kissed her cheek with a simple “Night,” and promptly turned over and gone to sleep. They’d never been particularly good at this and she had yet to remember a time she’d actually been able to finish with Tony, or any man for that matter, inside her, not without at least a little, or in this case, a lot of help via her own hands, but still, this was something else. This was verging on disastrous. She hadn’t been keeping score, but a rough reckoning told her that while Tony was managing to get what he wanted every time, she was looking a very low success rate. The last three times, he’d cum early and she’d been unable or lacking enough desire, or alcohol, one of the other, to have wanted to persist in finishing the job herself. Caitriona didn’t know what else to do to fix this. They were spending far more time together than ever before and yet the distance between seemed to be getting greater. So far, their combined reparation efforts had
resulted in at least three good old fashioned shouting matches, that Caitriona was positively sure could have been heard throughout the entire apartment complex, if not the street block, two occasions where the slamming of doors had been involved and once where she’d actually walked out on him, leaving him to deal with a bar full of patrons and investors.

It had been more frustration than actual anger. Frustration, disappointment and regret with a good measure of guilt thrown in to complete the set. Lately she seemed to be running into these feelings a lot. And not just in relation to their bedroom activities. The physical side of any relationship was important, but not as important as everything else. She could live without sex. There were well established ways and means of taking care of that oneself. But emotional isolation, emptiness, loneliness and regret were not as easily conquered alone. Feelings like that had made themselves right at home in the very forefront of every single thought and idea, hitting particularly hard last week, after they’d attended a friend’s wedding. Somewhere between the fourth and fifth glass of champagne, sitting there at a table, surrounded by other happy couples, some Caitriona knew, some she didn’t, it had suddenly occurred to her that here was another one of her friends married and settled, building lives with partners, happy and complete. She’d brushed that feeling off at first, occupying herself with spotting the singles trying to hook up that were also scattered among the celebrations, but three blue looking cocktails later, the ingredients of which remain a mystery to her still, she felt entirely alone in a room full of at least three hundred people. Worse, she’d felt that way with Tony sitting right there beside her.

She refilled the glass and glanced at the clock. He’d be here soon. Then the decision would become final, one way or another. She may not be sure right now exactly what she was going to do when he walked through the door, but one thing was blatantly obvious, despite their best efforts and her good intentions, it wasn’t working. None of it. Everything they did, everything she did. It had all been for nothing. Even the dark slate grey of the rain filled sky seemed colourful compared to how she felt inside. Cold, dull and alone.

Had she changed? She wondered, changed without her even realising it? Changed since the accident and the cabin? Before that she’d been okay, after it, something totally different. Changed or broken? Was there even a difference? Caitriona swallowed another mouthful of wine. She felt like something had broken her in, like a rubber band stretched too tight, pulled past it’s limit, suddenly snapped, and now unable to spring back even if it wanted to. She tried committing fully to Tony. It hadn’t helped, blue eyes searched the sky, the cold of the wind pushing her long hair off her shoulders. She wasn’t a teenager, she was a grown woman. She knew what she felt wasn’t love, or at least it wasn’t anywhere near close to what she imagined love to be, but at this point in her life she wasn’t even sure that soul capturing, never ending, heart stopping love that everyone wrote about even existed. This could be as good as it gets. Hell, even her own mother had told her that no marriage was perfect.

She’d always believed love at first sight was a myth. She had no real experience of it, but she thought she believed that love, if it existed at all, was something that needed to develop over time. Given more time, and following this theory, things might improve between them. It was possible, she supposed. Yet, somehow the thought of that possibility made her insides clench and left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Caitriona took a large swallow and rested the glass on her knee, or, she contemplated, brushing a finger over an errant drop of red about to trickle down the side of the glass, she could finally call this out for what it was and end it. Ending things would more than likely mean the end of a friendship, something Caitriona didn’t necessarily want to happen, but had accepted it as inevitable in this situation. Could lovers, she knew she was using that term very loosely, ever really return to just friends successfully? Rarely. At this point did it even matter? So many questions. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She’d been pondering them for a good while now. It had been
four weeks since the accident and for all four of those weeks she felt like she was in a constant state of tug of war. One moment tending one way, staying with Tony, trying to fix whatever it was that was broken, the next leaning towards leaving and just living her life. Feeling off balance all the time was not something she found appealing in the least. “Christ.” She berated herself, no one to hear it but the wind, “When did you become such a coward Caitriona. Just because things are difficult, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do them.” She emptied the glass and refilled it, this time draining the bottle.

It was time, her mind sounded. Time that she did what she knew she had to do. Time to stop being afraid. Time to do this. Not for Tony, not for Sam, not for some long lost love that may or may not be out there. This decision was for herself. Stay or go.

When she peeled back the guilt, the betrayal and the hurt of it all, it was really just that simple. In or out. Black and white. In the light of the stark choice, one or the other, Caitriona knew which one it was going to be. Which one it had to be. Which one it had always been. She closed her eyes and breathed in the chilled air. Fresh and clean. Decision made, she swirled the last of the wine around the glass. The next few minutes were not going to be pleasant. She’d tell him as soon as the time was right. It was going to hurt him. Hurt a friend. She’d try and be gentle about it, but there was really no good way to end a relationship, even one like theirs.

Small droplets of cold rain began to paint the tiled floor as the wind outside picked up and drizzle increased intent to rain. She heard the tumblers in the door click, her eyes watching as a flash of lightning lit the night sky for an instant before it was gone, replaced with a low rumble of thunder somewhere far off in the distance. “Caitriona!” Footsteps quickened, the rustle of bags and solid thunk of their weight on the floor. Tony swung the large doors closed, shutting out the wind and drizzling rain, “The floor is getting wet!” He shot her a disapproving look before grabbing a tea towel from the counter and industriously wiping the floor. “What you are doing?” Did he really want to know, somehow she thought not. “Sorry. I was just thinking.” Caitriona watched him, the slow swipe of the towel arcing across the floor with each pass of his arm. “Been drinking again I see.” He leaned over and picked up the empty bottle, “Least it’s red. It won’t clash with the salad I got from McGinnity’s.” He wandered over to the counter, tossed the bottle in the bin with a clank and started picking up the discard bags from the floor, “Don’t forget we have the network picnic tomorrow, I really need to meet up with Berhow and get him to sign on.” Tony gathered a few of the bags in his arms, “I’m just going to take a quick shower, I didn’t have time before I left.” He disappeared off down the hall towards her bedroom, leaving the room silent once again. She drained the last of the wine and slowly unfolded her legs from beneath her, standing and padding quietly over to the wine rack. Caitriona was sure she had another bottle somewhere. She thought she might need more wine. Awkward situations were always so much better with alcohol and she had the feeling this was going to be a long night. She had no idea how or even what to tell him. Straight up, or under the guise of conversation? She was tending towards a gentle, I think we need to talk.

A buzzing on the counter drew her attention. Tony’s phone was going off. One message, then another, followed by a third in about as many seconds. She grabbed a fresh bottle and pulled a seat over, setting the bottle down with a gentle clink and reaching for the phone which has now starting endlessly buzzing, signalling an incoming call.

She had intended to simply turn it over, thus ending the call before it even began, but the caller id and its accompanying photo stopped her in her tracks. It was of a young man, unruly curly blond hair framing a slim green eyed face. His assigned id, Lover#2.

Caitriona glanced towards the bedroom and back at the phone, closed her eyes, took a breath and
slide her finger across the screen. All of the messages, flashed in front of her eyes, several of them contained images. Images that she didn’t want to see, words Caitriona didn’t want to read and yet she knew she had to and the worst of it was that she wasn’t even surprised.

She returned the phone to its resting place. Then carefully opened the bottle of wine, surprised at how calm she felt. She refilled the empty glass and waited, leaning on the counter, watching the empty hallway, her mind suddenly quiet, almost at peace with itself. The quiet after the battle. She knew exactly what she was going to say now.

She didn’t have to wait long before Tony reappeared, freshly pressed pants and designer shirt, neatly tucked in, complete even with a pair of soft shoes he often wore indoors, considering bare feet absolutely unthinkable. She looked at her own bare feet, just visible beneath the tattered hems of a pair of old loose jeans and couldn’t help but smile. They had never been compatible.

Tony pulled a plastic bag towards him and sat down opposite her. He retrieved two containers from the bag and placed them on bench, “Let’s eat before my curry gets cold?”

Caitriona nodded and sipped her glass, finally putting it down with painstaking precision and opening the salad container that had been pushed in her direction, “Your phone rang.”

The spoon stopped half way to his mouth, his eyes flicking immediately to the device, mentally giving a sigh of relief at seeing it turned over, “Probably one the planning team at the council. I was hoping to get approval through tonight. That’s why I’m so late.”

“I see.” Her head cocked to one side “Strange name.”

He looked at her confused, slowly chewing, “What do you mean?”

“Strange name for a council planning associate to have.” She eyed him unblinkingly, “Lover number 2.”

The words hung in the air, tension now crackling through each and every particle, all of them seeming to stop, hoovering frozen, waiting for the whirlwind to hit. Tony swallowed, trying in vain to push down the lump that had developed in his throat.

She knew.

Christ, how could he have been so thoughtless to have left his phone, that phone out here. He had been so careful about this. He’d even brought two identical looking phones. The one time he’d been careless and slipped up. The wrong handset sitting there on the counter between them. Shit. Not now, he needed to close that deal tomorrow.

Fuck.

She knew.

Caitriona knew.

He’d been caught red handed. He couldn’t even use Sam Heughan this time. Not since Caitriona had been quoted in an interview saying that she wasn’t with Sam that she was with someone, not in the industry, all but confirming her relationship with Tony.

“Caitriona, I can ex..”

“No.” She calmly picked up the glass, “You can’t.”

“Caitriona…” He started to move towards her.

“Don’t.” Ice cold blue eyes flashed a warning over the rim of the glass. “Don’t. You. Dare.”

“Caitriona it doesn’t..”

“Yes. It does.” Her voice was steady, calm and void of emotion, not sadness nor regret, an honest reflection of exactly what she was feeling, “It’s over. This is over.” An arrow could not have been straighter and carried with it the same lethal intent. “We are over.”

“You don’t mean that Caitriona.” He stepped to her side, “Please, it was a mistake.” Thoughts
raced through his mind. If she left now, if he lost the contacts she provided, he’d be ruined. He had wagered everything with this latest deal. If it fell through, he’d face certain bankruptcy. He gripped her hand, “Please Caitriona. I swear it won’t happen again. Please.”

She slowly took back her hand and met his gaze, a strange feeling of calm settle over her, “You’re right. It won’t happen again. This is the end Tony.”

“Caitriona come on.” He straightened, “You said we would try. After Seattle, you said we could try. You owe me that Caitriona.” He was desperate now, trying his standard fall back, guilt, “After everything I’ve done Caitriona, don’t I at least deserve a chance here?”

“Everything you’ve done?” Blue eyes met his, “I gave you a chance Tony and god help me, I have been trying. I did owe you that, but not anymore.”

“Babe please..”

“I don’t love you and I’m tired of trying to.”

Tony stopped, real panic giving way to an anger fuelled fear. He had only one option now, hurt her emotionally until she came crawling back, “Love? Since when do people like you love anything Caitriona!” He raised his hands and let them fall against his sides, “It’s all a fucking act with you lot. Acting. On screen and off. All the time. Nothing is ever real with you is it? Half the world thinks you’re fucking Sam Heughan, which you claim is all part of your work! If you are that good at your job Caitriona, how is a man supposed to know what the fuck is real with you?” His voice was rising, “I’ve put up with you treating me no better than a casual acquaintance, I’ve put up with you trotting me out when you need me. I’ve done it all Caitriona, even put up with that red haired bastard rubbing my nose in it every chance he fucking gets.” He pointed an accusatory finger at her, “And you want to stand there and talk about love. Love has never been a factor in any of this Caitriona! We do what it necessary and that’s it!” He stopped, a little out of breath, hoping he’d stung her enough to at least succeed in a delay. “Now,” He calmed his voice, “Can we please just –“

“Stop.” Her shaky voice interrupted him, a treacherous lone tear escaping from the corner of one misted blue eye, “Get your things.” She stood and walked to the door, opening it, silently grateful for the solidness of it, hoping to hell that her legs collapse beneath her, “Then get out of my house.”

“Caitriona –“

“Now. Before I call the police and have you thrown out.”

Tony stared at her a moment. He’d lost. There was nothing else to hit her with now. Not guilt, not hurt, not sympathy, nothing. He’d exhausted every emotional button he knew. He reached over and snatched up his phone and coat and stalked past her, eyeing her as he passed close by her, “Do whatever you like with my things Caitriona. Throw them out if you want, after all that’s what you’re good at, throwing things away.” He took a step, crossing the threshold of the door, “Thanks for destroying my life. Good luck carrying on your little acting career without me.”

She didn’t know if he wanted to say more or not. The sharp sound of the door slamming put an end to the conversation. She closed her eyes, both palms pressed tight against wooden surface of the door.

Breathe, just breathe. She chanted softly, thick tears tracking down her cheeks. She didn’t want to cry, didn’t want to give his words any more power than they already had.

Tonight had been about making a decision.

She’d made it.

In or out.

For better or worse. It was out.

She was hoping like hell right now, it was for the better.
She didn’t know how much more ‘worse’ she could take.
Impossible

“Okay, that’s it. I’m done.” Johnathon Chase threw the pen on the desk and shut the folder of the current case that his team had been called to London to help with. He’d spent the last two hours catching up on the paperwork that went along with it.

“How the fuck did you finish that so damn quick?” Jackson Porter was seated directly across from the tall blond man and as the second most senior member of investigation team, was wading though his own stack of paperwork, though, unlike Johnathon, the dark haired man, still had a good portion left to do.

Johnathon shrugged, “I dunno,” He stood up and unhooked his jacket that had been hanging across the back of chair, “Maybe it’s because I didn’t spend an hour on phone trying to find a date for every night for the three nights we have left in London?”

Jackson threw his hands up in surrender, “Hey, I’m here at what?” He turned his head and looked at his watch, “At 1:00am on a Friday night, a FRIDAY night mind you. This is just a waste of good partying time.” He swung back on his chair and crossed his hands behind his head, “Want me to get out my black book and find you a date as well? After all we are in the city of love.”

“That’s Paris, not London.”

Jackson waved a hand in dismissal, “Paris. London. It’s all the same, so much potential, so little time. Sure you don’t want to tap some of it while you’re here?”

Johnathon visibly cringed and slipped his arms into the leather jacket, flicking the collar up as he did so, “No. I’ll leave that entirely up to you.”

“Uh huh.” Jackson fished out a packet of nicotine gum from his shirt pocket and tossed two squares into his mouth, “You know, there is more to life than work right?”

“Not right now there’s not.” Johnathon shoved his hands into his pockets, his fingers seeking the car keys hidden within.

The chair squeaked as Jackson leaned further back, “You know, seriously, don’t you think it’s time?”

“Time for what?” Johnathon glanced up as he thumbed through the keys for the correct one.

“Time to get back out there.” Jackson said leaning forward and resting his arms on his desk, “It’s been a good while now. I know a few women that would fall over themselves to go on a date with you. I could call and set one up, might be good.”

Johnathon's blue eyes flicked to Jackson, “Are you off your medication again?”

“Ha, Ha.” The dark haired man shrugged off the mock accusation, “It’s time, you know, time to get back up on the horse. They say nothing gets you over the last one like getting under the next one.”

Johnathon’s blue eyes glinted, “You know what else they say? Mind your own business.” It sounded like the definite warning it was. This particular section of his life was off-limits. Even to the man he considered his family.
“All the more for women for me I guess.” Jackson knew this subject was a touchy one, but lately he was becoming more and more concerned about Johnathon. Ever since those damned pictures and those fucking calls, the source of which was still a mystery and the breakup, his friend hadn't been himself. A lot more than just a relationship had been been broken. Something else, something far deeper had been severely injured in his friend, that much was clear. Jackson had watched as Johnathon had drawn back into himself, burying that happy, go lucky persona that was so much a part of him, replaced by a reserved, guarded man who lived to work. Life for him now consisted of case after case. Apart from a week two months ago, Johnathon hadn't had a day off. Not so much as one day. Even now, when they'd finished this case early and still had a few days left here in the city, Jackson knew damn well that Johnathon would spend it working on one of the handful of cold cases that his friend often worked on alone. Work life balance like that wasn't good for anyone. He'd give it one last try, “Listen man, it’s just that, well, it’s been a few months now -”

“I know.” Johnathon’s deep voice sounded, interrupting the conversation, a note of finality clinging to its edge, “Leave it alone, Jackson. Just leave it be.” The dark haired man fiddled with the top of his silver lighter, green eyes flicking to watch his friends face. Last thing he wanted was to make Johnathon angry. He was just trying to help and figured the best way to do that was to get Johnathon back out there, back dating again, meeting people, having a life outside of work. Work like what they did could seriously mess with you given enough time. They saw things no one should, saw the dark side of humanity and Jackson wasn’t above admitting that it was as scary as fuck and could easily take over your life, leaving you with nothing good, only darkness and death. He didn’t want that for the man he considered his brother. Jackson took a deep breath and nodded, “Okay. Okay” He raised his hands in mock surrender, “Far be it from me to mess up your big plans for a night in front of the tv or whatever it is you have planned.”

Johnathon took the peace offering in the spirit with which it was intended, “Believe me, that’s is probably going to be exponentially more action than what you are likely to see.” Jackson nodded thoughtfully before grinning, “So..... was that no on the babe for tonight?”

“There is something seriously wrong with you.” Johnathon shook his head with a smile and turned to go, “If you don’t get that started,” He pointed a finger at the pile of folders, “You won’t be going anywhere.” Johnathon began walking away, “And women all over the world will cheer.”

“So funny.” Jackson picked up the pen, “Real funny.” He blew out a breath and then picked up another folder, looked at it a moment and then yelled, “Last chance Chase.” Johnathon didn’t answer, instead he walked outstepping through the security area and out into the undercover parking garage.

Johnathon yanked opened the door and slid into the soft seat with a sigh. This case had been a tough one and Johnathon was glad it was over. He gripped the wheel and leaned back in the car seat, driving almost on automatic pilot though the city. It was a good feeling to know they had done it, that they’d had found the three evil bastards that had been assaulting women in Leeds for the past two weeks. Not only that, but they’d been lucky enough to bring all three of them in before any major media outlets had cottoned on to it. It had all been handled quickly and quietly, exactly how Johnathon wanted it to be. Three families had been spared the misery of seeing their loved ones having to deal with the ever present press, incessantly wanting to make them relive the whole ordeal, often in heart rending graphic detail. With the closing of the case from his side, it now landed in the hands of the prosecutors to make sure that some form of justice was done.

He turned off the main motorway down into the narrower inner London streets. Traffic here wasn’t as heavy as he expected but there was still enough to make the going slow. Still, it gave him time to relax, reorder his thoughts, leaving the case, the interviews, the unpleasant details of it all
behind him. It had been exhausting, but the outcome was more than worth the 72 hrs he’d gone without sleep. He swung into the small driveway, angling down the entry ramp and following the gentle spiral down to the lowest level of the underground parking bay of the hotel. It was almost empty down here, most guests didn’t have their own vehicles, preferring to rely on taxis or public transport rather than attempting to navigate the inner city traffic. While he wasn’t a fan of traffic, Johnathon liked to have his own method of travel. Working long unusual hours and travelling to remote sites was just easier if he did his own driving and it had the added benefit of not making him feel quite so closed in. He preferred large open spaces, quiet simplicity to the noisy, hustle and bustle of the city, but like everyone else in the world, he went were his work lead him and more often than not that was into the heavily populated cities or the world.

Last week it had been Washington, then Nashville, before that Sydney, Australia. At least that had given him a chance to go home and check on a few things at the same time. Home. Was anywhere really home anymore? Not as if there was anyone anywhere waiting for him. He wondered for a moment if Jackson might not be right. Maybe it was time. Christ, he must really be tired if he was contemplating romantic advice from Jackson. He shook his head at the mere thought of admitting that.

He would admit to himself, however, that he missed having someone to share things with, that one person who cared, who was there, who could be trusted with everything. He’d had that once. Now, with the safety of time passed and an earned emotional distance from the whole situation, he could at least admit he missed that feeling. He’d stumbled across a person who’d given him that, by pure chance. Now, it was gone. Crushed and broken, shattered into a million little shards, slivers and pieces. Never to be repaired. He wasn’t an expert on relationships, not even close, but he did realise that finding that connection with someone wasn't something usually happened twice. Chances were even more remote now that Johnathon’s existence consisted of hotel rooms, airport lounges and police stations.

Different cities, different countries. Sometimes he’d be in a place less than three days before he was gone again. Not exactly conducive to finding someone to share a life with. He pulled into the last car park beside the lifts. It was what it was, he guessed and he was how he was. Casual flings and liaisons weren’t something he’d ever found appealing in the least. Finding that someone, someone who wasn’t just scratching an itch was near on impossible at the best of times, let alone given his circumstances and work commitment and right now, if he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure he was up to another relationship. After all, here it was, almost 2 am and Johnathon wanted nothing more than get to his room, have a hot shower and crawl into bed and sleep. So unless the impossible just happened to walk smack bang into this hotel lift, his elusive ‘someone’ would have remain a pipe dream for the near and foreseeable future.

Johnathon gathered up his coat and briefcase, waiting patiently and watching the countdown display as the lift made its way down, floor by irritating slow floor. At least it was empty when it finally arrived. He pressed the button indicating his floor and then moved the back of the lift, leaning against the handrail and crossing his legs at his ankles, hoping that with the late hour, there wouldn’t be too many stops on the way up. His luck ran out when on lift stopped on the lobby floor. He glanced up as the doors opened. Johnathon had to blink twice before his mind caught up with optical input, pushing off the handrails in startled surprise, “Caitriona.”
Hi everyone, thanks for sticking with me. Just letting you know, I won't be posting for a few weeks. Renovations means I will be without internet access for a bit. But I will be back. Cheers to you all.

Caitriona scanned the room, her height giving her a natural advantage in this particular situation. It was late, though for this crowd, the night was young. Industry parties like this tended to start late and finish even later. This particular party was filled to overflowing with corporate sponsors, entertainment executives and various management and PR personnel. As the lead actress and face of the Outlander production her presence had been mandatory, as was the target of her search. She glanced over towards the small group of underling assistants she’d last seen him talking to and found that he’d moved from there. She swivelled back and forth, glancing from face to face until she found him. He was standing, surprisingly alone, on one of the smaller balconies, overlooking a manicured courtyard garden, his broad back to the crowd. Caitriona picked up the two glasses and headed his way. Another half hour or so and they’d be able to leave, obligations fulfilled, job done. It couldn’t come soon enough for her. Her ankle had healed well, but it still ached when she stood in heels for long periods of time. She navigated her way through the crowd, nodding greetings and excuse me’s as she worked her across the room, finally clearing the threshold and stepping out into the cool night air, “Here,” she said as she stepped to his side, “You look like you need this.”

Sam blinked, scattering his thoughts and accepted the offering, “Thanks. Think I just needed the fresh air more than anything.” He tossed the drink back and in one swallow it was gone. Caitriona raised an eyebrow at him. Perhaps she’d been premature in thinking that they’d found a way through all that mess that had been precipitated by Seattle and then again when she’d ended things with Tony.

She liked Sam, a lot. He had a good heart and they did work astonishingly well together. He’d been a great support to her and a great friend through all this whirlwind of Outlander. Caitriona valued her friends and Sam Heughan was definitely that. She never wanted to lose him.

What was becoming more and more obvious to her though, was that he wasn’t someone she could spend her life with, build a future with, give herself fully to. When she’d broken with Tony, Sam had tried again with her, wanting to take things further. She hadn’t left Tony to be with Sam or anyone else for that matter. She’d left Tony because she wasn’t happy. Sam had viewed the breakup as a signal of hope for them to be more than what they were. Caitriona had immediately set him straight, telling him what she felt, being openly honest with him. She hoped they would always be close friends, but that was all they would ever be.

It hadn’t been a decision she’d taken lightly and it wasn’t one that she hadn’t thought about. She had. For a small window of time after Tony, she had thought about Sam, had considered what that might mean, thought very carefully about how exactly she felt, how he made her feel, what they had between them.

She’d considered it, looked deep inside herself and had come to the solemn conclusion that Sam already had a place in her heart. Friends. It wasn’t anything that Sam did or didn’t do. It wasn’t
anything she’d done or hadn’t done. It was no one’s fault. It was just the way it was.

In the wake of her decision, Caitriona had thought everything was okay, that things were settled, that Sam was okay with it all, that he’d accepted things were what they were. Mr and Mrs Outlander to the public, friends in private. Nothing more and nothing less than that. Judging from the downcast set of his shoulders, things were clearly far from okay.

“The air getting a bit close in there?” Caitriona sipped her own drink, the warm fire trickling down her throat to her belly, “You were collecting quite the little bevy of female followers.” She smiled good naturedly. It was true. Sam was never short of female admirers, they seemed to gravitate towards him and industry parties were no different.

“Mmph.” He let out a derisive snort, “One of them, the blonde, wants to go out clubbing after this,” He turned away from her, leaned on his elbows and gazed into the greenery, often out of place in large cities.

“Are you going to go?”

“Thinking about it,” He pondered with a shrug, “Do you think I should?” He looked up at her, a clear question behind the spoken words.

“If you want to, then absolutely Sam,” She reached over and laid a hand on his arm, “You should do what makes you happy you know.”

“Tried that. Didn’t go over a big hit.” He blinked slowly at her, “Are you sure about this Cait? It’s not too late to ch..”

“Stop Sam,” She warned gently, tightening her hand around his forearm, “You need to move on from this.”

His eyes were searching hers, one last chance at persuading her to try. Sam loved her, he was sure of it, had loved her for a long time now. Loved her as his best friend and wanted desperately to take it to the next level.

“A chance was all he was asking. Just one last try. “Cait, we could just try – “

“Sam...”

He saw it, saw it in her eyes and his heart cracked a little more. He’d thought after the whole Tony bullshit and his inexcusable behaviour, that he might have at least a chance. But no. He looked at her, standing there beside him, the most exquisitely beautiful woman in the entire room, right here with him and yet, so far from his that she may as well be in another country. All he could was wait. Wait and hope for a change of heart. Waiting was as frustrating as hell, but what else was there. Give up. Not likely. Give her an either or choice? No. He wasn’t the type to be an asshole about it by forcing her to make a choice. He’d never been the my way or the highway type of man and wouldn’t be able to do that to her even if he wanted to.

She was right about one thing. They were friends. Good ones, great even. It wasn’t exactly what he wanted, but, friendship was better than nothing, he guessed. Sam stood up straight, sticking his hands in his pockets, trying to put a smile on his face despite what he felt, “Guess I’ll be going clubbing then.”

“I think you need more liquor if you’re going to survive that my friend.” Caitriona smiled, half relieved and accepting the flag of truce for what it was as she handed over the remains of her drink. Caitriona recognised it wasn’t easy for him and she had no desire to hurt him further by letting him continue to think there could ever be a them when as far as she was concerned, there wasn’t. She wasn’t about to rub that fact in his face either.

“Wish me luck then.” Sam downed the last of her drink, grimacing as the heat hit the back of his throat.

“You’ll need it, with those two left feet of yours.” She took the empty glass from his hands as he turned around and waved at the blonde woman inside, “Go on.” Caitriona lightly patted his shoulder, “Go show them how it’s done Sam.”

He hesitated a moment then leaned over and kissed her cheek, “See you tomorrow?”

“Of course.” She watched as he gave her one last look, then he strode off towards the group of women inside. Caitriona made a mental to shoot him a text later to make sure he at least made it
back to the hotel safely. Speaking of hotel, she leaned on one leg, lifting her aching foot a little and gingerly rolling it around. The thought of a soft warm bed seemed infinitely more attractive than continuing to stand here around any longer. She’d well and truly fulfilled her obligations and most of the other party guests were beginning to filter out into whatever other night time activities they could find. Caitriona decided to follow suit. By the time she had collected her coat and called for a taxi it was well after 1 am. Least the traffic was reasonable at this time of night. She leaned her head against the glass of the window, watching as the buildings drifted by, much like the thoughts rolling around behind her eyes. She hoped things would be alright with Sam, hoped she knew what she was doing.

Not for the first time in recent weeks she wondered if she was one of those people who went through their life alone. Part of her was really starting to believe that, but another part, wondered what it would be like to have that one person, who was there, always be there, who could be trusted to be there for no other reason than they wanted to. Not for themselves, but for her, for eachother.

If it hadn’t been for her parents, Caitriona might have been able to convince herself that type of thing as a ridiculous idiotic romantic notion, best left to fairy tales and unfulfilled dreams. She was still contemplating that as she pushed the revolving door of the hotel and headed into the mostly empty lobby. There were still small pockets of guests coming and going, but all in all it was quieter than she expected for a Friday night. She looked up at the red display, tracking the lifts progress as she pressed the button, hoping it wouldn’t take too long to arrive and that it would be blessedly empty. Noisy late night revellers weren’t really on her list of things to do right now, particularly not in the close confines of a hotel elevator. Luckily it didn’t take long, no more than a couple of minutes, before the metallic doors slide open a soft ding sounding to herald its arrival. She looked up, a soft gasp of surprise issued from her lips.

He was the last person she’d expected to see. Blue eyes she immediately recognised. “Caitriona.”

His deep voice sounded as surprised as she felt. He snapped to attention, pushing off the rail and standing straight.

It took a few long heartbeats to gather her scattered wits and her mouth to finally work, “Hello Johnathon.”

His handsome face creased into a smile, as he reached forward, stopped the doors from closing, which would have left her standing there like an idiot having forgotten to get into the lift. “Are you, um..” He tilted his head towards the back of the lift.

“Oh right, yes.” She said with a small laugh then stepped into the lift, hoping her face was as red as it felt. She gave her head a small shake, internally cursing at herself, frantically trying to pull herself together, “What are you doing in London Johnathon?” She knew it was the standard meet and greet question and couldn’t be more cliched and superficial if it tired, but right now Caitriona was just happy that what came out of her mouth was actually coherent.

Johnathon Chase had been the second to last person she’d expected to run into tonight, the last being Jesus Christ himself. He looked good, she mused, very good. She normally didn’t tend to be attracted to the men that were solidly muscular, but Johnathon was proving to be the exception that made the rule. Overly muscular was a definite turn off, Johnathon fell somewhere in the middle and her body wasn’t shy in voicing this new found approval, significantly aided by the half a dozen drinks she’d had at the party. It wasn’t enough for her to be drunk, but enough to dull some of the sharper edges of her thinking. Johnathon’s deep voice pulled her attention back to his face, “Working.” Those blue eyes locked momentarily with hers, “Just lending a hand to the local constabulary. You?”

“Industry event for the show.” She cleared her throat and tried to not focus on the fact that he not only did he look good but he also sounded good, that Australian accent of his only adding to
intrigue. Maybe she’d had too much to drink.

“Of course,” He raised an eyebrow, as if trying to remember, “Outlander, right?”

“That’s right.” She said with a soft smile, some of her initial nervousness dissipating as the floors slowly passed by, silently charmed that he remembered some small fact about her. “What are you doing out this late?”

“It’s only 2 am. Normal working hours for us in the force you know,” He said with a cheeky grin, “Isn’t that early for you entertainment folk?”

“Us entertainment folk?” Caitriona couldn’t help laugh. His good humour was utterly infectious and seemed to reach out and pull her in as surely as if it was a length of rope. “I don’t know about you force folk,” She shot him her own grin, “Or where you’re getting your information, but 2 am is considered late.”

The lift stopped, doors sliding open, Johnathon standing still while Caitriona passed in front of him, stepping out onto the deserted long corridor of the hotel, rooms lining either side in both directions. “How is that foot by the way?” He fell into step beside her, slowly ambling down the corridor.

“It’s coming along nicely. Wasn’t broken, obviously,” She lifted the foot in question, “It was sore for a few weeks though.”

“I can imagine, a good sprain can take months to mend.” Johnathon nodded towards the heeled shoe, “Probably hurting a bit after being in that is it?”

“A little.” She conceded, “ Couldn’t be helped though.”

“Guess not,” He said conversationally, “Not like you can rock up in thongs I suppose.”

“No, wouldn’t advise it, us entertainment folk have standards, though,” She laughed softly, “I would love to see you say that in a room of our US friends.”

A brilliant smile lit his face, neat white teeth flashing, “Half would be probably be appropriately scandalized the other half would be thinking how I knew specifically what underwear they had on.” He gave an amused chuckle, remembering as she had, that thong had a very different meaning dependant on geographic location. One being very casual footwear, the other, a piece of underwear.

“Might have livened the place up a bit and made it a bit more bearable.”

“Must have been a bad night if you’re telling me a thong joke would have been a highlight.”

“An evening of hours of standing around talking about nothing to strangers,” She smiled wryly at him, “Trust me, it would have been a highlight.”

They drew to a slow halt, stopping in front of Caitriona’s assigned room, blue eyes regarding each other as a small silence fell. It was the first time all night she’d relaxed enough to actually enjoy the company of anyone. Relaxed, in a nervously excited way that was difficult to reconcile and Caitriona found herself suddenly wanting to say something, anything to keep him talking to her. She’d walked slowly enough down that corridor that it was a wonder they hadn’t been moving in reverse. “How long are you in London for?”

“We fly out Tuesday morning.”

“We?” It was out of her mouth before she could stop it, with no way to pull it back.

“My partner and I”

Caitriona felt her stomach flicker with what she thought was disappointment, “There are plenty of romantic spots to visit in London to help pass the time.” She might have been slightly tipsy, but she could still hold it together. She was an adult after all. She eyed his handsome face. She hardly knew him. It wasn’t like she cared or anything.

He looked at her strangely a few moments, the wrinkled brow of confusion suddenly fading, replaced by a broad smile, “My work partner,” Johnathon clarified, “In the investigation Team.” He added after a beat, trying not laugh at the thought of showing Jackson of all people, the romantic side of London.

“Work partner?” Caitriona gave her head a little shake, “Shit, sorry. Of course.” She said, deciding
that now was an excellent time to study her feet. Johnathon Chase was definitely having an effect on her capacity to carry out a sensible adult like conversation. Either that or she was far drunker than she thought.

“I’ll keep your advice in mind if I ever find someone who fits that bill.” His voice was soft and smooth, flowing like molten honey into her hearing. The nervous fluttering in her stomach returned, her head lifting to see those blue eyes looking at her gently, “And what about you Caitriona? When are you and your partner heading home?”

She blinked slowly at him. Was he information hunting like she had been? The clear blue eyes watching her never wavered as she studied him, “I’ll can leave any time after Monday,” she said, her heart beating far too loudly in her chest, “No partner though, it’s just me now.” As if the sight and sound of him wasn’t enough, Caitriona also decided the Johnathon smelt good, that unidentifiable scent that was clean, male and thoroughly intoxicating.

The statement seemed to hang in the still air between them, like the short pause between lightning and thunder, or the inhale and exhale of a breathe, the two of them, standing quietly, face to face in that hotel corridor. Both knowing exactly where they wanted to go, but neither knowing how to get there.

“I should probably stop keeping you from the rest of your evening,” his head dipped to one side in a slight nod, “It was good to see you again Caitriona.”

“You too, Johnathon.”

He smiled at her then turned and started walking towards his own room. Johnathon hadn’t gone more than a handful of steps when he stopped. A small voice in the back of his mind, nothing much more than whisper directed at that intelligent mind of his. Don’t be afraid. Isn’t it time? Take the chance.

“Caitriona?”

She looked up at him from her hotel door, the key card in her hand, resting just above the lock, dark brows raised in question.

“If you’re not too busy, which you probably are, but anyway..” Johnathon stopped speaking, wondering just when did this suddenly become this difficult and why the hell the ability to form simple sentences had deserted him, “Would you like to catch up, sometime? Tomorrow over coffee or lunch or something? Maybe?” He took a clearing breath, hoping he didn’t sound as stupid as he felt.

Waiting.

Hoping.
Just a Dinner

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay readers. Real life and all that. I hope to update every fortnight or thereabouts from now on.

Caitriona checked her makeup for the fourth time in as many minutes. God, she mentally cursed, smoothing a hand over the sheer dark blue fabric of her stomach, twitching the long dress straight. She’d forgotten how nerve-wracking dating could actually be. Her brow wrinkled. Was that what this was? She leaned on the counter bench, staring quietly into the mirror, contemplating. Was that how he saw it? The dazzling smile that had lit his eyes from the inside and had sent a swarm of butterflies skittering pleasantly around her stomach as the words “I’d love to Johnathon,” had spilled from her lips without a single second of hesitation, all seemed to indicate to her that there was a strong possibility that he did.

A date. The warm buzzing in her stomach tickled her skin at the thought. Of course, the rational side of her brain asserted, there was also the possibility that this really was just a polite catch up and not a date at all. The politeness attribute was certainly one that Johnathon had displayed in the cabin. In fact, he had been nothing but companionable and polite.

In an instant the butterflies vanished. What if she was reading this entirely wrong? After all, they’d spent three days together and neither of them had even ventured into anything that could remotely be considered as romantic territory. Granted the situation then had been totally different. She had been in a relationship, recovering from an car accident. He had been aloof and while companionable, had also been distant. How on earth was she making this leap between then and now.

There was no way this could be a date.

Right?

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” She breathed, sternly addressing her reflection, “Get it together Caitriona. It’s just a dinner.” She let out a deep breath, giving herself one last appraising look, before pushing off the counter and going in search of her shoes.

It was just a dinner.

No big deal.

Just a dinner.

With a man.

Not a date.

Just a dinner.

That was for the best anyway. She didn’t exactly have a great track record when it came to understanding relationships with the opposite sex. The last two she’d been involved with had been
nothing short of pure disaster and she wasn’t entirely sure she trusted her instincts in this arena at all. She scowled at the anxious indecision plaguing her. She hadn’t always been like this. Caitriona remembered a time when she had been one to leap first and look later. Now, at thirty, with a decade of independent life experience at her back, the order had changed somewhat. Caution was the name of the game now, at least in her private life. Professionally she was happy to take some risks. Professionally the worst that could happen was that she go bankrupt or get fired. That she could recover from. Easily. Personally however, the potential fallout from failure was far more devastating.

Still, she couldn’t just shut the world out. Flipping open one of her suitcases, she found the elusive footwear. One way or the other, she reflected, resting on one hand and slipped each foot into its respective shoe, she’d find out in about ten minutes what Johnathon’s view of this situation was. Gathering up her purse and hotel key, she shot herself one last critical look in the mirror, took a deep breath and reached for the hotel door.

She hadn’t expected to see Johnathon again, ever, but now that she had, she couldn’t help it. She wanted this. Date or not. She wanted to see him, and was even looking for the opportunity to spend time the evening with him. Caitriona stepped inside the elevator, waiting for it to descend to the lobby, trying to calm her nerves. She checked her appearance again in the walled mirrors of the elevator car.

Christ, it was just a dinner, she repeated.

Caitriona shook her head, mentally chastising herself to get it together before the doors opened at least, determined to not repeat the stunned mullet look she’d very adequately projected the last time Johnathon Chase and elevators had been involved. The doors slid open and she stepped out into a busy hotel lobby.

Caitriona scanned the room, finally finding him, his tall, athletic frame casually leaning against a building column. Dressed simply in a dark blue shirt, the soft glint from the silver of his watch, barely poking out from beneath one long sleeve, long arms crossed over his chest waiting patiently for her to arrive. She wondered if he realised just how good he looked. If he did, he certainly gave no indication of it. Caitriona started towards him. She hadn’t gone more than dozen steps when his head turned and crystal blue eyes had found her. He straightened and walked to her, meeting her halfway, a warm smile on his face. In the space of a few seconds the worrisome nerves and rumination about what this was or wasn’t dissolved and as if by magic was replace by the gentle warmth of anticipation.

“Hello Caitriona.” The deep timbre of his voice saying her name, sent a pleasant tickle skittering down her spine.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” She said returning his smile, “I hope you haven’t been waiting long?”

“Not long at all. I only just came down here myself a few minutes ago,” He stepped to her side and offered his arm with a small flourish, “What do you say? Shall we?”

She dipped her head in agreement, tucking her hand beneath his elbow and starting across the lobby towards the large doors that marked the entrance. As they stepped out into the portico, several black cabs were lined up, gradually filling with passengers headed out for the evening.

Caitriona started towards one of them only to find herself gently directed along the paved walkway. She looked up at him, one eyebrow raised, a slight look of confusion on her face. “We don’t need a cab?”

“No. I think we’ll be okay,” He said, steadying her as she navigated the small set of stairs that lead towards the street.

She shot him an apprehensive look. She didn’t fancy walking a great distance in her heels. Tall, hot and handsome man by her side or not.

“Don’t worry, it’s not far.”
She was a little relieved to hear that. He hadn’t provided her with any information as to where they might be going, and she hadn’t asked. She’d been too busy saying yes to him. She hoped she wasn’t about to regret that now. They turned down a corner and much to her surprised, not 50 metres away she could see the entrance to a restaurant. She’d been to London dozens of times, stayed in this particular hotel, just as many times and had never even realised that this restaurant existed. It looked to be a small, but reasonable well appointed.

“Italian okay?” He asked, reaching out a hand and gripping the door, “We can go somewhere else if you’d like?” His paused, clean-shaven face quirked into a cheeky grin which instantly warmed her, “I’ll even call a taxi if we need it.”

She gave a small chuckle, “Italian will be fine Johnathon.”

“Phew,” He drew an exaggerated hand across his brow and flashed a cheeky smile, then pressed open the door, waiting for her to cross in front of him.

It was busy inside. The place was packed with dining guests, in fact Caitriona was hard pressed to spot a free table and she wondered for a moment if they were both about to be disappointed.

“Johnathon Chase. Table for two.”

The woman behind the counter, glanced down at her reservations book, placing a mark beside an entry, “Of course Mr Chase, just this way.” She led them through the busy restaurant and settled them at a table off to one side. It always amazed her, how in places like this, when so many people gathered together, all eating and drinking, that the volume of the surrounds always seemed to be muted, slightly dampened by propriety.

“Can I get you both something to drink?” The waitressed asked, handing them each a menu, Caitriona not missing the smile the woman flashed Johnathon. Apparently Caitriona wasn’t the only one who found Johnathon’s physically appearance appealing. Johnathon, she observed, couldn’t have cared less, politely taking the menu and studying it. Caitriona rather pleased at that, settled on an Italian red wine that she hadn’t had in a while, not since her last trip to the actual country itself. She’d looked for it several times since then but had been unsuccessful in finding it. Until this evening. She was surprised for a second time when her tablemate didn’t join her with wine, instead choosing a scotch and dry ginger ale. Caitriona wrapped hand around her glass, glancing over the rim as she sipped it, taking in Johnathon’s features as he studied the menu. She’d already made her selection, a vegetable pasta with goats cheese sauce and bitter greens and was now sitting waiting for Johnathon do to the same. Blue eyes flicked up to her, one blonde eyebrow raising in question, “You’ve found something already?”

“I have.” She nodded and set the glass down, “Hard choice, there was a lot there that sounded delicious. This place has a great selection of dishes that suit me down to the ground.” There were in fact a plethora of vegetarian meals, all listed, along with several gluten free meals.

A thought struck her. She studied him, sitting across from her, blue eyes blinking innocently. Surely he hadn’t done that on purpose. She’d only mentioned it in passing that first night, back in the cabin. He wouldn’t have remembered that.

Would he?

“How did you find this place? I’ve been in London many times and didn’t know it was here. “

He closed his own menu, selection apparently complete, “One of the other investigators I work with told me about it, though,” He lifted his own glass, swallowing a sip, “I can’t vouch for the quality of his recommendations. They tend to run a bit hot and cold.” In truth, it had been Jackson who had found the place because one of his so called ‘dates’ had turned out to be a strict vegetarian and a coeliac. Of course, the fact that the hotel was literally around the corner had also played heavily into the Jackson’s assessment of the place. “If it turns out to be a bum steer, then I willingly defer to your good judgement as to where we go next.”

“There is always the fish and chip shop around the corner in a pinch.” She playfully quipped.

As if on que, the waitress reappeared, standing quietly at the table’s edge, notepad in hand,
glancing from one diner to the other.

“Too late to escape now.” Johnathon quirked a grin, and placed his order.

Yes, Caitriona decided watching him with her own smile.

It most certainly was.
Instinct

Caitriona let out a deep breath, watching as it clouded in the cold air as she stepped outside the restaurant. Small puddles of damp littered the walkway, pavers and cobble stones, darkened with the remnants of earlier rain that had now eased for the moment but had also ushered in a drop temperature. It was late, far later than she intended it to be. Time had just run away from her. They had talked, laughed and generally enjoyed each other’s company until they’d realised they were the last patrons in the entire place, the staff, clearly wanting to shut down for evening, were wiping down tables and stacking chairs. Caitriona had stepped outside, leaving Johnathon to pay the bill, one that he’d stubbornly refused to let her pay even a small portion off. That, she reflected, felt so unusual. After the past few years and partners, she had become so used to paying for everything that it had become almost second nature. To have someone quietly offer it, was a strange feeling, albeit, not entirely an unpleasant one. In fact, the entire evening had been, at least according to Caitriona’s mental checklist of what constituted as catch up dinners, nothing other than a qualified success. No pretention, no expectation, just the two of them, sitting quietly, talking about anything and everything.

They’d started with their respective families. Her family, complete with her mother and father and seven siblings a stark contrast to his. He was an only child. Both his parents having been killed when he was a young boy. Caitriona had spent her entire life surrounded by family. Even when she hadn’t really wanted or needed it, there was a certain level of comfort and belonging that came with the knowledge that both her parents were still there if she needed them. Not to mention the close, sometimes too close she reflected, relationship she shared with her sisters. She couldn’t really imagine what it might feel like to have lost all that by the time you were two years old. How do you even begin to comprehend that when you’re barely old enough to understand anything at all. No siblings, no parents, just him. The only other living person on the planet remotely connected to him had been his uncle on his mother’s side. Johnathon had lived with him until he was four and after than he’d been sent to various boarding schools then on to university until he’d started work as a young adult. It seemed a very lonely, solitary existence to Caitriona and such a different upbringing from her own, where the chaos, noise and the activity of a large groups of people permeated almost every experience she’d had growing up. Even later as a model, when she was old enough to be forging her own way, Caitriona always seemed to be surrounded by people. It made her wonder for a moment what effect something as emotionally devasting as losing your family have on shaping you as a person. Perhaps it had played in a part in his selection of occupations. Though, she’d been surprised to discover that he hadn’t always been a detective. He had spent at least five years in law enforcement and had practiced law for some time before that.

She turned her head, quietly studying his profile through the closed glass door. Tall, strong straight back, framed by those square shoulders that looked entirely functional rather than the exaggerated musculature achieved from hours, too many hours if you asked her, in the gym. Johnathon looked to her to be the type of person far more comfortable with the outside world, moving around in it, rather than the claustrophobic monotony of interior corporate worlds, stuck inside, day after day. The smooth defined physicality of him seemed to support this theory but if there was one thing she had learned from her time as a model and now as an actor, never make assumptions based on looks. She watched him appreciatively a moment longer before turning back to the street, quietly studying the old stone work on the surrounding buildings as her mind turned inward again, intent on digesting the evening. Her earlier ruminations about what Johnathon thought this evening was or wasn’t were now totally moot. It might have started out as a polite catch up, but after they had quickly establishing that the other was indeed single, it was clear that the evening was drifting steadily but surely into a situation that could only be classified as date.
For her part, Caitriona had not so innocently brought up the topic when she had asked if he found it hard to travel with his job and have someone at home. Johnathon had replied with a small smile. One that told her instantly that he knew exactly what she was hunting for. His verbal answer had followed. It had been unhesitatingly certain. He was currently single by way of a situation that he hadn’t really elaborated on but that had happened about four months ago. Caitriona hadn’t pressed for details. She’d seen the flicker in those blue soft eyes and decided that the first date wasn’t the time to delve into his personal history. That could wait. The only thing that really mattered at this point was that he was as single as she was. It had been the metaphorical green light that she had needed for the evening to swing on its natural arc from a friendly catch up to something entirely different. Caitriona was a lot of things and had made more than her fair share of mistakes in the past, but she wasn’t a homewrecker and had exactly zero intention of becoming one. If Johnathon had revealed, at any point during the evening, that there was a significant other hidden somewhere, anywhere, in his background, then the evening and all thoughts to the contrary would have been instantly discontinued. Of that she was certain. It was the line she would not cross.

As it was, as far as Johnathon had admitted at least, there was no surprise spouse lurking around a hidden corner waiting to side swipe her. However, Caitriona wasn’t naïve enough to think that just because Johnathon had said there was no one, that didn’t necessarily make it so. To be honest, she didn’t really have the best track record when it came to detecting deception. For a few dreadful seconds she’d felt herself tottering on the brink, that uncomfortable fulcrum between believing someone is telling the truth, trusting that or looking for the lie in everything whether it existed or not.

It was a shocking legacy of her lifetime of relationship failures that always reared its ugly head when she least wanted it to. She’d looked into his eyes while he’d been talking and despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to find any deception, not even the barest hint of it. She sniffed reflectively and absentely rubbed her arms against the slight chill in the air, maybe her instincts were off, but Caitriona just couldn’t shake feeling that if she had still been with Tony, or been with anyone for that matter, that Johnathon would never have even asked her out here tonight. She had no proof or any reason to why she believed that. It hadn’t been any one thing that he’d said or even done, it was more of an overall feeling that Caitriona got from him, not just from tonight, but from their time in the cabin as well. Trusting her instinct meant she’d have to take a chance. Problem was, she wasn’t sure she was ready to do that, to go there again. She gave her head a small shake. So far, it was just a dinner.

Caitriona heard the door open behind her and turned to see Johnathon’s tall form step out, one hand tucking his wallet into his back pocket as he glanced up at the night sky, the storm clouds visible through the city haze. A strong gust of chill wind bulleted down the alley causing both parties to draw their shoulders up in a surprised shiver.

“Lazy wind that one.” Johnathon commented, stepping to Caitriona’s side and shaking out his coat with a flick of the wrist. She him a flashed him a confused look.

“Doesn’t bother going around you, just blows straight through instead.” He clarified with a slight smile, draping his coat across her shoulders.

“Thank you,” She said, drawing the edges of his blissfully warm coat around her, “That’s London weather for you. Pleasant one moment, raining and cold the next.”

“Mmm.” He agreed as they started back towards the hotel, “Bit different to summertime in Australia, that’s for sure.”

“Do you spend much in Australia?” Caitriona accepted his arm as they stepped over the lip of the sidewalk, her fingers wrapping around the solid warmth of his upperarm.

“No,” His blond head shook, “Not really. I go back now and then for work, but I haven’t spent more than a few weeks there at a time in while. I’d go back more if I could but, work doesn’t generally co-operate.”

“And when you’re not working, that’s home then?”
She knew he’d been born in Australia, she remembered he’d told her that much when she had asked about his accent and she also knew that he had since moved around, spending small pockets of time in various places throughout the world but it made Caitriona wonder, where exactly did Johnathon Chase choose to hang his hat.

He thought about that moment, “It was Boston for a couple of years,” his shoulders gave a small shrug as if physically trying to escape that memory; “I had a house there but I’ve sold it and moved so, I guess Australia it is.”

“I never been to Australia. Well, not really.” Caitriona admitted, “I went there once for a photoshoot, years ago, but I never had time to see anything other than where the work was.”

“A photoshoot?” Blue eyes met hers as she glanced up at him, one neat blond eyebrow raised, waiting patiently for her to answer. Caitriona swallowed, ducking her head and looking away, choosing instead to focus on the small groups of black cabs and the glimmer of the lights of the hotel in the distance. Partially because those eyes were making the flutter in her stomach more pronounced than she was willing to admit and partially because she was nervous to tell him.

Experience had shown her that sometimes just the mention of the word “model” caused a change in how people viewed you. Some people tended to view models as a ditsy, shallow, self-absorbed beings, narcissistic and usually of limited intelligence. Others categorised models as nothing more than value adding status symbols, generally kept around boost to ones ego or worse, a living breathing a cash cow. Add in the phrase, Victoria Secret to the word ‘model’ and that was usually the end of that. Caitriona had been used as a status symbol once, an ego boosting cash cow twice and had dealt with changes of behavior due to the merest mention of her modelling career more times than she could count. Not to mention the effect was worse now that you added Outlander and its success into the mix. It was a downright minefield and almost impossible to navigate without becoming a casualty. It was an experience she wasn’t keen to reproduce. Not again. If it meant she was second guessing herself so be it, but she knew damn well that she was not going to have another relationship like the last one.

She’d rather be alone.

She wouldn’t make it through that again.

Still, she reasoned, trying valiantly to put logic in the driver’s seat rather than fear and doubt, there was no use in delaying the inevitable. If Johnathon turned out to be the that type of man to threat her like that then better she found out now. Before it was too late. “It was before I starting acting full time, I went there modelling,” She took a breath and mentally steadied herself, “I modelled professionally for about 10 years actually.”

There.

She’d said it. Prepare to take cover. It was out there now floating in the air between them. All she had to do was wait of the fallout. The full extent of it wouldn’t be known for a while, Caitriona knew that, not until the party in question had time to google her and her career. History suggested it would take one perhaps two days to reach its peak but there was always some type of initial reaction. Always. Caitriona studied him carefully, waiting for it, hoping it wouldn’t arrive, but half expecting it anyway. The blue eyes blinked calmly at her, “I don’t know how you do that Caitriona.” Johnathon said quietly, then added with a self-deprecating smile, “Photos and camera’s in general scare the living Christ out of me. There is no way I could handle having do what you do. Fronting up to lens all day every day, for hours on end.” His head tilted slightly towards her, his expression serious and sincere, “Terrifying. Not to mention bloody hard work.” Caitriona locked eyes with him, searching.

Hoping.
No condescension. No patronizing, or side of the mouth comment. No twitch of a lie in sight. Just an honest acknowledgement of the skill and hard work so often overlooked in her profession. It hadn’t been the reaction she’d been expecting, and it completely derailed her thoughts, the words quietly tilting the seesaw in his favour, answering more of her unasked questions and, she realised for the first time in a very long time, it was the exact reaction she needed. Caitriona didn’t save lives, she didn’t change the world, she didn’t run corporations or rescue people from burning buildings. She was a model and now an actress. Not exactly occupations that are seen as uber professional. For most people that wasn’t a problem, but the older Caitriona got and the harder she worked, part of her yearned for someone, anyone outside her little industry bubble to acknowledge the professionalism behind the pretty face, the endless interviews, the fancy clothes and the hunky co-star. Tony hadn’t, Dave hadn’t and all of the others before and in-between hadn’t. Not even some of her friends.

Until now. Until him.

“Careful,” Johnathon’s voice drew her back from her thoughts as he nodded toward a larger puddle of water directly in her path, slick around its edge and a definite hazard for anyone in heels. That would be all she needed, to fall ass over in front of him. Caitriona tightened her grip on his elbow and placed her steps carefully around it, navigating the uneven cobblestones, “Seems like keeping me away from cold bodies of water is becoming a full time job for you.”

“Nah,” He grinned, drawing his elbow closer in against his side, “Part time at best. Haven’t got enough hours up to be full time yet.”

Caitriona laughed and they both looked up as an ominous low sound of rolling thunder echo somewhere a long way off to the south, “No wonder your hours are down,” She quipped back at him, “You dropped me at the hospital and that was the last I saw of you.”

Johnathon ducked his head in acknowledgement, “I flew out the day after the hospital.”

“Scared you off did I?” Caitriona said, bumping him slightly with her shoulder as she gripped the railing of the small set of paved stairs the lead from the valet area into the main lobby of the hotel “Not quite.” His handsome mouth quirked into a slight smile as they climbed the stairs, “Though I’m sure that little town will never be the same again. Never seen so many people descend on it at once before. Bar did a roaring trade though.”

“You know,” Caitriona said conversationally as they drew closer to the hotel entrance, “I heard the strangest thing, after you left.”

Blue eyes sparkled with amusement as he reached forward and pushed open the door, waiting for Caitriona to go ahead, “What’s that?”

She stepped ahead of him, into the warm hotel lobby. For a moment Caitriona thought about relinquishing Johnathon’s coat, but the clean scent of him that still lingered was enough to push that thought firmly away.

“That I’d been found by an old hermit mountain man that was barely civilized and only came to town to get a new stock of booze.”

“Oh really?” He said innocently.

“Yes. Or at least that was what the locals told anyone who asked. I had the devil’s own time convincing to my sisters that you were in fact nothing like a hybrid mix of an aged Jethro Clampett and Grizzly Adams.”

Johnathon laughed softly, a pleasant deep sound that immediately seemed to reach out to her pull her in until she found herself smiling broadly along with him, “I’m sure my family thought I was having some type of traumatic memory episode.”

One eye winked conspiratorially at her and a warm hand pressed against her back, motioning her forward towards the bank of elevators. “If I had of known I’d would have played the part for you. I had a pair of holy jeans and a bit of rope in the truck,” He leaned forward pressed the button, calling for the elevator, “Pair of pliers to yank out a tooth or two.”

Caitriona chuckled, “I would never have been able to convince them otherwise if you’d done that as well.” She paused as a sharp ding heralded the arrival of the lift and they both stepped inside, “I’ve never witnessed a whole town so completely and so effectively send strangers on a wild
goose chase before. It was very impressive.”

The button of their floor illuminated brightly as Johnathon pressed it, “If it makes you feel any better they did the same to me when I first visited there.” He folded his arms across his chest as he perched on the rail, crossing his long legs at the ankles, “Had a heck of a time tracking down the original owner of the cabin. Took me at least three days to find the actual person and they turned out to be nothing like what had been described to me. They do get better once they get over the stranger danger.”

“Safe to say they’ve well and truly warmed to you now. How long did that take for them to accept that you weren’t the devil in strangers clothing?”

Johnathon considered that a moment as the doors opened and they stepped out into very quiet hotel hallway, “I went up there a few weekends on and off for about six months when I first got the cabin and did some work for the owner of the bar, which may helped my cause.” He fell into step beside her as they headed towards Caitriona’s hotel room, “I hadn’t really gone back there until the week before I met you actually.”

“Well, icy death trap lakes and horrendous storms notwithstanding,” She glanced over at him with a wry smile, “That cabin is in a very beautiful location.”

Johnathon agreed with a slight nod of his head and tucked his hands into his pockets, “There is something about snow, makes the world seem quieter somehow.”

“A good place to think?” She asked softly, referring more to her own time there than to the possible reason Johnathon would have been in such a remote place to begin with.

“It can be.” His voice was low, the beats of humour that had been colouring their conversations dissipating in the silence of the empty corridor. For her, the cabin had been exactly what she’d needed. It had given her time to catch her breath, to steady herself, to able to face the world again and all the problems that went with it.

Their steps slowed as they neared the hotel room door, drawing to an eventual stop, both falling silent, the air still and charged around them.

“Thankyou for dinner Johnathon.” Caitriona said quietly giving her shoulders a slight wiggle, slipping his jacket off and offering back to him on an outstretched hand, “I had a wonderful time.”

He took the jacket from her, slinging it over his forearm then she saw him take a small step towards her, closing the distance between them, deep blue eyes locking with hers, standing close enough she could smell the scent of him, that intoxicating mix of cologne and something deeper it was just him.

“Maybe we can do this again some time?” His voice was soft and deep and almost flowed like honey down through her hearing, his face decorated with that smile, the one that seemed to make her heart speed up, stomach flutter and derail every intelligent thought she had.

“I’d like that Johnathon.” She said, hoping her brain was up to such a simple sentence given its present state. For the briefest moment Caitriona watched as a flicker of relief drift over his handsome face. In that moment she realised he was as nervous as she was. She decided to take that as a good sign that maybe this time, her instincts would be right.

“Really?” Johnathon said his voice barely a whisper, leaning his upper body towards her, his mouth drifting tantalisingly close to hers, his breathe warm against her face. She didn’t answer him, she didn’t trust that any words coming out of her mouth would be anything close to coherent. Instead, she held his gaze, nodded slowly and took a small breath. Throwing caution to the wind, Caitriona lifted her chin, angled her mouth towards his and closed her eyes.

God, please let her instincts be right.
She pressed her hand against the solid frame of the door, closing it with a soft click, a smile gracing her features, quietly letting the feelings of the moment wash over her. Caitriona been expecting Johnathon to try and kiss her. Expecting it and what was more, wanting it. In fact, she’d wanted him for a large portion of the evening. It was hard to describe, she mused, that feeling of complete anticipation in the moments before you give yourself over, let go and take one small chance. Her heart had been fairly pounding in throat as he’d leaned in. Anticipation fell way, replaced with a soft internal sigh of contentment, floating on the wave of pleasure as his warm lips covered hers. It had been everything she had been expecting and then some. Insistent without demand, gentle yet confident, with a quiet assurity that trickled down through every nerve, every pulse of blood, tingling to the very tips of her toes and a whole bunch of other places in between. Caitriona could almost still feel him, the pressure of his mouth on hers, the scent of him, the solidness of him as she’d leaned into him. She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. There was definitely something about him, something she couldn’t put her finger on, that seemed to slip past her well-constructed defenses, hitting deep in her belly, the feeling so thoroughly appealing and yet strangely foreign that Caitriona almost didn’t know what to make of it. Yes. There was no denying he was good looking in all the right places. Boy, was he ever, but Christ, she was far from being a damn teenager anymore and this certainly wasn’t the first time someone had caught her eye. No, she decided, it went further than the pure physicality of him. Sitting there across from him, talking with him, listening to the lilt of his accent and deep tone of his voice, hearing the intelligence behind the words, laughing along with his good natured humour had made for the perfect evening. She couldn’t have written a better night out if she’d tried. With Tony she had tried, time and time again to no avail. With Johnathon, she hadn’t needed to.

Caitriona pushed off the door and lifted one long leg, undoing the strap around her heel and then the other. She flicked her shoes into a heap under the luggage rack, then sat down on the edge of the bed. Caitriona was so used to being the instigator of evenings like this. Always on guard, always trying, always striving to get to any place that felt better than where she was. In the process, she’d forgotten what it felt like to be relaxed, to be happy and content. She debated with herself, if the reason tonight had gone as well as it did was because it had been a good while since she’d felt anything remotely resembling romantic intention or even physical attraction and now that she had, was over reacting to it. Or was this something different entirely. She’d never been one to believe in the instant, fall head of heels thing that people spoke of. Lust yes. Love no. That had to be what this was. Lust. Caitriona gave a small shrug of reflection. Maybe all these feelings were just the result of the exceptionally good wine she’d consumed at the restaurant. Had to be it. There was simply no other explanation. It had to be wine that was making her traitorous body want to reach out for Johnathon Chase, drag him inside the hotel room and do things highly inappropriate for first dates or catch up dinners or whatever the hell she wanted to call it. Caitriona never been a fan of the one night stand, or for that matter, she wasn’t generally one to be jumping into bed on the first date. In her opinion, the physical act of sex was far too intimate to be taken so casually. That didn’t mean that she had made mistakes and fallen down the one night stand rabbit hole once or twice before. She had and like so many of her past mistakes, Caitriona was at a point in her life where it was time to learn from them, rather than repeating them. Without warning, several images flashed through her mind’s eye. Images of a certain tall, blond haired, blue eyed man with that smile, performing actions entirely suited to a one night stand. “I really need to stop drinking wine.” She murmured and blew out another long breath, as she fell back onto the bed’s soft surface and stared at the ceiling. Her eyes drifted shut, of course, her body wasn’t always on the same page as
her usually far more disciplined mind. Case in point, the small traces of fire that still tingled in her blood from a simple kiss. She rested a hand on the flat plane of her stomach. A kiss and the promise of another outing together. Caitriona could hardly get the words out fast enough when Johnathon had quietly asked her if she was free tomorrow. In answering him, she had stuttered slightly, another uncharacteristic another side effect of the evening’s events that she decided blame on the evil wine intoxicant. Johnathon continually flashing her that smile, the one that he had no business making when people, namely her, were desperately trying to control themselves, hadn’t helped the situation. In an half-hearted last ditch effort to distract herself from the myriad of thoughts that were rapidly making her rethink her no sex on first date rules and the more recently developed, take it slow rule, Caitriona had suggested that she show Johnathon around some of the city sights. Her mouth twitched into a broad smile. It was a suggestion she was particularly proud of because, one, it would mean she would get to spend the entire day with him and two, she was hoping that the day would just drift on through into the evening. Johnathon had instantly agreed, adding in his own suggestion that since he had a car that he’d be happy to act as chauffeur for the day.

The idea was a good one, Caitriona mused as she hauled herself up off the bed and headed to the bathroom. She didn’t relish the thought of having to use public transport on a date. The transport part she wasn’t overly worried about. There were a lot of places they could simply walk to, or at worst take a cab. It was the public part Caitriona was concerned about. She slipped out of her dress, hanging it carefully on a hook and stepped into the shower. The last thing she needed was for a well-meaning fan to post a picture of her out on a date. Granted, the chance of that happening were slim. Caitriona had yet to be the target of the intrusive paparazzi attention that was the hallmark of her profession, but with Outlander on the rise, so was her public profile. She’d seen first hand the fallout when Sam had recently been snapped with his arm around a young blonde woman that he’d been casually seeing. Caitriona had genuinely felt bad for the poor woman. Once the Internet had gotten hold of the picture, all hell had broken loose. Caitriona turned on the tap and let the hot water run over her skin. It had turned out to be a bit of a storm in a teacup in the end. The young woman in question had moved on and so had Sam, but still, it had caused quite a few people their share of angst until the storm had blown over. Whether Caitriona wanted to or not, she had to be more situationally aware. The knock on effect of that requirement had been that she tended to guard her private life very carefully. To her great chagrin, she had accept the fact that there were literally cameras everywhere. Every person on the street, every person in a restaurant, every person in a shop, hell, even people inside the hotel. They all had phones, they all had cameras. Just one click away from a social media shit storm that could potentially end ones career. It was strange she mused as she turned off the shower and gathered up her long hair, twisting the dark strands to wring out the excess water, to have spent a lifetime in front of the camera as a model and to now be strangely wary of exactly that situation. She wrapped a towel around herself, tucking the ends in and returning to the main room, While she wasn’t the type of person to sit back and let fear dictate her life, she also had no desire to make any situation harder than it had to be. Hence, the idea of a quiet, somewhat secluded private car ride with Johnathon was even more appealing than it ordinarily might have been.Opening the small fridge, she bent and retrieved a bottle of water. Snapping the lid open, Caitriona took a healthy swallow before going on the hunt for her pill. She was still fossicking through the travel kit when a loud buzzing sound drew her attention. Dark brows furrowed in concentration, wondering who on earth would be calling her this late at night. She found the offending object in her clutch, where it had been all night, completely neglected for far more interesting subject matter. Long fingers flicked across the screen. One notification. Probably some stupid tweet that Sam had decided to post and tag her in. Caitriona’s eyes widened and her stomach dropped.“Shit.”

There, written in neat text was a reminder for a catch up breakfast with some modelling friends at 7:00 in the morning. “Fuck.” She cursed again, the gravity of the situation hitting her. This was not
just a serious problem to her plans for tomorrow but also for the fact that the arranged time was for 7 am. To make matters worse, she’d already cancelled on the friends in question at least twice before due to her work schedule. There was no way she could cancel a third time. Particularly not to go on a date. It wouldn’t be right and Caitriona couldn’t in good conscience do that to them. Even if she wanted to, she just couldn’t. On the other hand, Caitriona didn’t want to do that to Johnathon either. How had she not remembered this? She lifted a hand and rubbed her forehead, foggy from a mixture of alcohol and tiredness. Oh she knew how alright. The charm, the eyes, the deep voice and that smile was how. She tossed the phone on the bed and began to pace back and forth across the room, a curious habit of hers that she found strangely therapeutic when she was trying to unravel the threads of a problem. Caitriona let out a long sigh, coming to a stop and staring out the large window across the city skyline. There was nothing else for it, she scowled. She would simply have to cancel the date with Johnathon, or at the very least change it. Now that she thought about it, Caitriona did seem to recall organising to have breakfast and then shopping a few months back but she was reasonably certain that she hadn’t agreed to anything after that. Traditionally, Caitriona hesitated, shopping usually implied lunch as well, but, perhaps with some slick maneuvering, she could be done by early afternoon. It wouldn’t be the full day she’d hoped for, but at least part of the day with Johnathon might be salvageable and, Caitriona smiled slightly, there was always the evening if she played her cards right.

Caitriona gave her head a small nod, feeling somewhat pleased with herself that she'd found a workable solution. It wasn’t perfect but with the luck of the Irish, it would be doable. She started back towards the bed. She’d just text Johnathon and tell him and everything would be fine. She was almost within reaching distance of her phone when the second anvil of the evening fell from the sky, smacking her square between the eyes. “For fuck’s sake.” She spat, realising that she didn't have his number and knowing full well that he didn't have hers either. She hadn’t even thought to get his number. Caitriona had been so wrapped up in the evening that she’d completely forgotten to give him hers. “Well done Caitriona.” She growled, crossing her arms across her chest and considering the new complexities of her situation. She’d meant to give it to him before he’d left her for the evening but, well, things, namely his lips on her, had taken place that had completely robbed her of sanity, or so it appeared now. Her own number was silent and unlisted. It would make it nearly impossible for Johnathon to find it using traditional means. When she didn’t show up in the morning, he would try and contact her which would prove to be impossible which would in turn lead him to think the worst. That she'd lead him on and that she didn't want this. They had planned to meet in the hotel lobby at 9 AM. By 9 AM she’d be miles away, having breakfast with her friends at small cafe that they had a history of eating at for get-togethers like this.

So what now? Caitriona shrugged mentally perusing her list of available options. She could always call the front desk. Caitriona knew Johnathon was on this floor of the hotel, she just wasn’t exactly sure which room he was in. She pressed off the windowsill she had been leaning on and lifted the handset of the hotel phone. Dialling the front desk, she sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Front Desk. How may I help you.” A young girl’s voice issued rather cheerfully over the phone. “Hi, This is Caitriona Balfe in room 1512. I was wondering if you could connect me to Mr Johnathon Chase’s room please.”

“One moment Ms Balfe.” The feint sound of fingernails on keyboard could be heard over the line for several long moments, “I’m sorry Ms Balfe, did you say Johnathon Chase?”

“That’s right. Johnathon Chase. I’m not sure of his room number, but he is on this floor. Floor 15.”

Further keystrokes filled the short silence. “I’m sorry Ms Balfe. There is no record of a Johnathon Chase having checked in with us.”

“Are you absolutely sure? I was only speaking to him half an hour ago. Can you check again please?”
“Of course Ma’am.”

The seconds seemed to stretch into minutes as the clerk checked the records one more time. One hand fell to rest on her stomach, a chill feeling settling there without her permission. Caitriona’s brow wrinkled in confusion. How can there be no record for Johnathan Chase in the hotel? She’d just been kissing him half an hour ago outside of her hotel room door for goodness sake. This had to be some kind of mistake. Her mind was beginning to race in a thousand directions at once. Caitriona thought back to their time in the cabin and to their time together tonight. She had perceived every action from Johnathon to have been honest, honourable and true. This just didn't make any sense. Surely not. This had to be a mistake.

“I’m sorry Ms Balfe, we have no record of a Johnathan Chase in the hotel.”

“Are you absolutely certain?” Caitriona asked, feeling sick, her voice a mixture of confusion and anxiety. Was this going to end up being another horrendous exercise stupidity or worse?

“Can I just put you on hold while I check?”

“Yes.” She said softly. Caitriona didn’t want to think the worst. Really she didn’t, but the longer it took for an answer to arrive, the harder it was becoming. Every instinct in her body had all but screamed at her that he wasn’t like that. He couldn't be like that. The look in his eyes, the gentle caring nature, the courteous almost chivalrous actions towards her, none of it seemed deceptive. And yet that small voice, buried right down deep inside her, in that place where her darkest insecurities lay, was bleating out its warning that she was only going to get hurt again. Could she really be this atrocious at judging character? History told her yes. The bruising had barely faded from the last emotional battering. Caitriona wasn’t certain of one thing, she wasn’t strong enough for another one just yet. She tried to hald the train of doubt, standing on the brakes as hard as she dared. It had to be a mistake. This is what happens when you don’t follow you own damn rules, her mind warned, you get used and lied to. Caitriona scrubbed a hand across her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose, “Jesus, get a grip Balfe.” She breathed. She was jumping to conclusions over nothing and she knew it. She even knew where it was coming from, that place where a litany of bad decisions had almost ruined her. She knew it and was desperately trying to fight it, she just wasn't sure if she was succeeding.

“Miss Balfe?”

“Yes?” Her voice was barely audible, even in the stillness of her hotel room.

“Please accept my apologies. Mr Chase is part of a group checked in under a company name, his name didn’t appear on our normal initial search.” It took Caitriona several long heartbeats to comprehend what the woman had said, an immense wave of relief washing over her, sweeping the negative thoughts back into their dark corners. A mistake. It had been a mistake. “I can connect you to Room 1536 now,” The woman was saying, “Or you can directly dial from your room phone if you prefer?”

“Room 1536?”

“That’s right Ms Balfe.” The woman confirmed, “Instructions are beside the handset should you require assistance.”

“Thank-you.” Caitriona had already decided that she would call him herself, in a few moments, when she didn’t feel like such an idiot for having jumped to conclusions over nothing but a simple clerical error. “Bloody wine.” She growled and pushed off the bed, walking over to her suitcase and yanking out a pair of long legged pyjamas. Part of her felt like walking down the corridor, finding Johnathon’s door and just falling back into that warm, soft gentle place that she’d been reveling in earlier in the night and another part of her was angry at herself for letting the past cause
her to doubt someone. She stepped into the pajama pants tying the drawstring in a large loop and slipping into an old T-shirt, steadily trying to put the uncertainty of the last few minutes out her mind, choosing instead, to focus on far more interesting subjects. Johnathon Chase. He had made her smile, laugh, had listened to her, made her feel important, valued and more importantly, he’d made her feel like something other than an accessory. Her past couldn't compete with that. Yes, Caitriona decided, blowing out a long breath as she padded over to the bed and sat down on its edge. If nothing else, her instincts had at least been right about that. She reached out and dialed the number of Johnathon's room. It took four long rings before his voice sounded over the line, deep and husky with sleep, a sound that slid down through her hearing, warming a place deep in her belly.

“Chase.”

“Johnathon?” She hesitated a moment, hearing the soft scuffling of bedding, “It’s Caitriona.”

“Caitriona. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine, well not fine fine but, “ She closed her eyes, wincing at the absolute dog’s breakfast she was making of this conversation, “I’m really sorry but I’m going to have to cancel on our plans for tomorrow.”

There was a momentary pause on the other end of the line, “ “That’s alright. We can meet up some other time when I..”

“No, you don’t understand. It’s not..” Caitriona interrupted, then stopped and gathered her thoughts, “I don’t want you to think that I don’t want to, it’s just that I have a prearranged meet up with friends that I totally forgot about and I can’t get out of.” She waited a beat, "I’m sorry Johnathon.”

“It’s okay Caitriona.”, “Don’t let it worry you.” His voice was gentle and understanding, “These things happen. It’s okay. Really.”

“I’m hoping to be finished by three o’clock at the absolute latest, if you’re still interested in that city tour I promised you?” Caitriona was suddenly aware of her increased heart rate beating somewhere just below the surface of her skin. She was hoping that he hadn’t misconstrued her given reason as an excuse. She wanted to see him. The one time in an age that she actually wanted something like this, she seemed incapable of getting it.

“Tell you what,” Johnathon's voice interrupted her self flagellation, "Why don’t I meet you somewhere when you’re free?”

A brilliant smile split her face and she let out the breath she didn’t even realise she was holding, “That sounds like a wonderful idea Johnathon.”

Caitriona heard him take a breath and clear his throat, “Great,” She wasn’t sure, but she thought she could hear a smile behind his words, “because I’d really like to see you again Caitriona.”

"I’d like that." Her voice sounded small to her, as she let the words act like a salve on her soul, soothing the sting of all her doubts and fears and banishing them to their dark corners at least for a little. “Can I give you my number in case I get finished earlier?” She said quietly, determined to not forget that this time around. She waited for him to gather up his own phone and then quietly dictated the number. Caitriona barely finished saying the last digit when the phone in her hand vibrated with an incoming message. It was Johnathon's number, along with a photograph his business card, the text clearly revealing his name, his post-nominal initials, the name of the company he worked for, his business email address and not one, but two contact numbers. One
being the number she now had and one landline number obviously linking to the office of his business. Any concerns she might have had as to the validity of his identity were now a distant memory, replaced only with the pleasant anticipation of what tomorrow might bring.

“Did I get the number right or did some random person get a very strange text message in the night?”

“Yes, you got it right.” She replied with a soft chuckle, “I’ll call you as soon as I’m finished.”

“Sounds great.” A small silence fell, neither of them wanting to hang up the phone and both of them knowing they really should, “Well,” Johnathon finally said, “I’d better let you get some sleep then.” His voice seemed to dropped a register, “Good night Caitriona.”

“Good night Johnathon.” She set the receiver back into the cradle with a click. She’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone ask to spend time with her for no other reason than they wanted to. It was worth fighting for, worth trying for. The past be damned.

She flopped back onto the surface of the bed, a broad smile still decorating her features.

Tomorrow, or rather today as the late hour seemed to indicate, is another day and for once, Caitriona couldn’t wait for it to begin.

Chapter End Notes

Not entirely sure I am happy with this chapter, but I didn't want to go back on my word and not post at least every fortnight.
Posting time will always be Friday's 6 pm - Australian Eastern Standard Time for anyone wondering.
Next Up - Johnathon POV and some problems for him :) Cheers to you all and a huge thank-you to everyone who encourages with kudos and comments and anyone who has been reading this story.
“Oh Jesus Christ.” Jackson pulled the chair out slowly, trying with infinite care not to produce any more noise than absolutely necessary, “Coffee.” He croaked “I need coffee.” He held his aching head in both hands, elbows resting on the table, looking the perfect picture of a very hungover individual. Johnathon looked up from the paper he was reading and tried hard not to laugh, instead he pushed a tall glass of ice water across the table, “That will work far more effectively.” “The fuck it will.” The dark haired man grumbled, holding up a hand and gesturing to stop, wincing at the movement and the sickening feeling of vertigo that came with it, “I will never understand how you exist without coffee.”

Johnathon smirked, “Maybe if you didn’t wipe yourself out, you wouldn’t need a substance that looks like motor oil and doesn’t taste much better.” Jackson grunted his objection, for him, coffee ranked somewhere between air and food on the items deemed necessary for human life. Two large coffees later, Jackson slumped back against the back of the chair, the second cup still cradled between his hands as he nodded towards the stack of reports resting in Johnathon’s hand, “Please tell me you didn’t work on those all night. We’re in London.” He took another mouthful of the life giving liquid, “City love and all that. Far better things to do than spend every second working on cases you know.”

“That’s Paris by the way.” Johnathon corrected without looking up, “I take it you had a good night after you got those reports done?”

Jackson scowled at the bright sunlight, then grimaced and lowered a pair of sunglasses over his eyes, “It was spectacular if you must know,” He sipped the bitter brew letting it work its magic, “She was spectacular come to think of it. “He swallowed and added,”And yes, the reports are done. Sealed, and filed.” Jackson leaned back in the chair, crossing his legs at the ankles and flicking a smile at one of the waitresses before turning his attention back to his table mate, “I’ll take your lack of response as a yes by the way. Reports all night make for a very boring evening my friend. You know what they say, all work and no play.”

“But actually,” Johnathon said casually as he picked up his own glass of water and sipped it thoughtfully, “I had myself a good night thank you very much.” Jackson’s cup stopped half way to his mouth, a look of astonishment on his face, “I got myself at least four hours sleep.” Johnathon deadpanned, struggling to keep the smirk off his face. In reality, it was more like 2 hours of sleep and half of that time had been spent contemplating the night’s events and Caitriona. He’d been almost asleep when she had called, but he had more than welcomed the chance to speak to her again. She’d made him feel relaxed, intrigued, amused and as cliched as it sounded in his head, it had all just felt right. He wasn’t quite sure whether to put that down to just a case of him being so used to everything feeling wrong or not. The whole night, the way he felt about it, everything, was turning out to be more than a little unexpected. That feeling had started when he had surprised himself by asking her out for a catch-up dinner in the first place. It had been the last thing he’d thought he would be doing on this trip to London or any trip for that matter. Johnathon hadn’t been looking for, or even thinking about looking for, any romantic interaction whatsoever. And yet here
he was, filled with a quiet anticipation and looking forward to the next date. Johnathan, however, wasn’t about to share that information with his friend just yet.

“See that right there,” Jackson pointed an accusatory finger at Johnathan before attacking his third cup of coffee, “Is not a statistic to be proud of.” Jackson frequently worried about the man that was not only his boss, but his best friend. A best friend that Jackson considered to be his family. The whole business with Katherine last year had ruined Johnathan and he had watched the carnage take place, in real time. He had hated seeing his friend struggle, however privately, with that hurt that a broken relationship brings. Jackson, himself, wasn't entirely immune to such events but he’d never been in any type of overly committed relationship. He'd had his fair share of good kicks in the guts when things hadn't quite gone the way he thought they would but nothing on the level that Johnathan had been battling with. It was a good reason to avoid any type of serious relationship, Jackson reasoned, but that philosophy didn't preclude something slightly more casual. “You need to get out and about John.” He added another good helping of sugar to the bitter brew,"Seriously.”

In response, Johnathon shot him a dark look causing the dark-haired man to lift one hand in supplication, “Fine.” Jackson huffed, “Just tell me you’ll at least think about it sometime? Soon?”

He added, having been trying for months to snap Johnathon out of his melancholic mood that he'd fallen into after the breakup late last year. He’d tried a variety of strategies and suggestions to get his friend back out there, back to the land of the living as it were. So far Johnathon had resisted every all of it, preferring instead some self-imposed solitude surrounded only by work. Jackson wasn’t trying to be pushy but in his experience the best way to get over someone was to get under someone else, a strategy he himself had employed many times.

“Uh huh.” Johnathon gave up on the conversation, having heard most of it more than a few times before and went back to studying the case that was scattered on the table.

“No really. You should.” Jackson continued as he adjusted his sunglasses into a more comfortable position, trying valiantly to keep the light out of his eyes, “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Jackson cast a gaze over the room occupants, smiling at a group of three attractive women who were sitting on around a tall table the foyer of the lobby, obviously waiting for someone. Two of them smiled back at him. Jackson lifted his coffee cup in silent salute and raised a dark eyebrow at one of the women, “See, now that,” He smiled at the woman, “is what I am talking about. World would be a very dull place without them.”

Johnathon looked up from his case report at the group in question, flicking them a quick glance, then returned to reading his report, finding the typed police interview far more interesting than anything currently surrounding that table. “Do you ever stop?” He said with a disapproving shake of his fair head, not wanting to engage in this particular conversation but at this point he knew it was probably the only way to get Jackson shut up about it and move on.

“No.” Jackson sipped his coffee, “Not generally.” He gave the woman a small wave, “I mean what is not to li…” Jackson stopped midsentence. Not expecting his strategy for silencing Jackson to have worked so effectively or so quickly, Johnathon turned his head, following the line of Jackson’s gaze towards whatever was currently the centre of his attention. Caitriona, dressed simply in jeans and button up shirt and a leather jacket was walking casually towards the group of women, “See, now that,” He smiled at the woman, “is what I am talking about. World would be a very dull place without them.”

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“Sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” Jackson commented to noone in particular.

Johnathon lost track of whatever Jackson was saying. If he had any doubt before, he certainly had none now. Caitriona was utterly breathe taking. He’d thought so last night, when he’d first laid eyes on her as she had walked out of the elevator. Now, he swallowed reflexively, she had upped the ante by at least a factor to ten. His head generally didn’t get turned easily, but this was something else. She was something else. Johnathon watched her a moment longer as she greeted her friends and then left the hotel, the group heading outside, presumably to wait for a taxi. Jackson swivelled in his chair and turned back to face his friend, “So what important case is that anyway?” He waited for an answer, surprised to see his normally nonplussed partner still watching the last glimpses of tall dark haired beauty, a strange look on his face. It only lasted for a moment before Johnathon blinked and the expression faded, his gaze dropping back to the paper in his
“What?,” Johnathon asked quickly, “Oh, the case,” rather uncharacteristically flustered, he promptly answered his own question, “It’s that cold child abduction case from Met Pol that they wanted us to take a look at.”

Jackson took a long swallow, “So,” He eyed the blond man over the rim of his cup, privately debating whether to continue flogging this dead horse or not. In for a penny, “About getting out and about?”

Thankfully Johnathon didn’t have to answer him, his phone on the table began to vibrate with an incoming call. “Chase.” He answered simply, listening intently to the information being relayed. Jackson finished off yet another cup of coffee and dugout pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, setting them on the table while he waited for Johnathon to finish. “No,” Johnathon said after a few minutes, “I’ll be right over.”

“Trouble?” Judging from the look of Johnathon’s face it wasn’t good news.

Johnathon began gathering up the papers on the table into an orderly stack, “A bit. I’m not entirely sure just yet.” He said quietly, shuffling the leaves together and closing the plain coloured folder around them, “I need to see McGovern.”

McGovern and Sons were a small law firm that had looked after Johnathon’s personal affairs for as long as Jackson had known the blond man. “About?” Jackson asked pushing back his own chair and gathering up his belongings, wondering exactly what news it was that it changed his friend’s demeanour so quickly.

Concerned blue eyes met his, “Wakeling.”

Fuck. That’ll do it. If there was one name that Johnathon could go the rest of his life without hearing, Jackson knew it was Bryant Wakeling.

Johnathon stood, tucking his phone into his back pocket and slipping into his jacket, “Can you hold things down here for a bit?” He asked as he reached up and turned his collar down, “I need to go and sort this out.”

“Course.” Jackson fell in step beside Johnathon as they both walked back out into the lobby, “It’s a take it easy day today anyway so there should any problems.”

The team had finished their current case load and were due to fly out to Australia in just under 24 hours time, so for once, they actually had some downtime. “Call me there if anything comes up.” The button illuminated as Johnathon pressed it, requesting the elevator to take him to the car park below, “This shouldn’t take too long. Something about a parole screw up.”

“Parole?” Jackson’s brows drew in, “Wakeling shouldn’t even be due for parole for at least another what, six or seven years?”

“Keyword. Shouldn’t.” Johnathon dug around in his coat pocket for the car keys, “Until I know what’s going on, just hold things down here. If anything needs to change I’ll call you.”

“Righto,” Jackson selected a cigarette from the open packet, clamping it unlit in the corner of his mouth, “And you call us if you need to yeah?” He wasn’t exactly sure what Johnathon would be dealing with but in any case he’d be there if his friend needed it.

Johnathon gave him a final nod and stepped inside the empty elevator, “Will do.” The doors closed
and Johnathon leaned back on the railing, his thoughts the only company in the quiet space. He let out a long breath. He’d spent half his life haunted by the name Bryant Wakeling. It had taken him three long years to track Wakeling down and another four years after that to finally secure conviction. The parking bay was relatively empty, the dull orange light of the indicators blinking as he keyed the door entry and slid into the comfortable driver’s seat.

Of all the days, it had to be today. He had honestly been looking forward to spending the day with Caitriona. Between Caitriona’s earlier forgotten appointment and now this, Johnathon was beginning to wonder if the universe was conspiring against him. He stirred the engine into life and navigated his way out of the car park and onto the streets of London. At least it was still early, Johnathon mused, the traffic wasn’t as bad as he expected and the short drive would give him time to get his thoughts together.

Had it really been five years already? Five years since justice had finally swung in favour of the innocent. A Life sentence imposed for a horrendous crime. Johnathon had hoped, perhaps naively, that would be the last time he would ever have to deal with Wakeling. He’d spent hours upon hours, researching, gathering evidence, overseeing every last detail of the case, making sure there was zero room for error. He’d done his job well, excelled at it even, making sure every box was ticked, every T was crossed. It was more than a little confusing to him now something somewhere had evidently gone wrong and allowed Wakeling to somehow initiate the process of an appeal.

Johnathon swung off the main road into a small car park and headed towards the office entryway. The law firm’s office was modest, slightly deceptive to the casual observer. Despite outward appearances, the business was in fact a highly successful, though relatively small firm, that suited Johnathon’s needs perfectly. Over the years, it had steadily grown to have offices in Sydney, New York and now London and more importantly, it had partnership personnel that Johnathon trusted implicitly. A trust that had been a lifetime in the making. Johnathon had first met Charles McGovern, the most senior of the McGovern partners, almost 20 years ago, when as a young boy, he had walked into the Sydney law firm, straight off the street, a bag full of loose notes and coins and asked to see a lawyer. Johnathon wasn’t sure if they’d taken pity on him when they’d let him in but, Charles McGovern, who had seemed old to Johnathon even back then, had ushered him into his office and for the first time in his life, someone had listened seriously to what he’d had to say. From that point on the McGovern’s had handled all of his legal matters. Johnathon pulled open the glass door and strode down the hallway towards the reception desk, where he was politely ushered into a large conference room.

“Johnathon.” A tall dark haired man, a year or so younger than he greeted him with an outstretched hand and a broad smile, “It’s good to see you again.”

“Finn.” Johnathon acknowledged the man with a slight nod and a firm shake of his hand. He had wondered which of the six children Charlie would nominate to run the London office. Seems Finn McGovern, second youngest of the brood had drawn the short straw, “Been a bit of a while hasn’t it?” Johnathon asked as they sat down around the large clear glass conference table.

“Too long mate.” The lawyer reached across the table and grabbed a clear plastic folder, “Wish it was under better circumstances though.” He opened the folder and pushed several documents towards Johnathon. “Seems our friend Wakeling had been putting his time in prison to good use.”

Johnathon’s eyes flicked over the page. It was an appeal application, clearly written by a skilled Silk at one of the more prestigious law firms in London, though not one that Johnathon had any dealings with, either personally or through his work. It was detailed, articulate and extensive. Not your usual convicted felon attempt at proclaiming their innocence and injustice to the world. This was a serious attempt at an appeal and it raised an equally as serious question. “Do we know how
he is managing to fund this? Silks like this do not come cheap.”

“That’s just it and the reason I thought I’d call you in.” Finn explained. “The appeal is nothing we can’t handle. We will counter it, put in our own objections and be more than ready, when and if, it actually goes anywhere. But, Johnathon, I think we’ve got bigger issues here. A silk like that runs at least £5000 an hour and I already checked, they are not doing this pro bono.”

Johnathon shot him a surprised look. He’d been expecting this to have been someone’s charity case, probably done for tax purposes. It was very unusual for any Silk to take on a dead end case, particularly one they had little chance of winning, and certainly not when that case wasn’t for a paying client. It just wasn’t a good reputation exercise and even worse for the bottom line. Both of which held considerable weight in the legal profession. Reputation meant business and business meant reputation. Neither commodity was worth mucking around with for a prosecutorial slam dunk.

“Seems Wakeling has a benefactor.” Finn continued, picking a silver a pen from the table. A very wealthy one, Johnathon's mind added. For appeal like this looking at a minimum of £1 million and that’s estimating on the low side. "I had Angus and his team do some quiet investigation. Whoever is funding this, is funneling money through the law firm anonymously."

That meant it could be anyone number of a firm's thousands of clients. There was no easy way to tell where the money is coming from and legally, the law firm didn't have to disclose that detail, they only had to disclose the totals coming in and out going out, which, according to the paperwork in Johnathon's hands, they have done. Granted, it was slightly shady, but not entirely illegal. Johnathon considered that a moment, “See if Angus can keep investigating find out who exactly wants Wakeling out of prison badly enough to spend £1 million on that piece of shit.”

Finn scrawled some notes on a legal pad yet sitting in front of him, “I’ll take care of that and have Angus send a copy of all reports through to you?”

Johnathon nodded and steepled his hands, resting his chin on his fingertips, “Follow this one carefully. The last thing I want is for this guy to get out and scrape by on a technicality.”

The lawyer pushed another sheet of paper towards the blond man, “There’s something else I think you should take a look at.”

Johnathon raised an eyebrow, privately wondering what else the universe had in mind to toss in his direction today. So much for a day off with Caitriona.

“Someone has been buying up stocks. A significant amount of them, across seven different companies. Only small, relatively new acquisitions but every single one, a listed ECA subsidiaries.” Finn stood, gripping on the back of the conference room chair, "And that’s not the end of it. Someone has put through 15 freedom of information applications requesting majority owner and founder identity of ECA.”

“That’s not unusual." Johnathon commented calmly,"ECA gets their fair share of these type of requests every year.”

“CEO’s and COO’s yes, of all subsidiaries,” Finn gave a warning glance of his own to his friend and client, “but not ECA’s single controlling owner.” It had been the task of the firm for past fifteen years to keep the identity of the owner of the multi-industry parent company as private as possible within the bounds of the law. They weren’t always successful but for the most part, that privacy has been preserved. “There is something about these that just don’t sit right.” Finn gave voice to his worry, “ For a start, the requests are coming from a variety of different agencies and
different investigation firms from the UK, from the US, even directly from Australia. Thus far, the events of them with the standard information requested as required by the law, but I just have a funny feeling about these Johnathon.” He paused, taking a deep breath, “I don’t think these are your normal information digging from journos or business insiders. I think this is someone is looking for confirmation about information they may already have.” He hated to ask, having known about the recent relationship breakdown from the sale of property documents his office had handled, but he thought it prudent to go there never the less. “Is there,” He paused, trying to think of how to delicately phrase the question, “Is there anyway that perhaps Katherine has –”

“No.” The answer was instant, certain.

“You did tel -”

“Yes.”

“Then it is possible that she, given all that happened,” He tried to carefully clarify, fully aware of the dangerous line he was walking, “that she -”

“No.”

"Johnathon are you sure about this?"

Blue eyes met his squarely, “Yes.” The tone left no doubt in Finn’s mind whatsoever that this subject was now closed, off the table, locked in a filing cabinet and buried in concrete vault beneath someone’s house.

"Alright.” Finn conceded defeat, though privately, was quite as convinced. It wouldn’t be the first time in history that a someone had done something stupid in an angry reaction to a relationship breakdown, heartbreak always had the potential to turn something sweet into something extraordinarily bitter. He only hoped that Johnathon had a clear head on this. It would save them all a lot of work if the fault really did lay where Finn suspected it did. "Have you got time now, to sort through some of this? Or should we reschedule?"

"No." Johnathon said, letting out a long deep resigned breath. He hadn't meant to be short with Finn, he just wasn't prepared to entertain the possibility that Kate would stoop so low as to try something like was being suggested here. That also meant he now felt more than obligated to at least find a new starting point for Finn and his team to start searching for this needle in the proverbial business haystack."Show me all of it now." He said, standing and shucking out of his jacket, hanging it across the back of the chair, “Start at the start,” Johnathon sat back down again and motioned towards the pile of papers. Any ideas Johnathon had of this being a quick meeting had just disappeared like mist in the warm morning sun. He glanced at his watch. Caitriona had said she’d be done by 3. That gave him, he watched Finn sitting across the table already thumbing through some business reports. Gave them, Johnathon mentally corrected, six hours find what they needed.

Find the who.

Then, find the why.
Next Up - Caitriona, some old heartbreaks and maybe a little bit of a dance.
Caitriona took the steps two at a time, carefully weaving and dodging her way through the slightly crowded entranceway to the circular viewing gallery beyond. She hadn’t meant to be this late, but despite her best efforts to subtly hurry her friends along, shopping had taken far longer than she anticipated. It was well past the time she thought she’d be finished and even though she’d sent several texts to Johnathon throughout the day advising him of her progress, or lack thereof, she still felt bad about the enforced delay. Johnathon had been more than excepting of her reasons, and had reassured her after each and every one of her apologetic texts, that it was okay, but still, Caitriona couldn’t help but worry that she was inadvertently sending all the wrong signals when, for the first time in a long time, she was trying to send exactly the right ones. Any ideas she might have had about spending the afternoon meandering along through quiet hallways of the museum, looking at exhibits, something she generally found highly enjoyable even without the bonus of having Johnathon by her side, were now nothing but a distant dream. She’d left it too late. Her steps halted in front of the souvenir shop. Swiveling at the waist, Caitriona scanned the slow streams of people gradually making their way towards the exits. Pulling out her phone, she sent another text to Johnathon, letting him know her exact whereabouts in the large building, hoping rather optimistically, that it might help them locate each other quicker. She was about to send another when a deep voice sounded behind her, “Caitriona.”

She turned to find the object of her searching closing the last steps between them. He looked good, she mused, he looked very good. Dressed in a dark jeans and navy button up shirt, sleeves rolled up to the middle of his forearm, the top button undone just enough to be interesting. She didn’t know what it was about that man that made her mouth crease into a smile, without her permission and with staggering frequency whenever the blond man happened to be in her presence. Caitriona wasn’t entirely sure she understood why, but she was one hundred percent sure she liked it. “I’m so sorry I’m late.” She apologised for what seemed like the fiftieth time that day, dropping her phone back into her coat pocket and angling her face up towards his, breathing in the scent of him as he drew near.

“That’s alright.” He said as he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her cheek, ”My meeting went longer than it should have. I only just got here myself.” Johnathon smiled softly at her, blue eyes crinkling at their edges, “No harm done, though, I think we’re going to have to save going through the museum for another time.” He tilted his head towards the large ornate clock mounted at the end of the hall. “It’s almost closing time. Think you better tell me where we are headed to next?”

Caitriona hadn’t really thought about where they might go after the museum, having intended to feel Johnathon out as to what type of activity he might be interested in visiting. Due to a series of unfortunate events that hadn’t occurred, and now she was at a bit of a loss as to where exactly they should go now. “Have you ever seen the city lights come on from the top of The Shard?”

Johnathon suggested, having sensed her hesitation and decided to chime with an idea of his own. “No, I haven’t.” Though she did recall one of her friends mentioning to her how spectacular the view was from one of the restaurants there, “That sounds like a great idea to me.”

Johnathon offered her his arm one blond eyebrow raised in question, “Walking or driving?”

“Driving.” She said, giving a bit of a chuckle and settling her hand around his bicep, “it’s a little too far to walk don’t you think?” While it wasn’t that far away in distance, if you are going strictly by measurements, in Caitriona’s estimation, after the day she’d already had, around the corner would have been verging on being too far.

“I’ll take your word for it.” Johnathon answered, his mouth twitching into a half grin, “wouldn’t have the foggiest idea exactly where it is.”
They peeled off from the main group and headed out towards Russell Street. One look at the mounting traffic caused Caitriona to rethink her position on public transport. It would be a relatively short and simple ride on the tube from here. By car, it would take them anywhere from an hour to God knows when to navigate the inner-city blocks. London streets were notoriously difficult to navigate at the best of times without the added complication of increasing traffic. Not to mention, they would have to find parking at the other end somewhere within walking distance, which in London, wasn’t always an easy thing. There was, however the privacy issue to consider as well. The hands on the clock were about to tick over into peak hour and here she was suggesting that they travel on the most public of any transport system known to man. She’d already been running the gauntlet by just being in this tourist attraction to begin with. Should she really try and push her luck by riding on the London Underground? She really didn’t want to, but she wasn't keen on asking Johnathon to try and navigate the streets, in a strange city, without any real idea of where he was going, just because she didn’t want to run the risk of a little fan interaction.

"Johnathon?" She squeezed his arm, “The traffic’s going to be horrendous, and finding parking could be even worse. Would you rather take the tube?"

He seemed to consider that for a moment, “The tube is always an option,” Blue eyes turned her way, “if that’s what you want to do?” It wasn’t at all what she wanted to do if she could avoid it. Up until a few moments ago, Caitriona still hadn’t given up on the possibility of sitting with him, in the quiet little sanctuary the cabin of a car for some extended period of time, just the two of them.

Caitriona felt the warm pressure of Johnathon’s hand as he pressed it gently against her back, guiding her as they both altered course, turning slightly in order to avoid a collision with an oncoming pedestrian. With this much foot traffic, the tube was probably going to be as busy as its bitumen cousin. “Not overly keen on the tube.” She answered honestly, deciding that the former option was the better, “but navigating the one way narrow streets, that frankly make no sense half the time to anyone, even to those that have lived here half their lives can be a real challenge.”

“Challenge accepted,” Johnathon said good naturedly, as they stepped down from the footpath and crossed the street, heading towards one of the large car parking complexes nearby, “so long as you can put up with me making a few wrong turns or seven?”

“Challenge accepted,” Caitriona grinned back at him and adding a wink of her own.

It took longer than she’d thought and less time than she hoped for them to navigate the busy streets. Every complaint, written by anyone, anywhere, about London traffic was completely justified in Caitriona estimation, and if left her silently rejoicing that she wasn’t the one trying navigate what effectively was a rabbit’s warren swarming with ants. Johnathon had done amazingly well, considering and had only taken one wrong turn, resulting in them almost going down a one way street the wrong way. She almost wished he hadn’t been as proficient at driving as he had turned out to be. Caitriona could have quite happily spent another hour or two, relaxed in the comfortable seat of his car, the noise of the outside world muted and distant. Just the two of them. He’d asked her about her day. What was more, he had actually listened, chiming in with the odd comment or question, laughing along with her as she related some of the day’s activities. The whole interaction and left her feeling like she was floating in a warm bubble, a curious mixture of pleasant well-being and calm contentment. So much so that Caitriona had to stop herself from letting out a small sigh of regret as they’d left the car and headed back out onto the street, walking the last part of the journey to the high-rise hotel.

Relatively new and certainly unique in design, housing a variety of restaurants, offices and a five-star hotel, The Shard stood out, towering over the surrounding buildings. Caitriona leaned forward,
one hand on the handrail, casting her eye down the length of the building. It was a good thing that she wasn’t afraid of heights. The high altitude made the people below look smaller than ants. Then again, from 72 stories up, everything tended to look miniature. The sun had set and the last shades of twilight were beginning to cover the city, a variety of different coloured lights starting to illuminate in various buildings as the darkness of night fell. She turned her head. Johnathon was standing quietly beside her, intelligent blue eyes scanning the skyline. “Tower of London doesn’t look like a bad place to get locked up from here does it?” He raised a finger and pointed at the famous landmark below.

“Looks like a fancy B and B.” Caitriona commented conversationally.

“You're right,” His face creased into a broad smile, the sight reflected in the clear glass, as he inspected the landmark further, “it does.” The manicured lawns and neatly trimmed paths gave the old stone structure the distinct feeling of a hotel or perhaps even some type of upscale party venue rather than a cold stone monument to an horrific past. “Hard to believe it was once the most feared place in the country.”

“To be fair, it does looks a lot more imposing at ground level.” Caitriona defended, idly watching a large group of pedestrians cross London Bridge.

“So how is it,” Johnathon turned to face her, “you’ve spent so much time in London and never been up here before?”

“Most of my visits to London have just been so busy,” She hesitated, unsure of exactly how to refer to Tony, or if now was even the moment to bring him up. The discussion about exes had thus far been unexplored by both of them. Now was as good a time as any, Caitriona figured, to shine some light into this dark corner. If this, whatever it was, was to have any type of future, this was a discussion that they both have to have sooner or later anyway. “When I wasn’t working on promotion for the show, I was helping Tony with his business.” Helping was a bit of an understatement. It had been almost a second job for her. She’d been helping Tony promote his club, or helping him network with entertainment contacts that would have otherwise been off limits to him. In all honesty, the whole thing had left her without the time or the inclination to do anything else. “Besides,” Caitriona finished quietly, “Tony was never one to stop and enjoy the sights.”

“Tony?”

“My ex- partner.”

“I think I might have met him.”

Caitriona turned and looked up at him surprised, “You met him?” She was curious as to how on earth someone like Johnathon would have ever come across someone like Tony. It wasn't as if they ran in anything resembling similar circles. They couldn't have been more polar opposite if they'd tried.

“After the cabin. At the motel.” Johnathon supplied, tactfully leaving out the part about Tony inquiring as to whether or not he and Caitriona had slept together. In Johnathon’s opinion, unless there was something he was missing, the guy was a total asshole who needed more than a little instruction in the concept of respect. If it turned out that he never saw Caitriona again, Johnathon was still happy that she'd left that prick in her rear vision mirror.

“I didn’t know he saw you.” Caitriona apologised, ducking her head slightly, instantly confirming to Johnathon that everything he had been previously thinking about Tony had been correct. “We broke up not long after that. Irreconcilable differences shall we say.”
“Mutual decision?”

“No really.” Caitriona gave a wry shake of her head, “Tony wanted to keep going, but I couldn’t. I think I ended up just wanting something he just couldn’t give.” She gave a small shrug, “It needed to happen, as harsh as that sounds.” She took a deep breath and tried to explain what she meant, “I’m mean, I’m sorry if I hurt him, but I’m not sorry that it happened. If that makes any sort of sense.”

“It makes sense, Caitiriona.” Johnathon said softly, “I don’t think anyone ever sets out to hurt the other person or to not make things work.” He looked away, blue eyes scanning the dark horizon, circled by a dim halo from the glare of the blinking city lights, “but somehow, somewhere along the line, things happen and no matter what you do, you find that you just can’t keep going like that.” His voice trailed off, strong hands gripped the railing as he turned back to face her, “Something has to give and you suddenly realise it can’t be you anymore.”

There was no mistaking hurt when she heard it. She could almost see it buried right back there in those soft pools of blue. Someone had done a real number on the tall, otherwise, outwardly strong man standing beside her. Caitriona was curious as to who exactly had hurt him and why. “What was it?” She asked softly, “That one thing. That happened?”

For a moment, Caitriona wasn’t sure if she should even be asking, that maybe the hurt was still too real and that Johnathon wasn’t ready to give her or anyone else for that matter access to such intimate details. He remained, silent and perfectly still for several long heartbeats, before Caitriona saw him take a small breath, “She thought I cheated on her.”

That was not what Caitriona expected to hear at all. She’d been expecting job pressures, long distance difficulties with the travel requirements of his job, too much time apart, financial problems, anything but infidelity. It didn’t seem to fit with the picture she had been building of him. It didn’t seem like him. At all. Having said that, Caitriona of all people, knew that sometimes decent human beings made pretty piss poor choices, and that anything was always possible, even for the most unlikely of candidates.

“Had you?”

It was frank and direct and she knew it, but the question had to be asked. If Johnathon had cheated, she needed to know now. Even if it meant she had been terribly wrong about him and that this was the end, Caitriona wanted to know, before it was too late. There couldn’t be any room left for doubt, not this time, not again.

Blue eyes held her unblinkingly, “No.”

“What happened to make her think that you had?” She kept her voice soft, walking that fine line between wanting to know and prying into something that obviously still bothered him.

“Photos.” Johnathon swallowed heavily but didn’t look away, “while I was away working on a case, someone sent Katherine photos. Photos of me with another woman that I never even met.” His chest expanded as he took a long deep breath and slowly let it out, “Photoshopped. Professionally made. Probably the best fake photos I’ve ever seen in all my career, but fake just the same.”

“I take it she didn’t believe you?”

“She tried to.” Johnathon’s gaze dropped to study his hands, long fingers wrapped around the rail, knuckles going white as he squeezed and released. “Pictures, then phone calls. It got to a point
where I think I could have said the sky was blue and she would have doubted it was the truth.” His eyes flicked up, looking out at the cityscape, the blinking lights blurring as his memory turned inwards. “All the proof in the world, would never have been able to take the doubt away. Not for her. Not for me.” Johnathon blinked slowly, “We tried. For a few months after, before the end came.” The end had been inevitable. Even when the woman in question had owned up to the whole thing, confessed to the having the photos and making hundreds of phone calls, all for a considerable fee which turned out to be neigh on untraceable. Despite some effort on his behalf, Johnathon had never been able to find out exactly who had been behind the whole fiasco. The woman had taken the blame with her confession, but anyone with an ounce of investigator in them could see that woman had just been an unfortunate pawn in someone’s sick game. The real culprit remained unknown and when the relationship had broken, Johnathon hadn’t had it in him to keep looking for something that really didn’t matter anymore.

Caitriona took a half step towards him, letting her shoulder brush against his, resting her hand on his arm and gently curling her fingers around his wrist. “Mutual decision?”

Johnathon’s blond head nodded slowly, then he turned to face her, “It had to happen.” Warm fingers covered hers, “Glad now that it did.” Johnathon said softly, blue eyes locking with hers, “If it hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been at the cabin at just the right time.” Long fingers threaded themselves between hers as he moved closer, his voice dropping a register, “I wouldn’t want to have missed that Caitriona.”

She stared into intense pools of liquid blue, “I wouldn’t have wanted you to have missed that either Johnathon.” She felt her heart rate pickup as the tingle started deep in her stomach and worked its way out. She watched him lean towards her, his mouth just stopping short of hers, close for enough for her to feel every syllable, “Sometimes you have to go through the bad to get to the good. Yes?”

“Yes.” Caitriona murmured, her eyes fluttering closed as his warm lips softly covered hers, slowly kissing her. Yes, she decided, sometimes you did have to go through the bad, to get to good.

And yes, she sighed softly as she felt Johnathon deepen the kiss and resting a steadying hand on her hip drawing them closer.

This was definitely, the good.

Chapter End Notes

Next up : A Goodbye - Johnathon has to leave for Australia remember? :) And Caitriona has a bit of a decision to make.
The air outside was crisp and cool, distinctly different to the gentle warmth of the quiet interior of the car that Caitriona was comfortably ensconced in. The traffic, as they had made the journey from the restaurant to the hotel, had been reasonably light, though, every now and then, they’d been halted by the changing of a traffic light or the odd pedestrian crossing from one side of the road to the other, travelling to and from the many late night venues that dotted the streets and avenues in this part of the city. Caitriona turned her head, quietly studying the form seated beside her. It had been a highly enjoyable and somewhat revealing evening. Up until that point, Johnathon had kept most of the private details about himself rather vague, almost deliberately generic. She hadn’t been expecting him to be quite so open with her, telling her the intimate details of his recent breakup. It had left a mark on him, she mused silently. A hurt that she suspected he was still grappling with and a feeling she understood. Though, she reflected, she hadn’t exactly come out scot-free in the hurt department from her own recent romantic entanglements. Her eyes traced the features of his profile. The strong squarish jaw, down to the broad shoulders, toned forearms and wrist to the long fingers currently wrapped around the steering. Johnathon was different in more way than one to any man she’d ever been attracted to in the past. She had never liked to admit it, but she had a type and Johnathon didn’t fit any of them and yet, a gentle tingle started in her stomach and gradually worked its way out. He got to her. Somehow sliding past all her defenses with a negligent ease, that was both exhilarating and at the same a little frightening. There was no mistaking that feeling now, she swallowed, replaying the recent events of the night. The fire was still coursing through her blood from the intimate moment that they’d shared in the high-rise viewing area. Caitriona unconsciously nibbled her lip, her eyes closing a moment as her mind’s eye recalled the utter enjoyment she’d felt with the physical closeness of him, the touch of his hand on her waist, his mouth on hers, the scent of him, the warmth of his breath on her cheek. She’d felt like she could have quite happily stayed right there for the entire night. With him. Just the two of them. Of course the group of loud but well-meaning tourists, that had spilled out of a recently arrived elevator car at exactly the wrong time, had scuttled that idea completely, just when things had starting to get very interesting. Caitriona could have joyfully strangled the lot of them. She had felt Johnathon relaxing, drawing closer to her and what was more she’d felt herself reciprocating, walking that wavy the line between caution and daring, between safety and wanting.

Not wanting to cause a real scene by continuing in what was now a very public setting, the kiss had ended and they had headed decided to head downstairs to one of the Chinese restaurants. The food had been delicious, the wine even more so, though she had been careful not to overindulge. She had learned that lesson last night. They’d been lucky to have scored a seat a quiet little alcove with a beautiful view of the city where they had finished their meal, talked and laughed about a variety of topics and then headed back to the hotel.

“Quiet out tonight.” Caitriona commented quietly, returning her gaze to the now mostly empty streets.

“I think everyone is still inside, drinking, eating and generally getting themselves into trouble.” Johnathon nodded towards a particularly large group of night club patrons that had spilled onto the footpath. Some were managing to walk, most were moving in what could at best be called staggering, one even stopping to be sick in nearby rubbishbin.

“Trouble?” Caitriona gave the seat belt a small tug, moving the strap away from her neck, “That
sounds ominous. Expert about late night drunken rebel rousing, are you?” She grinned across at him as they started moving again, already knowing full well that he wasn’t, but enjoying the playfulness and ease of the conversation that they seemed to have developed.

“Well, Caitriona,” Johnathon drawled, sending a skitter down her spine at the sound of her name rolling of his tongue, “Don’t let my disguise fool you.” He said, turning his head to address her as they waited for another group to cross the road, “You name it, I’ve roused it.”

She laughed, the sound bringing a broad smile to his face, “Oh really?” Twin dark eyebrows arched neatly in disbelieving inquiry.

“Absolutely.” He paused, “Kind of.” Another pause, “Maybe.” A third pause this time a little longer this time, followed by, “Not at all.”

“So I’m not going to find you regularly holding up a bar at 3 o’clock in the morning then?”

“Fairly safe bet. Though,” He said as he navigated a particularly tight corner on the road, “in my defence, there might have been one or two occasions when I may have spent the night hugging a toilet after overindulging.”

“So that’s why I couldn’t tempt you into any wine tonight?” Caitriona asked, having noticed that he wasn’t a big drinker, “Fear of the aftermath?” In fact, tonight Johnathon hadn’t had any alcohol at all. It had made her wonder if he wasn’t feeling well or perhaps even if he had some history of addiction that he hadn’t yet confessed to her.

“Not quite,” One side of his mouth quirked into a half grin as he guided the car off the road and eased down the hotel parking ramp, heading towards the lower levels, “I wouldn’t want to be thrown in the local watchhouse for drink driving.” Caitriona hadn’t even considered that possibility as to the reason Johnathon wasn’t drinking. It made absolute sense to her now. Having a charge like that against his name couldn’t possibly be a good thing in terms of his career. Caitriona didn’t know for sure but she was fairly certain that, whoever his employer was, something like this wouldn’t bode well for promotion. Not to mention the danger it posed on everyone else on the road. “Besides,” Johnathon explained as he eased the car to a gentle stop, pulling into the assigned bay and silencing the engine with a turn of the key, “I needed all my faculties intact to have any chance of impressing you by navigating those streets in one piece.” Caitriona unclipped her seatbelt and gathered the purse from her lap, waiting quietly as Johnathon walked around the front of the car and opened her own door, offering her his hand. “Thank god for GPS,” He waggled his eyebrows comically at her as she gripped his hand and stepped out of the car, “It’s a miracle we didn’t end up in Wales.”

A warmth, that had nothing to do with the wine, washed over her in a contented wave, as long fingers threading between hers, his palm resting gently against hers, as they turned and walked towards the elevator. “Oh I don’t know about that,” Caitriona said with a gentle smile as she leaned towards him letting her shoulder’s gently brush against him, “I hear the countryside in Wales is really pretty this time of year. Might be worth seeing.”

Johnathon reached forward, his finger hovering over the button that would call the lift in an instant, blond brows raised in question as his blue eyes flicked from her face to the car in silent suggestion, a charming smile on his handsome face.

“I thought you said you weren’t a trouble making rebel rouser.” Caitriona laughed softly as she nudged his hand forward until it connected with metal press plate, the button illuminating, indicating the elevator was on its way.
“I’m not.” He smiled with a soft shake of his head, as his thumb slowly stroked hers through their linked hands, “Maybe I’m just looking for any excuse to spend to more time with you.”

Caitriona looked up at him, “Who said you needed an excuse?” Her voice was quiet, intent pools of blue holding his gaze in the charged stillness.

“Don’t I?” He asked, slowly leaning down towards her.

“No,” She breathed, resting a hand on his forearm and pulling him closer, “you don’t.” Caitriona caught the barest glimpse of a small smile as she closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of him as warm lips covered hers, kissing her long and slow. Strong hands moved from her hip, sliding over the small of her back and wrapping around her back as she leaned against him, her own hands finding their way to his shoulders, fingers curling around the back of his neck, urging him to continue. She let out a soft sigh as he deepened the kiss and tightened his arms around her.

Somewhere in the back of her hearing the annoying ding heralding the arrival of the lift sounded, bringing the kiss to a rapid end. Hands fell from each other as if they had touched a red hot poker, separating like teenagers caught in the sudden glare of the parental porch light as the lift doors opened and revealed an elderly couple standing towards the back of the car, evidently travelling from one of the parking levels below.

Caitriona suddenly found the ground worthy of intense study, hoping her face wasn’t as flushed as it felt. She heard Johnathon clear his throat, felt his hand take hers as they stepped into the lift space, taking up their position in the car on the opposite side to the older couple. Caitriona flicked a sideways glance to the tall form beside her. Blue eyes met hers and a cheeky wink followed, accompanied by the gentle squeeze of her hand, one corner of his mouth twitching, as he tried to keep the grin of his face. It seemed to take an inordinately long time for the elevator to finally arrive at their floor, until, at last they stepped out into the long hallway, which thankfully, was, at least for the time being, empty.

“You know,” Johnathon remarked conversationally, as they padded slowly down the carpeted surface towards Caitriona’s room, “I think you and I should stay well away from lifts.”

“No kidding.” Caitriona quipped, “Half the population of London chooses THE most inopportune moments to suddenly get the urge to go travelling in lifts. It’s becoming an epidemic.” Johnathon chuckled low in his throat, amused at Caitriona’s slight over exaggeration, though not able to argue the accuracy of the sentiment behind it. A small silence fell between them as they approached Caitriona’s door. The sudden realisation seemed to hit her at once, that with every step they took, the night was drawing to an end. That wasn’t what she wanted but Caitriona knew, in all reality, that is exactly was it was. Pretending may well have been a hallmark of her previous relationships, be damned if she was ever going to do that again. She couldn’t.

“When do you fly out to Australia?” She asked quietly, not wanting to hear the answer but knowing she needed to.

Johnathon let out a small breath and looked down at his watch, realising it was far later than he’d thought, “In about 3 hours.”

The statement hung in the air like a heavy dew, dampening everything it touched. It was worse than she thought. Three hours. No chance for an early morning breakfast, he would be long gone by then. She wasn’t even sure when or if he was coming back. “How long will you be in Australia?” Her voice faltered slightly as their footsteps slowed before drawing to a halt outside her hotel room. It wasn’t precisely what she wanted to know, but her courage had deserted her for the moment. In all likelihood, he wouldn’t be back for months and months, if at all. She would be neck deep in filming by then, the whole affair nothing but a distant memory. She felt like they were just
“Most of this week.” His voice was gentle as he turned to face her, long fingers idly playing with hers, “I have to testify on Wednesday afternoon and probably all day Thursday. Could take even longer than that. It’s a bit of a wait and see situation.”

“And after that?” Crystal blue eyes lifted to his, “Any chance you’ll be gracing the UK anytime soon?”

“Hard to tell really.” Her hopes began to fade. “It will depend on where our next case is.”

‘Oh.” Caitriona said softly, leaving the hallway ominously quiet. There it was. The overwhelming dose of reality she’d been dreading. He would leave go to Australia, she would leave go back to Glasgow and that, as they say, would be that. Time and distance would work against them, destroying any chance they might have had. If there had been any chance to begin with. After the disaster of Tony, she really didn’t expect a chance. It was probably a good thing that things ended before she made another mistake. It all seemed logical and fitted nicely with her newly adopted rules of looking before leaping, truth over pretense, safety over risk.

Except.

Even with all her self talk and doubt, Caitriona hadn’t been able to silence that small voice inside her that kept whispering to her that this, whatever this was, whatever she wanted to call it, it was different to anything that she’d experienced before and warranted the danger of a chance. It was more than the blatant sexual attraction and pure desire that her body screamed out at the top of its lungs whenever Johnathon was around. This was something entirely separate to that. Caitriona wasn’t even sure she understood what it was and if asked to pinpoint the reason, she wouldn’t have been able to. The only thing she knew with growing certainty, was that she wasn’t ready for this to be the end. She wanted more. God, did she ever. She just wasn’t sure how to get it.

“Caitriona?” Johnathon’s deep voice interrupted her thoughts, “Could I,” His eyes searched hers, “that is,” he took a small step towards her, “would you..” Johnathon hesitated, swallowing audibly, and letting out a short breath more in frustration than anything, “could I..” He felt like an idiot, nervously babbling, trying to keep his balance on what was unsteady ground. For the first time in a long time he wasn’t quite sure how to proceed. At this point, he was sure that a 17-year-old would probably be more articulate than he was. He wanted to see Caitriona again. Sooner rather than later. If it was up to him, he’d stay now, go back to Glasgow with Caitriona, take some time to really get to know her. But that wasn’t an option. At least not right now. He couldn’t just dump his responsibility. He had to go to Australia and testify. But he didn’t want to leave Caitriona without knowing for certain if she wanted to see him again. Johnathon suspected she did, though he wasn’t certain. He’d never been particularly good at the whole dating scene, and to be honest, he didn’t exactly trust his instincts when it came to judging this sort of thing. Was he reading more into this than he should? Feeling something that just wasn’t there? He wasn’t even sure if he was actually ready to even contemplate seeing someone. To let someone back in again who could, in the blink of an eye, inflict such pain that just breathing took effort. It was dangerous, the damage barely healed. Taking a chance on her was risky. In fact, it absolutely terrified him.

And yet here he was, standing in front of Caitriona, wanting to trust her, wanting to take that chance. A simple choice. The safety of solitude or the uncertainty that came with letting someone into his world, into heart. He studied Caitriona's soft blue eyes as she stood quietly, waiting patiently for him to finish. With his heart fairly pounding in his chest, Johnathon squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and made a decision, sending a silent prayer to whoever was listening and hoping to Christ this wasn’t another mistake. “I’d really like to see you again.
Caitriona. I know I’m leaving tomorrow, and who knows how long I’ll be away for, or when I’ll be able to get back and I know you have filming and work but, would it be alright if I called you, or skyped or whatever works for you?” It came out faster than he wanted but there was no turning back now, the decision had been made, “Just while I’m away in Australia, until I can get back here to see y-”

Johnathon never got a chance to finish the sentence. Caitriona closed the distance between them, laying one hand flat on his chest, the other curling around his neck and pulling him down to her. His words had been exactly that she had been needing. He wanted more and he was coming back. In the space of several long heartbeats he had quietened any doubts she might have had that this was the end, disappearing into warmth of his touch, reinforced by the certainty of his response. Strong arms closed around her, wrapping around her waist and pulling her tightly against the solid frame of his chest, "Is that a yes?"

“Yes,” Caitriona murmured against his lips, “That's a yes. To all of it.”

She sighed softly as Johnathon kissed her long and deep, her own hands sliding over his shoulders, holding on tightly, as she fell into him, steadily exploring his mouth, her tongue finding his, advancing and retreating, his own following hers, only reluctantly drawing the kiss to a close in order to breathe. Caitriona rested her forehead on his, studying his eyes at very close distance. “Come see me again as soon as you can?” She whispered on an uneven breath, threading her fingers through the soft silky strands on the back of his head.

“I will.” His voice was deep, slightly husky and flowed like honey, trickling down through her senses, honest eyes locked with hers unblinkingly, in a solemn vow that left no room for doubt, “I promise.”

There was no blaming the wine this time. She could feel it the heat of his skin through the fabric of his shirt, in the gentle touch of his hands on her back, in the warmth of his breath against her skin. She smiled, letting her fingertips follow the line of his jaw, her thumb, gently stroking his cheek, letting the pad trace the smile she saw reflected there.

This was definitely a beginning.

The right choice?

Or a mistake?

Only time would tell.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for all your encouragement. I may be a little late posting the next installment as it is reporting atm at work and we have a quadrennial review coming up next week as well. I will try and keep the writing train on the track but it might be a few days late. I'll see how I go.

Cheers
Waiting

4:31. Caitriona blinked slowly, and let out a sigh, staring at the red illuminated numbers of the bedside clock. He would be in the air by now. On a plane, flying out back to Australia, half way around the world. Thousands of miles away. She turned over and tucked a hand beneath the surface of the pillow. Maybe she should have gotten up, at least said goodbye.

Again.

Caitriona had suggested as much when they had said goodnight, but as Johnathon had logically explained, after the late hour of their date, they would barely have time to go their rooms before they’d be back right where they were, saying goodbye in the hotel hallway. Caitriona smiled recalling the moments in question. She had hardly believed what her ears had realised when Johnathon had asked if he could see her again. Stumbling over his words, shifting on his feet, sounding very much exactly as Caitriona had felt, Johnathon had seemed so uncharacteristically nervous, that Caitriona had all but convinced herself that he was about to say, ‘it’s been nice but I’ll call you don’t call me.’ He hadn’t though and had instead given her exactly what she’d needed. Caitriona rolled over onto her back and laced her fingers together, resting them on the flat plane of her stomach, eyes searching the ceiling through the muted darkness. A curious combination of relief and anticipation had washed over her in those few moments when the stunning realisation that Johnathon was coming back. She could almost still feel the soft pressure of his mouth on hers, the security that she’d felt when his strong arms had closed around her, the scent of him, that mix of male and his particular cologne that she found entirely intoxicating. “Christ.” She murmured as she blew out a long slow breath. Anyone would have thought she’d been deprived of sex for at least an eon the way certain parts of her body were reacting.

She stopped and thought about that a moment. In way, it had been a very long time since she had felt this way. Sex with Tony had, more often than not, generally been a one sided affair. He would finish, usually rather quickly, leaving Caitriona to take care of business herself or, as was usually the case, just give up. There had been a time, not that long ago when, Caitriona, being a bit of a romantic a heart, had really found it a stretch to believe some of her friends who were at the time in long term, committed relationships, had complained that they often felt lonely, even during sex with their boyfriends or husbands.

Not now.

Time and experience had changed her mind significantly. For a large portion of her relationship with Tony, more so towards the end, but now, looking back and with the benefit of the clarity of hindsight, Caitriona realised that it had been exactly as they had described. Tony had been right there with her and yet, even when he was inside her, she’d felt entirely alone. That feeling of empty helpless solitude was yet another thing that Caitriona was absolutely determined, with every fibre of her being, to never put herself in a position like that again.

Not in any future relationship, romantic or otherwise.

Never again, she reminded herself. If this thing with Johnathon turned out to go somewhere, Caitriona was going to make sure she went into it with her eyes wide open. No blinkers, no preconceived ideas, no lies or images to maintain. She fully intended to take this slow, to do things differently, place each step with infinite care and consideration, so there would be no tripping, no missteps or blind sides, to knock off her feet. Caitriona realised that in even beginning to hope she had opened herself up to disappointment. Relationships were risky bloody business. Stubborn intentions and careful planning were all good and well, but the fact remained, eliminating all the risk was impossible. There was no guarantee that Johnathon would come back, statements in hotel
hallways were just that. Words hastily spoken in a charged atmosphere. He’d promised, given his word and she got the feeling that was something he took seriously but, truth to be told, it was too early to truly know if his word was to be thoroughly trusted.

Trust.
The life blood of any relationship. Caitriona wanted to trust Johnathon. God, did she ever. But wanting didn’t erase the past. She was more than acutely aware that her past, and, given the information Johnathon had divulged to her tonight, his past also, still had a role to play in their futures, whatever that might or might not be. Her past with Tony had the tendency to colour every decision she made, exerted influence on every thought like a magnet on a compass, silently trying to push her one way or the other, putting up walls where there once were none, causing doubt without reason.

His, Caitriona nibbled one side of her lip, deep in thought, when you stripped back all the accusations that he’d detailed to her, whether they were true or not, it had been the loss of trust between the couple that had proved insurmountable for Johnathon. Similar to her own situation, the end had taken some time to finally come. Caitriona got the feeling that, unlike her, where letting go had been easier than she’d been dreading, Johnathon’s letting go had been difficult. Difficult, with one thing at the very centre of it all. He’d left because he believed he wasn’t trusted anymore.

Though, it could be argued, she only knew one side of the story. She wondered if, the woman in question, Caitriona’s forehead wrinkled, trying to remember the woman in question’s name. Katherine, she recalled after a few moments, remembering it only because its short form was extraordinarily close to her own short version of her name. Kate, Johnathon had called her. More than one person had mistakenly called Caitriona something similar. She generally didn’t shorten her name but that didn’t stop others around her from doing it. Namely Sam. She’d argued with him over it, but he had stubbornly refused to stop calling her Cait, which sounded like the feline animal rather than any resemblance to her actual name. Caitriona wasn’t particularly fond of it, but as more people had began to jump on the bandwagon, she’d decided to just roll with it. It was more effort than it was worth to try and put a stop to it. Regardless of her own name, clearly this Kate, or Katherine, or whatever her name was, had played a pivotal part and would have her own side in Johnathon’s story.

Had he cheated? He’d said not and, maybe she was stupid to do so, but Caitriona believed him. It was something in the way Johnathon had looked at her when she’d asked him if he had done the cheating. A look, deep down in the back of those blue eyes, unblinkingly tinged with a hint of sadness, but stunningly clear of any sign of regretful guilt, had all but convinced her that he was telling the truth. A look that reinforced her gut feeling that Johnathon wasn’t a man who would cheat on someone he was committed to. Had he been committed to her? Caitriona suspected he had. In her experience, the type of hurt she’d seen in the back of those eyes only came from one source.

Betrayal.

She knew, as well as anyone on the face of the earth, that betrayal had the capacity to hurt deep enough to leave that kind of mark, and only when you were deeply invested in someone. She’d thought seen bare glimpses of that hurt when she’d first met him in the cabin. At the time, she hadn’t taken much notice, her mind far too preoccupied with her own problems, but the hurt had been there none the less. Her own memory of it all helping to tip the scales in favour of her view that Johnathon was indeed telling the truth about the situation.

Caitriona was slowly finding out pieces of information from him the more time they spent together, but at the moment there remained an awful lot of blanks. She idly picked at a loose thread on the hem of the sheet. Truth of the matter was, Caitriona just didn’t know Johnathon well enough yet to be able to banish supposition and doubt. It was just too early and whether she liked it or not, she
couldn’t really do anything more than wait.  
Wait to see if he kept it word and came back to her.  
Wait to see if he was the man she thought he would be.  
Wait to find out more about the blond man that had sparked her interest.

She pulled the loose thread taut, wrapping it around the end of her finger. She wasn’t a fan of waiting. Never had been. Patience was not one her virtues. Caitriona’s eyes dropped to the bedside table, focusing on the slim profile of her laptop. She argued with herself for a few moments as too the moral justification of google stalking a man she was interested in. Her sister Sarah had no such moral qualms. It seemed to Caitriona that no matter the topic, problem, place or person, Sarah insisted that google had the answer.

Caitriona pulled the tread tight, a soft snap sounding as it broke and came away. She eyed the device on the table dubiously, still debating the logic of using the internet to glean information about Johnathon.  
The internet. Her own experience with that particular information source hadn’t always been positive. If Caitriona believed half of everything she had read about herself, she’d have been married to fifteen different people, suffered through a litany of eating disorders, several drug binges and have, or be working on having, her third child by now. 99% of what she’d ever read had been downright lies, the accuracy of the remaining 1% buried so deep that it was only that she knew personally knew the lies from the truth that she’d had been able to recognise it as such. She was in show business and knew she that brought the consequence of always having a stronger than normal online presence, but the lack of correct information made the idea of searching for information on Johnathon, who was just an ordinary citizen, seem like an exercise in futility to her. Then again, the only place that left her was sitting here. Still waiting.  
Caitriona narrowed her eyes at the laptop, then finally giving into its temptation, she gave a small shrug, let out a soft sigh and sat up. Extending a long arm, she snagged the offending item from the table. Drawing her legs up, she balanced the machine on her knees, flipping open the lid and waiting patiently for it to boot. It wasn’t as if she was going to believe half of what she found anyway. If she managed to find anything at all. A sickly white light bathed her face as she typed Johnathon Chase’s name into the search engine, her finger hovering over the enter button, one last moment of hesitation before lowering the digit.

A few seconds later the screen displayed the results. In fact, hundreds of results. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all. She clicked on the first link, then closed it, equally as fast. Clearly the name Johnathon Chase was as unique as she’d thought it might have been. Caitriona was positively certain that the man she’d been on two dates with was not of Mexican heritage nor was he auto mechanic currently doing 15 to life in a state penitentiary. She tried again, this time adding a few descriptors that she already knew about him, hoping it might help narrow the search. It took at least three more failed attempts before she finally she found what she thought was the first piece of reliable information about the real Johnathon Chase. She’d figured it was factual because there was no mistaking the pair of blue eyes looking back at her from the picture on the screen. This was definitely her Johnathon Chase. The same strong jaw, the same square set of his shoulders, the same blue eyes, the face slightly younger, but definitely still the man she knew. He was listed as an alumna of Harvard Law School. She clicked on the link below the image not overly surprised when it listed the dual degrees of an MBA and law degree, both completed with honours no less. That aligned well enough with what Johnathon had already told her. What didn’t quite fit with the date beside each of these accomplishments. Dark brows knit. Maybe they got their dates screwed up on the website. According to this data, Johnathon Chase had either completed a dual degree at one of the most prestigious schools in the United States at the age of 13 or he was at least 10 years older than she was.
The dates had to be wrong.

That’s all there was to it.

There was no way the man she was seeing was pushing 40. And what was more, it meant he would have lied to her about his age on their very first date.

Had to be a mistake.

Further down the page there was another notation indicating further achievements. Still puzzling over the last piece of information, she clicked on the link. “Holy crap.” She murmured. He had more degrees than she’d thought was humanly possible. Various levels of degrees in in criminology, forensic psychiatry, forensic science and criminal justice. Had she not actually been viewing the pages of Oxford and Cambridge University, and the annotation that he had apparently receive special dispensation from the Dean to complete extra coursework concurrently, Caitriona would have been seriously doubting the validity of the information she was finding. At least the dates on these made more sense. According to this page and her quick calculations, he would have been in his early 20s when he completed these. That made a lot more sense than the ridiculous age of 13 that she’d gotten from Harvard Law. Timelines it didn’t quite match up and yet, that had definitely been Johnathon in that picture. The whole thing was just curiouser and curiouser and it left her feeling slightly uneasy.

She’d heard the Internet described as a rabbit hole and she was well and truly now believing it. A few more clicks, some wrong and some right and she’d found information about the company he worked for. From what she could understand, it was an independent global consultancy firm that seemed to work with any and all law enforcement agencies. Johnathon was listed as a lead investigator, again, exactly truthful to what he had told her. The more she looked, the more she realised there wasn’t a great deal of information about him, but there was at least some of the basics. He had no presence on Facebook or Twitter or any of the other social media platforms. That wasn’t unusual, she herself was only on them as a form of promotion and PR for her work. All in all, it was turning out to be a bit of a mixed bag. If the information was to be believed, and the jury was still out on that fact, Johnathon had certainly been to university and he definitely did work in the field that he’d told her. Still, a small kernel of doubt worked its way into her brain over the discrepancy of his age and the timelines that she’d been presented with. It hadn’t exactly been the slamdunk shot of confidence that she’d been hoping for. “Bloody internet.” She cursed. The arrow of her mouse hovered over the small x, about to shut the whole thing down when the barest glimpse of an image caught her attention.

“Well, well.” Her voice a mixture of caution and curiosity. Scrolling down, she clicked on the thumbnail. A single image opening before her eyes. The picture showed a woman and man, standing close together. She in a simple yet elegant black dress, he in a black tie suit. Both of them smiling at the camera, taking what, to Caitriona’s practiced eyed, was indeed, an excellent picture. Her gaze flicked to the caption – “Dr Katherine Carmichael and partner, Mr Johnathon Chase attend the AMA Medical Benefit Gala.” The picture had been taken early last year from the information presented. Caitriona studied the image for a few moments, her eyes flicking from Johnathon’s handsome form and inevitably ending up appraising the woman by his side. They looked happy, Caitriona reflected, as she clicked on the link taking her to a digital magazine publication site. According to the article accompanying the picture, Katherine Carmichael was the head of emergency medicine at a large hospital and had been the recipient of some prestigious medical award or another that Caitriona didn’t even pretend to recognise. As the eldest daughter of one of Boston’s prestigiously wealthy business families, Katherine Carmichael was thin and tall, almost as tall as Johnathon, Caitriona assessed, with brilliant blue eyes and head full of long black hair. Quite beautiful, Caitriona begrudgingly admitted, in fact, they looked good together, a typical high society couple, she supposed. And yet, they had broken. “So,” Caitriona drew the word out
slowly, “you were the one.” The one that had caused that look in his eyes, the unmistakable injury that only betrayal can inflict.

It was only a flicker, but right back in the base of her belly, close to her spine, Caitriona felt the spark of anger. She barely knew Johnathon, but the mere inkling of a thought that someone had hurt him, that this woman, Katherine, her mind tasted the word sourly, had hurt him, had more of an effect on her and she had expected. She wouldn’t have liked to admit it, but it may have had more than a little something to do with the fact that Katherine Carmichael was obviously well accomplished and an attractive woman that Johnathon had evidently felt something far more than friendship towards. She could see in the way they were standing, closer than friends, the barriers of personal distance fallen away. He'd felt something for her that was certain.

“Now why,” Caitriona narrowed her eyes studying the picture closely, hoping to divine the impossible from the static image, “would little miss doctor, walk away from that?” Her voice trailed off as her eyes shifted from Katherine’s face back to the man of the moment.

Questions.

So many questions.

It was just one picture and Caitriona knew damn well better than most people that pictures could be deceiving. She shook her head, “Fucking internet.” She groused, making a mental note to use this exact example as an argument next time Sarah got on her one of her goggle stalking campaigns.

Resigning herself to the fact she was never going to find any answers until Johnathon returned Caitriona closed the laptop, long legs dropping over the side of the bed, the carpet soft beneath her bare feet as she padded across to the table and dropped the machine on its hard surface. Here she was, back to waiting again. “Fanfuckingtastic.” She let out a long deep breath of frustration, then leaning back, she arched her back, stretching out the kinks before crossing her arms over her chest, her active mind still ticking over as she started to pace, back and forth across the room. She shot a glance to the wretched clock on the table. Almost 6 am and at least another ten hours before Johnathon would land in Singapore, for a brief stopover to refuel before flying on to Sydney.

Just when, she reflected ruefully, did being attracted to someone turn into such an ordeal? She paced a few steps. Was dating always this difficult? And why the hell did Australia have to be so far away?

It was going to be a long few days until with nothing to do but trust that Johnathon would return.

Of course, she shrugged and paced some more, continuing her internal diatribe, that meant more waiting.

If this didn’t work out, she fully intended, without a single hint of a lie, to live the rest of her life, surrounded by nothing but a hundred cats for company.

In a country cottage far away from civilisation.

And the god damned internet.

And her sister's advice.

“Christ Johnathon.” She glared at the closed laptop, “This had better be worth it.”

Decided there was little else to do, Caitriona settled on having a long hot shower. Then maybe she’d start packing up and even leave for Glasgow a few hours earlier than she had planned. There
was evidently no point in trying to sleep late and to be honest, doing anything, was better than sitting around here.

Overthinking everything.
Waiting.
Wanting to know more.
Wanting to have more.
Wondering what had really happened after that damned picture.
 Wondering if she was doing the right thing.
Trusting that she was.
Wondering if Johnathon was coming back.
Trusting that he was.

Caitriona was so preoccupied with her current situation and the irritating slowness of the passing of time, that she didn’t notice the shadow, barely visible beneath the hotel door. Not even as she passed within a foot of it as she padded into the bathroom.

The dark outline, that had lingered far longer than normal, only now, turned on its heel.

Then slowly, silently, walked away.
He watched her silently until she disappeared behind the security doors, the last check point before boarding the aircraft. A one way flight to Glasgow. Erring on the side of caution, he decided to wait until well after the plane’s physical departure, just to ensure that she was on it. If he could just make it another few hours, then it would be done. He would have played his part just as he’d promised. He wondered briefly, as he pulled out a chair, sitting down at a long bench, and facing the blackened tarmac, studying the target aircraft as taxied towards take off. Watching wasn’t generally his thing. He preferred a far more permanent and indisputable end game.

But for fifty grand, he’d lower his standards. Hell, he’d even thrown in putting up with a silver spoon for a chance at the easy money. At least this silver spoon had a history of paying on time and in full, even if he was a bit a prick otherwise. It wasn’t a difficult task. All he had to do was follow some private investigator of a high price security firm, find out if he was fucking anyone and report back.

Easy money.

That was exactly what he’d been doing for the past week. Things had started out almost being too quiet. The target lived the life of a fucking monk. Didn't see anyone. Didn't go anywhere but work and the hotel. Didn't get any local hookers or even a visit from a local drug dealer. The fucker didn't even use the mini bar. He knew. He'd check the restock records. It was all positively mundane. Simple job, albeit extremely boring one. Nothing to report. He would have been finished earlier if it hadn’t been for the tall piece of ass that had come onto the scene in the last few days. Her arrival had changed everything. For one, he had to contact that prick and get further instructions. Something he disliked with a passion. Still, he’d been given instructions to watch her, find out what he could about and report back. Things had gone from bad to worse after that, forcing him to do some fucked up long hours in order to keep on eyes on both of them. He reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out scruffy looking notepad. Caitriona Balfe. Actress. He had to admit, that monk investigator had good taste. She was extremely fuckable and he had been sure that on the last night in particular that he’d finally have something to report back. If it had been him instead of that boring investigator, he would have fucked woman into next week. But no. Instead, all he had to report was bit of hot and heavy in the hotel hallway. He still was in disbelief that they hadn't ended up in each other's rooms. Though, the woman must have had second thoughts about that because, he noted, she was up and still moving around most of the night when he'd returned from the airport after the target had boarded the plane. Dark eyes flicked up to the information screen. Her flight status had been updated to departed.

Job complete. One in Australia, one travelling to Glasgow. If the silver spoon wanted anymore information, he was going to have fork out more money. Fucked if he was going to travel in opposite directions around the world for free. Maybe if he was lucky, the silver spoon would decide on a high-end service.

High end services, after all, were his specialty. Better than this low end, indefinite watching shit. He preferred the closure that only an end could give. Make no mistake. Death was his normal paycheck, bloodless and silent. No fuss. No problems. Just an end. His tattooed hand dialed the number then lifted the slimline cell phone to his ear, “It’s done.” He reported, relaying the relevant information to his current employer, answering in short sharp sentences. “No. Some actress. Looks like he just met her. I’ll email the packet to you when I see the funds in my account.” He waited a moment then added, “Unless you want something more,” He tasted the word as he said it slowly, barely able to contain the hit of adrenaline that came from just thinking about it, “shall we say
permanent performed on either of them.” The answer came back immediately. The price already triple his normal rate. A slow, lopsided smile spread across his face as he closed the phone and made his way to ticket sales. This was more like it.

"How can I help you Sir?” A pretty young brunette addressed him from behind the counter, "Where are you flying to today?"

"Glasgow." He answered.
Perhaps this job might turn out to be better than he thought.

Chapter End Notes

I'm posting two chapters this fortnight because this chapter was a short one and it didn't feel right only posting the one.

Cheers.
Johnathon pushed the chair back and stood, acknowledging the judge with a slight nod of his head, then quietly followed the court officer as he was escorted out of the main courtroom and through the set of large solid wooden doors into the small waiting room. He glanced at his watch.

10:00 am.

Better than he’d been expecting. Originally he’d thought that they’d be required to testify all day today, to be finished this early was an absolute boon. Within the hour, the verdict would be rendered and Johnathon’s team would be officially finished with this case. Sliding his phone from his back pocket, Johnathon checked his messages, unable to keep the small smile from his face as he read three of Caitriona’s latest messages. She had been at a read through during his night, the time difference making communicating with each other interesting. Thus far, they had been making it work somehow. Johnathon had stayed up very late the previous two nights video calling Caitriona during her morning hours and in return, Caitriona had messaged him when ever she had the chance during her day. It required a little finagling, but, he was determined to at least do his best to maintain communication.

Though, he reflected, he was still working on wrapping his mind around some of the terms, requirements and obligations that Caitriona’s current occupation demanded of her. It was a steep learning curve. Science, logic, mathematics, the language of academics and the law, that he knew like the back of his hand. Acting, the creative arts, fashion, photography and everything that was part and parcel of the entertainment industry, was something entirely different. Johnathon could tally up what he knew about that particular area on the back of a matchbook. His own set of life experiences were vastly different compared to Caitriona and he’d never really encounted, in any great detail at least, the things that were part of Caitriona’s day to day.

It was so different that Johnathon couldn’t even pretend to understand half of what Caitriona had been talking about in her messages. Table reads, blocking, promotional photos, even wig fittings. It was all a foreign language to him. As far as he was concerned, a bit of tape, a few pins, maybe some glue if you got particularly desperate, was all anybody really needed to fit a wig. He certainly had never heard of somebody having to go have a meeting about the said wig, make wig selections and then have to sit for a few hours while they worked out the time and preparation techniques to get the result they wanted. The whole process, it turned out, took far longer than the 10 minutes that Johnathon surmised it might. His smile widened, reading the last message, in which the subject of the wigs had been left behind, and now detailed Caitriona’s extreme dislike of exercising. A feeling which she had described particularly colourfully and one which Johnathon happened to agree with.

“What are you grinning at?” Jackson commented, shoving open the door with one hand, an extraordinarily large coffee cup in the other, “Wait. Aren’t you supposed to be in there?” The dark haired man nodded towards the courtroom entrance and sat down in one the arm chairs, sucking on the white lid of the cup.

“No. They are finished with me.” Johnathon didn’t look up, instead, long fingers darted across the touchscreen, sending a reply to Caitriona, before turning the phone face down on the table top.

“Finished?” Jackson swallowed a mouthful of hot coffee, “Already? I knew their case was pretty
shitty but this has gotta be a record.”

Johnathon leaned back in the chair, the hinges squeaking slightly under his weight, “They are doing the summation now, so we should have a final verdict by 11.”

“Hot damn. We are hitting two for two today.” Jackson grinned, referring to another three members of Johnathon’s team who were currently giving evidence in an unrelated case in the adjoining court room. There had been some question as to whether it would be necessary for Johnathon to also give evidence in that case, however thus far, the other members of his team seemed to have been managing quite well and Johnathon fully expected there to be dual guilty verdicts rendered. All in all, a successful end to six months worth of investigation.

The dull sound of the phone vibrating against the solid wooden desk drew both men’s attention. Johnathon leaned forward and flipped the object over, quietly reading the message. Blond brows knit as he read the long and detailed text. Rather than being the message from Caitriona that he’d been expecting, it was further information from Finn McGovern, the lawyer in London, about a slight situation that while nothing extremely alarming, at least warranted some further investigation. Not because Johnathon was worried about what they might find, but rather why now. The timing of it was slightly confusing. Early results seem to indicate that this was more than just the general inquiries that always floated about every few months so. This was someone was going to extra effort and Johnathon was curious as to why someone was suddenly interested in doing so.

“Trouble?” Jackson asked draining the last coffee from the cup. He’d known Johnathon a long time, almost 15 years and had learned to read his tight-lipped friend’s face.

“Not really.” Johnathon sent back more instructions and the odd suggestion or two about where to focus their energies on finding out who was doing this. He’d wait another few weeks to see if their interest had waned by then. If they didn’t, then he would get involved. “Just someone poking around.” Johnathon gave a slight shrug and tossed the phone back on the desk.

“What about?” Jackson asked idly playing with the empty coffee cup, rolling it between the palms on his hands.

“ECA.”

“Someone on that wild goose chase again are they. I swear, every year this does the rounds.”

“Almost,” Johnathon agreed, watching as Jackson gave a flick of his wrist, setting the cup spinning quite skilfully like a top on the flat surface. “It’s a bit different this time, though.” His voice held a casual tone which belied the seriousness of the subject matter. “They haven’t been happy with the normal answers. Got ourselves a digger this time I think.”

The cup’s motion stopped, as green eyes lifted to blue, a concerned look on Jackson’s face, “How close are they?”

“Close enough to be of interest”

“Any ideas on who?” Jackson studied Johnathon’s reaction. He knew damn well that his work partner sitting across the table was more than likely thinking three steps ahead of anyone working the details anyway, but it never hurt to ask.

“I don’t know yet.” Johnathon idly scratched a fingernail across a mark on the table, “I’ve left that with Finn to gnaw away at. I’ve given him a few places to start from.”
Jackson slowly nodded, quietly wondering if Johnathon was including the one name that had instantly popped into his own head at the mention of this problem. He knew that his friend still had extremely raw and somewhat mixed feelings on this subject. He felt like Johnathon was only just getting back to being his normal self and Jackson wasn’t particularly keen to bring anything up that might reverse that situation. Love, he cursed silently. That shit was dangerous. It had brought a strong man to knees for all the wrong reasons. Jackson had witnessed it and he was damned certain that number one, he’d never let that shit ever happen to him and two, if Katherine or anyone else wanted to hurt Johnathon like that again, they would have to go through him first. Jackson almost hoped he wasn’t right. He’d liked Katherine, really he had, but the whole fucked up situation with Johnathon and those damned pictures had been a clusterfuck from the beginning. There was only ever one way it was going to end. Jackson didn’t know who was blame and to be frank, he didn’t particularly care. People make mistakes. He viewed it as a simple fact of life. Shit happens. You move on. Best not to let your feet get tied down in the first place. That was the way he felt about it. He generally wasn’t into holding grudges, but, fuck, the timing of this was more than a little suspicious. Johnathon and Katherine break up and then some asswipe somewhere starts snooping around for information on his friend. Strong coincidence if you asked him. They may well have separated on a good terms, even if good was a relative term, reserved for any two people who go through a breakup but that didn’t mean that the loyalty Katherine might have once had towards Johnathon still remained the same. In Jackson's experience, women could be fickle. Hell, there had to be a reason why there was a saying about what women do when scorned. It was too coincidental to be ignored. Surely, he glanced over to Johnathon, who was currently studying the goings on in the court room on the wall mounted closed circuit TV. He had to have been at least considering her as the culprit.

Setting the now empty coffee cup aside, Jackson drew a short breath, wishing he could have a cigarette and taking a deep breath instead, “John?” Jackson hesitated as Johnathon’s gaze dropped to focus on him, “You don’t think that,” he ventured frantically trying to read his friend’s face which was staying infuriatingly passive, “that this couldn’t be, well, Kate, could it?”

The passivity disappeared in an instant, blue eyes turning to ice as they stared back at him, “Jackson...” The warning tone was unmistakeable.

Jackson raised a hand, “I’m not saying it is her or that she would, I just...” His hand dropped to the table, taking Johnathon’s silence as a positive sign the he should continue, “Shit has happened and that can make people do some fucked up things John. Things you never thought they would. Maybe it slipped out in drunken conversation or was overheard or something. I just think the possibility is one that maybe you should consider.”

For several long heartbeats the room was silent before Johnathon very slowly and deliberately pushed his chair back and turned, “I’ve already considered it.” His voice was low, a curious combination of resignation, regret and tempered anger, “Katherine hasn’t said a word. Drunken or otherwise.”

“Fair enough.” Considering retreat a perfectly acceptable from of valour and deciding that no good would come from further pushing the tall man, Jackson was prepared to drop the subject. Her name was out there. Johnathon would do the rest, of that, Jackson was certain. Even if it hurt, even if it made things infinitely worse somehow for Johnathon. He always followed through. Always did what he had to. Always did what he thought was right. Jackson admired that about his friend. Even if he didn’t always agree with it.

“I have thought about it.” Came Johnathon's surprising confession, strong hands reached out to grip the ledge of the window, squeezing until the knuckles turned white, “Kate has nothing to do with this.” Johnathon turned around and looked at Jackson,” because if she had said anything to anyone,
I wouldn’t have to try and figure it out.” He folded his arms across his chest, “She has all the information she needs to send anyone directly to me.”

Jackson had known that Johnathon had revealed a lot of very personal information to Katherine throughout their relationship, but if Johnathon had told her absolutely everything, even more than Jackson presumed, then he was right. All Katherine need do was offer up Johnathon’s name on the plate. A simple statement of fact. No backdoor enquiries or subtle attempts at subterfuge would be necessary. It would be right there in the open for the taking and using. “Sorry you told her?”

Jackson knew of Johnathon’s strong desire to keep so much of his past private. He could count on one hand the number of people that Johnathon had willingly divulged certain specific details too.

Johnathon’s forehead wrinkled and broad shoulders shrugged, “No.” He let out a long breath, “It’s not like it’s a state secret.”

And it wasn’t. It was just one of the many things that he liked to keep private. Private because it had the potential to change people. Johnathon had seen it before. Once people had this information about him or anyone for that matter, they changed. Changed who they were. Changed how they acted. Changed everything. Over time he’d learned that, those people, the ones that did change, were the people he could do without. Johnathon was a lot more selective about who he told and when he told them. Those cards were now deliberately held close to his chest.

Occasionally, someone came into his life where it didn’t matter. When they didn’t change before his eyes. Time. It all came to do time really. It was always the great revealer of character. With him, it seemed to take a long time to arrive at that place where he not just believed, but where he knew, without any hesitation or doubt, that the sharing of those secrets, the type that hide, buried in the deepest places inside your soul, was safe. He still remembered the day he told Katherine. She’d been furious with him. Furious for not telling her sooner, from keeping things from her. Eventually she came to understand why, but in the end, Johnathon wasn’t entirely sure if she ever forgave him for it.

Still, after everything that had happened between them, Johnathon believed that that decision had been a correct one. If the fault lies with anyone, it landed squarely on his shoulders. “I was the one that told her. Not her fault that I did.” He ended quietly.

“So,” Jackson drew the word out, “That’s a no for Kate then?” He raised one dark eyebrow and looked up at his friend, hoping Johnathon would accept the peace offering. He hadn’t meant pick at old wounds particularly a one only recently scabbed over.

Johnathon gave a small snort as one side of his mouth creased into the half smile, “It isn't a yes.” He tucked his hands into his pockets and returned his focus to the screen, watching as the gavel fell and verdict was rendered.

Guilty.

Case Closed.

“Have a nice life in prison asshole.” Jackson murmured at the screen, watching as the bailiff lead the convicted criminal away in shackles.

“Let’s just hope the bastard stays there.” Johnathon pushed his chair in and began gathering his belongings. If he left now, he’d be in time to catch the next flight out to Glasgow. Granted, it was via Dubai, but it would get him to Scotland a good three hours quicker than any other flight available.
And right now, time mattered to him.

It mattered a great deal.

“So where to next?” Jackson knew that with the closure of these cases, the whole team consisting of eight investigators would have little break before moving onto the next case. Sometimes the teams split and went their separate ways, each pair within the team solving their own case, in their own location and sometimes, as was the situation here, the teams consolidated and all worked on a group of cases in the one location. It was all very dependent upon the requirements of the cases involved.

“The others will stay here in Sydney for as long as needed just to tidy up a those cases that we still have pending,” Johnathon said, pushing the top of his briefcase closed with a click, “You and I have, not one, but four missing persons cases to take a look at in New York.”

“New York?” Jackson repeated, unable to hide the shocked surprise from colouring his voice. New York was the last place Jackson thought they would be headed. Katherine was in New York. Granted New York was massive city, with a population in the millions so the chance of randomly running into her would be very slim, but still, New York wasn’t a place he thought Johnathon would want to go and it certainly hadn't been on his private list of possible next case location.

“Yes. New York.” Johnathon restated succinctly, as he reached forward and slid his laptop into its carry bag, “The FBI put a request in six months ago.”

That was true. Now that he thought about it, Jackson recalled the exact request, having taken over some sections of Johnathon’s role within the team during the time his friend had been struggling late last year. It wasn’t that Johnathon had been neglectful or deficient in this work responsibilities during that time. It had just been something that Jackson had done. Was it necessary, no. Did Jackson think it was the right thing? Fuck yes. Johnathon had needed it. There was always another case, there was only one Johnathon. He had stepped up and taken over what he could, while Johnathon did whatever he needed to do to get through the ugly business with Katherine. It wasn’t as if this was a case with sensitive time pressure. It was well and truly cold and staying that way for an extra six months would have absolutely no effect on the chances of it being solved.

“We have a meeting with the lead agent Monday afternoon.” Johnathon reminded him, “We'll see what they have to say and take it from there.”

“At least that gives us a full twenty four hours to hit the town.” Jackson grinned, rubbing his hands together at the prospect of a night on the town.

“Sorry to disappoint,” Johnathon lifted the laptop bag, hoisting the strap over one shoulder, “But I’m flying out to Glasgow on the 1pm flight.”

“Wait,” Jackson said, his brows knit in confusion, “Glasgow? I thought our next case was in New York?”

“It is in New York.” Johnathon confirmed, pulling out his phone and sending one last message to Caithiona, not knowing when she would answer it.

“Wait, what?” Jackson looked at him like he’d grown a third ear, his mind doing a doubletake, “Then why Glasgow? God, please don’t tell me Scotland Yard wants us to work on another peat bog murder thing.” He grimaced as they both headed towards the door, shouldering it open, “I dunno if I can do that smell again. I never got that stink out of the jacket by way, ended up
throwing it away. Smelt like road kill in summer, four days past the bloat stage. That shit went in the actual jacket fibres, I swear.” He shook his head, one shoulder hunching up in a shiver at the memory, “Fucking reeked. And don’t even start with the whole freezing rain and no sun thing. They can keep that.”

Johnathon smiled, his footsteps sounding loud as they descended the stairs, finally exiting out onto the busy downtown street. “Good thing you’re not the one going to Scotland then isn’t it. I'll suffer through it and see you in New York on Monday.”

“Now you’re talking.” Jackson retorted as reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes, "I'll take New York over Scotland any day. Though you are going to owe me a night out there. You can't ditch twice man, not cool.”

"You'll manage just fine without me to make a name for yourself here I'm sure." Johnathon commented, knowing full well Jackson's unerring ability to find a bar, casino, night club, local pub, pretty much anywhere really, to find entertainment in some form or another. It generally involved copious amounts liquor and harmless fun, one often being linked to the other where Jackson was concerned. They turned and headed towards the row of white cabs, all lined up in a long que at the rank.

"I'll do my best." Jackson made a cross over his heart, accompanied by a smirk,"It'll be a struggle, but someone has to do it." They stopped at the first one as taxi etiquette demanded," Besides if you are going to hang in the land of the cold and dreary, someone has to the keep up the struggle. Just remember one thing, if we take any cases from Scotland, can we at least delay them until their summer time? Not a fan of the cold weather shit.” Jackson asked, already knowing that he wasn't beyond begging if push came to shove. Anything to get out of going back to that cold miserable place.

“Never said I was going to Scotland for cases.” Johnathon stated as he opened the passenger side door of the nearest cab, while Jackson clamped one white cigarette between his teeth, knowing better than to light it anywhere near the blond detective, who had an inordinate dislike for cigarette smoke.

"So why Glasgow then?"

“I will see you in New York on Monday." Johnathon restated, refusing to answer the question untruthfully and not willing to divulge just yet why he was in fact going to Glasgow. Instead he fastened the seatbelt across his chest, "Call me if there is any problems. In the meantime, try and stay out of trouble.” He gave Jackson a wave and pulled the door shut, ending any further interrogation.

The taxi pulled out into the traffic, leaving a partially stunned friend in it's wake. "What the hell is in Glasgow?" Jackson yelled after the vehicle, the unlit cigarette hanging forgotten from one edge of his mouth.

If not a case.

Then what on earth was his friend up to.

What could possibly be in Glasgow of all places?
Second Chapter as promised for this fortnight, so if you missed it, I posted 21 and 22 Friday 6th.

Thanks again those readers who are hanging in there. Good weekend to you all
Caitriona ended the call and fell back against the soft cushions of the long bench seat that covered the entire width across the back wall of her trailer, tossing the phone onto the nearby table.

Voicemail again. She’d been trying to call Johnathon since early that morning with no success. She hadn’t been overly concerned then, thinking that with the time difference, perhaps Johnathon was sleeping, but as the day progressed and she still hadn’t heard anything from him, not even so much as a text, she was beginning to be concerned. Granted, she’d been in production meetings all damn day and hadn’t really been in a position to talk to Johnathon anyway, but that wasn’t doing anything right now to quell the cool feeling that was beginning to settle in the pit of her stomach.

She’d thought things were going well. They had been video calling each other at least once a day since Johnathon had left for Australia and texting whenever they got the chance in between their respective work commitments and the obstacle of the 9 hr time difference. As much as Caitriona was trying to keep a level head, there was no denying that there was a definite connection with the blond haired detective. So much so, that she found herself looking forward to his calls, checking her phone for his messages more often than she ordinarily would have. She scowled and eyed the object now laying innocently silent on the table.

Radio silence was definitely not the direction that she'd thought they were headed in, not when she considered the pattern that had quickly developed between them. The current quiet was disconcerting and provided the ideal opportunity for doubt to creep back into her mind. Had Johnathon changed his mind and had decided that she wasn’t what he was looking for? It was always a possibility. Over the course of the week, Johnathon had told her that his next case was going to be in New York. Yet another continent away from her, and the skeptical part of her mind had quickly determined that the trip to New York could easily be a convenient excuse to end something before it had even begun. For all Caitriona knew, his promise of returning could be nothing more than empty words. A shiver skittered across her shoulders, not wanting to think the worst of him, but inevitably doing it anyway. She hated this new side of herself, and cursed anyone, everything and the decisions in between. Trying to stop the fears was like trying to hold back the tide. She knew exactly where it was all coming from and yet she was still unable to stop it. That is a direct result when you are used to being disappointed all the time, her mind stated with stunning and painful clarity. Caitriona drew her long legs up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees, staring introspectively into the nothingness of her mind’s eye. Why would this time be any different? Why would he be any different?

She was about to further delve into the process of dissecting the toxic thoughts when the screen on her phone suddenly illuminated, vibrating immediately with an incoming text. The caller ID brought her instant relief. There were four messages all from Johnathon. He had apparently had been without phone service for an extended period time and was only now just receiving her voicemails and texts. She scowled at the last message which relayed that he was about to lose service again but that he would see her sometime on Saturday if she wasn’t busy.

She stopped and re read the message.

Saturday.

That was tomorrow.

The doubt was quietly shunted back to its dark corner for the moment, instead replaced by a gentle warmth that started in her stomach and worked its way out. If she wasn’t busy? Caitriona didn’t have any plans but any that she might have had would have been rapidly rescheduled or ignored.
completely. If Johnathon could fly half way around the world to see her, she would make damned certain that she was free.

Saturday.

Her face split into a brilliant smile.

Johnathon would be in Glasgow on Saturday.

To see her.

She would see him tomorrow.

For what seemed like the millionth time this week, Caitriona shook her head wondering how on earth she’d managed to navigate this particular emotional roller coaster as a teenager. It was taking everything she had now not to feel like she was going insane. She hated to say it, but maybe she was getting too old for this.

“Balfe!” Sam’s deep voice bounced around the walls as the door rattled with a heavy knock, “Are you in there Balfe?”

“You know I am.” She sighed and stood, opening the trailer door. Sam had watched her walk inside barely fifteen minutes. Unless she had developed some type of teleportation skill she was unaware of, then of course she was in here.

“You ready?”

“Ready for what?” Caitriona gave him a confused look, closing the door behind him.

“Ready to go for drinks tonight?” He grinned, fingers curling into fists and giving her two thumbs up, “Bit of a Friday night piss up before the real work starts on Monday.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“Come on now, you can not ditch on us Balfe. Everyone is waiting.”

Sam had been trying to convince her for the better part of two days to go out for an evening on the town. She had been stubbornly refusing him, so he had apparently recruited half a dozen or so other crew members to come along as well, hoping it would help encourage her to join in.

“I’m thinking about just having a quiet night at home Sam.” It wasn’t that she was deliberately trying to be anti-social, it she just didn’t feel like hanging out with Sam right now. They were friends, great friends, but lately it felt like Sam was just trying too hard to include her in his plans. Not that she didn’t appreciate the offer, but Caitriona wasn’t sure if it was because he was genuinely worried for her after the whole Tony thing, or if there was something else, something more related to his confession to her about how he felt and her subsequent rejection, even if it was well meant and as gentle as she could make it. A rejection it remained.

“Oh come on Balfe,” Sam cajoled, “Don’t be a kill joy. It’s Friday night.” He reached out, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder, looking up from under his brow with his best impression of a hopeful puppy dog waiting for a treat, that he could muster, “It’ll be fun. Just come out for bit? Aye?”

Caitriona hesitated a moment, clearly considering his request.then let out “Fine.” She said on a long breath, ignoring his victory smile. “But only for a few hours,” she warned, “then I’m going home.”
“For sure.” He agreed, grinning broadly at the chance to spend some more time with her, “See you out the front in fifteen for the cab?”

“Uh huh.” Her answer wasn’t at all convincing but true to her word she met the small group in the studio car park as requested. Squeezing into not one but two cabs, the group headed off towards one of their local haunts, a small bar, with a reasonably quiet atmosphere, that generally had a band playing most nights of the week. Caitriona didn’t mind the place, having been there a number of times before and after a few drinks, she reluctantly admitted that it hadn’t been such a bad idea to go out after all.

As the night had drawn on, the group had begun to thin out, some going home, some moving on to different venues for the remainder of the night. The hours ticked by, getting significantly later than she'd originally planned, finally leaving only herself, Sam and three other crew members. They’d talked and eaten dinner, drunk more than a few drinks, she’d even, against her better judgement, danced with Sam. More to stop him from continually asking for the remainder of the night than anything else. Though, Caitriona was fairly certain that what Sam considered dancing looked to the rest of the world like he was having some sort of seizure. She could honestly say that she had never met someone so fit, so athletically inclined and sports crazy and yet still be so uncoordinated on a simple dance floor.

Luckily, after enduring the unusual co-ordination of her co-star for three songs at least by her count, Caitriona had been able to hand him over to another member of their group. She preferred to sit on people watch anyway. In between the talking, the drinking, the eating, some more drinking, lots more drinking, she had periodically checked her phone, but of course, found no further messages from Johnathon.

This time however, there was none of the unhealthy panicked doubt of earlier. This time she knew that Johnathon was simply en route, probably fast asleep in an aircraft seat. She curled a hand around the cool glass on the table and lifted it and taking a long sip. Caitriona hadn’t expected him to be back so quickly, the unpredictable nature of his business making it difficult to form definite plans. The news that he was visiting Glasgow, albeit by way of a roundabout trip to New York, had been the best news she'd had all week. She set the glass back down on the table and ran her finger through the condensation on the glass surface, watching as it gathered into a droplet and trickled down the side of the glass.

Slow, she reminded herself.

Keep your head and take this slow.

Keeping a lid on her excitement was proving to be more difficult the longer she thought about it. Excitement and hope were a dangerous combination and she knew all too well what would be the consequence if it all went wrong. Consequences she hoped to avoid by being careful. Holding something back in reserve and being protective of her own well-being was the only way forward for her. It was problematic she knew. She wasn’t overly good at being cautious, but this time, after everything that had happened, she had to be. She was going to be sure this time, before she gave in, before she opened herself up, even if it meant she had to have one foot on the brake until she was certain it was safe.

This time, she was going to be sure.

“Balfe!” Sam slurred loudly as he sat down beside her with all the finesse of a bag of potatoes, his large frame bumping the table in the process causing the few empty glasses on its surface to rattle and rock dangerously back and forth.
“Sam.” She chastised, lifting her glass just in time to rescue it from disaster.

“Whatch doin all over here bys ye self?” He took a long draft from the large glass of beer in his hand, the foam sticking comically to his upper lip.

“Just sitting down for a bit.” She answered slowly, watching with some amusement as Sam attempted to place the glass he was drinking from onto the cardboard coaster on the table. It took three attempts and far more concentration than natural before he finally succeeded. For such a large man Sam’s ability to metabolise alcohol was pathetic and right now it was a wonder to Caitriona that he still had the capacity for speech. “Maybe it's time to call it a night Sam?”

“Nay.” He emitted a low burp that made Caitriona’s nose wrinkle as the smell of second hand beer wafted in her general direction, “Just getting started ye ken?” As if to demonstrate his point he lifted the half filled schooner with infinite care to his mouth and promptly drained it in several long swallows.

“Yes I can see that.” This time Caitriona leaned over and helped Sam put the glass back safely onto the table.

“Have nother drinks with me Cait!” He raised his hand and smiled towards the pretty young blond waitress, who predictably smiled one of those smiles entirely unrelated to the serving of beverages back at him.

“I think you’ve had enough Sam.” While Caitriona wasn’t exactly what you would class as sober, she certainly wasn’t one drink away from passing out like she suspected her co-star was.

Bloodshot blue eyes, half lidded in alcoholic stupor regarded her, “Naw, come on.” He hiccupped, “One more then we will go aye?”

One more turned into four more before they all left the bar. It was almost 2 AM by the time they managed to get a cab, Friday nights being extraordinarily busy and the wait time for a taxi was extensive. As it was, they had all crammed into one car to save waiting for a second. It meant the journey now twice as long as they had been forced to take the circuitous route in order to drop each member of their little party back to their respective homes.

As luck would have it, or not, her apartment was the second last of the designated stops, Sam's home being the only one further out. When the car finally pulled up at her address, she'd bid Sam good night and was about to head up to her apartment when suddenly the taxi door had whipped opened. Sam had staggered out and had promptly been violently ill in the gutter. An argument with the taxi driver, another drunken cajoling request from Sam, and 15 minutes later, Caitriona found herself bodily hauling her co-star up the stairs towards her apartment.

“Just four more steps.” Caitriona breathed, one arm wrapped around Sam’s bulk. Navigating the small staircase was more difficult than one could imagine standing side-by-side with a virtual dead weight that she was sure must weigh at least the proverbial fucktonne at a bare minimum. But what choice did she have? It was either help him up to her apartment or let him sleep on the sidewalk and since she really didn’t want to wake up to those headlines on the Internet, navigating the small stairway it was. “Now just lean there for a moment will you.” She propped him against the wall as she dug around in her purse for her keys.

“Not drunk ye ken. Just bit tired.” He slurred on a half grin, already starting to slide unsteadily down the wall.

“I ken you are going to be paying for this in the morning.” She shouldered open the door and
grabbed his arm, pulling him upright and staggering inside, making a beeline for the couch. Several wobbly and unbalanced steps later, the back of Sam's knees finally touched the cushioned edge of the seat. Caitriona bent, dropping his heavy weight onto the soft surface, “Thank Christ.” She said straightening and studying his prone form.

“Mmmm.” Sam’s head fell back against the headrest, his eyes heavy and already closing. Clearly he was going nowhere now. She retrieved a blanket from the hall cupboard returned, flicking opening the fabric and draping it over him. “Ye smell good Balfe.” He said, taking a deep breathe as Caitriona leaned over him to tuck in one edge of the blanket.

“And you are drunk.” She commented moved to the end of the couch, lifting Sam's legs up with a grunt and removing his shoes.

“Could ave worked.” He babbled drunkenly, "You and me, ye ken.” The words slurring as he pulled the blanket up around his chin.

“No.” Caitriona said quietly, “It wouldn’t have.” Sam never heard her answer. His eyes fluttered closed and a soft rhythmic snore started before the last syllable fell from her lips. She shook her head and turned, locking the door, turning out the light and the padded down the hall to her own bedroom. It wouldn’t have worked for a whole list of reasons. The biggest one being that she didn’t feel it. That thing that she couldn’t put her finger on. That thing that she was feeling when Johnathon was around, or just in her thoughts lately. Whatever that unidentifiable thing was, it wasn’t there with Sam.

Caitriona kicked off her shoes and headed for the shower. She felt sorry for Sam that it wasn’t. It was abundantly clear that he still wanted it to be. But it just wasn’t there. Not on her behalf. She’d be there for him as his friend always. That wasn't about to change, but Caitriona hoped, for his own sake, that Sam would figure out how move on and be happy. She turned off the shower and wrapped a large towel around her torso, tucking the edge over her breast as she leaned on the cabinet and brushed her teeth. Caitriona knew Sam was working on it. He’d dated enough women lately to give Caitriona that impression at least. She retrieved her pajamas and stepped into them then flicked off the bathroom light. Sometimes it was just moments tonight, when Sam said something or did something, that worried her that he wasn’t okay.

Caitriona turned the covers back, carefully placed her phone on the beside table, plugging it in to charge. She wasn’t sure what else she could do for Sam honestly. She wanted to help but she couldn’t force herself to feel anything more for him. All she could do, she supposed, was keep doing what she’d already been doing, as frustratingly helpless as that was. The rest was up to Sam. It wasn’t a reason for beginning a new relationship, but, if that were to happen in her life, then perhaps it would be that final nail that Sam was seriously starting to look to her, like he needed. Caitriona gave a small sigh and slipped under the covers, stretching out, her body warmth creating a comfortable pocket in the softness of her bed.

A relationship. She turned on her side, tucking one long arm under her pillow.

Was that what she was expecting?

Was she even ready for that?

Was Johnathon?

Tomorrow she may well be able to find out.

A soft smile curled the edges of her mouth.
Tomorrow.

She let out a long contented deep breath, slipping her hand from beneath the covers and snagging the phone from the beside.

Johnathon would be here tomorrow.

No, she corrected herself as the screen illuminated, displaying the clock.

He would be here today.

Today.

The smile broadened, today, in just a few hours in fact, Johnathon would touch down in Glasgow. She slid a finger across the screen, accessing her messages. She wasn’t excepting there to be any new messages from Johnathon, but she couldn’t help checking anyway. As predicted, her inbox was empty. Fingers moved swiftly across the smooth surface, a small ping sounding as she pressed send.

He wouldn’t receive the message until he landed, she gave a wry smile and put the phone down, snuggling into the covers, but as soon as he landed, it would be right there waiting for him.

Caitriona wondered, as her eyes drifted closed and her breathing began to even out, if he would take her up on her offer.

In the morning, she smiled as sleep finally claimed her, she would find out.
This was it

Johnathon flicked up the collar of his jacket and headed down to the lobby of the Raddison and stepped outside into the cold blustery morning drizzle of the Glasgow city centre. He was tired, exhausted actually. Between staying up late nights to talk to Caitriona, testifying during the day and then travelling for 24 hours straight, without so much as more than ten minutes of sleep, all in an effort to get to Glasgow as quickly as humanly possible, he felt more than a little drained. Still, he sniffed and settled into the seat of the Range Rover he’d managed to hire upon arrival, he was happy that he’d been able to fly into the city on such short notice. It had been an unexpected but welcomed development, even though it meant a lot more airtime for him, it also meant adding another 12 or so hours to the time he had available to him to spend in Glasgow.

Monday he would have to head to New York to begin work on a new set of cases. The rest of the team would meet him there, each of them making their own way, attending to their own families or other commitments in the short window between cases. While other team members, particularly those with young families, often rotated in and out of the active unit, as team leader, Johnathon didn’t have that luxury. It wasn’t really against any rule or policy, he didn’t have a family or any other real commitments so if his team was involved, Johnathon had to be there with them. It was just how he like to run the unit. He’d never felt comfortable being a satellite leader, only dropping in when he thought they needed him too. Not that his team couldn’t handle things without him, he just preferred to be an active member of the team, getting his hands as dirty as everyone else in the unit as it were. It meant a lot more time away, but lately that hadn’t really been a problem, more of a blessing than anything else out.

Until now.

Now, he actually had someone he wanted to be with and for the first time in a very long time, Johnathon almost wished that he didn’t have the responsibility and time pressures of another round of cases coming on so quickly. Still, he mused, as he reached back and buckled the seat belt across his chest, the mechanism sliding neatly into place with a soft click, New York wasn’t for another two days. Two days to as he pleased. He already had plans for today. He smiled and turned the key, stirring the engine into life. Today he only had one thing in mind. Or rather one person on his mind.

Caitriona.

He’d made a promise to her and he had no intention of breaking it. Even if it meant going without sleep, dealing with inconvenient time zones, sitting for endless hours on aircraft battling travel sickness, or crisscrossing the world in the hope of gaining a few additional hours with her. He had said he was coming back as soon as he could and he’d meant it. He had a small window between this case and the next and Johnathon was determined to make this happen. It hadn’t all gone as smoothly as he hoped. Through no fault of his own, he had lost three of those hard earned extra hours in delays and transfers. Finally he’d made it to Glasgow, booked into the hotel, had a quick shower and now, was headed back out again.

He reached into his pocket and slid out his phone. Opening the hard cover he picked out a folded piece of paper, kept safely tucked away, pressed flat against the dark screen. Caitriona’s address, scribed in a neat precise hand on piece of hotel stationery, along with the words, ‘In case you Are ever in Glasgow’, signed with a rather large C, complete with a small flourish on the up curve of her initial. It had been handed to him by the desk clerk as he had checked out of the hotel in the early hours of the morning prior to his flight. Johnathon smiled to himself, wondering just when
Caitriona had time to do that. In any case, he was infinitely glad that she had.

He was about to reverse out of the car park when a thought crossed his mind. He glanced at the phone a moment, privately debating if he should at least message Caitriona before showing up on her doorstep. Good manners strongly suggested that he should. Though, in her last message to him, Caitriona had been pretty insistent that she wanted to see him as soon as he arrived and got settled. In fact, he pondered as he recalled the exact wording of her message in his mind’s eye, Caitriona had specifically stated that she didn’t care what time it was, that Johnathon should make his way to her apartment as soon as he was able. She hadn’t known it, but in that simple little combination of characters on a screen, Caitriona had unwittingly given Johnathon the confirmation to something that he had been ruminating over all week. He had wondered if Caitriona had been feeling the same attraction that he’d sensed growing between them the more time they spent together. Even if a good deal of that time had been battling the tyranny of transcontinental distance. Just the thought of what might be brought a soft smile to his face and made the endless miles of sitting on aircraft and all the exhaustion he might have felt fall away, replaced with the muted excitement of anticipation of what the next few days might bring.

Still, confirmation message from Caitriona or not, Johnathon decided as he reached for his phone, he couldn’t just rock up at her doorstep without at least sending a message first. It just didn’t seem right. He shot off a message and waited a moment.

Nothing.

She could be still asleep, he reasoned and slowly reversed the car out of the assigned park, stopping in the middle of the empty laneway waiting a few moments for Caitriona’s reply. As it turned out, he waited ten minutes without a single hint of a sound from Caitriona. Johnathon maneuvered the car to one side and decided that calling Caitriona would be a better idea. Dialing her number, he rested the phone to his ear.

Voicemail.

Blonde brows furrowed and he stared at the screen a moment, slightly confused. He tried again with the same result. Voicemail. Johnathon let out a breath and tucked the phone into his pocket. Voicemail could mean any number of things. Not necessarily bad ones. Maybe a meeting. Not likely at this time of the morning and on a weekend no less. No, he decided, more than likely the culprit was that her phone had gone flat or had been left on silent.

It was easy enough to do. Hell, Johnathon had done that himself on many occasions, only discovering it by accident when checking the device sometime later and finding a bulging inbox of messages and missed calls. It had to be something simple like that he mused, dismissing the wisps of negative thoughts that had begun to swirl around his mind, threatening to coalesce and form into solid ideas. If Caitriona didn’t want to see him she would have said. Right? There was no reason for her to avoid talking to him. Right?

He gave a short nod to himself and gripped the wheel, considering his options. Press on with his plan to go to her or wait here, on the side of the road until Caitriona messaged him back, whenever that might be. Waiting didn’t seem overly appealing, not after the effort he’d gone to gain extra moments. Wasting them here seemed utterly pointless. Besides, he reasoned as he pulled back on the main road, following the GPS towards Caitriona’s apartment, he still had a 25 minute drive ahead of him. Maybe she’d text him on the way. Failing that, he could always apologise for not calling sooner if he needed to when he arrived. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a plan. Without warning, his stomach grumbled loudly. A tell-tale result of not having eaten since he’d inhaled a rather dubious looking sandwich at the Sydney airport more than 24 hours ago. Johnathon, despite
the frequency with he had do it, wasn’t the best flyer, in fact he was a downright terrible on aircraft, frequently afflicted by severe travel sickness. Eating was not something that he ever attempted while actually in the air, not that he felt hungry on planes anyway. Once on the ground however, it was entirely different situation and right now, he was positively ravenous. Lifting a finger and tapping on the GPS, he found a small café on the way that he hoped would be open. Showing up with food might help offset arriving unannounced. 15 minutes later, a large paper bag curled over at the top resting safely in the passenger seat beside him, emitting the delicious aroma of a freshly cooked hot breakfast, including an inordinately large coffee cup filled to the brim with the dark liquid and an accompanying selection of savoury crêpes that he thought Caitriona might enjoy, he was heading down the mostly empty streets, studiously following the path displayed on the small interior screen.

The streets here were similar to London, perhaps slightly wider, all lined with parked cars, obviously belonging to the residents that lived in the many apartments and small town houses that filled either side of the road, making its width similar to that of a one-way street. At least, Johnathon considered quietly as the vehicle slowly crawled along a suburban street, the roads here didn’t twist and turn and randomly terminate when you least expected it London style. The slightly robotic voice informed him that, according to the GPS route he was religiously following, Caitriona’s apartment should be no more than 100 metres down the road, on the left.

Slowly gliding the car to a stop, Johnathon cast an eye over the high set brick building and double checked the address. The last thing he wanted to do was to end up knocking on some stranger’s door and make a right fool of himself. Confirming that the address was correct, Johnathon reached over and picked up the paper bag. He shouldered the door open and stepped out to the damp morning air, the light drizzle leaving small dark splotches in his leather coat as he closed the door with a click and headed up the small paved path towards the apartment complex door. The long breath he blew out, did little to calm his nerves, the warm air clouding in front of him in the cold morning air. Johnathon was a highly trained detective and had been in more stressful situations than he knew what to do with, but this, the wondering if he was doing the right thing, the hoping everything would fall the way he wanted it to, the nagging concern that he was making another mistake, the growing hope that he wasn’t and the absolute unknown of what might lie ahead was all working together to make his mouth go dry and his heart pick up pace, gently thrumming away with anticipation in his chest.

Anticipation and hope.

A strong combination if there ever was one. Johnathon was almost glad that he had the rough rolled top of the paper bag to wrap his fingers around. He stopped at the security door, eyes running down the list of the numbers. No names as he expected, just numbers by floor and apartment. He was about to press the intercom button of Caitriona’s apartment when a tall man, obviously a fellow resident of the complex, pushed the door open. Johnathon politely stepped to one side, one strong hand catching the edge of the door, holding it open and giving the man a slight nod as he passed in front of him. Stepping inside, Johnathon let the door close behind him with a gentle click, then he turned and headed up the short flight of steps. According to the note she’d left him, Caitriona’s apartment was on the third floor, the last door at the end of the hall. His footsteps sounded loud in the quietly narrowway and he closed the distance, finally drawing to a halt in front of her door.

Apartment 314.

Johnathon stood for a moment in the quiet stillness, blue eyes regarded the door. He shifted his shoulders in his jacket, lifted his hand, stopping just short of the hard surface of the closed door.
This was it.

If he was ever going to turn around, now was the time.

If this was a mistake, now was the time to prevent it.

He shuffled on his feet and squeezed the top of the paper bag.

And if it wasn’t?

If he was ever going to know the answer to that, this was his chance.

He closed his eyes and took a deep clearing breath.

If this was ever going to be something he wanted, it had to start.

Blue eyes slowly opened, focused and clear.

There was only one way to know for sure.

Johnathon softly cleared his throat, sent a silent prayer skyward to whoever might be listening and with a last fleeting hesitation, fingers curled into a fist as he knocked.

Then waited.

This was it.
Caitriona jerked awake, her hand blindly searching for the offensively screaming object somewhere on her bedside table. “Fuck.” She cursed, fumbling and finally silencing the alarm she’d set on her phone. 4 am. Caitriona blinked slowly and rolled onto her back as she stretched out in the warm softness of the self created comforter cocoon she was currently safely ensconced in. The good weather of yesterday had turned, she reflected, her eyes straining in the dim light as she watched the gently falling rain trickle down the clear panes of glass. She lifted her head from the pillow and immediately regretted it. Her eyes closed reflexively against the pounding in her head. “Jesus,” She murmured, throwing an arm across her eyes, cursing whoever it was that had the idea to drink that last round or three of whiskey that she’d stupidly allowed herself to be talked into. She laid quietly for a few moments, waiting for her head to settle before. It wasn’t as accommodating as she wanted it to be though and Caitriona actually thought seriously about getting up and taking something for the persistent dull ache that lingered somewhere just behind her eyes. She didn't move though, finding the alluring warmth of the bed, far too much to overcome. Instead she let out a low sigh and turned on her side, wishing she hadn’t forgotten about the alarm, having set it earlier in the day for her usual wake up time for filming next week.

Still, she grinned, it wasn’t all bad. The early hour did happen to coincide with the landing time of a certain handsome Australian detective. Speaking of which, she lifted the phone into her eye line, squinting at the bright light as the screen illuminated. Johnathon should have landed by now. The flight was scheduled for 3 am. Finding no message from him, she decided to check his flight status online.

Shit.

Caitriona slowly dragged herself upright and scrubbed a hand across her eyes, blinking to clear the last remnants of sleep and re-read the information, making sure she hadn’t made a mistake. Three hours! Thoroughly disgruntled, Caitriona threw the phone onto the bed and leaned against the headboard, scowling. If the information on the website was correct, and she had no reason to think that it wasn’t, Johnathon wouldn’t even arrive in Glasgow until 6 at the very earliest. That completely dashed any ideas she might have had for an early morning rendezvous and a complete day together. Caitriona sighed loudly, given this new information she had little choice but to resign herself to the fact that she would probably not even see Johnathon until around mid-morning at best. Probably closer to lunch by the time, she figured, he landed and got himself sorted with the hotel and what not. Best laid plans, she snarked to herself silently, settling back down, pulling the warm blankets up over her shoulders, tucking her hand beneath her head. Another few hours of sleep might do her more harm than good, considering she was still half hung over. As to which half exactly that was, was currently still up for debate, she thought, yawning and closing her eyes.

It seemed like she’d only been asleep for mere minutes when for the second time that morning she was jerked out from a sound slumber. This time it was due to the insistent urging of one very large hand resting on her shoulder, shaking her with more force than she really needed.

“Balfe! Wake up will ye.” Sam’s voice bounced painfully around the inside of her head.

“Jesus, what?” She grouched groggily as she turned over rubbing her eyes, while her mind frantically tried to catch up with current events.
“Painkillers Balfe.” He said, slumping on the edge of her bed, cradling his head in his hands, “God please tell me you have some.”

“In the bathroom medicine cabinet.” She lifted a hand and pointed in the general direction of the bathroom, thankful that the sickening movement and loud obnoxious tones had ceased. She heard Sam take a step before he stopped as if running into an imaginary wall, the colour draining from his face, “Oh Christ...” The words barely escaped his lips, before he took off, darting across the room, hand over his mouth towards her bathroom. Caitriona’s nose screwed up in disgust as the sounds of violent retching reached her ears. Clearly Sam was also regretting that last round of whiskey right about now. Serve himself right, she mused behind closed eyes, half listening to the goings on in the bathroom and half debating with herself whether to get up and check if he was all right. The sound of the toilet flushing, followed by the heavy, somewhat disjointed footfall on the hardwood floor made the decision for her.

“I think I’m dying.” Sam muttered as he collapsed across the end of her bed, getting a growl and a small kick in the ribs as Caitriona was forced to pull her legs up, to save them being squashed. “Can you do it someplace else?” She glared at him then turned over, “Preferably quietly.”

“Harsh Balfe.” He slung an arm over his eyes and took a few deep breaths, “Very harsh.”

The scent of unwashed male, second hand smoke and day old alcohol tinged with the sharp undertones of vomit wafted her way, “Christ!” She lifted a hand to her nose and shot him an accusatory glare, “Is that you?”

His turned and sniffed his armpit, trying unsuccessfully to stop the resulting gagging sound. “Off!” She shoved a foot in his direction, outraged, “Now.”

“What!” Sam defended, only just having time to catch himself as he was unceremoniously unbalanced from the end of the bed by a well placed kick, plonking down heavily on his backside on the unforgiving surface of the hardwood floor, “Nothing I can do about it. I dinna have a spare set of clothes in my wallet you know.” He cradled his head piteously in his hands.

“Not my problem Heughan.” Caitriona flicked the covers back, still shielding her nose as she stood and headed towards the walk in robe, “If you weren’t utterly wasted to the point of immobility last night, this wouldn’t be an issue.” She grabbed a fresh towel from the stack and held it out towards him, “At least shower will you, before you pollute any more of my apartment.”

“Fine.” Sam grouched, grunting with effort as he hauled himself to his feet, waiting a moment for his to stop spinning as he straightened to his full height.

“And don’t make a mess in there either.” She warned, as Sam sulked passed, yanking the towel from her hand with a scowl. She’d shared a trailer with Sam for a time at the very beginning of their very first season and knew from experience that neat and tidy were not adjectives that could ever be applied to that man, let alone with the hang over hindrance of the minute. “I’m serious Sam.” Caitriona called over her shoulder as she piled back towards the softness and warmth of her bed.

“I’m serious Sam. Blah blah.”

Caitriona rolled her eyes as she heard Sam mimic her words sarcastically from the bathroom followed by the sound of the shower running. She flopped back down onto the soft surface of the bed, thankful for the comfort and warmth. Honestly, Sam could be such a man child. It could be charming at times, but it did tend to get old pretty darn quickly too. She tugged the covers up over her shoulders, tucking her hands under her chin and eyeing the dim early morning light that was only just now beginning to filter through her bedroom window. The inky blackness of night was still stubbornly holding on, trying fruitlessly to prevent the coming of the day. A soft smile split her face thinking about what the later hour might have brought her closer to.

Johnathon.

Hopefully sooner rather than later, providing the airline industry did its bit and cut out the delaying bullshit of earlier. Actually, she thought, sitting up and hunting around in the bed for her phone, now was as good as anytime to check his flight status again. “Where in the fuck...” She cursed, rifling through the covers and lifting pillows. She was sure she’d dropped the thing in bed beside her last night. Frustrated, she dragged herself out of bed, and began searching in earnest, effectively
stripping the bed and shaking each blanket, sheet and pillow in an effort to find the elusive device. “Balfe?” Sam reappeared, towel wrapped around his waist, water still dripping from his damp idiotically scruffed up hair, “Can I throw these in the washing machine.” He screwed up his nose, holding the offending objects away from him, “Canna stand putting them on right now.” “Uh huh.” Caitriona said absently as she straightened, her hands on her hips, surrounded by a rough heap of bedding now laying haphazardly on the floor. Sam watched her a moment and debated asking her what in the hell she was doing, but the impending urgency to rid himself of his clothes that reeked like something at died in them, won out and he headed towards the small laundry room without further comment.

Caitriona crouched down and began checking the small space between mattress and beside table. “There you are you little bastard.” She reached out a long arm, finally snagged the device, still not entirely certain how the devil the thing managed to find its way down there in the first place. Caitriona pressed the home button, expecting to see the screen instantly light, instead she was greeted by nothing but an empty black. She shook her head and wondered what else was going to go wrong in the next five minutes. She hoped the wretched thing was just flat. She had meant to plug it back in after she’d last used it to check on Johnathon’s flight. Hopefully lack of power was the problem and the thing wasn’t irreparably broken from its little expedition from bed to floor during the night.

She plugged the cable in and set the phone down, letting out a small breathe of relief as the red charging light illuminated. That was a good start at least, she mused, knowing it would take a few minutes of charging before she could even attempt to power it on. While she waited, Caitriona decided that since there was absolutely no way she’d be going back to bed now, not with her bedding looking like it was the survivor of a natural disaster, that a hot shower might help perk her up a bit and help wash away the fog of last night.

“Hey Caitriona?” Sam called from somewhere down the hall as she headed into the bathroom, “Which one is the washing machine again.” “Man child,” She murmured. “What?” “The one on the right.” Caitriona called back and stepped into the shower, letting out a contented breath as the streams of hot water hit her. Resting a hand on the wall and closing her eyes, her head lulled forward, long hair falling around her shoulders as the heat seeped into her skin. It felt better than good and for a long series of moments she just luxuriated in the feeling of it, before she got down to the business of getting clean. Body scrubbed and hair washed, she reveled in the warm relaxed feeling for just a bit longer before she reluctantly twisted the tap and shut the heated water off. Wrapping a towel around herself and tucking the edge across her breasts, she padded quietly back into the bedroom, intent on solving the current phone problem. She bent over and retrieved it from the bedside, then tentatively pressed the power button, happy when screen instantly turned brilliant white and began loading its start-up routine. A lone droplet from her damp hair dripped onto the screen as she waited. Caitriona was just brushing it away with the pad of her thumb when the tell-tale vibration of an avalanche of incoming messages almost made her drop the thing. As it was, she barely had time to get a secure grip on its edge to stop another unplanned excursion to the hardwood floor.

A broad smile split her face as she recognising the sender. Tucking several damp strands of dark hair behind an ear, Caitriona lifted the phone and began listening to the messages Johnathon had left on her voicemail. She was half way through the very first message when she was vaguely aware of the sound of a knock on her front door.

“I’ll get it.” Sam’s voice floated back to her, not overly paying him much attention, her thoughts firmly elsewhere. In one ear, she could the gentle deep voice of Johnathon, quietly informing her that he was on his way to her apartment and in the other, she could hear the mechanical clicking and rattling’s of the locks opening on her front door.

It was at this point her mind connected the two and her stomach dropped. “No. Sam. Wait.” Caitriona pelted down the hallway, skidding to a halt as she watched the door
issue inward. “Fuck.” She breathed as she stood, wrapped in nothing more than a towel, wet hair dripping down her back, caught between being ecstatically happy to see Johnathon and simultaneously wanting the floor to somehow open and swallow her up.

Clear blue eyes flicked back and forth from Sam’s half naked form standing in her doorway to her own. One neat blonde eye brow arched in question as Johnathon’s gaze finally settled on her face. “Oh, you ordered breakfast?” Sam tossed over his shoulder at her, completely oblivious to situation unraveling before him, “Good thinking love.” He helpfully commented as he leaned forward and took the bag from Johnathon’s hand, “I’ll even pay.” Sam turned and headed towards the lounge, his wallet and phone laying on the coffee table, an awkward stunned silence descending around them.

Caitriona swallowed, trying to ignore the dreadful sinking feeling in her stomach and the pounding in her ears as she gathered her scattered wits, hoping to god things didn’t look as bad as she seriously thought they did. “Hi.” She said tentatively, taking the last few steps and drawing level with the door opening, leaning on the frame for support, almost afraid to saying anything else in case it made the situation worse. Though at this point, she was beginning to think that probably wasn’t possible.

“Hello Caitriona.” Johnathon’s voice was casually calm. Whatever she might have imagined his reaction to be, this was not it. Accusations, anger, even blame perhaps, anything but calm. He had to be thinking what she worried he was. She would have if she had of been him. Given the severely incriminating visual information, how could he not? Regardless of however innocent the actual situation might have been.

“Should I come back later?” He asked rather conversationally, his deep voice, though soft, almost seemed to echo in the starkly empty hallway.

“No.” Caitriona blurted, her blue eyes frantically searching his, “Don’t go just..” Caitriona stopped, all too aware of Sam’s curious gaze now boring into her back. No doubt there would be questions to answer from there later as well, but right now, all she wanted to do was get somewhere, anywhere that wasn’t quite so public and explain.

Explain to Johnathon before it was too late. The hallway of her apartment building was not the place to have that discussion. Particularly not dressed in a bath towel that barely went to her knees. “Don’t go. Could you,” Caitriona shook her head, trying to reorder her chaotic thoughts into some semblance of a coherent sentence, “I mean, would you like to come in? So we can at least talk? In private?” Her voice wavered as she searched his face, “Please?” She opened the door wider, hoping to Christ that he would accept the offer. The seconds seemed to stretch into an eternity before Caitriona saw his fair head give the slightest of nods and he began to move, crossing in front of her as he stepped inside the apartment. “Everything alright Cait?” Sam called after her. Watching, utterly confused as Caitriona quietly ushered the tall stranger down the short hallway towards her bedroom.

“It’s fine Sam.” She answered, in a tone that left no uncertainty whatsoever that now was not the time for Sam Heughan to stick his nose into her business. In any case, Sam never got the chance, Caitriona swinging the bedroom door closed behind her with a soft clock. She turned to face Johnathon, who was standing patiently in the centre of the room. She nibbled her lip nervously and pushed of the door stepping towards him then cringing as as her eyes fell on the crumpled upturned pile of bedding, looking every bit as disastrously incriminating as the scene she’d just shut outside and knowing full well that Johnathon would have seen it as he entered the room.

Christ.

Of all the ways she thought this day might have gone, none of them had been like this. Her heart was utterly thundering in her chest as she took another step towards him, apologetic blue eyes lifting to his, “It isn’t what it looks like.” She lifted her hands in front of her, “I swear Johnathon. Sam is my costar. I had drinks with everyone from work last night and Sam was too drunk to make it home. So I said he could sleep here on the couch.” The words spilled out in a breathless rush, “Your flight was delayed and Sam reeked, so I made him shower and he is
washing his clothes. Then my phone went flat,” She gesticulated wildly towards the pile of bedding as she tried desperately to explain, “And then I lost the thing in the bed, which meant I had to tear the bed apart looking for it so. I figured I would have a shower and that’s how I ended up like this.” She pointed to the towel, her face flaming as she realised the picture she was presenting. "Sam slept on the couch, passed out really. I know it looks bad," She finished, running a shaky hand through her hair, "But it's not at all what it looks like it."

“Caitriona?” His voice was soft and deep and drifted down through her chaotic thoughts, as he closed the distance between them, warm hands reaching out and settling on her forearms, “Breathe.”

Her heart felt like it was beating somewhere in her throat as Caitriona slowly took a breath and then another, gradually steadying herself on what felt like very uncertain ground that could fall out from beneath her feet at any time. “I know how this looks.” She tried again, trying subdue her characteristic panic babble, “I do. We’re both in towels and the bed looks like,” She stopped and shook her head, “I wouldn’t blame you for thinking it is exactly how it looks.” She glanced down at her feet and let out a frustrated breath. Explaining the truth was proving to be far harder than any lie she could have manufactured. "It's not what it looks like, but," She swallowed loudly and hoped that the tears that had been threatening to fall held off for a just few moments longer, "I'll understand if you need to go." She swallowed loudly, focusing on the floor, unable to look at him knowing this was probably it. And worse, the whole cluster fuck was entirely her own doing. If only she had not gone out last night. If only she had sent Sam home. If only she had checked her messages sooner.

“Caitriona?” Johnathon called quietly, interrupting her self flagellation ducking his head and waiting for her to meet his gaze, "Co-star?"

“Co-star.” She nodded, "Just co-star. Nothing more." She looked up at him, “I promise.” Meaning every single syllable with a definiteness that she wasn't sure she’d ever voiced before. “Is there any way,” She asked after long series of moments, taking the fact that he was he still standing here with her as a good sign, “Any way at all, that we could just erase the last few minutes and start this day over?”

Blue eyes locked with her own, one corner of his handsome mouth twitched into a soft smile. He didn’t answer her but instead slowly leaned in, stopping close enough for her to feel the gentle warmth of his breath on cheek, studying her eyes at very close distance, one hand lifting to gently cup her cheek before his mouth found hers, kissing her soft and slow. Caitriona let out a small sigh as her eyes closed and she leaned into him, a wave of utter relief flooding through her, almost taking her to her knees.

“Hello Caitriona.” He murmured against her lips slowly drawing the kiss to a gentle close then resting his forehead against hers.

“Hello Johnathon.” She breathed from behind closed eyes, wrapping her arms around the solid security of his shoulders and pulling him into a tight hug, letting the sheer feel of him fill her senses and calm her frazzled nerves.

Strong arms surrounded her and for the moment, everything that had come before didn't matter. The rest of world fell away, leaving just the two of them, quietly holding each other in the silence of the room.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry this one took so long to post. Technical issues. Next Chapter should be
out in around three or so weeks.
Think it's time Johnathon and Caitriona made themselves some rules cause they're a gonna need them if they are to make this work I think. What do you all think? :)

Cheers everyone and have a great day.
The door clicked shut, leaving him standing, leaning on the kitchen counter, staring at the closed surface. What the fuck as going on! Who the hell was that guy and more importantly, what the hell was he to Caitriona? Sam lifted a large hand, massaging his temples, searching his memory for any recollection of the strange man that was worryingly, currently residing in Caitriona’s bedroom. Drawing nothing but blanks, he stalked over the couch and plonked down heavily, cradling his aching head.

This wasn’t going the way it was supposed to.

At all.

Not that he’d really had a specific plan, but anytime Sam found himself alone with Caitriona was a good one, particularly given that lately, opportunities for such encounters had been exceedingly rare. Part of it was him, he knew, but a larger part had been Caitriona. She hadn’t been her usual social self and Sam hadn’t wanted to push it. Last night, the old Caitriona had been starting to show signs of reappearing. She’d been relaxed, he’d thought, no longer haunted by the memory of that prick and how it had all shaken out in the end. The night had been a good one and this morning, Caitriona’s familiar chiding aside, had continued that trend. He felt that connection between them that had been dampened in recent weeks.

Sam leaned back, letting his head rest against the cushions, staring at the spackled white ceiling. Someone else, a total stranger for that matter, suddenly being thrust into the mix had not only complicated matters, but Sam found it as confusing as hell and entirely uncomfortable. Maybe the guy was some relative that Sam hadn’t met yet or, his brows contracted, maybe he’s one of her modelling friends. God only knew they were always popping up here and there when one least expected it.

No, he decided after a few moments of introspection. The guy didn’t seem like a model to him. Sam wasn’t sure why exactly. It something in the way the man carried himself, coupled with something in the way Johnathon had looked at him, almost as if he had been silently appraising the situation. Almost academic in nature, similar to the way Sam imagined mathematicians looked at some complex problem or another, trying to figure a solution.

Johnathon.

The name rattled around in Sam's head. He was positively sure he’d never heard Caitriona ever mention that name to him. Not in the long hours on set, not in the mind numbingly boredom of international flights, not even during the days of never ending press tours, nor in the half a dozen times he’d met her family or the positive myriad of friends and acquaintances that she had.

Not once had she ever mentioned a Johnathon to him.

Maybe he was one of Tony’s friends. His mind seized on that idea. Probably come over here to try and convince her to come back. “Good fucking luck with that,” he spat out loud, knowing full well exactly what Caitriona thought of Tony now. She hadn’t been entirely forth coming but what she had said, had told Sam all he needed to know. It was never happening. Strange visitor or not. In fact, if this man turned out to be one of Tony’s flunkies then Sam fully expected he wouldn’t be here long. He sat up and studied the closed bedroom door, with a private gleeful air of anticipation.
Any minute now. Caitriona would shunt this idiot to the curb and it would be situation normal. Things would go back to the way they were. They would start filming and they would fall into their normal pattern. 18hr days together, a good amount of offset time together. Things would stabilise and with any luck, if he could just keep his shit together, maybe Caitriona would change her mind about them.

That couldn’t happen while Mr Unknown was still here however. The longer Sam waited for that door to open, the more doubts began to manifest. Caitriona should have kicked him out by now. The more Sam thought about it, the more convinced Sam became that this guy didn’t look like one of Tony’s normal crowd. He was too, Sam’s mind tried to put his finger on the word and failed. He almost wanted to say manly but was strangely reluctant to do so.

Whatever it was, Sam wasn’t impressed.

He shot a dark glance to the closed bedroom door. He wasn’t much impressed with being shut out either, no matter who the unidentified party was. What the hell was Caitriona thinking, taking him in there?

Alone!

It was just stupid as far as Sam was concerned. Stupid, annoying, confusing and frustrating. He stood up, hands lightly clenched by his side as he considered his next move. He couldn’t just sit here. The guy could be a murderer or drug dealer or something. His mind whirled, going from one extreme to the other, fueled by the unknown and a possessive jealous streak a mile wide hiding quietly under the harmless guise of friendship.

Friends were supposed to look after friends and if Sam was sure of nothing else, he was at least certain that some level of a close friendship still existed between them. Surely that fact alone gave him checking in privileges. His mind debated that idea for several long seconds, teetering on the brink between keeping out of it and not, interrupting and not. He knew Caitriona probably wouldn’t want him to, but since when did she know everything good for her.

With a nod of his head and significantly aided by the urgings of curiosity, protectiveness and a large helping veiled jealousy, Sam walked down the hall, deliberately keeping his footfall as quiet as possible, stopping and standing completely still. He could still turn around, he supposed, accepting the small possibility that he might be jumping the gun. Sam didn’t know much about the act of murdering someone but he thought it wouldn’t be that easy to do completely silently. Particularly not Caitriona. He’d heard her scream on set and had found she had quite the set of lungs on her. Still, he let out a long breathe, Caitriona may well have said she was fine, but that was at least five minutes ago. He stared at the wooden barrier separating him from the woman he cared about. Anything could have happened since then. Sam held his breath and listened carefully. He could just make out the soft tones of their muted voices. Not raised, but not quite loud enough to be able to accurately hear enough to understand what they were saying. It was infuriating, he scowled and privately debated again whether he should turn around and go back to the lounge, but his large feet remained still, glued to the spot, acutely aware that hushed voices were now ominously quiet.

That did it.

Sam lifted a hand and knocked loudly, barely waiting a scant few seconds before he gripped the brass handle and pushed open the door urgently. “Cait, everything o-” He suddenly stopped short, his mind still reeling, frantically trying to make sense of the image before him. Caitriona was leaning into the tall man, her slender arms wrapped securely around his neck, soundly kissing him. Sam didn’t quite know where to look as their hands fell from each other. The realisation that their
moment had been interrupted and was no longer private.

“Sam! Jesus!” Caitriona yelped, slightly startled, a red hint of a blush creeping up her neck as she took a step away from Johnathon. “What do you want?” She said shortly, after gathering her scattered wits and clearing her throat.

“Nothing.” Came the unrepentant reply, as Sam eyed Johnathon, “Just making sure you were okay.” He was a physically big human being and was generally used to people backing away when he stood to his full height and gave them the look he was currently shooting on full beam Johnathon’s way. He was almost daring the tall blond man to look away first and was surprised when he didn't.

“For the third time Sam,” Caitriona enunciated clearly, her own eyes snapping at warning at him, “I’m fine.” She stepped in front of Johnathon, fully aware of the conversation shooting back and forth silently between the two men. She reached for the edge of the door, half pushing Sam back through the door and sending an apologetic look over her shoulder to Johnathon, whose eyes instantly dropped and found hers before she turned to deal with Sam.

“Cait. Wait.” Sam protested pushing back against the door, “Who the hell is that?” He ground out from between clenched teeth, not at all happy at being dismissed so easily yet again. Even less so, given what he’d just walked in on.

“A friend.”

“A friend?” Sam looked skeptically from Caitriona to Johnathon, “A friend from where?”

“Look,” Caitriona hissed, leaning in close to him and lowering her voice, “I’m fine. Everyone is fine. He is a friend and the rest,” She paused, blue eyes snapping, “isn’t your business.” She tugged on the towel, readjusting the folded edges and preventing it from slipping lower, “Just go back to the lounge will you.” With that Caitriona turned on her heel and started to push the door shut, “And for god’s sake, get some clothes on.” The door closed with a soft click, leaving Sam once more standing alone in the hallway.

A friend? A friend no one had heard of. He just walks in and gets a greeting like that? Pretty fucking close friend. How had he now known about this? He and Caitriona talked often, almost every day in fact. Particularly over this last week when they were gearing up for a new season. To suddenly have a seemingly random bloke show up, at Caitriona’s apartment door no less, made absolutely no sense to him. Why had Caitriona not said something? Even something in passing? While Sam had accepted the decision when Caitriona had said she only wanted friendship from him, he hadn’t completely given up on the idea that someday, somehow, she might want something more. Caitriona hadn’t said she was seeing someone else and the lack of such as admission had been unwittingly feeding his hopefulness. He almost wished he wasn’t like that, wasn’t so optimistic, that he could just flick some magical switch and turn that feeling off. He had tried. Lord knew, he’d tried. He’d tried seeing other women, he'd tried getting involved in various charity gigs, he'd tried working out more, spending an inordinate amount of time at the gym, all in an effort to distract himself.

Sometimes it worked, and sometimes, like this morning, when it had just been the two of them, it failed epically. Reigniting that thought that maybe Caitriona would change her mind. That he hadn’t lost her completely. That maybe she’d finally see what had been in front of her the entire time. His hands clenched, fingers balling into a tight fist. The image of the Johnathon and Caitriona together in that room, flashed across the back of his eyes. His hopes shattering a little more each time it replayed in his mind’s eye. The washing machine beeped as it finished its cycle, gratefully drawing Sam's attention, even if only for a for seconds. “Get some clothes on?” Sam mumbled as he threw the damp, though now clean clothing from one machine to the other, “Get some clothes on. Says the woman prancing around in nothing but a towel.” He slammed the dryer closed, hard enough to make the machine shake on its rubber footings. Sam let out a frustrated breath. He didn’t like not knowing what was going on with her. He skulked back to the kitchen. Maybe he should just leave. Leave the whole thing behind.
All of it.

Glasgow.

Acting.

Caitriona.

The lot.

He’d thought about ending Outlander, truly he had, in those dark moments after Caitriona had turned him down. He had thought about leaving and moving completely on, to hell with all of it. He hadn’t though, stubbornly determined, to focus instead from that day to now on just being her friend. To be there for her whenever she needed him. To make sure that she was doing okay. He’d thought he’d been doing a good job. Giving her the time and space he thought she had needed but still including her whenever could. He’d known she’d acted strong. Anyone with eyes had seen that the breakup with Tony had taken its pound of flesh and left behind a good serving of regret. He shot look back at the closed door. Clearly she was over all that now. “Nice of her to tell me.” He mumbled.

That was the worst of it.

The stinging feeling that came with thinking that whatever this was, between her and Johnathon, whether it be friend, fuckbuddy or whatever he was and whatever Caitriona was doing, she evidently didn’t think enough of Sam to at least tell him about it. Not even in passing word or hint of an idea. Nothing. Sam sat down at the kitchen counter and picked up one of the warm packages, sniffing it.

Breakfast.

He shook his head disgustedly and sent another dark thought Johnathon’s way. Shows up, looking good and bringing her breakfast.

Fucker.

Sam peeled back one corner of the wrapping. It was exactly the type of food that Caitriona would like. “Sneaky bastard.” He mumbled then considered his next action. Without a single hint of remorse, he shrugged and took a healthy bite of the savoury pastry. No point in being hung over, pissed off and hungry. Besides what else could he do.

He thought about going and checking on Caitriona again, but the look in her eyes as she’d kicked him outside last time was enough to make him decided against it. That, and seeing Caitriona kissing Johnathon once was bad enough. He wasn't ready to witness that again anytime soon.

Shock, he decided as he swallowed one large bite then took another. Unexpected shock. He hadn’t thought that Caitriona would be alone for any great length of time, but he had at least thought that he had a small window into her life. That she had a let him in. That he’d know if she was looking to begin a relationship again. It had knocked him off centre to discover that that was not the case.

He looked down the hallway, door still closed and quiet then threw the food down on the counter as a wave of nausea washed over him. The realisation that Caitriona may be involved with someone sent his stomach churning and a wave of nausea crashing over him.

He didn’t think she was anywhere near ready for anything like this.

No.
A situation like this demanded one thing, he groused. As soon as Caitriona was alone, a good talk was in order. Jumping headfirst into who knows what, with who knows who, seemed like a spectacularly bad decision to Sam. Strong brows knit as he flexed his hands on the counter top. As soon as she came out of that bedroom, one way or the other, Sam was going to find out what the hell was going on.

Before it was too late and Caitriona did something that she’d regret.

Again.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up - Johnathon and Caitriona on the other side of the door. :)
Caitriona buttoned the last few holes of her shirt and padded quietly back into the bedroom, a pair of flat shoes hanging loosely from one hand. Johnathon was standing, his back to her, hands tucked into his pants pockets as he surveyed the street below. She smiled softly to herself at Johnathon’s obvious idea of courtesy, having politely turned his back when she had suggested that before they do anything else, she should at least change into something more than a towel. It apparently hadn’t mattered that she’d been well out of his view anyway, tucked away in the semi-privacy of her walk-in robe.

“Stopped raining?” She asked quietly as she sat down on the corner of the bed and lifted a long jean covered leg, sliding one foot into her shoe.

“Not yet.” Johnathon turned at the sound of her voice, “Only a drizzle though. Not so bad.” “Typical Scottish weather.” Caitriona commented slipping the last strap onto her heel, then moving to stand beside him, bending slightly to look out the window, making her own assessment of the conditions outside, “Drizzly and cold.” She turned her head to regard him, “Not very welcoming is it? Between the weather and what happened this morning, you’re never going to want to come back.” Caitriona kept her tone light, but had no such luck silencing the concern lurking in the back of her mind. She knew she was probably just being overly sensitive, and Johnathon’s earlier warm hug and the accompanying kiss has gone a long way towards allaying some of those fears but Sam’s second interruption hadn’t exactly helped. His persistent interruptions kept resuscitating situations that Caitriona was working hard to kill off. For his part, Johnathon had been politely gentlemanly about it, all things considered, but Caitriona had learned the hard way that just because things seemed okay on the surface, didn’t necessarily make it so deep down. She’d been burned by that particular stick in the past.

“I don’t mind cold and rainy,” Johnathon commented as he straightened and turned, leaning slightly on the sill of the window, “One of my favourite things actually.”

“Tick for inclement weather,” Caitriona made a motion with her index finger and gave him a half smile, “And the rest?” Came the casually nonchalant question, not wanting Johnathon to know about her private insecurity that she wished she didn’t have, but also desperately wanting, no, needing him to be honest with her. An honesty Caitriona wasn’t entirely sure she was ready to hear. There was no way to be one hundred percent certain, but anyone with an ounce of intelligence was smart enough to know that anyone presented with a half naked man in the appearing from behind an opened door of the woman you had romantic inclinations towards, wasn’t the best way to begin anything, let alone what Caitriona hoped might be a relationship. It was worse than bad. It was about as horribly horrendous as anything she could have imagined. Caitriona looked up at him, “I know how this morning looked. I don’t -" Her voice trailed off. She stopped and shook her head, lifting a hand and massaging her brow, “God, I’m not explaining this very well.” Her hand dropped to her thigh in frustration, “I know you've said that it's okay but.. I guess, I’d rather just know now if things..if you.. if we.. aren't okay. I don't want think things are all good and then have this morning come back and kick us in the ass later.” She'd said us, but she’d really meant me. Caitriona had first hand experience of this very thing. A past that was littered with instance after instance where old blame that she’d thought was dead and buried had come back. An unexploded ordinance secretly kept. The devastating evidence of some past indiscretion or another, secreted away to be rolled out and aimed squarely at her, where and when it could inflict the most damage. Even if facing the truth was terrifying. Even if it meant Johnathon would leave. If they were starting out on shaky ground, she’d rather face it now before she was in
too deep. Right now leaving was easy. The longer he stayed, the more she felt the pull of attraction towards him, the closer they became, the harder it would be to leave unscathed. “I know it’s hard to believe” She continued, mentally squaring her shoulders, “that it isn’t what it looked like. We don’t really know each other and you can’t be expected to just believe me like that,” She clicked her fingers, the noise loud in the quiet room, “I get that. Truly, I do and,” She swallowed, the sound seemingly so loud to her that Caitriona was sure Johnathon would hear it, “I’ll understand if you want to go.”

He studied her a moment, clearly thinking about his answer and just how much of it he should tell her. “In those first few seconds,” He finally said, “I thought about leaving.” Caitriona felt her stomach drop, the icy touch of regret starting in the pit of her stomach as all her fears came rushing towards her. You wanted the truth Caitriona, her mind warned, get ready for it now.

“I didn't leave though.” Johnathon continued, “And not because you asked me not to either.” He saw the flicker of surprise dart across her expressive face, “I didn’t leave because I wanted to stay. To hear you out.” He held her gaze, his voice soft and serious, trying to be entirely honest with an openness that wasn’t at all natural to him, “You told me the truth.” Blond brows arched slightly in question, blue eyes watching her intently, “Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s good enough for me.” Johnathon’s face lightened as he reached for Caitriona's hand, gently threading his fingers between hers, “It wasn’t exactly how I planned to say hello, but,” He gave her a soft smile, “it’s not turning out too badly.”

She searched his eyes, hunting for any indication of a disparity between what he was saying and what she thought he might be feeling. She been looked in the eyes and lied to before. If Johnathon was lying now, there wasn’t the slightest hint of it in the blue eyes watching her. Could it really be that he actually had let it go and he was genuinely telling her the truth. “Are you absolutely sure Johnathon?”

“I am.” There was no denying that seeing a half naked man in her doorway, had set Johnathon on his heels but he wasn’t about to lie about it. Not to anyone, including himself or Caitriona. In that fleeting moment when the door had opened and revealed her co-star, his mind had been racing, bouncing back and forth, trying to reconcile the Caitriona he had spent all week talking to and the dreadful thought that it all been a lie. That Caitriona was already involved with someone. That Johnathon had been used, that Caitriona wasn’t who he’d thought she was.

But when he’d dared to look, really look into those blue eyes of hers, Johnathon was sure he’d seen something else. Not innocence and not guilt, just a silent plea to listen. Maybe in time it would prove to be one of the worst decisions of his life and a mistake from which there would be no recovery, but there was something there in those deep pools of blue that Johnathon just couldn’t ignore. The beautiful face watching him was decorated with the same look now. It made Johnathon wonder just how badly she had been treated and which asshole in her past was responsible for it.

“It’s alright Caitriona.” His voice seemed to deepen and soften around the edges, the gentle certainty reaching down inside Caitriona and warming her from her belly out, “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to stay.”

Caitriona felt the wave of relief hit her. Warm hand holding hers, quietly steadying her as she let out a long breathe and slowly nodded, “I’m sorry. I just-” She paused, brows draw tightly together as she ran her fingers along his much longer ones, studying them silently while she again tried to articulate what she felt.
“I know.” Johnathon said softly, saving her from any further explanation and letting the world settle around them. Caitriona looked up at him, seeing familiar understanding in his deep blue eyes.

He did know, Caitriona realised, exactly what it felt like to have something look one way when it was in fact the direct opposite. While some of the more intricate details had yet to be revealed to her, Johnathon had told her enough about his recent past relationship, a rather serious one by all accounts, and the accusation that he claimed he was entirely innocent of. Lack of belief had torn that relationship apart. Leaving had been the only option available to him, once trust had been broken. This morning, he hadn’t left. He was standing right here. With her. Maybe that was evidence enough, at least for the moment, that maybe, just maybe, he was different.

“I’m glad you stayed,” She said quietly, a decision made. If it all came back to bite, then she’d deal with that.

Somehow.

Johnathon opened his mouth to answer but instead a low grumble sounded, loud enough to make both of them looked down at the offending body part, “Sorry.” Johnathon smiled sheepishly and lifted a hand to pat his midriff, as if touching it would magically silence its vocal objection. The tension broken, Caitriona gave a small laugh, “Come on,” She tightened her fingers around his and gently tugged his hand, “Let’s get you some food before you pass out on me.” Caitriona started towards the door, “Is it alright if we head out to get it though, I don’t have a great deal in the fridge.” She shot him another apologetic look, “I haven’t had time to do grocery shopping this week.”

There. That was one reason for getting out of the place. The other was that she just didn’t want to have Sam sticking his unwelcome head into situations that really were none of his business. “The car is right outside,” Johnathon nodded amiably, “The bag I brought with me had some food in it but it’s probably cold by now. I’m game for another automotive adventure if you are?”

She smiled broadly, “I’m in.” Meaning that in more ways than one, Caitriona reached out and swung open the door. She headed silently down the narrow hall, Johnathon presence warm at her back, as they walked through to the kitchen finding, Sam, who was gratefully now clothed, just finishing off the last of the Johnathon’s food that he had thoughtfully arrived with. Caitriona contemplated for a moment, not formally introducing the two men to each other, or speaking to Sam at all, but the good manners instilled her from birth, wouldn’t allow it. Squaring her shoulders and hoping to Christ that Sam, just this once, wouldn’t act ridiculous, she drew Johnathon close to her.

“Everything okay Caitriona?” Sam straightened to his full height, eyes flicking from Johnathon to Caitriona, the obvious question hanging in the air as they entered the kitchen.

“Everything is more than fine.” She greeted him calmly, ignoring the accusatory look on his face, “Sam, this is Johnathon.” She waited a moment, flicking her co-star an imploring glance to not make things any more awkward than they already felt, “My friend.”

Sam eyed the tall man dubiously, then dusted off his hands and half stood, leaning over the island counter and offering Johnathon his outstretched hand.

“Co-star and Caitriona’s good friend,” Sam announced, heavy emphasis on the ‘good’, being sure to grip the strong hand harder than strictly necessary before he let it go, “What brings you to Glasgow Johnathon?”
“Stop over. On my way to New York. For work.” Johnathon’s blue eyes glanced Caitriona’s way, the quiet look in them letting her know exactly what he was doing. He didn’t care if Sam Heughan was a good friend of Caitriona or not. Johnathon had no desire or reason to share anything private about Caitriona, or himself for that matter. Anything Caitriona wanted Sam to know, she’d tell him, Johnathon reasoned.

“New York?” Eyes narrowed almost to slits as Sam regarded the blond man, not at all comfortable with the looks passing between his friend and this stranger. “You in entertainment industry then? That how you know my Caitriona?”

Caitriona internally cringed. She’d expected Sam to be a bit, well, protective, but this was verging on ridiculous. She watched as Johnathon returned his gaze to Sam, adding in a smile for good measure, refusing to take the bait, “No. Not at all.” A simple statement, the accompanying elaboration deliberately withheld and an answer that she could see, didn't quite meet Sam's expectations.

“Quite an accent ye got there. Where’s that from then?” Sam pushed again, oblivious to the irony of his question.

“Australia.”

“That’s a good way’s away ye ken.” Sam reached down and selected the last morsel of the breakfast parcel, pointing it in Johnathon’s direction as he spoke, “Glasgow a bit off the track if you’d be flying from Australia to New York. Must have had a good reason to come here then?”

"Yes," Johnathon stated, "I do."

“Well,” Caitriona interjected, having had enough of Sam's little alpha male protective bullshit that he often put on around her, "We're heading on out," She lifted her coat from a peg beside the door and waited for Johnathon to join her as she stepped to the front door, “Make sure you lock up when you leave.”

“Nice to meet you Sam.” Johnathon politely acknowledged as he crossed in front of Caitriona and stepped outside.

“You as well.” Both men looked at each other silently, each appraising the other. The look on Sam’s face was a dead giveaway. He certainly wasn’t rolling out the welcome mat. Yet another reason to end this conversation. She glanced at Johnathon. His face was passive and calm, little indication of what he thought of Sam either way.

“Bye Sam.” Caitriona started to pull the door closed, “See you on Monday for work.” The door clicked shut, loud in the quiet of the empty hallway. “Ready?” She asked quietly, slipping her arms into the well worn leather jacket and pulling her hair out from under the collar, anxious to move as far as she could from the apartment and the disasters therein.

“Lead on.” Johnathon smiled softly, digging into his pocket and finding his car keys, “Parked just out front.” They navigated down their way down the narrow stairs, Caitriona leading the way, then stepping out into the misty rain, just heavy enough to small droplets on anything it touched. A soft tone sounded as Johnathon unlocked the car doors, the indicators blinking momentarily as he opened the door and waited for Caitriona slide inside. She watched as he walked, in long strides around to the driver’s side and climbed in beside her.

“Do you know the way?” Johnathon's head turned to face her as he stirred the engine to life, “Or are we throwing our fate to the GPS gods?” His stomach chose that moment to once again remind
the occupants of the car, that it was indeed starving. "Sorry." He apologised with a shake of his head.

“I know the way. Go to the end of the road and turn left.” Caitriona laughed, “When did you last eat?”

Johnathon steered the car down the street as directed, “Before I got on the plane.”

“In Australia?” Caitriona looked at him, both brows raised, getting a nod in answer, “Christ, no wonder you’re hungry. Why didn’t you have something when you first landed?”

“Didn’t have time.”

“Why?”

Blue eyes turned her way, honest and open, “I wanted to see you first.”

“Oh.” Was all Caitriona said as a brilliant smile split her face and a warm wave washed over her, taking with it the worry and doubts of earlier.

No, she decided.

Perhaps the morning wasn’t turning out so badly after all.

She studied Johnathon’s handsome face a moment, watching the gentle play of muscles under his skin as he focused on navigating the road ahead.

Yes, not to badly at all.

She settled back in the seat, smiling to herself. Johnathon was here. Here for her. Here with her. Finally. Someone worth looking forward with.

If only either occupant of the car had looked back. Just for a second, at that very moment in time. They might have noticed the middle aged man, sitting in a non-descript vehicle just two doors down from Caitriona’s apartment. He quietly tucked the long lens camera away, removed the SD card and stored it in a custom made case. That was a valuable commodity right there and certainly worth protecting. He started the car and slowly pulled out of the parking space. Always careful to follow a safe distance behind. Never too close. Just far enough to follow undetected.

He smiled darkly.

Undetected.

Silent.

Unknown.

Ready to strike when the target least expected it.

Just the way he liked it.
Next Up - A trip to the art gallery and a discussion about the terms and conditions, so to speak. Probably post around the 20th or so. Cheers everyone and a huge thank you to all those out there who leave kudos and comments and keep writers like me on track with fics when everything else is doing it's darnedest to get in the way.
Could it be

Chapter Summary

A day together. Nothing but fluff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They’d begun the day, having put the disasters of the apartment behind them and having found her tall companion some breakfast, the amount of which Johnathon had consumed, still left her slightly amazed. At her suggestion they had gradually worked their way across the city, visiting some to the galleries and museums and the odd famous landmark, finally ending the day in Modern Art Gallery, one her favourite local haunts that she often strolled through.

“What do you think about this one?” Caitriona asked as she glanced up to observe the handsome face that was currently peering at the large painting in front of them. Johnathon’s head tilted to one side as he folded his arms across his chest and considered the art work. Vivid swathes of colour, reds, purples and yellows had been splashed rather haphazardly across the large white canvas that had to be at least seven feet square in Caitriona’s estimation.

“Well,” He drawled slowly, “I think it’s,” He paused, tasting the word, “interesting.” Dark brows raised almost to her hairline and she turned to face him, “Oh really?” Caitriona certainly hadn’t expected that answer. She'd been building a bit of an idea about what Johnathon liked based upon his reaction to the various pieces that they’d viewed. This painting was messy, uncontrolled, chaotic and looked very much like a rainbow had vomited on a sheet of paper. Not at all what Caitriona had thought Johnathon might like. Museums he liked, she’d discovered over the course of the day, having visited two earlier. He had been genuinely intrigued by the various historical facts and equally so by the much smaller personal connections. Intimate individual stories detailed in neat script, almost as a side note on several of the exhibits. Artifacts ranging from a cup salvaged from a shipwreck, to a set of shackles and even a simple button scavenged from someone’s coat. The museums been an unqualified success. The Art Galleries, not so much, but Caitriona had to admit, Johnathon had been more than happy to patiently stroll through several of them with her without so much has a hint of complaint. She was surprised, nevertheless by his answer on the current art piece in question.

“Mmm.” He drawled slowly, “I think it’s,” He paused, tasting the word, “interesting.”

Caitriona turned and looked at him like he’d grown another ear, “Amazing?”

Yeah. Amazing.” Johnathon bent and studied the small white tag displaying the art work’s title and then looked up at her, one corner of his mouth twitching into a grin as he straightened, “Don’t you think it’s amazing that a two year old got their finger painting displayed in gallery. Bit of a step up from the fridge door.”

Caitriona shook her head and laughed softly. This reaction a good deal more like what she had been expecting from the onset. Johnathon’s description notwithstanding, the painting in question was even too outlandish for her to take seriously and Johnathon's description, though slightly sarcastic in nature, was almost exactly what the picture looked like.

“Really Caitriona,” He chuckled a broad smile on his face, “Do people get paid for this?” He pointed an accusatory finger at the mess on the wall.

“Some people do.” She matched his smile with one of her own and gently took his hand, reveling in the comfortable companionship and physical proximity that was quickly developing between
them. They headed through an archway into the next section of the gallery, “That painting hasn’t been sold yet, today is its first showing, but,” Caitriona leaned over towards him and lowered her voice as they drew closer to a small group of people that had clustered around the next exhibit, “according to the owner, it's very popular.”

“Talk about art being the eye of the beholder,” Johnathon gave his head a small shake of disbelief. “I thought that was beauty?”

“That too.” He jovially agreed, warm fingers contracting slightly around hers, “That one,” He nodded towards the group, “is probably a pasta necklace, judging from the excitement.”

“Come on,” Caitriona tugged his hand, so enjoying being with him that she decided whatever piece of art the group was cooing over, wasn’t going to stack up against the warm feeling in her belly and the smile that had worked its way onto her face and taken up permanent residence there. It felt good to feel happy again, she reflected quietly as she nudged Johnathon towards a different alcove off to their left. Happy, safe and content. Caitriona wasn’t sure when she’d lost that, or even if she’d ever really had it begin with, but now those feelings were here, so very real, in the gentleness of his voice, the warmth of his hand in hers and the soft security of the sheer closeness of him that it felt indescribably good. “Let’s leave that one to the crowd shall we.” She suggested quietly, only too happy to stay in the semi secluded bubble of two. They peeled off and found themselves alone in a much smaller viewing area.

“Now that’s more like it.” Johnathon commented, lifting their joined hands towards one of the smaller paintings. It was an oil painting, almost photographic in its quality, of a small boy, sitting on a fallen tree, the subject's back facing the viewer as he looked forward into the thick vibrant green forest. The log rested beside a small creek, its surface a wavy mirror until it flowed, dancing over moss covered rocks as it disappeared off in the distance. Beside the boy, sat a small black dog, its long tail hanging down, dangling over the curve of the rough bark log, one infant pale hand resting on its neck. The gentle embrace of a friend. It was, in fact, quite a beautiful painting, Caitriona mused, as she inspected the piece in question. Nothing outlandish or garish, a perfectly rendered recreation of a peaceful forest scene and two companions enjoying the view, complete with the rainy mist on the horizon that Johnathon professed to have a fondness for.

Her gaze flicked sideways, quietly studying Johnathon’s profile as his eyes moved over the art work. Now this picture type suited him, Caitriona decided, matching exactly the set of ‘Johnathon' characteristics that she’d been mentally gathering throughout the afternoon. She had the idea that he was more of an outdoor type than in and preferred nature over almost everything else. The painted scene reminded her in some ways of the cabin where they'd first met. Quiet and peaceful in a solitary sense. If Caitriona hadn’t appeared by the way of an episode of slippery wheels and some jubious driving, Johnathon would have been there alone, and she suspected, happily so.

“At last.” She teased and gently nudged him with her hip, “Something he likes.”

“Can’t go wrong with a boy and his dog. Particularly not when they actually resemble what they are supposed to.”

Caitriona bent slightly, leaning in closer to get a better look and inspecting the frozen figures, “Blond haired boy.” She shot him a look, “I could imagine that was you without too much effort.”

Johnathon peered at the figure, “Could be I guess, if you hold your tongue the right way and squint.” He studied the small animal, “That looks a bit like a little dog I once had.” He paused, clearly recollecting a past memory, “Tiny.” He said with final certainty, “Her name was Tiny. A little miniature foxie.”

“Tiny?” Caitriona raised an eyebrow, “Because she was small?”

His face split into a sheepish grin, giving a nod and small shrug as if to say what else would one call a small dog but Tiny. So very logical, Caitriona thought as she smiled back and leaned against his shoulder. “And what do you think you might have been thinking, sitting there on that log with Tiny?”

“Probably what was for dinner.” Johnathon chuckled, “Or maybe I was lost and trying to figure out the way home. Either way, it makes a good picture though.” His head turned, blue eyes regarding her with a slightly raised eyebrow, “You like it too?” It was more statement than question.
“I do,” Caitriona nodded, confirming his suspicions, “I wonder what the boy would do if a girl and a cat came along and sat down on the other end of the log.”
Blue eyes locked with her, “I would imagine it depends a great deal on who the girl might be.” The humour in his voice fell away, replaced by something deeper, a soft sensual rumble that vibrated through her hearing, leaving her very skin tingling and a swarm of butterflies dancing back and forth across the inside surface of her stomach. Strong fingers gently stroked hers, “Know anyone who might want to volunteer for the position?”
“Might do.” She held his gaze, her heartbeat beginning to speed up as he leaned in closer to her.
“Do you think,” His mouth drifted dangerously close to hers, “that this said girl might be willing to come sit next to the boy?” He was close enough that she felt rather than heard each syllable.
“Yes,” Caitriona murmured as she tilted her face towards his, “she definitely would.”
“In that case then,” Warm lips covered hers, kissing her slowly, sending a wave of pleasure flooding through her from head to toe.
Her eyes fluttered closed and she lifted a hand, resting the palm of her hand against the smooth surface of his cheek, craving greater contact, wanting to draw him in closer. She felt him hesitate, knowing the reason for it and finding herself caught between wanting to the moment to last and ever present awareness of the public nature of their surroundings. Johnathon gently drew the kiss to a slow close, “That’s what this boy would do.” His eyes left hers, briefly flicking gaze in the direction of a small group of people that were beginning to wander towards them, “Better not scandalise the locals on my first visit.” He brushed his lips across hers in a silent apology before straightening.
Damn the locals, Caitriona thought, letting out a long slow breath and contenting herself with curling her arm through his and pressing against his side. It was hard to describe the contentedness she felt as they slowly perused the remainder of the pieces of art. Staying close without being so close as draw the public gaze. Right now, they could be anyone, strolling through the gallery on a lazy weekend. Outwardly there was nothing amiss, nothing to see here. Inwardly, her body was positively humming with a curious mixture of the thrill of sexual attraction and the safe gentle feeling that things were exactly as they are supposed to be. They’d spent the entire day talking, laughing and just enjoying being with each other. Together. The disasters of the morning seemed so far away that they might not have happened at all. The day from that point to this had seemed to flow from one perfect moment to the next. They hadn’t done anything overly exciting or even anything out of the ordinary and yet, it had been perfect just the same. Exactly what she’d been looking for. After all the travelling, all that she’d seen and done, the whirlwind of Outlander, modelling and Hollywood, it was hard to comprehend how something as simple as just spending the day with Johnathon could have such an effect on her. This feeling, this way of thinking, all of it. It just didn’t happen to her. She’d heard other people talk about it but had never really believed in it.

Attraction was one thing.

This.

This was something else entirely.

Yes, Caitriona admitted, there were moments when her body reacted so strongly to the pure physicality of him, that it made her want nothing more than drag him into the nearest quiet space and get lost in him completely. Then there were other moments. Entirely different moments, when it felt like small secret little pieces, hidden deep within the heart of herself, that had been out of place and lost, were finally fitting together. Sliding into place in quiet slow motion and definiteness that it was stunning in its intensity. Is this what falling in love feels like? The question was so unexpected that for a split second her feet almost tangled.

“Everything okay?” Johnathon’s deep voice sounded softly near her ear, tightening his grip and steadying her.
“Yes.” She shunted the question to the back of her mind, unwilling to face the answer just yet, "Think we need to make a move though. This closes in five minutes.” She rested a hand on Johnathon’s upper arm as they made their way down a small set of stairs towards the entrance doors, conveniently also serving as the exit back out onto the street. They ducked from overhang to overhang as they walked along the street trying to keep out of the light drizzle that had persisted all day and now, into early evening as well. It was a blessing that Johnathon, against the odds, had managed to find a car park relatively close to the gallery.

“Still a fan of the drizzle?” Caitriona asked, as she took of her coat, slightly damp from the short unprotected walk back to the car, and laid it across her knees, grateful for the gentle flow of warming air as Johnathon started the engine and headed down the street.

“Absolutely.” He grinned, lifting a hand and running his fingers through his damp hair, scattering small droplets of water and causing one section to stick up comically. Without thinking Caitriona reached over and smoothed the thick strands down, feeling the gentle curve of the back of his skull and the warmth of his skin. Blue eyes flicked her way, blinking slowly before turning back to the road, a small dimple appearing on his cheek with the soft smile that lit his face, “Where to next?”

Caitriona let her hand linger there longer than strictly necessary before reluctantly removing it and resting it in her lap, “How about some dinner?”

“Did you have somewhere in mind or shall we play restaurant of fortune?”

She considered that a moment. There were literally half a dozen excellent restaurants that were within a half an hour drive from here. It was Saturday night and they would all shortly be packed to gills with patrons gathering to start a long night of reveling. Once upon a time not so very long ago, she would have been one of them, having spent more time than she cared to remember, in bars and night clubs. Tonight however, the thought of being around a crowd of people, anyone other than her tall car companion, suddenly didn’t seem at all appealing. Besides, it seemed to her that Johnathon certainly wasn’t the type who craved large crowds and constant group interactions or the wildly exotic party night life. No, Caitriona privately wagered with herself, he’d be more of a stay at home with one or two close friends type. There was something about that Caitriona found immensely attractive.

“How about home?” Caitriona finally said quietly. She knew it wasn’t the most exciting or even a glamorous suggestion in terms of showing off her current home town, but the quiet seclusion of her apartment was entirely too enticing to ignore. No one else save the two of them. Private and peaceful. “I don’t have a lot in the fridge to cook but we could pick up something up on our way,” She glanced over at him, trying to gauge what he thought about the suggestion, “Maybe Chinese and quiet night in?”

The handsome face beside her smiled broadly, “Chinese it is.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up a quiet dinner at home and some terms and conditions.
The key slid into the lock easily, the tumblers clicking softly as she unlocked the door. For a dreadful moment a dangerous thought crossed her mind. What if her over protective, though well meaning co-star was still loitering about? Explaining that whole fiasco for the second time that day was more than Caitriona was prepared to put up with. With some trepidation she pressed the door open. Thankfully it revealed nothing more than the darkened interior of her apartment. Quiet and more importantly, empty. Relieved, she flicked on the light and dropped the keys into their normal resting place, a small ornate bowl on the counter before turning, one long arm holding the door open enough for Johnathon, arms laden with delightfully smelling containers, to cross in front of her.

“Here,” She held out her hand, “Better give me that.” Caitriona gestured towards one broad shoulder indicating his damp coat as he easily hoisted the bounty onto the stone counter. “After your dash in the rain, it’s almost soaked through.”

Johnathon settled the last of the food containers on the counter and began shucking out of the offending garment. “The drizzle decided to get serious about ten seconds after you got out,” He commented, gripping the jacket by the collar and handing it dutifully to her, “Your street sure does get busy during the evenings.”

They had arrived at Caitriona’s home to find every car space along the street for a good distance taken. Even the space allotted to Caitriona’s own apartment had been occupied by, of all things, a large motorcycle. At first glance, Johnathon had thought that the vehicle might have belonged to Caitriona, but the look of disapproval that had flashed across her descriptive face when he had asked her about it had been enough to tell him all he needed to know on that matter. Even if that hadn’t done it, her ensuing comment did. “Legalised death magnet” had been the exact term if Johnathon’s memory served him correctly. Needless to say, apparently Caitriona wasn’t a fan of that particular two wheeled form of transportation. Less apparent was the exact ownership of the problem bike. Johnathon had wondered if it belonged to Caitriona’s earlier morning guest but she had explained that it didn't and that she wasn’t even sure if it belonged to a neighbour at all. In any case, there was no parking Johnathon’s car anywhere close to her apartment. Deciding to go with plan B, Johnathon had double parked just long enough to let Caitriona out and then had continued down the street. He finally found a single spot that he managed to just squeeze into. He had been in the process of walking back to Caitriona’s apartment when the heavens had opened. The resulting downpour had forced him into jog to avoid being completely and utterly soaked. Luckily his jacket had taken the brunt of the onslaught but it had suffered for it.

Caitriona hung the soaked jacket coat on the peg and moved to stand behind the counter, “The street is particularly busy tonight,” She mused, bending and dragging out two plates from under the bench, “One of the residents is having a twenty-first party.” She recalled the invitation that had come by way of a handwritten note dropped into every apartment mail box in the complex, “Maybe we should gate crash?”

“Gate crash?” A low chuckle drifted through the air as Johnathon grinned broadly, wiping an errant raindrop from the side of his cheek. “To show them how to really have a party?”

“Precisely.” Caitriona agreed conspiratorially, then turned and lifted onto her toes trying to retrieve two large wine glasses from a clear fronted overhead cabinet, “Do you think we could take them?”

“No doubt.” Blue eyes crinkled at their edges as he smiled, “Party animals that we are.” He studied her a moment and then stepped to her side, easily reaching the glasses and handing them to her, “You don’t really want to gate crash right?” His was standing so close to her that she could feel the heat of him.
“God no.” She gave a slight toss of her head, enjoying the close proximity and the gentle
comfortableness that had been developing between them.
“Thank Christ.” Johnathon let out a long breathe and drew a hand across his forehead, “Thought
I’d gotten myself into trouble there for a moment and was going to have to prove what we
preached.”
“No,” Caitriona laughed, setting the glasses down, “You’re safe this time. I’ll save the leading you
astray for your next visit.”
“Deal.” He swiveled on his heel and glanced towards the extensive wine rack resting against the
opposite wall, “Did you want wine from there or?”
“Bottle of red. On the bottom shelf, if there’s still one there.” Caitriona watched has Johnathon
stood, strong shoulders and back visible through the folds of his shirt, the fabric pulling against his
skin as he moved, highlighting shifting muscles. Slow Caitriona, she reminded herself, trying to
make her mind focus on anything other than how good he looked, how good he sounded, how
good he smelt, how normal it felt to have him here.
“This one?” Long legs bent as he dropped to his haunches and retrieved the bottle from its
designated spot, “Merlot?” Johnathon held up the selected bottle of wine up, twisting it so
Caitriona could see the label.
She nodded her approval at his selection then turned, “Are you sure there is not something
different I can get you ?” Harsh white light bathed her form as she opened one side of the large
refrigerator and selected a tall glass bottle of water from the door.
“Positive. Wine does strange things to my stomach and I’ve got to drive so,” He laid a hand on the
body part in question and gave a good natured shrug, “Kinda boring I know, but water will do me
just fine.”
A few twists and a loud pop later, the deep cherry coloured liquid was filling one of the glasses.
Caitriona began spooning various bits and pieces from the different food containers now spread
across the counter onto the large white plates. She took an educated guess and gave Johnathon
almost double what she dished up for herself. Even then, she wondered if it would be enough.
“Chopsticks or forks?” She held up the selection, one type in each hand, waving them slowly back
and forth.
“Dealer’s choice.”
Caitriona set a pair of the wooden sticks on the side of his plate and lifted it, waiting for him to
finish pouring himself a glass of water “Couch dinner okay? I can set the table if you like but the
couch is way more comfortable.”
His blond, slightly damp head shook, “A comfy chair will be perfect.”
Caitriona was pleased with that. Her ankle was starting to ache, as it sometimes tended to do in
weather like this particularly when she’d been standing or moving most of the day. She settled her
plate on the table and reached behind, flicking on the tall lamp, showering the area in a soft yellow
light, looking up just in time to see Johnathon step around the edge of the table. He set his plate
down and then reached out to snag one of the large blue cushions that lay scattered over the long
dark leather couch, “Can I borrow this a moment?” He asked.
Caitriona nodded as she stretched, leaning forward and picking up her glass. She had expected him
to use the cushion to make the seat more comfortable, wedging it behind his back or something
similar. When he didn’t but instead stepped around the table towards her, it left her wondering what
on earth he was doing. Caitriona’s plate of food was carefully moved to one side and the cushion
was purposely placed on the edge of the table.
Kneeling, Johnathon looked up at her, “Lift?” Warm fingers curled around her sock covered ankle
and gently started to raise it, placing it down on the cushion’s plush surface with infinite care.
“How did you know?” Caitriona let out a soft sigh as the aching immediately started to ease.
“Your step was bit different the last half hour or so. I figured your foot might be playing up.
Specially with this weather.” A gentle smile graced his face as he returned, the surface of the chair
dipping slightly as he sat down beside her, “Better?”
God, where to even begin. Just having him around made her feel better than she had felt in a very
long time. She’d never been a strong proponent of the idea of two people connecting with any real
depth so quickly, but the way this was progressing, Caitriona was seriously reconsidering her
position on that point. “Much.” She said with a satisfied sigh, leaning back and watching as
Johnathon settled into the seat, “I can’t imagine the trouble I’d be in if I’d actually broken the
thing.” She flexed the toes on the elevated foot, wincing slightly as the movement pulled a tender
spot.
“Sometimes a bad sprain is worse than a break. Yours was about as close to a break without
actually breaking as you can get.”
“There were a lot of things that were too close to comfort.” She gave a soft shudder at the memory,
“If you hadn’t arrived when you did..”
“You’d have figured something out.” He said gently, the deep timbre of his voice soft and smooth,
“Though, I thought we might have been in trouble there for a few minutes on the way to the cabin.
At one point, you looked like you were about to ditch me and take off running into the forest.”
“I thought you might have been some type of hermit sociopath or wild axe murderer or something.”
The tips of her ears tinted slightly pink as she ducked her head at the now ridiculous idea of the
man. “You were out in there in the woods, in the middle of night, all alone.” She defended, “And I
was half out of my mind with hypothermia.”
“You were a little chilled.” He conceded with a soft chuckle, “I hope you’ve changed your mind on
the axe welding murderer front at least?”
“Weell..” One eye squinted as she eyed him with a cheeky grin, knowing full well that she’d
changed her mind on that moment Johnathon had wrapped her in a warm blanket and carried
her into the cabin, “Jury is still out. It is leaning your way though.”
“You wouldn’t believe the trouble I had explaining the axe to customs.” Johnathon played along
and flashed a brilliant smile and leaned forward to gather his own glass from the table.
Caitriona gave a soft chuckle, letting out a slow contented breathe, unable to keep the smile from
her face, “Did you have a good day at least? I know it didn’t start off particularly good, but it did
improve right?”
“Wouldn’t have missed a second of it.” Johnathon’s arm flexed as he bent forward raised his glass,
tilting the rim of it towards her, “To a good day Caitriona?”
There was something in the way that deep voice wrapped around her name, sending a pleasurable
thrill darting down her spine. “To a very good day Johnathon.”
“Good enough to entice you to visit our fair city again?” Caitriona asked quietly after several long
moments, her heart beating so loudly in her chest it was a wonder to her that Johnathon couldn’t
hear it.
“Depends.” His voice seemed to drop a register, a tone that shot straight to her very core and made
it hard for her to concentrate on the conversation at hand.
“On?” Caitriona took another mouthful, letting the full bodied slightly bitter flavoured liquid slide
down her throat in a long swallow, hoping to Christ that the alcohol would calm the rapidly
increasing fire running through her blood. At this point she was willing to try anything.
“On if my host would be gracious enough to put up with me again or not?” The steady pools of
blue blinked, patiently waiting for her answer.
“Tough job.” Caitriona joked softly, deciding to try humour as a fire fighting strategy, “I mean
with you possibly being an axe murderer and all. Tough but I think I could handle it.”
Johnathon smiled as he set his glass back on the table, “Oh you do huh?” He picked up their plates,
offering Caitriona’s hers’.
“I do.” She took the plate from his hands, “Unless there is some secret dark side that I don’t know
about yet?”
“What? Something worse than axe murderer?” He settled back beside her, his plate resting in lap,
“What would qualify a dark side then?”
“Obviously being a murderer of any description.” She pondered, expertly using the chopsticks to
grip a dumpling, “But also and not limited to drugs. Alcohol. Substance abuse.”
“I see.” Johnathon captured a large piece of broccoli from his plate, “I’m in luck then. No to all of
the above.”
“Prison escapee, career criminal, mafia hitman?”
“Mafia hitman?” He chuckled, a neat row of white teeth biting the top off the vegetable, “Think
maybe I should be asking you these questions if you’ve been cavorting around with hitmen.”
“Cavorting?” Caitriona grinned, “I’ll have you know I haven’t cavorted in quite a while, with
hitmen or otherwise.” She took a healthy bite of the dumpling still held securely in the chipsticks
then paused, “That is a no right?”
He nodded around a mouthful of food, swallowing before answering, “It’s a no. I can safely say I
am and have never been to prison or been hired by a crime syndicate to knock someone off.”
“So far so good then,” She traded her chopsticks for the glass of wine, “Bankrupt? Gambling
issues?”
“No. I’m solvent,” He flashed a wink, “Gainfully employed and everything.”
“Given all this information, I’m calling it.” Caitriona laughed, “Jury is back. Innocent on all counts
and no secret dark side.”
“I pass Caitriona’s immigration quality control? ” He laughed softly, “So I can detour to Glasgow
whenever I can then?”
“So that’s how you organised this visit so quickly? A work detour?” Caitriona asked, thrilled
beyond good sense at his admission that he intended to visit Glasgow and by default she reasoned,
herself, regularly in the future.
“Not quite.” He explained between mouthfuls, “I had already decided when I left London that I
was going to come and see you as soon as I could. I just had to get those cases finished. Besides,”
He continued, “The company is sending me to New York anyway. Glasgow is on the way.”
He cocked his head and flashed a conspiratorial smile, “Kinda.”
“Kinda?” She raised a fine dark eyebrow, chewing slowly, making her way through her own plate
of food, “Kinda as in a twelve hour detour not really type of kinda?”
“That’s the one.” He chortled, attacking a crispy spring roll, catching the crumbs with one cupped
palm, though a few still managed to escape onto his shirt clad chest.
“This ‘kinda’ detour isn’t going to get you fired is it?” While her employment could be somewhat
flexible, at least for a few months of the year, Caitriona was well aware that the majority of the
working world wasn’t as lucky. Admittedly, she didn’t really know a great deal about Johnathon’s
work, but she was reasonably sure that most bosses wouldn’t exactly be over the moon at an
employee diverting travel arrangements to suit romantic situations.
“Nah.” Johnathon allayed her concerns with a shake of his fair head. He put the chopsticks down
and brushed the crumb escapees into his hand, “It’s not like I do this all the time. So long as I’m in
New York for the case briefings on Monday, it’s all good.”
“How long?” Caitriona asked between mouthfuls of her own food, which she had to admit was
delicious and she was hungrier than she thought, “How long do you think you’ll be in New York?”
“Not sure.” Johnathon supplied before devouring a mouthful of rice, “Only as long it takes to get
these cases done. I’m thinking about a month or so.”
A month.
Her heart dropped and magic little bubble of romantic hope that she’d been floating in all day
promptly burst.
Between her intensive film schedule and his work, the chances of finding any spare travel days in
the near future, as in the next week or even the week after, were looking exceedingly slim. How
the hell were they going to make this work? Was it even possible? Christ, she mentally cursed.
Why was nothing ever easy?
“Is that a typical time frame?” Caitriona tried to keep the tone casually light, but there was no
denying the nervousness swirling just below the surface. “For most cases I mean?”
“Every job is different.” Johnathon dusted his hand into a cloth napkin and carefully selected the
last gyoza on his plate, “Sometimes it is just a court appearance, like Australia and it’s a quick turn
around.” He explained, biting into the pork filled parcel, “Usually though, cold missing person cases tend to run long. Depends on the state of things and how many cases we are working on as to exactly how long it takes. Sometimes the pieces all fall in place and it’s over and done within days.”

That didn’t sound so bad, she thought optimistically. A few days per case. That could mean he’s be done within a week or so. Maybe all wasn’t lost just yet. “How many cases are on the program this time?”

“Half a dozen.” He skillfully scooped up the last morsel of his meal, balancing a bundle of sticky small grains between the ends of the chopsticks, “The thirty year old case will be a bit of a challenge.”

“Thirty years? How do you even begin to start with something like that? Won’t most people have moved on or forgotten anything that might help?”

“Sometimes they do.” Johnathon set his own empty plate on the table, “Sometimes though we get lucky and someone who has been sitting on evidence for all that time, finally decides say something.” He took a sip from his glass of water, “Other times technology helps out with DNA or something similar.”

Caitriona stretched forward, exchanging her own empty plate for a wine glass, “Do you at least have somewhere to stay there? In New York? Living out of a suitcase in a hotel can get old pretty quick.”

“The company has apartments in a few places here and there,” He crossed his feet at his ankles and settled back beside her, “I’ll stay in one of those if it’s available. Otherwise, it’s a hotel room. Somewhere close to headquarters if I can.”

“Manhattan right?” Her own working memory of New York seemed to recall the FBI main office in New York was in the very centre of the busy city.

Johnathon nodded, “Usually we stay at Tribeca Tower, but sometimes the apartment is already leased out. If that’s the case, probably stay somewhere on Duane or there abouts.”

“Your whole team in one apartment?” Caitriona knew the street he was speaking of, having spent a considerable amount of time in the city herself during the early stages of her modelling career. She also knew that the apartments there weren’t exactly known for their large living spaces. Nothing in Manhattan was.

“Just me. The rest of the team have family in the area that they will want to touch base with. Most usually stay close to them whenever we are in New York. Jackson will probably stay with Emma, if they are over their latest feud by then.”

She looked at him over the rim of her glass as the last sip of wine disappeared down her throat, “Emma?” That was a name she hadn’t heard before and it immediately made her curious. Was this another potential skeleton in his relationship cupboard that she should be aware of. Unfamiliar names were always a tell tale sign of trouble in her experience.

“Emma Stanton.” Johnathon gave a sardonic shake of his head, “Her and Jackson have a bit of an on again, off again relationship. Last I heard it was off, but that could have changed by now. It frequently does.”

“Wait,” Her brows drew together, “Wasn’t it Jackson who was trying to pick up the desk clerk during the week?” She recalled one specific video call earlier in the week that had been interrupted by Jackson trying to convince Johnathon into participating in what Caitriona had imagined was a double date. Johnathon had of course turned him down on the offer. At least as far as Caitriona knew he had.

“The one and the same.”

“So how does that work?” She asked, curious about Johnathon’s views on the subject. Figuring this was an easy way to find things out without actually asking him.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Johnathon gave a disbelieving shrug, “Jackson, well,” He paused, as if searching for the right words, “He’s something else completely. I’ve known him a long time and let’s just say that if you wanted the human embodiment of the old adage a rolling stone gathering no moss, Jackson would be it.”
“So, does this Emma know that he is like that when he’s away?” Caitriona queried, “Or is it a case of what happens in Vegas?”

“She knows. If she didn’t, I’d be the first to make sure Jackson told her. Immediately.” Blue eyes regarded her honestly, “Home or away. It wouldn’t matter. Just because two people are apart doesn’t ever make it okay to be playing the field behind someone’s back. If Jackson was doing that, we’d be having words.” Caitriona was more than a little relieved to hear those words fall from his lips. “I’ve never had to though.” Johnathon added, “He’s pretty unfiltered about it all when it comes to the women he’s seeing. They know exactly what they getting into.” One corner of his mouth arched into a soft smile, “Not sure how the hell they expect that to work but, occasionally it seems to.”

“So, does this Emma know that he is like that when he’s away?” Caitriona queried, “Or is it a case of what happens in Vegas.” Blue eyes regarded her honestly, “Home or away. It wouldn’t matter. Just because two people are apart doesn’t ever make it okay to be playing the field behind someone’s back. If Jackson was doing that, we’d be having words.” Caitriona was more than a little relieved to hear those words fall from his lips. “I’ve never had to though.” Johnathon added, “He’s pretty unfiltered about it all when it comes to the women he’s seeing. They know exactly what they getting into.” One corner of his mouth arched into a soft smile, “Not sure how the hell they expect that to work but, occasionally it seems to.”

“Sounds,” Caitriona rocked the glass back and forth in her hand before setting down on the table, “Very casual. I don’t think I could handle a relationship like that anymore.”

“I know I couldn’t.” Johnathon’s deep voice sounded, definite and immediate. Caitriona didn’t know why she expected a different answer from him. Perhaps it was because everyone that she’d ever known, at least relationship wise, hadn’t valued fidelity. Things happen. People change. It was a mistake. It meant nothing. You weren’t here. You’re always working. I was drunk. Men are like that. The list went on and on. She’d heard those excuses more often than she liked to admit. Hell, she’d even been the one delivering it on past occasions.

“Not good at sharing.” Johnathon said quietly, “At least, not good at sharing that.” Blue eyes turned serious in the dim light, “Can’t do the whole let’s see other people thing. Not saying it’s a bad thing for those that can do that. Whatever works, I guess. It’s just not for me.” His gaze seemed to turn inwards and for a long moment Caitriona could see the feint reflections of past pain lingering in their pale depths, “I just can’t do it. Couldn’t stay in a relationship in that situation. You’re either together or you’re not.” There was a tone of serious finality to the statement that Caitriona hadn’t heard from him before, “I think unless both people feel the same thing and are on the same page about what is okay and what they need, then, what’s the point you know?”

Caitriona wasn’t sure whether she wanted to cheer or accuse him of reading her mind. Maybe he was just telling her what she wanted to hear. There was no real way to be sure at this point. The only thing she was sure of was that she didn’t need to worry about past skeletons because Johnathon Chase was never going to fall back to them. ‘That woman’, the title Caitriona had decided to assign to one Katherine Carmichael, had really done a number on him. Johnathon had been deeply hurt. Far more than Caitriona first suspected. In some ways, his situation had been far worse than her own. Caitriona had been used and betrayed. With the passing of time and the benefit of hindsight, she had come to realise that she herself, to a large extent, had been a willing participant in that betrayal. Deep down she had always known what was happening and had tried to convince herself that she was happy, that things were how she wanted. She’d almost been complicit in hurting herself. In the end, there had been no surprises, just relief that it was finally done. Caitriona had felt free and had known from the first moment that she’d done the right thing.

Clearly, for Johnathon, the only relief he’d managed to find had been in the pure survival of the whole train wreck. No relief. No deep down feeling that everything was for the best. Only the vicious pain of heartbreak. Caitriona was certain now that Johnathon had cared for ‘that woman’ very deeply. You only hurt that much when you care, she knew that from experience. Caitriona only hoped that the damage wasn’t irreversible. Was he even able to do this? After all, once bitten, twice shy. She was almost at that point herself, having come closer than she’d liked to admit to resigning herself to just being alone. It seemed easier that way and yet, that small quiet voice down deep inside her wanted something more. Sitting there, shoulder to shoulder in the still and quiet room, it suddenly became stunningly clear to Caitriona that this was the something more. A shared life. She wasn’t sure if Johnathon was the someone just yet, but Caitriona was certain that if they were ever going to even being to make any type of relationship work, if there was ever to be any chance of intimacy between them, they were both going to need to work on getting through their respective pasts. This was going to take time for him as well as for her. Caitriona decided that if she wanted this to turn out differently then she was going to have to do things differently from the
get go. For both their sakes. Caitriona had never been one for rules in the past, but, she studied the handsome face watching her. Maybe some ground rules might be a good place to start. For both of them.

Decision made, Caitriona gently laid a hand on his forearm, “I couldn’t do that either.” She confessed, “Not anymore.” A soft look of understanding graced her face as she searched his eyes, “I think I would need to be with someone who is willing to be in a relationship with me. Totally. Not by halves. Not with someone else thrown into the mix or lurking on the sidelines,” She tried to explain how she felt, wanting to be as open with him as he had just been with her. “I’d want someone who was it not for me, but in it WITH me.” She squeezed his forearm, “Does that make any sense?”

“Makes perfect sense.” A much larger warm hand covered hers, long fingers gently playing with hers, running back and forth over them, as if seeing by touch alone, “But I think finding that place might take some time.” He tried to let her gentle touch steady him, “For me at least.”

“For us both.” Her thumb gently stroked his, “Not easy to risk everything over again. Specially when we’ve have been hurt by someone before.” Caitriona concentrated on a small scar that ran from the base of his thumb up to the first knuckle, “Even more important when,” She stopped and corrected herself, her own thumb following the thin line until it disappeared in the ridge of the joint, “If, a long distance relationship was involved.”

Johnathon was quiet a few long heartbeats, intently studying their joined hands, “Caitriona?” He hesitated, straddling the line between caution and risk, protection and vulnerability. Slender fingers slipped between his, drawing their palms together, urging him to continue as surely as if she had thrown a rope around him. “Would you,” He stopped, brows knit in concentration, “That is,” His jaw tensed and he tried again, “if say, both people agreed to take it slow,” Blue eyes found hers, the utter uncertainty visible to anyone that looked, “and maybe learn to trust each other, just the two of them, no one else. Could you, would you, take that risk again, with someone?”

“Depends.” Her voice quiet as she slid a little closer to him, her hands warm in his. Caitriona was acutely aware that right in this moment, the uncertainty of the future and the consequences of the decision they both made here, weighed far more heavily on the broad shoulders sitting beside her than on her own. If it all went bad, she would probably survive. He would not.

“On?” Johnathon’s adam’s apple dipped as he swallowed loudly.

“The someone involved.” She gave him a soft smile and laid a palm against his cheek, “Know anyone who might want to volunteer for the position?”

“Might do.” The skin beneath her palm twitched slightly as he recognised her words from earlier in the day.

Fingertips traced the outline of his jaw, as she felt herself falling into the deep pools of blue studying her at very close distance; “If you can be in this with me,” Caitriona breathed, “If you are ready to be in this with me,” Warm hands settled on her hip as she turned her upper body towards him, “and we take however long we both need to figure this out and get past whatever we need to.” She slowly tilted Johnathon’s chin towards her, “Then yes.” Her mouth drifted closer to his, “I’d be willing to take that risk. With you.”

“Just you and I?” Johnathon whispered, his lips almost touching hers, “Just us?”

“Yes.” Caitriona murmured, leaning into him, feeling the solid security of his broad chest as her hands framed his face, “Just us.” Blue eyes fluttered closed as warm lips met. The kiss soft and certain, holding within it all the promises of the future and a silent pledge to each other. They were in this now. Together.

Chapter End Notes
At last. I have fought to get this chapter back, after the great computer failure of 2018. It still isn't what is was it has been hard to recreate all that I lost when the computer failed. But I need to post this chapter and clear it so that I can move on and start fresh chapters.

On a personal note, a terminal diagnosis for my father and more recently the loss of my little dog, who was my own little family in my house for 14 years has kicked me pretty hard. Losing her has been like losing someone in my family and the empty house has meant that writing has been really hard. But, you have to keep going and so I have. While I could have ended the story with this chapter, I'm not. I need to continue this through to it's end, whatever that maybe. I just needed to clear this chapter to start writing again on new chapters.

So here it is, after a very long time and a lot of heartache in between. It's not perfect, but it is what it is and I'm thankful if you are still reading it.

All my best to you all and I'll post whenever I can.

Cheers,
Chapter Summary

For everyone who has every left a comment, read a few lines and stayed with me. Thank you.

The weather had cleared, leaving the air, crisp, cool and clean. The sky was a perfect powder blue, with only the odd wisp of white cloud drifting high above. She watched as one pale tendril coalesced into the rough form of a butterfly or, she squinted slightly from behind her sunglasses, maybe it was a bird. She lifted, leaning on her elbows and crossing her long legs at the ankles as she cast her eyes over across down the slight slope to the grassed open space of the park. Several families were there. Some playing football. Some playing cricket. One small group were racing remote control cars back and forth along the paved path. Caitriona watched them for a few moments, smiling at one man’s attempt to teach, his young daughter, Caitriona surmised, to use a cricket bat. It took a few tries and redos, but finally the small girl managed to connect bat with the ball, sending it skittering into the grass a few feet away and gaining a round of supports yells and applause from the other players.

People were interesting to watch, she reflected, her gaze moving from one assembled group to another in various locations around the park. Families, couples, even singles, she mused in reference to a man she could see sitting on a bench across on the opposite side of the small lake. He’d arrived not long after they had, seemingly content to study his newspaper in early afternoon sun. They were all probably as glad as she was that the weather had cleared. While spending the day inside, she smiled, hadn’t been a bad thing, she’d been more than pleased at Johnathon’s reaction to her suggestion that they go sight seeing and then have an early dinner. As much as it irked her, she would have to keep a close on the time tonight. She had to be on set in the morning by five and needed more than a couple of hours sleep to function properly. Unfortunately that meant her time with Johnathon was also to an end. At least this visit.

She relaxed and settled back down, resting on the soft blanket that they’d spread under the large tree, leaving them in dappled shade. Just enough sunlight to keep the chill away, but not enough to make it uncomfortably warm. Treading her fingers together, she pillowed her head and let her eyes drift closed. One thing was certain now. There were going to be more visits. Whether from him or by her. There would be more. She hadn’t figured out quite how she was going to achieve that with her work commitments and god help her, she had never intended on having a long distance relationship and knew even less about to make that successful, but, she let out a breath, she knew now with a definiteness that had been missing before, that she wanted to try.

Caitriona heard the footsteps draw closer as they stepped with gentle cadence up the slight rise towards her. She cracked one eye open, to see Johnathon dropping to his knees beside her, hands filled with what Caitriona presumed, was lunch.

“That didn’t take long.” She sat up, folding her long legs in front of her and resting one neatly wrapped paper parcel in her lap.

“We got lucky.” Johnathon commented as he settled beside her, his shoulder barely brushing against hers, “A bus load of tourists arrived just as I was leaving.”

The mouth watering aroma of fresh cooked fish and chips wafted in the air as she peeled back the last layer of grease proof paper. Squeezing a wedge of lemon over the fish and she took a healthy bite, humming her approval deep her throat, “Would you like some?” She offered the remainder of
her morsel to Johnathon, who was attacking a handful of chips from his own parcel. “No, no.” Johnathon shook his head, “I don’t want to contaminate my chips with that stuff.” He joked, moving his food away and shielding it with his hand. Caitriona smiled and then deliberately took an exaggerated bite, “You don’t know what you’re missing.” “That’s okay. I’m perfectly happy to sit here and eat my chips thank you very much.” She had established that her picnic mate didn’t like anything that came from the sea except, perhaps, the salt. Caitriona would eat seafood every day all day if it was up to her. At first, she’d thought Johnathon might have had allergy or something to seafood, but it turned out it was just as simple as he didn’t like the taste of any of it. Totally opposite to herself in that regard. How anyone couldn’t enjoy it was beyond her. More curiously from someone who enjoyed anything and everything marine related. Johnathon was certainly a study in contradictions. Loves the sea, hates seafood. It was one of the many little things that she was enjoying discovering about him. “Are you sure you don’t want some?” Caitriona watched him devour his remaining food, beginning to worry that he wouldn’t have enough to eat and would still be hungry. “Positive.” Johnathon swallowed the last mouthful of the fried potatoes, then scrunched the empty white paper into a neat ball, “That is all yours to enjoy.” They were interrupted by the rather loud and obnoxious ringing of Johnathon’s phone. He scowled and retrieved the vibrating device from his pocket. “Chase.” Caitriona contented herself with finishing her own food while she waited for the phone call to end. From what she could ascertain from the one sided conversation, some department somewhere was requesting assistance with a case. Urgent assistance from the level of squawking she could hear second hand. “I’ll see what I can do.” Deep blue eyes looked apologetically at her as he ended the call. “Work huh?” His blond head nodded, “Unfortunately.” Caitriona knew full well this would more than likely mean the end of their weekend together. God, did she ever know how this went. Her father was in law enforcement. She’d been there when those calls had come in. No matter what time of the day or night, no matter what family responsibilities, the call had to be answered and acted upon. “Sorry Caitriona.” Johnathon’s voice solemn and serious and laced with disappointment, “Let me just get some things rolling here?” He placed the phone back against his ear, “This shouldn’t take too long and we can get back to our afternoon.” Caitriona leaned over, “It’s okay.” She took his bunched up ball paper from his hands and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek, “I’ll stretch my legs and be right back.” She took heart in that, perhaps their plans wouldn’t be thrown too much out of whack after all. Caitriona stood and ambled down the slight rise towards the bin. Part of her was disappointed with the knowledge that this little romantic bubble that they had been floating in was going to burst prematurely, but strangely, another part of her was taking some small comfort in the fact that Johnathon wasn’t the type of guy who just dumps his responsibilities to impress a woman. She’d seen her fair share of those in her lifetime and had never found it an appealing quality. Adults have careers. It was a fact of normal life that there was no getting around. They did. Both of them. Caitriona never wanted to be in a relationship again where one person decided that one person’s career should take priority over the other or worse used the other person as a cash cow or their career as a ladder climbing exercise.

She tossed the rubbish in the bin and continued on to a small foot bridge, stopping half way across and leaning on the rail, waiting patiently for Johnathon to finish. Caitriona had no intention of being one of those women who demanded all the attention, all the time. It wasn’t her and wasn’t at all what she wanted from a partner. She didn’t want to be ignored either. Caitriona hadn’t found it yet, but surely there had to be a happy medium. She idly watched a small family ducks drift back and forth across the small pond the she was standing above. The smaller ones, struggling to keep up with their mother. Or father, her mind corrected as she turned her head and located Johnathon,
phone still pressed to his ear, a grim look on his face, pacing back and forth. Seems she wasn’t the only one on the planet whose feet were mysteriously connected to their phone. Sam often chipped her about on set. Whenever she was talking on the phone she couldn’t stand still. She smiled, another small thing discovered about her tall Australian partner. She watched him a moment longer and turned back to the small family and their antics on the water, the sun warm on her back. That was when it hit her. The sudden realisation that she was happy. A feeling that had been absent in her life for what seemed like forever. Who would have thought a simple picnic could have such a profound effect? She hoped she wasn't somehow overthinking it. That all this was just her projecting some romantic hope onto the situation. Like the drowning man clutching at any straw or twig and thinking it will save them. Was that was she was doing? Clinging to the first man in, oh so long that had made her feel something other than regret. She considered that and everything that had transpired between them. The quiet moments alone with him, the contentment she felt, the fire of attraction that ignited every time he said her name, or looked at her in a certain way, the small quiet voice inside her telling her to trust him, that with him she'd be safe. It just felt..., Caitriona took a deep breath and let it out, it felt right. She was about to debate that fact further with herself when her own phone chimed. "Sam..." She breathed, recognising the number and reading the message. An invitation to ‘hit the town’ one last time before the grind of filming settled in for another season. She shot back a simple reply and added her usual advice to stay safe and have fun. Hitting the town wasn’t really her thing at the best of times and she was pretty certain it would not at all be something she would feel like doing after putting Johnathon on the plane later that night. She tucked her phone back into her pocket and watched as Johnathon made his way down to her, dodging a well hit cricket ball in the process. “All sorted?”

“For the moment.” He nodded, coming to stand beside her, the blanket they’d been sitting on looped loosely over one arm. “My team will get things rolling so I can hit the ground running in the morning. One more case to the list.” A warm hand reached out and rested on her forearm, “You know, you didn’t have to go just then if you didn’t want to.”

“Just giving you some space,” Caitriona gave him a soft smile and laid a hand over his, “In case it was not for civilian ears.”

“Nah.” He flashed a good natured grin, “Your ears are of acceptable security clearance.”

“Oh really?” Caitriona laughed and edged closer to him, close enough to let their shoulders lean against each other, breathing in the fresh air and the warmth of Johnathon’s presence.

“Yes.” Johnathon reached up and slowly tucked a loose strand of hair behind her one ear. Caitriona’s eyes drifted shut for a moment, his touch sending a pleasant tingle down her spine before his hand dropped back to the rail, “Top secret clearance material right there.” His deep voice sounded, only adding to her little personal struggle between head, heart and various other parts of her body.

No, Caitriona decided. She wasn't drowning and Johnathon most certainly wasn't a projection. Of if he was, she was rapidly approaching the point where she didn't care. “Well, now that I’ve passed security,” She knew it would probably fuel the flames but she craved the solid contact with him. Caitriona was trying not to think about the fact that in a hand full hours, any chance for contact would disappear for at least a month, possibly more now, given this latest phone call and she was determined to make the most of it while she could. “You up for a walk?” She said, sliding her fingers between his, “There’s something I want to show you.”

“Something?” One blond eyebrow raised, accompanied by a curious half grin.

“That’s right.” She answered cryptically as they pushed off the rail, their steps loud on the wooden planks underfoot.

“Do I get any hints or are you testing my powers of deduction?” Johnathon asked, hands twinning together, gently swinging back and forth as they walked along, following the path as it meandered in and around the various plants and shrubs beside the creek.

“Nope. No hints.” Caitriona smiled, pulling him closer until each step brought their bodies brushing against each other, “Deduce away.”
“Hmm, let’s see here,” Intelligent blue eyes scanned their surroundings, then settled back to her face, “Can’t be a famous something.”
“What makes you say that?” Caitriona tugged his hand, they approached a small junction in the path, angling them off, going in a direction that wasn’t much more than an overgrown trail. “Exhibit 1,” Johnathon nodded towards the foliage that was gradually closing in on them, “Unless it’s a bridge or something?”

One neat dark eyebrow raised questioningly, wondering how he had arrived at the particular idea. “Listen.” He whispered pulling them to a halt, eyes flicking towards the sound of the small stream running over rocks as it drifted through the still air.

“Not a bridge.” Caitriona’s head rocked from side to side, “But you’re getting warmer. Come on.” They set off again, the narrowing path having the unfortunate effect of forcing them to walk single file.

“Waterwheel?” Johnathon quizzed, smiling to himself as Caitriona bent in front of him to brush aside several small boughs of an enormous willow tree, privately admiring the view.

“Nope.” She smiled back at him over her shoulder, reveling in the comfortable ease that was flowing between them, “It should be just through here.”

“You sure you know where you’re going?” Johnathon commented, just managing to catch a sprung loaded branch that his expedition leader had missed as she was ducking and weaving between the boughs. It would have left a nasty mark had it hit her. It never got the chance, safely captured and subdued in his hand.

“Course I do.” Caitriona swiveled on heel, “Would I lead you astray?” She smiled broadly and pushed aside the last branch blocking their path.

Johnathon was considering his answer to that when they emerged into a small clearing, not much bigger than the two of them, the water of the creek bounding them on one side, the large willow tree and wild foliage on the other. It was, in fact was, quite the picture and Johnathon knew precisely why it would have caught Caitriona’s eye. Beautiful and yet, just that little bit wild and spontaneous around its edges.

“Impressive.” Johnathon blew out a soft whistle of appreciation, “Didn’t think you’d be able find something like this this close to the city.”

“It’s the only park I’ve found that has anything like it.” She rested a hand on his bicep, “But, we’re not there yet.”

“Not there yet?” Blond brows knit, “What do you mean?”

Caitriona leaned against him, steadying herself with a grip on his forearm, “Take off your shoes.”
A tiny mischievous glint sparked in the corner of her eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“Take off your shoes.” Caitriona restated, hands on her hips, eyes flicking to his feet.
Both blond eyebrows arched nearly to his hairline.

“I think you’ll like it,” She explained, taking off her own shoes then waiting for him to do the same, “Trust me.” The words were out of her mouth before she realised it and her eyes shot up to met his gaze. She hadn’t said them with any seriousness, just as people said them in common conversation every day. No big deal.

Blue eyes blinked slowly before Johnathon knelt. Ordinarily no. But Johnathon’s very recent past had attached extra meaning to the common saying. Caitriona looked down at the bowed blond head, nimble lean fingers making short work of the laces. “You might want to roll your pants up too.” She said quietly, resting a hand on his shoulder, so close to the slope of his neck that she could feel the crisp edge of his collar just below her thumb.

Johnathon did as instructed, rolling the heavy material of his pants half way up his calf. “Okay, now that you’ve got me barefoot and looking like Huck Finn,” He gave her a soft smile, “Where exactly are we going?”

Caitriona took his hand and lead him to the water’s edge. The stream’s flow was slow here, split down the middle by a large flat rock, flanked on either side by a roughly made stone weir, that spanned the distance from one bank to another. “Not far now.” She pointed towards the middle of
the water, “Just to there.”

Johnathon nodded, crouching and placing on hand on the bank as he stepped down into the water, “Holy shit!” He let out a strangled breath and flashed an outrageous look to the bank. “Where’d this water come from? The artic?”

“Not quite,” Caitriona smirked, “Just the highlands. And here I thought Australian’s were tough.” “Says the woman still standing on the bank.” Johnathon took a small step, “Woah.” He dropped a hand to grip one of the stacked rocks almost slipping on its moss covered surface.

“Careful.” Caitriona warned reaching forward to steady him and at the same time taking a small step towards the water.

“Hang on.” Johnathon stopped her, carefully turning and offering his broad shirt clad back to her, “Hop on. One of us with hypothermia is enough.”

Caitriona smiled. She’d been hoping he would do that. She hadn’t asked or expected it. She took a deep breath, feeling the warmth of his skin through his shirt as she wrapped her arms around his neck, but she’d been hoping. Strong arms locked beneath her knees as she lifted her legs around his waist.

“Okay?” His head half turned, his voice vibrating through his back into her chest as he straightened, lifting her comfortably in a piggyback cradle.

“Perfect.” Caitriona murmured, settling her chin on his shoulder, “Think we can make to the middle without going swimming?”

“Can’t guarantee it.” Johnathon took a few uncertain steps, “But as least now, if I fall,” His cheek twitched into a half grin, “you’re coming with me Caitriona.”

She smiled against the soft skin of his neck, the sloping muscles shifting beneath her hands as he moved, walking slowly picking their way carefully along. At this point, Caitriona was just about willing fall into a pit of lava so long as Johnathon was holding her on the way down.

After few more steps and the odd over balance or two, they made it to the middle. Johnathon bent his knees, gently depositing Caitriona on to the mostly flat, dry surface of a large boulder. The water flowing smoothly around its edges, creating a private safe haven in the eddies of the moving water. He braced his arms on the hard surface and lifted to sit beside her, barely enough room for the two of them side by side. “Not that this isn’t a pretty little spot,” Johnathon’s head twisted in her direction, “But, couldn’t we have admired it from the bank?” He flexed legs, lifting his feet from the cold water, the skin slightly pink.

“Yeess,” Caitriona drawled, “We could have, but then you would have missed it.”

“Missed what?”

Caitriona smiled and scooted forward, hanging her legs over the edge, pointing a finger towards the underside of the rock that they were sitting on.

Blue eyes narrowed skeptically, “Is this some type of acclimatisation intervention or something?”

He shuffled forward, “Trying to get me used to the freezing elements of Scotland?”

“No pain, no gain.” Caitriona gave him a cheeky one shouldered shrug.

“Alright,” Johnathon said, sucking in a sharp breath as his feet touched the water, “What am I looking for?”

“You’ll know it when you see it.” She grinned, thoroughly enjoying their little interplay.

Leaning on one hand, Johnathon bent, studying the stacked stones beneath the much larger one Caitriona was sitting on, “I’m seeing rocks and oh look a water spider.”

“Wait, what?” Caitriona sat up straight in alarm, drawing her legs up closer to her body and looking nervously at the edge.

“Oops, my mistake.” A hand lifted, water dripping down his wrist, “It’s just a stick.” He twisted the object back and forth, grinning at her, before tossing it over his shoulder.

“Not funny.” The smile on her face totally incongruent with her words.

“It was a little funny.” Johnathon chuckled, ”What happened to no pain, no gain?”

“Uh huh.” Caitriona quipped, a smile painting her face from ear to ear, “Enjoy your time in the water there 007.”
“Harsh.” Blue eyes crinkled at their corners, the light sparkling in their blue depths. He took a small step towards her side of the rock, “Now,” Johnathon planted a hand on the rock beside her knee and bent, studying the stones, “Let’s see here..” His voice trailed off, his other hand disappearing, reaching under the ledge of the boulder, his back bending further to get a clearer view.

Caitriona smiled softly and waited, hoping she hadn’t been totally off course with this idea. The blue eyes lifted to hers, “1803?” He said, running a damp finger over the rough numbers, nearly faded now, carved into a single rounded stone. “Construction date?”

She shook her head gently, “This wasn’t built until the early 1900’s.” Caitriona nodded toward the far side of the bank, “According to that plate over there.”

“She’s right.” Johnathon stood up and crossed damp arms over his chest, considering this new information. Caitriona watched as he puzzled over the stone. It took less time than she thought it would for him to arrive at an answer. “Ballast stones.” He smiled at her, “These are ballast stones.”

Johnathon bent again and studied the object in question a second time, “Probably from an old sailing ship or something.”

In fact, Caitriona had only realised that the place was made of ballast stone after their little visit to the museum and seeing something similar there. She’d made the connection and thought that it might be of interest to her tall companion as well. Judging from the smile on that handsome face of his, she’d been right. Caitriona watched as he studied the stone a moment longer, then his eyes lifted to hers, “Thank you.” He said quietly, resting a hand on her leg, just above her knee.

“You’re welcome.” She covered his hand, then nudged him with her leg, gently encouraging Johnathon to slide sideways, until he was facing her, leaning against the rock wall, bracketed on either side by her long legs, “Did you like it?”

“Did you like it?” Caitriona asked softly, slowly running her hands along his forearms, feeling the slight flex in the muscle beneath them as she worked her way higher. The old ballast stone wasn’t the only reason she’d brought him here. The park could be busy, bustling with locals, with tourists, with the public. Sometimes it was nice to have a small space that was a little more private.

“I did.” Crystal blue eyes looked unblinkingly up at her, Johnathon’s torso leaning towards her, “It was a very interesting ‘something’.”

“Was it?” Caitriona held his gaze, slowly tracing the curve of his shoulder, her fingers gliding up the slope of his neck, her heart beginning to pick up speed with the fire coursing through her blood.

“Yes.” Johnathon’s voice deepened as he leaned in, “It was.” She felt, rather than heard the words, his mouth a bare hair’s breathe from her lips. Trust me, she’d said. Would he, she wondered, his pulse beating fast and strong beneath her fingertips, “Caitriona...”

“Come here.” She breathed. No more time for words, just the gentle pressure of his lips on hers. Caitriona’s eyes slid closed, letting the warmth of his kiss flow through her. Hands settled on her waist, her own fingers threading through the short strands of his hair, holding him to her as the kiss deepened. Caitriona was playing with fire and she knew it. She let out a soft sigh as his tongue found hers, warm hands snaking their way across her back, long fingers splaying out against her cloth covered skin and pulling her closer. Her knees lifted, long limbs locking around his hips, his chest pressed against hers, mouths slowly exploring each other, her body quickly becoming lost in the touch and taste of him.

Then the world came rushing back at her as a loud noise sounded, startled them both. Like teenagers being caught by their parents, mouths broke apart and heads turned towards the source of the noise. A large flock of birds, evidently spooked, scattered off in various directions across the sky. The arms still looped protectively around her, tightened a moment, drawing her up close, twisting slightly, squarely placing himself between Caitriona and the source of the disturbance.

Blue eyes scanned the bank, from their discarded belongings to the tree line and beyond.

Something had caused the animals to flee.
Perhaps a fox?

Maybe a cat or even a dog?

Or something far more sinister.
Leverage

Chapter Notes

Be warned - Strong language and some sensitive content - including implied sexual violence.
Please don't read if you are sensitive to this material or if you are triggered by this type of content.
It is not graphic, but it is there.
This chapter can be skipped without really doing too much damage to the story. So if you need/want then please do.
Take care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He swallowed the liquid, enjoying the warmth as the whiskey slid down his throat. Today had been a very good day. He watched as page on the screen updated. $50,000 for few days work wasn’t so bad. Particularly when he hadn’t had to off anyone for that. Not that he didn’t mind killing. It didn’t bother him in the least. Money was money. If he had to relieve someone of the privilege of living their life, so be it. As long as the money went in his account, he really didn't give a fuck. Nothing personal. Just business.
Dark eyes looked out across the bar to the small tables beyond. She was a beauty, make no mistake. He’d almost be sorry when this job was over. She made great scenery if nothing else. He lifted the glass, sipping on the amber liquid and watching his quarry over the rim of his glass. He'd never really been the jealous type, but he’d almost wished that he’d been able to trade places with the blonde man. He was sure he was going to get a front row seat to real life, out in nature, hardcore fucking, in all its glory at that damn creek. If it had been him, he’d have fucked her into next week. Depending on his current client's response, he still might do exactly that. What else was a man expected to do if he found himself at a loose end in Glasgow. Judging by the way she carried herself, strong and self-assured, it would be extremely pleasurable to break her. She’d probably put up a fight. Ones like her always did, but, in the end, she’d break. Just like all the others before her.
Dark eyes narrowed, he’d take his time with her, specially if that one, his eyes flicked to the blond investigator leaning casually on the counter, was out of the way. With any luck his current client would issue a terminate command. He hadn’t killed in months and like any skill, constant practice was the key to maintaining the level of perfection he desired. Let shit slide and things like that tended to go one of two ways. You either ended up in prison or dead. Either option wasn’t something he wanted on his career path.
He put the empty tumbler on the bar and signaled the pretty blond waitress for another. Pulling out his phone, one finger flicked through the scores of images he had taken that day. He scowled. If he hadn’t of slipped and moved the only fucking branch in the whole damn forest that had just happen to have every fucking bird for a million miles sitting on it, who knows what would have happened. Naked pictures of those two fucking would have been worth triple the price he was getting. Of that he was sure. His client had a set of very particular instructions and fuck pictures of those two would have netted him a veritable windfall. Still, the pictures he had would do well enough. The park, the creek, the little romantic dinner they’d had at some two bit restaurant. The images were clear, high quality and in the right hands, were plenty compromising enough to be of decent value.
These were good. A sex tape would have been better.
The phone in his hands rang, “Yeah?” He knew far better than use names.
Anyone’s name.

Ever.
Even on a burner phone.
“What’s the situation?” The upper class American accented voice sounded in his ear.
He swirled the liquid, the ice chinking in the glass as it spiraled in a small circle, eyes returning to
his target. She was sitting drinking coffee while she waited for the blond man. “She’s staying
here.” He waited a moment, “He is on his way to you.” Dark eyes glinted with evil intent, “Flying
to New York.” He was not above a little psychological torture, even with the person currently
paying the bills. He took the ensuing silence as a sign he’d been at least partially successful. A
dark smile spread across his face. That was more like it.

“New York?” He wasn’t sure if he heard excitement or fear in his employer’s voice, “Not London?
Are you certain?”
He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket, “I’m looking at his booking details right here.
Glasgow to New York. Departing 20:45” He refolded the document, “So yes. I’m certain.”

“And the woman?”
“Staying put.” He took a swallow of whiskey, “I’ve got a source who tells me she’s filming on set
tomorrow. Some show called Outlander. You want me to,” He licked his lips, thinking about his
earlier intentions, “remove her from the equation?” The dark smile grew, “Maybe teach her some
little life lessons?” Or seven.
A long deadly silence of contemplation echoed over the phone and his heart began to pick up with
anticipation.
The things he could do. He shifted in his seat. This could turn out to be more than a
good day after all.

“No.” He heard the tell-tale sound of a lighter snapping shut, “Not yet.” A deep breath exhaled,
blowing out a lungful of smoke, cigarette or cigar, he couldn’t tell, “I want more.”
“It’ll cost.” He set the glass down, twisting it back and forth, studying the pattern of the movement
in the liquid, “$100,000 a week and all expenses. First week in advance.” Money would make up
for his disappointing let down. It wasn’t as good as seeing the life sucked from some pathetic
victim. But it was close second.

“And what precisely does that get me?” Another deep breath, followed by an equally long exhale.
Cigar, he concluded. Cigarette would be less inhale. “Whatever you want.” He replied simply. For
that money he couldn’t care less. Whatever the client wanted, he’d get. He was fairly certain there
was no job this client could possibly think up that would be too vile, too evil, too reprehensible or
too abhorrent for him. In his world, anything goes. Death. Murder. Rape. Torture. Whatever. It was
all the same to him. He’d done it all before and would happily do it again. Particularly for a
hundred grand a week.

“Agreed.” the staccato sound of fingers dancing over the keys of a computer, “Whatever I want, no
exceptions.” It wasn’t a question.
He flicked the screen on his phone, returning it to his bank account and hit refresh. Just like than
another $200,000 was added to the total, “No exceptions.” He smiled, “What did you have in
mind?”

“Get closer to her.” Another pause and the long draught of the cigar, “I want to know everything.”
He glanced towards Caitriona who was standing and making her way towards the blond man,
“What about him?”
“Just get close to the woman,” He recognised a kindred tone in the voice addressing him, “I have
other plans for him.”
He started gathering his belongings, “Closer?” He tossed the last of his drink down and stood up,
“How close?”
“That I leave to your discretion.”
He smiled at the ambiguity of possibilities of the instruction , “Just be sure to send all the evidence
you can. Pictures, videos, recording, I don’t particularly care. Just get it. Daily reports.” There was
another dark pause, “That woman just might be the leverage I am looking for.”
He ended the call and started towards the long row of escalators, hanging back just far enough,
following Johnathon and Caitriona towards the upper boarding gates, “Let the games begin.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll post the Johnathon and/or Caitriona chapter next week as per my fortnight posting thing. This was little weekly tide over chapter while the world deals with GOT. :)
Caitriona lifted the cup from the saucer, idly twisting it back and forth while she watched him. Tall, with strong square shoulders that tapered to his trim waist, Johnathon was standing at the rental desk, returning the car that he’d rented for the weekend. She swallowed the last sip of her coffee, pleasantly appreciating the view. The weekend had turned out to be a spectacular success. They had laughed, talked, and, Caitriona smiled softly, recalling their afternoon, grown decidedly closer. Probably would have been a great deal closer than she expected. Far less than she wanted. Had it not been for the rowdy flock of birds spoiling the moment, god knows where they would have ended up. No, her mind sounded, Caitriona was pretty sure she knew exactly where they would have ended up. Still, she was supposed to be taking things slow so it wasn’t a total loss she guessed. Any concerns Caitriona had about Johnathon not coming back or about whether Johnathon felt the same connection between them that she had been feeling, had disappeared entirely. Caitriona had even relaxed about the whole Sam situation, putting it to the very back of her mind and was now feeling cautiously optimistic about her and Johnathon’s romantic future. No, she corrected herself again, not her future. Their prospective future. It felt a little strange staying that. Even when she’d been with Tony for months, even at the very end, she’d never thought of things in terms of the togetherness. It had always been hers and his, yours and mine. Caitriona didn’t know if that was necessarily a bad thing. It was more a case that it was all that the relationship was capable of sustaining. Maybe that had been part of the problem. Or one of many problems with her past relationships. There was no real way to tell now. It was all conjecture at this point. In any case it felt good to be at least starting to feel that there was something more and that maybe, just maybe, there was another way to making relationships work. It was a still little terrifying, and a whole lot exhilarating to let her mind wander unhindered towards the future of us, ours and theirs.

And yet, she watched as Johnathon leaned forward onto the desk, one strong arm flexing as he lifted it to sign some paper or another and drop the keys on the desk, Caitriona was acutely aware that the whole being in this relationship thing was still in its infancy. Things were always great in the beginnings. You get hearts and roses, the butterflies in the stomach, the wanting, the needing. The heartbeat that speeds up when they look your way or send you a message or touch you. Oh yes, Caitriona knew all too well, the beginnings of relationships are great. It’s the afterwards where the potential real damage occurs. She rested the edge of the cup against her lip. Caitriona suspected she was a little further along the damage recovery path than her handsome blond haired partner over there. She was, however, under no illusions that if this was to be successful, there were a lot things to work out and to work on. That was okay, she nodded to herself and took a sip of her coffee, they’d agreed to take all the time they both needed. It seemed like a sensible way forward to her. Taking things slow and steady. Though, she sighed ruefully, there had been several times in the past 48 hrs when her body had had other ideas. Every time he kissed her, her mind helpfully provided, or touched her, or when he said her name in that deep voice of his. Caitriona took a deep breathe and set the cup down and settled back in the chair, crossing her long legs at the knee and smoothing out an errant crease in the fabric along the hem of her shirt, trying to get her mind back on the ‘take it slow’ train. She dealt with the crease and then looked up just in time to see Johnathon slip a hand into his pocket, causing his pants to tightened slightly across his backside. “Sweet Jesus..” Caitriona mumbled, shifting in her seat then finishing the last drops of her coffee. She cleared her throat and took a deep breathe, pushing some very inappropriate thoughts to the back of her mind. It probably wasn’t the best idea to get worked up in a public airport. “Excuse me. Caitriona?” A woman’s voice sounded beside her and she turned her head to address...
the speaker.

“Yes?”

“Oh my god, I’m sorry to bother you, I’m such a huge fan of Outlander,” the middle aged woman gushed with a beaming smile, “I can’t believe this.” The woman produced a phone, “Can I take a quick photo with you?”

“Of course.” Caitriona smiled and stood up, thankful for the distraction. Photo taken and a few minutes of small talk exchanged and the woman was on her way, happily walking back to a group of what Caitriona surmised was her family. She gave them a final smile and a small wave before turning back and looking for Johnathon. He was standing facing her. The car successfully returned, his bag slung over his shoulder, leaning on one arm watching her quietly. Caitriona gathered her purse and walked towards him, “Sorry about that.” She said when she got to his side. Fan interaction like this wasn’t an everyday occurrence just yet, but it was on the increase. “Duty called.” Her blue eyes flicked in the direction of the woman and her family and back to Johnathon’s face.

“So I saw.” He smiled softly, “You’ve made her day by the looks of things.”

“Just part of the job.” Caitriona commented as they turned and started walking down the long corridor towards the secure area in preparation for the boarding call, “The public part of the job I’m afraid.” She wrapped a hand around the strap of her bag in order to stop herself from reaching for him. “Sometimes I have separate public me and private me.” The last thing she wanted was new speculation popping up on social media, complete with pictures about who she was and was not currently involved with. Not yet. Caitriona intended to keep these particular relationship cards extremely close to her chest, at least until she was certain where this was headed. That meant that for the moment she would be extremely cautious about displaying anything remotely connecting herself to Johnathon to anyone, let alone the viewing public. Just being here with him was a risk, she got that, but she wasn’t about to lock herself away from the world. She didn’t exactly want to open the flood gates into her private life either.

Caitriona wondered if Johnathon would understand. It was different for her. She’d inhabited this world for a good while now. Granted she’d had the benefit of experience, hanging around the peripheries during her modelling days but since Outlander, Caitriona had accepted that with acting success came the public interaction responsibility and the loss of certain ‘everyday’ privileges. She understood that. That didn’t mean that Johnathon, a man who had literally spent his entire life as far as humanly possible removed from modelling, acting and every and any aspect of the entertainment industry, was ready for the harsh scrutiny of the public glare or that he would necessarily understand that for her, it just had to be this way. It was part of her job. A part she considered quite important. Caitriona glanced up at him as they stepped onto the escalator, privately debating if she should at least try and explain this to him now. Whether by design or coincidence, Caitriona was relieved when Johnathon leaned on the handrail, extending the gap between them and keeping his eyes forward. Maybe he understood more than she was giving him credit for.

They reached the top and headed towards the private security entrance that would put some separation between the general public and more cloistered privacy of the first class waiting area.

“Does it bother you?” Johnathon asked quietly as they walked along the mostly empty gangway towards his designated boarding gate, “Having to make the separation between private and public?”

“Sometimes. Social media can be brutal, but on the whole, with what I do, losing a certain amount of privacy is a given.” Caitriona said honestly, “It’s not like I’m a movie star anything. It’s all pretty tame really. Just the occasional picture or autograph.”

“Is that something you want?” His blond head tilted in her direction, “Big movie star fame?”

“No. Not the fame.” Her long hair swayed from side to side as her head shook, “I don’t really care about any of that. I do want to get decent roles. Things that are interesting and challenging. Parts
that I want to do. Problem is, a lot of the time all the good roles get snapped up by the so called ‘stars’ I guess.”

Johnathon lifted his bag onto the loading conveyor and collected his boarding pass, “Can’t have one without the other huh?”

Caitriona nodded slowly, “Not really. No.”

Blue eyes locked with his as she reached up to fix his collar that was still poking up from where he’d removed his bag, “Welcome to television and the age of the internet.” She let her hand rest on his shoulder a moment longer than she strictly should. Caitriona had seen the carnage social media and public scrutiny could do to relationships, families, hell, even friends. Maybe now wasn’t the best time, but she wanted to him to know exactly what it meant to be around her. It wasn’t too late for Johnathon to back out with either of them being hurt to the point of complete destruction.

Johnathon lifted a hand and gently brushed several long strands of her hair back behind her shoulder, blue eyes searching hers, “Not trying to warn me off are you?”

Was she?

Standing here now with him, seconds away from setting Johnathon on a plane, the stark reality of real life suddenly settling around her. Surprisingly the answer came with more certainty than she expected, “No.” Caitriona caught the hand and stepped closer, “It’s just…” She took a breath, “This. What I do, it can be complicated.” Caitriona looked up at him, “I just wanted you to know what you’re getting into.” A loud chime sounded and a tinny voice announced the immediate boarding of Johnathon’s plane. “Timing.” She sighed softly.

“Caitriona?” He smiled gently and let his hand trail down her arm until warm fingers threaded between his own, drawing their linked hands in the protective shadow of their coats. “Every career has its downside. Mine’s not exactly a picnic either.” The fingers contracted slightly around her own, “Kinda something we can’t avoid.” He took a small step closer to her, “Guess we’re just going to have muddle through it all.”

Blue eyes lifted to his, “Together?”

A broad smile graced his handsome features “Together Caitriona.” Johnathon’s deep voice wrapped around her like a soft warm blanket on a cold winter’s night, “Though,” He squeezed her hand and tilted his head towards a group of fellow passengers walking towards them, having responded to boarding call, “Kinda wishing I said goodbye to you in the car.” Reluctantly their hands dropped and they took a step apart.

“You and I both.” Caitriona laughed softly, “Small oversight on our parts.”

“A bit.” Johnathon blew out a breath and flashed her a ruefully look, “Let’s not do that again.” He stepped aside to let a large group in the boarding que go ahead of them, among them the woman from downstairs who shot him a strange look but continued on their way without further incident. “Excuse me, Mr Chase?” The boarding assistant looked down the line at him, “Gold class can board immediately.” She raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“It’s okay.” Johnathon gave her a slight wave and then looked at Caitriona, a soft look of honesty gracing his face that he hoped she understood, “Happy to be last to board.”

Caitriona held his gaze for a long series of heartbeats and let the warmth of his words soak into her soul and just enjoy the last moments, at least in person, that they would have together for who knows how long. It took more time than she thought and less time than she wanted for them to reach the gate door. The rest of the passengers boarded and squared away. All but one. Johnathon handed his boarding pass the young attendant who ran it through the scanner and returned it, clearly she was waiting for the blond man to board so she could move on to the next flight. “Think you better get going.” Caitriona said softly, giving his arm a gentle squeeze and looking down the empty gangway towards the aircraft door, “Plane is likely to take off without you shortly.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Johnathon smiled softly then leaned in and gently kissed her cheek, wanting desperately to move an inch to the left but knowing he really couldn’t, the place was already filling with the next round of passengers. “Really regretting our little oversight right about now.”

Caitriona drew him into a quick hug, lingering close to him, knowing she shouldn’t, but she couldn’t help it. It felt good to have those strong arms close around her and she was quickly
drifting towards a point where she wasn’t sure that she ever wanted them to let go. “Definitely going to fix that next time,” Caitriona breathed, the scent of him surrounding her. She reluctantly let her arms slide from his shoulders and took a step back, giving his hand one last squeeze before letting it go completely. “Text me when you land so I know you arrived in one piece?” She tried to keep her tone light, but part of her wanted to walk down that gangway with him and never look back.

Johnathon adjusted his bag on his shoulder, “Will do.” He said softly, then he paused, eyes searching hers for the longest moment. His feet were heavy, caught between wanting to stay and the certain knowledge of the responsibility he had waiting for him in New York.

“Sir,” The young attendant called to him.

“One moment.” He said, not taking his eyes from Caitriona’s face, instead reaching for her hand and gently pulling her with him as he stepped through the boarding ramp doors, stopping just inside the metallic frame.

“Sir! I’m sorry but only passengers are allowed past this point.”

“Just give us one minute.” Johnathon asked, finally turning to address the young woman, handing her a card that he pulled from his wallet. She inspected the card and let out a sigh, “One minute,” She handed the card back, already closing one half of the split gangway doors, “The plane has to go. It’ll miss its window.”

Blue eyes found Caitriona’s again, “One minute.” He murmured, the air stilling around them as the second section of door half closed, effectively shielding them from the outside world.

“What are you doing?” Caitriona asked, her heart already knowing the answer, its pace increasing at a rate entirely disproportionate to the amount of energy she was expending.

“I can’t leave,” He whispered, one hand sliding around her waist, settling in the small of her back and closing the distance between them, “Without doing this.” Fingertips tracing their way along her jaw, until his warm hand cupped her cheek, slowly pulling her mouth to his, kissing her with steady intent. Caitriona leaned into him, curling her fingers around his collar and holding him to her, sighing softly as he deepened the kiss, his tongue finding hers, strong fingers splaying across her back, drawing her tightly against him, pressing against each other from thigh to breast bone.

Johnathon slowly drew the kiss to a close, resting his forehead against hers. Caitriona felt him take a breath as her eyes fluttered open. Blue eyes studied hers as very close distance, his thumb gently stroking her cheek. For a timeless moment, they stood, eyes locked with each other. Each of them coming to a stunning conclusion at the exact same time. They could see it. Right there in each other's eyes. Feel it almost crackling in the air around them. Sense it in the secret parts of their souls. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. The door slowly began to reopen and they reluctantly separated. The anxious face of the attendant appeared from around the door's edge, “You have to board Sir. Now.” The woman turned to Caitriona, motioning for her to return through the door to the lounge, “Ma’am, I need to clear the gangway.”

“I’ll talk to you soon.” Johnathon's eyes found her, “I promise.” Then he turned and gave Caitriona one last look over his shoulder and sprinted up the ramp, the heavy aircraft door closing behind him.

Caitriona let out a long breath and stepped back into the harsh reality of the outside world. She wandered over to the large plate glass windows that separated terminal from runway. Fingers curled around the handrail as blue eyes watched the aircraft slowly taxi to its designated runway. She watched as the plane built speed, racing down the runway until it lifted off, the wheels tucking in beneath the long body, the coloured flashing lights diminishing until they disappeared into the inky blackness of night. A single lone tear trickled down her cheek without her permission and she reached up to brush it way.

“Planes are a curious thing,” A man’s voice sounded from a few feet away. “Can’t wait for the plane when it’s arriving.” Eyes the colour of coffee regarded her, “Want to delay them when they are leaving.”

Caitriona smiled sadly, barely acknowledging the stranger, her eyes intent on searching the dark
sky for any last remaining hints of Johnathon. She never found any, just more tears that tracked silently down her cheek. She didn’t know why she was reacting like this or maybe she did and she wasn’t quite ready to admit that herself yet.

“Family?” The man offered her a clean white tissue from a small travel pack that he produced from his pocket.

“Friend.” Caitriona said, politely declining the tissue and excusing herself. There was nothing more to be gained from standing in the airport, wishing for just one more minute. She’d take a taxi home, she supposed, perhaps have a long hot bath and then turn in for the evening. She gave one last look over her shoulder to the empty runway. Please arrive safely, her mind chanted, Please. Please. Please. She closed her eyes and sent a wish skyward to whomever might have been listening. Arrive safe and then come back to me as soon as you can. Caitriona turned and started to make her way down the concourse towards the exit and then home.

Dark eyes watched her leave, tucking the packet of tissues back into his coat. He pushed of the rail and started after the tall woman. Always careful to stay just far enough behind to never draw attention. Just close enough to hear everything. To see anything of importance. Closer had been the instruction. That’s exactly what he intended to be.

Chapter End Notes

I know. I did a bad thing. I separated them.. AGAIN. What can I say, they have work right? They have to figure out how to make this work right? Unless Caitriona quits? Or Johnathon quits? Long distance is hard y’all.

Next chapter in a couple weeks. Thanks everyone and a special thanks to all who take the time to comment every now and again. It has kept me going when I really wanted to close the word document and let it be. Cheers to you all.
That Guy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He readjusted his sunglasses for the hundredth time in what seemed like the last hour in a vain effort to blank out the glare from the harsh make up trailer lights that he was sure had been turned up to maximum just to spite him. Every single one of the fuckers seemed to be directly focused with laser precision directly into his eyes. Between the light and the feeling that he’d wiped his face with sandpaper, he would have much preferred to spend the morning sleeping off the night before. Trying to keep movement to a minimum, he slumped a little further down in the chair, stretching his long legs out in front of himself and putting every ounce of concentration he possessed into not unloading the entire contents of his stomach onto the floor. He should have known better than to mix his drinks last night, really he should. He’d started with beer, which had been fine for the first handful or so rounds but things had taken a bad turn when some woman, who he had very little recollection of, had coerced him in trying some sweet tasting cocktail concoction, which had in turn lead to one or, his brows wrinkled, maybe five more. It hadn’t seemed so bad at first, but right now however, the sickly sweet concoction was sitting about half way up his throat with a seemingly solid upward intention towards ejection.

“Hi Sam.”

The tall man winced behind the dark glasses as the cheery voice reverberated through his head, bouncing around and hitting him in the back of the eyes, doing nothing to ease his current level of self induced pain. Sam grunted a reply and mumbled something which he hoped would pass as an hello and returned to the more pressing issue of vomit mitigation while the woman started getting his hair ready for days filming. This really wasn’t his fault. Or at least not all of it was his fault. He hadn’t meant to be out all night and he wouldn’t have been if Caitriona had of been out with him like he’d assumed she would be. The incessant pounding in his head was testament to how badly that plan had fallen through. Not once, but both nights this weekend, Caitriona had ditched him. Sam frowned. That guy. That’s who it was really at fault here. Who shows up at Cait’s door that early in the morning anyway, his mind spat.

The way Sam figured it, Caitriona was just getting to the point where she was ready to get back into the swing of seeing someone again. At least from his perspective anyway. Caitriona finally seemed like she’d left that cheating man whore of a leech behind her and Sam had thought that Caitriona was probably heading towards a time when the window of opportunity that she had once closed on him might just be reopening. Time heals everything right? Maybe she'd see that there was a chance for them if she'd only give him a shot. One shot was all he wanted. Just one. If she ever gave him another chance, he wouldn't fuck it up again. He'd thought this weekend might have been the time he was waiting for. Caitriona'd come out with him after all on Friday night and they’d had a great time. \\n
Sam was certain he’d have been in with a shot if this new prick had showed up on Caitriona’s doorstep. Sam still wasn’t entirely sure who the guy was or what the fuck he was doing kissing Caitriona. Whoever the guy was, he was seriously messing things up. Sam decided he didn’t like him. Relegating the stranger to his permanent shit list seemed fair to Sam. Caitriona needs to be careful, he mused. He was her friend. She knew him, had known him for a good while. Surely that had to count for something to Caitriona. Speaking of Caitriona, Sam cracked open one eye and slid the glasses down his nose, where the fuck was she anyway? His head angled it towards the large clock above the door. She should have been here by now.

As if the universe was suddenly listening, the door issued inwards and Caitriona’s dark head turned his way as she stepped inside the trailer. She gave him a quick smile and started shucking out of her coat before she claimed the makeup chair beside him.
“Morning Sam..oh Jesus.” Caitriona was unable to hide the surprise in her voice, “Big night out huh?”

“Mmphh.” He grunted, somewhat placated that Caitriona was at least here now, “Thanks for the ditch by the way.” He slowly lifted the glasses from his face, not wasting any time with niceties and getting straight to what Sam considered the most pressing point floating around his fuddled mind at the minute.

“Ditch?” Caitriona’s dark brows knit, “I didn’t ditch you Sam.” She held up a hand, “And before you say it, that half drunken text last night does not an invitation make. Besides,” She turned back to the mirror, allowing the hair and make up team to get started on preparing her for the day, “I told you I wasn’t free this weekend.”

“Oh right,” Sam slid forward in the chair and sat up, trying desperately to ignore the wave of nausea that came with any sudden movement, “You spend all weekend with him then?” He jabbed a finger in her direction before she had the chance to answer him, “I think that guy is bad influence if you ask me.”

“That guy?” Caitriona gave him a strange look, not entirely sure that she liked where this conversation was going, or for that matter Sam’s tone.

“Ye ken who I mean.” He reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose. “The breakfast guy or whoever he was.”

Indeed Caitriona did know exactly who Sam meant, but she wasn’t about to discuss Johnathon or anything of an any substance with Sam while he still half shot and clearly in a mood. Today was shaping up to be an awesome first day back at filming. She turned back towards the mirror and accepted a coffee from one of the assistants. Caitriona had often found that it was sometimes better to just let Sam stew in a moment or two of deliberate silence when he got like this. Obnoxious and juvenile. She leaned forward and started thumbing through the latest script page by page, scanning the pages for changes, letting the silence hang in the air and giving the makeup artist time to finish curling the last section of her hair.

“You missed a good night.” Sam commented after a good long while, their hair and makeup almost complete.

“Looks like it.” Caitriona mused, still studying the papers without looking up. Going by Sam’s presenting appearance this morning, even if Johnathon hadn’t been with her, it would have still been a wise move on her part to be as far away as possible from the going’s on of whatever it was Sam had gotten himself into last night. The regularity of his antics was beginning to cause a small kernel of concern. Now that filming was starting, Caitriona hoped that her co-star would revert to his normal self. Gyms instead of cocktails. Theatre and auditions instead of late night bars and charming whichever young woman happened to catch his eye. Caitriona cast him a sideways glance, maybe Sam would start being her friend again instead of the over protective and jealous ass that was currently sitting in the chair beside her.

“Is he still here?”

Then again, maybe not.

“Sam..” Caitriona warned, flicking a glance to the make up artists still puttering around them, doing last minute fixes.

“What?” He scowled and leaned over towards her, lowering his voice, “Can’t do what you did and not expect me to ask.”

“Do what I did?” She shot him a confused look, not at all following his hangover logic of the morning.

“That’s right.” Blurry blue eyes pinned her, “You know. You and him. In the bedroom. Pretty damn warm welcome if you ask me.”

Caitriona toyed with the top of her foam coffee cup. She knew what Sam was referring to. The kiss he’d rudely interrupted. Part of her understood Sam’s confusion. Having a strange man, randomly show up on her door step had to be more than a little hard for Sam to understand. Particularly when Caitriona hadn’t mentioned a word of the growing attraction between herself and Johnathon to anyone, much less her co-star. It may have been a reason for Sam’s confusion but it didn’t excuse
this recent little interrogation or his behaviour more generally lately.
“Not that it’s any of your business what is happening in my apartment, which let me remind you, you were only in because you were too legless to make it home. I really don’t think my behaviour should be in question here.”
“A friend?” Sam crossed his arms over his chest, completely ignoring Caitriona's rebuttal, “That all the explanation I get then? A friend that shows up and just what? Moves in and needs entertaining all weekend?”
Caitriona slowly swallowed a mouthful of coffee but didn’t elaborate any further. If Sam wanted to keep carrying on like a two year old, then she was more than willing to let him. She’d told him Johnathon was a friend. For Christ’s sake, she’d introduced the man as such to Sam in her apartment. At this point she wasn’t sure what more Sam was expecting to get from her. Or rather, Caitriona did know what he wanted. She also knew it was never going to happen.
“All set.” The makeup artist smiled at them, giving them one last touch up their make up before heading out the door, finally leaving the two stars alone.
“Seems like a pretty close friend for someone who just shows up from nowhere I you ask me.”
“Lucky I’m not asking you isn’t it.” Caitriona sniffed reflectively and pinned him a cool glare of her own, hoping he would just drop the subject altogether.
“Hope you had fun at least. With that guy?” His red head shook when further information wasn’t immediately forthcoming, “So what was he just a booty thing or what? Like friends with benefits? Cause I’m gonna tell you Cait, there are easier ways to make that happen.”
Caitriona’s temper was rising but her face remained passive and calm. She really didn’t want to get into anything right now. Not on the first day. Not when she’d had the best weekend she’d had in months. Not when in half an hour or so she would be expected to be professional and get a job done. She would let it go this time, but the time would be coming soon when Caitriona was going to have to sit down and have a very serious conversation with her co-star.
“Look Balfe, I just don’t want to see you do something stupid you know?” Sam continued, “After that last prick, don’t want you to make another mistake.”
A mistake? Okay. That did it. Now she’d officially had enough. “You don’t think that is slightly hypocritical Sam?”
“What do you mean?”
“You’ve been drunk more times than you’ve been sober lately,” Caitriona looked at him, “I wouldn’t even begin to try and keep up with the list of your liaisons you’ve had this month alone. And yet, I have one weekend spending time with a friend and I’m making a mistake?” She tossed the script on the table, “That is the very definition of hypocrisy if you ask me.”
“Not the same. Not the same at all.” For a start Sam had never kissed any of his pickups the same way he’d seen Caitriona kissing her weekend guest.
“Not the same?” Caitriona swung out of the chair and started collecting up her belongings, "Sounds like double standards to me.” A quick trip to wardrobe and then she’d decided that the quiet of her trailer was preferable to spending more time sitting around talking to Sam right now.
“Is he still here?”
Caitriona’s hand gripped the smooth surface of the door knob as she contemplated whether she wanted to answer that. Was Johnathon still here? No and at the same time, absolutely he was. He was right there. Right there in the very forefront of her thoughts. Right there in the very recent memory of yesterday. Right there in her hopes for tomorrow. “Johnathon flew to New York last night.” That was considerably more information than Sam deserved to know and it had the added benefit of being completely true. “I’ll see you on set Sam.” Caitriona ignored Sam’s slightly confused look and stepped outside into the early morning light.
The sharp bite of cool night air was still lingering on the wind and Caitriona hurried on towards the wardrobe trailer. She was almost to the door when her pocket momentarily vibrated and a small chime sounded. Her face split into a smile and the chill she’d been trying to escape vanished, replaced by a gentle warmth that worked itself from her chest out. Johnathon had landed safely, though, Caitriona scrolled further down, continuing to read the message as she stepped into the
wardrobe trailer. There are been several late winter storms that had apparently caused some
turbulence on approach and Johnathon hadn’t particularly enjoyed the bumpy ride. Caitriona was
about to type back a reply when she changed her mind and decided to call him instead.
“Ms Balfe.” The smooth voice answered immediately, the hustle and bustle of the busy airport
clearly audible in the background.
Caitriona grinned and returned his formal greeting, “Mr Chase.” She tucked the phone against her
cheek, pinning it with her shoulder as she collected her assigned clothing. “Rough flight?”
“Kinda.” Johnathon leaned against a pillar as he watched the luggage carousel waiting for his bag
to appear, “Let’s just say I’m glad to be on solid ground again. How’s things on set?”
Caitriona juggled the phone to her other ear and started shedding clothing. “Business as usual
mostly.”
“Mostly?”
“Hmmm.” She slipped into the plain linen shift, gathering her hair and freeing it from beneath the
material, “Just a friend being bit a jerk. Nothing I can’t handle. Even this early in on a Monday
morning.” She sat down on the soft chair, waiting for the rest of her costume to arrive. Becoming
Claire Fraser was more than a one person job and it always took far longer than most people
expected. “How’s your morning looking? As busy as you thought?”
“Oh yeah.” Johnathon said with a slight sigh, “Jackson is already outside with a car and from there,
straight to headquarters.”
Caitriona looked at the large clock on the wall and did a quick calculation in her head, “At 3
o’clock in the morning? That’s going to make for a very long day.”
“No kidding.” Johnathon grunted slightly has he leaned forward and snagged his bag, hoisting it on
his shoulder and heading towards the exit, “Inter-continental travel kicked my ass this time.” It
was never easy, leaving at night and then arriving 11 hrs later and it still be in the middle of the
night. It tended to throw his natural body clock out of whack for a while. Not that there was really
any chance of Johnathon seeing the inside of a hotel room anytime soon. There had been another
victim discovered three hours ago and with his complete team on the ground, there would be no
slowing down. “What time will you be in tonight?” He shouldered the door and stepped out into
the muted sounds of car engines, horns and people, eventually seeing his tall friend standing beside
a car somewhere about half way down the stream of vehicles.
“Probably about 9 or so.” Caitriona roughly estimated as her dressing assistant arrived, costume in
tow. Days usually ran anywhere from 12 to 16 hours so with any luck she’d be done and at home
by about that time. She carefully stepped into her woolen skirt, lifting her arm as the assistant
fussed with a set of clips, tightening the item around her slim waist. “Skype call about then?”
Johnathon checked his watch. That would be about 5pm his time. There was every chance that he
wouldn’t be anywhere near finished for the night by then, but he figured he could take a break,
give Caitriona a call and maybe grab something to eat before heading back to headquarters again.
“Sounds like a plan.” He started walking along the curved walkway, making his way down
towards the waiting car, “Let me know when you get home and I’ll be there.”
Caitriona smiled, letting the deep tone and lilt of Johnathon’s voice soothe her earlier ruffled
feathers. Sam and his first day work fuckery faded into the background of the day, replaced by a
subtle warmth of anticipation. The costume assistant gently touched Caitriona’s arms and pointed
towards the clock, indicating that she needed to wrap up the phone conversation and finish dressing
before she was late to the set. “I better go.” She sighed softly, acknowledging the older woman
with a slight nod of her head, “See you tonight.” Caitriona ended the call, not missing the knowing
look that flashed across the assistants face. “Not a word. Just a friend.” She warned with a soft
smile, though she knew she really didn’t need to. Caitriona had developed a certain level of trust
with the older woman over the time she’d been working on Outlander. Gossip always ran rampant
on a film sets, Caitriona knew that to be a fact, but, none of that gossip had ever originated from
the woman in question and Caitriona saw no reason why that would suddenly change now. The
signed non-disclosure agreements that everyone employed by the studio was bound by didn’t hurt
either.
“Of course Caitriona.” The assistant smiled and began helping the taller woman into her corset. “Friend? Is that what they are it calling these days?” Caitriona’s blue eyes crinkled at their corners, one side of her mouth quirking into a shy smile, “Kinda.”

Chapter End Notes

See you all in a couple of weeks. Thanks for reading everyone. Cheers
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnathon stood up and reached across the table, offering his hand to the man, “Thanks for your time Mr Baker.” A large hand gripped his, “If you remember anything else, give us call.” He handed the man a card and stepped back, watching as Jackson escorted him out the door, closing it behind their lastest interviewee.

“What do you think?” Jackson leaned on the door handle, “He as full of shit as he seems?”

“He knows.” Johnathon started gathering the various notes and pieces of paper, tucking them safely away in his briefcase, “If he didn’t do it, he knows who bloody well did.”

They had spent almost the entire day in Boston, interviewing a man whose name had been buried in one of the files regarding the death of a fifteen year old boy some thirty years ago. At the time, he’d been cleared, but Johnathon and Jackson had decided maybe he deserved a second look. Rightly so it now seemed. It was something in the way the man had answered his questions that just didn’t sit right with Johnathon and he was hoping that it would be the break through they needed. They'd been working well over a month on this and Johnathon wanted nothing more than to close this last remaining case post haste.

“So what now?” Jackson unhooked the shoulders of his coat from a nearby chair, “Dig a bit more and see what little skeletons pop up?”

“Probably need to go all the way back on this.” Johnathon picked up his briefcase, slipping the strap over one shoulder, “Early childhood on.” If there was something in this man’s past and there generally was, they’d find it.

“We going work on that back in New York or stay here?” Jackson asked he shoulder the door and as they started descending the stairs of law offices to ground level. Jackson suspected he already knew the answer to that. This place held history for Johnathon. Recent and painful. Jackson having had a front row seat as he’d watched the disintegration of a relationship that had a profound effect on his friend. Johnathon had sold everything after the break up. The house, the cars, the boat, the lot. His tall partner had well and truly severed every single tie, link and association with the place. As far as Jackson knew, this was the first time Johnathon had set foot back in the town since and he was betting Johnathon wouldn’t want to stay here a moment longer than he had to.

“New York.” Came the confirmation as they stepped out in the twilight of late afternoon, “I have something I need to do here first then we can hit the road.”

“I thought we were done with cases here?” Jackson shot him a confused look, “Did we miss an interview or something?” He twisted, about to dig through his own case in search of a small notebook the dark haired man always used to keep track of things.

“Not a work thing.” Johnathon stated as they got to the parked car, a soft beep echoing as Johnathon keyed the locks and slipped into the driver’s seat, “I can drop you off somewhere if you rather.” The engine stirred to life, “It shouldn’t take long.”

A set of curious question raced through Jackson’s mind, inevitably settling on one that gave him pause. Not a work thing. That meant it was a personal one and if it was the one Jackson thought it was, there was no way he wasn’t going to want to tag along. For moral support if nothing else.

Green eyes glanced across at his partner, “This…this thing,” Jackson queried hesitantly, “It… it isn’t a Kate… thing is it?” Hanging around in the place where the proverbial shit had not only hit the fan, but exploded with the force of an atom bomb, didn’t seem like a good idea to Jackson. “I mean, I totally get that you might want to patch it up with her, but John,” Jackson hesitated, “Just…you know…maybe just…. I dunno if that’s a good thing to do.” There. He’d said it. Johnathon had never been one to stand being told what to do, but, goddamn, the woman had damn neared killed Johnathon last time. Not on purpose and not by design. Jackson really did believe that
Katherine Carmichael hadn’t meant to hurt Johnathon the way it all shook out, but the outcome had been just the same. Jackson had no desire to ever see his friend go through anything like that again. Women, he sighed. Fucking dangerous if you asked him.

“Why would it be a Kate thing?” Johnathon fastened the seat belt across his chest, his voice even and emotionless, “She hasn’t been in Boston for months. Even if she was, it’s got nothing to do with me.”

It really wasn’t his place to ask, but lately Jackson was beginning to see a shift in Johnathon’s attitude and he was starting to wonder as to the cause. At times his friend seemed okay, more than okay. Actually happy for a change. That was good thing as far as Jackson was concerned. Great really. Far better than the robotic zombie that had been barely verbal and a man who had reduced life to the absolute basics of breathing and working with exactly zero in between. He much preferred to see this version of his friend than the Johnathon of a few months ago. Something had clearly changed. Something that Jackson thought merited further mental investigation. The mysterious repeated visits to Glasgow for a start. Not to mention the suddenly private phone calls. Jackson was convinced Johnathon had received more texts and call in the last few months than he’d seen the tall man received in the rest of his life. The damned phone was always going off. Point in case, Johnathon’s phone vibrated loudly from its resting place in the factory formed cup holder beneath the gear stick. Something was sure as hell going on. “So what’s this about then?”

He asked, wondering if the two might be connected somehow. Johnathon steered the vehicle into the busy afternoon traffic then nodded towards his case, sitting on the seat behind him. “Yellow envelope.”

Twisting, with much grunting and groaning and a few curse words thrown in for good measure, Jackson managed to snag the strap of the bag and tug it towards him. “Dutton family?” The dark haired man mused aloud, after finally finding the required envelope, not having the foggiest clue who that family might have been. “Disneyland?” Now totally confused, he thumbed through the papers, slowly reading the details and giving the blond man a surprised look.

“That’s right.” Johnathon commented without providing any more details than absolutely necessary as was typical of his nature.

“So not be a total asshole here,” Jackson looked up from the paperwork as they made their way across the city, “But couldn’t you have just mailed all this.”

“Could have. Decided not to. Don’t know when I’ll be back this way and I promised I would visit them next time I was in Boston.”

That would explain it, Jackson’s mind sounded, relieved it wasn’t what he had been thinking. If Johnathon promised anyone, especially a family in the circumstance he’d just read, then there was no way they would be leaving until it was done. They’d be lucky to get back to New York anytime this side of midnight. Still, the envelope contents didn’t really explain the sudden change in his friend’s mood. Jackson was about to explore the subject further when Johnathon spoke.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go and do your own thing?” The blond man asked again, “Get something to eat or something?”

“This a polite way to say fuck off for a bit?” Jackson returned the envelope and tossed the bag into the back seat.

“No. Just offering.” Johnathon’s phone chimed with another message. This time Jackson was able to see a portion of the sender’s name as it momentarily flashed across the screen. CB. Didn’t exactly give him much to go on but it was a start he guessed.

“So we going to?” Jackson needled, “The family’s house?”

One blond eyebrow raised with a smirk that meant nothing good. “Okay google.” Johnathon said clearly, “Show destination.”

Green eyes widened to almost the size of saucers as google kindly replied with an answer. Westward Memorial Hospital.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. Hell no. Fuck.” Came the repeated curse and the accompanying slumping of shoulders in the passenger’s seat, “Maybe she won’t be on duty? Right? Fuck.” Panic babble spilled from Jackson's lips, “I mean, what normal person works all the time? Fucking Christ. Hey,
maybe it’s her day off or something?”
False hope if ever Johnathon heard it. "Maybe.” Johnathon chuckled in a tone that clearly meant the exact opposite.
“Fucking shit.” Jackson grouched, resigned to the fact that this was happening no matter how many fucks he issued aloud. “You think she’s still mad at that little misunderstanding?”
“Yeah.” Johnathon took a deep breath and let it out, slowly nodding his head, “I think there’s a better than average chance of that.” The misunderstanding in question had to do with a certain dark haired investigator forgetting he had made plans to attend a hospital benefit with said serious problem. It hadn’t gone over well. Words had been exchanged and the ever-changing relationship status flicked to off again.
“Shit.” Jackson slumped a little further into the chair, “One mistake.”
“One?”
Jackson waved his hands dismissively, “Okay, one or may two mistakes.”
Or fifteen, Johnathon’s mind added.
Johnathon stifled a laugh. Knowing the woman in question, Jackson wasn’t over exaggerating the severity of his current situation. Johnathon wouldn’t be surprised if the woman in question came good on that particular threat. Emma Stanton wasn’t known to be the overly forgiving type. Or what anyone would call placid, but, she was a decent human being and Johnathon did have a certain fondness for her. He had considered her a friend at one time and now wondered if that friendship had become another casualty of the break up with Katherine. Not that it would come as surprise. Emma Stanton is Katherine Carmichael’s best friend so it was always going to be a given as to where Emma’s loyalties would fall. Johnathon understood that and didn’t blame her. He’d have done the same should the situation be reversed.
“Gonna stay in the car.” Jackson blurted, giving a reflective sniff, as if coming to a definite conclusion, “Yeah. Should be good right here in the car.” He pulled on the lapels of this jacket, “Mean it. Not going in there.”
“Don’t have to.” Johnathon conceded, “You can drop me off and circle the block or something if you want. I won’t be long. Just long enough to say hello and drop off that packet.”
“Good idea.” Jackson grouchfully, effectively sulking in retrospective silence until the large imposing building of the hospital could been seen, gradually drawing closer city block by slow passing city block. “You really think she’ll be there?” He asked nervously, running his fingers through his thick unkept hair as the car slowed to a stop.
“No idea. Can’t see why she wouldn’t be.” Johnathon unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned over, grabbing the envelope, “Last chance?”
“Don’t fucking way.” Jackson looked apprehensively at the exterior of tall building of the hospital, “Not going in. And I’m not forking over hundred bucks for parking either. I’ll baby sit the car.”
“Not going in. And I’m not forking over hundred bucks for parking either. I’ll baby sit the car.”
Johnathon stepped out onto the sidewalk, dropping the keys into his friends outstretched hands, “I won’t be long.” He glanced at his watch, then leaned on the edge of the car door, “You want me to smooth the way if I see her, if I’m not public enemy number one that is.”
Jackson thought about that a moment, quickly considering his options, “Worth a shot.” He breathed as he slid over into the driver’s seat, “Don’t lose your balls in the process though.”
Johnathon smiled and tapped the metallic surface of the car’s roof, stepping back as Jackson set off on his mission to navigate the block in the relative safety of the car. Despite Jackson’s cursing and whinging, Johnathon had the sneaking suspicion that if there was ever a woman made on earth to tame his wild friend, Emma Stanton was probably it. More to the point, Johnathon suspected Jackson wanted her to attempt it.
Stepping through the large sliding doors of Westward Memorial Hospital was like stepping back in
history. Sights, sounds and smells assaulted him. The beeping of the buzzers, the bright harsh florescent lights that never turned off and that smell. The clean antiseptic smell that pervaded hospitals everywhere. This one was no different. He crossed the reception area, nodding hello to a few acquaintances, most of them trying unsuccessfully to hide the look of surprise that flashed across their faces. Even Jasper, the aged janitor who had worked at the hospital for as long as anyone could remember, gave him a strange look. Looks like word had gotten around as to exactly why one of their most prominent doctors and the deputy head of emergency medicine in the city’s second largest hospital had suddenly taken an extended leave of absence with no explanation whatsoever. Dr Katherine Carmichael had a reputation of professionalism mixed with compassion that had been appealing to both her colleagues and her patients. She had been beloved in this place. Johnathon Chase, not so much. At least not now. He was betting that the gossip surrounding the whole ordeal hadn’t been at all complementary towards him. Most of them didn’t know whether to speak to him, look away or pretend he didn’t exist, as he crossed the skywalk, heading towards the Oncology Department. Johnathon wondered idly, who had replaced Kate. Probably someone looking to climb the medical advancement ladder. Whoever it was had some reasonably big shoes to fill.

“Well, well, well,” Emma Stanton, the hospital’s chief nurse in the emergency department, arms crossed over her chest, watching him from a nearby nurse’s station. Short, shocky with a head full of long curly chestnut hair, her face set with an expression that suddenly made Johnathon want to cross his hands protectively over his crotch, “Look what the cat dragged in.”

“Nurse Stanton.” Johnathon addressed her as she closed the last few steps between them. Public enemy it was to be, his mind sounded. The expression on the nurse’s face only serving to reinforce that view. Maybe he should have stayed in the car with Jackson. Hazel eyes drifted over him, taking in his tall form from head to toe. Johnathon straightened, physically preparing for a very public dressing down. This wasn’t going to be pretty or easy. The slightly rounded face twitched slightly, the stern expression slipping away, “So formal Mr Chase,” She chided, opening her arms, “Come on hot and handsome.”

“It’s good to see you Emma.” Johnathon let out a small breath of relief as he leaned down and accepted her warm hug, “Been a little while.”

“Too long.” She admonished him as she took a step back, “What brings you into my hospital then?” Emma gave him the once over again, this time from a purely medical stand point, “Everything alright?” He looked good, she reflected, better than she had seen him look in a long while. The nurse had been seriously concerned about Johnathon during those last few months he was with Kate. In fact, she’d had strong doubts if he was actually going to pull himself out the death spiral he seemed to be on. Now that it was all said and done, the destruction of that relationship well and truly complete, Emma had hoped that both Johnathon and Kate would find their own ways back to happiness, if not together than at least apart. Johnathon looked like he was at least making an attempt at that goal. Kate on the other hand, she sighed internally, that was an entirely different story.

“Everything is fine.” Johnathon’s deep voice sounded as they turned and started walking towards a bank of elevators at the end of the corridor, “I’m here to visit one of your patients actually.” “Oh?”

“Jessica Dutton.” The name didn’t immediately trigger recognition in the nurse. She searched the recesses of her mind, finally settling on some vague memory that Emma seemed to recall Kate mentioning something of a little girl that Johnathon would frequently call in and see during the times when he would be sitting waiting for Kate. If memory served Emma correctly, the girl had been battling a rare form of childhood cancer for most of her young life and was frequently in and out of the hospital.

“Oncology. Children’s ward.” Johnathon clarified, proving the accuracy of the nurse’s memory. When a little girl had appeared in the hospital cafeteria crying because her earphones had stopped working, Johnathon had volunteered to see if he could fix them for her, while he waited for Kate's
shift to end. From that point on, Johnathon had checked up on little girl whenever he could. Unfortunately, time was not on this child’s side and Johnathon had learned the hard way not to put things like this off for too long.

“Come on,” Emma slipped a hand around Johnathon’s elbow, “I’ll walk you up.”
“That’s okay Emma, I know the way if you have other things to do. Emergency is not exactly the quietest place in the hospital.” Johnathon said as he reached out and pressed the button, calling for the elevator.
“This is true,” The head nurse agreed as they both stepped inside the arrived elevator, “But I can’t have ruffians like you wandering around the place. Anything could happen.” She pressed the floor five button, “Speaking of ruffians,” She crossed her arms over her chest again, “Where is boy wonder? Still hiding under a rock?”

Johnathon smirked, “Jackson is…. parking the car.”
“Parking the car?” Emma repeated skeptically, “Is that his euphemism of choice these days?”
Johnathon chuckled, “No he actually IS parking the car. You know how he gets about paying parking fees so he’s parking a block away or something.”
“Oh yes,” She said, “I know exactly how he gets.”
“He’s,” Johnathon tucked his hands into his pockets and leaned on the railing, “He’s sorry about the benefit thing Em. Work’s been crazy. Hard to keep track of these things you know.”
“Johnathon Alexander Chase.” She said in a tone that meant nothing good ever, “Are you honestly telling me you would have forgotten something like this? Because of your work?”
“I’m not Jackson.” He said simply with a shrug, “If it makes any difference, he was actually working that night and not..”
“Not parking the car?” One chestnut eyebrow arched.
“Something like that.” There was no point in denying the truth. Particularly one that Johnathon knew Emma was more than aware of.
“I swear, that man!” She shook her head with an exaggerated sigh, unable to stop a soft smile forming on her face, “Give him some lessons will you? Before the oaf gets himself serious hurt. Or worse.”

The elevator doors opened and Emma put her hand against the edge of the metal, preventing it from shutting, “Make sure you come by and see me before you go you hear?”
“Course.” Johnathon nodded, giving her a warm smile, pleased that this friendship seemed to be reasonably still in tact, even if it felt a little awkward initially.
Emma stepped back eyeing him sternly, “I mean it.”
“Yes Ma’am.”

The doors closed leaving Johnathon standing in the quiet corridor. The place still looked the same. Johnathon knew that he if had stayed on that elevator for another half a minute at most, he would have arrived at Kate’s floor. Her office, just the same as it was then, only empty now. It was a poignant reminder that nothing ever stays the same. Johnathon really wished he didn’t have come back here. The hurt of it all was still lingering, just below the surface. The scar, healing slowly, yet it strangely still stung with ghost of a memory. The memory of someone he had loved. Loved.
Then lost. The hurt and the ugliness of it all. The failure of something he’d thought was strong. That was the most painful part. Believing that one person was it. The one. The one in a billion meant just for you. The hard part was finding out that you’d been so very wrong. It had made Johnathon doubt everything and everyone. Yes, he sucked in a deep breath, he really would have preferred to not come back here. But a promise is a promise. Just because his world had fallen apart didn’t give him an excuse to ever break that. With stubborn determination he’d do this. Face the hurt and the past head on. Then, he took a deep breath and let it out, slowly looking around the place. He’d leave this place and everything behind. Just rack it up to life experience he guessed. Footsteps seemed loud as Johnathon walked down the corridor, stark and white apart from a brightly painted strip, half way up that wall that featured a cavalcade of various animals. As his feet drew closer to the assigned door, Johnathon’s face split into a soft smile. He could hear her voice. High pitched and full of the excitement that only a child can bring. The sound almost
genetically empowered to lift anyone’s spirit. Even in place like this where parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives routinely went to battle an enemy that was as indiscriminate as it was merciless. Johnathon had never been overly religious, but he often wondered that if there was some cosmically powerful being out there, that he, she or they, which ever it was, should have their collective asses kicked for putting the most innocent of victims through a struggle like the one they faced in this ward. It seemed so very unfair. Jessica Dutton was just a child, her whole life ahead of her.

Johnathon looked through the rectangular slit of a window of her closed hospital door. Eyes bright, sitting on the bed, tubes going into one arm, a colourful bandana wrapped around a hairless head, her teenage sister sitting in a chair off to one side reading a magazine. Your normal everyday family, facing an extraordinary battle that they would never win. It almost made Johnathon ashamed of the way he’d been feeling after Kate. He’d had his share of heartbreak and woe but it was nothing, nothing, compared what this little eight year old girl was going through. There is always someone worse off than you, he reminded himself as he knocked lightly on the door and pressed it open, the young girl’s face lighting as she recognised her unexpected visitor.

“John!”

“Hello there Miss Jessica.” Johnathon moved to stand at the end of the bed, nodding a greeting to her mother.

“See Mum!” The girl chortled excitedly, "See! I told you he would come back.” She flashed him an adorable smile, “Just like he said he would. John, John, see my chart!” She pointed wildly to the folder at the foot of her bed.

“Alright, let’s see.” Johnathon pulled the folder from the rack and flipped it open, “What I am looking for Jess?”

“My count!” She was almost vibrating with barely contained excitement.

“Holy smokes!” He widened his eyes in mock surprise, “That’s some great going and for a whole three months straight too!”

“Yes.” She said, little chest puffed out with pride, “Dr Macrossan said I was well enough to go out for a trip now hey Mom?”

“A small one.” Her mother confirmed with a smile.

“Did you have anywhere in mind?” Johnathon returned the folder to wire frame and leaned on the bed table, “Maybe down to the cafeteria or across the road to McDonalds or —”

“No silly!” Jessica chastised him, “A proper trip, like a long way away maybe.”

“Now Jess,” Her mother cautioned, “You know we might not be able to go too far. Your Dad has work and it might be hard for him to get time off, but I promise we’ll do something special okay?”

Money was tight and her husband was already working double shifts just to afford treatment. Getting time off was proving difficult at the best of times. They would try and figure something out, but it wouldn’t be much and she didn’t want her little girl to get her hopes up too far only to have them dashed.

“Okay.” The fall in the girl’s voice was unmistakable, casting a sombre feeling in the room,

“Maybe we could go to the beach when the weather is okay?”

“Of course we can sweetheart.”

“The beach is great you know,” Johnathon said quietly, giving the girl a wink, “It is my all time favourite place to be. You’ll have a great time there. Bury your sister up to her neck.” He said with a conspiratorial grin and got a evil little giggle in return for his trouble, the mood lifting, “Now,” He reached over and tweaked her sock covered toe, “You better promise me you’ll have fun at the beach or where ever you decide to go and then I better head out and find my friend. I left him parking the car and he’s probably lost by now. He can’t really figure out the hospital map. He’s not smart like you.” He grinned at her.

“Can’t you stay some more?” Young green eyes looked up at him, a silent plea reflected in their depths.

Johnathon moved to sit on the edge of the bed, “I wish I could Jess, but I have to go back to work in New York city.”
“Are you catching more bad guys?”
“Trying to.”
“Will you come back and see me again maybe?” She gripped his arm and locked eyes with him, “Not tomorrow but maybe next month or soon?”
“Well that depends,” He said solemnly, “Are you going to promise me to have fun at the beach with your family?”
“I promise. I’ll have fun.” Jessica nodded vigorously, trying with childlike enthusiasm to convince him, “Now you have to promise too.”
“Course. I promise. Next time I’m here in town, you bet, I’ll come and see you.” Johnathon smiled gently, “Might not be a for a little while though. Now how about a hug before I go?”
That got him a smile that lit the room and she scrambled over to him, hugging him as tightly as her small frame could manage. “Be good til I see you again.” He whispered, giving her a wink as she settled back into the large hospital bed.
Cancer had ravaged her small frame and was continuing to do so. Fighting this was taking a toll, strength, its first casualty. She’d be asleep in minutes Johnathon wagered.
“I will. I promise John. Please stay for just a bit? Please?” Young eyes begged him, the look on her face echoing the thought in Johnathon’s head. He doubted there would be a next time. Jessica didn’t have too much more time left. You only had to look at her to know that.
“Just for a bit.” Johnathon sat gently on the side of bed, defying any human on the face of the planet to be able to refuse the request of sick little girl. He spent the next half hour or so talking and joking with her, even playing a quick game of checkers until her eyes went heavy, finally fluttering closed.
“It was so good of you to come Johnathon.” Her mother said softly, lifting the edge of a blanket and pulling it up to cover her sleeping child, “She’d been asking after you lately.”
“It’s nothing. My pleasure really.” Carefully standing without rocking the bed, Johnathon reached inside his coat and fished out the envelope, “I’m sorry I won’t be able to be here very often but I wanted to give you this while I was in town. It’s yours do with as you like. Keep it. Give it away. Whatever you decide.” He was worried she’d take offence at the offer. Johnathon understood all too well that need to be independent. Family business was just that and not something for strangers to poke around in. “Open it later, when Jim gets in from his shift,” He suggested as the woman took the package from him, giving him a strange look. “It’s nothing important.” Johnathon clarified, “Just a little something. One you and Jim should decide if you want or not.” He flicked a glance at the sleeping child, “without big ears there hearing all about it.” Johnathon gave her a soft smile as he nodded toward the envelope, “If you ever need anything, my number’s in there.” He turned to go, giving the sleeping child one last looking, hoping that she managed to hold on a little longer for her family. As an only child himself so he could only imagine the pain a parent would feel to watch their child slowly slipping away. No one could stop what was coming, but Johnathon hoped that what he’d given them might at least buoy the family up for just that little bit longer. Maybe a make a memory for them all to hang on to when the darkness of the future descended. Johnathon said his goodbyes to the family and quietly left the room, walking silently down to the emergency room.
“Finished already?” Jackson called out to him from his leaning spot against the counter, where he was standing talking to Emma. He still looked in one piece, a surprised Johnathon mused. That had to be a positive sign. An unexpected one when these two particular people were involved. Complicated was an understatement.
“Well? Was she over the moon or what? I bet the kid near jumped out of her skin?”
“What are you prattling on about?” Emma shot the dark haired man an exasperated look, “I thought you said he just popped in to say hello?”
“That’s right.” Johnathon commented, standing beside his friend, “I did.”
“That’s right?” Jackson said with a roll of his eyes, “Of course he leaves out the part about handing over airline tickets, hotel bookings and a ten day pass to Disneyworld in Orlando, with spending money mind you for the kid and all of her family. All pre paid. Christ, he even organised for her
father to get full paid leave for two months from his two jobs.” He slapped Johnathon on the
shoulder, “So did she like it or what? What’d her mother say? Bet they were excited?”
“I don’t know.” Johnathon’s voice didn’t hold the same joviality as his friend, “I never asked.” He
hadn’t done it for some type of credit or hero worshiping. In fact, in all seriousness, he hoped his
name wasn’t ever mentioned in relation to any of it. This was something as a family they should do
together, enjoy whatever time they all had left together. Chances were, it would probably be the
last time that family got to be whole for the rest of their lives. A stranger’s name should play no
part in that and that was exactly what Johnathon wanted. The quieter details were kept the better.
Leave the show boating to those who liked that type of thing. Johnathon was sure there were
plenty of people out there who reveled in the lime light of congratulations and success. He wasn’t
one of them. He was happy to stand in the shadows. So long the right thing was achieved, who the
hell cared who was behind it.

Something’s never changed, Emma observed silently. Kate had often confided to her several
instances detailing similar such acts. The two of them discussing during those long late night shifts,
why Johnathon rarely took any credit for almost everything he did. She wasn’t sure they ever
landed on a real explanation for that. Privacy had been the last one they settled on as Emma
recalled. The opportunity to get any further clarification on the subject now lost, possibly forever.
“Take it from me buddy.” Jackson assured the blond man, “She’ll love it. They all will.”
“We’ll see.” Johnathon’s head tilted towards the large clock on the wall, “We need to get going
soon if we’re going to get back to the city tonight.”

Emma came out from behind the counter, “Come on then, give us a hug before you go.”
Jackson grinned insufferably and stepped forward, “Not you, you oaf.” The nurse turned towards
the blond man and opened her arms. Johnathon chuckled and embraced the woman, kissing her
cheek softly as they separated, “Try and keep that moron out of trouble will you?” She shot the
moron in question a look, “If that is at all possible.”

“Will do.” Johnathon nodded, “Take care Emma and..,” He hesitated a moment, privately deciding
whether to say something or not.

“Don’t worry.” Hazel eyes met his in a silent understanding, “I will.” If you asked her, Emma
thought Katherine Carmichael had made a horrendous mistake. It wasn’t Emma’s place to interfere
and so she hadn’t. Despite what she believed. Johnathon was a good man, better than any she’d
met, and she’d met quite a few. Maybe what Kate had told her was true. Maybe it wasn’t. Every instinct in her, told her this man wasn’t one to screw
another woman on the sly. Particularly not in the same house and bed. Emma had never believed it,
but there were quite lurid photographs which said otherwise. At this point, it really didn’t matter
what was the truth and what wasn’t. Emma still thought of Johnathon as her friend though and she
was determined to let him know that. “You be careful out there and don’t be a stranger you hear
me?”

“Will do Emma.” Johnathon nodded and stepped away, flicking a glance at Jackson and then back
to the nurse.

“Oh for love of god,” Emma grouched, turning to face Jackson, the smile on her face taking the
sting out her words, “You get one hug and that is all! And don’t try anything funny.”

“Would I ever?” Jackson defended, wrapping his arms around the smaller woman and hugging her
tightly, finally letting go, but not without a passing squeeze of her backside and a quick kiss,
resulting in a yelp and an accompanying mock scowl.

“Go on the pair of you,” Emma gently pushed Jackson away, hands on her hips, “Get yourselves
safely back to New York.”

Both men turned to go.

“Jackson?” The nurse called after him, “Call me when you get there.”
The dark haired man smiled and gave her a wave as they stepped outside.

“Ak yes!” Jackson grinned insufferably as they walked down the street towards the car, “She
wants me.”

“Jesus Christ.”
“What?” Jackson retorted, “What can I say? When you’ve got it, you’ve got it.”

Chapter End Notes

Extra chapter as a thanks to all those who comment, particularly to MCBS and Can't Resist Temptation who have stuck with me despite real life and the delays and who have always made an effort to encourage and keep me writing. Thanks also to Janmarie who commented on every single chapter as they were reading 30+ chapters in one sitting.
Enjoy your weekend with my sincerest thanks all of you. Caitriona next chapter.
Cheers
The trailer door clicked shut and Caitriona collapsed onto the couch. “Thank Christ.” Six weeks. Her head fell back against the soft cushion. Six weeks of filming was finally over. The block was done. It was only the first of many, and almost a week over schedule as it turned out, but, it was finally complete. Not a moment too soon either. She’d just about had enough of whatever was still crawling up Sam Heughan’s ass and making him pricklier than a hedgehog. He seemed to be permanently in a foul mood around her and she wasn’t sure why. At first Caitriona thought Sam was still stewing over the fact that she’d spent time this block with Johnathon. Granted, she’d been talking, texting, skyping and spending time the blond haired investigator whenever she got the chance, but Caitriona had also made a point of going out with a bunch of the Outlander cast and crew, which included Sam, at least twice since then. It was a fact of life now that she couldn’t and didn’t want to, spend as much time around show related people. That included Sam by default.

Caitriona had only a certain amount of time and she wasn’t deliberating ignoring anyone. It was purely a matter of priorities. Right now, she didn't any spare time or energy to devote to social Outlander. Professional Outlander, yes. She had been working as hard as she ever had on that front. Social Outlander. Not so much. She hadn't been completely neglectful on that front. Caitriona had honestly been trying hard to make sure those social connections weren’t lost. Going out with them whenever she could. She’d thought that was what Sam had wanted from her but apparently not and Caitriona was now at the point where she was quickly losing patience with her problematic co-star. Surely this behaviour couldn’t still be about her admission to Sam about she felt about him. Or rather what she didn’t fell about him. Concerned blue eyes flicked towards the adjoining section of the trailer, a thin wall separating her half of the trailer from Sam’s. Could it? She’d thought Sam had accepted all that. At the time, Sam had assured her he was fine with just friends. Now, Caitriona wasn’t so sure. Sam’s attitude lately was completely the reverse from the Sam that had once been her friend. The pendulum would swing from him acting like his normal fun loving self, generally when it was just the two of them, usually during the long hours and hours on set, to the obnoxious jealous ass that had been annoying her the entire last scene. It seemed Caitriona that as soon as her attention was elsewhere, Sam’s demeanour changed. He acted surly and petulant. Even if she hadn’t been involved with someone, on what planet would Sam ever think that type of behaviour would be remotely attractive to her?

It was getting very old, very quickly. She let out a sigh. This is the exact reason that every studio in the business was currently instituting non-fraternization clauses between show leads. Caitriona rocked her head in the direction of the trailer door, eyes going distant, her mind searching for a way through the mess that seemed to be developing. Maybe it was time. Time to tell Sam. Tell him who Johnathon really is to her. It would mean exposing a relatively new relationship and breaking the veil of privacy Caitriona had very deliberately cast over this part of her life. She wasn’t trying to be secretive, really she wasn’t. In her mind there was a distinct difference between secrecy and privacy. Secrets could be damaging and generally, all her secrets never saw the light of day until she felt safe revealing them and then, only ever revealing them when the chance of hurting someone else was so far removed, that the telling of them outweighed the fear of the risk involved. Privacy was another thing entirely. Privacy was protection. Protection from the outside world invading her own little bubble. Shielding rather than hiding. Right now, Caitriona still felt like the prospect of her and Johnathon being together needed that shield. Keeping things quiet wasn’t even something she and Johnathon had really even discussed in any serious thought out detail. Caitriona suspected Johnathon would be in strong agreeance with the idea. He hadn’t shown himself to be someone who divulges personal information readily. It wasn’t as if Caitriona was
suggesting it without a reason. In her line of business, relationships were a dangerous double edged sword. They started with shocking regularity. Ended with even more consistency and never as quietly as they began. The percentages of things working out weren’t exactly in her favour and Caitriona was hoping that some privacy might help tip the odds towards success rather than failure. Telling anyone, even her family, even her friends, even Sam, meant the potential for that level of privacy to disappear. Caitriona shook her head and drew her long legs up, wrapping her arms around them and resting her chin on a knee. She felt like she wasn’t ready to lower the shield but she also knew she had to do something if this working relationship between herself and Sam was going to continue.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. It wasn’t like she intended to sky write the news or anything. She could tell Sam. Only Sam. Ordinarily she wouldn’t have any concerns over Sam’s ability to keep her secrets. He did know more than his fair share of them, Caitriona mentally shrugged. It was inevitable when you spend eighteen hours a day with someone for ten months straight, that lips loosened and secrets got spilled. It was just how it was and up until now, Caitriona had zero reservations about Sam’s capacity to keep her secrets as exactly that. Lately however, Sam’s behaviour hadn’t exactly filled her with confidence in the friend department. He was going to find out eventually anyway if things between Johnathon and herself went the way Caitriona hoped they would.

Sooner or later everyone would know.

Sam included.

Perhaps sooner would help him get over whatever he had to in order get back to a place where their working relationship was at least restored.

Was it worth the risk?

Who really knew how Sam was going to take anything right now. Caitriona would be risking a new relationship for an older one, totally different in nature and yet, strangely needing both of them. There was still a show to make and whether she liked it or not, Caitriona couldn’t do this show without Sam. She also knew she wasn’t prepared to sacrifice the relationship she was building with Johnathon either. There was no other option. She had to make this work. How she was going to do that, she had no idea. Caitriona let out a long sigh, making a mental note to talk with Johnathon and see what he thought about the whole situation.

Johnathon.

Caitriona smiled with the thought of him and glanced up at the clock, trying to calculate the time difference, privately contemplating calling him. It was astounding to her just how much their relationship had deepened in the six weeks since Johnathon had first flown to New York. She missed him. Missed his quiet presence. Missed the feeling of peaceful contentment she felt around him. Missed touching him. Missed hearing him. Missed kissing him.

As it was, it had been two long weeks since they’d physically been in the same place at the same time and that, Caitriona blew out a long breathe, was beginning to feel like an eternity.

A soft knock interrupted her thoughts and she sat up just as her manager pushed his dark head around the edge of the door.

“Hey Matt.” She smiled at her manager as the older man closed the door behind him and sat down. Blue eyes narrowed as they recognised a kindred look, “God, What now?” She asked with some trepidation, “Let me guess, they want to reshoot that last one again?”

“Relax.” He said with a gentle smile, “You’re officially wrapped for this block and it’s only mid afternoon on a Friday.” The tall man took a seat opposite her, leaned back and crossed his legs, “Which leads me to the sci-fi audition….” Caitriona audibly groaned and rolled her eyes, “I know, I know,” The older man held up his hands in supplication, “You’ve already passed on it, but they are really wanting to at least have a discussion with you, if not an audition.”

“I seriously don’t think it’s my thing.” Caitriona’s face screwed up. She had read the script and while the part they wanted her for wasn’t a lead, it was sizable role. Not a bad one actually. She wasn’t at all convinced that this genre was something she wanted to get into. Yes, the market was strong and the franchise value was huge, but…..
“You did say you wanted to diversify right?” The manager reminded her, “These guys have been chasing you for months.” The look on her face wasn’t at all convincing, “You can always say no post fact if it came to it.”

“Which I probably will.” Caitriona forewarned, “When and where?” She asked cautiously, still not prepared to give anything serious thought to prospect. If Johnathon wasn’t going to be in town this weekend then the idea of having some down time at home alone wasn’t a bad second choice.

“They will work around you. Any time that we can arrange it, they’ll do.” Her manager said in an upbeat tone, clearly designed to make the omission of the second half of that question as invisible as possible. At least until he could throw in a slightly sweeter incentive. Matthew McBride had been Caitriona’s manager for the past five years and he knew his client wouldn’t exactly be over the moon with having to travel on her days off. She tended to want to save any travel for hiatus or extended breaks, which he totally understood. Actor burnout was a real thing in the industry and he was determined that his client would never be one of them. At the same time, he wouldn’t be doing his job if he didn’t present her with as many career opportunities as he could. “Oh and,” The manager made a note on his phone, “If you wanted you could attend the WCC benefit dinner.” He dangled the bait, hoping he’d at least get a semi-interested nibble.

“What WCC benefit?” Caitriona searched the recesses of her mind, thinking that she must have missed an email or a phone call or something. She was usually pretty good with things like that but with this, she was drawing nothing but blanks. Caitriona had been certain that this month was pretty commitment light. She usually tried to keep it that way when filming for the show was just kicking off after a break. It made it easier to focus that way.

“One of the major annual fundraising benefit dinners.” Matt clarified, pulling up the details of the benefit on his tablet and scrolling through them, “This weekend. Saturday night. We had already declined months ago because,” Her manager pointed towards the door, indicating the bustling studio beyond, “you were scheduled to film on those dates, but it’s an open invitation so I’m sure they’d love to have you there if you wanted to make it happen.”

“Alright,” Caitriona nodded her head slowly. She was after all a patron of the charity and could feasibly now attend. Caitriona picked up her phone, deciding it was probably a good idea to let Johnathon know what was happening with her. While she wasn’t aware that he had been planning to fly in to her this weekend, mostly because Caitriona had pre-warned him that she had thought she would be working, the last thing she wanted was for them to miss each other through a miscommunication of travel arrangements. “And where is all this going down,” Caitriona asked again, without looking up, her finger flicking across the screen on her phone, “In London?”

“No.”

Her finger stilled, hovering just above the phone’s surface. Surprised blue eyes lifted, her mind already wondering where on earth Matt thought she would be willing to travel to except London, with late notice like this.

“It’s in New York actually.”

Caitriona had to stop herself from looking like she’d just been handed the keys to the proverbial kingdom, “New York?” She said rather casually, a warm feeling of anticipation sparking in her stomach.

“I know it’s a bit of a journey,” The older man confessed, “but honestly, I think it would be good to at least go and have a sit down, if not the full audition. The studio is even offering to spring for the flights and the hotel.” He gave her a hopeful look and continued pleading his case, “You could fly out tonight, and do the audition, then the benefit and fly back by Sunday afternoon if you wanted to.”

Wanted to? Caitriona was about a thousand percent certain that she would want to spend as much time in New York as she possibly could get. “I think we can make that happen.” She said quietly, “Can you organise the flights and see if there is a room at the Four Seasons?”

The manager’s brow wrinkled, “The Four Seasons?” He queried, “WCC is at the Park Hyatt. You sure you want to be trying to battle Manhattan traffic on a Saturday night?”

“I am.” Caitriona confirmed, giving no further details despite her manager’s more than befuddled
look. “Please?”
She was absolutely sure she wanted a room at the Four Seasons for reasons that weren’t obvious to her manager but that were abundantly clear to her. One hotel had a certain blond haired investigator staying within it, the other was merely the location for a fancy benefit ball.
No decision to be made there what so ever.
“Okkaay.” He stretched the word out, “Four Season’s it is.” He wasn’t entirely sure of what exactly was going through the actor’s mind but decided to accept the small victory where he’d found it, “Give me a minute,” He stood and started towards the door, “I’ll be back with details. Late night flight?”
Caitriona gave a small shrug, “I just need time to go home and throw a bag together then,” She started getting to her feet, “I can leave as soon as you can get me a flight.” Caitriona tried to not sound as eager as she really was, a pleasant tingle already skittering about in her stomach at the idea that she would be with Johnathon much sooner than she’d thought. The older man gave her a short nod and disappeared out the door, phone pressed to his ear. Caitriona watched the door swing closed behind him, her mouth slowly creasing into a soft smile. Talk about a turn around.
A few moments ago she had been at the end of her tether. With work, with Sam, with the tyranny of distance and time. Yes, she’d have to go to that audition and yes, she’d have a benefit to attend, but the rest of the time. The smile of her face broadened. Johnathon.
She was halfway through stacking together a bunch of papers that had been littered across the table, which included the scripts for the next block along with three completely different scripts belonging to prospective projects that she was looking into, when Sam’s head poked around the door.
He watched Caitriona a moment, more than a little surprised to see her looking very much like she was getting ready to leave. “You going already?” He’d thought Caitriona didn’t have any special plans and had been considering asking her out for the night. Maybe to a restaurant or one of their local hangouts. He’d already gotten a few others from the crew in on the idea. Having a small group was the only way lately Sam had been able to convince Caitriona to spend any non-work time together.
Caitriona nodded, sliding the neat stack of papers into a large bag and hunting around on the floor for her shoes, “Headed out to New York for a World Child Cancer thing.”
“New York?” Came the redundant question, complete with a predictably tone of disapproval, “Kind of late notice don’t you think?”
Caitriona crouched and snagged the recalcitrant footwear, which she had kicked to the far end of the table when she’d been in a mood earlier in the day, “Late notice, but not their fault.” She stood, leaning on the table and slipping the shoes on her feet, “I thought we’d still be filming so I cancelled months ago,” She wriggled her toes, settling her footwear into place, “but we were so late with this block that it’s thrown the schedule out anyway. With this weekend now clear, I’d thought I’d go.”
Sam didn’t know if Caitriona was telling the truth or not about all that or not. It wasn’t like her to lie but then again…
New York.
Sam knew damn well that the guy Caitriona was seeing was in New York. He’d remembered Caitriona mentioning it when they first came back to work and she was always figuring out what time it was in the damn place compared to Glasgow. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was really going on. He cast an eye over Caitriona’s attractive face.
Yes.
He was calling bullshit on this one.
This was a trans-continental booty call if ever he saw it and that smile, the one that lights her eyes, just confirmed it.
WCC my ass, Sam’s mind growled.
This was about that guy.
At first Sam had thought this would just blow over. That Caitriona would come to her senses after a
few weeks and kick this other guy to the curb. There was no way in hell that the Caitriona he knew would ever be happy with a long distance affair. She’d even said as much to him, way back when they’d first started filming, emphatically stating that she was someone who needed someone to be there with her at the end of the work day.

Not a million miles away. On and entirely different continent. For weeks at a time. It wouldn’t work.

Sam knew it. He couldn’t believe that Caitriona hadn’t come to the same conclusion. There was still time he guessed. Though, the longer it went on, the less the chance would be that she would change her mind. Caitriona was a stick and stay type. If there was one thing Sam had learned about Caitriona was that once she made her mind up about anything, you had god’s own job to change it. “You going to be back in time for shooting on Monday?” He asked, leaning on the frame of the door, silently pondering what to do next.

Caitriona slipped her long arms into her jacket, “I should be.” She freed her trapped hair from beneath the collar, “It’s just the one night. Saturday. I should be back on Sunday.” Her eyes flicked to the older face of her manager as he returned, stopping halfway up the small set of stairs that lead to her trailer, further progress blocked by the large body of Caitriona’s co-star. “All set?” She asked picking up the last of her belongings.

“Car is on its way. Hotel is booked. Flight is at six,” The older man nodded, “That enough time or should I transfer it to the nine o’clock flight instead?”

“No, no,” Caitriona grabbed her bag and phone and made for the door, “I can do six.” She would have to get moving if she was to make that flight. By the time she got home, packed a bag and got through customs it was going to be tight, but if she could make it, it would be an additional three hours that she would have in New York. With Johnathon.

“Should I organise wardrobe for this or?”

“No. It’s okay,” Caitriona fiddled with the strap, taking the last twist out of it before slinging the bag over her shoulder and pushing past Sam, who was still in slight disbelief that Caitriona was actually going to do this, “I’ll get something from home. Wait,” She turned to regard her manager as she made her way down the stairs, “I’m assuming it’s black tie? Not a masquerade ball or anything right?” They turned and headed towards the pick up zone, both men falling into step along side her.

“According to the invitation,” Eyes scanned over details displayed on the tablet, “It’s your standard black tie benefit ball.”

“Then no,” Caitriona affirmed as they walked around the corner of one of the massive sound stages and headed down the paved alleyway to their normal drop off point, “I’ll be fine.” She had a wardrobe full of potential outfits at home. She’d just pick a dress and take it from there. Clothing. Hair. Make up. It was always nice to have that done for you, but it wasn’t necessary. You’d didn’t spend half a life time in the fashion industry without learning how take care of all that yourself.

“Just you?” Matt asked, “or will I confirm a plus one as well?”

Sam shot the manager a dark look. A plus one? Jesus Christ, his mind screamed, don’t fucking encourage her.

“Press controlled inside the venue,” The manager confirmed at little breathlessly, having to walk quicker than he would have liked to keep up with the tall woman's stride, “Full vetting of all official photographs.”

Caitriona considered that a moment. Press controlled was a start. It would mean the she would get final approval of any and all photographs taken within the event. That was good in terms of the privacy she’d been mentally debating earlier. One mental mark landed in the pro column. Of course, there was no such control of personal phones. Con column. The likehood of the clientele of this particular event rabidly tweeting, instagramming or status updating their every move was reasonably small. High end business men and women like the ones attending this event, generally acted as private as Caitriona liked to be. Another mark for pro column. It wasn’t like she hadn’t
ever hidden in plain sight at these types of things before. And feasibly, who would even know whoever she was photographed with wasn’t just another business man. Only Caitriona would know different. One more tick appeared in the mental pro list. Johnathon in a well made tailored suit…..

“Confirm a plus one.” Caitriona said, ignoring the outrageous look coming from her co-star as they reached the pick-up area, her driver stepping out and taking her bag from her. She wasn’t sure if Johnathon would even be okay with attending the event with her, or that he wouldn’t be working. Caitriona figured that if her first plan fell through for whatever reason, she could always talk her older sister, Diedra, who now lived in New York, into attending the benefit with her. Either way, she’d figure something out.

“Already done.” The older man gave her a soft smile, watching as his client settled in the passenger seat, “I’ll send you through all the details and see you Monday for filming.” She flashed him a grateful smile, “Thank you Matt.” She leaned towards him, softly kissing his cheek, before sitting back and pulling the seatbelt across her chest. Her gaze turned towards Sam, who was standing, arms folded defiantly across his chest, a slight scowl on his face.

“See you Monday Sam.” Caitriona gave him a small wave and closed the door. Clearly that situation hadn’t improved any, if anything, it was probably worse. She watched him in the side mirror as the car started to move. The stiff back, the square set of his shoulders, the glare from beneath his heavy brow before he turned and stalked away. Definitely worse. Still, she’d worry about him later. Now she had a trip to prepare for.

The traffic for once in its life, appeared to be on her side. The run home was relatively easy and, despite leaving her apartment looking like a tornado had been through the place, Caitriona had managed to pack her bags, find an acceptable dress and get herself to the airport in record time. With good ten minutes to spare actually. Quite a feat and rather unusual for her.

“Hello Miss Balfe, Seat 2 F. Window seat, second on the left.” The airline steward smiled at her, pointing down the small aisle and indicating her assigned seat.

“Thank you.” Caitriona returned the smile and made her way the short distance to her seat. She debated lifting her handbag into the overhead locker, then decided against it, instead she pulled out her phone, a tiny set of headphones and the stack of scripts, then slipped the bag beneath the seat in front her. If nothing else, she cradled her phone in her lap and tucked the belongings into the netted compartment on the back of the seat, she could use this time to read those scripts Matt had been hassling her about for the past month. Caitriona fastened her seatbelt over her slender waist then glanced at the darkened screen of her phone. She had already gotten confirmation that Johnathon wasn’t flying to her this weekend by way of an answered text she had received while she had been frantically throwing things into various bags at the apartment. Caitriona had a quiet little argument with herself about whether to tell him she was on her way to him or not. She’d eventually decided that perhaps it was her turn to surprise him. After all, Johnathon had been the one doing all the travelling for weeks now and Caitriona had decided that fair was fair. It was her turn, and she smiled, all the sweeter considering it would be a total surprise. One Caitriona was fairly certain the blond man would be happy about. She’d carefully answered Johnathon's text with one of her own, saying she would talk to him tonight when he was finished work. All of it the truth. Caitriona would definitely be talking to Johnathon tonight. Perhaps in a slightly different manner to what he might have been expecting, but she was more than fine with that. Caitriona let out a contented breath and settled back in the seat, the extra space of first class affording her the luxury of being able to cross her leg comfortably. There couldn’t be that many more passengers to board, she calculated, watching the stewardess closest to the heavy door separating place from gangway methodically work down the manifest of passengers.

“One more.” She heard her comment to one of her colleagues who had arrived to help with matters. Caitriona briefly wondered which unfortunate soul would have the dubious honour of delaying an entire international flight. She’d had that honour once or twice before and it was not exactly pleasant. The worst of it was you couldn’t just quietly sneak on board. If you were that one passenger, the only way to your seat was a very public walk of shame, straight down the aisle in front of the very people you had delayed. Most of which generally looked like they wanted to
strangle you. Caitriona wished whoever was going to have to face it this time luck. Though, she glanced at her watch, if whoever it was didn’t hurry up, she’d be joining the strangle crowd. She had places to be and one very handsome blond man to be with.

“Sorry.. Sorry.” A deep voice sounded as the large coated form of man finally cleared the aircraft doorway. Caitriona head shot up, dark brows knitting as the spark of recognition fired, darting from her ears to her memory. Eyes went wide as the man turned and set of blue eyes she knew flicked to her face.

“Oh fuck.” Caitriona cursed softly, shifting slightly uncomfortably in her seat and taking a deep breath.

“Hey.” Sam acknowledged with a small smile, as if this was an entirely normal situation and not unusual in the least.

“What are you doing here?”

“Me?” He hoisted his bag into the overhead locker and plonked down in the seat along side her, “Audi.” He said cryptically, dropping his eyes from hers and fastening his seatbelt.

“What?”

“Audi Party. In New York. You know. For their car show? They have it every year.” Sam looked up and leaned towards her, “Thought I’d take a page out of your book.” He bumped her with his shoulder, “You know, make hay while we’re not working.”

Cool blue eyes stared at him and he knew Caitriona was more than a little pissed off with him. Sam was past caring about all that. He just had this feeling that if he didn’t do something, Caitriona was going to make a serious mistake with this guy. If she didn’t want to be with him, fine. But Sam wasn’t just going to let her make another stupid mistake if he could help it.

“Sam,” Her voice was low and about as warm as the glare she was currently pinning him with, “Where are you staying?” She asked, one dark eyebrow lifting. If Sam was doing what Caitriona suspected he was doing, she was about ready to climb over the armrest and deliver a slap to her friend’s face with a force entirely inconsistent with her thin frame.

For the first time since this plan had popped into his head as he’d watched Caitriona driving away from the lot, Sam Heughan hesitated.

What the hell, the devil on his shoulder gave a nonchalant shrug, how mad could Caitriona get? Blue eyes drilled into his, the intensity of which made him reflexively swallow, “The Four Seasons.” He said with a somewhat nervous smile, “Should be fun right?”

Chapter End Notes

Johnathon and Caitriona should be in the same city at the same time shortly here. Just one flight away. Baring any hiccups.... What could possibly go wrong??

Thanks to you all for your comments last chapter. You guys rock.

Have a very happy mother’s day to any and all the mum’s out there. The world is a better place because of each and every one of you.

Cheers and catch you in a couple of weeks and as always, thanks for reading.
Johnathon kicked the door closed behind him and dropped an armful of folders and his laptop onto the table. They’d made good time on the road, arriving back in New York a little after ten. They’d even had time for a quick to detour by the offices and collect extra work on their way back to the hotel. If nothing else, it would save Johnathon the same trip in the morning. It also had the added benefit of helping to take his mind off the fact that Caitriona wasn’t returning any of his texts. It had been hours since he’d last heard from her. Johnathon had already decided that if he didn’t hear from her by 6 am Glasgow time, he’s start raising the alarm.

He pulled out his phone and rechecked her texts, the last of which had been sent while they had been sitting in the legal offices, taking statements from some less than savoury minded people, almost twelve hours ago. She’d said she was just waiting for a set turn around and that she didn’t think they’d be finishing anytime soon. Complete silence for extended periods of time wasn’t like her and Johnathon was beginning to get concerned. There was, of course, a stack of entirely logical and rational reasons why Caitriona may have chosen to go radio silent. Working on set being up there on Johnathon’s current list, followed by sleeping or her phone could even be flat. Johnathon had learned Caitriona had a terrible habit of not really paying attention to things like that until the device actually shutdown. So, he reflected, toeing off his shoes one at a time, it wasn’t panic stations just yet. Close. But not yet.

Turning, Johnathon snagged the ice bucket and room key from the counter. Late night drink sounded good to him. He swung the door open and padded barefoot down the carpeted hall, muted and quiet in the late hours. Maybe Johnathon would even order some room service or something. He hadn’t eaten in a good while and had to admit he was starving. Ice bucket full to over flowing, he made his back to his room. After perusing the mini bar, Johnathon twisted the metallic top off a small bottle of whiskey and poured the entire contents into a glass then added an equal measure of ice.

“Alright,” He said softly, swallowing a sip and setting the glass down then tugging over three folders, “Let’s see which one of you is a liar.”

Several folders and about as many small bottles of whiskey later, Johnathon stretched, lifting his arms over his head and standing up. It was just after midnight. He eyed his phone, dark and silent. He’d wait another half hour then he’d give Caitriona another try. If she was still filming, then at some point in the next couple of hours she should break for dinner and Johnathon knew Caitriona always checked her phone during those times. Lately she’d taken to going back to her trailer during her downtime, so they’d been lucky enough to have managed the odd video call or two.

Johnathon wandered over the window, his shirt pulling across his shoulders as he bent, hands leaning on the sill, eyes studying the cityscape. He’d wait just a little longer and if there was still no response from Caitriona, then he’d start calling around to make sure she was alright. If she didn’t want to speak to him, that was one thing, if she was hurt or in some kind of trouble, that was something else entirely. She was probably just busy, his logical mind made an attempt at some reassurance. Caitriona should be fine. She’s surrounded by people. Surely someone would know if she was in trouble. His eyes flicked to the stack of folders sitting silently on the table. Case after case of people who had no forewarning that something terrible was about to happen. They were all perfectly fine.

Until they weren’t.

That did it.

Johnathon stalked back over to the table, spinning the laptop around and pulling up the company travel booking portal. Exactly five clicks later, his inbox alert chimed, flight details confirmed. One
way ticket. Earliest departing flight, in just over five hours. Destination Glasgow. Johnathon knew he was probably worrying for nothing. Johnathon’s precaution frame of reference inevitable skewed due to his over exposure to the dark side of humanity. In his experience, it was better to be safe than sorry. Johnathon wasn’t about to take any chances. Not this time. Not with Caitriona. He grabbed his half open suitcase and flicked open the lid. Couple of pairs of pants and a few shirts, just enough for a couple of days. If he needed more than that, he’d buy new. Johnathon was about to head into the bathroom to gather his wet pack when the sound he had been waiting to hear all night, chimed from the table. In less than two steps he had the noisy vibrating device cradled in his hand, the text message successfully received. Blond brows knit as his eyes immediately recognised the number and began reading the message.

Phone flat.
23rd Floor.
Suite 3.
Ten minutes.

At first Johnathon thought maybe he’d confused Caitriona’s number. Either that or he’d ingested more whiskey then he’d thought. Johnathon double checked its accuracy then decided he would just call the damn thing. “What in hell.” He mumbled a few moments later, looking at the phone as if it could somehow provide him with the answer.
Voice mail.
Ten minutes be damned. Johnathon was going to go now and find out what the devil was going on. Sockless feet were forced into shoes that were obnoxiously tight, the urgency of the situation not affording the time of having the laces untied. Hotel key, wallet and phone where shoved into a back pocket. Johnathon was still slipping his arms into his jacket when he stepped into the metallic box of the elevator and hit the illuminated button for the 23rd floor. His mind was racing, swinging between concern that something was wrong and tingling with excitement at the idea that Caitriona could possibly be right here. In the hotel. Right now.
The numbers on the screen above the buttons ticked over far too slowly for Johnathon’s liking. Finally the doors slid open and Johnathon stepped out into the long corridor. Glancing down the hallway he spotted a large luggage trolley frame, usually laden with a variety of suitcases and garment bags, now empty coming towards him. Johnathon politely nodded to the bellhop, stepping to one side to allow the trolley to pass, blue eyes reading the bronze suite numbers decorating each door as he continued down the hallway.
Suite 3, the message had said. Each step drawing him closer, until he stood facing a closed door, the very last suite on this side of the hotel.

Number 3.
Johnathon lifted a hand and knocked softly.
No answer.
Blond brows knit and Johnathon tried again, this time delivering a smart rap to the wooden surface. Still nothing.
Johnathon was rapidly approaching the point of total confusion and correctly figured there was only one person on earth who could help him solve this problem. He let out a long breath and tugged his phone from his pocket, long fingers flicking over the screen, typing a new message on the off chance Caitriona would magically get it some how.
“You’re early.” A voice sounded from down the corridor. Johnathon looked up to see a set of amused blue eyes watching him,”“ I thought I said ten minutes?”

Johnathon’s face split into a broad smile as he gave a low chuckle of relief, as he stepped towards her, wrapping strong arms around her waist and pulling her close. His eyes studied hers a moment, a hand lifted to lay a palm against her cheek, “Indeed you did Miss Balfe.”

Caitriona sucked in a breath as his mouth found hers, kissing her long and deep, her body melting in to his, her arms looping around his neck as a warm wave washed through her.
“Hi.” Caitriona whispered from behind closed eyes a few moments later, her face hovering close to his, breathing in the scent of him, leaning into the solid security of his strong frame.
“Hello Caitriona.” His deep voice rumbled, the soft sound of her name setting a thousand butterflies zinging back and forth beneath the surface of her belly, “What,” Lips brushed against softly against hers, “are you doing here?”

Caitriona’s fingers curled around his neck, “Thought I’d surprise you.” She slowly ran her fingertips through the short strands of hair along the back of his skull, before her mouth found his, smiling against his lips at the low hum of approval she got for her trouble when she deliberately deepened the kiss, her tongue chasing his in steady exploration of his mouth. The arm around her waist tightened, pulling her body tightly against his as Johnathon responded to her intimate game of advance and withdrawal with one of his own.

A low sigh escaped her lips as the kiss slowly drew to a close, ending with a soft brush of her lips over his, their foreheads resting against each other. “God I’ve missed you.” Caitriona murmured, running her hands back and forth over his strong shoulders, studying his eyes at very close distance.

“What a coincidence.” Johnathon smiled, lifting a hand to laying a palm against her cheek. Fingertips drifted along the edge of her jaw and neck, deep blue eyes locked with hers, his voice dropping a register, “I missed you too.”

“Did you?” Caitriona whispered as she leaned into him, threading her fingers through his hair and pulling him closer.

“Yes.” Johnathon breathed, “I did.”

His mouth found hers again and for several long heartbeats Caitriona let herself get lost in the taste and touch of him. Slow, long kisses stealing her breathe and thought, a sigh falling from her lips as Johnathon softly sucked on her tongue, large hands splayed against her lower back. Caitriona’s fingers tightened in Johnathon’s hair, pushing her body tightly against his chest, the heat between them rising.

The muted ding of the elevator drifted from somewhere down the hall, accompanied by the sound of another luggage trolley being maneuvered along the hallway forcing Johnathon slowly drew the kiss to a close, blue eyes flicking from hers to the hotel corridor and back again.

“Think we better go inside.” He said on an uneven breathe, the reality of situation invading their romantic moment. He was more than fully aware that they were rapidly approaching the point of no return and he really didn’t think that a hotel corridor was the best place to further their physical relationship.

“Think you might be right.” Caitriona blew out a long breathe, trying to calm the fire racing through her blood, as they reluctantly separated, both of them walking the last few steps to the suite door. Slightly shaking fingers struggled with the electronic key card and a seemingly problematic lock.

“May I?” Johnathon’s deep voice sounded beside her ear, immediately sending a sensual shiver down her spine, Johnathon standing close enough that Caitriona felt his chest brush against her back. Long fingers rescued the key card from her grip, the small light on the top of the light flicked from red to green as he pushed the paper card into the slot.

“Show off.” Caitriona softly kissed him as his head turned towards her, “You haven’t been drinking by any chance have you?” She asked quietly, the slight taste of whiskey registering on the back of her tongue, arching one eyebrow at him as strong arms pushed the door inward.

“Maybe.”

“By maybe do you mean yes?”

Deep blue eyes sparkled at her, their edges crinkling as the handsome mouth curled into a guilty smile, “Yes.”

“Sprung Mr Chase.” Caitriona shot him a grin of her own as they cleared the doorway and both stepped into the plush suite, “Caught red handed. Drunk in New York City.” She playfully teased, “And here I thought you were working.”

“I was working,” The door closed behind them with a click, “And I’m pretty sure drunk might be a slight exaggeration.”

They wandered down the short hallway, emerging into a large sitting area complete with a couch.
and small dining table on one side and the entry way to a large bedroom on the other.

“Not bad.” Johnathon commented. The whole space was approximately three times the size of his executive room. Three times the price too he mentally wagered.

“Courtesy of Universal.” Caitriona called over her shoulder as she made her way towards the luggage rack, a neat stack of suitcases already occupying it, “I have an audition tomorrow that they want me to do.” She tuck her handbag away on the shelf and shucked out of her coat, hanging it on a hook, “I thought it was a good chance get it done and see you at the same time.” She held her hand out. He looked good, Caitriona mused, taking in his tall form as he stepped towards her, fingers brushing against her as he handed over his own coat.

“Ah.” Long fingers threaded between hers, “The old work excuse huh?”

“Something like that,” Caitriona smiled, hanging his coat on the hook, “I couldn’t believe my luck when they told me they wanted me in New York. Caught the first plane I could.”

“Amen to that.” Johnathon slid his arms around her waist, her own hands coming to rest on his upper arms, blue eyes locking with blue.

“Not upset that I didn’t tell you?” She slowly ran her palms over the slope of his shoulders, “Wasn’t sure if you’d want me here while you were trying to work.”

“For the record,” The muscles beneath her hands shifted as Johnathon’s arms tightened, momentarily pulling her closer, “Working or not Caitriona,” He placed a soft kiss on her lips, “I always want you here.”

“You know that goes for me as well don’t you?” Blue eyes searched his, the air stilling around them. She hadn’t meant to get so serious, so quickly but something had shifted. Caitriona could feel it and she suspected Johnathon could too. Things that went far deeper than just pure attraction of which she felt in spades for blond man. It went beyond that.

Caitriona felt different when she was with Johnathon. Different to all the other times and all the other men in her past. The spark of attraction that had drawn them together initially, was now deepening with every passing day. For the first time, in a very long, Caitriona felt safe. Safe enough to let a him in. Safe enough to hope for something more than betrayal or a relationship of pure professional advantage. Safe enough to trust.

Safe enough to begin.

“I don’t care what we have to do,” Her fingers gently scratched the back of his neck, “How many flights we have to take, what schedules we have to shuffle, what extra hours I have to do. I don’t care. Whatever it takes, Johnathon,” She laid a palm against his cheek, feeling the slight rasp of the day old stubble, “I want us to be together we whenever we can.”

The surface beneath her palm moved as Johnathon nodded then lowered his mouth until it hovered almost touching hers, “Whatever it takes Caitriona.”

Her fingers curled around his jaw, sucked in a breath, her mouth opening, inviting him in. One large hand lifted to thread through her hair as Johnathon deepened the kiss, his tongue chasing hers in a delicate dance, heartbeats racing, skin igniting with the warmth of pure sexual desire. God. He wanted her. He was more than willing to wait, to take this slow, as slow as they both needed to. This had to be Caitriona’s call. No questions and no need to ask them. It was her right. Always. It didn’t mean he wasn’t human however, and Caitriona Balfe had the unerring ability to make every nerve ending in his body stand up and take notice. His skin was already on fire with just the thought of her. If they didn’t stop soon, it would become blatantly more obvious that it already was, exactly what his body thought he should be doing with her and it had nothing to do with leaving her hotel room. He drew the kiss to a close, breathing heavily against her lips, eyes closed, resting his forehead against hers. He had to give her a way out in case he was misreading things.

Fingertips rested over the pulse point in his neck, the gentle thrum beating faster than normal just beneath the warm skin, both of them breathing the same air. Both of them dancing along a line they desperately wanted to cross. They had taken things to the physical brink several times now,
only just managing somehow to rein themselves in. To stop. To wait. To make sure they were both ready. To make sure their relationship was ready for the intimate step.

Caitriona was acutely aware that there was a reason they had been taking things slow and steady. Given their respective pasts, she was protective of what they were building together. But this, she audibly swallowed, hoping like hell Johnathon couldn’t hear her heart pounding in her chest, this felt right. “Johnathon?” His eyes slid open, meeting hers, “If you wanted to,” She blinked slowly at him, letting the desire coursing through her blood, show in her eyes, “You could stay.” A soft breathless whisper that Johnathon wasn’t sure he had heard but rather imagined it. Her fingertips moved along his chin and drifted down the side his neck. Johnathon could still turn around, her mind warned.

“Are you sure Caitriona?” Deep blue eyes darkened with a deep wanting that shot straight to her core.

She had never been more certain of anything in her entire life, “Please stay.” She murmured before curling her hand around his neck and pulling him to her, taking possession of his mouth, stealing his breath, letting strong arms wrap around her, surround her. The last barrier between them falling away with soft sighs, a steady exploration of mouths, lips and tongues. Warm hands settled on her hips, fingers splaying out against her cloth covered skin as they began to wander over her lower back, pressing their heated bodies tighter against each other. His tongue met hers, the tip of it running over hers, mouths opening, tasting and sucking, their bodies responding to the sheer closeness of it all.

Caitriona pulled back, her breathing short and shallow, her face flushed, pupils large in dim light, chest heaving. Her hands smoothed over his broad shoulders, down the collar of his shirt, leaning into him as she tugged at the fabric of his shirt. Shaking hands fighting with stubborn buttons that refused to undo. The sudden need to touch his skin almost overwhelming. Johnathon’s hands running distractingly over her back, drifting down to rest on the swell of her backside.

Finally, the last button came free, the tails of his shirt untucking from his pants as his palms pressed flat against heated skin of his lower stomach, then sliding up, feeling every ridge and hollow of stomach muscles, over ribs and chest pushing the shirt from his shoulders hitting the floor almost soundlessly. His mouth returned to her as he leaned back in, kissing her long and deep,

soft moans passing between them both as bodies pressed and rubbed against each other in a desperate attempt to get closer.

His hands worked their way under the hem of her shirt, his wrists bunching the fabric, his fingertips working their way over the naked flesh of her back. They separated long enough for Caitriona to raise her arms. Eyes held his as the flat of his hands slowly moved over ribs, barely brushing the sides of her breasts, dragging the shirt up over her head, the soft ruffle of her long hair settling on bare shoulders. The shirt dropped to the ground as her hands pressed down against his shoulders, breasts pressed against bare chest. Caitriona slowly began to walk them towards the bedroom, intense blue staring unblinkingly back at her. She realised then, watching the steady pools of blue, feeling the warm body gently moving against her with every step, that as much as she was giving herself to him, that he was laying a part of himself that was quite vulnerable in her hands. Their steps slowed as they crossed the threshold of the bedroom, the last vestiges of hesitation and guarded fear fell away. Replaced by an insistent drive of flesh, soul and desire. The last few paces to the bed became nothing more than excuses to breath between kisses. Some of them slow, tongues searching to brush against each other, some of them desperate, quick, filled with an almost primal wanting that made concentration near on impossible. Her fingers drifted over the smooth skin of his chest, down over his stomach, pulling away on a heated breath, her eyes following a fine smattering of darker blond hair trailing from navel down, disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans. Fingers reached for his belt, undoing it and pulling it free from the material loops, the solid buckle hitting the floor with metallic thud. She felt gentle fingers reach for her own clothing, the rustle of fabric falling from heated skin with growing urgency punctuated the stillness, finally leaving naked flesh, pressing against naked flesh, both of them completely lost in the other’s taste, touch and rapid breathing. Caitriona was aware of the sound of a packet
opening before she was gently lifted and settled in the soft plushness of the bed, a warm naked body instantly hovering above her. Hot breathe and wet lips kissed over the soft skin of her neck, his chest brushing against her nipples. Her eyes closed as the lips found their way back to her mouth, her hands resting on the slope of his neck, running over the smooth expanse of his broad back, feeling the gentle curve of his shoulder blades moving just under his skin. Her thighs fell open as his hips slipped between her legs. She could feel him, hard and wanting, brushing against her, her own body slick in intimate response. Tongues chased each other, kissing, tasting, sucking. The arms bracketing her body tensed slightly, his torso angling up and away from her. Caitriona’s eyes fluttered open at the loss of contact. She worried she might see hesitation and the anxious fear of uncertainty, the reflections of a possible mistake, a last minute change of heart. Instead she found steady eyes locked with hers, a gentle question burning in their blue depths. The surety of his intention and desire staring back at her.

In answer, she curled a hand around his neck, held his gaze and very deliberately pulled her legs up, resting them over his hips. In one slow smooth motion, the hard length of him slid gently inside her. Her eyes drifted shut, breathless moans and sighs slipping from her lips, the feeling of him, hot, silky and smooth, filling her with each slow stroke as he started to move. Utter pleasure coursed through her, working from her insides out with the slick friction of every slow steady thrust. Fingers tangled in his hair as mouths met, kissing, sucking, breathing against each other. Her hands slid over his back and shoulders as his pace began to quicken. He leaned into her, his chest brushing against her own. She felt it building deep inside her, somewhere in her very core, her legs tightening around him, her hips rising to meet him, every part of her wanting to wrap tightly around him and never let go. Fingers gripped his back, pulling him down as close as she could against her, her breathing fast and ragged as the wave grew with every deep long thrust of him. She took a deep breath, “John!” She called as her own orgasm crested and washed through her, bringing him with her, feeling him thicken and jerk inside her as her back arched towards him, every muscles tightening then relaxing. Blood pounded in her ears, limbs became limp and heavy as the last spasms of pleasure rippled through her, leaving her breathlessly clinging to the warm body above her. He was still for a few moments except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest and the exhale of his laboured breathing warming her neck. Caitriona’s legs slipped from his hips, resting across the back of this thighs. When he did move, his blond head lifted and kissed her softly. “Everything okay?” He murmured against her lips, his body covering hers from hip to shoulder. “God yes.” She breathed, threading her fingers through his hair and kissing him as long as her breathing would allow. Caitriona felt him move, sighing softly as he slid gently from inside her. He lifted away from her for several long heartbeats and for just a moment her heart skipped a beat, fearing an echo of the past, until she realised what he was doing. Before the thought had time to take root, long arms and warm body returned, wrapping around her, kissing her slowly as he rolled them both onto his back, half cradling her against his chest. She closed her eyes, settling her body against him, the gentle thrum of his still slowing heart, beating just below his heated skin, reveling in the closeness of him. “I’m very glad you decided to stay Johnathon.” Caitriona let out a deep sigh of contentment, draping an arm across his stomach and sliding a leg across his thigh.

“I’m still thanking Mary, Joseph and Jesus that you asked.”
Caitriona chuckled softly, snuggling into him as one long arm rested, laying down the slope of her back. “And if I asked you to stay more often?”

“Careful what you wish for.” He whispered, kissing her forehead, “I’m fairly certain you’ll get it.”
Caitriona felt him tug the bed sheet over them both, before settling comfortably back down. Long fingers began a slow tracing of idle patterns on the smooth skin of her lower back. Her eyes fluttered shut, listening to the quiet rhythms of warm body beneath her, so utterly content that she could scarcely believe it.

Finally.

A lazy sated smile painted her features.

Finally.

No doubts.
No regrets. Nothing but pure pleasure wrapped in a solid blanket of emotional fulfillment and quiet security. The hand on her back was gradually slowing, as was the movement of his chest beneath her hand, sleep slowly stalking them both. She felt Johnathon tighten his arm around her a moment, drawing her closer, his head turning towards her to rest against hers. Caitriona took a deep breath, nuzzling the side of his neck, the scent of him slowly wash through her senses, snuggling into his side, in haze of contentment.

Finally.

Chapter End Notes

Will definitely be two weeks before the next post everyone. Work is super busy just at the minute. Anyway, I think a few readers might have been waiting for this chapter to happen. So, enjoy and see you in a few weeks. Stay safe and as always, thanks for reading and commenting.

Cheers to all
Timing

Caitriona blinked the sleep from her eyes, watching the beam of sunlight, slowly creep towards the foot of the bed, revelling in the simple quiet peacefulness of the morning. The heartbeat beneath her ear was steady, slow and predictable in its rhythm. The warm body she was snuggled against still relaxed in the grip of sleep. Not surprising, she mused. Unlike her, Johnathon hadn’t had the luxury of catching up on sleep during a long haul flight so he was bound to be tired. Particularly given that they had been awake half the night. Her eyes slid closed. Vivid memories of the activities of the early hours painted the back of her eyelids. At the risk of sounding like one of the women in those romance books her youngest sister was always prattling on about, last night had been absolutely everything she had hoped for and then some. Johnathon had been gentle when he’d needed to be, insistent when her body had demanded it, considerate without being asked. More than that, he’d been there. Physically, emotionally, completely and utterly right there. With her. Caitriona pressed herself tighter against his side, enjoying the feeling of his smooth skin touching hers, naked and warm. A tangible, physical reminder that he was still right here with her. He hadn’t left. He hadn’t turned over and ignored her. He hadn’t disappeared immediately to shower, as if what they had done needed to be washed away. Instead, Johnathon had surrounded her, letting her snuggle against his side in the safe protection of his arms.

Caitriona allowed herself to float in the pure contentment of that for a long series of minutes. She had been wondering for a while what this was going to be like, the physical part of this developing relationship they’d both been cultivating for weeks. Now, her face curled into a soft smile, she most definitely knew. It hadn’t just been good. It had been heart pounding, breath stealing, muscle clenching, overwhelmingly satisfyingly good. And that was just the start of it. Was it possible that she had just forgotten how good this could feel? She thought about for a few moments. Caitriona had slept with her fair share of men in the past and somehow, she had never, ever managed to feel what she’d felt last night. It was unfathomable to her how what they had just done, was so different to every other time in her life. There was after all, only so many ways certain parts of human anatomy fitted together. It wasn’t exactly rocket science and Caitriona was pretty sure she’d tried just about all of those ways at least once or more in her lifetime. Some had been a complete waste of time. Some had been disastrous. The odd one or two that had been downright painful, she grimaced, preferring to not think about those. Some had been good she guessed, though perhaps satisfactory would have been a better way to describe it. Those times had more about serving a purpose and they usually involving a lot more work by her own hand so to speak. Which was fine, she conceded. Caitriona wasn’t adverse to having to do that if that’s what it took. Any port in a storm was her philosophy and there was only so long she could go without having some form of release. If that meant she had to take matters into her own hands, then so be it.

Last night however…. Caitriona took a deep contented breath. Last night her hands had been otherwise engaged. Thoroughly occupying themselves by gripping onto a steadily moving body. One that had most definitely not been hers. Caitriona’s eyes slid open, her gaze drifting across the smooth planes of the broad chest she was currently resting on. Over the ridges of the his ribs, down the flat of his stomach, it’s surface slowly rising and falling with each breath, following the fine smattering of blond hair trailing down from his navel and disappearing beneath the folds of the soft white comforter they were both wrapped in. The man was certainly well put together. Muscular without the bulk, lean without being skinny, strong without being rough and gentle without being weak. When you mixed all that together with the uncanny ability to make every nerve in her body stand to attention with just a look, or a single sound from his mouth, it was about as far from satisfactory as you could get. And as for his touch. A warm wave of sensuality washed over her. Her body seemed to crave it. A wanting so strong that she always wanted more. The feeling so powerful that it left Caitriona wondering why. Why was she reacting like this? Why was everything so very different with him?
There had to be a reason. She had never prescribed to the idea of soul mates. That one person in the entire universe that is meant exclusively for just you. It never made sense to her, the utter randomness of it all. She’d always believed that such bonds took time and effort to be forged. That over time, someone could become your soul mate. Nothing instant or comically predetermined about it. It happened because you wanted it to, not because it was meant to be. If she was to hold true to that belief, then, there had to be a reason why she was feeling this way with Johnathon. There just had to be.

Maybe it was because of the self imposed abstinence Caitriona been living in for a good while now. Certainly since Tony and even before that, opportunities for any such release had been few and far between. She wondered if the long dry spell had made her hypersensitive. That could possibly explain her body’s more than willing reaction to Johnathon. All that pent up sexual tension finally given permission to release after a very long period of denial. Yes, she decided, that could well have been the case.

The first time.

Caitriona wasn’t as convinced however, that it was the culprit for the second, third and definitely not the fourth time.

Maybe, a slight blush worked its way up her neck, it was because a certain blonde haired investigator appeared to have been blessed with the extra width and length that seemed to fit her body like a glove. Or more importantly, she corrected, Johnathon seemed to have an excellent technique when it came to putting that extra length and width to the best use possible. Consistently doing so at precisely the exact moment that she had needed him to. She let out a soft sigh, not needing any reminding of how close her own leg, the one currently draped across the subject of her thoughtful musing’s muscular thigh, was to the particular body part in question. He was right there in the that goldilocks zone, she mused silently. Not too big, not too small. Just right. In fact, Caitriona was hard pressed to find anything, physically wise about Johnathon that didn’t fall into that zone. It was as if his body had been specially made to fit hers with stunning precision. A thought struck her. Had she really just spent her whole with men that were disturbingly shocking in bed? Only now just happening to encountering someone who actually knew what they were doing? Surely there had to be more to it than just that? No one could spend 15 years being THAT unlucky. Not even her. Caitriona never professed herself to be any good a mathematics but she was certain the statistical odds of that had to be incredibly unlikely.

Maybe it was just as straight forward as she was finally ready. Ready to give herself permission to have something different this time. Ready to have more than just sex. More than the physical need of it all. Ready to make love to someone who she knew wouldn’t turn away from. Someone who wanted to be there. Someone who cared as much about her as she did about them. No longer a just one sided act. No longer just an expectation of the relationship. A connection that somehow seemed to her to be on a far deeper level. Something that went past the pure physical mechanics of them both. No walls, no resistance, no safe guards. Just the two of them.

A stunning realisation hit her, instantly silencing any and all other thoughts. Blue eyes blinked slowly. The answer so surprising simple that it took her a long few moments to fully comprehend the truthfulness hidden within it.

Love.

She was falling in love with him.

Caitriona was barely able to admit that to herself for fear that she’d be wrong. That she was misreading the signs. That this feeling would disappear and she’d be left alone with nothing but the bitter taste of disappointment.

“What are you busy thinking about?” His voice low, slightly husky from sleep, startled her, instantly drawing Caitriona back from her quiet introspection. The warm fingers attached to the long arm laying down the length of her back, began steadily tracing a slow pattern on her naked skin.

“You actually.” Caitriona said truthfully, looking up at him and tightening her arm across his waist.
“Uh oh.” Johnathon smiled, gently reaching over and brushing a long length of hair away from her face, “Whatever it was, I swear it wasn’t me.” He lifted his head, kissing her lips softly.

“I beg to differ.” She ran the pad of her thumb across his lower lip, “I can guarantee,” She gently gripped his chin, studying deep blue eyes at very close range, “It most certainly was you.”

“Is that a good thing?”
She framed his face, feeling the rough stubble tickling her palm, “A very good thing.” Her mouth found his, instantly opening inviting him in, sucking in a breath as his tongue found hers and the kiss deepened.

Legs tangled with hers, strong arms wrapping around her and gently rolling them over on to her back. Breasts pressed against strong chest as the kiss continued, a warm wave desire washing through her, her body throbbing with need. Caitriona’s eyes closed, her head falling back onto the soft pillow as warm lips kissed over her jaw and neck, along her collarbone. Skilful fingertips drifting over her sides, along the edge of her breasts. The bed dipped slightly as Johnathon’s hands pressed against the surface, arms tensing as he lifted slightly, moving down her body, his belly brushing against slick flesh, his mouth kissing a path down her chest, his tongue tracing the outline of a nipple. First one, then slowly kissing and nibbling to find the other before tracing ribs, following each ridge and hollow. The slight rasp of his unshaven chin, grazing over flesh, setting nerves tingling. Caitriona’s fingers tangled themselves in the short silky threads of his hair, feeling his skull moving as lips and tongue danced over her skin, driving thought from her mind and breath from her lungs. A soft sigh fell from her lips as Johnathon moved steadily lower, his palms running along the outside of her thighs as she spread her legs, letting his shoulders settle between them, slowly kissing his way down her inner thigh and back up again.

Blue eyes looked up at her, a quiet question burning in the gentle blue depths, his mouth hovering above her so close she could feel the warmth of his uneven breath as it brushed against her heated flesh. She held his gaze, her hand curling around the back of his skull, her hips slightly rising. Question answered, Johnathon’s mouth found her. A moan of utter pleasure filled the room as her head lolled back, his mouth covering her, his tongue slowly working back forth over her, circling, sliding, sucking and tasting. Hands smoothed over her sides, fingers splaying out across her belly, working their way over her stomach, cupping her breasts. Nipples brushed against his palm as his tongue moved against her, the feeling starting deep inside her. Fingers tightened in his hair as her breathing became shorter. His hands moved to slip beneath her backside, lifting her, pressing her against his mouth. Caitriona felt the wave building with every touch, swipe and swirl of his tongue. Muscles began to tense as she closed her eyes and took that one last deep breath. Her back arched.

“John!” She called to him as the wave broke. Her orgasm washing her, working from her centre out, leaving her chest heaving and blood pounding in her ears. Gradually every muscle began to relax, leaving her floating in a contented cloud of boneless sated pleasure.

Caitriona felt Johnathon move, sliding up her body until warm lips found hers, kissing her softly, tasting the barest hint of herself on his lips. Her eyes fluttered open and Caitriona lifted an arm, limp and heavy, resting a palm against his cheek, breathing heavily against his lips as his forehead rested against hers. “God Johnathon.” She murmured, her fingertips gently scratching along his jaw as her breathing began to settle.

His eyes locked with hers, studying hers so closely that Caitriona could almost see the thoughts darting back and forth behind them. She knew exactly what he was thinking. Knew precisely what he was grappling with. Knew that as much as she had opened herself up to him, Johnathon was doing the same. She had seen it in those eyes of his, more than once last night. Could see it in them now as clear as day. A certain vulnerability and trust that Caitriona was suddenly fiercely protective of.

The walls were down.
All of them.
She didn’t speak. Didn’t move. Didn’t look away. She didn’t want to. Caitriona knew what he wanted to say, knew it as sure as she knew her own name. She understood completely because she’d realised the same thing.
“Caitriona?” Johnathon’s eyes drifted closed, his voice soft and low, his breath warm against her cheek, every muscle stilling. His body resting against hers, belly to chest. He was so close that Caitriona could feel his heart thrumming against her rib cage. It’s beat entirely out of proportion with the stillness of his body.

“Yes?” She turned her face towards his, sliding her hand around his neck.

Waiting.

Caitriona’s heart began to accelerate, wanting so desperately to say don’t be afraid, I’m with you and at the same time knowing she’d couldn’t. Not because she didn’t feel the same but because this time, Caitriona wanted to hear it. Not said as response to her, but rather as private admission from a man to a woman. Caitriona knew that need was probably driven by the mistakes of the past but she couldn’t help it. She’d always been the one to put herself out there, to admit how she felt first. This time, she’d hoped that Johnathon might be the one to say it first.

Caitriona felt him inhale and exhale before his eyes opened, finding hers unblinkingly.

“I am ….”

The hotel phone began ringing, the sharp sound bouncing almost painfully off the walls, startling them both, instantly shattering the intimate moment.

Johnathon’s head turned to glare at the offending object.

“Ignore it.” Caitriona murmured, letting out a small breath of frustration. Of all the bloody times. Christ! Her mind screamed. Was it too much to ask for just ten more seconds! Jesus fucking Christ! She gripped Johnathon’s chin and turned his head back to her, “It will stop. Just ignore it.” She lifted her head and softly kissed him, hoping to draw them both back to a place where the rest of the world faded away. Including the still obnoxiously loud phone which continued to ring despite the wishes to the contrary of everyone in the room.

A growl sounded from the warm mouth she was intent on exploring as Johnathon ended the kiss.

One long arm reached over and snagged the offending object from its cradle, finally leaving the room quiet once more.

“Hope that wasn’t important.” Johnathon said quietly, wrapping his arms around her and rolling them over onto his back.

“They’ll call back if it is.” Caitriona breathed, slipping a leg over his waist and lifting to straddle his hips, “Whatever it is.” She smiled down at him and leaned forward, placing a hand on either side of Johnathon’s head, “It’s not as important.” She lowered her face closer to his, her hair falling around them, “as this.” The kiss was slow and gentle, her body lowering until her chest to brushed against his. Caitriona let out a small sigh when Johnathon’s head lifted, his tongue running along hers, his hands sliding over her back, fingers splaying across the smooth skin and pulling her closer. The two of them slowly getting lost each other. Lost in the taste. Lost in the touch. Lost in the scent of each other.

Caitriona moaned softly against his mouth as a familiar warmth starting again deep in her belly at Johnathon’s rigid length brushing against sensitive skin. Her body wanted nothing more to feel him inside her. She breathlessly pulled back, reaching over, picking up the last foil packet from the bedside table. Johnathon’s hands stilled on her back as she reached between them, gently gripping him, her fingers slowly sliding down the thick silky length him. Caitriona lifted slightly, placing the heated tip of him at her entrance. Locking eyes with him, she slowly lowered herself, a long sigh falling from her lips as he slid smoothly inside her. She fell forward, leaning into his as her rapidly increasing breathing would allow. Finally she had to rest her forehead against his in order to get enough oxygen into her heaving chest. Soft breathe laden sighs filled the air with each slow deep thrust inside her. She was close, she could feel it. The familiar tingle of muscles and nerves slowly building, her breathing becoming shorter and shorter, her body getting closer and closer.
Loud obnoxious banging on the hotel room door, rapidly snapped them both back to reality. Johnathon’s arms instantly tightened protectively around her, moving to quickly roll them on their sides. Effectively placing his body between Caitriona and the source of the startling noise.

“Caitriona!” A woman’s voice called.

Another loud knock.

With her body screaming in utter revolt at the sudden removal of certain sensations and her mind struggling to catch up with current events, it took Caitriona a few seconds to realise what the fuck was going on.

“Christ!” She finally said on uneven breath, “It’s my fucking sister.”

“What?” Johnathon, equally as breathless and in a state of semi bewilderment, glanced from her face to the direction of the door and back again.

Another loud knock, “Caitriona, would you let me in already?”

“For fucks sake..” Caitriona mumbled, gathering up the sheet and wrapping it around naked form. She took a few steps toward the small hallway, then turned on her heel and retreated to the edge of the bed. Bending over she placed a soft kiss on some very confused lips, “I’ll be right back.” She ran her fingers tip along his chin, “Right after I murder my sister.”
Caitriona snugged the edge of the sheet tighter across her breasts and blew out a long, very frustrated breath. “Christ.” She muttered ignoring the slightly shaky feeling in her legs, almost tripping on the tail of the sheet that was pooling around her legs. First the frigging phone and now this! Did the universe suddenly decide that today was the day to fuck with any and all of her plans. Her heart was still pounding beyond all good measure and it was taking all she had to ignore the slow throb between her legs that had yet to catch up with the sudden cessation of some recent and very welcome activities. She made her way down the short hallway towards the door as fast she dared. “Hang on!” She snapped at the sound of yet another round of frantic knocking vibrated the wooden surface. Whatever it was, it better be a fucking world ending crisis to warrant what she’d been through. Caitriona Gripping the metal handle, she yanked the door open, instantly meeting the startled gaze of her older sister.

“Finally!” Her sister shot her an exasperated look, “Would it kill you to answer a phone once in a while Caitriona? Seriously.” Deidra pushed passed her younger sister, stopping a few paces down the hallway and turning to regard her sibling. The stormy glare currently pinning her wasn’t entirely unexpected. A typical reaction, the older woman reasoned. Caitriona had never been a morning person. Not for as long had Deidra had shared a bedroom with Caitriona at their childhood home that was. There was always the chance that during the decade away from home, Caitriona had changed her habits. Judging from the foul look she was getting from her younger sister, it certainly didn’t seem to her that Caitriona had changed much in the regard at all.

“What are you doing here?” Caitriona roughly scrubbed a hand across her face, hoping it wasn’t a flushed as she suspected it was.

“Why are you not dressed?” The older woman looked strangely at her younger sibling.

“Breakfast.” She stated, the vacant look staring back at her a clear indication that Caitriona plainly had no idea what on earth was going on. “We were going for breakfast today. Remember?” Caitriona’s brows knit, “I never said anything about breakfast.” Granted, her mind was still catching up with current events, but Caitriona was pretty darn sure she wouldn’t have made breakfast plans with her sister. Particularly given her purpose for flying into the city in the first place was to see Johnathon.

“Sure you did.” As evidence, Deidra pulled out her phone, eyes scanning through the messages. She got about halfway through when blue eyes lifted, “Ohhh..shit…” Her voice trailed off, wincing as she realised her mistake.

Caitriona had indeed sent her message but that message had been asking her if she knew a good place to have breakfast. “Oops?” She offered with a guilty look, “Sorry sis.” She leaned in and kissed her sister’s cheek, “I really did think you wanted to do breakfast.” She paused, deciding the best form of defence was offense, “Doesn’t explain why you weren’t answering your phone though.” Deidra may have gotten the text message confused, but she was a thousand percent convinced there was a lot more to her sister’s mood than first met the eye. Something that went a lot further than just a case of being woken up too early. Not that you had to be a genius to figure that. It wasn’t exactly normal for Caitriona to receive guests dressed in a bed sheet.

“My phone is flat,” Caitriona shot back. A fairly standard excuse, which in this case, happened to be true, “I got in so late last night that I didn’t think to charge it before I went to bed.” “Of course.” Her sister smiled, not at all convinced but intelligent enough to play along. “Doesn’t explain the hotel phone though…”

The shit eating grin plastered on her older sister’s face instantly set alarms bells ringing in Caitriona’s head, giving her the distinct feeling she was about to be on the receiving end of
something she probably wasn’t going to like.

“Did it ever cross your mind that I might have been sleeping?” Caitriona grouched darkly. Not only had her sister interrupted her when she was about three good thrusts away from another heart stopping orgasm, with this knocking on the door bullshit, but more importantly, it now seemed she was also responsible for shattering the moment that Caitriona was positive Johnathon was about to tell her what she had been waiting and wanting to hear.

“Wait a second…” Deidra’s eyes narrowed slightly, her gaze taking in the rather disheveled appearance of her sister. The sheet wrapped around her obviously naked body. The flushed complexion. The vibe of frustrated exasperation. In fact, Deidra took a closer look, if she didn’t know better... “Oh my god,” She smiled broadly, one fair eyebrow arching with barely contained glee, “You…” She raised a finger, pointing it accusingly at Caitriona, “Holy sh*t Caitriona! Do you have…” Half sentences tumbled from her mouth, “Have you been..” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper, familiar blue eyes going round, “Is someone here with you?” She peered down the hallway, purposely inspecting the doorway to the bedroom, her feet already itching to walk towards it.

Shit. Caught between guilt and denial Caitriona stalled, “Look,” She said, gripping her sister’s elbow, pulling her back, stopping her sibling’s movement towards the bedroom and the very naked blonde investigator it contained. “Can we please talk about this later?”

“Who is it? Sam?” Deidra whispered, reveling in her sisterly element and downright curiosity. She’d thought Caitriona had said no to her tall co-star but perhaps that had changed since the last time they had spoken about the subject. “So?” She leaned in and bumped Caitriona with her hip, “What was it like?” Judging by the look of disgust that crossed her sister’s expressive face, Deidra realised she was way off the mark. Sam had either been shocking in the sack, which was always a possibility. Just because the outside looked half decent, didn’t mean that translated in any way to bedroom satisfaction. “Okay so that’s a thumbs down in the sack department for Mr Heughan then?”

For a very long series of heartbeats, Caitriona gave serious thought to staying silent and allowing the incorrect assumption to sit exactly where it was. Not that she had first hand knowledge to the contrary but it would be easy to let the convenient lie cover a truth Caitriona was becoming more and more protective of. “I have no idea.” She finally said, her conscience getting the best of her, “About Sam or anything else.”

Deidra’s brow furrowed a moment before she shot Caitriona a concerned glare, “Oh god, you didn’t?!” She jabbed a thumb towards the bedroom, “Please tell me that is not ..”

“It’s not.” Caitriona held up hand, effectively forestalling any further conjecture. Knowing exactly who her sister was referring to. Suffice to say, it would have to be a cold day in hell before there would ever be another time in her life where she’d find herself back in that particular bed. “And before you go any further,” She added, tightening her grip on her sister’s elbow and tugging her closer, “This is not a topic for discussion at the moment.” Caitriona nudged Deidra towards the door, “Now,” She pushed the door open, “If it’s all the same to you.”

“No. Wait,” Deidra smirked, leaning back and resisting the hand in the middle of her back that was currently shoving her forward towards the hotel corridor, “You can’t expect me to leave without knowing who.” While supremely relieved that Caitriona hadn’t done something stupid like attempt to rekindle her relationship with someone Deidra thought Caitriona should have thrown by the wayside years ago, she was now curious as to who exactly Caitriona had waiting for her back there in that hotel room. “Come on Caitriona, just his name.”

“No.”

“First initial then?” She needled, thoroughly enjoying the experience. With the rest of the family scattered across the United Kingdom, Deidra often felt a little isolated and alone in New York. She had her husband and her children, but it wasn’t quite the same as being around her sisters and brother. There was something special about that bond that you just couldn’t replicate or replace. “You can’t not tell me now that I KNOW there is someone here.”

“Yes I can.” Caitriona shot back, not quite ready to forgive her sister from her earlier crimes and
now where near ready to spill intimate details of who she was sleeping with. With one last good shove, Caitriona started closing the door, “I’ll talk to you later dear sister.”

“Caitriona! Wait. Come on now..”

“Goodbye Deidra.”

Caitriona let out a long breath and leaned against the hard surface, listening to her sister’s receding footsteps, privately wondering who would be next to interrupt her morning. Pushing off the door and she padded barefoot back down the hallway to the bedroom, making a mental note to find her phone and at least get it on to charge. All jokes and excuses aside, it probably wasn’t a good idea to be this long on phone silence.

“All sorted?” Johnathon swiveled at his hip, turning to look at her from where he was sitting on the edge of the unmade bed.

“Yes.” Caitriona nodded, crossing the room to stand in front of him.

“Is she still alive?” He quipped.

Caitriona smiled down at him, gently nudging his knees apart with her own and stepping between them, “For the moment.” She rested her hands on his bare shoulders, feeling the warm naked skin beneath her fingertips, “You cleaned up.” She cast her eyes towards the small waste paper basket, giving him a cheeky grin, “And you put pants on.” She scowled, her eyes drifted to his now material clad legs, “Not sure I’m a fan of that last part.”

Johnathon gave a soft chuckle, “I thought it might be a good idea.” Blue eyes looked up at her, “Just in case we got invaded from our visitor.” Large hands settled on her waist, gently gripping her sides, “You could have gone to breakfast with her if you wanted to.”

“I know I could have,” Caitriona lifted a hand from a broad shoulder and slowly ran her fingertips through his blonde locks, “I didn’t want to though. Rather be here.” She gently stroked the silky strands back along his scalp, “How much of that conversation did you hear?”

Caitriona had wondered if Johnathon had heard her sister going on about Sam. More importantly she wondered how Johnathon felt about that. Between her sister and the insistent buzz on the internet and social media about her and Sam, Caitriona worried it would wear away at Johnathon. She knew first hand how hard it was to read some of that over and over and again. Caitriona couldn’t really say she blamed anyone for thinking what that there was something going between her and her co-star. It was the result of a very deliberate image they had constructed when the series began. They were selling a story of a romantic couple on screen, the act continued for publicity sake off screen. Caitriona and Sam were Mr and Mrs Outlander. When the camera’s had flashed, they had made sure the pictures presented a certain way. It was all part of the marketing strategy, part of her job and it wasn’t going to change anytime soon. Caitriona had never cared one way or the other what most the public actually believed. If the world thought she was with Sam, then so be it. Caitriona knew the real story so what did it matter what anyone else believed.

Except now, it did matter.

There was one person Caitriona did not want thinking she had any aspirations what so ever to be with Sam Heughan.

Ever.

The person in question’s soft blue eyes met hers, “A bit.”

“A bit?” Caitriona studied his face, a small crease forming on one side of his mouth, “So pretty much everything then?”

He raised an eyebrow, giving her a half grin, “Pretty much.”

Caitriona gave her head wry shake, “Thought so.” Then she sobered, letting her hands frame his face, her thumb tracing one side of the smile, “You know she only picked Sam is because that’s the only other person she thinks I interact with on any regularity right?”

Caitriona watched his reaction carefully. Most people couldn’t keep it from showing on their faces. She was one of them. Maybe in the curl of a lip, the raise of an eyebrow, the hint of a smile. It generally couldn’t be helped. At least Caitriona couldn’t help it. She tried and just couldn’t. Johnathon, she was learning, showed it in the blue depths of his eyes. Hurt, love, truth and joy. It was all there in the endless pools of blue. It was like trying to read a book written in a completely alien language that Caitriona
was still learning. She was getting better at it, every time they were together, but Caitriona knew there was still quite a ways to go. It would come in time, she knew, just part of the natural evolution of any normal relationship. Gradually learning the language of each other.
The head in her hands nodded slowly, his eyes clear and honest. There was no mistaking this message. As far as Johnathon was concerned, Caitriona had already explained Sam and whatever it was between them. Johnathon believed her. Every word if it. If he had even the smallest sliver of doubt, he wouldn’t have stayed with her. Not then. Not now. He wouldn’t have shared Caitriona’s bed last night. Would not have let her in. It wasn’t Caitriona he doubted. He never had.
“Sam may have other ideas about that.” There was no accusation or blame in his voice, just a simple state of fact. One they both knew to be true. It was pretty clear to Johnathon and Caitriona, that Sam wasn’t quite ready to accept that Caitriona was never going to be in his life the way he was hoping she would. Clear as crystal to everyone, but Sam. Having felt what she was feeling now with Johnathon, there was no way on God’s green earth she’d ever felt anything remotely like that with Sam. Even before this weekend. Even before the slow fire that warmed her blood whenever she was around him. Before the quiet, late night, long distance discussions. Before the security she felt inside his arms. Before she’d even met her tall blonde lover. Caitriona had never felt anything remotely close to any that with her co-star.
“Let him.” She said softly, bending and placing a kiss on Johnathon’s upturned lips, “It will never happen.” Caitriona gripped his face, holding it firmly, eye to eye, letting him see exactly how serious she was about that.
The blue eyes watching her slowly blinked slowly. The silent acknowledgement so clearly understood it might as well as been spoken. If Caitriona wanted to be with Sam, then she would already be with him. There was nothing stopping her. All she had to do was say something, anything, expressing her wish to be with Sam and Johnathon would have walked away. He’d never have gotten involved. Never started something with her. But she hadn’t.
The decision had been hers and she had made it. From their first date, to now. She hadn’t wavered a single moment. Whatever Sam felt, whatever Sam wanted to happen, had no bearing whatsoever on the relationship he was trying to build with Caitriona. Johnathon was certain about that.
She was here.
In this hotel room.
Her hotel room.
With him.
There was no walking away quietly now.
“I’m not worried about it at all.” Johnathon said, lifting his eyes to her face, her long dark hair framing her face, the soft glow of the morning light dancing around her slender form. Just when he thought she could possibly be any more beautiful, “Sam can do whatever he wants. So long as you know that I don’t have any doubts about us, or you, then that’s all the matters.” His voice dropped a register, finding that low serious tone that instantly sent a pleasant tingle down her spine and a warm feeling of assured certainty growing in her belly, “I trust you Caitriona.”
Caitriona wasn’t sure she had the ability to speak the right words or to even begin to explain the depth of such a simple statement and what it meant to them both. Instead, she curled her fingertips around his jaw and angled his head towards hers and slowly, kissed him. She’d been wanting to hear an entirely different admission from him, but she suddenly realised this meant just as much.
Caitriona sucked softly on his lower lip as she ended the kiss then rested her forehead against his.
“I don’t know that I’ve ever trusted anyone,” her hands drifted down the slope of his neck, “before you.”
The very air between them seemed to still. Neither of them moving or looking away. The invisible threads that bind two people together slowly tightening with each heartbeat.
The interruption this time came not on Caitriona’s behalf, but rather from Johnathon. His phone on the bedside table almost vibrating with such fierce intensity, it almost ended up on the floor.
“Oh come on…” Caitriona tilted her head back and glared at the ceiling.
“Think the universe is trying telling us something.” Johnathon sighed, flipping the device over to
see who the hell was calling him, when he’d specifically given every single member of his team the weekend off. Andrew Coleman – Director of Violent Crimes FBI. Blue eyes slowly closed, the weight of responsibility settling on a set of broad shoulders.

“No kidding.” Caitriona placed a soft kiss on his lips, “Think you better take that.” While she had the luxury of turning of her phone, ignoring calls and generally falling of the face of the planet for a little while. Johnathon wasn’t as lucky.

“Sorry Caitr..”

“Ssshhh.” She pressed a finger to his lips, “It’s alright. You take that while I have a quick shower.” There were some phone calls that couldn’t be ignored. Not even for her. Caitriona understood that. Anyone who had every had anything to do with law enforcement knew that. Even if they were beyond frustrating sometimes.

With one last quick kiss, she stepped away and headed towards the bathroom. They were going to have to get moving soon anyway. She had that audition to get to by lunch and at some point she would have to go and see her sister or else run the risk of being bombarded by messages and god knew how many more calls. With a flick of her wrist the sheet wrapped around her fell to the bathroom floor in a crumpled pile. There was also the WCC dinner tonight to attend. She stepped into the shower and twisted the metal mixer, letting the water spray over her skin, fiddling until she had the temperature just right. With everything that had happened Caitriona hadn’t even had the thought to ask Johnathon if he wanted to go with her. She reached over and picked up one of the complimentary shampoo bottles from a small basket on the tiled shelf. It would do, she decided, not really having the inclination to leave the steaming water just to get her things from the luggage rack. Tipping a good portion into the palm of her hand, she lathered it through her long hair. The automatic motion giving her the chance to digest what had happened since arriving in New York. Caitriona hadn’t expected that this trip would be the time when their relationship would take a turn towards the more serious. This was no longer something that they were trying. This was now something that they were doing. They were a couple. She rinsed the lather from her hair then picked up a small tube of body wash and set to work. Not that they hadn’t been a couple before last night, but now, with the added physical intimacy between them, it felt like the those last few pieces were clicking firmly into place. Despite the constant interruptions, she smiled softly, rinsing the soapy bubbles from her skin, everything had been better than she could have possibly dreamed. Her head turned as a gentle knock sounded.

“Like some company?” One blond eyebrow arched as Johnathon poked his head around the jam of the door.

Caitriona eyed him through the clear glass of the shower stall, his form slightly obscured by wisps of steam floating in the air, “Come here.” She smiled, watching appreciatively as Johnathon’s clothes joined the discarded bed sheet on the floor. A small gust of cool air swirled in against her bare legs as the large door swung open and admitted his tall form. She let out a small hum of approval when long arms slipped under hers and wrapped themselves securely around her waist from behind, “For future reference,” She slid her palms along Johnathon’s muscular forearms, resting her hands over his and leaning back against him, “Your company is always welcome anywhere.” Her eyes fluttered closed as a series of soft kisses worked their way up the slope if her neck, “Including the shower.”

“This is excellent news.” Johnathon smiled against her skin, the rough stubble tickling the smooth surface before his chin came to rest on her shoulder, “It also applies to you. Welcome in my shower anytime.”

“Why thank you kind sir.” Caitriona chuckled, enjoying the close contact almost as much as the natural ease flowing between them. Any thought that there might be some morning after awkwardness between them had completely vanished before it even had time to ever be fully realised. Her fingers slowly ran along his, feeling knuckle and length of bone between the joints, then threaded themselves between the long digits. “Caitriona,” He said quietly, voice soft beside her ear, the low almost solemn tone of his voice reached deep down inside Caitriona’s chest. “There’s something I need to tell you.” She turned her head him regarded him. The sudden urge to
see him to strong to ignore. A small knot of concern taking root in the pit of stomach. Those words usually meant nothing good. Was he about to tell her there was a wife somewhere? A child? A home that she was in the process of wrecking? He was nervous. She could see that much. The bobbing of his adam’s apple as he swallowed. His damp blonde hair was slicked back against his skull, the slow trickle of the water droplets hitting one side of his face, then flowing in long streams down his neck. His eyes lifted to hers, the blue darkening to resemble the colour of the ocean depths. A sign whatever it was, he was deadly serious. Her gaze flicked to the juncture where Johnathon’s neck met strong shoulders, the skin rising and falling in a rapidly increasing beat. Nervous and serious. "This isn’t..." He stopped and took a breath, his brows together, "This isn’t because of last night. Of what we did..." He stopped again and shook his head slightly, as if trying to reorder the thoughts Caitriona could see racing across the back of his eyes.

Christ, his mind cursed, thoroughly admonishing himself for not being able to articulate precisely what he needed to tell her. What he wanted to tell her. Something he’d known for a long time now. Just say it, his mind called.

Just say it.
She’ll catch you.
Just say it.
He seemed to go quiet for an inordinate amount of seconds before his eyes closed. Inadvertently closing the book Caitriona had been frantically trying to read behind his eyes. She was about to step back, so worried that all of this was about to shatter before her eyes. The arms around her tightened slightly as he if he’s sensed her growing fear. The chest pressed against her back expanded as Johnathon took a deep breath, the pools of blue finally opening. This time calm, clear and sure. "Caitriona?" He said, "I’ve fallen love with you.” It was out there now. There was no taking it back.

He could have waited he supposed, waited until she’d said it. It would have been safer. Would have probably been easier. But there was something inside him, that small quiet voice that speaks from the very depths of most secret, most unprotected part of himself, that had been whispering to him long before the recent physical reassurance of the moment, that it was time. Time to tell her what his body already knew. Time to admit what his heart was sure of.

A wave of pure relief flooded through her, so powerful that it almost took her legs from under her. She probably would have fallen if it hadn’t been for the strong arms wrapped around her. Gathering her scattered wits and Caitriona slowly turned in his arms. Slick damp skin pressing against each other, never once breaking eye contact. She opened her mouth about to speak when a damp finger pressed against her lips, “Don’t say need to say anything." Johnathon whispered, his eyes searching hers, “Until you’re ready.” He swallowed, “I can wait.” The last thing he wanted was for Caitriona to feel like she had to say something in return. That wasn’t why he’d said it and he didn’t want any expectation on Caitriona that might make her say something before she wanted to. He’d rather not hear it all if she didn’t mean it. Or worse if she'd only said it because what else to you say with someone professes they love you. It might have only been words, but to him, this was serious. About as serious as it got. It went above that of a promise. It went further than the quiet sighs and whispers of a shared bed. It outranked all others. Except one. That one, Johnathon intended to speak once and once only in his lifetime.

Johnathon could wait. Wait until, if, Caitriona was ready. Silence was better than a lie of obligation.

“You don’t need to wait Johnathon,” She breathed, gently gripped his silencing finger, her hand slowly guided his, pressing his palm flat against her breast, “I’m already there with you.” Droplets scattered at she lifted her other hand, slipping it between them and resting on the smooth plane of his chest directly above his own heart, “I’m in love with you Johnathon.”

Time seemed to slow, the world going quiet around them, even the soft hiss of the spray of water faded away, replaced with the feel of each other as Johnathon lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss a silent, intimate promise freely given and accepted between the two the them. If this is what love was supposed to feel like, Caitriona never wanted it to stop. Her only regret was that she’d spent what seemed like half a lifetime missing out on this.
Mistakenly confusing what she’d thought had been love for this. She knew now that there was absolutely no comparison. That had never been love. This was. She knew the difference now. It was her greatest hope that she would never be without it again.

Chapter End Notes

Hi Everyone,
Hope you are all doing okay. Little bit of Johnathon and Caitriona this week.

Have a good week and take care.

Cheers
He stood watching quietly at the car disappearing around a corner, steadily taking its lone occupant across town to her scheduled audition commitment. Caitriona hadn’t been happy about having to bring their lazy intimate morning spent together to an end. Having strongly voiced her objection more than once to Johnathon, firmly stating that she would much prefer to spend the day with him. More so due to the fact that she wasn’t particularly interested in doing the movie anyway. Johnathon couldn’t say that he was overly impressed at the prospective lost time with Caitriona either, but work as work and they both knew they could only avoid it for so long. Reality sure could be a real pain the ass sometimes, Johnathon’s mind groused. With one last glance down the busy street, he turned on his heel and headed inside the hotel. Thankfully the hour was late enough that the early morning checkout crowd had now thinned, leaving the place feeling slightly empty.

Johnathon waited patiently for the lift to arrive. Or perhaps it felt empty because a certain dark haired beauty was no longer there with him. He knew he really shouldn’t complain, he sniffed reflectively as the elevator car arrived, the doors sliding open with a soft metallic hiss. He hadn’t expected to see Caitriona this weekend at all, so any time with her was a bonus. Johnathon moved to rear of the car, one arm leaning on the handrail, watching as the doors slid shut silently. At least they’d managed to spend the morning together. He smiled softly, recalling the very leisurely breakfast which had taken far longer than it ordinarily would have. If he closed his eyes now he could still feel her. The warmth of her skin where she had snuggled against him, the soft look in the back of her blue eyes that drew him in without even trying, the low whispers and soft sighs that had fallen from her lips. Johnathon’s chest expanded as he took a deep breath then slowly blew it out. God it felt good to feel that again. Not only the sheer pleasure of her but that thoroughly intimate connection that had been missing from his life for what seemed like an eternity. That mysterious thing that went beyond the primal urges of desire alone and somehow became something far deeper. Something that had banished all thoughts of distrust, fear and hesitation and replaced it with a gentle certainty. Had someone tried to explain it to him, or even attempted to describe it, Johnathon knew he’d of laughed and said they were love drunk or cast some other aspersion relating to mental capacity. After all, he’d been in love before and knew what if felt like. Or at least he thought he had been. Until now.

Until this morning.

Until her.

Standing there in the quiet warmth of the shower’s spray, pressed against Caitriona body, that very same mysterious feeling of absolute certainty had settled over him. A feeling so strong and deeply powerful that Johnathon was certain that he could of almost reached out a hand and wrapped his fingers around it. He’d always been extraordinarily cautious when it came to using that word 'love'. There were some people who seemed to say it all the time. A sentiment spoken as easily as hello or goodbye. For some, ‘I love you' was just another part of the everyday vernacular.

Johnathon, however, wasn’t one of those people. Love wasn't a word he used easily. It had never been just another word that you said with offhanded casualness. It was a serious word. Something you felt long before you gave voice to word. Maybe it was a ridiculous notion, Johnathon mused, but he’d always believed that if you were going to say you loved someone, then you better bloody well mean it.

Johnathon pushed off the rail as the lift arrived at his designated floor, the doors sliding opening with a muted hiss. Tucking his hands into his pants pockets, he slowly wandered down the hallway towards his room. There was no point in denying it any longer. No point in maintaining his carefully constructed walls. No other conclusion to be reached. His body knew it. His mind knew it. He suspected his very soul knew it. He was in love with Caitriona.
This morning, Johnathon had been sure.
This morning, he had meant it.
With his mind deep in thought, Johnathon paid little attention when one of the hotel room doors,
swung open. A dark head poked through the gap between door frame and door, “Oh thank fuck.”
Came the relieved, if not colourful curse, “Where have you been?” Jackson grumbled darkly,
pulling his door shut and falling into step alongside his friend, "We have ourselves a god damned
fucking emergency here and you are off doing..” He paused and ran a hand through his unruly dark
hair, leaving several strands standing comically on end, “What were you doing by the way? Work
again? Fucking seriously John.” Jackson was genuinely convinced that Johnathon would work
himself to an early grave given half the chance. The way his friend was going it was a real
possibility. “We need to find you a woman before you end up going insane or something.”
Johnathon glanced across at the rather pathetic form of his best friend, who looked for all intents
and purposes like he’d just gone fifteen rounds with a bottle of Tennessee’s best and come out on
the losing side. “Your evening that good was it? By the look of you, I think you better worry about
your own love life before you start on mine.”
“No fucking shit,” Jackson groaned as they arrived at Johnathon’s room, leaning on the wall for
support, “Shit’s gotten real here. I admit. Some mistakes made.” The dark haired man pinched the
top of his nose, “I may gotten myself into slight situation.”
“A situation?” Johnathon keyed his hotel door, shouldering it open, then throwing the key card on
the bench as he walked passed it, “Involving?” Johnathon was willing to bet the said situation
involved a woman. If it had of been an honest to goodness emergency of the life and death variety,
Johnathon would have been informed instantly. The mere fact that Jackson was this tight lipped
generally meant that he’d gotten himself entangled in some romantic situation or another.
Jackson skulked across the room and slumped into one of the chairs, eyes downcast and
hesitantly silent. He needed Johnathon’s help but he was reluctant to involve his tall friend given the subject
of the current complication. Necessity eventually won over practicality “Emma.” Jackson breathed,
lifting a hand to his brow, rubbing it as if the action would somehow magically stop the pounding
in his head. Jackson wasn’t insensitive to the fact that Emma was still an active part of Katherine’s
life and he wasn’t sure if Johnathon was in the mental space to have such an obvious connection
constantly reminding him of people that were best forgotten. “She..um..” Jackson stuttered
nervously, “She flew in from Boston last night. Damn near beat us back here actually.”
“And? She still upset with you over last time or?” Johnathon slid out of his coat, hanging it over
the back of a chair and toeing each foot from his shoes.
“Not exactly.”
Johnathon waited a moment. He knew exactly how this went, “So what did you have to promise to
do this time?”
A long sigh, “A night at the fucking theatre.”
Johnathon stifled a chuckle.
“Not fucking funny John.” Jackson slumped a little further into the chair, “Opera or some shit.
Probably won’t even be in English!”
That did it, Johnathon face split into a broad grin, rapidly devolving into a fit of laughter.
Jackson scowled, “What else was I supposed to do?” He whined pitifully, making a motion with
his hands mimicking a set of scales, “Balls?” He moved one hand, “Or Opera?”
Judging from position of his hands, the decision had been a pretty straight forward one. Opera it
was. Johnathon couldn’t say he blamed Jackson. Emma could be a formidable force when she
wanted to be. Headstrong and stubborn with good dash of determined persistence thrown into the
mix. Even Johnathon would have thought twice before crossing her. “Say, what are you doing
tonight?” Jackson asked, looking like a drowning man desperately searching for anything that
floated.
“Oh no,” Johnathon said after his laughing fit began to calm, “Don’t drag me into this.” He
grabbed a set of clothes from his bag and heading into the bathroom. While he had no particular aversion to the theatre, Johnathon wasn’t about to sit through it for no other reason other than
sharing Jackson’s pain. They may be friends, but opera was a step too far.
Besides, Johnathon had other plans. After their shower and breakfast, Caitriona had informed him that she had to attend a charity dinner tonight and had wondered if Johnathon would attend it with her. He had sat quietly while she had explained everything from her obligation to attend, to the black tie requirement, to the press control measures. Caitriona had even given him an out, saying that if he didn’t want to go it would be alright, she could take her sister. It was an invitation, not an expectation. While benefit dinners were as boring as proverbial batshit, there was no way on god’s green earth that Johnathon was going to pass up an opportunity to spend time with Caitriona. Even if it meant a black tie and enduring the self indulgent business society types.
If Caitriona wanted Johnathon there, he’d be there.
Simple as that.
“Thanks buddy..” Jackson intonated from the main room, “Remind me to repay the favour next time you get dragged off to some fucking shit show or another.”
“You can always tell her I am making you work or something, if you really want to get out it.” Johnathon offered sympathetically, exchanging one set of clothes for another, sliding into a pair of well worn jeans and simple button up shirt. He contemplated taking the time to have a shave but decided it could wait until later in the day. A few splashes of water and a quick comb of his hair would do for now. He had places to be.
“Like she would believe that.” Jackson grouched with a resigned sigh, “No fucking choice now. I'm just going to have to go.” Thoughtful silence fell for a few minutes, then the dark haired man's face brightened, "I’ll buy earplugs and open a bar tab. That'll work." Green, slightly bloodshot eyes looked up at Johnathon as he wandered back into the main room, “I just need your help first.”
“Help with what?” Johnathon asked, fiddling with the metal clasp on his watch before sitting down on the edge of the bed, idly wondering if Jackson actually knew the torture he was preparing himself for.
“With clothes.” Came the quiet reply.
Johnathon stopped mid motion, one blonde eyebrow raising.
“Opera clothes.” Jackson clarified, making a face as if he had tasted something bitter, “She said and I quote,” He added in a double scrunching finger movement to further demonstrate his point, “It is formal wear. If you show up in a pair of jeans and a shirt you will not be getting any for the rest of your life, including forever. End quote.” His hands dropped dejectedly to his side, “I don’t even know what the fuck people wear to this shit. Please tell me you have something I can borrow?”
“Actually I don’t,” Johnathon smirked, barely managing to stifle another round of laughter that was about to escape his mouth, “But lucky for you, I know where you can get some.” He debated telling Jackson that most opera companies didn’t have a strict dress code but reasoned that Emma evidently wanted to make a formal night of it, so who was he to interfere with that.
“Thankyou Jesus Mary Joseph and the fucking donkey.” Jackson made a swift crossing motion over his chest then shook his head ruefully, “I swear Johnathon, the woman should come with a warning label.”
Johnathon smiled in amusement then bent and started applying a sock to each large foot. He was going to have to organise his own suit so having Jackson tagging along wasn’t as big a deal as the dark haired man thought it was. Though, Johnathon reflected, pulling the heel of one sock straight, it was probably going to need some type of explanation when they walked out of the place with not one but two tuxedos. He’d cross that bridge when and if he encountered it, Johnathon guessed. With any luck, Jackson would be so preoccupied with Emma that he’d forget all about Johnathon and his reasons for needing similar clothing.
Johnathon smiled in amusement then bent and started applying a sock to each large foot. He was going to have to organise his own suit so having Jackson tagging along wasn’t as big a deal as the dark haired man thought it was. Though, Johnathon reflected, pulling the heel of one sock straight, it was probably going to need some type of explanation when they walked out of the place with not one but two tuxedos. He’d cross that bridge when and if he encountered it, Johnathon guessed. With any luck, Jackson would be so preoccupied with Emma that he’d forget all about Johnathon and his reasons for needing similar clothing.
Johnathon pulled the ends of his pants over the top of his socks, “Where is Emma anyway? Still in your room?”
“No,” Jackson shook his head, “She left a bit ago. Headed over to see K....” The words stopped short.
“It’s alright Jackson,” Johnathon straightened the hems of his pants, pulling it over the top of his
socks, “You can say her name you know.” He stood, slipped his feet into his shoes then bent, snuggling the laces tight, “Not like she’s the devil or something.”

“It’s just,” Jackson shrugged, “Feels wrong to bring her up after everything you know.”

Johnathon did know. For a very long time, he hadn’t been able to even think about her without hurting. Katherine, he presumed, had moved on and now, so had he. Time helping to ease the pain of the past. It would never disappear. Just like a physical scar, it would fade, but the memory of what happened would always be there. Part of him now. Johnathon didn’t hate Katherine. He didn’t have that in him. He had cared about her once. Still did. Probably always would. No where near as deeply now as he once thought he did. Katherine and all that was between them, was now banished to a place where she would never hurt him again. Forever locked behind the walls of his past. Her name a small red dot on the map of his life. Like a place he’d once traveled through. A detour towards somewhere and someone completely different. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to avoid bringing Kate up mate.” Johnathon straightened and giving each foot a stamp, settling his feet into place in the shoes, “Particularly if you’re going to keep seeing Emma?”

“Woah!” Jackson held up a hand, ”Now just hold up.” Green outraged eyes going wide, “I am not SEEING her.” He clarified, the merest hint of commitment far more terrifying to Jackson than anything they'd ever come across in their investigations of humanity's darkside. “We are just friends and this is not.......”

For the second time that morning, Johnathon waited. Jackson wasn't a stupid man, far from it. It was only a matter of time before Jackson, like Johnathon, finally accepted certain realities when it came to to their feelings about the respective women in their lives.

“Aw Shit.” Jackson leaned forward, cradling his head in his hands, "God damn it.”

“Yes.” Johnathon nodded knowingly. The need to voice the blatantly obvious long since passed. The mere fact that Jackson cared enough to be in Johnathon’s hotel room begging for help with getting a tuxedo to go the opera was all the indication anyone with half a brain needed. Green eyes flicked to Johnathon’s face, “You going to be okay if we decide to... you know...” He trailed off.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with it?” Johnathon answered quietly, “She’s a friend. If you and her want to see each other that’s your business. It really hasn’t got anything to do with me and if it’s what you both want, then, go ahead.” He said with a wry grin, “Though, you might want to consider taking out some form of injury insurance.”

“No fucking shit.” Jackson leaned back in the chair, “She is a feisty one to be sure.”

“She is.” Johnathon agreed, “Just..” He unhooked his jacket from the top of the chair, “promise me one thing though?” Serious blue eyes pinned his friend, “No one likes being mucked around with. So if you are going to go there, don’t hurt her by doing something..”A delicate pause, "Stupid." Jackson nodded slowly, “Woman would kill me if I did anyway.”

Good enough, Johnathon decided. Jackson didn’t have a malicious bone in his body, but if there one thing Johnathon had come away with after everything with Katherine, it was the knowledge of just how dangerous being romantically involved with anyone could be. The potential for enormous harm was about as real as it got and he’d rather not have Emma or Jackson for that matter, have to face it if it could be avoided. “You spend all night working on this?” Jackson twisted one of the folders that lay scattered across the table’s surface, effectively changing the subject.

“I wouldn’t say all night.” Johnathon conceded truthfully, digging around in the pocket of his jacket and retrieving his phone, “I took a bit of look at those two.” He pointed to a couple of the folders, still open from the night before, “Didn’t get very far though.”

“Hmmm.” Jackson thumbed through several of the loose sheets, “Probably hard to concentrate.” Johnathon looked up from his phone, having only now remembered to remove it from silent status, “What?” He asked confused by Jackson response, only half listening in the first place.

“What, with this new found fascination with Scotland and all.” The statement seemed to hang in the air. Not helped at all by the Cheshire grin that was working its way across Jackson’s face. The opportunity to catch his friend off balance arose so infrequently that Jackson wasn’t above taking a small amount of pleasure in the occurrence.
“What are you talking about?”
“Glasgow.” Jackson said watching as the realisation dawned on Johnathon’s face. Jackson may well act cavalier and occasionally be a complete ass with the overwhelming propensity to stick both feet in his mouth at once, but, he was also a more than competent investigator with a streak of curiosity that ran a mile wide. “Got a call from travel at some ungodly hour of the morning. Seems someone didn’t turn up for his flight.”

Shit. The flight to Glasgow had completely slipped Johnathon’s mind. He’d booked the flight but then...well..Caitriona.

“They did try and call you, but,” Jackson clicked his tongue, “Seems you didn’t answer your phone,” He studied Johnathon carefully, looking for any confirmation he was on the right track. “Soooo,” He drew the word out slowly, “they called me.”

It was a standard procedure within their unit that if someone didn’t show up for a flight and appointment or a designated meeting then security safety measure would be automatically activated. It was an early warning system. The 'just in case' protocol. You never knew when a member of their team was in trouble somewhere and needed assistance.

“I came down here, knocked.” Jackson pointed to the door, “Never got an answer though. Lucky you answered my text or else let me tell you, a full blown orange alert was a headed your way.” The alert would signal the full activation of missing person protocol. Johnathon could only imagine the vexation Caitriona would have had at being interrupted by half the local and federal constabulary. “So,” Jackson continued conversationally, “Now that we’re finished with me, want to tell me who is she?”

“Who is who?”
“Oh come on Johnathon.” He shook his head at his friend, “Who is who? Who ever you are seeing in Glasgow. That is who.” Green eyes bored into his, Jackson fairly reveling in the moment, “Or should I say whoever WAS in Glasgow and is now currently residing on the 23rd floor.”

Johnathon’s eyes narrowed at the accuracy of information, knowing full well there was only one way it could have been discovered, “You pinged my phone?”

“Yes.” Jackson admitted unrepentantly, “Damn straight I did. Figured it was better I know than have half the team alerted and looking for you.”

“This before or after I answered you?” Johnathon was stalling and from the look on the Jackson’s face, the dark-haired man knew as much.

“Before. You know the drill John. Someone goes MIA. Alerts go out and your phone is pinged within ten minutes.”

Since it had taken almost double that before Johnathon had finally responded, Jackson had executed the command, getting the results instantly. 23rd floor, right here within the hotel. When you put all that together, as Jackson had done in the early hours of the morning, even half inebriated, he’d still had the sense to figure it out. Everything fell into place. The flights. The change in his partner’s mood lately. All of it. If that didn't all add up to a woman, then Jackson might as well give investigating away as a bad joke.

“You the only one with that information or did it go team wide?” Johnathon finally said with a soft sigh, frantically trying to think of a rational explanation for all of that and coming up empty. So much for keeping Caitriona on the quiet.

“Only me. I did the pinging just in case.” Jackson knew better than to disseminate private information about Johnathon unless it was completely necessary. Once Johnathon had confirmed he was safe and well, there had been no need to involve anyone else. So Jackson hadn't. The information safely staying entirely private. Just as it should be. “It’s not a bad thing you know.”

Jackson said after small silence, “Starting something new.”

“I know.” Came the equally quiet reply. Johnathon decided there was no point in trying to deny it longer. At least not to his closest friend. There was, however, no reason to be an open book either.

“So..” Jackson gave a broad smile, the seriousness of the conversation too much to take this early in the day for Jackson's liking. “Hot?” There was more than one way to get his tall closed mouth friend to divulge information.
“You have a problem.” Johnathon sighed, shaking his head, “You know that right? You should talk to a professional. Get yourself some help.”
“I’ll take that evasive response as a yes by the way. Law enforcement or airline hostie?”
“What?” Johnathon collected his jacket from the chair, “How did you arrive at that? Out of every possible option...”
“Way I see it,” Jackson stood, following Johnathon as they walked to the door, “They are the only two options you’ve had time for recently.” Green eyes grew wide, “Oh god, tell me it’s not that blonde hostie that does Qantas long hops. She was Scottish right? Or was she British?” His dark head shook as if he was clearing his mind of a memory and returning to the present, “Anyway, tell me it’s not her right?”
“I have no idea who the hell you’re talking about. So, no.” Johnathon clicked the door shut, giving the handle a slight shake to make sure it locked.
“Oh thank Christ.” Jackson let out a relieved breath. He may not have precisely the same moral compass that Johnathon possessed, but he would never, ever, knowingly cut someone else’s grass. Even Jackson had some places he just never went. “No? That all I’m gonna get huh?”
“I repeat,” Johnathon glanced at him a moment from the corner of his eye before they headed towards the lift, “You have a serious problem.”
“Fine. Just tell me one thing and then I’ll drop it.” Johnathon was like a Chinese finger trap, the harder you tried, the more resistance you got. Jackson could wait. Johnathon would eventually tell him or it the answer would become clear. One or the other.
One blonde eyebrow lifted as they both stepped into the empty lift, Johnathon pressing the button and sending it on its way toward the lower car parking level.
Jackson cleared his throat, his tone shifted, turning serious again “Just...” He paused, thinking how to phrase words of caution without sounding like the worlds biggest hypocritical asshole, “You know what they say about rebounds right?”
“Jackson..” The warning tone was unmistakable.
“I’m just saying man,” He backpedaled, “Things got real there for you a while a bit ago and stuff like that...,” He wanted to say, can fuck you up completely and evidence not withstanding, it had. Johnathon was barely over the whole screwed up situation with Katherine. Let alone ready to fall headlong into another. “That can really mess with shit you know? It can make you think one thing is something else and it’s just not and...” Jackson let out a long breath, “Just tell me you’ll keep that in the back of mind?”
Blue eyes blinked slowly, accompanied by a slight nod, almost imperceptible to anyone else and Jackson knew the message had been received. Jackson had accepted Johnathon’s little warning about Emma and now he had delivered one in turn to Johnathon. In truth he couldn’t be happier that his friend had found someone to help at least remove some of the darkness of the past six months but in all seriousness, Jackson hoped Johnathon was at least erring on the side of caution this time. His friend wasn’t one to fall easily, but when he did, Johnathon usually did completely. And that, according to the Jackson’s own little rules of life, was a one way ticket to fucking catastrophe. While this woman’s identity hadn’t been revealed yet, Jackson fully intended to make it his business that this woman didn’t hurt his friend in any way, shape or form. He would make damn sure of it. Jackson wasn’t sure when Johnathon had had time to pick up a woman and without him knowing about it to boot. Must have been long before Australia. If that was the case then there was every possibility that Johnathon and said mystery woman, were much further along the get the know you path than Jackson thought. Not that he was entirely surprised by the lack of information on the subject. Johnathon had been seeing Katherine for months before he’d even mentioned her name in conversation to Jackson or anyone else. The mere fact that Johnathon had all but acknowledged the woman’s existence to Jackson meant that whatever was going on wasn’t new nor was it casual. If Jackson was reading the signs correctly, and he was pretty fucking sure he was, Johnathon had spent the night with said mystery woman. It did make him wonder though, who exactly the woman was and just how she had managed, in the course of a few months, to not only catch his friend’s very discerning eye, but to convince him to fly around the world on the
regular.
Sex, Jackson mused, has to be sex.
Yes, Jackson decided, that had to be it.
That damned thing clouded your mind and made you do stupid shit like ending up at the fucking opera.
Or, as the case maybe, at society charity dinners.
Revenge

Chapter Summary

Hi all, Little bit of plotting this week. I debated with myself as to the timing of this chapter. I was going to hold it back until after the next one, but decided to put it here and then let the dinner run it's course. Soooo, all things being equal, Caitriona's chapter will be straight after this one, hopefully next week.
As always, thanks for reading and commenting. Have a good week.
Cheers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." - Confucius

He twisted the long finely made cigar between two fingers, sucking on one end as he applied the blue flame to the other, slowly encouraging the wrapped leaves to catch. Thick clouds of heavy blue smoke floated in the still air. Neatly manicured fingers reached across the hardwood desk and flicked on the large computer monitor, his deep eyes scanning the list of freshly arrived emails. He’d been expecting a report from Morgan any moment now. Progress had been more than pleasing. Morgan had already had gotten closer to the woman, who, judging from the surveillance pictures he’d already received, was certainly a good looking piece of ass. Seems Johnathon Chase had certainly traded up. He wasn’t as pleased about that aspect. Quite the opposite. The mere inkling that happiness was a possible prospect for Chase, stuck in his craw. Attractive as the woman was, he would make sure that, in the end, she would be just one more thing that he’d take from Chase. He leaned closer to the screen, idly assessing the woman in the picture. Tall, slim, pretty blue eyes, pale skin, long dark hair, though, not as dark as the last one had been. He could understand the attraction. If it hadn’t been for the rather unfortunate position he currently found himself in, he’d be tempted to do the job himself. Take her from him. Devastate him again. Nothing would give him more pleasure. It would be almost as good as the first time. The look on Chase’s face when he’d finally realised that she’d left him, had been something that he would treasure forever. A moment, he hoped to witness again. He leaned back in the chair, blowing another cloud of smoke in a steady stream from pursed lips. If he couldn’t be the one to personally inflict the fatal damage this time, then make no mistake, he fully intended for it to be his finger pulling each and every string. This time, he’d do it right. This time he’d make sure Chase was eliminated permanently. This time it would be perfect. He had already decided that rather than one huge event, this victory would come from a series of small ones. Death by a thousand cuts. The slow torturous breaking of the man would be far more gratifying than the sudden finality like that delivered by way of a car accident or a well place bullet. This would be slow. Painful. Certain. It would take patience, something he wasn’t naturally inclined towards, but something he was willing to endure. If it got him what he wanted, then he would do it. He had already set the wheels in motion for one of his 'cuts'. A long play, he believed they called it. Seeds already planted, now
taking months to mature before they came to fruition. He just needed to fill in a few more details and then he’d be ready. Ready for when the time was right.

A new notification flicked up, lighting the corner of the computer screen and sounding a small alert. “About goddamned time.” He drew an extended breath, resting the cigar in the Waterford crystal tray then clicking on the message. A few seconds and a message successfully decrypted later, the information he’d been waiting on lay before him.

Dark brows lifted almost to his hairline. World Child Cancer Benefit Dinner. He hadn’t been expecting that. His mouth twisted into an evil smile, one hand slowly stroking his smooth chin. Considering. Pondering. Plotting. His mind turning over the new possibilities.

Yes, he decided. An event like that could prove to be the perfect platform. It wouldn’t be difficult to arrange an invitation and the outing would be the perfect opportunity to deliver another ‘cut’. His own little personalised thorn, shoved directly into Chase’s side. Assuming of course Chase would be attending. Benefit dinner’s where seat ticket prices usually ranged in the twenty thousands, weren’t strictly something he believed Chase would normally be part of. Chase had the annoying penchant of wanting to appear to be one of the masses, even when he was provided the means to break that disgusting classification. This was something he would never understand. His family hadn’t been part of the masses for three generations and he was damned if it would ever crawl back down to that sewer willingly.

Still, he calculated, if Chase decided to avoid the benefit dinner, all wouldn’t be completely lost. Chase’s latest little conquest would definitely be there. She was, after all, the only celebrity patron of the charity and Morgan had been certain she was attending.

Chase’s absence may even prove to be advantageous to his cause. If Chase wasn’t with her, she be out in the open. A fair easier target. Approaching her would be a relatively simple task. Flirt a little. Compliment a lot. Then, at just the right moment, strike. He thought about an alternative for a long series of moments. Yes. He could it or.... His fingers pressed against pursed lips. Perhaps he would get his fiancée to do it.

He smiled darkly, already imaging the words she could say, the surprise she could deliver, the doubt she could seed. He would wait, he decided after another few minutes of careful deliberation. Wait and see exactly what he was dealing with tonight before deciding which way to jump. Which trigger to pull.

Eyes returned to the screen. Boston, the report read. Typical, his mind spat. He should have known Chase would crawl back to the nurse. A futile attempt at making amends or mending bridges or something equally as ridiculous and inane. His hand curled into a fist as he read the next line. He’d thought that little Irish witch of a nurse would be sensible and take the correct side in all this. He’d have bet his life on it. He’d seen the way she had turned on Chase when certain facts had come to light. He’d been that certain that the nurse would never tend towards forgiveness. Not after what she believe Chase had done. Apparently, according to the report, that wasn’t the case. It was more than infuriating to him the nurse had seemingly granted Chase, and that moronic idiot that he worked with, a free pass. Perhaps her loyalty wasn’t as guaranteed as he’d previously thought.

One phone call and ten minutes later, he sat back, somewhat mollified. He hoped the little nurse bitch would enjoy her new found unemployment. In his experience, people were far easier to manipulate once the money ran out. The more desperate the situation, the easier it was.

Money was an excellent pressure point. Eyes narrowed in semi delight as they read the last addition to the message.

Competition was another.

The woman’s co-star. He steepled his hands together, resting his elbows on the table. Could be a useful asset. Another beneficial pressure point.

Decision made, he quickly clicked out a reply, organising a meeting as soon as possible. He’d run through the instructions with Morgan for the next step of his plan in person. Mistakes were less likely to occur that way. Message sent and all evidence of the communication removed, he finished the cigar, mashing the stub against the crystal bowl to extinguish it. He would destroy that fucking prick Chase this time around. Just see that he didn’t.
Walking across the plush office, he looked out over the manicured lawns and carefully tended gardens of his estate. His eyes drifted to the figure of a woman, currently walking slowly along one of the paved paths. A scowl of disapproval coloured his features. Does the fucking woman never listen? He stalked back over to the desk and savagely punched the call button. “Anderson!” He barked, “Why is it my fiancée is outside walking? Did I not tell you that she was to be kept off her feet as much as possible! Get fucking down there!” He released the button, returning to the window and watching as a largish man, clad in a well made suit, quickly approached the woman. It took longer than he would have liked, but the woman eventually yielded to his command and was safely escorted back inside.

He didn’t know how she could be so fucking selfish. Did she not understand what she was putting at risk when she refused to follow his instructions? For someone so intelligent, she could make incredibly poor decisions sometimes. Besides, he would need her well rested if she was attend the dinner with him this evening. When pointed in the right direction, she could be a very effective weapon.

He turned his attention to pressing matter of having to buy a seat to this little charity event. It was extraordinarily late notice and something his mother would describe as very poor form, but it couldn’t be helped. He needed those tickets. With any luck, none of his usual business contacts would be in attendance. It wasn’t exactly a society highlight in terms of prestige, so he felt sure the offer of paying double or triple the asking price would secure him a seat relatively easily and more importantly without causing too much fuss. He pulled up the contact details of the organiser. An hour later and the personal promise of a sizable cheque, he had two seats at the best table on offer. Money, he mused. Anyone who thought the world was ruled by anything else was simply an idiot. With money, he could do anything. Even the unthinkable. Even the unforgivable. It made friends from enemies, blurred the line between right and wrong. Magically allowing a blind eye to be turned when it otherwise wouldn’t. Money was a privilege and he intended not to loose a single penny of it.

In fact, in a few months, he have access to more wealth ever he had expected. It was all part of the plan. A very carefully laid out plan. His family merging with her’s. Finally fulfilling plans that had been in place since before he’d even started elementary school. He’d done his part and now it was time for her to do her’s.

In another three months or so it wouldn’t matter one way or the other to him. He’d have everything he’d ever need to secure his future. A binding tie that was so permanent and unbreakable that she would never, ever, attempt to leave him. She would finally be broken. At last, doing exactly as she was told. It had been a long time coming. Yet another thing, he intended to make certain of. He wasn’t going fail on this front either. Not again. She’d left once before and it had cost him ten years. He wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice.

The leather of the chair creaked as he leaned forward, pulling a small brass key from his breast pocket. He’d already decided on the next set of instructions he’d be delivering to his newest paid employee. Tonight, the watcher’s attention would be turned elsewhere, free to go on a little side mission. He would personally be keeping an eye on proceedings at the dinner. His gaze, sharp and narrow on Chase and his little actress slut. After all, they would be in the same room together, though, he smiled darkly, he’d wait until the timing was just right before he’d let Chase know of his presence. With over five hundred other people listed to attend the event, he was certain they would be able disappear into the crowd until the perfect moment. If Chase was there he’d have him. If his little slut was alone, then he’d have her. Plant the right seed in her mind and she’d probably do his work for him. It would only be a matter of time before she questioned everything she could possibly believe about Johnathon Chase. Once that started, he grinned, the end was inevitable. The destruction would begin.

He slid the key soundlessly into the very bottom drawer of the large executive desk, pulling it open, he retrieved one of the large yellow envelopes and dropped it onto the polished wooden surface. It was a curious thing, he mused as he closed the drawer, relocking it and securing the key. Such a simple thing as the contents of an envelope could destroy a man’s life. Simple and effective.
He’d used this strategy before and would use again before the end. If not tonight, then soon.
Dark green eyes eyed the thick yellow packet. It was some of his best work. The cost hadn’t been cheap, but it had been worth it. A gamble that had paid far greater returns than the initial investment, working so perfectly and completely that, even now, doubt still lingered in her mind. Then, he had been forced to bid his time for months and months. All the time searching for the crack. The one weakness that, when pressed would open a chasm. He’d found it and what is more, he had taken a certain amount of pleasure in the fact that, in the midst of it all, he’d cleverly worked his way back into her good graces. All of it right under Chase’s idiot nose. Slowly but surely convincing her that her beloved fucking Chase was screwing whores every chance he got. During her long work shifts. In every one of Chase’s hotel rooms when he was off investigating so called homocides. Even in that house they’d shared in Boston. Oh yes, he’d cleverly been the one to suggest the idea to her. Every time chance she and Chase had been separated, he had been there. Making sure the idea that with absence, came the opportunity for the blonde man to fuck whomever he wanted to. He’d made sure she never forgot the subject, made sure it continually raised it’s ugly head. Made sure to feed the doubt whenever he could. Just enough to keep it alive, but never enough to raise her suspicions that he was doing anything other than looking out for her. He’d had to be careful not to make her turn against him. She’d done that once in her life and he’d be damned if she’d ever do it again.
So, he’d whispered.
He’d suggested.
He’d conspired.
And, he’d waited.
Waited until the strain began to wear away at her. Then he’d delivered the master stroke. He tapped the envelope on the desk, caressing it almost affectionately. The contents, the loaded gun, he’d placed so skilfully in her hands. Unable to help herself, she’d pulled the trigger and the rest, he let out a long contented breath, was history as they say. It had frustratingly, taken longer than he’d thought, but she’d eventually walked away from Chase and directly to where she was always supposed to be.
The place her father wanted to her be.
The place he’d tried to force her into back in her youth.
Back when they’d both younger.
Then she’d been too headstrong and wild to see things his way. Now, with the passing of time and after effects of the past six months, that spirited woman of the past had tempered. At last conforming to the wishes of her family and more importantly, his desires. Occasionally she would attempt to defy him, but those occurrences were becoming less frequent the further this progressed. Although, he admitted, she was still extraordinarily closed mouth about some of the details surrounding Chase. He’d quizzed her multiple times about several of his suspicions he’d developed about the man but thus far, she’d denied all of them. She was hiding something. That much he did know. Something three privately funded investigators had yet to find. He’d had them scouring every source, over turning every rock in Johnathon Chase’s life. Financial, educational, social, even historical. Everything and anything about the man that might give him that one piece. There had to be something, somewhere. If you looked in enough places, sooner or later you would find what you desired. He’d already starting looking in some of the less desirable places. Having already set the necessary pieces in motion to release some, he licked his lips, like minded people from their imprisonment. People who hated Chase as much, if not more than he did. Most of them less than savoury, but he was well past the point of caring about their social standing. His social standing mattered. Others did not. He always took meticulous care to ensure the maximum level of self preservation. If it he had to use criminals, drug dealers and whores to bring Chase down, he didn’t give a rats ass. They would never cross into his world anyway. Never have any connection to him. That was why people like Morgan existed. The link between his world and theirs. If the scum of society could get him what he was looking for then the rest was purely academic. All he
needed was one piece. The one piece that would finally either kill Chase completely or, his face twisted into a snarl, make him wish he was dead.
He’d settle for either.
Taking back what was rightfully his was only the beginning.
“Let’s see Mr Fucking Chase, what your new whore thinks about these shall we.”
He lifted the envelope, flipping it back and forth between his fingers, taking immeasurable pleasure in knowing the hurt, pain and betrayal it contained.
He’d have his revenge.
One way or the other.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up : Chapter 41 - In's and Out's ;)

Hi Everyone,
I very good friend of mine reminded me today that, at least in Australia, we are in the middle of Xmas in July. It's a thing some people here do because July is the only time in the year when the temperature drops below 30 degrees C, ie, winter time. Our one week of winter. Life in the tropics y'all. So, in that spirit, here's a little something for you.
Until Friday, as always thanks for reading and commenting. You are all awesome.
Cheers

Caitriona let out an aggrieved sigh, deliberately inverting the phone, sliding the glass surface against the cloth covered table. Her frustration was rapidly rising to the point where blocking a certain number was fast becoming a very attractive reality. One more text, call or notification was all it was going to take. Sam was really beginning to test her last nerve. The annoying behaviour of the Glasgow film set had continued here in New York. Caitriona had received no less than forty-five messages and a missed call count in the teens from her very persistent co-star. All of them since she had stupidly decided to charge her phone earlier that morning. It was a mistake she was really beginning to rue.
There had been calls throughout her breakfast with Johnathon. Calls throughout the midmorning. Even a call in the middle of the audition. That one, Caitriona hadn’t answered, though, she had made the mistake of answering Sam at least three times previously.
No.
She didn’t want to do brunch with him.
No.
She didn’t need a partner for the charity dinner.
And no.
She didn’t consider anything she was doing to be a mistake of kind.
Each message and call seemed to revolve around the same thing. Johnathon. Not just the name of the man she was sleeping with, a detail the world wasn’t yet privy too, but somehow now, the new title seemingly associated with some imagined horrendous mistake that Sam Heughan was convinced she was making.
It didn’t seem to matter what Caitriona said to him, Sam wasn’t having any of it. To him, Johnathon seemed to be the next anti-christ with about the same intentions.
Caitriona knew where it was coming from, knew what was driving it but she didn’t understand why Sam was blaming Johnathon. If there was anyone to blame, it was her. She’d been the one that had told Sam she didn’t love him. It was she that didn't feel what Sam wanted her to. Johnathon was entirely innocent of that charge. He’d had nothing to do with her decision and had played no part in her feeling what she did towards her co-star.
She wasn’t completely blind to reality either. Caitriona realised that Sam still thought he was in love with her. She got that. She’d have to be a complete narcissist to not recognise that Sam was still holding hope that someday she might have a change of heart. It wasn’t going to happen. There was truly zero possibility of something happening between her and Sam. Caitriona knew that now and to be honest even if that possibility did exist, it was still no excuse for this continued
behaviour. She’d been more than clear about this to him on several occasions. Frankly, the way he was acting was getting to point of ridiculousness. Caitriona didn’t love him. Would never love him and as far as she was concerned that wasn’t changing at any point in the present or the future. Johnathon or not.

It was friends or, if Sam kept this up much longer, it would be nothing. It was upsetting to think this might well have come to that, but at this point, Caitriona was quickly running out of ideas and patience when it came to dealing with Sam and his antics. With the perfect timing of everything else that morning, the phone on the table vibrated again. A quick glance confirmed yet another message. That did it.

Caitriona snagged the phone, fingers dancing across the screen, swiftly blocking Sam’s number and dropping the device into her lap.

Enough was enough. She’d dealt with this for far more time today than she wanted to.

“That him?” Familiar blue eyes twinkled with glee as Deidra watched her over the edge of the crisp white coffee cup, “The mysterious bed shaker from last night?”

And then there was this to deal with, Caitriona mentally sighed. Whoever would have thought that spending a night with the man she was falling in love with would send everyone and their dog descending into temporary insanity.

“No. That was Sam.” Caitriona let out a long breath of frustration, wondering idly if Johnathon was dealing with as many interferences as she was. He hadn’t mentioned any such issues when she had last been talking him. Merely telling her that he was on his way to organise his suit for the dinner tonight.

That conversation seemed like an eternity ago. Between dealing with Sam and preparing for this audition, today was turning in a very long day. It made Caitriona want to fast forward time to a point right around midnight tonight. The time she had mentally calculated that they would return to the hotel from the benefit dinner and finally, phone gods willing, be interruption free and completely alone together.

“So….” Deidra smiled sweetly, “Can I take it from your little reaction sister that the mystery man of the moment is definitely not one Sam Heughan.” This wasn’t a great revelation. Caitriona had said as much this morning, but one never could be sure of things said in the heat of sisterly discovery. All the same, Deidra had already concluded that it was unlikely that Sam was the indeed culprit responsible for giving her sister what had obviously been a VERY good night. Upon further reflection, namely in the taxi ride home from the Four Seasons, Deidra had postulated that if that had been the case, Caitriona wouldn’t have acted so defensive and squirrelly. A strategy her stubborn sister was still engaging at the minute, Deidra observed. There was only thing for it, she decided. Head on assault. “Not quite ready to talk yet Caitriona?” She probed strategically.

Caitriona took a long slow sip of the hot beverage, deliberately taking her time in reseating the porcelain cup back on it’s saucer, swivelling the handle back and forth, “We’ve been speaking now for a while Deidra.”

“Oh don’t give me that,” The older woman reached forward and slid the edge of a small desert fork through a large slice of chocolate cake, “You know what I mean.” Deidra pointed the food laden implement accusingly across the table, “Now do tell. All the details. Beginning with who and ending with just how many times you called for the almighty last night. And don’t leave anything out either.” She warned.

“Calling for the almighty?” Caitriona winced and shook her head, “What are you? 12?” Her sister, having caught a glimpse of something Caitriona would have preferred to keep hidden from her family until she was ready, was now like the proverbial dog with a bone. The unwanted attention proving almost as persistent as her annoying co-star.

Unlike this morning however, when Caitriona had been lucky to be coherent enough to remember her own name given what her sister had so rudely interrupted, she had given some thought as to what her options where in putting out this particular dumpster fire. The way Caitriona saw it, her options were few and seriously limited. She could either tell her sister everything. Or not. And by everything Caitriona meant not much more than she absolutely had to. Just enough to satisfy her
sibling’s appetite for curiosity so that she would hopefully, move on. There would be time for family introductions later. Much later.

“Stop stalling Caitriona.”

“I’m not stalling.” Knowing that was exactly what she was doing, “I’m simply saying that’s a pretty juvenile…”

“Caitriona!” Deidra glared across the table, tapping the now empty miniature tines against the ceramic surface of the plate, “Name.”

For a long series of heartbeats, Caitriona gave serious thought to digging in her heels and really pushing this as far as sister would let her. The only problem was that Caitriona doubted her ability to outlast this particular sister. Not on this subject at any rate. Stubborn determination ran strong in her family.

“Fine.” She finally groused, then took a deep breath, mentally squaring her shoulders before speaking. “Johnathon.” Caitriona said quietly, lifting her gaze to defiantly look her sister in the eyes. “His name is Johnathon.”

The fresh forkful of rich dark cake stopped midway in its journey, Deidra’s brows wrinkling. That was a name Deidra wasn’t familiar with. At least not one that immediately came to mind.

“Johnathon?” She asked, checking that she’d heard the name correctly.

“That’s right.”

Maybe he went by the name of John or Johnny. Deidra’s mind tossed names back and forth through her memory. Discarding them one by one. It was plainly evident that she was going to need more. “And the rest of it is?”

“Chase.” Caitriona said neatly, picking up her cup, taking a small victory in the confused look plastered across her sister’s face, “Johnathon Chase.” She repeated, resting the heated ceramic surface of the cup rest against her palm, privately enjoying the warm wave that washed over her just from speaking his name, “Satisfied?” It was an optimistic hope at best, Caitriona knew, but she was determined to not throw out extraneous details if they weren’t required. There was a fine line to be tiptoed along. Just enough, without being too much.

“God no.” Deidra devoured the forkful of food and dragged her chair closer to the table. Rather than supplicated, the older woman was now thoroughly intrigued. “Was this a what happens in New York pay for action type of a deal?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively, “Or something more permanent?”

“Excuse me?” Caitriona spluttered, almost spitting the fresh mouthful of coffee all over herself, “A what type of deal?”

“You know,” She explained, “A male escort. Someone to have a quick roll in the hay with. Scratch an itch?” Deidra leaned back grinning and holding her hands up defensively, “No judgement here if that’s what it was. You’ve kinda been on a dry spell for a long time so…”

“Oh holy Jesus Christ.” Caitriona mumbled, “Because that totally sounds like something I would do.” Her voice fairly dripping with sarcasm.

“What?” Deidra snickered, “You wouldn’t be the first woman in history to …” She paused, taking in the look of utter outrage currently being fired with laser precision in her direction, “A no on the male prostitute huh? See.” Her eyebrow arched, “This is why it is important to not leave out details Caitriona. Unless you want me to continue to fill in the blanks.” She shook a reproachful finger at her younger sister, “I’d be getting to the good stuff if I were you. All the ins and out’s,” She smirked, “so to speak of this Johnathon Chase.”

“You know,” Caitriona sniffed conversationally, “I don’t know whether to be offended that you think the only way I can get sex is to use a prostitute or worried that off all the possibilities it could be, you went to that one first.”

“Not like I had a choice baby sister.” Deidra defended, “You’re not exactly giving me a lot to work with.” Knowing full well that longer this back and forth went on the more chance there was that Caitriona would finally break and spill information like water pouring from an upturned jug. It was a tactic Deidra had often employed with Caitriona throughout their younger years. Rather successfully. Though, Deidra observed silently, Caitriona did seem different this time. Definitely
more closed mouth than she ordinarily was when it came to these types of things. Deidra could still recall the precise moment Caitriona had told her about her last romantic coupling. It had started with a simple “We’re together.” Followed by, in the very next breath mind you, every single specific detail, in all their technicolour glory. Everything from where and when they had met, to what he did, to his family, to where he lived, to the very intimate details of their entire history thus far, which frankly had been a little more than even Deidra really needed to hear. This was a completely different scenario. A forever changed sister seemingly now sat opposite her. Defensive. Secretive. Protective. Clearly, Caitriona was holding this particular fistful of relationship cards tightly against her chest. Even to Deidra, a member of her own family. Still, it wasn’t quite time to raise the white flag just yet. “Model? Or Actor?” Deidra took an educated guess, taking advantage of the law of averages given Caitriona’s profession.

“Neither.” Caitriona twisted the cup slowly, “Investigation consultant.”

“Law enforcement?” Both brows raised to her hairline. This just got better and better.

“Yes.” It was very broad term for what Johnathon did, but Caitriona was happy to run with it under the circumstances. The broader this conversation stayed, the better.

“Like Dad?”

“No.” Her dark head shook, “Not like Dad. He’s not on the public facing front line like Dad was.” Their father had spent a lifetime serving in the Gardai, where he had done everything from crime resolution to road safety and even a stint in border control. A far as Caitriona was aware, Johnathon was primarily concerned with the solving of crimes, both current and cold and had very little, if anything to do with general policing.

“A detective then?”

“Mmmm.” Close enough, Caitriona conceded swallowing another sip of her coffee.

“Pray tell, dear sister,” Deidra reached for another bite of the half eaten chocolate cake, not entirely sure she was buying what Caitriona was attempting to sell her, “When did you run across said detective? Not generally someone I would have said hangs out a lot on a film set.”

Caitriona hesitated, knowing that if she answered that question truthfully, it could well be the crack that destroys the dam. A seeming small piece of information, nothing more than a mere trickle and before she knew it, one thing would lead to another and there would be an unstoppable flood. She could say London, she guessed, since officially, that was the place where things between herself and Johnathon had taken a turn towards what they were now. After all, did it really matter that technically they really hadn’t met there. Reconnected was the term closer to the truth. Their actual meeting place had been somewhere far quieter. The small cabin in the backwoods of the US. A place so greatly removed from the hustle and bustle of the European capital city that any comparison was, at best, ridiculous. Or so it seemed to Caitriona, fully aware of the thoughtful silence that she knew was beginning to stretch on longer than it should. Her sister all the while waiting, watching, like a cat ready to pounce.

“Johnathon was the man that helped me a few months ago.” Caitriona met her sister’s gaze. She decided on the truth, figuring it was going to come out sooner or later anyway, “In the US. After the convention. In the snow.” There. That was more than enough and all she was prepared to say. She had exactly zero intention of explaining the events that had precipitated her being in the car that ended up in the icy lake in the first place.

“I see.” Her sister chewed on a fork full cake, clearly mulling the information over. “Wait.” She suddenly stopped, quickly swallowing the mouthful, “That guy.” She clicked her fingers as the memory took root, “The one that took you to that cabin upstate? Is that who you are talking about?”

Caitriona nodded slowly, hoping to Christ this wasn’t the stone holding all the others in place.

“The man you said was nothing like what the townsfolk,” Deidra’s expressive eyebrows raised in unison, “The ENTIRE town, I might add, described him as? That guy?”

Caitriona didn’t answer, merely satisfied herself with taking another mouthful of warm liquid. In truth, she had completely forgotten that at the time, seemingly every resident in the tiny town had formed a protective shield around her blonde rescuer. Telling anyone and everyone who had asked,
that this Johnathon Chase was a toothless alcoholic hermit that trapped animals for a living and
only came to town twice a year to pick up more supplies to make contraband ‘white lightning’, or
moonshine as it was more colloquially known. Completely laughable once you knew the actual
truth.
“Let me get this straight,” Deidra sucked on the fork before narrowing her eyes, “You take off
from some convention. Go screaming into the night, the reason for which, by the way, you’ve yet
to fully explain, but I digress,” The metal fork was again poked in Caitriona’s direction, “You
spend three days. Alone with said man. A man that everyone, except you, says looks like some
human animal hybrid from the stone age and now, out of the blue, you decide to have a little secret
tryst, in New York of all places, I might add, and have a night of unbridled fun and frivolity?” The
older woman eyed her sister with a look that was about as sceptical as the scenario she was
describing. “Really Caitriona? I know you’ve never really had a hang up about looks and love
nothing more than to dabble in the eccentric and unusual, but this is taking things a whole other
level. I mean are you sure this guy isn’t just a pity fu…”
“Okay.” Caitriona interrupted, setting her cup down “Stop right there.” She held up a hand, “I’ve
already told you Johnathon isn’t any like that at all. In fact, he is…” She stopped, watching the
grin opposite her widen and knowing at that point, she’d walked straight into a well laid trap.
“Yes?” One neat brow lifted, “He’s what Caitriona?” Deidra was laying odds that he would be on
the slender side. Strictly an indoor type. Probably down on his luck, they all tended to be. Dark
hair, Deidra reasoned, since every other man in her sister’s past generally possessed that particular
feature. Caitriona tended to be a creature of habit, with a very definable and rather narrow palette
when it came to who she seemed to be attracted to. Deidra expected this man, mad trapper or not,
to be exactly the same as all the rest of them. She admired a lot about her sibling, but sometimes
Deidra wished her younger sister had slightly better judgement when it came to choosing
prospective men to share her bed with.
“Johnathon is completely different from whatever you heard Deidra alright?” This time Caitriona
let a little of the morning’s ongoing frustrations show in her eyes. “I can assure you that Johnathon
is not, nor has he ever been a trapper, an alcoholic nor a hermit.”
And if he is what cavemen look like, then there should be more of them in the world, her mind
added, though she wisely kept that sentiment to herself for the time being. Her sister needed no
more fuel for encouragement. “That is all I’m saying the matter.” She stated with a note of
stubborn finality, “I mean it.”
“Touchy.” Deidra conceded with a soft, knowing smile, leaning back and lifting her own cup of
coffee to her lips. “What time is your shin dig tonight.” She nodded towards the garment bag
draped across the empty chair beside Caitriona, deciding that a temporary change of subject might
be advantageous to her cause. Slow and steady would win this information gathering race.
Caitriona glanced towards the bag, “It’s 6:00 for 6:30 so we’ll probably have to leave the hotel
sometime after 5 with traffic the way it is.”
“The Park Hyatt?” Deidra tapped her fingernails thoughtfully against the cup’s surface, having not
missed her sister’s offhand use of a certain pronoun. “I would allow at least a good half hour or so
Caitriona. Traffic there is horrendous on Saturdays.” She waited a beat, “Johnathon going with you
then?”
“He is.” Caitriona confirmed, “If he wasn’t, you were my next go to plus one.”
“Oh Christ Caitriona,” Familiar blue eyes round, her head shaking vehemently from side to side, “I
love you baby sister, but no. I don’t do the whole small talking around the permanently stuck up
and over privileged thank you very much.”
“Lucky Johnathon said yes then aren’t you?”
“You and I both!” Deidra smiled amiably, “One tick,” A slender finger drew an imaginary check
mark in the air, “on the plus side for your Mr Chase. And with out even trying. Not a bad start.”
Caitriona rolled her eyes, “I’m sure Johnathon will be relieved to know he’s impressed you.”
“He should be.” The older woman remarked, “God help him Caitriona if he disappoints me.” She
gave soft laugh then lifted her eyes to study her younger sister, a small silence falling between the
two. “You’ve been seeing him, Johnathon,” More statement than question, “For a while then.” Her head cocked to one side, “Since the cabin?” If indeed her sister was being truthful and Deidra had no reason to think that Caitriona would out and out lie to her, then it would mean that this little affair, or liaison, or whatever it was, had probably started in that cabin and continued on since. It would explain why Caitriona’s current relationship at the time had broken down so irreparably. Nothing like one party getting a bit on the side to ruin things. Though, Deidra studied her sister silently, having an affair wasn’t really something she’d have said her sister was capable of. Out of all of them, Caitriona typically tended to take the moral high ground first. Still, Deidra reminded herself, all people, even the ones in your own family, had the capacity to do stupid things that were totally out of character, more often than you thought.

“No. Not since the cabin.” Caitriona corrected, idly inspecting the table cloth and brushing a small crumb towards its edge, “There was absolutely nothing going on between us then.” She clarified, “I was still with Tony and Johnathon wasn’t.” She met her sister’s gaze directly, “He wasn’t anything other than the complete gentlemen. To be honest, we were both too wrapped in trying to get out of the place before the next storm to think about anything else. So no, not since the cabin. But yes,” Her dark head nodded slowly, “We’ve been seeing each other for a little while.”

“Casual?” She asked conversationally studying the last forkful of cake before popping it in her mouth.

“No.” Caitriona said carefully, knowing this was dangerous territory. Transatlantic telephone lines would be running hot tonight when news filtered back, and it would, to the rest of her extended family. “At least, neither of us plan on it being that way.” She admitted honestly, “We’re still figuring it all out really.”

“Oh?” Here comes the complication, Deidra’s mind sounded, taking it upon herself to read between her sister’s lines. Some skeleton or another in this man’s cupboard that needed to be dealt with. Should be interesting. Married maybe?

“He travels a lot for his work and with my filming schedule, time together can be diff …”

“Wait…Long distance?” Deidra’s mouth fell open. “This is a long distance relationship?” Of all the things she’d expected the complication to be, long distance at been at the bottom. Caitriona had always professed a strong feeling against long distance romance. Firmly stating on more than one occasion, her need to have the physical connection, not necessarily a sexual one, but that closeness that was an impossibility when the two people concerned where on opposite sides of the world, readily available. Deidra tended to agree with her. Long distance was a recipe for disaster and an open invitation to get one’s heart severely broken. The phone, a poor substitute for a hug at the end of a trying day. “Caitriona…” She warned, “Are you sure about this? Long distance is bloody hard at the best of times.” Much less on the rebound, she wanted to say, but kept that to herself for the moment.

“I know.” Slim fingers toyed nervously with the gold watch on her wrist, twitching the face back straight again, “I know it’s not going to be easy. But,” Blue eyes darkened with a flicker of deep emotion, her voice going quiet, “This is something I want. Something we both want and it takes a bit of effort but so far, Johnathon and I are making this work.”

“Everything is easy in the beginning Caitriona.” She’d been married for a little over eight years and Deidra had first hand knowledge of just how quickly the red hot flames of desire fizzled when a generous does of reality was applied. Falling in love was easy. Staying that way took work and a lot of it. Long distance may well be something Caitriona thought she could live with now while her blood was up but once the initial romance of it all wore off, the distance would eat away at her. Long distance isn’t something that we plan on doing forever Deidra.” Caitriona had no intention of being separated from Johnathon as frequently as they were now or for anywhere near as long, for the remainder of their relationship. However long that might be.

“You’ve discussed it then?” Her sister probed gently, “Or is this the part you’re still figuring out?” “We haven’t yet. But for now, Johnathon and I travel to each other whenever we can,” Caitriona stated with a note of finality, “And we seem to be doing okay, at least we were, until you showed up banging on the door like a mad woman.”
“Oops?” Deidra smirked, “Honest mistake I swear.” She did however, accept the surrender for what it was. She was satisfied at least for the moment, that her younger sister wasn’t as caught up in the sweeping romance as she’d first thought. She’d let this go for the moment and keep her eye on things from afar. “Now,” She leaned over the table toward Craitriona, “About those in and outs?” “Jesus Christ….” “That too.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter : Chapter 42 - Let Me Go
Caitriona’s fingers rooted through her handbag. She was sure she’d dropped the hotel key card into the side pocket this morning. “Bloody hell.” She frowned, the strap of the bag falling from her shoulder as the search intensified. She’d give it until the lift made it to her floor. If she hadn’t found it by then, she’d turn around and head back to reception and get a replacement printed. Instant replication the only plus to this whole computerised door locking business over a solid, old fashioned, metallic key. A soft ding sounded and the lift doors slid open just as her long fingers closed around the missing card. “There you are you little bastard.” Re-adjusting the strap and juggling the long garment bag Caitriona had draped over the other arm, she stepped out into the long hallway. She’d barely gone three steps when she felt her phone vibrate against her skin from its position safely tucked in her back pocket.

She’d look at it as soon she could, making a private bet with herself that it was probably Johnathon, having only just sent a text to him when she’d first arrived back at the hotel. They hadn’t seen each other as much as Caitriona had hoped for since separating this morning. The audition had stretched on far longer than it should have and then she’d met up with her sister, deciding that a quick catch up was a better use of her time rather than risk a repeat of the morning’s antics.

Catch up, however, was a fairly broad description of what it actually turned out to be.

Interrogation was far closer.

Johnathon had been the subject.

Caitriona thought she’d been reasonably successful in thwarting most of her sister’s curious questions. She was also aware that she’d slipped up a little on one or two of them. Admitting to her sister that she was not only seeing someone new, but that it involved a long distance relationship, had been mistake. A definitive lecture on the difficulties of such a relationship had followed. Something that Caitriona hadn’t been in the mood to hear. They weren’t far enough into this to even think about making life altering decisions. Decisions that involved uprooting their lives and moving cities just to be closer together on the off chance that everything was going work out.

At this moment in time, the reality was, it was a long distance relationship or nothing and Caitriona knew for damn sure, that nothing was no longer an option. She was in this now. She couldn’t see around corners or accurately predict the future. Not even when it came to if what she was doing with Johnathon was even going to work long term. She did know one thing, however.

She wanted to try.

If long distance was something they both had put up, then so be it. Caitriona was under no illusions that the distance was something she and Johnathon would need to discuss at some point in the future, when the direction they were both taking became clearer. But for now, it was what it was. Just another factor in the delicate mix of two lives merging into one.

Her sister, however, hadn’t been deterred by that any of that and had spent a good fifteen minutes ranting about the dangers of long distance and how it was a recipe for getting one’s heart trampled on. Apparently, according to the resident Balfe family self appointed expert, men who travel a lot, though why it had been limited to just men was beyond Caitriona, simply can’t be trusted for long
periods away from their significant other. “When distance is involved someone always ends up cheating Caitriona. Either by a little or a lot.” Deidra had said, referring to the out of sight no one will know syndrome that afflicted some people. To which Caitriona had stated, that perhaps those people shouldn’t be in a relationship to begin with.

It was slightly hypocritically of her to say that, she knew, after the relationship she had just escaped and all that involved, but she’d been defensive of her new blonde partner. Feeling as if he was being prematurely condemned for something he was entirely innocent of. If Johnathon wanted to cheat on her, he wouldn’t necessarily need some vast distance between them to do it. Caitriona had first hand experience that an affair could take place right under your nose and you’d still be none the wiser.

Until it was too late.

In the end, Caitriona had agreed that long distance wasn’t ideal, but at the moment, that was the only option available to them.

It took effort, that was true, but so far, Caitriona felt things were working about as good as anyone could have expected them to. Deidra had been somewhat mollified by that answer but had reiterated the warning again to Caitriona as they said goodbye. No doubt the transatlantic telephone lines would be running hot tonight as news of Johnathon spread throughout the family. Caitriona wasn’t sure she was ready for that, but she guessed, there was no stopping it now. Her family would have to know sooner or later.

She rounded the last corner into the small alcove that lead directly to her suite door, pulling up short with a sudden stop. “Sam!” She blurted, having almost tripped over his prone form, “What the hell?”

Her tall co-star was sitting on the floor, his arms resting on his drawn up legs, leaning against her door, “Since ye decided to not answer my calls Caitriona, thought it best I wait here for ye.” The words fairly dripped with accusation, his tone leaving little room for doubt.

“I did answer your call Sam.” She waited, as he gathered himself upright, moving out of her way to stand at her side.

“Not the last lot.”

“I didn’t see the need to say the same thing over and over Sam.” Caitriona slipped the paper card into the door slot, hoping like Christ that the ridiculous thing worked for once. She was still fuming over the fact that Sam had taken it upon himself to called her so many times that she’d had to make the decision to block his number until she’d figured out what to do with him.

“How do you know my calls were about the same thing when you never answered but a one of them after this morning?” He scowled at her, blue eyes looking out at her from beneath his heavy brow, “Was only asking about tonight Caitriona.”

“And I already told you Sam,” She waited for the small green light to illuminate, indicating the door was unlocked before leaning on it, “I’m all good for tonight.”

“He going or are you taking your sister?” Sam fell into step behind her as they entered the room, walking down the hallway that lead to a small dining area beyond.

“Does it really matter Sam?” Caitriona gave a weary sigh, making her way to the long couch and dropping the garment bag onto one of the cushions. Whether it was Johnathon or her sister, either
way, Sam wasn’t even in the running.

“Aye.” He said quietly, his voice dropping to a tenor, “It does matter.”

“Why?” She was struggling to see Sam’s issue here. It wasn’t any of his business who she was taking in the first place. This wasn’t high school for pete’s sake.

“It just does.”

“Is that all you’re going to say? It just does?” Caitriona raised her arms and dropped them with a slap against her thighs, “That’s a pretty piss poor explanation Sam. Off something that really isn’t any of your concern.”

“Not my concern?” Blue eyes snapped at her, “Are you serious?” He ran a hand roughly through his hair, “Do you expect me to stand by and watch while he makes a fool of you?”

“Makes a fool of me?” Caitriona looked at him as though he had suddenly grown a second head, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

She was beginning to wonder if Sam knew something she didn’t about her blonde lover. Some fact or hidden detail that he had dredged up. Perhaps a slimy little secret lurking deep somewhere in Johnathon’s past. Maybe Caitriona was dismissing him too quickly. After all, something had to be continually feeding this irrational behaviour.

Maybe she would consider that point later.

Much later.

When she didn’t feel like grabbing her co-star and shaking some sense into him.

“I just have a bad feeling Caitriona.”

“A bad feeling. That’s it? You have a bad feeling and suddenly the man I’m interested in, who I might add, has done nothing. Nothing.” She repeated with deliberate enunciation, “other than show the same level of interest towards me in return and somehow, according to Lord Sam Heughan and his mysterious feelings,” her voice stretching, gaining strength, increasing with the tension in the room, “somehow that makes him a dangerous mistake? That is bullshit and you know it Sam.”

Caitriona felt the heat rising in her chest, “Somewhere in that thick head of yours, you’ve got the idea that if not for Johnathon, if he just disappeared of the face of the earth, that I would suddenly want to be with you. Is that it Sam?” She was almost yelling now, so furious that all this was because Sam didn’t like being told he was never going to be the centre of her universe. It was arrogant and childish and downright hurtful and Caitriona had had enough. “This is not about Johnathon at all is it?” She challenged, pointing a finger in his direction, “This is about you and I isn’t it?”

Startled blue eyes widened, both at the angry look and the harsh words directed at him. He hadn’t been expecting Caitriona to call him out. To have her state so succinctly the matter at the very heart of issue but she wasn’t go to give him the easy out. Not this time.

“Is that it Sam?”

“No.” He retorted unconvincingly, followed by a long silence and then, “Yes.” Came the guilty admission. Sam straightened to his full height, squaring his shoulders and jutting his chin out, “I think we’d have a chance if you’d just be willing to try Caitriona.”
“Try?” She didn’t know whether to laugh or scream with frustration. How many times did she have to say it before Sam accepted it? What more did she have to do to convince him that it was never going to happen.

“Yes.” His red head nodded, “Just try. That’s all I’m asking. Come on one date with me. See if we don’t have a good time.” Sam took a step towards her, “Try Caitriona, with me, before it’s too late.”

Caitriona couldn’t believe what she was hearing. This had to be a joke. If she just stood here a moment, Sam would break in laughter, the joke finally revealed.

Surely.

That had to be it.

This had to be some twisted episode of candid camera or punked or something similar. He couldn’t seriously be standing there suggesting what he’d just suggested unless it was a joke.

“Please Caitriona.” The hopeful look on his face, the serious tone in his voice immediately dashed any thoughts of this being a comedic experience.

“It’s already too late Sam.”

The statement seemed hang in the charged air. The implied meaning of what they meant slowly working their way into Sam’s consciousness. It showed as plain as day on his face. First disbelief, then anger and finally, disappointment. Caitriona felt her own heart squeeze at the look on his face. She did care for Sam and had no desire to hurt him, but sooner or later, Sam was going to have to face facts. Pain, regret and disappointment included. He had to accept the reality of something that would never be.

Caitriona let out a long breath, “It was already too late the moment we started working together Sam.” She hoped it would be further proof that Sam was misdirecting the blame towards Johnathon.

It had nothing to do with him or even with them. This was about Sam wanting so desperately for her to feel what he did. Swallowing her anger and putting a firm lid on the annoying frustration she still harboured, she tried one last time with her stubborn co-star. If this didn’t work then, as much as Caitriona hated to even think it. This could be the end of their friendship. She wasn’t prepared to continue the way they were and she wasn’t about to forget about the innocent party in all this.

The man Caitriona was in love with.

She could no more toss Johnathon aside, than force herself to love someone else.

The whole premise was completely ludicrous.

Surely Sam would see that.

“Listen to me Sam. Really listen.” His eyes examined hers, searching for a truth he was never going to find, “What you’re holding out for, you need to let it go.” She paused, then took a step towards him, framing his face with her hands, “It will never happen.” Her voice dropped becoming serious, with a quiet certainty that sent a cold shiver down Sam’s spine, “Not now. Not ever. Johnathon or not. It is never going to happen. No amount of arguing or trying to persuade me is going to work. I don’t love you and that isn’t something you can change Sam.”
He tried to look away but Caitriona tightened her grip, forcing him to meet her gaze, “You’re my friend and I don’t want to lose that, but so help me Sam, if you keep going this way, you’re going to leave me no choice.” She ignored the look on his face. The one that made her feel like she was kicking a someone’s pet puppy. “The person you’re becoming is not anyone I want to be around. So please Sam, before it really is too late,” Caitriona consciously softened her voice, “Please. Let it go.”

She dropped her hands from his face and took a step away, “Let me go Sam.”

“Is that what you truly want?” Sam swallowed heavily, hoping Caitriona was just angry with him. Hoping she would reconsider.

Change her mind.

He’d pushed the issue, he knew that, but damn it.

He had to.

“It is.” Caitriona’s dark head nodded slowly, imploring Sam to understand what she was saying. She really didn’t want to end this friendship and she had never wanted to hurt him but one way or the other he had to stop. “Be my friend Sam, but please, I’m asking you, please let me go.”

His blue eyes searched hers, the tension in the air crackling between them, as wants and desire met the unyielding harshness of the truth. Sam watched helplessly as any remaining hope he’d clung to, dissolved in the growing distance between them. The three feet separating them, suddenly feeling more like a thousand miles.

Caitriona meant his gaze squarely.

She wasn’t going to change her mind.

She wasn’t going to be persuaded by anything he did or said.

For the first time since he’d met her, Sam felt a real danger, so palpable he could almost taste it, that their friendship was on the line.

He had pushed this as far as he could.

“Guess I don’t have much choice do I?” Downcast eyes dropped to study the floor, his voice flat and resigned, “I hope you know what you’re doing Caitriona.”

Without another word, or even a look back at her, Sam Heughan, left.

Chapter End Notes

Have a good week everyone.

Cheers and thanks for reading and commenting.

Next chapter: Banishment

Hopefully posted next week.
Johnathon tugged on the bottom of his dinner jacket, giving his shoulders a slight shake, and pulling the cuffs of his sleeves down. “It’ll do.” He murmured, regarding his reflection in the bathroom mirror. With one last glance, he picked up his watch and set of silver cuff links, then headed into the main room.

“I’ll fix you in a minute you little bastard.” Jackson ground out between clenched teeth, trying for the fifteenth time to fold the fabric of the bow tie into something resembling the correct shape. Having been banished over an hour ago from his own room by Emma, who had apparently wanted to ‘surprise’ the dark haired man, Jackson had taken refuge a few doors down.

“Start with one side lower than other mate.” Johnathon commented, turning his wrist, slipping the metallic bar of the cuff link through one button hole, then sitting down on the edge of the bed. By the time he’d gotten back from his little clothing expedition, he’d barely had time to see Caitriona before they’d had to get start getting ready. It must be a woman thing, Johnathon mused, fitting the second cuff link to his shirt, the ends crisp and starched. Johnathon didn’t know if he’d class it as banishment, but he too had been sent to his room to dress. Caitriona had wrapped her arms around him, leaned into him and kissed him soundly. The type of kiss that that had warmed more than the tips of his toes. Before his mind really had a chance to catch up with the rest of him, Caitriona had flashed a cheeky smile and shoved him bodily towards the door, telling him she expected to see him no later than 5:00pm. Johnathon had been on track for that target until he had been interrupted by the refugee from down the hall.

“Should have just brought a clip on one.” Jackson fiddled with the black fabric, ending up with a product that looked more akin to something one might find on clown at the local fair. “Fuck this shit.” He threw the obstinate piece of clothing down, “Do you think she’ll notice if I go without?”

Johnathon reached for the hotel phone, tucking the receiver against his neck, “Do you really want to take the risk?” He raised a blonde eyebrow, regarding Jackson’s reflection in the large mirror that ran along the back of the bench.

For a long moment, Jackson actually looked like he was considering the options. Luckily, sanity prevailed, “This better be worth it.” The dark haired man grumbled, fingers twisting and tugging savagely at attempt number sixteen. After a short conversation with concierge, Johnathon dropped the receiver back into its cradle and stood.

“For god’s sake.” Johnathon muttered, tapping Jackson’s shoulder and waiting until he turned to face him, “Start with this lower,” Nimble fingers moved quickly, wrapping and lopping the material, “Put that there and then..” Johnathon nipped the last piece tight, “It all kinda just comes together.” He slapped Jackson’s shoulder and flashed a triumphant grin. “Done.”

“Kinda sounds like bullshit.” Jackson jabbed a finger against his collar, pulling it away from his neck, “Is this supposed to be this tight? I swear this a conspiracy of punishment. That is what this is.” He turned towards Johnathon, “How the hell are you looking so comfortable in this get up?”

“You just get used it.” The blonde man shrugged, slipping his wallet into the inside pocket of his dinner jacket, followed by the room card then headed towards the door. “Anyway by the time you get to the end of the opera, that tight collar will seem like nothing.” He teased, closing the door as
Jackson followed him out into the hallway, busy now with other hotel guests making their way to dinners, theatres, nightclubs and bars.

“Jesus don’t remind me.” Jackson stepped to one side to allow another couple space to pass around them. He dug around in his pocket producing a piece of nicotine gum and tossing it in his mouth, chewing enthusiastically. He was a nervous smoker, the gum a poor substitute for the real thing, but it was better than nothing. He’d once, when they’d both been younger, made the mistake of lighting a cigarette around his tall friend. Johnathon’s ensuing asthma attack and emergency room visit making certain that Jackson never made that same mistake again. “How the hell did I get myself into this.”

“Probably the same way I did.”

“No shit.” Jackson swallowed heavily and rocked his head from side to side, as if he was about to begin a boxing match. He glanced across at Johnathon face as they ambled along. Cool, calm and collected. A distinct contrast to the rolling in his gut and a heart that felt like it had decided to move into his throat. Every fibre in his body was so twitchy that Jackson felt like breaking into a sprint. Taking off down the hallway and never looking back. This dating thing was proving to be more fucking frightening than he’d ever thought possible.

They were still a few feet from the door when it suddenly opened. Emma emerged, clad in a long grey gown, a narrow swathe of similarly coloured satin snuggly wrapped around her midrift, separating the lace patterned top from the flowing folds of the skirt. Her long chestnut hair neatly braided, a simple yet elegant gold chain adorning her bare neck.

“Fuck.” Came the utterance as Jackson’s mouth fell open, the power of further speech deserting him. The woman in front of him so very different from the one he was used to seeing. Not a work uniform in sight. Instead, stood an elegant woman that any man would have been lucky to stand beside.

“You look beautiful Em.” Johnathon said quietly, after a moment or two passed with Jackson still apparently struck mute. He placed a small kiss on Emma’s cheek and stepped back, hoping Jackson had regained at least some of his facilities.

“Thank you Johnathon.” Her eyes met his briefly before settling on Jackson’s immobile form, “Well?” Hands settled on her hips in a stance entirely typical of the stubborn nurse.

With a slight shake of his head and a straightening of his back, Jackson stepped forward. “You are the most good looking woman,” His voice dropped, eyes locked with her, “I have ever laid eyes on.”

Johnathon looked awkwardly at his feet, suddenly feeling like an intruder on a very intimate moment.

“You scrub up alright too.” The nurse smiled, resting a hand on the Jackson’s lapel and twitching his collar straight, “What time is the cab booked for?”

The colour drained from Jackson’s face. The cab! Bloody hell, crap, shit and fuck. He had meant to book it this afternoon and had completely forgotten about it.

“Car is arriving,” Johnathon interjected, glancing at his watch, “Right about now actually. You told them five right Jackson?” Johnathon raised a blonde eyebrow in question.

“Uh yeah.” Grateful green eyes met his, “Five.” He nodded slowly, letting out a relieved breath and taking Emma’s arm, “Almost made me forget the time, you look so good.”
“Should be waiting at reception then.” Johnathon gave them a smile, watching as Emma blushed with the compliment. “I better get going too.” Johnathon lifted a hand and waved, then turned, heading down the hall towards the bank of lifts. “Have good night you two.”

“Johnathon?”

His feet stilled. So close.. his mind sounded. Any hopes of an easy get away vanishing like smoke in the wind.

Emma gripped Jackson’s arm and started down the hall after him, “If you think you’re going to get away with giving me details then you are sorely mistaken.”

“Shit..” Jackson murmured, giving an apologetic shrug and deciding now was the perfect time to study his shoes.

Shit was about right. That is exactly what Johnathon would be in if he wasted time standing around talking. Emma and Jackson weren’t the only ones waiting on a car. Caitriona had said 5 and Johnathon was determined to not be late.

“Now,” Emma shot him a warning look, almost daring the blond man to object, “where exactly are you off to tonight?’ There was an art to fishing. If you wanted to catch the right fish, or in this case, get the information you wanted, you needed to start with the right bait. Unfortunately for Emma, this particular fish was more than fully aware of what was going on and wasn’t inclined to bite.

“Just a benefit dinner.” Johnathon answered nonchalantly as they drew level with the lifts, “Lots of stuffy business men opening their wallets so they can feel better.” He stuck out a finger and pressed both down and up, a sickly blue ring illuminating the buttons, “All pretty boring really.”

“Fancy get up for such a boring thing.” She mused aloud, “Wait.” Dark brows knit, “A charity dinner where?”

“Park Hyatt.”

“The World Child Cancer fundraiser?” Both Jackson and Johnathon looked at her like she had suddenly sprouted a second head. “At the Park Hyatt?” Emma began to look as thoroughly confused as the two men around her. Before either man had the chance to question Emma any further, the first lift arrived, the metal doors opening and disgorging a noisy group of revelers into the hallway. The group barely across the threshold when the second lift arrived, the large up arrow blinking impatiently.

“Go on.” Emma gave Johnathon nod, her voice raising slightly over the din and the melee of people. “Information later.” She gave him a stern look then a soft smile and wave. “What was that about?” Jackson asked, waiting until the crowd thinned and they could finally make their way into the elevator.

“Nothing.” She said softly with a shake of her head, “Was just wondering is all. It’s good he’s finally getting back on his feet.”

“Emma?” He looked at her from beneath his brow. It wasn’t nothing and Jackson knew it. He just didn’t know what it was yet. “It could be me.” She offered, shaking her head as if trying to shake the answer she was looking for free. “This woman. The woman Johnathon is seeing, what’s her name?”

“Dunno.” He shrugged. A glare pinned him, “No really,” Jackson held up one hand in supplication, “Johnathon never told me. All I know is she’s Scottish. Lives in Glasgow.”

“Are you sure?”
“Swear to god.” A finger drew an imaginary cross on his heart, “Flew in to see him last night I think.”

Emma’s face brightened with that piece of information. Maybe she was remembering wrong, misheard and her mind was now just filling blanks with current information. Something. Anything other than the alternative. After all, the odds on that happening had to be astronomical. There was more than one charity involved with children and cancer. Surely the universe wasn’t that much of an vindictive asshole. It was probably nothing.

The lift doors opened, the smiling face of the concierge greeting them, “Mr Porter. Miss Stanton. Your car.” He turned and extended an arm towards the long black extended limousine, the paint so polished and waxed it gleamed under the lights, a neatly dressed chauffeur, complete with black cap, standing beside the back door.

“Oh Jackson…” Emma breathed, a broad smile splitting her face, as she turned to her head to regard him, eyes shining with delight. For his part, Jackson tried not look as surprised as his date and made a mental note to thank Johnathon later. The hand tightening around his arm as they crossed the reception area.

“Ma’am. Sir.” The driver nodded and opened the door. They slid easily into the expansive rear seat and with a soft click of the door and the gentle purr of the engine, the hotel lights began to fade away.

Jackson felt Emma reach for his hand, her fingers threading through his.

“Thank you.” Emma said quietly, in a tone that sent warmth seeping across his chest, wrapping around his heart without even trying.

So, this is what it feels like, Jackson’s mind quietly whispered, his attention completely captured by the glint in the back of the hazel eyes watching him.

Maybe this dating thing isn’t so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next Up - Tuxedos, Dresses and Threats
The noise slowly faded away as Johnathon stepped into the lift. The doors closing, muting the outside sounds instantly. How had Emma known, he pondered silently, idly watching the floor display numbers tick closer to 23. Johnathon was certain he hadn’t told Jackson the details of the night. There had to be at least half a dozen charity functions being held in the inner city alone, much less broader New York. Some of them far more recognisable than World Child Cancer. He hadn’t really looked, but Johnathon was sure this wasn’t a benefit dinner that was well known or heavily advertised. In fact, Caitriona had explained to him that it was one to the reasons she’d decided to lend her support to the charity in the first place. It was far less in your face in terms of exposure than a good deal of the other, much larger charities.

None of that helped in escaping the pressing question of the moment. How had Emma Stanton known which dinner he was attending? A chime sounded, accompanied by a small, almost imperceptible jolt as the lift’s vertical movement stopped. Johnathon started to move as the doors opened, then stopped, realising the lift had stopped not on the 23rd floor, but the 22nd. The doors sliding open in readiness to accept another passenger. Johnathon was still pondering the strange coincidence when the large form of Sam Heughan stepped inside.

“Sam.” Johnathon acknowledged him, dredging up a smile. He wasn’t particularly a enamoured with Sam’s recent behaviour towards Caitriona but Johnathon had no desire to make an enemy of the man.

“Chase.” Dressed a similar dinner suit, one hand reached out and punched a button on the panel, closing the lift doors and sending the car on its way. The tension inside so thick it was wonder it did physically manifest. “Your going to the WCC dinner with Cait.”

It wasn’t a question but Johnathon decided to answer it anyway. “I am.” He cleared his throat, “The Audi party yes?”

“That’s right.” Came the tight answer, “I went to last dinner for WCC with Cait.”

Johnathon hated small talk at the best of times and this was far from anything that remotely resembled that. What exactly did Sam expect him to say to that. Good for you? Thank you? In the end, Johnathon settled on silence. There was no point in making this any more awkward than it already was. Johnathon had never been more thankful in his entire life that he only had to stay in the lift for one floor. The minute or so before the doors reopened, this time on Caitriona’s level, was more than long enough. “Enjoy your evening Sam.” Johnathon stepped past the tall Scotsman, pulling up short as a large hand snaked out and latched on his arm.

“If you hurt her,” Sam leaned towards him, deliberately invading Johnathon's personal space. One hand gripped the lapel of Johnathon’s jacket and yanked him forward, his face inches from the blonde man, “I’ll kill you.”

Johnathon straightened to his full height, meeting Sam’s glare, eye to eye, with one of his own. “Get.Your.Hands.Off. Me.” His voice was soft, dripping with deadly intent. Sam may have had a slight advantage over Johnathon in terms of sheer bulk, but the blonde man stood equally as tall, with a solid frame that was coiling in readiness. If Sam wanted to do this now, Johnathon was more than happy to oblige. He didn’t take kindly to be threatened, however well meaning that threat
might had been at its core.

For a long series of seconds, the air around them seemed to hold it's breath, the gasp before the explosion of action that teetered precariously on the edge of actuality. The hand on his lapel released. Giving Johnathon a shove in the process. The blonde man however, didn't move. Didn't move so much as an inch. Holding his ground unblinkingly.

Left with no other recourse, Sam took a small step back, thrusting a defiant finger in Johnathon's direction, “I fucking mean it Chase.” He savagely punched a button on the panel, “You hurt her,” the door began to close, “And I’ll kill you.”

Johnathon stood stock still for a moment, his jaw clenched hard, his fists slowly beginning to uncurl. “Because she loves you,” He eyed the cold metal of the closed elevator doors, “You get one Sam.” Johnathon murmured, straightening his jacket.

One chance.

One reprieve.

One time when a threat went unanswered.

One.

Just one.

Johnathon turned, pulling his cuffs down, grateful for the quiet walk to Caitriona’s door and the opportunity to let the remaining tension drain from his body. Where the fuck this next level of vitriol from Sam was coming from, Johnathon wasn’t entirely sure and at this point, he wasn’t sure he cared enough to find out. It was pretty clear that no matter what, in Sam’s mind, Johnathon was now public enemy number one and would probably stay that way as long as he was with Caitriona.

That was alright, he sniffed reflectively, Sam could threaten him all he liked. Every day, all day if that’s what he wanted to do. But the second Caitriona so much as voiced the merest hint that Sam had reached her limit for tolerance, Johnathon would be through there like category five storm and deliver some sorely needed life lessons on respect. There would be no concession given for behaviour like that.

Not ever.

Johnathon blew out a long breath, pushing the problematic turn of events of the last few minutes to the back of his mind. Between Jackson turning into romantic fool, a lucky guess that simply couldn’t be just that from Emma and now, a death threat from Sam Heughan, Johnathon gave a wry shrug of his shoulders, tonight was shaping up to be at least interesting if nothing else. His feet drew to a halt outside Caitriona’s door.

This was it. Giving his clothing one last settling tug, he knocked softly and waited.

The handle turned and door opened, “I’m almost ready, “Caitriona smiled, a pair of shoes dangling loosely in one hand. Johnathon took one look at her and any thoughts Johnathon had of anything other than the vision in front of him, flew directly out the nearest window. Words, thoughts, hearing, even the power to move deserted him all at once.

A long deep blue dress, drawn in at her waist, floated around her legs. The fabric almost touching
the floor. Her hair, the same strands he’d run his fingers through last night, had been neatly parted
to the side, a loose wave falling across the left hand side of her face, a slight curl twisting the ends
of the long strands where it brushed against her naked shoulders. A thin line of slightly different
material criss crossed beneath the swell of each breast.

Fuck.

Johnathon audibly swallowed. His sensory system in complete overload. It was a wonder to him
that he was actually still on his feet and hadn’t toppled over.

“Sorry I’m running a bit late.” Caitriona said softly, ignoring the feeling of instant attraction that
raced through her blood as she took in his appearance. Standing there in that dark midnight blue
tuxedo, his blond hair combed down, his dinner jacket snugged and buttoned around his trim waist,
Johnathon looked about as good as she’d seen any man, model, actor or male in general look.
Caitriona forced herself to stop, because if she kept thinking along these lines, there would be no
benefit dinner and that suit, that did all the right things and every single one of the right places,
would find its way on her bedroom floor quick smart.

Looking away, the shoes in her hands dropped to the floor, her fingers gathered the soft fabric of
her dress, lifting it and sliding a foot into each shoe, wiggling them slightly to make sure her heel
was seated properly. She glanced up at him as she collected a blue satin shawl and wrapped it
around her shoulders, freeing her long hair from beneath it. “Johnathon?” She asked, seeing him
still standing, unmoving outside her door. “Are you alright?” She stepped foward to stand in front
of him.

Crystal blue eyes blinked and he nodded slowly, gradually regaining at least some of his more
immediate senses, "Do you.." He stopped and blew out a breath, “Caitriona, do you have any idea
how beautiful you are?” Johnathon leaned in, his breath warm on her cheek, “Absolutely
breathtaking.” He was about kiss her, when he stopped, a last minute thought running through his
head, “Your makeup and all..” He breathed, raising an eyebrow, “Is it alright if I..”

“If you don’t, there’ll be trouble.” Caitriona angled her head towards his, still bathing in the
warmth of the heartfelt compliment. Warm lips touched her in the gentlest of kisses. She hooked a
finger under his chin and pulled him back for a second much longer kiss. “For the record,” She
murmured as they separated, the enticing scent of his cologne clinging to her from the close
contact, “I’m a huge fan of this.” Slim fingers smoothed their way over the fabric of the dinner
jacket, her eyes meeting his, “Very handsome Mr Chase.” She placed one last kiss on his lips and
stepped away, “We’d better get a wriggle on thouh.”

As much as she regretted it, they were now beginning to be running the risk of being dangerously
late. Caitriona gathered the small clutch from the bench and dropping the hotel card and her phone
inside. She gave the room a once over, running through the mental list in her head of things she
needed. Her speech was in her clutch, the hotel key card, a credit card, a tube of lipstick and a
small compact, one or two, she smiled to herself, essentials, and last but not least, a tissue. Satisfied
Caitriona stepped outside, letting Johnathon close the door behind her. “Do you think we’ll get
there by six?” She asked, curling a hand around his elbow as they made their way down the hall.

“Yes do. Depends on how good they are at unloading cars. 500 people can take a bit of time to
wrangle.”

“That’s true.” Caitriona hadn’t thought about that. The New York traffic, yes, but the delay that
there could be at the venue itself. 500 people would take time to organise.

500 people.
It was her turn to swallow loudly, though for an entirely different reason.

Johnathon turned his head when he felt Caitriona press tighter against his side. “Don’t worry,” He said softly, sensing the subtle change, “We’ll make there in plenty of time. We won’t be late.”

“I’m not overly worried... about that,” Caitriona paused, it was hard to admit to this particular demon, “It’s just...500 people.” She gave a small shiver, taking comfort in the solid body beside her and the strength of the muscular arm beneath her fingers. “Speeches aren’t really my forte.” Caitriona said, as they made their way into the lift. Or crowds, she reflected ruefully. Caitriona had never coped well with large amounts of people and even less so with public speaking. 500 people. All of them would be looking to her to say something interesting, something relevant and poignant.

It was strange given her profession, both now and in the past, that the close scrutiny of large groups of people made Caitriona feel uncomfortable to the point where she was verging on a full blown panic attack. She was used to people watching her, but always from a distance. The camera acting as the intermediary, projecting whichever character she’d been instructed to play. All the while, keeping the real Caitriona safe from view. At an event like this, there was no camera, no character to play.

Just her.

Just plain Caitriona.

Out there on display.

In front of 500 people.

It was more than a little intimidating.

“You know,” Johnathon said gently as they exited the lift and made their way across the crowded reception towards the waiting limousine, “It’s alright to be a bit a nervous. Perfect normal response to these types of things.”

“Is it?” Caitriona looked up at him, unconsciously seeking reassurance that what she was feeling wasn’t some stupid over reaction, “Even for a model come actress who is supposed to enjoy the thrill of the spotlight?” She tried to keep it the conversation light, but was unable to stop doubt from colouring the words.

“I think it’s a bit nerve wracking for everyone.” Johnathon covered the hand that was resting in the crook of his arm, “No matter what they do.”

They stopped at the edge of the drive, Johnathon steadying her as she stepped down in readiness to enter the waiting car.

“Once I had to give a speech to a lecture hall of 300 of the top barristers and QC’s in the country.” He smiled softly at her, hoping that by talking, he would at least prove to be a distraction, “Damn near soiled my pants, I was that nervous.”

A soft snort sounded in the back of Caitriona’s throat, “Somehow I think that is an over exaggeration.” She gave him a skeptical look, carefully lifting hem of her dress as she slid in the backseat.

“A soft snort sounded in the back of Caitriona’s throat, “Somehow I think that is an over exaggeration.” She gave him a skeptical look, carefully lifting hem of her dress as she slid in the backseat.

“Tis not.” Johnathon waited until Caitriona was settled on the seat in the car, then slid in beside her, “Ended up with me being so nervous that I buggered the whole speech up completely.” He
leaned forward, pulling at his jacket and getting more comfortable, “Lost my place three times, read it out of order and forgot to read at least five of the most important facts. Made a right royal ass of myself. Complete cock up from beginning to end.”

Dark brows raised to her hairline, “It this supposed to me feel better?”
“Yesssss,” He grinned, reaching for her hand, “Patience grasshopper. Patience.” Long fingers slowly threaded themselves between hers, “Want to know what happened next?”

“Go on then.” She said with an exaggerated sigh, rested their joined hands in her lap, rhythmically stroking the skin between his thumb and index finger, the surface, smooth and warm. Despite her suggestion to the contrary, the deep cadence of his voice and the candor of his words were already helping to soothe her nerves. Conveniently giving her mind something other than the immediacy of her situation to concentrate on. A very, very good looking distraction at that.

“Nothing.” The fingers in hers contracted, “Nothing happened. I spoke. They listened. All applauded at the end. Good time was had by all.” Johnathon’s body twisted slightly, turning more towards her, “Turns out they didn’t care about the mistakes. Didn’t care that it hadn’t been perfect. Didn’t even hear me stumbling over the words, or the tremor in my voice.” Blue eyes locked onto hers, the pupils large in the dim light, his voice dropping to the low tenor that she was beginning to adore, “Turns out, they just wanted to hear what I had to say.” He softly kissed her lips, “The rest, didn’t matter at all.”

“I hope you’re right.” She whispered, lifting a hand and stroking the smooth skin of his cheek.

“Caitriona,” Blue eyes stared intently at her, “You could stand there and read a page from the city ordinance regulations,” One edge of her mouth lifted into a shy smile at his words, “Everyone, including me, will be utterly entranced. Trust me. You’ve got this.”

“I think you might have a slightly biased opinion of my talents Johnathon,” She traced the crease of his smile with the pad of her thumb, “But thank you,” Caitriona accompanied the words with a soft kiss with one of her own. She didn’t know what she had done, what good deed she’d performed that the universe had seemingly approved of, that had allowed this man to come into her life. Whatever it was, Caitriona was eternally grateful.

“Just telling the truth.” Johnathon gave her hand a squeeze as she settled happily against his side, the streets gliding by with an efficiency entirely incongruous with the normal traffic of downtown. “Besides,” His low voice sounded, “if all else fails,” He smiled neatly, “Just imagine everyone naked. I hear that works a real treat.”

Well, Caitriona reflected quietly, maybe not everyone.

Just one would do.

Chapter End Notes

First off, shout out to MCBS, Janmarie and Pamela-Ann for always making my day. I'm sorry I was a bit late answering your comments. I always like to answer each and every comment and I was a bit slow doing that this week,
Anyways, Here is a couple of chapters for you and as always, thanks for reading and sticking with this story.
Take care and have a good week.

Oh yeah-- Next Chapter - Them
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Had you asked her, at any point up to and including this morning, if the simple gesture of a hand resting in the small of one’s back was a necessary requirement for surviving the ordeal of a room full of people, she’d of laughed at such an idiotic notion. And yet, the amount of comfort Caitriona was deriving from the gentle touch of Johnathon’s warm hand pressed securely against her back was inordinately disproportional to the simplicity of the act itself.

Caitriona wished she could wind an arm around his waist and feel the subtle movement of his muscles shifting beneath the material of his shirt, wanting to return the touch she could feel on her own skin. The slow steady motion of his fingers that every now and again would slide back and forth across her lower back. Barely enough to see but more than enough to feel. As if he had realised that anything more intimate than that, even in a press controlled environment like this, was just courting trouble.

At least they were together, she thought quietly, even if they had been press ganged into service from almost the second they had stepped out of the car. The well meaning chairman and his wife had greeted them with welcoming smiles and handshakes, and then, it had begun. They’d spent the last hour, smiling politely, engaging in conversation, answering similar questions, over again to a different faces, different people, as the groups surrounding them drifted in and out. The one redeeming factor, at least it seemed that way to Caitriona, was that Johnathon had been beside her the entire time.

Together.

Putting aside the crowd and constant introductions, it was good to have a someone to share things like this with again. Her eyes drifted sideways, taking in the Johnathon’s profile as he was listening attentively to one of the businessmen in the latest group of designated introductions. If Johnathon was at all nervous about any of this, he certainly didn’t show it. He’d picked up the conversation ball when she had lagged, effortlessly taking the lead and giving her the moment or two she had needed to gather her social feet again. In short, she tightened her hand around his bicep, Johnathon had been absolutely amazing and exactly what Caitriona had needed. He wasn’t over bearing, nor was he dismissive or trying to impress anyone. There was no private networking on the side or ambitions to make advantageous business connections.

He didn’t have to be there.

He wanted to be.

With her. No, she correct herself.

For her.

It made Caitriona wonder why she’d put up with anything less for so very long. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t known better. It just somehow became the way it was. Like the frog in a pot of water. Put it in hot water and it jumps out immediately. Put it in cold water and slowly heat the water and it will boil to death. It hadn’t been hot water in the beginning, just something that slowly became what she had accepted. Blue eyes flicked her way, his body leaning a little towards her, until their shoulders brushed against each other, the hand on her back, unconsciously drawing her closer. She gave him a soft smile in returned, extremely thankful now, that she’d still been able to jump, before
“Excuse me, Miss Balfe?” A young woman with a thick black headphone piece over one ear, touched her arm, “I need to show you to your seats and then if you would like to make your way to the stage in preparation for the announcements.” She gestured towards the raised platform in the front of the expansive space, a lecturn standing the centre, “It shouldn’t take us long to seat the other guests and then,” She hesitated, glancing at the clipboard in her hand, checking she had the information correct, “the chairman will introduce you.”

“Of course.” Caitriona smiled, despite the sick rolling feeling that had begun churning in her stomach. 500 people and all of them would be looking at her.

“This way.” The woman started leading them towards the large circular tables that filled the front section of the ballroom. Each table, neatly laid, ten chairs surrounding the outside, finely printed name cards in front of every setting. Caitriona reluctantly let go of Johnathon’s arm, walking ahead of him. The winding passage through the tables suitable for single file only. “This one is your's Miss Balfe.” She pulled out a chair at the table in the very centre of a positive sea of tables that surround them, “Your’s Sir.” The woman indicated the chair beside Caitriona’s for Johnathon. “If you could allow us ten minutes to seat the remainder of the guests and then we should be ready for your speech. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No,” Caitriona smiled and touched the woman’s arm, “Thank you.”

“Your welcome Miss Balfe.” She gave Caitriona a short nod, “I’ll be waiting at the side of the stage if you need anything.”

With that she turned on her heel, heading off to the next VIP assignment. The chairman probably, Johnathon wagered, noting that the other guests had already embarked on their own little journey. Scouring each table for their name cards. It was like playing the lotto, he mused. You never knew just who you’d end up sitting next to. He looked down at Caitriona, who was settling herself into her assigned chair, taking in the slight shake of her fingers as she undid the latch on her clutch and retrieved the folded paper, confirming what Johnathon already knew.

He dropped into the seat beside her, waiting quietly until Caitriona had finished her the last minute read through of her speech. He wished he could take the tension and the worry from her, but realised that was an impossibility and, having gotten to know more and more about Caitriona the longer they were around each other, Johnathon knew that a rescue wasn’t what she wanted or needed. “All set?” He gently nudged her with his shoulder, the paper now folded and resting harmlessly on the white tablecloth.

“Think so.” She toyed with the paper, swiveling it one way and the other, “There’s lot of people here tonight Johnathon. I didn’t expect it to be this big of an event.”

“They must had done an impressive job at promoting it.” He reached out a hand and covered hers, stilling the rhythmic turning of the paper, “The guy on the organising committee,” Johnathon’s brow furrowed, then relaxed, “Can’t remember his name, anyway, he said they had a veritable run on tickets this morning.” Slim fingers began playing with his own, “Seems once word got out of a certain Irish actress attending, they couldn’t keep people away.”

One side of her mouth lifted in a smile, “I think you could be slightly over exaggerating facts again Mr Chase.”
“Me?” He looked shot her a look of mock outrage, “Exaggerate? Never. Just ask the three million people in the room.”

The soft sound of Caitriona’s laughter filled the air, “Clown.” She said with a gentle smile and a shake of her head, “Whatever am I going to do with you?”

The handsome face beside her split into a cheeky smile, “Whatever you like Miss Balfe. Whatever you like.”

“Careful what you wish for Mr Chase.” Caitriona leaned over towards him, her lips stopping beside his ear, “You just might get it.” She softly kissed the side of his cheek and sat back, thankful beyond all good measure for the distraction she knew Johnathon was deliberately providing.

Chairs around them began to be populated with guests. Like a flock of birds settling in to roost for the night, each one slowly being taken, the sound gradually mutating to a humming buzz rather than the rambunctious sounds of greetings and introductions. Johnathon saw the tension return to Caitriona’s shoulder. The immediacy of the task ahead descending with the silence of the room. The young assistant from earlier had taken up her position at the edge of the stage. She nodded at Caitriona, indicating it was time.

Caitriona took a deep breath and started to stand, “Duty calls.”

Johnathon stood, helping Caitriona with her chair. “Hey..” He called softly as she tucked the paper against her side. Worried blue eyes met his, ‘Breathe.” He smiled softly, “You’ve got this.”

Her eyes searched his for a moment, trying to draw confidence from the words. She nodded, gave him a half smile, then headed towards the stage. Caitriona didn’t know why this terrified her so much. It was just a speech. She reached the small stairway just as the chairman was taking his place at the lectern. Caitriona glanced back to the table, seeing a set of blue eyes watching her quietly. They held hers for a long series of heartbeats. For just a moment, everyone else disappeared. Even the sound of chairman’s voice faded away. “You’ve got this.” She heard the deep tenor of Johnathon’s voice echo in her head, saw the belief in the soft pools of blue watching her. One of the eyes winked at her and Caitriona couldn’t help herself, she smiled and gave him a gentle shake of her head. She took a steadying breath as reality slowly reasserted itself.

“Please welcome Miss Caitriona Balfe.”

God. She hoped Johnathon was right. Applause sounded and gripping the handrail, she carefully took the stairs one a time. On top of everything else, the last thing Caitriona needed was to fall base over apex before the speech had even started. She stopped halfway across the stage and accepted the brief kiss on her cheek from the chairman as he passed by on his way to exit. Caitriona continued on to the lectern, unfolded the paper and looked out.

Fuck.

Caitriona swallowed hard, her fingers curling to gripping the edges of the surface as the room silenced. Her eyes flicked to their table. Johnathon’s eyes still on her, “Mr Chairman, distinguished guests..” She began.

For all the stress and worry it had caused, less than five minutes later, the last line delivered, it was done. To Caitriona's ears, the room was ominously quiet. For several long dreadful moments, the paralyzing fear of failure began to surround her. Her concern turned out to be premature as mere seconds later, the entire ballroom erupted in applause. A feeling of utter relief washed over her. So overwhelming that Caitriona felt slightly lightheaded. A broad smile lit her face, her eyes scanning
the crowd, unerringly settling on Johnathon.

He was sitting at the table, his arms crossed over his chest, a triumphant proud smile decorating his handsome face. He held her gaze, rocking his head from side to side, with a grin, then adding his own applause to the crowd. It was the quietest “I told you so.” she’d ever heard.

Caitriona gathered up the paper from the lectern and left the stage, gradually making her way back to table, weaving in between the various groups. Accepting the nods of what she assumed was approval. When Caitriona got within a few feet of the table, Johnathon stood, politely pulling out her chair, gently pushing it in again as she took her seat beside him. Caitriona turned her head to regard the Johnathon, waiting until he looked towards her.

They watched each other silently. Something entirely unseen passing between them. Unseen and at the same time, so extraordinarily powerful that it reached inside each of them, tightening the unique bond that was slowly but surely binding them together. Caitriona lifted a palm, placing it against Johnathon's cheek, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw, before she tugged him closer and kissed him softly. “Thankyou.” Caitriona whispered against his lips as they separated.

She didn’t care about what the other guests sitting at their table thought.

Caitriona reached for his hand, pressed her palm against his and settled their joined hands into her lap.

She didn’t care who saw what.

She needed this.

Needed him.

Needed them.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter : The Past Becomes The Present
Apologetic blue eyes found his from across the crowded ballroom floor. Caitriona was currently being chauffeured around the room by the ever present, World Child Cancer Foundation Chairman. The old man was revelling in his chance to introduce her to various groups of event attendees. It was a tried and true method guaranteed to loosen purse strings. The more support they could garner for the foundation, the more successful the evening would become.

From the look on Caitriona’s face, Johnathon suspected that it wouldn’t be terribly long before she politely excused herself and quietly made her back to the their table. She’d need a break soon, he could see it in the tension of her shoulders. The tension was to be fully expected after the stress of the speech and the ensuing extensive charity duty. When they’d first arrive and it have become apparent what the evening was probably going to entail, Johnathon had wondered if Caitriona would prefer to do that by herself. She was more than capable and, he smiled to himself, there was more than a one of two strands of independence running the dark haired woman’s dna.

Instead, however, Caitriona had pressed herself firmly against his side. Clinging on to his arm for a good portion of evening until they had somehow diverged into two separate groups. One minute Caitriona was beside him, the next she had been whisked away by the elderly chairman to be introduced to yet another group of potential foundation support.

Johnathon flashed a smile and an accompanying wink in her direction to let her know it was alright. This wasn’t his first rodeo. He’d been to the odd benefit gala in his time and knew well enough that a gala like this one, was ninety percent business and ten percent pleasure. Whether they wanted to or not, business responsibilities came with the territory. Raising money for the charity that Caitriona had generously lent her support too, was always going to be the priority tonight.

Just as it should be.

Johnathon was more than happy to patiently occupy himself while Caitriona did whatever she needed. After all, there were worse places to be. The opera for one. Caitriona gave him one last soft smile before her eyes left his, her attention returning to the task and the people at hand.

Johnathon lifted a glass of thirty year old single malt scotch to his lips. There was always the open bar. Cradling the empty glass in his hand, rolling the remains of the ice cube from side to side as his mind drifted. It drift very far however. She was just naturally stunning, he decided, quietly studying Caitriona’s tall form. From the long legs to the slender waist to the long dark hair, more naturally brown than black, to anything and everything in between. No to mention that dress, his mind helpfully added. Christ, he swallowed reflexively, the woman was absolutely breathtaking. He watched her a moment longer as she sat down at one of the tables and began engaging in conversation with a large group of potential charity philanthropist sitting around its edges. Smaller pods of guests drifted back and forth across the room, finally obstructing Caitriona from Johnathon’s view.

A scowl and a soft sigh later, he decided now was as good as time as any to stretch his legs. He threaded his way across the crowded room to the small bar, the neatly dressed bartender waiting patiently for his order. A few minutes later, with a tall drink of ice water resting snugly in his hand Johnathon headed towards a small balcony, its perimeter lined with floor to ceiling frameless glass
windows. The thin barrier separated the interior from the sounds of downtown Manhattan. A small brass rail rimmed the edge, making it an ideal spot for Johnathon to lean against. His eyes dropped to the silver watch around his wrist. The closer it crept towards midnight, the closer it would be to the time when they’d be able to slip away.

Duty fulfilled and the quiet of their hotel room beckoning. It hadn’t been so bad, he supposed. The inane conversation and small talk were irritating to him, but Caitriona had been with him and he’d found that just having her beside him had made the evening far more enjoyable. Still, Johnathon found himself yearning for the privacy of their hotel room and the quiet of Caitriona’s company. The two of the alone.

He slowly sipped the cool drink idly perusing the brightly lit streets below. Cars that looked more like a child’s toys then the real thing, worked their way slowly on the thin black ribbon streets. Occasionally they stopped at a red light or because the flow of the other traffic around them had come to a temporally standstill. Every now and again city dwellers who were feeling either lucky or adventurous, Johnathon didn’t know which, took advantage of the temporary break in action. Venturing across the streets, crossing from one side of the street to the other.

His eyes narrowed, focussing in on one particular group as they spewed out of a busy restaurant and onto the sidewalk. Weaving haphazardly as they ambled along. Three members of the group were occupied in keeping a fourth member of the group upright and moving. That’s probably going to end with someone’s head over a toilet before too much longer, he mused, thankful that he had already made the switch from alcohol to water. He’d never had the strongest constitution when it came to metabolizing alcohol. In his case, a little went a long way.

Johnathon watched as the hapless group attempted to navigate the pedestrian crossing. A disaster waiting to happen if ever he saw it. At least they were only trying to cross a small alleyway and not the main four lane road.

“Do you think they’ll make it?” A quiet voice asked absently from somewhere behind him.

Johnathon turned towards the voice as he spoke. “I wouldn’t guaran…”

The world seemed to fold in on itself as recognition hit him like a ten tonne truck.

“Kate.” The name came out on a puff of air, almost as if Johnathon had been punched in the stomach. He didn’t know who he’d been expecting to see, but Katherine Carmichael had been second to last on his list.

“Hello Johnathon.” The dark haired woman flashed him a tentative smile, unsure of the reaction she was about to receive. She took a small step towards him, watching as his eyes dropped from her face to her mid rift. The second she’d seen Johnathon Chase from her vantage point at a table across ballroom, Katherine had known there would be no avoiding this moment.

The world, it seemed, was far smaller than one ever realised.

Following his gaze, Katherine rested a hand on the slope of her belly. The cloth covered surface, once flat, as it had been the last time she’d seen Johnathon, was now dramatically rounded and expanding with the new life it contained.

Eyes flicked back to her face, pools of deep blue that Katherine had once known like the back of her hand studied her’s intently.

“When are you due?” Johnathon asked quietly after a short silence. It was always a dangerous thing in his experience to ask a woman if she was pregnant or not when you hadn’t been explicitly given
such information but in this case, there could be no other conclusion. Kate had either managed to swallow an entire watermelon whole or she was pregnant.

Kate licked her lips nervously before she straightened slightly, physically steeling herself for what she knew would be the worst of it.

There was no preventing the hurt answering this question would bring.

To either of them.

Repentant blue eyes met his, “6 weeks.”

She saw it hit him.

Straight between the eyes.

The awful realisation of exactly what that statement meant.

And worse.

Of what it could mean.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone,
Cheers and thanks to all who comment and read. This marks the end of xmas in July, soooo, multi chapter posts time is probably over :) (if it didn't end, you guys will catch me and I won't have anything written in time to post :)

Next Chapter : Good Causes
Caitriona politely excused herself from the latest, and she hoped last, group of dinner guest introductions. There just couldn’t be any more people left in the room that she hadn’t met. Heading back towards the main area of the ballroom, Caitriona weaved in and around the scattered tables, intent on hunting Johnathon down and all things going well, suggesting to him that they start looking towards heading home. Back to one very quite and very private hotel room.

She stopped momentarily beside one of the empty tables. It wasn’t their table but Caitriona decided that the vision of a vacated chair looked to inviting to pass up. She’d sit for just a moment. If she could get the weight off of her feet for a few seconds, the dull ache that had worked its way from the ball of her foot up to her ankle might ease. Staying stationary might also help out on hunting down of her handsome date. Like a child lost in a shopping centre that had been told to stay still until located, Caitriona decided the strategy of staying put was a sound one. Sooner or later Johnathon would come looking for her and hopefully she would be easier to find if she wasn’t a moving target.

Besides, she gave a small wince, high heels may well look fantastic but sometimes, like tonight when she had been on her feet more than she had been off them, extended use came at a cost. She wasn’t just talking about the pain in her feet. Forcing yourself to listen to conversation after conversation about how good stocks have been this year wasn’t her idea of pleasure either. That and the fact that almost everyone seemed to focus on one and only particular aspect of her current job. Caitriona swore to god, if she had explain one more time what acting out intimate scenes with Sam was really like, she wasn’t going to be responsible for her own actions. Still, she blew out an aggrieved breath as she sat down, it was for a good cause she supposed, and it had conveniently provided the catalyst for her visiting New York this weekend. For that alone, she figured she didn't have very much at all to complain about. Resting her foot on the spike of her heel, Caitriona gave a soft sigh as the pain she’d been feeling for the past half hour or so, instantly began to ease. She gave serious thought to removing her heels altogether but then decided that once she’d experienced the feeling of shoeless freedom, putting them back on would be nothing less than torture. Padding around barefoot was definitely out of the question. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what inane questions and conversations she’d have to endure if she did that. Not with this crowd.

Straightening her back, Caitriona cast an eye across the crowded room. A positive sea of faces. All of them busily talking to each other, putting serious and sustained effort into being seen, pretending to be at least interested in each other. Some were better than others at that, she observed, watching one woman in particular chat away happily to a small group of assembled men, who all spontaneously broke into laughter at something or another the woman had said. Caitriona was willing to bet that whatever she’d said wasn’t that funny but it was the done thing to at least appear amused. So many people. Almost all of them she’d met. Almost all of them she’d already forgotten. Even those she’d just met. For the past hour or so she’d been almost exclusively with the charity founder. Having had her arm surreptitiously taken almost as soon as the formal part of the evening had concluded, the older man had been using her so called 'celebrity status' to help shake loose some cobwebs and moths from the charity crowd.

It always came down to money, she mused. Good intentions, publicity, tweeting, blogging, raising
awareness. In the end, it was all just a mechanism for the accumulation of cold hard cash. Every handshake, every smile and superficial conversation, her own contribution towards one simple goal. More money for the charity. In that regard, she reflected quietly, she’d at least done her part tonight.

Now, her blue eyes flicked across the room, onto far more important matters. “Ah.” She said softly, a gentle smile painting her face as she finally managed to lay eyes on subject of her search. Her eyes traced the well defined lines of his body. Drifting from his broad shoulders, down the strong muscular back that her own hands now had an intimate and all too recent memory of, to the tapered slim waist and, one dark eyebrow arched as she nibbled on the edge of her lip, to the curve of his firm backside. She almost let out a growl when a large group of event attendees moved across the room, inadvertently obstructing her view as they passed by, making their way towards the bar area.

When the swarm finally cleared a few moments later, Caitriona returned her gaze to her blonde lover. This time finding that Johnathon was no longer looking out the windows but had turned and was addressing a tall, dark haired woman, who in Caitriona’s opinion, looked to be heavily pregnant. Probably one of the wives or girlfriends of one of the hundreds’ of business men that she’d met tonight, Caitriona reasoned. She watched as the woman in question reached out a hand, laying it on Johnathon’s forearm.

One dark eyebrow arched. While the gesture in and of itself wasn’t unusual, Caitriona having been guilty of doing the exact same motion as part of normal conversation, there was something in way the woman’s hand had settled on Johnathon’s arm that instantly raised her hackles. It was all a little too familiar for her liking. Just because Johnathon was without question, the best looking man in the room, didn’t give whoever this woman was, permission to get overly friendly. Even more so if you were at a charity dinner with your husband, boyfriend, baby daddy, or whatever title you wanted to assign to whoever was responsible for the woman’s growing belly.

No, Caitriona decided, that was just not on.

She continued to watch, seeing Johnathon’s back straighten at the strange woman’s touch before he took a step back. Instantly breaking the contact and increasing the distance between the two. Johnathon's immediate and definitive reaction brought a soft smile to Caitriona’s face. That’s right lady, her mind happily chortled, back the fuck off. From her vantage point, Caitriona could see the woman was one the doing all the talking. Something not entirely surprising. Johnathon was without question, the best looking man in the room, didn’t give whoever this woman was, permission to get overly friendly. Even more so if you were at a charity dinner with your husband, boyfriend, baby daddy, or whatever title you wanted to assign to whoever was responsible for the woman’s growing belly.

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Not one bit. Surely the woman would read the blatant signals Johnathon was clearly sending her and step away, Caitriona thought, her brows drawing together. “Oh no you don’t.” She murmured as the woman made a second attempt at laying hands on Johnathon’s person.

Enough was enough.

Caitriona uncrossed her legs. Pain in her foot or not, she took in Johnathon’s form, his expression was continuing to darken considerably. She wasn’t going to sit here any longer. Not with Johnathon's entire body now fairly radiating tension. So strong that anyone with an ounce of intelligence could see. The tense set of his jaw, the straight back, the stiff posture, the squaring of his shoulders as if he was about face some unseen threat. Caitriona didn’t know what was going on over there but she suddenly felt the undeniable need to be by Johnathon’s side.

Possessiveness, protectiveness or downright curiosity. Call it whatever you liked. Either way, it prompted her bodily into action. Planting her hands on the table, Caitriona half stood, pushing the chair away with the back of her knees. Pregnant or not, this woman needed to be given a little
lesson on how to keep one’s hands to oneself.

“Jesus Christ!” The startled curse accompanied by a soft grunt.

Caitriona spun around. The metal frame of her chair having connected solidly with a moving body behind her. “Oh my gosh,” Her eyes widening as she realised what she’d done.

A tall dark haired man was standing stock still. The long drink in his hand, now three quarters empty, the red liquid still sloshing back and forth from the recent upheaval. The white surface of his shirt instantly soaking, the dark, red stain spreading across his chest as if the surface were blotting paper.

“Are you alright?” Caitriona apoloised, grabbing a crumpled cloth napkin from the table and offering it to him, “I should have checked behind me. I’m so sorry.”

“Indeed.” His voice was deep, slightly gravelly, the edges of each word tinged with a soft but unmistakable southern accent.

“Ice water will help stop the stain from setting.” Caitriona ventured, glancing around hoping to catch the eye of one of the waiters and trying to at least lend what little assistance she could. There would be no way that stain was coming out anytime time soon. Not without professional intervention and several cleaning cycles.

“I’m sure it would.” The man dabbed at the stain with the napkin, “I’ll have my staff see to it.” He tossed the napkin on the table and set the mostly empty glass down. Dark green eyes, surrounded by not entirely unattractive squarish face, lifted to hers, “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure…,” His neat mouth broadened into a half smile, “Miss Balfe.” His gaze slowly raked over her, drifting down the entire length of her body, silent appraising her form, “Stephen Cross.” His eyes returned to her face and a neatly manicured hand presented itself to her, “CEO of Cross Industries.”

“Caitriona.” The warning signals tingling across the surface of her skin made her reluctant to have any contact with him. Good manners and the necessity of the surrounding won out. Her hand gripped his, privately trying to figure out why that name sounded familiar to her. She’d definitely heard it before but for the life of her, details eluded her.

“It’s a great pleasure to meet you, Caitriona.” The sound of his mouth emphasising her name, set her teeth on edge. “I thought you gave,” the grip of his hand around hers seemed to linger, his fingers stroking the skin on the back of her hands before finally, slowly releasing, “an inspiring speech. WCC is lucky to have a patron such as yourself.” His gaze darkened, “Intelligent and beautiful.”

Caitriona had never been so grateful for acting lessons in all her life. Despite the uncomfortable tingle on running down the back of her neck, she put on the best impression of a genuine smile that she could muster, “Thank you for supporting the charity. I know every dollar is greatly appreciated.”

“It is,” His upper body leaned towards her, “my pleasure.” He paused, intense green eyes studying hers, “Though it can be rather difficult to find the time with a busy work schedule. I hear you almost were unable to attend? Having to fly into from.. London was it?”

“Scotland.” She corrected, “It was a bit of a close call, but,” Caitriona gave a small shrug, “Thankfully the flights were on time and everything worked out.”

“Indeed. Most fortunate.”
It was a strange thing. The mysterious intuitive feeling that sent the silent thrill of warning racing through your blood when you sensed rather than felt danger. The one you got when you walked down a dark alley at night that made you walk just the little bit quicker. The one that made you reach for the light switch when something went bump in the night. The one Caitriona was getting whenever Stephen Cross looked at her. “And your husband? …. is it?” His green gaze shifted from her eyes to her lips and back again, “I do hope a beautiful woman such as yourself didn’t have to travel all that way alone?”

Husband? No. Too early too call on that front.

Boyfriend? No. That word made it sound like she and Johnathon were a pair of teenagers involved in a high school romance and it was so much more than that at this point.

“My partner was already here in New York. Working.” She explained, taking the opportunity to swivel on her heel, her gaze immediately going to spot she’d last seen Johnathon. Hoping that he’d still be there and by pointing him out, Stephen Cross would take the hint and just move on. As far as Caitriona was concerned, he could take his not so subtle flirting and over the top attention with him as he went. Unfortunately the space occupied not so long ago by Johnathon, had now been filled by several businessmen. A quick scan of the immediate area also came up blank, leaving Caitriona wondering where her tall companion had disappeared to and the more immediate problem of what do to with the rather slimy, all too clumsy wanna be standing at her side. Caught between the edge of the table and the over attentive business man, Caitriona had little room to manoeuvre and no polite way to rapidly escape.

“I hope this evening hasn’t kept you away from him.” Stephen continued, oblivious to Caitriona’s growing discomfort.

“No. Not at all.” Her dark head shook, “He’s here with me.” Somewhere, her mind added. Maybe just mentioning the fact that the partner in question was actually here with her would have the same effect as the living breathing version, at least until she could locate the real thing. Caitriona flashed another fake smile, “And you?” She asked more to continue the appearance of being polite than anything else.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Caitriona saw his face change. The perfect impression of the original Cheshire Cat now stared directly into her eyes. In that moment, Caitriona realised that she had just walked straight into the place Stephen been slowly, methodically, leading her to go. the perfect little trap/

“Oh,” He said, the casual tone of the word meaning anything but, “I attended with my fiancée”,” He paused for effect, his dark head curiously tilting towards her, “Katherine Carmichael. Dr Katherine Carmichael.”

The name hit Caitriona with such force that that she had to put a hand on the chair beside her in order to steady herself.

Katherine Carmichael. The woman responsible for the most if not all the doubt that Caitriona still sensed lurked deep inside her handsome lover. The woman who had thrown him away. The woman who had broken Johnathon in a way so profound, that the resulting wound was now permanently part of him. A scar so deep that Caitriona wasn’t sure it would ever truly heal. Trust and betrayal now a tender spot on Johnathon’s soul that would always need to be protected and treated with special care.

It took everything Caitriona had and then some, to keep the terrible rolling in her gut from manifesting to a stunned look of shock crossing her face. She wasn’t prepared to give this man that
satisfaction of seeing the shiver of the icy tendrils that were beginning to creep through her veins. It was one thing to know Johnathon had been with other women. That wasn’t what you would call unexpected news. It was quite another, however, to know that the last woman Johnathon had been with, a woman with whom he had been in a serious committed relationship with, was here. In the flesh, hovering around in the room somewhere. Like the proverbial snake in the grass, ready to strike out when you least expected it. Caitriona didn’t care if the strike came her way, but she would be lying to herself if she said she was anything other than extremely concerned about the effect of coming face to face with Katherine Carmichael might have on her recently healed partner.

Silence filled the air as Stephen stood still and watched his quarry, barely able to contain himself. There was no better feeling than having one of his carefully constructed plans came together. Seeing the look of comprehension settle into Caitriona’s features was particularly satisfying because she hadn’t seen it coming. No ordinary blindside, this had been designed to be far more insidious. The woman across from him may well have been an actress but she wasn’t very proficient at hiding her thoughts. The complete gamut of emotions chased each other across her face. Concern, worry, fear, doubt, jealousy. Exactly what he’d been aiming for. Now all he had to do was sit back and watch the ripples rock whatever boat they touched. Starting with her belief in her new ‘partner’, Stephen’s mind spat. It never did take much to make a woman doubt everything she thinks she knows about the man in her bed. This one was no different, he smiled to himself.

“Oh there you are my dear.” The elderly chairman bustled over to her, interrupting them and inadvertently saving Caitriona from any further conversation with Stephen Cross. “I see you’ve met Stephen.” He beamed, reaching across and shaking the taller man’s hand, “Proud to say, this man is the single largest donator for this evening. Quite the achievement.”

“Like I was just saying to your beautiful patron here,” He eyed her, “It’s been my absolute pleasure.”

“We are very lucky to have your support Stephen. Now,” The chairman turned, addressed Caitriona directly, “Speaking of good causes, there is one last guest I’d like to meet before we leave for the evening.” He looked across at Stephen, “If you’ll excuse us.” Taking Caitriona’s arm he gently lead her towards another group, “Are you quite well my dear?” He said quietly after a few strides, "For a moment there you looked a little..” He searched for the right word, “Uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable was only the beginning of it. The longer she was apart from Johnathon, the more on edge Caitriona felt. Her mind was reeling. Christ only knew what she would be dealing with if Johnathon had somehow managed to run into Katherine. What would she say to him? Would she want him back? Would he want to go back? No. She tried to stop herself. She glanced around frantically, she’d been wrong about people before. Could she survive it if Johnathon left? Would he survive it? Would Katherine hurt him again?

Fuck.

That did it.

“Actually William,” She said apologetically, “Would you excuse me just for a moment?”

The time for the charity was over.

Right now, there was only one thing Caitriona needed to do.
Hi Everyone,
Might be a couple of weeks before the next chapter.. It's that time of the year when things get real so we'll see how it goes. Next Chapter - "I'm Sorry."
Thanks for reading everyone and for commenting . You all have a good week and take care.

Cheers
Johnathon’s hand tightened around the rail, a heavy ball of ice settling in the pit of his stomach. Pregnant. Six weeks left. His intelligent mind kicked into action, rapidly attempting to calculate dates. Desperately hoping with every passing second that his past wasn’t going to irrevocably change his future.

Or the woman he wanted to share it with.

His brow’s knit. Date and times were muddled and confused. That time in his life hadn’t been something Johnathon had wanted to remember and so, he hadn’t. He’d thrown the information away. Like so many other things from that time. Trying dredge all that up now, details of specific events on specific days, was like trying to remember what you had for breakfast six months ago. Damn near impossible.

“Is it..” His voice trailed off, unable to say it, for the fear that giving sound to his thoughts might somehow make it true.

Katherine rested a hand on the slope of her belly, “No.” Pale blue eyes met his, “It’s not.” Her hand moved from her own belly to Johnathon’s forearm, “As much as I might wish it otherwise.”

“Bit late for that.” Johnathon’s throat bobbed as he swallowed hard, the clenched muscles along his jaw standing out in stark relief.

“I know.”

Did she? Did she know what she had done to him? Really done. How much it had hurt? What it had cost him? How much effort it had taken to allow himself to be that venerable again. Johnathon doubted she did. He had wondered how seeing her again would make him feel. Now he knew. His feet unerringly moving away from her. His arm dropped, leaving Katherine’s hand floating in mid air for the shortest of seconds, before she lowered it sadly to her side.

All the disagreements came rushing back at him as Johnathon tried to remember. Tried to decide if she was telling the truth or not. They hadn’t been together now for well over six months and before that….

He searched the recesses of his memory. Diving into dark places that he’d rather forget. Arguments. Heartache. Loss. All the accusations she’d ever levelled at him. Over and over. The weeks and weeks of trying to sort things out. He started frantically trying to piece together so type of coherent timeline. He’d been away back then, for almost a month before that first question of doubt had been hurled at him. He’d been working on a case in conjunction with homeland security. Work records could confirm it, Johnathon supposed. If he really wanted to look. Could she really think so less of him that she would lie to him? About this? He searched her eyes, trying to find answers. Any hint that there might be some remaining shreds of trust they once shared. He thought she was telling the truth and basic maths seemed to indicate that she was. At least about the child’s parentage. The rest, Johnathon wasn’t so sure of. Not anymore.

Johnathon didn’t know whether to be relieved or angry or what at this latest revelation. It wasn’t that he’d been afraid about the prospect of becoming a father. Quite the opposite. Parenthood was something he hoped one day to experience. It was more about the permanent and unbreakable link he would be forced to have with any woman who was the mother of his children. Something, that
right now, would be all levels of difficult. More so, given the history of his relationship with Katherine and the fact that he was now deeply in love with another woman and looking to build his future with her. Johnathon honestly didn’t know how Caitriona would feel about something like this. At this point, he didn’t even know if they would have even survived the added stress a baby with another woman would place on what was still a relatively new relationship. For the moment, at least, it seemed that they dodged that particular bullet.

“When?” Johnathon asked quietly. Numbers didn’t lie and if this timeline was to be believed then it meant…

“After the first set of photos,” Katherine’s eyes dropped to the floor, a curious feeling of shame and relief washing through her. Shame at what she had done. Relief that Johnathon, the man she had loved, the man she would always love, finally knew the dreadful secret she’d hidden from him. A single, stupid, deeply regretful, retaliatory action that had, as fate would have it, lifelong, unavoidable, consequences. “Though,” Katherine gave a self-depreciating laugh, “I never realised I was pregnant until,” Her voice wavered, “we were close to the end.” The irony of the statement not lost on her given her occupation.

Johnathon turned away from her, gripping the solid rail with both hands, squeezing until his knuckles turned white. Eyes firmly fixed on the cityscape. An affair. Behind his back. Lied to his face. The entire time she had known, his mind screamed. She had known what she had done, how it would hurt him. She had known and then, with a deliberateness that Johnathon would never have believed her capable of, she had turned around and done exactly the thing she had spent weeks accusing him of.

“How did you…” His voice, strangled and tight. Johnathon didn’t know why he was bothering to ask. The answer was as plain as the nose on his face and the empty look on hers.

“Yes.” Came the quiet confirmation.

He had moved on. Left Katherine Carmichael in his past. Was in love with Caitriona. Thought he was learning to trust someone again. And yet, Kate’s admission left him feeling like he’d been kicked in the guts from a mule the size of small car. A heavy shroud of disappointment, betrayal and deception settled over him. Bringing with it, every dark thought and whispers of doubt that had ever crossed his mind. Could you ever really trust anyone? Or was it nothing more than an illusion. Lulling the unsuspecting. A nasty little trick devised to make fools of the intelligent and turn lovers into sworn enemies. Destroying anything it touched. Was trusting anyone, even Caitriona, a mistake? After all, he’d trusted Kate once. Thought he’d spend the rest of his life with her. Now, every single thing Johnathon thought he knew about the woman was turning out to be wrong. It had all been a lie.

Johnathon didn’t know what to believe anymore. Every truth now hidden beneath layer upon layer of doubt. A doubt that was growing exponentially with every passing second. Was this what trust really was? A weakness for someone to exploit when they were done? Maybe it was him. Something in him that wasn’t good enough to allow anything to be real. Something he did, over and over that always lead him to the same outcome.

“Johnathon…” Katherine called to him after a few moments of stretched silence. Tentatively she extended a hand, laying it on his forearm. The muscles beneath her palm hard as steel, taunt and tight with tension. “It didn’t mean anything.”

“No to you.”

Three simple words, far more effective than any argument Kate could have mounted, cut through the deafening silence. It was never supposed happen. Never supposed to be anything more than
stupid mistake. Never supposed to end this way. Never supposed to hurt this much. She let the responsibility of it all settle firmly across her shoulders. “I’m not telling you this to hurt you Johnathon.”

“Hurt me?” Deep blue eyes turned on her, snapping with a rare anger she had only seen reserved for others, never for her, “Am I supposed to be happy that you’re having a kid by way of an affair that happened long before we were done? Is that how you thought this would go Kate?”

“Of course I didn’t.” Her dark head shook, her hand tightening around his, “I never expected to see you again. Much less having to explain any of this.”

“Why tell me at all?” Johnathon pulled his arm back, jamming his hands into his pocket, “It obviously hasn’t been high on your list of priorities. So why bother Kate?” All the questions and secret fears chased each other across the back of his mind. His thoughts in utter freefall, frantically trying to latch onto anything that would help him make sense of it all. Like a confused animal suddenly cornered, doubt began to turn into defensive aggression. The fuse igniting deep in his belly. A low simmering anger, gradually gaining momentum.

“I wanted you to know.” Katherine took a small side step closer, “Wanted you to hear it from me.” She watched the rhythmic clenching of his jaw, a telltale sign of the understandable fury she could see building inside him. “When I saw you tonight, I didn’t want you to hear the news from someone else. You deserved that much at least.”

Too hurt, angry and confused to face her any longer, Johnathon turned his back and started to walk away. A task not as necessarily easy as it should have been. Ever moving, ever changing, tangled groups of guests meandered about, obstructed his path towards escape. All that he wanted to do was get away. From her. From them. From it all. He needed time to think. Sort things out in his own mind. Just like he’d always done.

When you didn’t understand something, you used your head.

Block out everything else.

And think.

Johnathon weaved between the groups, heading for a much quieter area through a large arch off to one side. Maybe Kate was right. This is what he deserved. Deserved it because he had failed to learn the lesson the universe was determined to teach him. Over and over and over again.

Trust no one.

In the end, all you get is lied to, accused or left.

Every single person he had ever truly cared about. Every single one of them, the dark side of his thoughts reminded him with each step. He didn’t know why he was surprised. What chance did a stranger have a success when even his own mother had left. Katherine was just the latest edition to the long list.

Who would be next?

Caitriona?

A hot wave of sickness rushed over him.

Holy fuck that was going to hurt.
“Johnathon...stop.” Katherine called after him. It wasn’t easy trying to keep up with Johnathon’s long strides. The simple task made even more difficult when you were carrying another human in your belly. Acutely aware of the situation surrounding them, Kate suspected the last thing anyone needed right now was for her to draw unwanted attention their way, but if she didn’t act now, the opportunity would be lost forever. “Johnathon!” She raised her voice a little, slightly out of breath. “Please stop.” She wasn’t sure if it was the slightly panicked tone in her voice or something else entirely but as they cleared the main ballroom, Johnathon’s feet finally stilled.

“Why Kate?” Came the question as he turned to address her, “What is there left to say?”

The look on his handsome face was a heartbreaking mix of anger and profound hurt. Kate had never hated herself quite so much as she did in that moment. Hated what she’d done. Hated what she was doing to him now. Hated that it had to be done. If she didn’t explain herself to Johnathon, Stephen would. Kate had known that from the second she had seen Johnathon arrive tonight. It was the only reason Stephen had wanted her to be here at all. The sudden, out of the blue, last minute notification that they were going attend a benefit dinner tonight was nothing more than a chance to use her to hurt Johnathon.

Again.

She had long since accepted that she had destroyed her own life, lost Johnathon’s love forever and was now eternally locked into an utterly miserable situation, but Kate was determined to do a set at many things right as she could.

“I’m sorry.” Even if he didn’t want to hear it or accept it, she needed to say it. Needed for him to hear. “I’m sorry Johnathon. If it makes any difference at all,” Kate continued, feeling her own heart breaking right along with his, “I’m sorry. For all of it. I was hurt and alone and he was there. It was once and I thought I had proof you had...”

Johnathon’s eyes clamped shut, “Don’t.”

“I need to you hear it John. I should never..”

Strong shoulders slumped, defeated. “Please don’t.” He whispered hoarsely.

Tears pricked the back of her eyes at the sound but she persisted, doubting she’d ever get the opportunity to speak face to face to him again. “Honey, please..” The term of endearment slipped from her lips before she had a chance to stop it, “John...” She corrected, stepping to his side, “You need..”

“Kate. I don’t need anything from you.” He said tiredly from behind closed eyes. He didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t want to argue. Not here. Not now. He needed to think. “Just go. Go back to Stephen.” Like sand thrown on a fire, despondent acceptance began to quell the anger inside.

“I can’t.”

“Kate...”

“No.” She waited, “Johnathon. Look at me.”

It took a long time and several deep breaths before his eyes slowly opened and turned her way. She’d been expecting it, but Kate still wasn’t prepared for the lost and devastatingly haunted look that coloured the deep pools of blue. It took everything she had to not breakdown. To not give in and let the world completely stop. “It wasn’t your fault.” She gripped his bicep, “Do you hear me John?” She squeezed the muscled flesh, “None of it was your fault.” A tear leaked from her eye
against her permission, “It was me. I believed something I shouldn’t of and now.” Her throat moved, swallowing rapidly, trying to get the words out before her resolve broke, “I’m pregnant. I betrayed you and I’m sorry.” The tears began to flow freely now, coursing down her cheeks, “I should have believed you. I should have trusted you. I didn’t. I have to live with that forever John, but please.” She met his gaze squarely, trying to stem the flow of tears and get the words out, “I can’t go back in there, to Stephen and try and do this, without knowing that you’ll be alright.” She stopped and gathered herself. Almost there now, her mind urged. Don’t stop. “I saw your face when you looked at her Johnathon.” That got a reaction. It was too early to tell if it would be a positive one or not. “Caitriona right?” She watched him carefully, “I want you to promise me that you won’t give up on that.” Kate ignored the stabbing pain of regret that almost made her heart stop. God she wished so many things were different, “Please honey,” Her words were becoming strangled with lurching urgency, “Please let her love you John. If not her than someone else, but promise me that you’ll let yourself trust in someone again.” The desperate plea spilled from her lips in halting fits and starts. There was still so much to she wanted to say him. So much she was sorry for. Her dark head bowed, determined strength giving way to overwhelming grief, “Please Johnathon. Please…” Her slender shoulder shook as dam broke, tears tracked down her cheeks, damping the fabric of her swollen abdomen in round thick splotches.

As angry as he had been, as hurt, confused and unsure as he was, Johnathon defied any man with a single shred of humanity in them, to be able stand there and let a woman cry like that without doing something. He couldn’t leave her like this. It just wouldn’t be right.

“Don’t cry.” A warm hand covered hers where it stubbornly gripped his forearm, a slow trickle of tears ran down the curve of her cheek. A sight for which there was no defence. A woman’s tears were never something that could be ignored. “It’ll be okay Kate.”

She looked up at him. No. It wasn’t okay. She’d seen the look in his eyes. Could still see it now. That look that signaled his complete defeat. A look so filled with doubt that she could almost taste it in the air between them. Doubting himself. Doubting anyone close to him. The look, his own personal harbinger of death. One that would doom any new relationship he tried.

Kate was neither blind nor stupid. She had recognised the entirely different look on Johnathon’s face, every time he’d been with the dark haired woman, the actress and his date for the evening. One glance was enough for her to know that if Johnathon and Caitriona weren’t already together romantically, it wouldn’t be long until they were.

She had lost him. She knew that as surely as the sun rose each and every painful day. Kate wasn’t trying to win him back or rekindle something that was nothing more than cold, dead ashes now. She had long since accepted that. This wasn’t about her. This was about Johnathon. It she didn’t handle this right, Johnathon would never trust anyone again. He would look for betrayal behind every action. Close part of himself off. Lock it away behind carefully constructed walls. Never let another living soul into that one small vulnerable part of himself. It had taken Katherine a long time and a great deal of relationship patience to finally get him to unlock that door. She didn’t know if she’d ever made it across the threshold, but at least he’d trusted her enough to have given her a glimpse inside. Kate knew she had no chance of ever being granted access to that again, but she didn’t want the next woman, whether that be Caitriona or someone else, to suffer the same fate. “I’m so very sorry Johnathon.” Kate sobbed softly.

“I know.” He brushed a heavy thick tear drop from the edge of her chin. Letting out a long breath, Johnathon gently lifted her chin until clouded blue eyes found his, “Everything will be alright Kate. Come on now, don’t cry.” He opened his arms, unable to keep from comforting someone he would always care about. Even if he was angry and disappointed in her actions. Even if he was confused and unsure of everything he thought was true. Johnathon still cared for her. Not the way
he once did, but enough to have his heart strings jangled at the sight of her tears.

“Promise me.” Katherine took a few deep halting breaths against the warmth of his strong chest, holding him tightly for what she knew would be the last time in her life, “Promise me you’ll let her love you. Promise me you’ll be happy.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be alright.” It was strange, he thought, as he rocked her gently, letting her slowly calm. It wasn’t that long ago when he would have given anything to have her in his arms again. A time when he would have felt at her hand the comfort that only a lover’s touch can bring. Not anymore, he reflected on an exhaled breath. That feeling reserved for someone else now.

“Say it.” Kate insisted, pulling back and looking up at him, “Promise me.” Johnathon had a distinct bone of literality that ran a mile deep. She knew that if you wanted a promise, you had better make sure you got it. Not a ‘yes’, or an ‘alright’ and never something as simple as an ‘okay’. Words needed to be precise and accurate where he was concerned. A promise needed to be just that. A promise. Once given. It was never, ever to be broken.

“I promise.”

Finally satisfied with his answer, and knowing it wouldn’t last long, she let herself just dissolve in the secure blanket that was Johnathon Chase. Maybe now wasn’t the ideal time, but Kate had always intended to tell him about the baby. Wanting him to know the truth about everything that had happened. That she believed him now. That she had been wrong. Finally placing the blame where it should always have been. On herself. There wasn’t much she could about it all now. Except protect him. Protecting him from Stephen. Protecting him from himself. From the past. From her. She’d had made her bed and Kate was preparing to lie it for the rest of her life. That was her punishment. Be damned if she was going to walk away without knowing that the man she would love until the day she died, wasn’t going to become another casualty of her poor decisions. She wanted Johnathon to find happiness and love and all that came with it. She wanted him to be free. His promise was a start and more than likely that last she would ever know of anything in his life.

“Will you do the same Katherine?” The deep sound of his voice vibrated through his chest into her hearing interrupting her private thoughts, “Promise me that you won’t settle for anything less?”

She closed her eyes, breathing in a lungful of his distinctive scent. You can do this, her mind chanted. You have to say it. He won’t accept it unless you do. Mentally squaring her shoulders, she straightened and took one single step away. Out of his arms, out of the safe security, leaving the one place Kate truly wanted to be. The last ties between them slowly unraveled, like the loose strands on a woolen jumper, worried at until the delicate stitches gave way. Irreparably severed. The two of them now nothing more than one time friends greeting each other at a benefit dinner. A veritable ocean of regret separating their two lives.

“I promise.” She lied, unable to meet his eyes, wiping away the last of her tears with the back of her hand. Tonight there would be more. Too many to count, in the quiet depths of night. Katherine would cry for the man she’d lost, cry for the son she was carrying and cry for all that lay in between.

Cry until she ran out of tears.

Alone.

“Kate?” Blue eyes looked down at her, somber and serious, “Do you love him?”
Truth or lie, her mind debated.

Silence. Answering him was too difficult. Difficult and pointless. No lie would ever be able to cover this painful truth.

“You don’t have to stay with him.” Johnathon sighed, “Just because he’s the father. Kate, you don’t have to stay.” His blond head shook slightly, “If you’re worried about money or raising this child by yourself then don’t be.”

If only he knew, her mind sounded. Knew just how far down this rabbit hole she had fallen. There was no way out for her. She could no more leave Stephen than fly to the moon. There was too much at stake. Her child for one. Johnathon for another. “Are you offering up child minding services?” Kate tried to dredge up a smile, her soul slowly cracking, shattering like the ice covering a lake in the spring, the splinters sharp and painful.

“Not sure I’d make much of a baby sitter.” One side of his mouth quirked into a half grin. The grin Kate had once adored, “There’s always Jackson for jobs like that.”

“Oh good god.”

Johnathon smiled at her reaction, entirely typical and predictable, “Will you at least keep it mind?” He sobered, “Please?”

“No.” She shook her head, locking the image of his smile away in her mind’s eye, “I’m not letting Jackson near my children. Sorry.”

“Kate..”

Humour would only distract him for so long. “I’ll think about what you’ve said..” Katherine rested a hand on her protruding stomach, “Things are complicated but I promise, I’ll think about it.” For the second time that night, Katherine Carmichael knowingly told a lie. There was nothing to think about. There were some bells that couldn’t be silenced and some problems for which there was no solution.

This, was one of them.

The hand on her stomach jumped a little as small, well placed foot, kicked out. Probably in protestation to her being on her feet for this long. Kate smoothed her hand back and forth, trying to settle the miniature being inside.

“You should sit or even better head home and rest?” Johnathon nodded towards the main ballroom and the endless array of tables and chairs there. Groups were already starting to break up, the evening all but over.

“I thought I was the medical professional?” Kate delayed. She knew she should let him go. The longer he was here with her the more painful it would be when she had to say goodbye. That one last time. “He’ll settle in a moment.” Kate said, wincing as another kick landed directly on her kidney.

“He?” Johnathon raised an eyebrow at her, “Thought you always said you wouldn’t want to know until the actual birth.”

“I did.”

“Ah.” Johnathon read between the lines. But Stephen didn’t. It made him dislike the man even
more, if that was humanly possible. Not that there was anything wrong with knowing the sex of your baby before hand. If that was how you wanted it, then more power to you. It was entirely that Stephen clearly hadn’t given any consideration as to what Kate had wanted. That didn’t sit well with Johnathon. Not now. Not ever. “At least you know what colour to paint everything I guess.” His nose screwed up, “None of that sickly yellow that is supposed to be neutral.”

“You never did like yellow.” She gave a small laugh, “Blue was always your colour.”

“But not…”

“Light blue. I know.”

A small silence fell. God, what she wouldn’t give to have him back. Any deal. Any devil. Name it and she would make it. Anything to get the couple they were before it all went to hell back. Wishing would never make it so.

Nothing would.

“You should get back in there.” She looked towards the room, desperately trying to keep her emotions under control. Her eyes lifted to his. “Stephen will come looking for me soon. And I’m sure your date will be wondering where you’ve gotten to.”

“Mmm.” He agreed quietly, eyes flicking over the crowd and not finding any trace of Caitriona. “She knows I’m here somewhere. She’ll find me eventually.” Johnathon took a breath, “Kate?” He decided to try one last time, “ You don’t have to stay with him if it’s not what you want. You know that right?”

What I want is for you to stay, her mind yelled. I want you to tell me you love me and that you’ll stay. That you forgive me. Take me home. Lay down with me. Make love to me. Have this child with me. Make everything alright. “I’ll be fine.” She reassured him, lying for the third time, “Stephen should be almost ready to leave and this one,” She rubbed a slow circle on her swollen belly, “He’ll settle in a bit.” She rocked her head towards the busy ballroom, “Go on. I’ll be fine.”

Johnathon slowly nodded, as if considering his options. He started to move but then stopped and turned, “Kate..” Eyes locking with hers, “About Caitriona.” The soft pools of blue regained the gentle glint of certainty, “She and I..” A sad, knowing smile crossed Katherine’s face as she remained silent and let Johnathon get the words out that she knew he needed. A promise was one thing, believing it was another. That only came from within and Katherine knew the tall man well enough to know he had to get there on his own. “We’re together and…” He trailed off.

“You love her.” Saying it hurt and yet at the same time, the words gave Katherine some small sliver of hope that she was doing the right thing.

“Yes.” Steady blue eyes found hers, “I do. And I’ll keep my promise. But Kate, I can’t just walk away from you. Not unless you tell me that you’re going to be okay.” The words deliberately chosen to reflect her own earlier request. “I can’t walk away without knowing that and Caitriona wouldn’t want me to either.”

“John..”

“Katherine. You wanted a promise and I’ve given it. Now.” He interjected, “You promise me. And this time mean it.” Came the soft warning. “Whatever it is. “ He eyed her directly, “Whatever is going on that you don’t want to tell me about, at least promise me,” He stopped, the worry turning his blue eyes almost grey, “Promise me you’re going to be alright.”
“Please don’t ask that of me.” Her voice wobbled, her eyes misting. She had lied more times tonight than in her entire life. What would one more hurt? And yet, she couldn’t do it. Couldn’t tell him she was going to be alright when, deep in her heart, Kate knew she would never be alright again.

“Why?” Johnathon studied her face and reached for her hand, “What is going on Kate?” Intelligent eyes flicked back and forth, trying to read the hidden book written there. “Whatever it is. Let me help you.”

“You can’t.” She closed her eyes, shutting him out. Her resolve was weakening with every offer he made. “You need to go.” Her dark head rocked back and forth, “I want you to go Johnathon.” She squeezed his hand, “Please.”

“Listen to me.” He tried again, “Just because we are over, doesn’t mean I can just turn my back on you. If you’re in trouble Kate, let me help. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t.” She moved their hands to her swollen belly, letting him feel the small innocent life moving restlessly inside her. A small foot kicking against his palm. “It’s not just me now.” She looked at him desperately, urging him to understand.

“And is Stephen Cross really the best for him? For you?”

“Johnathon...” Her eyes slid closed, “He’s the father. He has a role to play in raising this child.”

“So? You’re not the first woman to fall pregnant when they least expected it.” He slowly moved his hand to cover hers, “Don’t ask me to believe that you think, after everything that man has done, when you don’t love him Kate, that his home is the best place for you and for the baby. I refuse to accept that. I know you and this isn’t like you. So, I’ll ask you again, tell me what’s really going on here Katherine.”

“I can’t John. Alright?” Her eyes shifted from his, widening as she saw a lone figure stalking across the room towards them. Time was up. This was it. Momentary panic set in. “Keep your promise Johnathon.” She said quickly, stepping to one side and giving Johnathon an open and straight forward path back the ballroom and to the woman how held his future in her palms. “Go on.”

“You have options Kate. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

Yes, she thought sadly, it does.

“Well, well, well,” The footsteps were slowly getting closer, “Look what the cat, or should I say model, come bit part actress, dragged in.” Stephen’s voice called across the empty space.

Before Katherine knew what was happening, Johnathon started to move, spinning on his heel, long strides rapidly closing the distance between himself the owner of the voice

“Oh..fuck…,” Kate murmured, laying both a protective and settling hand on her belly, “I hope you don’t inherit that temper from your father.” She murmured to the unborn child in her belly, then sighed loudly and set off towards to two men who were now inevitably on an unavoidable collision course.

Hands curled into strong fists, tucked tight against his thighs as he stalking towards Stephen with deadly intent. In one smooth motion a strong hand wrapped around the oncoming man’s arm, momentum and sheer force of will, pulling them both to a halt. To anyone watching, it looked as if the two were merely standing together, discussion some business deal or another. All very civilised
“You listen to me.” Johnathon yanked the dark haired man’s arm a little closer, “Whatever little scheme or deal you’ve cooked up that involves Katherine.” His voice lowered to a growl, “It stops now.”

Stephen tried to move, but the iron grip around his arm didn’t budge. Instead it tightened. Surprised green eyes flicked his way, “That bitch tell you..” The words were bitten off as a red hot pain raced up his arm. Clever fingers finding the debilitating pressure point near his elbow and contracting with unyielding determination.

“Call her that again and I’ll..”

“You’ll do what Chase?” Stephen fought for control, snarling back at the blond man, ignoring the pain and the danger that fairly radiated from Johnathon’s very being. “You going to do nothing and let me fuck your latest woman like I did the last one. She’d look good with my son inside her too don’t you think?” The dark haired business man half collapsed, pitching forward as the steel grip around his arm contracted further until his very bones creaked. Dark red streaks began to dart across the back of his eyes. For a moment Stephen thought the blonde haired man might well break his arm.

“Johnathon.” Katherine saw the tense coiling and knew her so called fiancée was about be on the receiving end of something far more serious than a harshly worded conversation. Blue eyes flicked momentarily her way as she stepped to stand behind him. “Don’t.”

Johnathon’s jaw clenched, his fist contracted. He wanted so badly to make Stephen eat the hateful words he so fond of spewing. “This isn’t the place.” Katherine said quietly. She was right and as much as he hated it, Johnathon was going to have to be the one to step back. He glanced from Stephen to Katherine and back again, then reluctantly released his grip and took a step back.

“You always were a coward Chase.” Stephen spat the words out on an uneven breath, knowing he could say whatever he liked and there was nothing Johnathon could do about it. He leaned towards Johnathon, “She was never yours. Just so you know. She was always going to be mine. Now, why don’t you run along to your little actress.” Stephen straightened, “Come with me Katherine. There is someone I wish you to meet before I take you,” He smirked darkly at Johnathon, “Home.” He extended is hand towards her.

Waiting.

The moment she had been avoiding had arrived.

This was right, her mind sounded. It has to be this way. It’s for the best. Taking a deep breath of composure, Kate turned, wrapped her arms around Johnathon’s shoulders. “Keep your promise Johnathon.” Knowing she would pay for it later, she placed a soft kiss on his cheek, “I love you.” Kate whispered. Then she stepped back, swallowed hard, folded her fingers around Stephens, refusing to look into a set of blue eyes she would only ever dream of now and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Happy reading everyone. See you in a few weeks. Take care and to each and everyone one of you, have a great week.
Next up Johnathon and Caitriona and some explaining

Cheers
Caitriona had finally managed to escape the endless parade of greetings and obligatory small talk of the various groups she’d encountered on her search for her elusive bed mate. It had taken far longer than it should have but, she let out a soft breath of relief, at least she could see the target of her search now. Johnathon was standing in a small area off to one side, speaking closely with a tall dark-haired man whose back was too her. Although, her eyes narrowed as she started to close the distance separating them, from the sour look on Johnathon’s face, the man her partner was currently conversing with should consider himself lucky to alive. Caitriona wondered, as she continued to weave and dodge across the room, slowly getting working her way to him, just what their conversation entailed that might have elicited such a response from Johnathon. Caitriona been worried about whatever Katherine Carmichael might say or do towards Johnathon and the aftereffects of any such exchange. It now seemed the woman wasn’t the only person at this damned dinner that Caitriona needed to be worried about. Her concern only grew as she circled the edge of a large floor to ceiling column that framed one of the and realised that the man conversing was in fact Stephen Cross.

“Shit.” She cursed softly, completely understanding why Johnathon looked like he was about to launch the dark-haired man through the nearest window. Apart from the fact the man was probably one of the most slimiest human beings Caitriona had ever met, Johnathon’s reaction was entirely par for the course when you suddenly found yourself face to face with the person said ex-partner was currently bumping hips on the regular with. Generally awkward and uncomfortable at the best of times, this, Caitriona reflected, it was made all the worse when the new someone in question was a sleazy asshole. A slight shiver rippled across her naked shoulders. Just thinking about the man made her skin crawl. What in name of all that is holy, would make a woman, any woman, turn to someone like that after being with someone like Johnathon. Even if Johnathon had been guilty of the disgusting behaviour Katherine had accused him of, there was no way this side of hell, Caitriona would have willingly run to a man like Stephen. And as someone who had a litany of extraordinarily questionable relationship choices decorating her past, that was saying something. If Katherine Carmichael had thrown Johnathon away for a man like Stephen Cross, then Caitriona had serious doubts as to the level of the woman’s intelligence. It would be like trading in a Rolls Royce for second hand bicycle that had one flat tyre and no seat. It just made no sense to Caitriona at all. While she knew firsthand that relationships had the potential to seriously cloud your mind, Caitriona had the sneaking feeling that there had to be more to this whole thing. Maybe it was time she had a little talk with Miss Katherine Carmichael. An opportunity for her to find out exactly what was what for herself. Not to mention the chance for Caitriona to firmly establish that if Katherine had any intentions of hurting her blond partner in any way shape or form, she had better think again. With any luck, she would either find Johnathon before Katherine did or be there with him when she did.

Caitriona was almost to the last archway that separated her from the mostly empty space now occupied by only Johnathon and Stephen, when her eyes caught the movement of the pregnant woman from earlier, striding across the floor. She was moving with surprising agility for someone so heavily pregnant and heading with definite purpose towards the two men. Caitriona’s eyes flicked from the heavily pregnant woman to Johnathon, to Stephen, and back again. Like the proverbial bolt of lightning that suddenly splits the still air of an approaching storm, the stunning realisation hit Caitriona with all the subtly and finesse of a fifty tonne truck.
Her eyes snapped back to Johnathon, her heart throbbing in her chest. The pregnant woman Caitriona had seen before the spilt wine incident was Katherine Carmichael. Each mental puzzle piece snapped into place with startling clarity.

No.

It had to be a mistake. Her dark head shook slightly, the inside filled with chaotic thoughts and far reaching conclusions. This couldn’t be right. She had to be putting two and two together and getting five. That had to be it. She had to have it wrong. Katherine couldn’t be….

A cold chill worked its way down her spine, instantly stilling her feet and forcing the breath from her lungs. Please no, Caitriona’s mind chanted, as the woman reached Johnathon’s side, please let me be wrong. Her heart skipped a painful beat as she saw those blue eyes of his, the same eyes she had stared into a very close distance this morning, turn directly to regard Katherine. In an instant Caitriona knew she wasn’t wrong. Katherine Carmichael was that woman. Pregnant. Right here. Right now. With Johnathon.

She was thankful for the close proximity of the stone pillar archway as the floor beneath her feet seemed to lurch and tilt. Christ. Far enough along in a pregnancy to mean… Her shaking hand reached for the solid stone of the arch, its surface cool to her touch. Her thoughts tangled and raced through her mind at break neck speed. Every ‘what if’ Caitriona ever had pushed and shoved their way to the forefront of each and every thought. What if this had been a mistake? What if the baby was his? What if Katherine wasn’t as completely out of the picture as she’d thought when it came to Johnathon’s heart? Round and round the questions tumbled, each one another stone flung at the fragile glass of their new relationship window.

Fine tendrils of fear and doubt began snaking through her veins as she pressed her fingers against the stone. As much as Caitriona wanted desperately to be wrong, the longer she watched, the more certain she became. She wasn’t wrong. She could feel it in the very pit of her stomach. She just knew. She tried to tell herself to calm down, to wait. Wait for Johnathon and some surety or explanation for what was happening. It could all still be a terrible misunderstanding, she tried to stop the almost irrational freefall, stubbornly reaching, trying to find anything to cling to, any sign of an optimistic hope that somehow, this wasn’t what she thought it was.

Watching in barely contained terror, Caitriona saw Johnathon take a slow step away from Stephen, his blond head turning towards Katherine, obviously listening to her as she spoke to him. For the first time in her life, Caitriona wished she could lip read. She was too far away to hear anything other than the muted crowd noise at her back and desperately wanted to know what the dark haired woman was saying to Johnathon. It was too late now, her mind warned, whatever damage Caitriona might have prevented by finding Johnathon and being with him, was, by now, completely and utterly moot. If Katherine had wanted to hurt him, there was nothing stopping her. Whatever her purpose for being here tonight, had already been fulfilled. All Caitriona could do was wait. Wait and watch. Watch Katherine Carmichael speak to the man Caitriona was in love with. Watch the look in Johnathon’s eyes change at her words, the apparent red hot ire of only moments ago now significantly tempered in the deep pools of blue. Watch as Katherine made the conscious choice to stand closer to Johnathon than to Stephen. Watch as she moved towards Johnathon and wrapped her arms around the same strong shoulders Caitriona herself had held onto as her body had arched beneath his in the quiet hours of the night before.
She almost had to turn away, unable to witness the close contact between what was and what is. Caitriona took some small comfort in the fact that Johnathon’s arms had remained by his side even as Katherine had held on to him for what seemed like an eternity. She swallowed hard against the wave of anxiety she could feel rising her chest as Katherine placed a single kiss on Johnathon’s cheek before taking Stephen’s hand and walking away.

“Please don’t,” Caitriona whispered aloud, “Please don’t go to her.” Caitriona’s heart thundered in her chest, seconds slowed to minutes as she watched and waited for Johnathon to react. He wouldn’t, the rational side of her thoughts tried to calm the rolling sea in her stomach. Johnathon wouldn’t let her down. He wouldn’t leave her. Not like this. Not for, she shot a dark look towards Katherine’s retreating form, not for her. Johnathon was different. He had to be. Not because Caitriona wanted him to be but because for once in her life, she needed him to be. She couldn’t go through that again. She wouldn’t.

Johnathon didn’t move for the longest time, except to slide both hands into his pockets, his blond brow furrowed in deep thought, his gaze tracking the couple as they walked away. Was he angry? No, Caitriona assessed. The tell-tale tension he usually showed in his posture was absent, his breathing, steady and calm. Far calmer than her own at the minute. Regret? No, she didn’t think so. Though regret was a tricky emotion. It had the uncomfortable habit of hitting you when you least expected it. It was a positive sign she supposed, taking in Johnathon’s quiet form, still standing alone, that he hadn’t taken off after the woman or begged to take her back. At least, he didn’t look like he tried to do that.

Caitriona took a halting steadying breath, mentally squaring her shoulders against the deep pain the next question might bring. Had the look on his face been... Had it been love? She could fight a lot of things, but there would be no coming back from that. No getting around it if Johnathon was still in love with Katherine.

Her eyes drifted shut, vividly recalling each and every detail of his handsome face as he’d stood beneath the warm spray of shower and told her what he’d felt. Caitriona knew how love looked on his face. She truly believed that. It had been there when they’d made love. It had been there when he’d looked at her with such desire that it had taken her breath away. It had been there when he’d held her in the quiet moments they shared together among the chaos that swirled around them. It had been there tonight, when she’d been nervous and afraid to speak in front of the crowd.

Overlaying the two imaged in her mind, she silently compared what she knew with the all too recent image burned onto the back of her eyes of Katherine leaning in and holding him. Of her kissing his cheek, of the look that had passed between them. Whether is was the result of pure wanting alone or something approaching the actual truth, Caitriona felt the wave of relief wash over. No, she breathed, leaning heavily against the pillar, whatever else it was, he hadn’t looked at Katherine with love. At least not the same love that Caitriona had seen shining in the back of his eyes and that, she swallowed slowly, meant everything. The one ‘what if’ that would have spelt the certain and undeniable end to her and Johnathon as a couple was shoved back. Firmly placed into the deep dark hole in the very back of her mind, hopefully to never, ever, see the light of day again.

There was still the pressing matter of the woman’s swollen stomach and the unspoken implication that it held within it. A baby. Potentially Johnathon’s for all Caitriona knew. She knew rough timelines of when Johnathon had last seen Katherine, but any discussion about more intimate details remained a mystery. Previous sexual encounters wasn’t generally a topic that most new couples willingly rushed to discuss and certainly not with the specificity needed to accurately determine the possible parentage of an unborn child. But Caitriona no longer felt the paralysing fear that they were hurtling towards of something that had only just begun. She knew she was probably over thinking things and more than likely verging on what the world would classify as
your garden variety typical hysterical over-reaction, but by god, try telling her stomach and her heart that. Or even her slightly shaking hands and unsteady legs. Over reaction or not, the feelings were about as real as they got. If the baby was Johnathon’s, what did that mean for her? For them? Johnathon wasn’t the type of man that would abandon his baby and Caitriona wasn’t sure she was ready to put herself through the hardship something like that would bring. Becoming a parent by association didn’t bother her, at least Caitriona didn’t imagine it would. This was all unchartered territory for her. Children had never been something she’d really thought about. Until now, she mused watching as Johnathon turned, putting the Stephen, Katherine, the crowd, all of it to his back and headed towards a bank of windows. Plenty of split families thrived under such circumstances. No, she thought, seeing Johnathon hands lift to rest on the wide window sill, his gaze settling over the lights of the city, a behaviour she was quickly learning was typical for her tall companion. The baby wouldn’t be the issue, at least not directly. Katherine would be the real issue. She would always be there. Regardless of how Johnathon felt towards Katherine, she would, by natural default, always need to be in their lives. Caitriona had been the third person in a relationship for far too many times too count and she knew she couldn’t do that again.

Her gaze shifted towards the problematic woman and her slimy fiancée. As if sensing it, Katherine Carmichael’s head turned, eyes lifting to meet to her own squarely. Caitriona didn’t really know what she had been expecting to see. A defiant look that screamed confrontation perhaps. Caitriona knew the look, had even given it on more than occasion. The one that women shot to one another that usually meant get prepared because they were coming for you and what was yours. Sometimes it was the smug look of satisfaction that they had already succeeded. The sad smile and gentle nod of acknowledgement Caitriona received instead, caught her entirely off guard. It wasn’t the satisfied smirk of victory or even the thinly veiled grimace of defeat but rather the haunted look of a woman resigned to a fate she had no other option than to accept.

For an instant, Caitriona felt a guilty pang of sorrow towards the woman who had tossed a stone into the placid water she’d been blissfully floating in with Johnathon. The thought hit her that it was possible that Katherine wasn’t the enemy she’d made of her in her mind. Maybe the woman was innocent of the charges, Caitriona was leveling at her but nevertheless, the quiet relationship calm she’d been happily building with Johnathon had definitely been disturbed. Intentionally or not, the ripples were rolling across the surface. Soundless and unstoppable. Caitriona had the distinct feeling that the magnitude of the ripples depended on what everyone, including herself, chose to do next.

Katherine, she surmised, would shortly leave with Stephen. Then of any further interaction with either Johnathon or herself for that matter, rapidly reducing. Katherine may well not be the enemy but Caitriona was just as convinced that she wasn’t quite a friend either. She turned her attention back to the broad dinner jacket clad back belonging to her lover, tucking anything further introspection into Katherine Carmichael and her motives firmly away for a later time. Right now, she was more concerned with the aftermath rather than the actions that caused them in the first place.

Johnathon hadn’t moved. He remained standing alone, strong hands gripping the sill of the window. Would he be willing to even tell her about the whole thing? Or would he hide it. Not even bother to tell her. Would their little meeting become first secret between them. If he would hide something like this from her, the devil grinning on her shoulder whispered, what else would he hide? She was less than impressed with herself for thinking that. Johnathon had never even given her the slightest indication that he couldn’t be trusted. Caitriona knew how Johnathon felt about that word and all that it meant. But how many times had she blindly believed the men in her past without question or hesitation that had lead to nothing but hurtful regrets and heartbreaking mistakes. What was the saying? Once bitten, twice shy. She’d been bitten far too many times to not be at least a little wary of situations like these where what she knew was hugely outnumbered by
what she didn’t. Caitriona took a deep breath and smoothed a shaking hand over the smooth fabric of her stomach. There was only one thing for it, she decided, pushing off the pillar and walking steadily across the mostly empty space towards Johnathon. Whatever was to happen, baby or no baby, the end or the beginning, Caitriona would rather just face it head on. There was no turning away. Nor ignoring it. Not from Johnathon or the rest of it.

“Hey,” She called softly as she drew level with him, letting the warm smile of recognition she got help calm the sickly rolling in her belly, “There you are,” Caitriona lifted her hand, sliding it down the length of his arm, the solid muscle beneath her grip a small reassurance, “I was beginning to think you’d disappeared on me.” She said as Johnathon turned to face her.

“Nah,” Came the casual reply, long fingers threading themselves between hers, “Just got a bit too rowdy in there for second.” He said with a slight shrug, idly playing with her hand, “Chairman decide to give you an early mark?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say early,” Caitriona watched his face carefully, “but yes, freedom at last. Not sure how long that will last for though.” The furrow in his brow was mostly gone, which was somewhat relieving and for a moment she thought things might not have been as bad as she had worried. Until she looked closer. There it was, tucked right there in the very back of Johnathon’s eyes. The unmistakeable sign of concerned worry. Part of her realised that worry might well be reaction of any sane person at the sight of someone willingly walking off with the likes of a person such as Stephen Cross, but the stretching silence and nervous fidgeting of his hand in hers only served to increase Caitriona’s growing anxiety. It continued to grow when his eyes refused to meet hers, instead, staying fixed on their linked hands, his fingers twisting the thin metallic band of a silver dress ring she had on, back and forth, finally straightening it before letting go of her hand entirely. Caitriona began preparing. This wasn’t going to be good. The short silence seemed to drag on. Seconds turning to minutes before he finally spoke.

“Kate Carmichael is here.”

She debated for a split second looking surprised but decided against it. If she expected the truth from him, it would be hypocritical of her to not at least grant him the same in return. “I know.”

Intense blue eyes lifted at the slight waver in her voice, “You knew?”

“Not exactly. Stephen Cross.” Caitriona explained, watching as Johnathon’s back immediately stiffened at the mere mention of the businessman’s name, “He introduced himself to me, or rather, I pushed my chair back without looking, and introductions were necessary. He mentioned his fiancée. Said her name was Doctor Katherine Carmichael.”

“If I know Stephen for the asshole he is,” Each word fairly dripped with repugnant distaste, “he probably took a lot of pleasure in telling you that. Did he also tell you Kate is pregnant?” Such a simple statement that was more confirmation at this point than news to Caitriona but still she found her mouth went dry, the very pulse of her heart began to pound somewhere in her throat as she waited for was to come next. “Almost 8 months.”

There it was.

8 months.

Far worse than Caitriona had suspected. She’d half expected it and still, it took the wind from her sails and shook the ground beneath her feet. “Is it….?” Her throat closed around the words as if it was unwilling to speak the words for fear of the answer they might bring.
“No,” His blond head shook as he took a half step towards her, “It’s not mine.”

Caitriona let out the breath she didn’t realise she’d been holding as his words brought a swell of emotion so powerful it almost took her to her knees. The utter relief she felt leaving her slightly lightheaded and unsteady on her feet.

“Easy there,” His voice rumbled as he turned, squarely placing his back the main room, his body becoming the privacy shield Caitriona needed as she fell into him, “Relax Caitriona.” He soothed, bracketing her waist with his hands and steadying her, “Probably should have lead with that huh?”

Her hands curled into the lapels of his jacket and leaned against him, breathing in the scent of him as the whooshing sound in her ears began to recede. Not quite able to form words yet, Caitriona nodded from behind closed eyes. She had managed to work herself into the quite the state and she needed to let her mind catch up with the adrenaline and god knew what other emotional chemicals were running through her body.

“Sorry.” He said softly and gently kissed her forehead, slowly rocking her as she rested against him, “If it makes it any better, I had about the same reaction myself until I figured a few things out.”

She let herself float in the quiet togetherness for a few moments. The world around her slowly righting itself. The worst it was over now. Whatever else was to come, they might have a chance at beating. “Are you sure Johnathon?” She let her head drop to rest against his neck. Caitriona didn’t want to call the woman a liar outright, but at this point, she wasn’t sure she’d trust a single thing when it came to Katherine, much less so if Stephen was also involved.

“If Kate is being honest about how far she is along, then I’m definitely sure.”

“And if she’s not?”

“Possible but still pretty unlikely. We only….” Caitriona felt his hesitation and knew where this was going. Johnathon let out a soft sigh, “We were only together once after, well,” One shoulder lifted in a half shrug, “After everything and that was toward the end so…” Caitriona had always realised that Johnathon and Katherine would have been sleeping together and that all this had happened a long time before she’d even met Johnathon, but she’d be lying to herself if the thought them together didn’t smart just the same.

“No. She did her lying a long time ago.” He gave her a soft resigned smile that did nothing to hide the hurt of betrayal in his eyes, “Turns out someone was sleeping around, it just wasn’t me.” Any feelings of sorrow Caitriona might have felt towards Katherine extinguished as quickly as a lit match in a windy day. “She has no reason to lie about this. If she was going to tell a lie, I’d expect her to tell me it was mine when it wasn’t. Not the opposite.”

Johnathon was right. While Caitriona would never have even dreamed of attempting it, she knew it was a strategy had been tried many, many times before. If you wanted to keep said man in your life, tell him you’re pregnant with his child and let his sense of obligation and responsibility do the rest. If Katherine really wanted to Johnathon back, really wanted to trap him, then, without question, a baby would do it. Lying at this point, did seem to be counterproductive to Katherine’s cause when it came to any chance at keeping Johnathon Chase in her world. Letting Johnathon off the hook so readily all pointed towards Katherine being truthful.
Caitriona took a slow steadying breath, the anxiety of the situation gradually draining away with the soft security of she found in the close comfort of him and the reasonable logic behind his words. Just the fact that Johnathon didn’t seem too overly concerned about questions of paternity was helping her feel considerably better about the situation. She let out a soft sigh as strong hands settled in the small of her back, she decided to trust in that. In him. If there came a time when she couldn’t or didn’t trust in it any longer, then she’d deal with that she supposed, but for now, the storm had at least eased. Eased but not completely cleared.

“Johnathon?” Caitriona asked, nuzzling the warm surface of his neck, feeling the steady throb of his pulse point beating just beneath the skin, “Are you worried about her?” She pulled back enough to meet his gaze, “Worried about her being with him I mean?”

“A bit.” His brow creased, “I get the feeling Stephen being here tonight has nothing do with child cancer support and everything to do with Katherine and us. Kate refused to tell me anything, but something is definitely going on. I don’t know if it’s some messed plan involving the baby and Katherine or what. Can’t quite put my finger on it, but whatever it is, I’d bet my bottom dollar on that asshole being at the centre of it.”

Even Caitriona had to admit that the odds of Stephen and Katherine just happening to be at the one benefit dinner Johnathon attends with her, was more than slightly coincidental. “He’s quite the man.” A shiver of disgust skittered down her neck, “Does he actually think that I or any woman for that matter would find his sleazy behaviour is at all attractive?”

Define sleazy?” Blue eyes narrowed as the insinuation of her description worked its way through Johnathon’s mind, “Do I need to go and teach him to keep his hands to himself?”

“Easy there tiger.” Caitriona smiled, tapping of flat of her palms against his lapels, “It wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle.” Caitriona realised that Johnathon was probably itching for an excuse, any excuse he could find to put Stephen in his place, she couldn’t deny the warm feeling the thought of him wanting to defend her sent through her. “Can’t say I was unhappy when our friendly chairman appeared and roped me into more meet and greet duties.” She waited a moment, privately debating if she wanted to open this next can of worms given that they’d only just stabilised the ship. She’d come this far and now it was clear things weren’t as bad as Caitriona thought so she might as well keep at it. “Johnathon, this isn’t,” Caitriona paused, choosing her words carefully, “this isn’t Katherine trying to relive the past is it? With you I mean.” She would never have admitted to anyone else other than herself, but she would take Johnathon worrying about Stephen and his antics towards women any day, over the prospect of her blonde lover having any residual feelings towards Kate and or her child.

“No.” Came the instant answer, “Be futile even if she was, but no, she’d not trying anything like that.” He smiled softly, “She did ask me to let you love me though.”

Caitriona was absolutely flabbergasted. Of all the possible responses, that one hadn’t crossed her mind in the slightest. She’d been expecting a challenge of the ‘I want you back” variety, or the obligation trap guilt trip. Anything but this. Katherine had to know how Johnathon felt about promises and giving his word. Christ, Caitriona had only been with Johnathon a relatively short time and she’d immediately realised the solemn commitment the word promise meant to her tall
lover. By asking to him promise, Katherine must realise she would be scuttling any plans she might have had to somehow get Johnathon back into her bed.

Ever.

“Caitriona?” His voice drew her back as surely as if he’d thrown a rope around her, “Would you like to know a secret?” Deep blue eyes locked with hers as she nodded up at him, “The whole time Kate was talking to me, all I wanted was to come find you. It doesn’t matter what Kate or anyone else could say to me.” He lifted a hand and gently rested a palm against her cheek, “I’m always going to choose you.” Long fingers tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, “Not because of a promise made or anything like that either,” His voice dropped to the sultry whisper that Caitriona was developing an extraordinary fondness for, “but because I want you. I want us. It’s always going to be you Caitriona. I didn’t need to promise to let you love me. I already do.” One side of his mouth twitched into a soft smile, “For as long as you’ll let me that is.”

After everything that had happened tonight, how could he have possibly known how desperately she had needed to hear this.

Caitriona lifted a hand to slowly trace the outline of his smile with a lone fingertip and ignored the prickling of tears in the back of her eyes. “Careful what you wish for Mr Chase,” A lone tear escaped her eye and trickled down her cheek, “That could be a very long time you know.”

“Only if I’m lucky.” The pad of his thumb moved back and forth, softly brushing the tear away.

“Luck is not a factor.” She murmured, tilting her head towards his and softly kissing him. Pregnancy, fears about the strength of their relationship, uncertainty about who Johnathon might chose, all the what if’s and the maybe’s, faded away like mist in the morning sun. She longed to wrap her own arms around him, but despite the press control measure in place, Caitriona wasn’t going to tempt fate any more than she already was. Instead she gripped his sides and pressed her lower body against him as tightly as she could. “Johnathon?” She asked against his lips, feeling herself falling into the soft pools of blue watching her and suddenly wanting nothing more than to just be alone with him. To feel him. To feel them. “Can you please take me home?”

“Always Caitriona.” He rested his forehead against her and pulled her close, “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter was held back a week. I had a bit of trouble with some parts of it but we got there in the end! Originally I was taking this chapter in another direction but I changed it because I think I needed reminding that often things are never as bad as we think they are and that the storm will pass. Eventually.

See you in two weeks everyone and thanks for reading! Have a good week everyone and take care.

Cheers

Next up : One hotel room, two people and no interruptions.
“I can’t thank you enough Caitriona.” The elderly chairman was saying as they exited the lift into the hallway of their assigned floor. Due to a series of unfortunate events which included their hosts’ driver suddenly becoming ill, a double booking of cars and a co-incidence that simply had to be observed to believe real, namely that the chairman and his wife happened to be staying at the Four Seasons and on the very same floor as Caitriona, though thankfully their rooms were on opposite sides of the hotel, any chance for quiet intimate car ride to the hotel had been dashed. Their solitude in the back of the car traded for the peace of mind of not leaving the elderly chairman of WCC and his even more elderly wife waiting for two hours or more for another car to be arranged. It made sense to share the car, Caitriona supposed, since they were all going to the same hotel. Made sense and was possibly the right thing to do, but it was a real pain the ass never the less.

“Oh yes,” His wife chimed in, the conversation meant for Caitriona even though the older woman’s eyes were laser locked in Johnathon’s direction, who was standing rather oblivious to the attention, quietly beside her, “We’ve never raised this much before in one evening.” She positively beamed, “You simply must come again next year.”

“Yes, yes.” The chairman picked up the ball and ran with it, “We would love to have your support again next year.”

Caitriona smiled politely and wrapped a hand around Johnathon’s upper arm, leaning into him, “I would love to be here, but it does depend on filming. If you send me through the details when it gets closer, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Wonderful!” He thrilled, rocking on his heels and looking like he’d just won the lottery, “I’ll inform the organising committee tomorrow.” He turned to his wife, “Come my dear, we best let these young ones be one their way.” He stuck out a hand towards Johnathon, “Good to meet you Johnathon.”

“You as well.” Johnathon shook the older man’s hand obligingly, “Thankyou for letting me gate crash. It was a great evening.” He smiled charmingly at the older woman, ignoring the raised eyebrow from the beautiful companion by his side. A reaction he felt rather than saw.

“Until next time Johnathon.” She gave him a shy smile, then turned to Caitriona, “He’s a good one.” The old woman whispered conspiratorially, giving Caitriona a wink of approval.

“I know.” Caitriona gave a small laugh, “I think I’ll keep him.”

“If you don’t dear, I will.” The older woman grinned then straightened, “Goodnight to you both.” She waved, taking her husband’s hand and turning. With the careful steps of someone well past their younger days, the pair began making their way to their room. Silence and solitude finally descending as the couple disappeared around the corner.

“I do believe,” Caitriona rested her head against on the strong arm her hand was wrapped around, “We are finally alone.”

“Sshhh.” Johnathon murmured with a sideways glace, “Don’t jinx it.”
Much like their older counterparts, they turned began walking towards Caitriona’s suite. “I’m glad that’s over.” She sighed, slipping an arm under Johnathon’s unbuttoned dinner jacket and winding it around his waist, privately enjoying feeling the warmth of the skin soaking through the material of his shirt.

“You and I both.” Johnathon’s arm lifted and wrapped around her slender shoulders.

“Socialising is hard work.” She happily snuggled against his side, their steps automatically syncing with each other as they continued down the hallway.

“Damn straight.” Johnathon’s deep voice rumbled down through her hearing, “Thought that chairman was about ready to adopt you into his family, he spent that much time with you.” Blue eyes twinkled in the low light, “Either that or he has a crush on you. I haven’t decided which yet.”

“Me?” Caitriona squeezed his side playfully, “I’m not the one his wife spent all night making eyes at, thankyou very much.”

The arm around her shoulder tightened, “Apart from the fact that I was already with the most beautiful woman in the entire room,” His handsome face screwed into a grimace, “his wife is old enough to be my grandmother Caitriona.”

“Age is no barrier.” She chuckled, “Or so they say.”

“I would love to know who the ‘they’ are that come up with these things.” Johnathon shook his head, “Because I’ve got to say, most of time, ‘they’ really don’t have any idea.”

“Weellll,” She drawled, nudging him with her hip as they came to a halt in front of her hotel door, “We all can’t be cradle snatchers like you, you know.”

It was Johnathon's turn to laugh, “Cradle snatching?” He looked at her from beneath his brow, “I’m what?” A hand presented itself waiting for the hotel card, “four months older than you?”

“Yes.” Caitriona grinned, retrieving the card from her clutch, snapping the clasp closed and dropping the card into his upturned palm, “Probably closer to three if you want to get technical. Still cradle snatching.”

“Is that right?” Johnathon waited for the lock light to show solid green before he pushed the handle down, shouldering the door and holding it open until Caitriona passed in front of him.

“Yes,” She said with a grin, spinning around and offering her hand to him as she started walking slowly backwards, “Lucky aren’t you that apparently I have a thing for older men.”

“Ohhh, so now the truth comes out.” Long fingers threaded between hers, Johnathon swiftly closing the distance between them, catching her as they made it to the small living area opposite the bedroom, “I knew there was something going between you and the very attentive Chairman.”

“My secret is out.” Caitriona mocked, dropping her purse onto the low coffee table before turning, slipping her arms around Johnathon’s neck and leaning against him, “How will you ever forgive me?” She lightly scratched the back of his neck, thoroughly enjoying the comfortable interaction and the feeling of being alone with him after hours and hours of having literally been surrounded by 500 people, not to mention the emotional upheaval of the last hour or so.

“Hmmmm. Not sure.” Large hands slipped around her waist, gently pulling her closer, “I’ll have to think about that.”
“Oh really?” Caitriona let her fingers idly toy with the short strands of hair along the back of his skull, “Is there nothing I can do to redeem myself?”

“Well,” The shoulders beneath her arms gave a small playful shrug, “I wouldn’t say nothing..” He leaned in, tightening his grip around her waist and letting his chest press against hers, “I’m sure there is some..” Before he had a chance to finish the sentence, warm lips covered his, kissing him long and deep before gently sucking on his lower lip, drawing the kiss to a slow close. Caitriona's hips pressed forward as she arched her back, deliberately leaning away from him, just enough to she could eye him directly, one dark eyebrow neatly arched in a silent question.

“Oh, fine.” Johnathon whispered, resting his forehead against hers, “Redeemed.” He felt the quiet laugh run through her, the soft sound warming him from the inside out.

“Apart from the obvious,” Caitriona asked softly, gripping the dark material of his jacket lapels and sliding the edges over the point of his shoulders. “Tonight wasn’t as bad as you thought it would be was it?”

“It definitely had its moments,” Johnathon stood very still, quietly watching her, letting his arms fall back to his side as slim fingers took hold of the end of his sleeves, tugging at them until his jacket fell to the floor in a heap. There was something in the soft lilt of her voice and the touch of her body leaning against him that immediately set every sensual nerve in his body standing to attention and then some.

“And what moments were those?” Blue eyes lifted to his, her palms steadily tracking up his body, sliding up from his navel, flowing over the slight ridge of his upper chest.

“Oh well, you know,” The very air around them began to still as if the world was suddenly holding its breath in silent anticipation, “This one’s not turning out too badly.”

Caitriona hooked her fingers in the back of his collar, her thumbs to levering the stiff material up. Despite the fact there were things they would probably need to talk about and things she knew they’d need to deal with, or perhaps because of them, right now the only thing she wanted was Johnathon. Wanted to hear him. Wanted to see him. Wanted to touch him. Wanted to feel the tingle of intimate connection flooding through her blood and her bones. Her voice dropped a register, “Only this moment?” It was a wanting that went further than the heady sexuality of it all. This was a need that she felt so acutely it almost hurt not to have it. She needed to feel him. To feel them.

“There may have been,” The hands around her waist shifted, Johnathon’s touch trailing over the smooth surface of her belly and up over the swell of her breast until two fingers slowly twisted and wrapped themselves in the thin material of her shawl, “one or two other moments I guess...”

“One or two?”

“Mmm.” The material was gently pulled, the silky fabric caressing the surface of her naked shoulders. Her heart started to beat double time at the sexual energy flowing between them as easily as water from a tap. With a flick of Johnathon's wrist her shawl joined his discarded jacket on the floor.

“Sorry you said yes?” Caitriona breathed, her fingers beginning to worry at the ends of Johnathon’s tie, tugging them until the knot released.

“Never.” The tie was pulled from around his neck with a soft rasp, before fluttering to the floor.

“Are you sure about that?” Caitriona rested her hands on the ridge of his broad shoulders, feeling
the subtle shift of muscle beneath the warm skin as he moved, “I’m sure there was more than one
time tonight when the inside of the hotel room was looking pretty darn good.” She started to trace
the outline of the white collar with the tip of one finger.

“The hotel room?” His throat bobbed as he swallowed, watching her Caitriona’s slow and
deliberate movements, “Depends really.”

“Is that right?” Slipping her fingers between the skin of his throat and stiff material of his collar,
she deftly pressed a small button through its hole, liberating the collar from its confinement, the
ends coming free with a soft click. “Depends on what Johnathon?”

“Very …you know, important things.” Every cell in Johnathon's body was urging him to do what
he’d wanted to do the moment he’d seen Caitriona standing in that doorway before they’d even left
for the benefit. What he wanted to do whenever he was around her. In short, Caitriona got to him.
In every gentle touch. In every soft word and whisper. In every look. She just got to him. If she
kept going the way she was right now, it was going to become very obvious just how much she got
to him and exactly what it was that he wanted to do with her. That was alright, Johnathon tried to
refocus his thoughts, two could play at this game.

“Important things?” A slim hand slipped under the fold of his shirt near his collarbone and began
working its way down his chest, forcing the next button through its hole. It was becoming harder
and harder to keep her thoughts on anything other than feel of Johnathon’s body pressing against
her’s and the naked skin that was oh so close. The warm tingle in her belly growing stronger with
every passing moment. “Such as?”

“Such as,” Johnathon blinked slowly then curled his hands around the waist in front of him,
splaying his fingers out, “Are you in said hotel room Caitriona?” His touch worked its way up,
skimming over her rib cage, the leading edge of his thumbs, barely brushing the underside of her
breasts with the rise and fall of each uneven breath.

“No.” She swallowed heavily, trying to concentrate while her body fairly screamed at her. Another
button on his shirt came loose, the heat of his taunt belly skin warming the back of hands, “I am
not.” Caitriona didn’t dare look up into those deep blue eyes of his. Not yet. Too much clothing
still separated her from her goal. Though, she had to admit, the urgency of said task was increasing
exponentially with every thundering heartbeat. A gentle tug the folds of Johnathon’s shirt, finally
pulled the tails of the material free, the edges now hanging over the top of his pants. Caitriona’s
fingers gripped the metal buckle of his belt, “I am still at the benefit dinner.” A soft click of metal
on metal sounded as she released Johnathon’s belt buckle, her arm extending, pulling the leather
smoothly through the loops, “More than likely being introduced to one boring business man after
another. Unfortunately.” The belt joined its compatriots on the floor, the buckle hitting the floor
with the muted thud.

“That sounds like a terrible situation Caitriona.” Her back arched towards him as long fingers
snaked up the ridge of her spine, the strong body she craved all but wrapping around her. “I’d do
something about that if I were you.” His warm breath tickled the thin wisps of hair on the side of
her neck.

Her eyes drifted closed, the intoxicating scent of him filling her senses, her chest rising and falling
rapidly. “What would you suggest?” Caitriona knew she losing this little battle. Knew it and
couldn’t have cared less.

“Hmmmm, let’s see..” The sound of his deep voice was so close it fairly vibrated against her
skin, “I hear hotel rooms are a good option apparently.” The small tab on her dress zipper began to
move, the soft sound loud in the charged stillness.
“I heard …” She swallowed heavily on an uneven breath, “the usefulness of hotel rooms depends on one or two things.” Going by feel alone, she gripped the waist band of Johnathon’s pants, steadily working on the button until it too stubbornly surrendered.

“Like what Caitriona?” One hand slipped beneath the now open edge of her dress until his palm rested against the naked skin of her lower back, strong fingers drifting over the curve of her backside.

A set of very blue eyes blinked open and slowly lifted to his, “Are you in said hotel room Johnathon?”

“No.” He said seriously, lowering his mouth to hers. “I am not.” A soft almost chast kiss brushed across her lips, before his focus shifted, slowly, deliberately nibbling their way along the slope of her neck. His hands drawing an invisible a path up her spine. If Caitriona had found concentrating difficult before, it was now downright impossible. The soft touch of his mouth on her heated skin worked its way back, ending up hovering tantalizingly close to hers as he spoke, “I’m still at the benefit dinner, trying to get to the attention the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life.”

“Good answer.” Caitriona breathed against his mouth, curling her hands around his shoulders.

“I thought so.” His mouth took her, kissing her long and deep, stealing any further words or thought. Leaving nothing but the unbridled desire. His tongue found hers, both of them falling deeper into each other. Tasting, sucking, breathing into kiss after kiss. Fingers tangled in his hair. Now that she had him, there was no way Caitriona was letting him go. Their bodies so close she could feel the rapid rise and fall of his chest against her skin. “God Caitriona,” Johnathon murmured, the taste and touch of her flooding into every sinew and fibre of his being. A soft groan of deep wanting sounded his throat. “I want you.”

The soft words hit her deep in belly. “Then take me.” Caitriona panted between kisses, their mouths barely separating long enough to get the words out. “Get rid of this.” She frantically pawed at Johnathon’s undone shirt, pushing it over his shoulders and down his arms, fingers fumbling with the linked cuffs, the metal finally giving way and landing on the floor with dull thud. Caitriona leaned back, allowing skilled hands just enough space to rid her body from the confines of her dress. The need to feel naked skin against naked skin was almost overwhelming. Mouths unerringly found each other, desperately wanting more. Soft sighs and moans drifted from her mouth to his as fingertips roamed over her back, her sides, leaving a trail of fire that glowed red hot. Caitriona hands slipped beneath the undone waist band of Johnathon’s pants, sliding over the smooth skin of his backside. Her wrists pushed the fabric both underwear and pants down as she went. Gravity greatly aiding in her endeavour.

“Bed?” Johnathon murmured against her mouth, now so lost in the feel of her that anything other than one word was too much to articulate.

“Here.” Caitriona could feel Johnathon hard and wanting, the rigid length of him pressing against her thigh, the few moments it would take for them to make it to the bed seemed like an eternity. She felt the edge the low coffee table touch the back of her now naked legs as Johnathon walked them both back a step. With one sweep of his arm, the magazine and wooden fruit bowl toppled from its surface, the contents scattering in different directions across the floor. With a gentle contraction of muscles arms, Caitriona found herself lifted and carefully lowered onto the now empty wooden table, the hard surface cool against her heated naked skin. Her head fell back as large hands planted themselves beside her, Johnathon’s body lifting, hovering over hers. Warm lips starting to kiss down her neck, along her collarbone, circling each nipple the slow stroke of his tongue. “Need a ..” His chest heaved, blue eyes almost violet with shear desire.
“No.” Caitriona reached for him, “Clutch.” Her head tilted, looking over her shoulder as she lifted her hips and shimmying out of her underwear, hoping her purse hadn’t been sent to dwell on the floor with the rest of their clothing.

Johnathon reached over her, his body so enticingly close that Caitriona gave serious consideration to sliding a hand between them and putting him where she wanted him so desperately to be. Protection and the sensibilities of reality be damned. She had never been so glad to hear the tell tale tearing of foil in all her life. Johnathon rocked back onto his knees, Caitriona’s thighs willingly opening as his hips settled between them. Large hands slipped beneath her backside, lifting her closer until the heated tip of him resting against her entrance, her own body slick with intimate need. Blue eyes met blue. The unspoken question burning right there in the back of deep pools of ocean blue. The question, the one Caitriona had the feeling Johnathon would always need ask her, wasn’t one that of want nor of desire. Those answers were to be found in every movement and touch between them. This question remained one of quiet, respectful permission. A question Caitriona knew without a single shadow of a doubt, that even now, with Johnathon between her legs as she lay completely open to him, even with his blood up and racing on complete sexual overload, if she answered with a no or a stop or even the merest hint that she was uncomfortable, that he would stop. Whether it was a part of his nature or a product of his upbringing, Caitriona wasn’t sure, but either way, she found the notion deeply comforting and just one more thing that she utterly adored about the man that Johnathon appeared to be.

Lifting a hand and curling it around his neck, Caitriona held his gaze directly, letting the answer show clearly in her eyes. She wanted this. Wanted him. Wanted them. Johnathon’s blonde head lowered until his lips rested against hers, a long draw out sigh spilling from both their mouths as in one smooth slow movement, Johnathon slid home.

The slow fire they had been building all night quickly erupted, the heat racing through muscle, nerve and bone as together they started to move. Elbows bent, hands bracing on the flat surface of the table, Johnathon’s hips moved against hers. The connection between them deepening with each steady thrust. Caitriona’s long legs wrapped around him, tucking them over the back of his thighs, her body moving sinuously with him, drawing him into her, the full hard length of him filling her. Sighs and moans became as frequent as the pounding of the hearts in their chests as together they pushed, rubbed and moved against each other. Each slick slide in and out of her sent wave after wave of pure unbridled pleasure racing through her, pushing her closer and closer to the edge. Caitriona buried her face against Johnathon’s skin as the hot wave of release began building in the very depths of her centre, losing herself in the very feel of him. Wanting to feel him deep inside her until there was nothing left to give. Feeling it in every movement of the muscled body beneath her hands, in the warmth of his rapid breath against her skin, in the silky smooth hardness that filled her with exquisite precision over and over with every quickening thrust of his hips. Feeling it everything that was Johnathon, in everything that had become them. Biceps tensed as he lifted, blue eyes locking with hers as their bodies moved faster together, both of them falling headlong in the urgent rush towards the cliff.

“John...” Caitriona urged softly, knowing the edge was right there, felt her body coiling and tensing in readiness for the release she knew would come and completely powerless to stop. She barely had time to suck in one last hurried breath before her body arched up towards him, “Johnathon.” Her hands gripped his back, fingers contracting, digging into the strong muscles along his shoulder blades, her toes pointing, her thighs tensing. Every muscle in her willing body tightened around him until that one smooth deep thrust sent them hurtling over the edge. All Caitriona could do was hold on as the orgasm rushed through her, racing through her blood like a torrent down a dry creek bed, rippling through every nerve, every bone, every fibre of her being, leaving her gasping for breath and floating in the warmth of the connected sense of togetherness she’d been craving for so long. She was vaguely aware of the comforting weight of Johnathon’s body as he gradually stilled.
and relaxed completely against her. “Mine?” She whispered softly against his lips, lifting a trembling hand and laying it against his cheek.

“Yours Caitriona.” His eyes unerringly found hers, kissing her softly on an uneven breath, his slightly damp forehead lowered and rested against hers, “Just yours.”

There had been moments during the evening when Caitriona had felt the ground shifting beneath her feet. Shaken by the threats of pregnancy, by nervous irrational fear and by the painful memories of their collective pasts. Here, in the quiet of connectedness of each other, feeling the rapid beat of Johnathon's heart thrumming against her ribs, the softness of his touch and the certainty that this was real, that this was right, the world and all its broken pieces, clicked solidly into place. The mended pieces locking so tightly together it was as if they had always meant to be that way.

Steady.

Secure.

Complete.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

Not an interruption in sight :) as promised. I have discovered that writing sex scenes is hard y'all. No pun intended. Words can be tricky little buggers and they were frustratingly non compliant this past couple of weeks but I think I've got them beat now.

Cheers and have a great week! You are all awesome!
Caitriona sat down on the edge of the bed and quietly toweled dry her long hair. When their bodies had finally cooled, it had become entirely apparent just how uncomfortable the coffee table was in terms of a love making surface. Johnathon had ended up, what looked to her, to be an extraordinarily, awkward position. Half kneeling, half laying on her, partially bracing himself so he didn’t completely squash her. It looked about as uncomfortable as they could get without getting overly creative. And worse, the resulting positioning hadn’t been at all conducive to the quiet post orgasmic snuggling that she suspected her blonde lover enjoyed as much as she did. It was, she reflected, just one more thing to add to the growing list of a thousand little things that Caitriona was discovering was wonderfully different when it came to Johnathon and this relationship they were building.

The lack of snuggle appropriate real estate had predictably prompted a swift change in location. The bed had been the logical next choice until Caitriona had mentioned to Johnathon that she needed to remove her makeup before they settled down for the night. The simple suggestion, with more than little encouragement from a certain one blonde haired detective, had then turned into an extended, long, hot shower. Which in turn, Caitriona smiled quietly, had lead to a series actions that had nothing to do with getting oneself clean and everything to do with slow, entirely satisfying, activities of a completely different nature. While Caitriona would have quite happily floated for the remainder of her natural life in the boneless sated bliss that had followed, the need for sleep had slowly but surely asserted itself.

Glancing over towards the clock, Caitriona grimaced at the lateness of the hour, the vivid red numbers confirming her suspicions. If they didn’t go to bed soon, or rather, to sleep soon, there would be little to no point in even trying. She had to get back on a plane to Glasgow by mid-morning and with less than a handful of hours left before dawn, they were rapidly approaching the point of no return. It wouldn’t be the first time, she’d gone without sleep and if there was ever a reason to make a sacrifice to the sleep gods, spending the night with Johnathon Chase was it.

Stifling a yawn, Caitriona stood and set one of the two provided pillows beside the bed stand then flicked the pre-turned down covers back. For the barest moment she debated the need for some type of clothing but, she turned, eyeing Johnathon through the open bedroom door supposedly hunting down their phones which were buried somewhere in the pile of discarded clothes, the single white bath towel he had wrapped low around his hips gave her a pretty good indication as to what Johnathon intended to wear to bed.

Smiling to herself, for the second time in as many minutes, Caitriona slipped off the soft material of the hotel robe, draping it over the arm of a nearby dressing chair. Spending what was left of night naked, pressed up against an equally naked and very attractive man seemed, like a pretty good idea to her. Sliding between the crisp clean sheets, the cool material quickly warming with her body heat, she turned on her side, tucked the covers under her arms and propped herself up on one elbow, privately observing the antics of the mighty phone hunter in the next room. Johnathon had dropped to his haunches and was currently surveying the dark corners beneath the long couch. Caitriona was sure she’d left her phone in her clutch and, as far as she could remember, Johnathon had slipped his phone into the inside pocket of his jacket. Judging by the haphazard mess of various clothing that now rested on the ever versatile coffee table, the search area had apparently needed to be expanded.
She watched appreciatively as the muscles in Johnathon’s broad back tensed and flexed as he leaned closer to the floor, reaching under the couch and fossicking out a slightly misshapen orange, before trying again. One by one the errant pieces of fruit and the accompanying bowl were set neatly back on the table. Caitriona was about to get out of bed and lend some assistance when she heard the soft muttered curse, “There you are you little bastard.” Johnathon disappeared from her sight completely for moment, the end of the bed and the angle she was laying at, blocking him from her view, before he re-emerged triumphantly wielding the dark case of his phone. Straightening, he gathered up the pile of the clothes and walked to the side of bed.

His side of the bed, Caitriona realised. She always tended to sleep on the left and Johnathon, she’d noticed, naturally gravitated to the right. She mentally made another addition to her list of things she’d happily discovered about him.

“One for you.” Johnathon said as he reached her then leaning over, he softly kissed her upturned face then deposited her phone onto the bed’s surface.

“And one for you.” Caitriona pulled him back for a second kiss before letting him go with a soft smile, “How on earth did your phone get all the way back there?” She twisted, plugging in the phone, making sure it was charging before setting it down on the wooden bedside table.

“I have no idea.” Johnathon dropped the elusive device onto his respective bedside table then set the remainder of their discarded clothing onto a chair, “Must have come out when my jacket hit the floor.” He dug around in the back pocket of his dress pants, fishing out his wallet before adding the pants to the pile on the chair.

“Mmm.” Caitriona agreed, rolling over to face him, “Didn’t crack the screen did it?”

“Nah.” Johnathon’s blonde head shook. He set the wallet down, hitching up one side of the towel that had started to slip, revealing the smooth cheek of his backside before he headed back out the bedroom door.

“Where are you going?” She asked after him, scowling at both at his disappearance and the inopportune towel correction.

“Just checking the door and turning out the lights. Won’t be long.”

“Better not be.” Caitriona mumbled, doing her part and turning out the light on her side of the bed before settling back down to wait. True to his word, it wouldn’t have been more than a few minutes before Johnathon reappeared, the smile returning to Caitriona’s face as the problematic towel was dropped unceremoniously on to the floor. “All safe?” She asked, privately admiring the male form the was Johnathon before he turned off the light, dousing the room in darkness.

“Yep.” The bed dipped slightly and a large warm body slid in beside her, “All safe and secure.” Caitriona lifted slightly, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder and snuggling tightly against his side with a long contented breath.

“That’s a big sigh,” One arm wrapped around her, then stilled to lay down the length of her naked back, “Good or bad?” Gentle fingertips began to trace slow idle patterns in the small of her back.

“Think you know the answer to that already.” Caitriona nuzzled his neck, inhaling a lungful of the scent that was uniquely him, “I’m really glad I got on that plane Johnathon.” She said quietly, sliding a leg across his muscled thigh.

Soft lips kissed her forehead, “That makes two of us.” The hand on her back moved, long fingers
combing through her hair, “My turn this weekend. Or will you be filming?”

Her eyes drifted closed at his touch, “Scheduled to be finished late Friday night.” Caitriona laid an arm across his stomach, slowly tracing the outline of one rib, “Could change if there is a technical issue or something.”

“Either way, sounds like plan. I can always wait and work there if anything happens.”

“There? By there do you mean at home?” Caitriona nestled closer, reveling in how comfortable it felt to be wrapped around this particular human pillow, “Because let me tell you, don’t you even think about getting a hotel Mister.”

“You sure about that?” His blond head tilted towards her, his hand trialing down her back, returning to settle in the small of her back, “Don’t want to invade your space.”

“Invade my space?” Caitriona let out a soft snort and angled her head to look up at him, “I think you’ve already invaded my space,” She flashed him a cheeky smile, “Several times in fact. And if you’re wondering, my space is completely,” She placed a soft kiss on his lips, “and utterly,” Lips nibbled their way along his jaw, “Yours to invade whenever you want.” She returned to his mouth, resting her forehead against his and gazing into his eyes at very short distance, “Will you please come and stay with me Johnathon?”

Blue eyes sparked in the dim light, “Wellll,” He let out an exaggerated sigh,”if I must..” His head lifted, mouth covering hers, kissing her slowly in a thoroughly intimate way that had less to do with sexual desire and more to do with the quiet deep connection that was developing between them.

“You must.” A soft sound of pleasure hummed deep in her throat, “God, you seriously must.” She let the feeling of satisfied peace settle over her like a warm blanket on a cold night as the kiss drew to a slow close and she settled back against his side, “Not a chairman, a dinner or ex-partner in sight, I promise.”

“In that case, I’m in.” The fingers resting on her back resumed their gentle tracing of slow circular patterns, “Sorry you had to deal with that last part.”

“I’m not.” Caitriona said quietly, idly stroking her fingers back and forth, feeling the soft tickle of the sporadic patches of fine hair that smattered his chest brush against her fingertips, “I’m sorry you got publicly blindsided, but I’m not sorry that I was there. Even if I did have a slight panic attack at the prospect of what a baby might mean for us.” The hand on her back slowed, but didn’t still, “Not the actual baby part.” Caitriona explained, “Quite partial to those really, but the Kate part…” Her voice trailed off a moment, as she mentally gathered herself. Thinking about something and keeping those thoughts to yourself was one thing, verbalising it, was entirely something else. “I know it’s selfish of me,” She continued, "I know it is, but,” She took a breath and blew it out, “A baby would mean you’d always be connected to her. A living reminder of something that you and her share. Something you would only ever share with her. I know we’re not the first couple in the history of the world to face this,” Her palm splayed out across warm skin of his breast, feeling the soft thud of his heart, beating steadily beneath the surface, “It just spooked me for a moment, I guess. I really hope she’s telling the truth about all this.”

“Mmm.” Johnathon was quiet then for a long series of moments, “I would be lying if I said the news didn’t set me on my ass for a second or two.” His deep voice vibrated against her cheek, “Even if my timelines are out, even if I’m not remember right and all other facts aside, I think that if the baby was mine, Kate, one, would admit it, particularly now and two, airing all this in public is completely out of character for her. Quietly, with as little fuss as possible, is more her style. The fact that Stephen is telling everyone and anyone who breathes that he’s the father, is almost as
good as a paternity test.”

“Do you think she’s had one done?” Caitriona had been wondering about that very thing. Seemed to her, if she was in Katherine’s shoes, a test would have been the first thing she’d have done. Not being sure about the who is the father of the baby you had growing inside you for nine months, wouldn’t exactly make for an easy time.

“I’m betting she has.” There was something in the tone of Johnathon’s voice that made Caitriona lift her head and meet his gaze. Not quite definite certainty but about as close to it as you could get. She could almost see the cogs turning inside that intelligent mind of his. He didn’t think the baby was his but he wasn’t taking this at face value either. Johnathon was, after all, in the business of investigating people and things that had been hidden from the light of day. He spent hours and hours hunting down information to help people he barely knew.

“Are you going to look for it?” Caitriona had very little doubt, with something this personal, that Johnathon wouldn’t at least look. And what was more, she wanted him to look. Wanted that solid undeniable proof of parentage. A paternity test would do that in one neat little package.

“Yes.” Blue eyes studied hers, “It’s not strictly by the rules. Nothing illegal but just…” His brow knit, the conflict darting back forth across the surface of those pools of blue as thoughts of necessity wrestled with that strong sense of ingrained honourable morality that seemed to be part of Johnathon’s DNA, “It’s not something I really want to do. Considering it’s Kate’s business. It doesn’t feel right to go poking around in it, but,” He blew out a long breath, “I want to be sure. Especially with Stephen involved.”

“Stephen.” A shiver worked across Caitriona's shoulders at the mention of his name, “You should have seen the look of triumphant on his face when he was informing me about his pregnant fiancée, all the while hitting on me by the way.”

“I knew I should have smacked him in the mouth when I had the chance.” Johnathon grumbled, tightening his arm protectively around her, “If there is one thing you count on, it’s for Stephen to be a low down snake.”

While Caitriona didn’t know Stephen any further than their brief interaction at the dinner, the amount of pleasure the businessman had taken in telling Caitriona just enough information to set her mind reeling, seemed to indicate that Johnathon’s assessment of him was accurate. “Why on earth is Katherine with him?” Caitriona twined her leg around his, “I get that she is pregnant and everything but Jesus Johnathon…” She let out a long sigh as clever fingers released a particularly tight muscle in her lower back. Baby or not. To trade someone like the man Johnathon Chase was, for a man like Stephen Cross seemed completely insane to her.

“They have history.”

History. She thought it a little strange when Johnathon didn't elaborate but decided not to push it. A past together would certainly classify as a reason, Caitriona supposed. It was always easier to run towards something you knew then to set out alone. Throw in being pregnant to boot and it could make a wealthy business seem like a decent prospect. Still, it would want to be something extraordinarily frigging decent to offset the negatives of putting up with a man like Stephen was proving himself to be. “Are you worried about Kate being with him?”

“A bit.” Came the quiet admission. ‘A bit’, Caitriona was learning, meant the exact opposite of a bit when it came to Johnathon speak. It was more than what she would classify as a lot and just a tiny bit less than a complete, full blown, ‘yes’. “I’m more worried for her, then about her. Something’s just not right about the whole thing.” His brows creased in studied thought,
“Something that goes deeper than her wanting to respect the fact that he’s the father of that baby. I hope for her sake, she knows what’s she’s doing.”

Caitriona considered his response silently a moment. It was clear Johnathon still cared about the woman, but, Caitriona was about as certain as anyone on earth could be in situation like this, that caring was a far as this was ever going to go. When it would have been easy to lie, Johnathon had told her the truth. Without prompting, without a single utterance or inkling on her behalf, he’d simply told her the truth. Complete and immediate, instantly scuttling the insidious wondering’s of insecurity that would bubble to surface like scum rising on slowly heating pot on the stove, in the quiet moments when Caitriona would reflect, as she always did, on what she’d seen and heard. If he had hidden this from her, she knew her mind would have spiraled into a pit, filled with questions of the ilk such as if he is hiding this, what else is he hiding? Caitriona knew where thinking like that lead. A one way track to sleepless nights and mental turmoil that did no good to anyone, much less a growing relationship. Honesty, she marveled, soaking in the quiet comfort of Johnathon’s embrace, such a small, often elusive thing, but, oh so powerful. She wondered if the effect had been magnified for her, having spent a lifetime where honesty had been as rare as hens teeth. “Are you going to see her again?” It felt strange to ask and yet, Caitriona felt completely safe in doing so.

“No unless I need to.” Steady eyes met hers, “We’ll help her if she asks, but, unless there is a reason for us to be involved, I can’t really see our paths crossing again. She has her life and,” Johnathon brushed his nose against hers, “we have ours.”

We and us, Caitriona’s mind repeated, letting the simple security of that wrap around her. “When I first heard about all this tonight, a baby, Kate, all of it,” She offered very quietly, “I was terrified that I might not have been able to do this.”

“And now?” The tentative tone wavering just behind his words was unmistakable.

“And now I’ve realised that even if Kate is lying,” Caitriona lifted, sliding her body over his and laying a hand against his cheek and letting her thumb slowly stroke the skin she found there, “Even if the baby turns out to be yours,” She studied his eyes closely, “Then we’ll deal with that.” Her eyes locked with his, "So long as you’re in this with me, we’ll deal with it.” A silent promise passed unseen between them in the still air. It was a big leap of faith, for both of them and she knew it. But one, she truly believed she was ready to take. She couldn't speak for Johnathon but for her, something inside her had changed. Changed partly from the way Johnathon had reacted, changed partly from her own thoughts in processing her fears but that switch, the one deep inside her had been flipped. She was in this now. In it for the long haul. In it for the good, for the bad and everything in between. In it with him. Maybe she was in the grip of new relationship fever, where everything and anything seemed shiny, new and perfect, but that small quiet voice inside her kept whispering to her to trust in what she felt. And for the first time in her life, she made the conscious choice to believe it. Believe in it. Accept it. Trust in it. In him as much as in herself. “Together Johnathon.” She sucked in a long breath his mouth found hers, "We'll do this together." She murmured and fell into the long deep deep kiss, the soft touch of their bodies laying against each other, reigniting the fire deep in her belly.

Large hands wandered over her bare skin as Caitriona pressed off the bed, drawing her legs up and straddling him as the slow exploration of mouths, lips and tongues continued. Any thoughts of sleep dissolved like mist in the morning sun, replaced by the breathtaking need to melt into each other. To touch and taste. To connect. Her body slid against his, her hips already beginning to move, feeling Johnathon immediately begin to respond, hardening beneath her. Chest heaving, Caitriona tore her mouth from his, bracing herself on one arm, she leaned across him, reaching for last foil packet resting on the bedside table. Her fingers had barely closed around it when she near leapt from the bed in startled shock. Her phone screen lit, showering the room in a sickly ghost
light, the loud ringtone assaulting the quiet of the still room, the accompanying vibration echoing through the wooden surface it rested on.

“Jesus CHRIST!” Caitriona let out a strangled curse, one part surprise and three parts frustration. It was almost three o’clock in the morning for fucks sake! Even her sister wouldn’t be this inconsiderate.

“It’s the room.” Johnathon’s head lolled back against the pillow, "Jinxed.” He blew out a long breath, “I think it needs a cleansing or something.”

“No fucking shit.” She growled, yanking the phone from the table, hesitating for a just a moment. The digits displayed on the screen identified the number as local, but not one that Caitriona recognised. Not family, not friends, not anyone that would have her unlisted number in the first place. Probably a nuisance call from some call centre or another that had unknowingly stumbled upon the number by pure random dumb luck. Dumb luck or not, Caitriona jammed a finger against the screen, declining the call, it was certainly fucking inconvenient. No sooner had she declined the call when the screen lit again with the same number. “Oh for fuck’s sake.” She was about to decline it again when a the soft tap of gentle fingers on her bent thigh stopped her. “What?”

“I think you better answer that.” Caitriona looked at him like he’d suddenly grown a third ear, “That number is NYPD’s central booking. Right here in Manhattan.”

Dark brows lifted almost to her hairline as she glanced from his handsome face to the phone and back again, “Central booking? As in arrested person central booking? That type of central booking?”

Johnathon nodded as the phone fell temporally silent before a third call came in, “Whoever it is only get’s three tries Caitriona. Answer it and if you don’t recognise the name, just hang up. It’s perfectly safe.” He settled his hands on her hips and waited as she finally accepted the call.

“Hello?” She asked tentatively, straightening to sit on her bent legs that still bracketed Johnathon’s body. She listened as a woman’s voice, though pleasant enough, clearly pre-recorded, promptly informed her that the call was in fact, from the exact location Johnathon had named. If that was enough of a shock, the real surprise came at the voice Caitriona did recognise sounded over the line.

Short, just the one syllable, the owner unmistakable. If she’d been in any doubt, the voice stating it's own name, would have removed it completely. “Oh holy fucking Christ,” Caitriona muttered, her jaw dropping. The pre-recorded voice returned, instructing her to press 1 to accept the call or to hang up to decline.

“Caitriona?” Johnathon asked, a small kernel of worry taking root in his belly as he watched her accept the call, “Who?”

She rested a hand on his chest and pressed the phone to her ear, her expression a curious mix of confusion, concern and thinly veiled anger, “Sam.”

Chapter End Notes

Thought these two needed to deal with the baby situation as best they could before they get separated again for a minute or two. It didn't feel right for them to sweep it
under the carpet so this chapter is my attempt at dealing with that. I do want to say sorry for being a bit tardy in releasing this. Time gets away when you least expect it! Hopefully the chapter won't be as far away.

Thanks again everyone for reading and for commenting. You all don't know how much I appreciate your thoughts and comments. Cheers everyone and have a great week.

Next Chapter : Visit from a jail bird and a small revelation on Johnathon's behalf before the dreaded deadline of filming.
Thanks Janmarie for your message. You will never know how much those simple words meant at a tough time.

Johnathon slid the gear stick forward, a dull thunk sounding as parking gear registered, the harsh florescent light casting a sickly white hue over everything inside. This was bad idea. He’d thought it then and nothing he’d heard in the intervening hour and half had changed his mind on the subject. Not in the slightest. The basic mechanics behind the scheme he got. Sam wanted someone to come down and bail him out immediately. Not so unusual. No sane person would willingly want to spend a minute longer than they had to in the city lock up. Sounds simple enough. What Johnathon didn’t agree with was the request that Caitriona be that person. Worse, Sam had specifically asked her to not involve managers, the studio or anyone else. Maintaining privacy was one thing. Stupid ignorance was another.

There was no way that something like was ever going to be kept silent. It was a matter of when, not if, employers, and by extension, the general public, found out about this type of thing. Johnathon had seen the charge sheet and none of it was good. All of it perfect fodder for the press and a nightmarish headache for an industry that lived and died with public opinion.

A simple police check on his laptop when he’d returned to his room for a change of clothing, had revealed just how much hell Sam had managed to raise in the handful of hours since their little elevator altercation. Johnathon had given some thought as to whether to tell Caitriona about what he’d discovered relating to Sam’s current predicament. His current thinking had landed on since it really wasn’t Johnathon’s news to spill, he’d decided to keep the details to himself. Even if he wanted to cheerfully strangle Caitriona’s problematic co-star, it seemed only right to let Sam tell whoever he wanted to in his own time.

None of that altered the fact that Johnathon thought bringing Caitriona downtown to bail Sam out, was a spectacularly bad suggestion. Bringing anyone, let alone a television celebrity of sorts, down to central booking to bail out another celebrity, an area, which incidentally had one of the highest concentration of surveillance cameras, all actively recording, and expecting it not to be sniffed out by the press, was just ridiculous.

Johnathon had expressed this view point to Caitriona and had offering his own proposal to her. If she really intended to do this, to bail Sam’s sorry ass out of jail, and every indication told Johnathon that was exactly what Caitriona was leaning towards, then would she at least let Johnathon help. He’d tried and failed, to convince his dark haired lover to stay in the safe anonymity of the hotel and let him go to Sam instead.

Caitriona had not only flat out said no, but the refusal had been stated in such a definite manner that the blonde man knew it was futile to keep travelling down that particular road. So, he had changed course slightly, offering to take Caitriona to the much less public and far more secured area usually reserved only for law enforcement and that she stay in the car, leaving the collection of Sam to him. Johnathon knew he would be able to walk into the complex and not one person would raise so
much as an eyebrow. After a few minutes of quiet pensive thought and a handful of questions, which Johnathon had answered truthfully, Caitriona had reluctantly agreed to his suggested plan B. Besides, she had explained, Sam was her problem and despite evidence to the contrary, she was determined to spend as much time with Johnathon as she could, even if it meant driving downtown to the city lock up. It was better than being apart. Johnathon couldn’t argue with that sentiment. He knew as well as Caitriona did that their time together was limited and the reality of her leaving to return to Scotland was beginning to assert itself in a real way. A prospect neither one of them was looking forward to.

Swiveling in his seat, Johnathon took in Caitriona’s quiet form as she sat, eyes scanning the brightly lit area specially marked for police use only. Closest to the non-descript admittance door, the space was primarily used to unload less than savoury criminal cargo from active patrol cars. Reaching across the centre console, Johnathon slowly threaded long fingers between Caitriona’s, her skin soft against his, “This is about as close as we’ll get tonight,” He said, referring to the parking spot they were currently occupying on the opposite side of the bay to the main doors. “Over there is reserved for incoming.” His thumb slowly stroked her skin, “Should be pretty quiet over here, but if anyone asks, tell them you’re with me and show them this.” He handed her one of his business cards, his company insignia emblazoned in the one corner along with his name and string of identification numbers that would put and immediate stop to anyone asking questions.

Caitriona nodded slowly, dropping the card into her lap, “Are you sure you want to do this?” Her eyes searched his, gently squeezing his hand, “You don’t have to.” Her gaze dropped, the apologetic tone in her voice unmistakable, “You shouldn’t have to do this.”

“If you really don’t want me to,” Johnathon said quietly, wondering if he’d over stepped without knowing it, “I won’t.”

“It’s not that.” Her dark head shook slightly, her fingers gently running over his, her eyes remaining downcast “I don’t want you to do this if it’s going to get you into any trouble.”

“Me? Trouble? Never.”

“I’m serious John. I don’t want you to put yourself in a position that could come back to bite just to help Sam out.”

“Don’t worry, I’d never let him do that.”

That made sense, Caitriona reflected silently. She’d already seen the signs of that honourable sense of responsibility in Johnathon’s actions. She really didn’t believe he would ever compromise his integrity for anyone, not Sam, possibly not even for someone he loved but hated that she was putting in the position just the same. “So what happens now?” She asked, reaching up to nervously toy with a small thread that had worked its way loose on one of Johnathon’s shirt buttons. In all honesty Caitriona had no idea how this all worked. She’d never been arrested. The closest she’d ever come was being pulled over when she was fifteen for driving without a licence. It had been on a back country road and the officer had been a friend of the family. She’d had gotten a warning and a stern talking to by her father, a far cry from the situation Sam now found himself in.

“He’ll go an arraignment and offer a plea.” Johnathon watched as slim fingers slowly pulled the errant thread, “Then, depending on the judge, he should get bail.”

“How long will that take?” She tried to pinch the thread between her nails, acutely aware that the longer Sam was under arrest, the greater the likelihood that this might not stay a conversation between just herself and Johnathon. The wolf that was the press was stalking them. Pacing just outside the door, waiting for the slightest glimpse inside her careful controlled private world.
“Depends on demand really and on what exactly he’s done. Usually at least eight hours. Though, from what you’re saying he might have already done all that and be at the bail stage.”

“How does he, or us, as the case may be, do the bail?” Slightly shaking fingers gave up on the thread and flattened to lay against the surface of Johnathon’s chest, the comforting warmth slowly soaking through the material of his shirt. “Credit card? Deposit? Bank cheque?”

“Bondsman usually.”

“Johnathon?” Caitriona could feel the soft beat of his heart, thrumming just below the surface of her hand, “I’m sorry.” Adrenaline, nerves, anger and worry were all conspiring to unravel every attempt she was making to not let the worse case scenarios and what ifs begin playing on repeat in her head. One of those what ifs included wondering how they were going to deal with all this. They being Johnathon. He was in law enforcement, not the entertainment industry. He wouldn't be used to this. It had the potential to effect them all, far greater than just the interruption of their intimate night together.

An arrest, or worse, a conviction, would be news. News meant press and that meant a microscope being pointed at her, the show, their families and anyone connected to them. Invasive and unrelenting. If Caitriona had thought the interrogation she’d received from her sister was painful, it would be nothing compared to the press shit storm that would rain down on them. Not to mention studio heads and executives. Johnathon didn’t sign up for this level of scrutiny. Caitriona felt an overwhelmingly guilty about that. Guilty that he would have to go through it because of his association with her. Guilty that she couldn’t stop it from happening. Guilty that she couldn’t protect him from it. Caitriona couldn’t help but wonder if, in time, Johnathon might decide it was all too much. That this, what they were doing together, wasn’t worth the privacy he would be forced to give up.

Tears stung the back of her eyes at the thought, “I'm really sorry you have to deal with this.” She scrubbed a hand across her face. Christ! She felt like screaming with utter frustration. If Sam had only …

“Caitriona?” Johnathon called softly. She looked up into a set of liquid ocean eyes, calm, patient and understanding. “Breathe.” He said with a ghost of a smile, “Just breathe.”

“Sorry.” She blinked, scattering a few errant tears and then took a slow deep breath, “I just…”

“I know.” Johnathon soothed, the pad of this thumb brushing away the droplets as they tracked down one cheek, “How about I,” Long fingers curled around her ear, “go see what your friend there has gotten himself into,” He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her lips, “And we take it from there?” He rested his forehead against hers, “You’ve nothing to be sorry for. I’m right here with you because I want to be.” One edge of his mouth curled into a grin, “Kinda partial to spending time with you. Jails, sisters, dinners, ex-girlfriends, baby scares,” The grin broadened, “Showers, beds, coffee tables, doesn’t really matter what happens, as long as you’re in it with me. So," He smiled softly, "How about it? You in?"

One day, Caitriona thought quietly, staring into those circles of deep blue, one day she might be able to figure out just what she good deed she had done that had convinced whatever universal cosmic power out there, to send this man into her life. Whatever it was, by Christ, Caitriona was thankful for it. “God yes.” She kissed him slowly. A fresh set of tears, happy ones this time, leaked from her eyes, “In. 100% in.”

“That’s what she said.” Johnathon smiled against her lips, kissing her back gently before reluctantly pulling away. “Let me go do this,” Gentle fingers brushed the last of her tears away,
“Then how about you and I continue this conversation... in bed?”

Caitriona nuzzled the palm of his hand, reveling in the steadying touch. “I like your thinking.”

“Only my thinking?”

She gave a soft chuckle and folded her fingers through his, “Smart ass.”

“Yep,” Blue eyes twinkled back at her, “But I’m your smart ass.” He flashed a stunning smile that immediately warmed Caitriona to the tips of her toes, shunting the anger and worry of all that was to come to the back of her mind. “Lock this after I get out yeah?” He reached for the door handle, “Be back in bit. Don’t go anywhere.”

Not likely, her mind sounded as she watched Johnathon’s long strides cover the distance between their car and the brightly lit solid door that marked the entrance to central booking.

Caitriona saw Johnathon turn, give her one last wink before he disappeared through the door and into a world that she imagined would be a foreign to her as the entertainment industry was to Johnathon. The old adage of opposites attracting appeared to be holding true in their case. Their worlds as different as night is to day. Their backgrounds distinctly diverse and yet, if early results were anything to go by, this was beginning to turn into something that might, for once, really be worth holding on to.

Johnathon hadn’t disappeared for more than a minute before tell-tale red and blue lights danced off the parking bay walls. A police cruiser followed, slowing to a stop in the designated section, disgorging two officers and eventually one very angry and very intoxicated woman, who was vocally expressing her objection at being subdued and was putting up a fight the likes of which Caitriona would not have expected from one so thoroughly and so clearly drunk, or high, or possible both.

At one point, the woman, to whom handcuffs seemingly made no difference at all, made a break for freedom. Caitriona jammed a finger down, triggering the central locking and unconsciously slid down lower in her seat. She needn’t have worried. The woman was quickly subdued again, this time with the use of a taser, no less than three additional officers arriving to lend assistance. The woman may have finally been contained, but the ordeal didn’t seem silence her verbal tirade. It continued with every step and scuffle, right up until the point, where with little to no warning, the woman’s stomach rebelled, showering her captors in a thick spray of putrid vomit.

“Jesus...” Caitriona grimaced, sincerely hoping that incidences like this were not the normal. Though the pragmatic side of her mind, told her she was probably wrong about that. She didn’t really know what the inside of a jail was like, but considering what she’d just witnessed, her imagination was filling in the available blanks.

A fresh wave of guilt washed over her. She was worried about the effect on her own life, that was true, but at least she was out here, a man she was in love with, seemingly committed to stand firmly with her.

Sam had no one.

Caitriona knew she had been his only call. The one person he had turned to. She was angry with Sam, frustrated beyond belief with him and the with the way he was choosing to deal with his life, but she’d never wanted him to be in a situation like this. One bad decision had the potential to spin so violently out of control in this business that it could easily end up costing Sam his career. With any luck this would all turn out to be fairly straight forward and everyone involved would get out
relatively unscathed.

A small voice inside her to get prepared for the worst.

Caitriona heard the voice, took a deep breath and waited.

Chapter End Notes

I know it's been a while. If you are still reading this story, thanks for hanging in. I WILL be posting again next week. It is written and ready to go. The only decision I have is whether to post Sam and Johnathon in the jail or Katherine Carmichael and the little issue developing in her world (post dinner wash up). Either way, one chapter will arrive next week.

Happy New Year to you all.

If you are in Australia right now and have been impacted by bushfire, please remember, we are with you. To all our fifies and emergency services out there, thank you and stay safe.

Cheers
Central booking was stuffed to the gills and threatening to overflow at any moment. By Johnathon’s rather conservative estimate, at least 30 people were awaiting initial processing, with another 20 or so already in the process of being admitted into the facility. Apparently Sam wasn’t the only one in the place who’d had themselves a very good time.

Luckily for Johnathon, simply presenting his credentials to the young clerk was all that was necessary for him to be ushered inside, behind the plexiglass to the secured area beyond.

“As I live and breathe,” A deep, booming voice sounded from within one of the offices that lined either side of the long hallway, “If it isn’t Johnathon Chase.” A large man appeared in the doorway of one office, a crisp white shirt stretched to breaking point over his large protruding stomach, “How the hell have you been?” A large hand slapped Johnathon’s shoulder, the older man’s face splitting into a wide smile, the edges of his mouth disappearing in the thick bushy beard, once black was now sprinkled with patches of stark grey and white.

“G’day Bryan.” Johnathon shook the man’s hand, “Can’t complain, so I won’t.” At 25 years Johnathon’s senior, Bryan Martinez had spent a lifetime working in law enforcement. He’d been a senior detective with the ATF for a good portion of that time, but had accepted a lesser position as supervisor of the city’s largest facility after a drug raid had gone bad and left him without his left leg from the knee down, “Bit early for you be on duty isn’t it?” Johnathon asked, referring to the pre-dawn hour, “Can’t imagine Sally will be happy about that?”

The older man let out a low chuckle, “She did say something along those lines, which I’m dang sure I'll pay for later, but you know how it goes. Work to be done, so that’s all there is too it.” The pair continued to walk along the hallway, “And how about the pretty woman of yours, Kate doing alright is she?”

“I’m sure she’s doing fine.” Johnathon answered amiably, “She’s living here, in your city now.”

“Is she then?” The elder detective was almost successful in hiding the tone of surprise in his voice, “Well, you know what I say, best city in the world right here. Now, what brings you down here at this fine hour? Case work?”

“Not quite.” Johnathon gave him five out of ten for the attempted recovery, appreciating the change of subject if nothing else, “Just after chasing some arrest details actually.”

“Oh?” That got the man’s attention, “Who’s the perp?”

“Scottish national. Visiting your fair city for the weekend I believe.”

The old man thought about a moment. Johnathon imagined him mentally flipping through a stack mugshots, scanning the night's intakes for the possible suspect, “Oh,” He said after a few seconds, the hint of an idea lighting his face, “Tall guy?” He motioned with his hands, “ dirty blonde? Dressed in his best like he was some type of Hollywood star?” He swiped an authorisation card through the locked door and tapped in a code before yanking on the handle.

“Sounds about right.” Johnathon followed the larger man through the doorway and they headed towards a bank of the spare computers, one of which Martinez perched in front of.
“Damned if I can remember the his name now, even though he was screaming the damn thing loud enough.”

“Sam Heughan.” Johnathon spelt the surname out as he snagged a nearby roller chair.

“What sort of spelling is that?” Came the grumbled comment, “Whatever happened to names that are actually spelt like they damned well sound.” Fat fingers typed in the name and in the blink of an eye a detailed list appeared on the backlight screen. Martinez let out a low whistle, “This guy had himself a good time in the old city last night. The trifecta, cars, drugs and sex.”

“Indeed.” Johnathon murmured. Not a single charge had been dropped from the initial arrest record that Johnathon had read at the hotel over an hour ago. Public intoxication, DUI. Three times the legal limit had registered at the road side test. Dangerous operation of a motor vehicle. The charge apparently relating to a single vehicle incident in which an R8 Quattro had failed to navigate the corner of a freeway on ramp and had hit a guard rail and lane divider. No injuries or casualties. Except the car, Johnathon noted, it looked to him to be a complete write off. Something Johnathon was sure Audi might have a little something to say about. If two charges and one crumpled car wasn’t bad enough, they’d conveniently left the more serious to dead last. Something told him, Caitriona is going to as surprised as he was, if not thoroughly shocked, when she learned of the extent of his charges.

Number four on the list detailed a classic case of resisting arrest. A charge Johnathon found not entirely out of character for Sam. Alcohol and arrests rarely went smoothly when combined and if the run in Johnathon had with Sam in the elevator earlier in the evening was any indication, Sam was already in the right frame of mind to swing first without thinking. Add some booze into the mix and it wasn’t a stretch to see how the charge eventuated.

Blue eyes continued to scan the remaining list of arrest details. The next charge did nothing to improve Sam’s situation. His companion, a young blonde woman. whose picture was displayed next to the lurid details of the evening’s events, had been in the car at the time of accident. She had been interviewed by police, where it had become apparent that she wasn’t just any companion, but was in fact one of the top earners at the city’s most exclusive escort agency. Escorting, as such, was not illegal and Sam wouldn’t be the first person to engage the services of an escort rather than go to an industry even alone. If that was all there had been to it, the charge may never have been laid. When officers began trying to reconstruct how the accident had occurred, whether by design or by a slip of the mind, the woman had divulged that Sam had offered the her a small amount of money to become more personally acquainted with certain parts of his anatomy as he was driving. Just like that, the escort had become a prostitute and Sam had been charged with solicitation.

The final charge, was, in Johnathon’s opinion, the most serious and it really began to make him wonder if there was something else, something far darker, causing Sam’s erratic behaviour. Possession of a prohibited substance. Not unusual for celebrity as much as any one else, Johnathon guessed, but for someone who was always raving on about whole foods and going to the gym, the idea of polluting your body with an illegal, seriously addictive substance, left Johnathon feeling some astonishment for just how far down this rabbit hole Sam seemed to have fallen. This was behaviour that was perilously close to that invisible fine line. The one that separated the stupid from the extraordinarily dangerous.

The confiscated material hadn’t revealed themselves to be any of the normal Hollywood type designer drugs, like cocaine or heroine. The small crystals in the bag that had been in Sam’s jacket pocket, had tested positive for methamphetamine. Personal use or not, it made no difference when you are dealing with illicit substances and the quantity had been enough for the arresting officers to justify the extra charge.
In one night, Sam Heughan was living up to every bad stereotype of a reckless celebrity completely out of control. It was a plus, Johnathon supposed, that Sam’s drug test had shown he hadn’t actually used the drugs, but Johnathon doubted that would make an ounce of difference when the press found out. Drugs were drugs and this, he sighed softly, was going to be a real pain the ass. For everyone.

“This son of gun was kicking up such a storm, yelling and carrying on about who he was, we had to put him a wet cell for a couple of hours before we could interview him he was so sauced.” Martinez commented as he swiveled on the chair to face Johnathon, casting a silent appraising eye the younger investigator.

“Trouble is right.” Johnathon lifted a finger and pointed at the screen, “The woman’s been bailed already?” Slightly unusual, he thought, for someone with a touch more value to the department than your normal street walker. Could always be something else going on behind the scenes that he wasn’t privy too. Informant maybe.

The chair creaked as the older man leaned closer to the screen, his eyes squinting to read the remaining case notes, “Looks like she caught a break from the judge. Represented by some pricey counsel. My bet,” He rocked back and forth on the chair, “Accepted a lesser for information. You know how it works.” He gave a bit of shrug, “So who is this guy anyway? Your perp? Sir Famous, according to him, but be damned if I recognise either the face or the name. The way he was spraying it around you’d thing he was the next big thing. Half expect him to jump over a couch or something.”

“Famous in his own mind.” Johnathon returned his attention to the screen, “He’s done some stuff for television. Just enough to be worth the press sticking their nose in where its not wanted and causing a bit of an issue.” Johnathon shook his head as he read the remaining case notes. Sam had refused legal representation, which was just plain stupid in Johnathon’s estimation. He had already appeared before the judge, plead guilty and had his bail set. $120,000. Less than Johnathon had expected, but high enough to ensure Sam returned in a month’s time for sentencing. “He still in a wet cell?” It was a fair bet that Sam in his current state combined with every thing the blonde man had read in the last ten minuted, Sam hadn’t managed to win himself any favours from the grizzled supervisor and knowing Martinez the way Johnathon did, the wet cells, the most uncomfortable, stinking place in whole complex would be Sam's home for as long as it took for the bail to be paid and probably then some.

“C12.” Martinez confirmed Johnathon’s suspicions. C12 was well known as the worst wet cell in the complex. The very last cell on the basement level. Cold, dank and with 30 years worth of god only knew what imbued into the unyielding concrete that made up its floor and walls. “Now,” The older man turned to squarely face Johnathon, a solemn look on his face, “You want to tell me why you’re here when I know for a damned fact, you could have found all this out on your own and a hell of a lot quicker than coming down here in the middle of the night?” Wizened grey eyes narrowed as they pinned him, “What’s the real story here?” He may have no longer been an active investigator, but time hadn’t dulled the old ex-detectives investigative mind. He knew when something didn’t quite fit and Johnathon Chase rolling up to central booking in the middle of the night for no specific reason was unusual to say the least. “You sure this isn't a case that crack team of yours is working on?”

“If only.” Johnathon said dryly. Life would be so much easier if this was just a case. One he could relegate to a pile of manila folders and just leave it until he was ready to deal with it. One that wouldn't have disturbed their evening and left Caitriona worried and alone in the car. One that wasn't going to cost a man his career if he a wasn't careful or, if he kept going, cost him something far greater. “Nothing that exciting. Just here to bail the idiot out.”
“Bail him out?” Thick peppery eyebrows lifted comically almost to his receding hairline, “You trying to tell me this twerp is a friend of yours?”

“Friend...no. Acquaintance. More friend of a friend.” Johnathon clarified, standing and returning the chair, “Trust me, if I didn’t need to be here, I wouldn’t be.”

Johnathon wasn’t sure his ex-colleague accepted the explanation in its entirety, but the old man gave a bit of a grunt before standing and together they started to walk towards another secured area where a younger officer began filling out a form with the relevant details in readiness for arranging the payment of bail. She handed the form to Johnathon and was about to launch into the standard speech that she recited a hundred times a day, every day, when the Martinez stopped her, “No need for that. He knows the drill.” He advised the younger woman with a soft smile, "He's one of us."

A few taps of a finger on his phone and his signature across the bottom of the form and within moments, money was transferred and one problematic co-star acquaintance, come friend of a friend, had his bail status changed from required, to secured.

“You sure about this?” The aged supervisor inquired, "You really want to trust that to a tosspot like this?” He gave Johnathon a sideways glance as they made their way down several flights of stairs towards the wet cells, so called because they could easily be cleaned with a hose. A practical consideration given the fact that most alcohol had the tendency want to leave the human body one way or the other, usually when it was least expected. “This friend of a friend isn’t going to leave you hanging is he? Internationals don’t have the best record in returning to show up for court dates. If he doesn’t show, well, you know what happens well enough.”

Johnathon did know. The bail would be forfeited, the money would be lost and an arrest warrant would be issued. Worse, skipping bail wouldn’t be taken lightly and any chance of Sam escaping without prison time would completely disappear. “It’ll be alright.” Johnathon assured the older man, "He’ll show. I’ll make sure of it.” If he was bailing the idiot out then he’d damn well make sure Sam fronted up to his responsibilities. Even if it meant Johnathon had to drag Sam’s sorry ass there himself.

They stopped in front of the designated cell, the one way glass panels revealing the occupancy of one. The prone body reclining on a rack along one wall lay unmoving. There was no doubting it was Sam. Clothing disheveled, shirt half undone, his jacket folded into a makeshift pillow. He was laying on his back, on what looked like the world’s most uncomfortable bed. The plastic covered mattress beneath him, barely an inch high, had compressed under his bulk to resemble something more like a sheet of cardboard rather than bedding.

“You want to have a little chat with your buddy there before we take him out?”

“As a matter of fact I would.” Johnathon turned his gaze back to the pathetic form behind the glass, “Do me a favour and lock this behind me and don’t let anyone intervene?”

“Ah…” One grey eyebrow lifted, “One of those chats is it?” Martinez reached forward and punched a number into the keypad, “Can’t say as it’s not warranted.” A harsh buzz sounding and the door unlocked, “When you’re ready, we’ll exit him with a full…” He tasted the word slowly, “review of video. As is mandated by law.” He gave Johnathon a knowing look, “Strangest damn thing lately, that video system has been playing up left, right and centre. Technical issues they are calling it.”

“Is that right?” Johnathon gave soft smile, "It's fine to leave running. He's not worth the kickback."

“I have to agree. Not worth the time you've wasted on him but," Wise eyes studied his, "John, you
don't want extra video of laying around if this fool is like you say, a press magnet. The arrest, we have to keep, you know that, but cell video has a 48hr turn over anyway. You've bailed him. I consider that video redundant. Particularly if I have your word that big mouth in there won’t get bitten by the public crusading, ligation against the department bug.”

Whatever was about to happen in the cell, Martinez wanted to make sure that there was no visual record of it, which Johnathon considered, wasn't a bad thing he guessed. A good idea, yes, given what he and Caitriona were concerned about happening post fact, but something about it, just didn't sit right with Johnathon. It wasn't illegal or even immoral, and he was sure plenty of officers did this and it probably happened more times than anyone would like to admit, but.......

"Let's take the chance for the 48 yeah?" Johnathon suggested, "Then, after that, as per policy, the footage can be overwritten if necessary." Johnathon turned back towards the cell, "And in the meantime, I'll take personal responsibility for him. He won't cause any trouble for you or the department. I guarantee it."

“Good enough for me.” Martinez pushed open the door, privately impressed with the younger man decision, "Good luck in there."

"Luck is not a factor." Johnathon murmured and stepped inside the cell.

Smelling like sweat and disinfectant with the undeniably undertone of vomit, the still air made his nose itch, the hinge giving a loud squeak he swung the door closed behind him. This was only going to go one of two ways. It would work or, bloodshot eyes cracked open to regard his with a silent rage clearly burning in their depths, it wouldn’t. Johnathon’s money was on the later. Here goes, Johnathon mentally sighed.

“Where’s Caitriona?” Came the husky voice, that sounded every bit as rough as it’s owner looked and probably felt. Bloodshot half lidded eyes looked up at Johnathon from beneath the arm Sam has cast over his face, the only protection from the harsh florescent lighting.

Johnathon waited a beat before answering, “She’s outside.” He eyed Sam directly, watching as he pulled himself upright, sitting on the edge of the bed, “She is trying to keep a low profile I would imagine.”

“Know a lot about that do you?” Sam snarked, grabbing his folded jacket, “With all your experience with what we do and all?”

Johnathon didn’t dignify the question with a response, merely crossed his arms over his chest and leaned casually against the door. A charged silence stretching between the two men. Johnathon was willing to put up with more than he ordinarily would do for Caitriona’s sake. However, sooner or later, Sam would either speak respectfully to him or learn to just shut the hell up. Johnathon didn’t really care which option came to pass.

“Has she posted my bail? I’ve had about enough of this place.” When Johnathon didn’t immediately answer, Sam shot him a look that, had it been a rifle, murder would have been added the current litany of charges on the Scotsman’s rap sheet. “Well? Has she?”

“I’m curious,” Came the response, several tense seconds later, “Why would your bail be Caitriona’s responsibility?” The tone of voice was alarmingly quiet.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sam pushed off the bench, a dark look crossing his features, “She’s my friend.”
“She is.” Blue eyes glinted dangerously, “I would not be here if she wasn’t.”

“Fucking hooray for you.” Hands clenched in anger at his sides, “How about you just fuck off back to where ever you came from. Send Caitriona in here. We were doing fine before you decided to show up and fuck up the world.”

He had a good mind to do just that. Walk away and leave this petulant child to throw his little tantrum in the stinking cell for a few more hours. It wouldn't have worried Johnathon in the least. For someone supposedly so personable, Sam Heughan sure could be an ass. “So let me get this straight Sam.” Johnathon’s posture remained frustratingly calm. He may as well have been reciting a grocery list, his voice low and completely devoid of any emotion. “You expect Caitriona to walk into Manhatten’s Central Police plaza and do what exactly?”

“She is fuck you out you dumb cunt.” Sam’s voice echoed off the walls, his neck reddening with every passing moment.

“Bail me the fuck out you dumb cunt.” Johnathon’s posture remained frustratingly calm. He may as well have been reciting a grocery list, his voice low and completely devoid of any emotion. “So let me get this straight Sam.” Johnathon’s posture remained frustratingly calm. He may as well have been reciting a grocery list, his voice low and completely devoid of any emotion. “You expect Caitriona to walk into Manhatten’s Central Police plaza and do what exactly?”

“She is fuck you out you dumb cunt.” Sam’s voice echoed off the walls, his neck reddening with every passing moment.

“Alright.” Johnathon said thoughtfully, “I see. And you want me to..?”

“FUCK OFF!”

“Alright.” Johnathon said matter of factly. Stunned surprise mixed with confusion chased each other across the co-star’s face like a mouse exercising on a wheel.

“What do you mean alright?”

“Alright.” Johnathon repeated, “If Caitriona tells me to fuck off,” He gave a nonchalant shrug, “I will.” Then his voice turned serious, darkening as if they were clouds from an approaching thunderstorm, “Until that happens,” long arms uncrossed themselves and hung ominously at his side, “If you don’t understand anything else because you’re too busy feeling sorry for yourself, you had better understand this.” Johnathon took one single solitary step towards Sam, his voice dripping with dangerous intent. “Your friend is sitting outside in a car, terrified out of her mind with worry over YOU. She’s doing all she can to keep you as this friend you keep telling everyone about, you fucking idiot. And this,” Johnathon motioned to their surroundings, “is what you leave her with? ” He waited a beat, the air crackling with tension. "A drunken call in the middle of the night and a demand to come down to a jail alone, where there are criminals, literally in every room, to bail your ass out because you couldn’t even get through one night without drinking yourself stupid and having an accident that could have fucking killed you and who knows who else. That how you treat your friends Sam?”

“Fuck you Chase.” Like a raging bull in a Spanish arena, Sam lowered his shoulder and charged at Johnathon, slamming into his body with impressive force and taking them both to the ground in a tangle of limbs. The blonde man's back to the ground, body blows rained down on Johnathon from above. Most missed. Some connected. One painfully striking with potent force into Johnathon’s side, some of the sting taken from it when Johnathon rolled to one side.

Twisting, pushing and using his legs as leverage, Johnathon surged up and shoved Sam’s bulk off him, springing to his feet in time to see his opponent slowly dragging himself off his knees. Johnathon had once read of ancient viking warriors who would ingest mushrooms to bring on a mindless blood rage. Staring at him from across the cell, Johnathon pretty sure Sam fitted that category right now. Way past the point vocalising actual words, Sam let out a low growl and stalked towards Johnathon, one muscled arm tensing with definite intent.

Some people never learn, Johnathon sighed silently and tensed, readying for the onslaught. The roundhouse swing that followed had been easy to anticipate. Instead of connecting with
Johnathon’s temple, the intended target, a sharp slap had sounded and Sam found his fist neatly captured, any forward movement immediately blocked. “I warned you earlier and I’m warning you now, for the last time.” Sam let out a small grunt as the fingers wrapped around his painfully contracted, “Do not try that again.”

Sam stumbled back as Johnathon released the hand with a shove. Undeterred, the larger man swung again, this time with the opposite hand. It too, was stopped and returned this time with a sharp blow to Sam’s rib cage that sent the actor staggering backward and doubled over, gasping for breath.

“Caitriona is outside Sam.” Johnathon slowly paced back and forth, “She is outside. Alone and having to deal with this. And that,” Each and every word was carefully enunciated, “Is not okay.”

“Fuck you Chase.” Sam slowly straightened, “You’re not the only one who cares about her!”

“Then start showing it.” Johnathon squared his shoulders, straightening to his full height, the restrained anger he’d kept hidden, now clearly burned in the depths of his eyes, “Stop this now. Be her friend instead of this a whiny little boy. Acting out because the woman you love is with someone else. Grow the fuck up.”

Having had moderate success the first time, Sam tried the same manoeuvre a second time, shifting his weight and surging across the room, the very picture of a typical rugby player trying to tackle a mountain by dropping the shoulder and ram rolling over them.

It was even less effective the second time than the first. Johnathon easily swerved to one side, Sam’s momentum propelling his body forward and unable to stop himself, he plowed into the wall with a thud, heavy enough that his breath was forced from his lungs. Before Sam really knew what was happening, Johnathon had him pinned, both arms yanked hard behind his back, his chest pushed painfully against the wall.

“I’ll fucking kill you.” Sam thrashing about, grunting and heaving with effort, trying anything and everything to make the bands of iron gripping his wrists, to let go. The more he struggled the tighter the grip got. Desperate and seemingly left with no other option, his energy quickly waning, Sam threw his head back, slamming his skull into Johnathon’s face in a vicious headbutt that left his own head ringing.

Johnathon felt the skin over his eyebrow, split under the impact but persisted. That was it. Fists were one thing. Headbutting was something else. With patience exhausted, the quiet wolf rose to surface, hackles rising and teeth barred. “Now you fucking listen to me,” Johnathon seethed, leaning into Sam and reefing his arms up higher, ignoring the sudden cries of pain as the limbs threatened to break, a thick stream of blood leaking from spilt half hidden beneath one eyebrow, “It doesn’t need to be this way. Do you hear me?” More struggle and grunting was his answer, so Johnathon pressed harder, twisting the strong arms higher, until the motion stopped, “You love Caitriona. Fine. Join the club.” A low growl sounded directly into Sam’s ear, “At least be man enough to accept what she is trying to tell you.”

With one final shove, Johnathon let loose his grip around the actor’s wrists and stepped back. Sam turned, rubbing his arms, trying to get some circulation back, chest heaving, sweat rolling down his face. “I’m not trying to take her from you, you idiot.” Johnathon said quietly, swiping the crimson liquid away with the back of his hand, “Caitriona is wants to be your friend. I have no problem with that. I’ve never had a problem with it. All anyone is asking is for you to be her friend back.”

He took a step towards Sam, deliberately moving within easy swinging distance, “Accept what is.” Ice blue eyes locked with his opponent, “Don’t make me have to protect her from you.” The
statement hung in the air for a long series of moments, “She deserves better and you know it.”

Johnathon turned his back and walked back and resting a hand on the door handle, the truthfulness of the words cutting through the false bravado, testosterone and residual alcoholic haze, like a warm knife through butter.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” Defeated shoulders slumped, “I’m never going to not love her.”

Steel blue eyes regarded Sam over a broad shoulder, “I know.” Sam’s confession was neither ground-breaking nor informative. “That is not what Caitriona is asking of you.”

“I don’t know if I can give her that.” The actor leaned heavily against the wall, sliding down the surface to slump on the floor, the perfect impression of a sack of potatoes. Shaking his head back and forth, as if the movement could somehow stop the buzzing between his ears and the chaotic whirlwind of thoughts swirling around his hungover head, “Not when I feel..” Sam’s tired voice trailed off. Johnathon hadn’t expected the honest admission, but took it as a good sign that maybe, just maybe, he’d gotten his point across.

Pushing off the door, Johnathon moved to stand in front of the downed man, “If you love her enough,” He said quietly, looking down, “You’ll find a way to do it.”

Sam took in the open hand that was extended to him and then up into the intense eyes watching him, one of them obscured with a fresh track of blood. He gripped the hand and hoisted himself to his feet, dusting himself off. “This doesn’t mean I’m not watching you.” He gave Johnathon’s hand a forceful tug before letting it go, “But I’ll try aye? For Caitriona’s sake, I’ll try.”

"Fair enough." Johnathon turned, one hand on the door handle, "And Sam?" Deadly blue eyes locked with his, "The threat will not go unanswered. Not to Caitriona and not to me. Understand?"

He saw the tall actor consider his next move. Saw the clenched hands and the gritting of his teeth and for a moment, Johnathon thought he was going to have to practice what he preached and really deliver up a very hard lesson, but Sam's gaze eventually dropped to his study feet before his head nodded silently. Leaving well enough alone, Johnathon didn't say another word, simply tapped on the metal door, which swung open to reveal the imposing form of the aged supervisor.

“Bail’s posted.” The old man grizzled in Sam’s direction, not without a pointed gaze at Johnathon’s bloody eye, “Get your belongs before I decide to lock you up again.”

Without single utterance of protest or comment, Sam bent, picked up his jacket, walked between the two men and out of the god forsaken stinking cell.

“Something like that.” Johnathon dabbed at the split, grimacing as he applied pressure, “Didn’t think he’d headbutt.”

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“Don’t know yet.” Johnathon tried to wipe a dried blood stain from his collar, the sticky liquid half dried in a track down the side of his neck. “Guess we’re going to find out.”

“I reckon you will. So Johnathon...” Martinez commented conversationally, “the friend? The one in car, who has that dumbass for a friend is a woman huh?”

“Don’t start.”
“She a doctor too?” A smirk crinkled the corners of clever grey eyes.

“No.” Johnathon dabbed at the cut, inspecting the paper towel, the white fabric now stained crimson. The thing about cuts to your head, he cursed silently, they always tended to bleed like a stuck pig.

“In that case then,” Martinez chuckled, “you’re gonna need to get more cleaned up before you leave.”

“It’s just a scratch.”

“That so?” He nudged Johnathon towards a shiny metallic rectangle, inlaid into the wall for safety. It wasn't as clear as its glass counterpart, but it nevertheless it served the purpose.

"Shit.” Came the muted curse.

The so called scratch, was at least an inch long and ran along the top of his eyebrow, the edges of the split had separated wide enough that the bright red flesh beneath was easily visible. It would need one, possibly two stitches. Johnathon pushed the edges of skin together, resulting in a fresh stream of blood, but somewhat closing the wound. Maybe some glue would do the trick.

“Take some advice from an old man,” Martinez pointed down the hallway, “Go see the infirmary, while we exit dumbass over there. Trust me, if you don’t, you’ll never hear the end of it.” He nodded towards Sam’s form who was almost at the end of the hallway which had been bounded by a closed security door. “Go on. It won’t take but a bit. You'll probably get back before dumbass here has filled in the rest of his paperwork anyway, but I’ll hold him til you’re back.”

It was probably easier to just get it done here than to have to go to a doctor or heaven forbid, an emergency room. He didn’t much fancy the prospect of going back out to the car looking like he was. There would be enough explaining to be done already. Caitriona wasn’t going to be happy about this. Not with Sam and probably not with him. Best to not make it any worse by showing up with blood dripping off his cheek. “Alright.” Johnathon conceded and quietly made his way to a small room were the on duty paramedic was busy marking several vials of blood with the fine point pen. Drug tests probably.

True to the supervisor’s supposition, it took far less time to have the wound glued and butterfly stitched than it took for Sam to be processed, so Johnathon spent the remainder of the time trying to wash out the few errant spots of blood that had fallen on this shirt. It wasn’t exactly invisible, but it certainly was a lot better than it was, he thought, assessing his reflection, this time in a silver backed glass mirror that was hanging on the back of door on the secure side of the prison.

Maybe Caitriona would be so distracted by Sam and the stupidity of the night that she wouldn’t notice.

And maybe pigs would sprout wings and sprinkle fairy dust.

Johnathon let out a long breath and headed out, finding the grizzled supervisor overseeing several officers who were processing a handful of new inmates. “Well,” Martinez inspected the results of Johnathon medical intervention, “Not bad.” He gave the blonde man a cheeky smile, “You may get away with it.”

“I’m not hopeful.” Johnathon gave a rueful shake of his head. “Thanks for your help Bryan. Appreciate it.” He shook the older man’s hand.

“Anytime John. You damn well know that.” They turned their attention towards the other side of
the glass. Sam was sitting, cradling his own head in his hands, a plastic bag sitting on the floor between his feet, patiently waiting for Johnathon. “Keep your eye on that one. Probably going to get worse before it gets better.”

He didn’t really like to think about it, but deep down Johnathon suspected the man was right. “Say hello to Sally for me and take care.” Leaving the secured area behind, Johnathon waited momentarily as Sam gathered his things and stood, the pair of them stepping through the automatic doors that separated booking from the carpark.

“This isn’t going to be good is it?” Sam muttered as each step closed the distance between building and waiting car.

Johnathon’s eyes met a familiar ones, intently watching their every move from behind the safety of the windshield. “No.” He let out a long breath, “I don’t think it will be.”

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy everyone. Originally had this split into two chapters but decided last moment to combine them. Next Week - A discussion in the car. Needless to say, Caitriona is not amused.

Cheers and thanks for all the wonderful feedback and generally just being great people. Have a good one and stay safe.
Last Chances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh thank Christ.” Caitriona muttered, straightening in her seat and leaning forward to get a better look at the two men walking towards the car. Sam had his head down, concentrating on placing one foot in front of the other as if he was walking through a mine field whilst wearing roller skates. Following, a few steps behind, a set of familiar blue eyes found hers. One eye winked and Johnathon’s mouth lifted into a gentle smile in greeting. She hadn't expected both men to appear at the same time, but rather she’d thought Johnathon would be back to get her to sort out the bail situation.

As they got closer, Caitriona’s brow wrinkled. The top section of Johnathon’s shirt was discoloured, large patch stretching from collarbone to around his neck to half way down his chest. It almost looked like he had attempted to have a drink of water or something and had completely missed his mouth. “What in hell..” She squinted, trying to make out more detail. “Is that..” Blue eyes went round in shock, “It better fucking not be.” Caitriona murmured, sitting back and crossing her arms over her chest, “It seriously better not be.” She managed to get a better look at the face in question as Johnathon walked in front of the car then slid into the driver’s seat beside her. No, it was exactly what she’d thought it was. Doors opened and Johnathon slid into the front seat, Sam soundlessly occupying the seat directly behind Johnathon. The soft click of each door, suddenly loud in the quiet cabin.

Caitriona twisted in her seat, gaze shifting from one man to the other and back again, the growing silence as telling as it was unusual. At this close range, there was no mistaking the stark white of the twin butterfly stitches, holding together the torn edges of cut above Johnathon’s left eyebrow. It also explained the damp shirt, one lone drop of blood still staining the turned down rim of his collar. Blue eyes delivered an accusing look with stunning laser precision towards the passenger in the back seat, who apparently had found something supremely interesting out the window that required his full attention. Caitriona had thought posting bail was a simple matter. Apparently, it was not.

Taking a deep breath, loud enough to be heard by all occupants in the car, Caitriona turned her attention back to the driver, who currently had his head down, clipping the buckle of his seat belt into the latch between the seats. Reaching across, Caitriona gripped Johnathon’s chin, turning his head towards hers and inspecting the damage. She slowly moved his head from one side to the other. Sheepish blue eyes blinked back at her from under his brow, so very reminiscent of a young child in trouble that Caitriona almost laughed out loud. “Are you alright?” She asked quietly, running a gentle finger across Johnathon’s temple, the skin around the torn brow was already beginning with darken with a lurid bruise. “Course,” Came the predictable answer, though Caitriona felt him lean into her touch for the shortest of moments, “It’s fine, just a scratch.”

“Bit more than a scratch Johnathon.” Caitriona admonished, slowly stroking his skin along his jaw, “How?” She asked, dropping her hand to take Johnathon's where it rested on his thigh.

“Would you believe I ran into a door?” Long fingers threaded themselves between hers.

“Is that what happened?”

“No.” His mouth curled into a cheeky smile, a small dimple forming in the creased skin of his cheek, “I was just asking if you’d believe it.”
It was impossible, Caitriona mused, to be upset at him when he smiled at her like. “Smart ass.” Her eyes met his in silent understanding and recollection of an earlier conversation.

“I am.” Was all he said, flicking a quick glance to the rear vision mirror and then back to her face, his uninjured eyebrow arching in question.

She blinked slowly and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. Yes, Caitriona’s mind agreed, they would definitely be talking about this later. In private, she thought, sitting back in her seat as Johnathon stirred the car to life and started navigating their way through the winding ramps of the parking garage. With it was just the two of them. Alone and together. This would definitely be a topic for conversation and if Sam Heughan thought he’d be able to interrupt them again, he was sorely mistaken. And by god, if she was right, and Sam was responsible the blood on Johnathon’s shirt, then he was going to find out just how serious Caitriona had been when she’d warned their friendship would be over if he continued down the path he was on. Turned out he hadn’t just continued, he torn down that road full bore, pedal to the floor, without giving her warning a second thought.

Caitriona decided to let Sam stew in tactical silence a little while longer. It would give her time to consider carefully what she was going to say. If she went at it now, there was very good chance Sam would end up on the side of the road, finding his own way home. Caitriona knew Sam had feelings for her and she had been willing to give him a little latitude until he dealt with that, putting up with him being persistently annoying and juvenile was one thing, physically hurting someone she loved was an entirely different matter. She would not have it. If Sam thought she’d put it with that, then he really didn't know her very well at all.

Caitriona did wonder about what exactly had transpired inside that jail that had one, caused her lover to be hurt in the first place and two, why Johnathon and Sam for that matter, were so closed mouth about it. A curious thought drifted through her mind. Caitriona surreptitiously surveyed Johnathon’s knuckles where his long fingers curled around the steering wheel. Not a single bruise, or a mark on them. Slowly she turned over their joined hands currently resting on the console between them, gentle fingers exploring the peak and valleys of the warm skin. Again, Caitriona neither saw nor felt a single blemish, reddened area or mark.

Whatever had happened, Johnathon didn't appear to be the one that had been doing the hitting. Caitriona couldn’t say she was particularly surprised at that, in retrospect, she would have been more surprised to have found bruises or scuff marks. According to what Caitriona had she’d seen of Johnathon’s nature, he tended towards the placid, rather than the aggressive and Caitriona was positive Johnathon didn’t suffer from the puffed out chest, lord and master syndrome that often made men, in particular, want to swing their fists for no good reason whatsoever.

Now, Sam on the other hand. Caitriona had personally witnessed him showing that swing first, talk later tendency on more than one occasion. The instinct appeared to get exponentially stronger in Sam when alcohol came into the mix. Maybe it was time to get some answers from the painfully quiet offender in the rear of the car. The one who was yet to find the courage to look her in the face.

“Well?” Caitriona finally said, face forward, eyes never leaving the road, her fingers firmly wrapped around Johnathon’s, “Are you going to tell me why you were arrested Sam?” She waited a beat, “Or do I have to ask Johnathon?” Caitriona felt Johnathon’s eyes momentarily flick her way before they returned to the slowly increasing early morning traffic and the road ahead.

The silence continued for a very long series of heartbeats before the air was filled with soft sound of paper rustling and crinkling. “Here.” Several pieces of folded paper appeared on the centre
Caitriona reluctantly let go of Johnathon’s hand to unfold the papers in her lap, smoothing the semi-crumpled sheets on the knee of her jeans clad leg. Flicking on the overhead light, the seriousness of the trouble Sam was in, began to become all too apparent. It was worse than Caitriona had imagined. Not only had he embarrassed himself by over indulging at a party, the hosts of which had entrusted him to be an ambassador of their product, but he had then done the one thing, Caitriona had no tolerance for at all. He had gotten behind the wheel of a car and had driven while drunk. Effectively putting not only himself at enormous risk, but also hundreds of other drivers on the road. Innocent people just going about their business. Caitriona had never been able see any reason why, when a taxi was a phone call away, anyone would do that. You want to wipe yourself out, fine. Have at it, but how dare he put someone else’s life in jeopardy.

A slow burning anger ignited and began simmering, just below the surface as Caitriona continued to read the litany of charges. By the time she got to the final charge the fire was raging and white hot. She was so angry, she didn’t think she couldn’t speak. At least not to Sam, even if Caitriona had wanted to, which right now, she most certainly did not. Fury didn’t even begin to cut it. Complete disappointment in someone she thought was a better person than the actions so neatly typed on that page depicted, was closer to what Caitriona felt. Rather than a friendly, responsible, caring human being she’d thought Sam was, the typed words painted a dire picture of someone who was determined to walk a path of slow self destruction. A gradual implosion that would have real and lasting consequences for all involved. Family, friends, co workers, acquaintances, the lot. These charges were not something that would just go quietly into the night. They were exactly the salacious material that would create a press feeding frenzy.

This wouldn’t be the kind of good press the studio might accept. Network heads were going to go ballistic when they found out. You can’t spend millions of dollars and market a program with ‘Mr and Mrs Outlander’ every second moment and then expect the same marketplace to not react when Mr Outlander is doing the complete opposite in his personal life. As much as Outlander was fictional and their real lives were vastly different from their make believe counterparts, the two were also inextricably linked. Whether they liked it or not, the fictional was always going to bleed into their real lives. Sam and Caitriona were selling a brand as much as a fictional television show. A brand that didn’t stop when director called cut. In time, their brands would diversify and separate, but right not, they were the two separate peas in the very same pod. And the pod that was their brand wasn’t going to fair very well when one of the main players now came out looking every inch a drunk druggy who holds company with prostitutes in his down time.

When the mud started flying, some of it was going to hit Caitriona, she knew that and was even, to a certain extent, prepared for it. In a way, Caitriona had accepted that risk when she’d signed on the dotted line to be in the business of public entertainment. Johnathon, however, hadn’t signed any such thing and Caitriona didn’t want to put him through dealing with all that if she could help it. Sam had just made the task a lot harder. Maybe it was selfish, given it was Sam’s neck on the line, but this time, Caitriona wanted her shot at happiness. Johnathon was that shot. Caitriona could feel it. Possibly her last chance. And god help her, she wanted grab it and keep it for as long as she could. If Sam was going to keep making these mistakes over and over, ignoring her advice, unwilling to change, wanting her to be something she could never be and hurting himself in the process, then perhaps it was really time to walk away. It made Caitriona's heartache at the thought of abandoning someone she really did care about, but, she swallowed hard and looked at the papers in her lap, maybe this was the best thing she could do for him. Something had to be done, that much was evident.

“Do you want to tell me your version?” Her tone was tight and clipped.
“Is there any point Caitriona?” Sam gave a long sigh and dared to look at her for the first time that evening.

“Yes.” She turned in her seat, “There is. Ice blue eyes locked with his. What he said he mattered a great deal, Sam just didn’t know it yet. “Is this the truth?” Caitriona lifted the paper and pointed it towards Sam.

“Yes.” Her co-star looked down, staring at his feet, “It’s true. Most of it. I didn’t know she was, well…” His throat moved as he swallowed, “A hooker. She was at the party and we.. hit it off so.. anyway I didn’t know alright.”

“And the drugs?”

Sam’s head came snapping up, “You really think I would take drugs like that Caitriona?” It was precisely the wrong thing to say, at exactly the wrong time.

“I didn’t think you would crash a half million dollar car into pole because you were too drunk to know better and get arrested but here we are Sam!” Her voice rose, “You could have been killed you fucking idiot! Jesus Christ Sam! Did it ever cross that thick head of yours that the phone call I got tonight might have been to come and identify you because, for whatever fucked up reason,” she held up a hand to forestall any reason Sam might have attempted, ”which I do not want know right now, you decided to drive after drinking yourself stupid! Fucking drink driving Sam! You’re not fucking two any more! Jesus Christ!”

“No one was hurt Cait.”

”Are you fucking kidding me!” The small vein in her forehead stood out, ”YOU COULD HAVE BEEN HURT!” Caitriona jabbed a finger at him, ”SHE COULD HAVE BEEN HURT!” Caitriona was shouting now, all the tension, the worry, the disappointment and frustration boiling over, “When is it going to stop Sam? Booze and now drugs! Fuck you Sam! Seriously, how fucking DARE YOU!”

“I DIDN’T take any drugs I swear it.” The denial was indignantly strong and immediate, “I don’t know where they came from or how they got in my pocket.” He bodily threw himself against the back into the seat, ”Everything else in that report might be true but, fucking damn it Caitriona, that isn’t. I. Did. Not. Take. Them.” He pointed a finger at the paper in her lap, “Check the blood results. I didn’t take them Caitriona.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck about blood results. I’m asking YOU, Sam.”

“And I’m telling you,” Surly blue eyes lifted to hers “I didn’t take them Cait.”

They studied each other silently. Each trying to come up with their own solution to the same problem. Neither of them quite ready to forgive the other and both of them knowing that this was only the beginning of the trouble Sam's thoughtless actions had caused. “Look,” Sam slid forward in his seat, the belt pulling tight against his chest, “I’m sorry alright. I’m sorry for all of it.” His fair head shook, “I made a mistake Cait.” Both dark eyebrows rose almost to her hairline and Caitriona glared at him, “Alright, I made a lot of mistakes.” Sam corrected, “I’ll take the heat for this. Face the press, the studio, all of it. It’s me they will come after and if they don’t, you can send them my way. I’ll deal with it. I never meant for any of this. I'll do what I can Cait. For you both.”

What was she supposed to do with that? Accept Sam's apology and hope things got better? As for him catching all the heat that was about to fall from the sky, surely Sam wasn't stupid enough to know that Caitriona was going to be forced to bear at least some of the load. A 'no comment’ from
Sam meant they would come to her and ask the same questions. She could say 'no comment' too but that wouldn't stop the press hunting around for months and months and months. That's wasn't even considering the social media fall out. That was a whole other world of pain that would kick off with a fervor and ferocity that you could see and still not believe it. Fuck. Part of her wanted to believe him, wanted to think he was the man she'd always thought him to be. The man she knew, the man she wanted to be friends with. Lately his behaviour had caused her a lot of hesitation and doubt and now, Caitriona wasn't certain she could trust him anymore. Her eyes flicked to Johnathon's, his face impassive and calm. Caitriona had thought she was learning some of her blonde lover's tells, but not this time. Johnathon was sporting the perfect poker face and absolutely no help at all. Leaving Sam now, wouldn't stop the shit storm. It might stop Sam being a dick about her feelings towards Johnathon, or at least, she wouldn't have to hear Sam being a complete dick towards Johnathon anymore. At this point it was even odds that Sam was probably going to keep carrying on with his bullshit until death or Caitriona left Johnathon. So, she mentally corrected, until death is it then. Shit storm is still happening. Bullshit towards John is still happening so where was the benefits here? Fucking Christ.

Caitriona let out long breathe and closed her eyes, shaking her head as she considered her options, “If this ever happens again Sam....”

“It won’t.”

“If it does, ” Blue eyes, so filled with serious intent and such a raw honesty that it left exactly zero room for doubt, drilled into his, ”we are through. I can’t do this again. I mean it Sam. Figure this out. This is the last chance you get. Ever. We will no longer be friends if this happens again. I don’t care if it means I leave Outlander. That is what I will do. What I won't do, is this. Ever again. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you Cait.” Sam said quietly, “I know I’ve made a mess here and I’ll don’t know if can fix it all but I’ll try okay?” Glancing at the rear vision mirror, he found a of set of piercing blue eyes watching every single move he made. ”I can only try.” The eyes turned back to the road, accompanied with an almost imperceptible nod.

“I really hope you do.” Caitriona turned back around, watching as the traffic light ahead turned from green, to amber and then red, “And if you ever even think of punching, slapping, hitting, kicking or do whatever you did tonight, to someone I love again, specifically Johnathon Chase, I will not only leave Outlander, I will never, ever, ever speak to you again. I will not even visit you in the hospital. Which is where you will be, because one more bruise, one more cut, one more anything, and as god is my witness, I swear to you Sam, I will tear off your balls and feed them to you through the straw that you will need to eat with for the remainder of your natural life.” Caitriona glanced over her shoulder at him, “Understood?”

Sam nodded mutely and squeezed his legs together in instinctual reaction.

Swiveling frontwards once more, Caitriona reached over and took back the possession of one of Johnathon’s hand, raising an eyebrow at the closed mouth amused smile decorating Johnathon’s face,

“What?” She asked, drawing his hand over and setting on her own thigh, idle slim fingers playing with the digits, letting the touch soothe some very, very ruffled feathers and strained nerves.

“Nothing.” Johnathon very wisely said, “Nothing at all.”
Thanks for the wonderful comments everyone. Your insights, comments, thoughts and humour are always appreciated and I thank each and every one of you out there, who takes the time and effort to read and comment.

Out of respect for anyone who has lived this nightmare, I'm going to put a warning up right here for next weeks chapter. There will be some situations coming up that could be triggering to anyone out there that has experienced domestic violence. Next week's chapter is not particularly heavy on this topic but, it does mark the beginning of a series of events that are going to be, very dark. I completely understand if chose not to read these chapters. Take care of you first.
I will try to alternate the heavy stuff (which is kinda important for the story or else it would not be in there) with the lighter stuff of Johnathon and Caitronia who deserve at least a little together time for just a bit before the next whirlwind.

Next Week: Stephen and Katherine and the aftermath of the dinner.

Thanks again for reading and you all have a good week and stay safe.

Cheers
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This chapter contains depictions of behaviours that may be triggering for anyone who has experienced situations involving abusive or threatening behaviour.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katherine Carmichael felt his eyes on her. Even through the dim light of the darkened bedroom, she could feel the disapproval, so strong it bordered on disgust. She felt it and deliberately turned more towards the window, refusing to give him any satisfaction, no matter how minute.

They’d left the benefit dinner hours ago, but Kate’s mind was still back there. Endlessly examining what is, comparing it with what might have been. Johnathon. Caitriona. Stephen. Herself. They’d all left the benefit dinner at the same time, respective partners in tow. Johnathon with Caitriona. Kate with Stephen. They’d both stepped into cars that had driven off along the same street. In the same city. That, Kate reflected, was where she thought the similarities ended. She couldn’t have known completely, but Kate was pretty damn sure, that whatever was happening across town in a hotel room, Johnathon would not be leaving Caitriona sitting alone in the dark, crying and wishing things were different.

Kate let the white noise of the soft rain falling outside fill the deafening silence, taking some small comfort in the gentle yet persistent sound, looking out to the darkened space beyond. Carefully tended gardens and brilliant green lawns filled her field of vision, foliage glistening with delicate sheen of moonlight and rain.

It would have made quite the picture, she thought quietly, trying to lift herself out of the pit of despair that seemed to surround her lately. The wonder of nature. Simple, neat, beautiful. Until you looked further to the shadows of the harsh steel spines of the wrought iron fence that surrounded property. An absolute necessity by the standards of the gated wealthy elite. Their ridiculously oversized houses all securely tucked and manicured within an inch of it’s life. Most of it for show, very little of it for practicality.

She’d never liked that, Kate frowned. She’d grown up with it. Hated it as much then as she did now. She had managed to escape it for a while. Finding an entirely different world out beyond the fence. A place where Kate had taken her first breath, leaving Katherine Carmichael, heiress to the Carmichael Consolidated company, the future of their family, as designated by her unfortunate position as eldest offspring and by a declaration as such from her parents, behind for what Kate thought would be forever. The expectation had been as high and as heavy as the responsibility she’d felt pressing down on her young shoulders.

Kate had tried explaining back then. To her parents. To them all. To Stephen. All of it, for nothing. Her words had fallen on deaf ears and left with no other real option, Kate had set about making her own plans that she hoped would carry her away. She applied for medical schools out of state. Gathered documentation, scrimped and saved, squirrelling away any left over money from her summer jobs working in the very company she was supposed to run someday. The company she despised.

Kate still remembered the feeling she got with the arrival of that medical acceptance letter. It had
been almost as good as the feeling she’d had when, quietly, in the middle of the night, she’d left home and started a new life. A life in which she’d managed to thrive, despite the fact that her mother and father had all but disowned her. She’d built a career, one she truly enjoyed and excelled at. She’d found a small, but loyal group of friends. She’d fallen in love with man. A good man, one she could have built a future with. She had been happy then.

How, Kate turned her head to regard the figure laying silently in the bed across the room from her, how, had she managed to land herself, right back in the one place she had never ever wanted to be. Trapped.

Alone.

Each and every hallmark of a fate, seemingly predetermined at birth, staring her in the face.

A fate she had never wanted.

The marriage Kate had fought her entire life, the very same one her parents had always fostered, urged and almost forced upon her, was here. A marriage that had far more to do with the financial merging of Cross Industries and Carmichael Consolidated than with the happiness of anyone involved. Or, Kate mentally corrected, specifically anything to do with her happiness. Her father, no doubt was beyond pleased with the whole situation. He’d been grooming Stephen for years to take over. The son he never had. Kate was pretty certain that if there had of been such a thing as return policies on babies, she’d have been sent straight back and exchanged for male before she’d been a minute old. A male might have shown some interest in taking over the family company and the trappings of the lifestyle it would afford. The prospect of being drafted into the grey world of businessmen, of boards of directors, of endless financial meetings and the boredom of the corporate world was something Kate found akin to snacking on razor blades and, after having made the mistake of strongly communicated her feelings on the matter, Kate’s only role now, at least according to the antiquated rules and edicts of her father, seemed to be finding a husband that did. Now, however, that sentiment also included and was not limited to, getting married to avoid the everlasting shame that would apparently descend from the heavens because, shocks of all shocks, Kate happened to find herself single and pregnant.

Her dark head shook, half in disgust and half in amazement. It sounded like something from the 18th century and felt about the same. Part of her wanted to hate them for making things this hard, to blame them for the way it all turned out. That would have been a lie, she sniffed reflectively. Deep down, in the secret places that you shared with no one but yourself, Kate knew her parents were not to blame this time. Nor anyone else for that matter.

This latest, ultimately game changing cluster fuck, had been all her own doing.

She had made the decision to open that envelope.

She had made the decision to not believe the truth.

She had made the decision to open her legs in anger.

Like it or not, when you looked at it in the cold light of reality, the responsibility of it all, landed squarely at her feet. She had personally lit the fuse that her exploded her life.

Resting a hand on her swollen stomach, Kate watched the small rivulets of rain, streak and snake down the window. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad, she reflected, feeling a bump of pressure
beneath her palm shift as a miniature foot kicked out. Maybe she could still manage to fashion together some semblance of a decent life.

There was one small innocent light in all the ugliness. Kate gave a small, half smile and rubbed her hand in slow circles, the gentle touch magically settling the small nameless being inside.

A baby.

Her baby.

Kate was under no illusions about just how hard this was going to be. Stephen was going to be near on insufferable and her family, she sighed softly, her family was as bad if not worse. Her friends, what few she had, were already drifting away. Apart from Emma, Kate hadn’t seen or talked to a single one since she had cut ties with Boston. She could add Johnathon to that list now she supposed.

More tears flowed at the silent sounding of his name as it echoed across her memory. She might have been still fuming over the circumstances by which it had happened, but, Kate was glad she’d gotten to see Johnathon. To say goodbye properly and close the particularly painful book they shared. He’d looked happy, she’d considered silently. Happy and in love. More settled than Kate expected him to be. The last time she’d seen him, Kate had been genuinely terrified that Johnathon would never recover from the damage she had caused. That the man she’d known, would disappear from the world completely, so lost in the hurt they had shared, that he’d spend his life living without really being alive. Johnathon didn’t deserve that. Seeing him with Caitriona and watching the way that they had looked at each other, as hard as it had been to witness, had reassured Kate that Johnathon would be alright, but she’d be lying to herself if she tried to say that she hadn’t been more than a little jealous of tall actress.

It was hard to watch them, to see them together and to know she had lost that completely. Walking way tonight had tested every last fibre of her resolve. Johnathon’s offers to help didn’t make the task any easier. The temptation to accept the offer had been strong, if for no other reason than to have him back in her life.

Kate knew he would. Johnathon would give her everything, except the one thing she desperately needed. Can’t give what isn’t his to give, her mind sounded sadly. It was written on his face, in his every action, in the quiet words Kate had watched Johnathon and Caitriona exchange. In the subtle touches and smiles they shared when they thought no one was watching. Caitriona had Johnathon’s heart now. That much was obvious.

It was a good thing, Kate nodded quietly to herself, the movement dislodging a string of damp tears. She had broken his heart. Caitriona, had repaired it. As simple as it was true. Kate knew she should be happy for him, but damn it, despite her best efforts, her heart positively ached.

Even if Caitriona wasn’t now the centre of this picture, Johnathon was still unattainable for her now. As long as he was remotely connected to her, Kate knew Johnathon would always be a target. Any connection to her would always be seen as a threat. Stephen was unable to let anything go when it came to Johnathon. An irrational, illogical and pathological hatred towards the blonde detective, viewing Johnathon as something to be broken and eliminated.

Kate had let that happen once, she had no intention of giving so called fiancée a second opportunity. Stephen already had the means. The smug smile on his face as he’d proudly handled her a fat, thick folder filled with details about herself, her family, her friends had proved beyond any shadow of doubt that Stephen wasn’t joking around nor issuing empty threats. Some of the details she’d read, were nothing more than embarrassing. Some of them, career ending and the odd
one or two, so serious in nature that there was only ever going to be one way forward for Kate. All that was left was for Kate to try as best she could to protect the people she cared about. Johnathon, her family, and most importantly, she glanced down, half cradling her stomach, her son. She knew what was coming and marriage seemed like a small price to pay if it meant shielding them from the worst of it. What was it they said about enemies? This enemy had enough dirt to sink her family, more than likely see her father imprisoned, her brother-in law joining him, her mother stripped of all assets. Kate may not have been close with her parents, and honestly, she despised most of the things they did and said, but she didn’t want to see them destroyed or have her nieces and nephews growing up without their father and grandparents.

She was a train on the track now, unable to get off bands of steel without total destruction. There was no going back. No turning around. It had to be done and so, Kate had done it. Johnathon was better off, she reasoned, everyone was. The only thing that really mattered to her now was keeping her family and Johnathon safe as best she could. “And you.” She whispered, smoothing her hand around the curve of her belly.

No matter what the cost.

No matter what she had to endure.

If meant giving up her chance at being happy to give her son security and stability, then she’d do it.

Her son.

Her sole responsibility.

“Are you going to brood all night Katherine?” Stephen’s voice, low and stern almost made her jump as it echoed from across the darkened room.

“Yes.” Kate saw little point in dressing up the situation to be anything other than what it was. She’d accepted her lot in life. That didn’t mean Kate was going to just let Stephen run rough shod over her. There was still a little fight left her in yet.

Stephen raked a hand through his dark and sat up, “Rather childish behaviour Katherine.”

“About as childish as playing stupid games.”

“I don’t play games Katherine.” His voice dropped, the edges laced with the confidence and arrogance of a man unused to being challenged.

“Please.” She snorted derisively, swivelling and letting the anger show in her eyes, “Do not insult my intelligence by trying to tell me that tonight was about anything other than Johnathon Chase and some idiotic attempt at one upmanship.”

“Johnathon Chase.” Stephen spat the name at her like he had a mouthful a bad tasting food, “I was simply supporting some of these charities that you keep harping on about Katherine.”

“His name?” The small vein in Kate’s throat stood out in relief against the pale skin of her neck, the volume of her voice steadily rising, “If you didn’t want him in this room, then you should have thought about that,” She took heated breath, “Before you deliberately orchestrated all of us being at the same event together Stephen!”

“I was simply supporting some of these charities that you keep harping on about Katherine.” He idly inspected his fingernails, “The fact that that Chase was there, was mere co-incidence.”
“Bullshit.” She flashed, “This had nothing to do with charity or coincidence.” Kate gripped the arms of the chair and pushed herself to her feet. “And for what? To rub it in John’s face that I am pregnant! To force me to have to face him and tell him I fucked you behind his back!” Blue eyes snapped cold and angry in unabashed accusation, “Or was it to make me see him in love with someone else?” Kate was certain the answer was probably a strong cocktail of all three, “Either way,” She spun on her heel and headed towards the bathroom, “You shouldn’t be surprised when I bring up his name!”

Kate made the door before a voice, completely devoid of any emotion, anger, repentance or otherwise, sounded, “You are correct.” The unexpected statement of admission caught her temporarily off guard and she turned to face him. Stephen swung his long legs over the side of the bed. The fine hairs on the back of her neck prickled, as Stephen’s larger frame and stalked towards her, each word, clearly enunciated, “I. Fucked. You.” Each step brought him closer, dark eyes locked on hers, “You let me fuck you. You made me fuck you Katherine. Me. Not that pathetic creature you claim to love.”

Stephen was right there now, close enough that she could smell the sickly scent of his aftershave. Her stomach began to lurch and churn, threatening to revolt as he leaned towards her, “I don’t need to play a game of one upmanship.” He nodded pointedly towards her enlarged midriff with a satisfied smirk, “I have already won.”

Gripping the doorhandle with one hand, Kate laid a protective hand over her stomach with the other, her voice shaking with equal parts of anger and fear, “Congratulations Stephen.” With all the force she could muster, she slammed the door in his face, twisting the knob sideways and locking it just to be certain.

Shaking hands wrapped around the edge of the handbasin, the smooth ceramic surface, cool and solid to her touch. Familiar blue eyes searched each other in the silver reflective surface. Kate knew Stephen was manipulative and scheming but he’d never, her eyes closed and she took a large swallow between the deep breaths, ever spoken to her like that before. They’d had arguments, disagreements, disputes, fights, whatever you wanted to call them, plenty of times before. There’d been yelling and shouting, behaviour Kate would classify as normal for that type of thing. But this, she blew out a long breath, surprised when tears began to tickle the back of her eyes, this had frightened her.

She stood for a few moments, gathering her scattered wits and trying to rationalise what happened with what she was feeling. It was alright, she chanted over and over. It was alright. Leaning heavily on the counter, Kate splashed a few good handfuls of cool clear water over her face. She was alright. The baby was safe. It was just an argument.

Through the shelter of the closed door, Kate heard the heavy footsteps recede as Stephen left the room. Heading towards his office like usual, Kate surmised, unable to deny the relief the idea of an empty room brought with it. Drying off her face, Kate unlocked the door, tentatively opening it.

Wary eyes flicked over the empty room before she quietly padded over to the bed and sat down slowly on its soft edge. “It’s alright.” Kate murmured aloud, as much to her unborn son as to herself, “We’re safe.” Kate debated moving to sleep in one of the guest rooms but decided against it, firmly believing that Stephen would probably spend the remainder of the night in his office, as was his normal habit after something like this.

Besides, she slid into the soft warmth and turned on her side, settling a pillow between her legs and tugging up the covers, now that the adrenaline had leached from her system, Kate felt utterly exhausted. So exhausted that just the thought of having to get up again unless she really had to,
suddenly seemed too much. Late stage pregnancy didn’t help on that front either. Kate was pretty sure she could lay in bed all day and still feel like she’d run a marathon and worked a triple shift.

Slowly, Kate felt her body relax. Muscles that had been pushed to breaking for several hours too long, steadily began to unwind. Joints that had borne the added pressure of extra weight, sighed in utter relief. Her mind drifted, running through, around and over the events in the bedroom.

Over the future.

Over the baby.

Over Johnathon.

Kate knew if she closed her eyes, she’d see him. The small dimples the formed on his cheeks when he smiled, really smiled and his ocean coloured eyes would light from the inside out. The deep pools of blue so crystal clear, that you felt like you could almost see into his very thoughts. “If you’re in trouble, let me help.” A soft deep voice floated back to her, it’s tenor and lilt soothing her nerves, “Whatever it is, let me help you.” Her eyes flicked to the darkened screen of her phone, resting silently beside the bed. The temptation to reach for him so strong Kate could almost taste it. Before Kate could stop herself, she reached out an arm and pulled the phone to her.

Finding Johnathon’s number, she began to type. Each letter a staccato click in the night.

‘I need your help.’ The letters formed the simple words. Kate’s finger hovered over send, her mind swinging like a clock pendulum at midnight. She knew what was at stake but maybe, just maybe, she glanced towards the closed bedroom door, maybe she was in something that was completely over her head. Taking a deep breath, Kate shot a glance skywards, before her fingers curled into a ball.

No.

She couldn’t give into this.

If she did then what was the point? Johnathon would still be lost. Her family would still be in the precarious position they were.

And her son, Kate squeezed her eyes shut.

No.

There was too much as risk. It was just and argument. Her son was safe. Johnathon was better off out of this and Kate would just have to endure.

Slowly, carefully, deliberately, the phone was placed face down on the bedside table.

Decision made.

Fate sealed.

The message, remaining, unsent.
Johnathon and Caitriona next week. To those out there that have left a comment or continue to leave comments each and every chapter, even when your real lives are busy and hectic and never quite going right, and you still manage to take the time to comment, you all are amazing. Seriously. Amazing.

Thanks to you all and have yourself a great weekend and a fantastic week.

Cheers
“Sam had better stay in that room until the flight back to Glasgow,” Caitriona scowled, letting the stream of hot water wash way some of the lingering anger she harboured about utter stupidity of her co-star’s actions.

“After your little talk in the car,” Johnathon pressed a soft kiss to her damp forehead, “I think it’s a good bet he’ll stay put for the night.”

“He seriously better not so much as move one square inch out that that hotel door.” Damp fingers gently drew the wet wash cloth down the side of Johnathon’s neck, enjoying the quiet closeness of each other as much as chance to clean away the last small flecks of blood and the hideous scent of hospital disinfectant that had stubbornly clung to her lover’s skin.

The return journey from jail to hotel, hadn’t taken long, a side effect of the trip happening early enough to avoid the morning city traffic. Sam had remained sullen and silent for the entirety of the journey. Which was a good thing, Caitriona reflected, she wouldn’t have necessarily trusted what might have flown out of her mouth if Sam had been anything other than the perfect passenger. Though, that had been before Caitriona had discovered that Johnathon had not only been clocked in the face, but apparently, he had also been walloped in the ribs. “Sam is damn lucky you didn’t mention that before now,” She pointed an accusing finger at the mark on Johnathon’s side, a lurid red and purple bruise the size of a small plate smack bang in the middle of his rib cage, “Or, I swear to god Johnathon, I would have thrown him out of the car and left him on the side of the road. I’m not even joking about that.”

“Really?” Warm, wet arms looped around her waist, thick rivulets of water ran over the naked skin of his shoulders and torso as Johnathon smiled at her, “I wouldn’t never have been able to tell.”

“You know,” Caitriona commented casually, sliding the flat of her palms over Johnathon’s chest and draping her arms around his now thoroughly cleaned neck, “Levity is not going to get you out of trouble either mister.” Fingers slowly stroked his hair, slicked smooth with water, the strands following rounded contour of the back of Johnathon's skull, “Are you ready to tell me exactly what when on between you two that resulted in this?” She ran a gentle finger across the spot in question across his brow, being careful to keep it as dry as one possibly could in a steaming shower.

“But much to tell.” One shoulder shrugged, “I gave him my opinion on a few things. Told him he better knock it off and grow up. He disagreed.”

“And how did this happen?” Her hands dropping to circle the bruise on this side.

“That was part of the disagreement.”

“He punched you?” Blue eyes blinked back slowly at her, the confirmation as clear as if he spoken the words aloud. “John..” Caitriona let out a long sigh, “And this?” Her gazed turned towards the split on his brow, “That part the disagreement too?”

Johnathon’s blonde head nodded, scattering droplets as he moved, “To be fair, he was face planted against a wall when he did that.”

“Wait..” Dark brows knit, “How did he punch you if he was facing the wall?”
“Wasn’t a punch.” Johnathon’s head gave a bit a jerk backwards in demonstration.

Eyebrows lifted almost to her hairline, “He headbutted you?” Every protective muscle in her body seemed to flare at once. Not only had Sam punched the man she loved, but a headbutt... It was the straw, the very last one and it broke some already frayed nerves, “You have to got to be kidding me. That’s..” Caitriona blew out a disgusted breath, “Low down, dirty, and just..” She stopped, struggling for words, “beyond even beyond. I’m so done with him, I don’t even know if I want to be a friend anymore. Seriously.”

“Don’t be too hard on him Caitriona.” The deep timbre of Johnathon’s voice pulled her in, “I’m not saying Sam hasn’t made some pretty bad mistakes or that he doesn’t deserve a good kick in the pants for being a stupid idiot, but I think this was unavoidable.” One hand lifted and gently tucked a damp strand of hair behind her ear, “Whether it was here, in New York, or back in a Glasgow in a month’s time or whenever, something like this was always on the cards.” Large hands distractedly started stroking her back, the gentle touch running smoothly over tensed muscles, “When two men love the same woman,” Johnathon gave her a wry smile, “Someone is always going to come out with a few cuts and bruises. It had to happen. This time it just happened to be in a jail cell.”

Caitriona didn’t know if she accepted that. Sam had been, and was being, a complete ass, and Caitriona was sure she didn’t agree with Johnathon being the one to end up with the bruises and the cuts, while Sam seemingly got off completely scot free. Where in god’s name was the justice in that? Johnathon wouldn’t have even been there if it hadn’t been for his connection to her. It felt to Caitriona like Sam was hiding behind the fact that he claimed he loved her. It was an excuse and one Caitriona was tiring of. She’d said no and now, Sam needed to move on. If he couldn’t do that, she would do it for him. “I meant what I said in the car.” Caitriona eventually said, sliding her hands up to frame Johnathon’s face, “I’ll leave Outlander and Sam Heughan behind if that’s what it takes.” Her thumb stroked the smooth surface of his cheek, “I will not have him do this again. So if he can’t figure it out, then I will.” Caitriona raised her chin, the commitment showing clearly in her eyes, “He will never come between us. Not now. Not ever. You know that right?” Her eyes searched his, “I would never let that happen.”

“I know.” Johnathon leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers, “Known it for a good while now.” Warm, wet lips found hers, kissing her slowly, feeling the tension drain from her bones with each slow swipe of his tongue against hers, “I trust you Caitriona.” He murmured as the kiss ended, “I’m not worried about him at all like that. Sam knows he’s lost any chance he ever might had with you. He just needed to take that out on someone.”

“Couldn’t he have found someone else to do it to? It didn’t have to be you.” Johnathon might have understood what happens when two men love the same woman from the male perspective, but Caitriona couldn’t keep track of how many relationships that she knew had crumbled because of something like this. The one person who never can let go, never is happy to see someone they claim to love with someone else, always there in the background, poking and prodding, worrying at the the strings that bind until they rip apart. Caitriona would never have believed Sam would turn into someone like that, but then again, she never would have believed that one day she’d have to bail Sam out jail either.

“Kinda did have to be me.” Johnathon mused, “Sam blames, and will always blame, me for stealing his shot with you.”

“That is what is so fucked up.” Caitriona settled her arms around Johnathon’s waist, “That ship sailed long before you and I even met. He never had a chance, no matter if you were here with me or not. It was never going to happen.”
“Yes.” Johnathon turned off the tap with a flick of his wrist, “But he couldn’t very well take a swing at you, so,” He nudged her towards the door with his hip, one long arm reaching around her for a towel, “I’m the next best target.”

That almost made some sense to Caitriona.

Almost.

She still wasn’t sure she agreed entirely with Johnathon’s argument, but she understood the basic premise. Men, she silently sighed, they can be strange, strange creature sometimes. She accepted the large white towel and wrapped it around herself, tucking the edge across her breast.

“Johnathon?”

"Mmm?"

Caitriona watched as her blonde partner, wrapped a towel around his waist, “Next time, just hit him back after the first punch.” She waited a bit, “And don’t hold back either. And when you’re done, send him my way.”

“With any luck there won’t be a next time.” Johnathon chuckled, leaning on the edge of the sink and passing Caitriona a second towel, which she immediately accepted and went to work drying the excess water from her hair, “But if there is, I can say, I won’t be the only one sporting some cuts and bruises.”

“Are those aching at all?” Caitriona watched his tall form out of the corner of her eye, as she traded towel for comb and began running the teeth through her damp hair. “That one looks like it should be.” She eyed the naked skin of his ribs, "An ice pack might be the order of the day.”

Johnathon lifted one arm and twisted, inspecting the bruised flesh on his side with his finger, cautiously prodding at the flesh around its edge. “Nah.” He concluded, dropping his arm, “She’ll be right.”

Caitriona raised a skeptical eyebrow at him, “Is that a nah it’s not hurting?” She finished the last few strands and put the comb back on the surface,"Or a ‘nah it is hurting but I’m not telling Caitriona it is’ type of nah?”

Blue eyes blinked back at her. It would have been interesting, she mused, to have seen Johnathon as a little boy. If she was having this much trouble resisting that adorable guilty look that was staring back her right now, she could only imagine how much this little boy would have been able to get away with sporting looks like that.

“I don’t know what you mean Caitriona.”

“Is that right?” She put one hand on her hip and picked up a dry hand towel from the porcelain surface. Johnathon opened his mouth to say something, “Acting innocent isn’t going to work either.” Caitriona forestalled, stepping closer to him. “So don’t even think about trying that.” The mouth closed, amused blue eyes locked with hers as she reached up and began patting the split above his eyebrow dry, not missing the softest of trace of well hidden wince as she inadvertently pressed a little too hard in one particular spot.

“Well, see, hmmm.” Johnathon mused aloud, clearly planning strategy, the barest hint of a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, “In that case, I plead the fifth.”

“Nice try. But no.” Caitriona softly kissed a nearby cheek, then tossed the towel on the vanity, “There is no pleading the fifth. Rule of the house.”
“But this is a hotel room.” Johnathon helpfully pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest, wagging his eyebrows comically at her.

Caitriona tried not to smile, really she did, but standing there, surrounded by the comfortable Intimacy that came as easy as breathing, and looking at that damned playful boyish grin that Caitriona was developing an inordinate soft spot for, she just couldn’t help it. “Rule of the hotel room then smart ass. No,” She corrected immediately, trying to the spot the loopholes before a certain intelligent detective did, “It’s rule of the woman. This woman.” One slim finger pointed at her herself, “Let’s call it Caitriona’s rule shall we?” There she thought, watching the cogs turning behind those deep pools of blue, let’s see you get out of that one.

“Caitriona’s rule huh?” Johnathon said after long series of heartbeats.

“Yes.”

“Well...hmmm. That’s a very specific name.” One hand reached towards and fingers tangling themselves in hers, the long digits running over hers.

“It is.”

The fingers contracted and tugged her closer, Johnathon’s upper body leaning towards her. His voice dropped to a quiet whisper, “I like that name.” A hand lifted and clever fingers started tracing a slow steady path across her exposed collarbone, pausing for a moment over her pulse point.

“Do you?” Caitriona swallowed, meeting his gaze and leaning into his touch, resting a hand on his thigh, feeling the flutter in her stomach.

“Uh huh.”

Fingers moved slowly up her neck, the back of his knuckles skimming over the line of her jaw, the slow sensual tingle run through her blood at the touch. “Johnathon?” Caitriona said softly as his hand cupped her cheek and her mouth drew dangerously close to his, so close she could feel every breathe and whisper.

“Yes Caitriona?”

“Distraction won’t work either.” That wasn’t strictly the entire truth as her body was fairly screaming at her to wrap her body around his and never let him go, but Caitriona was determined not give in. Not yet.

“Shit..” Came the soft curse.

“Uh huh.”Caitriona’s face split into a broad smile, playfully placing a quick kiss on his lips, “An ‘a’ for effort though.” With a soft sympathetic pat of his thigh, Caitriona turned on her heel and headed towards the bedroom, intent on hunting down what she needed.

“Wait,” She heard Johnathon’s deep voice call from behind her, “You can’t make up rules on the fly. That is constitutionally not allowed.”

“I beg to differ,” Caitriona let out a laugh as she sat down on her side of the bed and snagged a small zippered bag from the bedside table, “It must be allowed, because I just did it.” Her fingers closed around the plastic blister pack filled with oblong white tablets.

The surface of the bed moved as Johnathon large frame sat beside her, a second towel draped over his shoulder. He let out a long sigh, dramatic, over exaggerated sigh. Caitriona popped two tablets
from the packet and snagged a small bottle of water from the table and turned to face Johnathon, who had busied himself from the looks of things, by towelling dry his hair, which now stood up at ridiculous spikes and angles. It took more effort than she thought not to break into a fit of laughter, instead she took steeled her resolve and presented the up turned palm of one hand, with the full water bottle in the other.

Blue eyes flicked from tablets, to bottle, to her face, “Are you trying to ply with drugs so you can have your way with me?” Nevertheless, a large hand supplicated itself to her.

“One, I wouldn’t need drugs to do that and two,” Caitriona dropped the tablets into Johnathon’s waiting palm, “the drugs in question are over the counter Panadol. So are you allergic or do you have some other really good reason not to take them, apart from nah?” She asked, running a hand through the thick tussled strands of blonde hair, gently ordering them until Johnathon looked more like the man she was in love with and less like a startled porcupine. Amused blue eyes, locked with her as he tossed the two tablets his mouth, draining the bottle of water.

Leaning across in front of her, Johnathon set the empty container on the table, pausing on the return journey, “Thank you Caitriona.” He said oh so quietly, in that tone that always shot straight to the most gentle, unguarded parts of her heart. Caitriona smiled knowingly against his lips as Johnathon kissed her. This time, she let the gentle intensity of it pull her headlong, willingly, falling utterly and completely into the couple they were becoming.

“You’re welcome,” Caitriona murmured on an uneven breathe, her heart skipping more than one beat, as the kiss drew to a close. This is what is different, her mind happily sighed as she closed her eyes and breathed in a lungful of that pleasant scent of clean male and something else, deeper, slightly spicy and yet earthy at the same time, a scent completely unique and entirely intoxicating. Their night had been, by any one’s standard, a complicated mess. Both of them dealing with things they wished they didn’t have to and yet, here, quietly floating in the peace and quiet contentment that came from simply being together, all the issues, the consequences, the problems still yet to come, all of that lost focus, blurred and disappeared into the background. This was just her, and just him. Just them.

“It was the second nah if you were wondering.” Johnathon’s voice floated up to her, deep and rich, the timbre of it vibrating against the skin beneath her hands.

“I know.” Caitriona said softly. She took a slow deep breath, and this was what mattered. Really mattered. Turning her body towards his, Caitriona pushed off the bed, lifting and hitching up the bottom edge of the towel that was still wrapped around her. Sliding across she settled onto Johnathon’s lap. Strong arms looping immediately around her, steadying her as she straddled his thighs, Johnathon's bent legs providing a convenient seat. “Are you always going to be this much trouble?” Caitriona asked quietly, dropping her hands to rest on as flattened her hand and pressed her palm against his breast.

Johnathon's head tilted up, “Yes.” Intense blue eyes locked with hers, a gentle contraction of the muscles beneath his skin he pulled her body closer until his chest met hers

“Good.” Caitriona whispered as her mouth found his, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding on. The soft pressure of lips, the slow advance and retreat of tongues as they touched, sent a wave of sensuality washing through her skin and bones. Leaning into his body, the broad chest pressing back against her own, Johnathon slowly relaxed, lowering them both until his back hit the surface of the bed. “This isn’t going to hurt your cuts and bruises is it?” Caitriona breathed, bracing a hand on either side of his head and lifting, her long hair falling around them in a living curtain. One strong hand reached between them and with a quick flick of wrist, the edges of the towel
across her breasts came free, the material falling open with a soft brush against her naked skin.

Deep blue eyes gone almost violet with desire looked up at her “Nah.”

A hand slid up her back, splaying out and drawing her body back close to his, until naked skin slid against skin from hip to shoulder. Yes, Caitriona decided as she fell into Johnathon, finally giving in to the longing that had building in her blood. This, was everything.

Chapter End Notes

Thankyou so much Can't Resist Temptation, MCBS, jbunsick and Janmarie for your wonderful comments last week as always, really appreciate each and every one of them.

Little bit of Johnathon and Caitriona fluff this week. One week I decided to see how many times I heard the word nah was said at my workplace. It was ALOT, like an actual f tonne and hence, when Caitriona asked Johnathon a question, and I was thinking about how he might answer, real life provided the inspiration :)

Next week: back to the dark - Kate and Stephen.

Everyone reading, please have a wonderful week and take care of yourselves out there. Cheers
Stephen twisted the cigar back and forth, slowly rolling the long cylinder between fore finger and thumb. The pungent grey smoke danced in the still air with each slow movement. The evening had been a moderate success by all standards. The look on Chase’s face when he’d been confronted with the inevitable truth that Katherine was pregnant, had been something to behold. The whole scene had been as close to perfect as anyone could have made it. First that Katherine was pregnant, and even more so when Stephen had been rewarded with witnessing the realisation dawn on the Johnathon’s face that the baby at the centre of all this, had been put in Katherine's belly by someone else. Stephen had seen the concern in the detective’s reaction. A low laugh escaped around the thick cigar. The fact that Katherine had willingly chosen to stay, right here with him had made the victory even more delicious. Chase hadn’t been happy about that. He’d known the dumb fuck would probably try to convince Katherine to reconsider. He knew Katherine better than Chase ever would. She wasn’t going anywhere.

The end of the thick roll between his fingers glowed bright red as Stephen took a deep breathe, the contemplation of the sheer variety of destructive thoughts that he knew would rush though Johnathon’s feeble little brain at the situation thrilled him no end. Exactly as he’d planned. The opportunity to personally see the effect of his plans on Johnathon Chase had come quicker than he had anticipated, but the plan had remained the same. Every penny Stephen had needed to spend in order to secure the ticket to that ridiculous dinner had been more than worthwhile. Even Chase’s new whore had proved herself more useful than he’d expected. Stephen grinned darkly, a thick stream of pungent grey smoke leaking from the edge his crooked mouth. The woman had tried to hide it, but Stephen had seen it. The look that had flashed across the whore’s face when he’d pointed out Katherine to her.

Doubt.

All it took was one little seed, and the dark haired man knew right then, he’d managed to plant it. Once planted, all Stephen had to do was propagate it. He already had several plans floating around his head on how to best use this new found advantage. Morgan would play a key part. The leather cushions, slightly stiff in the cool air, protested quietly as Stephen leaned back in the chair, rocking back and forth as he continued to map out careful plan of destruction.

Katherine wasn’t happy with him, that much was highly evident. Her little display in the bedroom had come as small surprise. Stephen had anticipated some repercussions from Katherine, but he’d be lying to himself if he hadn’t been taken a little off guard by strength of her reaction. He had thought, after all the ground work he had so carefully invested in actively making sure Katherine tended to view Chase from the correct perspective, that she would have been more conducive to seeing things his way. He’d hoped she might even become a willing participant in the mission to make sure Chase got what he deserved. From the looks of things, there was still some way to go before that scenario eventuated. Experience told him that Katherine would come around,
eventually. She always did. You just had to hit the right pressure point and Katherine Carmichael was as pliable as putty. Chase’s new whore may well prove to be one such pressure point. Any thoughts Katherine might have about wanting to rekindle a dead history with that blonde fuckwit were now moot. Chase was fucking some two bit actress now and Stephen had no problem with reminding Katherine of that fact. Why the fuck his fiancée persisted in this futile attempt to protect Johnathon Chase was beyond him. At first, Stephen had been willing to give Katherine some time, he wasn’t trying to be unreasonable after all. But if little outbursts like the one that had occurred this evening, continued, well, he sucked on the end the cigar, then he would be left with no option. He’d just have to break Chase without Katherine’s help. No bother to him.

Stephen turned his attention towards the darkened screen of his laptop. The benefit dinner may have been a success but it was but one piece in the many plans Stephen had very deliberately put in place. Plans that needed tending to, continually adjusting, fine tuning. To be successful, Stephen believed in the wisdom of having a back up. Always cover your bases. It was his most important rule. Never broken. All plans had an alternative course of action. Each plan diverse, uniquely different. Anyone looking would never see a pattern. Never be able to link them together. Unless you knew where to look, it was virtually impossible to find any trace leading back to him. It was his safety net. An important feature, given that Chase did have some ability when it came to this type of thing.

Dragging a finger across the trackpad, Stephen waited impatiently for his encrypted email service to load. He was anxious to see if Morgan had completed his mission for the evening. A mission that was both safety net and strategic puzzle piece. He studied the screen silently. If Chase thought he was going to have an easy run with his newest piece of ass, then he was sorely mistaken. Stephen had planted the seed, now it was time to water it. He already had the perfect delivery device. A thick yellow envelope, filled with 10 x 4’s. Glossy colour images that could neither be denied nor ignored. It could not have worked out better, Chase deciding to screw an actress of all people. If there was one group of people who had skeletons somewhere around them, hiding in a closet, just waiting to be used, it was that demographic. Hell, they played make believe all day and relied on public perception. It was the text book definition of low hanging fruit. It would be as easy as stealing money from a blind man to get them to believe whatever the hell Stephen wanted them too.

“Ah.” He commented to himself, blowing out a long stream of fresh smoke and reading the latest update from his hired accomplice. Morgan’s report had arrived. Short and to the point, simple shorthand sentences detailed the night’s progress. Target in custody. Packet delivered to hotel. A broad smile stretched the muscles in his face, a soft clink filling the air as he tapped the cigar on the edge of the crystal tray, the fine powder of ash dropping onto the clear surface. This was excellent news. Chase and his latest dick warmer were about to have more than one issue to deal with. By morning the press would swarm. Stephen would see to that himself and by nightfall, Chase would be defending himself all over again. Stephen wondered briefly, just how many minutes it would take before that actress kicked Chase’s sorry ass to the curb. It had taken Katherine several months before she’d had enough. Something told the dark haired man that with the actress, the wait time would be far less. Of course, Katherine was far more invested in Chase than Stephen suspected the actress was, but either way, Chase was headed for a fall and that was all Stephen cared about it. The time frame was irrelevant, Stephen would teach that bastard a lesson if it was the last thing he did.

Dark thoughts still running through his mind, Stephen pondered the next question posed by his confederate. Girl also in custody, K or E? Keep or eliminate. Stephen’s first instinct was to keep. Racking up a body count might draw unnecessary attention. A serious consideration given Johnathon Chase’s professional background. Still, the bitch was a nothing to him. A common whore from who knew where. Morgan had recruited her. Morgan had interfaced with her. Morgan
was the only face she knew. The woman had evidently played her part, and right now, Stephen
didn’t think he’d have any use for her. Swiveling back and forth, he contemplated the fate of the
hired prostitute. She was a loose end. He hated loose ends. What would it matter? If it got him
what he wanted, what was one more life. Small price to pay really. Stephen was relatively sure no
one on earth would even bother to miss or care if the whore never came home. Odds were, it
wouldn’t even be investigated. Yes. He was probably doing the world a favour. Best to get rid of
the bitch, just to be sure. The less people involved, the better. Leaning forward, Stephen typed
the single character reply then sent the message on its way.

Satisfied with his decision and with the evening’s success, he stubbed out the remainder of the
cigar. Things were progressing satisfactorily and damn if it didn’t feel good. Ten years it had cost
him. Ten years without her. Plans that had been set in motion since they were young children had
been ruined a decade ago and now, it finally felt like the tide was turning. Stephen knew he wasn’t
quite there yet. Old man Carmichael was still being painfully reticent when it came to and mention
of merging family companies. The old man's stubbornness was proving a positive stick in the mud
to Stephen's plans for expansion. When Katherine married him, things would improve, Stephen
knew they would. Her father had always wanted her to go this way, to be with him. The company
was his incentive. The woman, the prize. Stephen would have been in this position two years ago,
if only Katherine hadn’t started with Chase. Stephen had been close then, close enough to almost
taste the success. He'd gotten rid of that last prick she had been seeing and the coast had been clear
and open when fucking Johnathon Chase appeared on the scene. It had changed everything. Chase
had screwed it up. If he hadn't been there, Katherine would have done what she was supposed to.
The companies would have merged. Stephen would have been in control of it all. With business
capital like that, the sky would have been the limit and to top it all off, Katherine would have been
his. Completely his. Instead Fucking Chase had taken her. Taken Katherine and all the business
possibilities right along with her. Not anymore, his mind sounded darkly. Now it was his turn to
take everything from Chase. All his plans, all the plotting, it was all coming together.

Turning off the light, Stephen made his way down the hall towards the master bedroom, his mood
high with the dark thoughts of the ruination of others, namely one Johnathon Chase. He’d never
understood what Katherine found appealing about the second rate detective. Whatever it was, it
was about time she got over it. Stephen’s mind helpfully added a little more fuel to the always
simmering fire when it came to this particular subject. The woman was going to have to learn to do
as he told her. Whether she liked it or not. That was all there was too it. If Katherine kept this up,
Stephen was going to have to prove a point and take some action. Maybe he’d organise a IRS audit.
Jesus, half the time they found things when there was nothing to find and Stephen knew full well,
this time, there most certainly was plenty to find.

He tentatively turned the handle of the bedroom door, the room beyond, dark and silent. Padding
quietly over the bed, he stripped off his clothing and slid under the covers, the crisps sheets cold
against his skin, quickly warmed. He’d think on the audit idea, he supposed. Give Katherine one
last opportunity to come around before he took that next step.

“Why did you do that tonight?” Katherine’s voice cut through still darkness, “Just the truth. Why
did you do that him? To me?”

Stephen rocked his head to one side, seeing the glints of sapphire blue looking back at him in the
dim light. “It was a cancer benefit. How would I have known he would be there Katherine? Be
reasonable. It was a co-incidence and nothing more.”

“Do you ever stop?” Kate breathed, exasperation and weariness colouring every syllable.

“Stop what?”
“Lying.” She pulled the covers up over her shoulder, “Just once, from you, I’d love to hear the truth.”

How dare she call him a liar. His own fiancée. In his own bed. He’d already walked away from her previous little outburst. Once was enough. Two in one night would not be tolerated. The air around them seemed to still, as if the atmosphere itself had sensed the coiling anger inside him. Glaring at her, Stephen turned his body, facing his accuser directly. From the exact folding down of the covers, to the slow twist of his body, to the extension and folding of one arm as he propped himself up. Each movement, slow, meticulous, restrained. “What exactly,” He said with stunning precision, green eyes boring into hers, “do you mean Katherine?”

“You know what I mean Stephen.” Blue eyes glared unapologetically back at him, “Do you know what I was doing? While you were off doing whatever it is you do in that office apart from smoking those vile cigars? I’ll tell you what.” Kate continued without giving him the opportunity to utter another syllable, “I was laying here, trying to think of a time, when you had actually told me the truth. Just one time. And do you know what I came up with?” Kate took a short breathe, “Nothing. Not. One. Thing.” She gave a soft rueful snort, “I should be thanking you really, for tonight’s little stunt. If you thought me seeing Johnathon would hurt me, you were right. It did. For first little bit, Johnathon and I both felt devastated. So congratulations on that. I hope you’re pleased with yourself...”

“And there you go again.” Stephen finally interjected, his face screwed up as if he sucking on a lemon the size of a grapefruit, “Bringing his name up again. And in here. Is there no place Katherine, that we can have that is free of that...”

“You’re damned right I brought his name up Stephen.” Kate snapped, cutting his sentence off midway and violently flinging the covers of the bed, then rolling to her feet as fast as her late stage pregnancy body would allow her. Anger surged through her veins like a raging fire let loose in a pile of kindling, “Do you have any idea what it did to me to see him tonight,” She yanked a dressing robe from the table, thrusting an arm into each sleeve, “To see him and know I had to walk away?” Shaking hands wrapped the edges of the silken material around her swollen stomach, “Of course you don’t. You don’t because you can’t see more than inch past your own nose. It’s all about you and what you think you have the right to.”

Stephen tossed the blankets viciously aside, jumping to his feet in a single smooth motion, fists clenched so tightly, his knuckles turned white, “What I have a right to, is that child in your belly! He is MY son and I guarantee you Katherine, no judge in the land will ever give you sole custody.” He pointed a long finger at her, “And I am warning you, for the last time, you know what you agreed to. One phone call is all it would take and your happy little family would be spend the rest of their lives in federal prison. Your sisters would love that I’m sure. Or how about that precious little Irish slut nurse that you claim is your friend. I could have her on the jobless line within the hour!” His blood was up now, fueled by success and the intoxicating feeling of pure power it brought with it, “And do not think for a minute I could not do the same to Chase.” Dark green eyes flashed at her, “Would you like him to watch as every, single, person, he cares about…. He sneered at her, “disappears. Just vanishes.”

Silence fell. To the outside world the words probably sounded like grandiose threats. Something that should be laughed at. Except this, was Stephen Cross. He had resources, connections and funding to make those threats cross the line from unrealistic, to highly possible. Even the smallest possibility was too much for Katherine to risk. Too much for her too lose. Too many people to suffer for her own stupid decisions. Like the thick black veil that covers the face of those in mourning, the still air settled around Kate’s shoulders, a sickly chill skittering down her spine at the reality of what her life had become. The tears came now despite her best efforts,
“Congratulations Stephen. You win. I get it.” She raised her hands, swiping away the thick tracks of moisture, “I either marry you or,” Her hands dropped in defeat, the palms slapping against her thighs, “I lose my son, my family and the people I care about are ruined or worse. That it? That the way you want this to go?”

“Your words Katherine.” Dark eyes regarded her, now frighteningly calm, “An accurate assessment however.”

“So be it Stephen.” She snatched her phone from the stand, “Your son and I will be perfectly comfortable in the guest room from now on.” She started towards the door, “You can do whatever you fucking like but you will do it alone.” Thin fingers snagged around her arm, like the sinewy vines that slowly encase a tree in the forest, wrapping around strong branches and limbs.

“Do not do this Katherine.” The vines tightened, pulling her back, spinning her on her heel as she tried to pass, as she tried to escape, “You need to calm down and think clearly before you do something you can’t undo.”

Kate stared into green eyes, turned almost black, “I’ve already done that Stephen. I let Johnathon go. If there was one thing in the world I could undo, it would be that.”

“Katherine!” Stephen’s gripped tightened, fingers squeezed into her flesh, hard enough to bruise, “Do not walk out of here. You agreed. You are part of this now. We are to be married. You agreed to be mine.”

“No. I will not be part of whatever sick little game you are playing any longer. We may share a son,” Blue eyes flashed, “and you can threaten me all you like.” Instead of fighting to pull away, Kate drew herself closer, so close her nose almost touched his, “I will never be yours Stephen. That name you’re so afraid of, the man you are so fucking terrified of,” Kate straightened to her full height, too far into this now to back down and not wanting to even if she could, “I will always love him. I will never stop wanting him. I wish the son inside me was his. I will always be his. Always.” Her chest was heaving, “Live with that Stephen.” Kate never saw it coming. The blow that hit the side of her face, leaving the delicate skin stinging and pink. Fine tendrils of pain raced just under the surface, from her lip to her eye socket.

“Live with it?” Stephen growled low in his throat, “Do not ever bring that name up in here again you ungrateful bitch. I think you’ve forgotten who had you first Katherine.” A second blow followed the first, snapping her face in the opposite direction, leaving her dazed, a tangy coppery taste filling her mouth. “You. Are. Mine.” A third blow, a curled closed fist this time, connected with her temple, her head shot back, an eerie soundless dark beginning to cloud the edges of her vision as she swayed unsteadily on her feet. Hands unconsciously covered her stomach in a protective instinct, so strong, that went above any thought of self preservation. “You have always been mine.” Kate heard Stephen’s voice, distended and foggy, floating from somewhere near her ear, felt his rough hands on her. Felt the shove as she was pushed, tumbling forward, the timber end of the large bed striking her kneecaps. “It wasn’t Chase in that car now was it, you fucking lying bitch.” A fist landed on her shoulder, hitting with such force Kate toppled helplessly forward, landing face down on to the soft surface of the bed. Another thud, this time to the back of her head, the impact leaving jagged red streaks dancing in front of the growing inky black consuming her vision. Blurred and confused eyes refused to clear no matter how many times she blinked and tried to focus.

Powerful hands roughly gripped her, impatiently tugging, pulling, ripping at her night dress. The thicker bands of material along the seams marking her skin, as it was dragged forcefully over her flesh. Trying weakly to get her arms under her, Kate pushed back against the spongy surface of
the bed. A mistake to move, she realised far too late, as another punch sent Kate sprawling flat again. This time the wind was driven from her lungs as Stephen’s fist landed squarely in the centre of her back. Pain radiated through every nerve and tendril in her spine, icy and cold and yet, red raw and white hot in intensity. “Do you remember now Katherine,” The distant voice was saying as her lungs cried out for air and her body begged for any protection from the physical onslaught, “Who it was that took you first?”

As a doctor, Kate had seen bodies, when confronted with the immediacy of death, suddenly fit back, against all odds, against what medically should be impossible, the body going to extraordinary means in an effort to preserve and chance at life. The fight instinct, taking over, pushing when surrender was seemingly the only option. That same bone deep sudden sense of desperate urgency filled her now. Get help, her mind screamed. Help. She had to get help. Limbs that refused to follow instruction with any efficiency, flopped useless around. On the verge of blind panic, a single deep voice cut through the pain and creeping fog, its deep tenor echoed softly in the safest recesses of her mind. “If you’re in trouble Kate,” it said, ”Let me help.”

The voice she knew. The voice she loved. Blurry eyes frantically tried to think, willing the darkness to recede. Her phone, if she could get to it, then help would come. Someone would come. Johnathon would come. Her phone was all she needed. Blinking, searching with new found purpose, Kate caught the barest glimpse of one edge, hidden beneath the corner of the crumpled bedding. Hurry, her body and mind fought, engaged in a deathly struggle against inaction unconsciousness would bring. Fingers scrabbled, searching, finally closing around the cold metallic back of her phone. Johnathon, her mind cried, God Johnathon. A text. Already waiting to be sent. If she could just…

The room suddenly tilted and whirled in a dizzying spin that left her mind reeling. Flipped onto her back, another punch landed squarely between her eyes, shattering her nose, spraying them both with fine mist of blood. The darkness now had the upper hand. There was no stopping it this time. No keeping it at bay any longer. The world outside was fading into the very beat of her own heart pounding in her ears.

“It was me Katherine. Not him.” Stephen snarled, grabbing each of her legs and spreading them wide, “You remember don’t you. All those years ago. After the football game.”

Unseen fingers roughly gripped her chin, dazed blue eyes tried to focus on his, tried to see beyond the blinding dark nothingness, “I took you then.” His breath was hot on her cheek, “You remember don’t you!” The voice was all Kate could hear as she slowly fell, drifting further and further away, sinking down into the empty void. It took all the concentration Kate could muster, to lift a hand, so heavy she was convinced somehow it had turned to stone, and laid it protectively on her abdomen, cradling her unborn son, futilely trying to protect him from the violence.


That one, last, word bounced around her head, as the last rays of conscious light yielded to the darkness of night.

The fingers of one hand, wrapped tight around her last hope. The other, protectively cradling her deepest love.

Blue eyes fluttered closed and Katherine Carmichael fell, down through the quiet silence, to the painless oblivion beyond.
Thankyou everyone for all your great feedback. This chapter was dark and not easy to write by any means. The only saving grace is that somewhere down the track, the universe always makes sure assholes like Stephen Cross get their comeuppance. Always.

Next week back to Johnathon and Caitriona for some light and a little back story i think those that know would call it. Seriously thanks everyone for reading and commenting. It might be two weeks before I post again. I have a stack of stuff happening at work that is eating up my free time. Grr, real life hey.
Her heart thundered in her ear so loudly, Caitriona was sure Johnathon must be able to hear it. Her breathing, rough and ragged, struggled make up ground, slowly working, forcing more and more oxygen into her lungs. Muscles that had been tensed in pure pleasure only moments before, released, her entire body collapsed completely in a boneless, sated, heap. It was amazing to Caitriona, how two bodies, two very different bodies, fitted together so perfectly. Without even trying, they just meshed. Physically, emotionally and everything in between, they worked. It was as simple and, as complex, as that. Two halves that completed the whole. Johnathon knew what she needed, when she needed it and if his reaction was anything to go by, Caitriona knew she was definitely doing alright in this department herself.

There was no conscious thought, no trying to please, no need to be anyone or anything other than themselves. Hands, gentle yet firm that had gripped her hips as they had made love, now flowed over her back as she rested her face against the warmth of his neck. Caitriona felt like she could happily float here, in the comfortable post orgasmic haze of each other, for the rest of her life. Legs tangled together as Johnathon slowly rolled, turning them onto their side, a soft sigh falling unbidden from her lips, as Johnathon, slowly softening, slid from inside her. “We really need to do something about that.” Caitriona murmured, running a fingertip along the edge of Johnathon’s jaw, watching has he moved and took care the frustratingly annoying, though pressing need.

A warm, very enticing body slid back against hers, “Not a fan huh?”

Limbs wrapped around her and a slow easy kiss was placed on her waiting lips. “Not of that part.” She nodded in the direction of the small bin sitting beside the bedside table, “The other part,” Caitriona snuggled in close, burying her face against his neck, unable to stop the smile creeping across her face “Huge fan. Huge.”

“Good to hear.” Caitriona felt a low, short laugh run through the warm body beneath her, “but there is no escaping that particular necessary evil.”

“That’s not entirely correct you know.” She tilted her head up, “There is this little invention called the pill.”

“Oh really?” Blue eyes went comically wide, “A pill you say? Well I never.” One blue orb winked, “This is exciting news.”

“I know right.” Caitriona smiled against his lips, finding the temptation to kiss that handsome mouth of his, far too great to resist. A soft hum of approval sounded from deep in Johnathon’s throat as her body curled into his and fingers tangled in his hair, holding his mouth to hers in a slow gentle exploration. “Doesn’t quite cover,” She whispered, a little breathlessly a long series of heartbeats later, “No pun intended, all the bases,” She combed her fingers through the short silky strands of his hand, “but it’s a promising start.”

Truth be known, Caitriona was well aware she really didn’t have much choice in the matter. Given Tony’s behaviour, which Caitriona had little or no trust in, and she still really didn’t know how long he’d been playing around for, unprotected sex with Johnathon, or anyone else, for that matter, was a risk her conscience just wouldn’t allow her to ignore. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t been tested. That she had done as soon as she could, but found herself still painfully waiting for time to pass
before the second test, three months later, would hopefully confirm she was, in fact, totally in the clear.

As for Johnathon, Caitriona knew, he had already been given a clean medical note. It wasn’t exactly the most romantic discussion one could have, but this wasn’t the first time the topic had come up. The first time had been as much a random occurrence as it had been completely unexpected. Caitriona had innocently texted Johnathon and asked what he was doing. Something she’d found herself often doing at various times lately when time zones and oceans caused an unwelcome separation.

Expecting Johnathon to tell her something along the lines of a case that he’d been working on or that he was having lunch or something equally workdayesque, Caitriona been slightly shocked by his answer. Johnathon had calmly informed her that he had been currently sitting in a medical centre’s waiting room.

As one could have predicted given information of that nature, Caitriona had completely panicked. A cold nameless fear had gripped her insides at the thought that Johnathon might have been hurt or shot or something equally has devasting. The ensuing series of quick replies, that felt like they took a lifetime to send and receive, had reassured Caitriona that her nightmares weren’t coming true just yet and that Johnathon was in fact, getting the recommended six month recheck.

Results had quickly followed, revealing that all was well and since it was Caitriona’s firm belief that Johnathon hadn’t slept with anyone else since his split with Katherine, there was no reason for that status to have changed from that point to this. The entire conversation hadn’t been one Caitriona had been expecting to have at the time, but still, given recent developments, she was glad they had at least spoken about it. “I’ll make a doctors appointment for the next day off I get, and then,” Caitriona raised an eyebrow, accompanying it with a soft smile, “Can we revisit this conversation?”

“There is no way on god’s green earth that what we did could make anything worse. Ever.” A hand trailed over her side, skimming past her ribs and down the centre line of her back, eventually settling in the small of her back, “Trust me on that Caitriona.”

“I’d rather there be no cuts and bruises at all.” Caitriona sighed, contenting herself with Johnathon’s gentle touch, “I’m still annoyed that you had deal with his nonsense at all.”

“Well,” Johnathon slid a hand along the back of her thigh where it rested over his hip, “Fair’s fair.”
Caitriona hummed as his mouth lowered to hers, kissing her in a slow, steady, intimate exploration that ignited the warm tingle, deep in her belly. “After all,” Johnathon breathed against her lips as the kiss ended, “You had to deal with Kate right?”

“Slightly different John.” Caitriona let out a slow breath, running her hand along the edge of his jaw, feeling the soft rasp of short stubble beneath her fingertips, “As far I am aware, Kate didn’t get herself arrested, while engaging in prostitution and then decide to go ten rounds with my partner for no reason whatsoever last night.”

“Doesn’t mean she didn’t come with her own little set of trials and tribulations,” His blonde head bowed slightly, until his nose touched hers, “Trade places. Pretty sure you’d do the same for me.”

“You know I would. I would alwa…….” Her voice trailed off at the knowing smile that now greeted her at very close distance. She’d just proved Johnathon’s very point and she knew it. If the situation had been reversed, Caitriona would have been in there, boots, elbows and all, with him. No matter what the situation, no matter who was involved, without a single moment’s hesitation or even a second thought, she’d be in there with Johnathon and helping him however she could. It now sounded a little silly for her to expect him to not want to do the same for her. “Stop that.” Caitriona shook her head at him, tracing the edge of his smile with the pad of her thumb.

“Stop what?” Blue eyes twinkled at her, one neat, quasi innocent, blonde eyebrow raised in question.

“You know what.” Caitriona smiled, latching a finger under his chin and pulled that grinning mouth closer, “You know exactly what.” She sucked softly on his lower lip as she kissed him, feeling her blonde lover immediately respond in kind, matching her move for move and stroke for stroke until Caitriona was hard pressed remembering her own name.

“Was that what I was supposed to stop?” Johnathon asked quietly, drawing the kiss to a close and running his hands down the length of her naked back.

“No.” Caitriona curled into him and tightening her arms around him, “That was definitely not what you were supposed to stop.”

“Thank god. Thought I might have to plead the fifth again there for a moment.”

“And I thought you had already been told about that rule?” She flashed him a closed mouth grin, that was three parts smile and one part smirk.

“Now that you mention it,” Johnathon mused thoughtfully, bodily wrapping around her and turning them until his back rested against the bed’s soft surface, letting Caitriona’s head rest, “I vaguely remember someone saying something or another about that.”

“Trouble maker.” She murmured, nuzzling the soft skin of his neck before she relaxed completely, her head resting comfortably on his shoulder, “Were you this much trouble when you were young?” Caitriona layed an arm across his stomach, idly tracing the subtle line of the muscles she could feel just below the warm skin, “Or is this a recent development?” She placed a soft kiss on the underside of his jaw, breathing in a lungful of his distinctive scent.

“Recent?” An amused blue eye tilted her way, “Hmmm, I don’t know if I’d call it recent, but I do remember Mrs Cooper, the old housekeeper that worked in my parent’s house, telling me that my grandmother used to call me Mister Mischief.”

“Oh really?” Caitriona smiled broadly up at him, the image of a little blonde haired, blue eyed boy,
a miniature version of the man she was currently wrapped around, a boy with that same cheeky grin splitting a young, rounded face appeared in her mind’s eye.

“Mmm. According to her anyway.” The deep tenor of his voice vibrated through her hearing, “I was pretty young at the time,” A look of mock outrage coloured his handsome features, “Sounds like a scurrilous accusation if you ask me.”

“Not sure I believe the judgement of the accused in this particular instance.” Caitriona gave him a poke in the side, “Sounds rather accurate to me.” Gentle fingers started combed themselves through her long hair, her body naturally arching towards his, her eyes drifting closed at the touch. “I get the feeling someone I know might have been a very, curious, little boy with the odd stubborn tendency or fifteen.”

“Stubborn? Since when?” The tone in his voice however, told Caitriona she was right on the money, her description matching completely with the much large and much older grown version the little boy in question, “I do not know this person of which you speak.”

She imagined Johnathon being the type of child that was never still, always getting into something or another. Not in a naughty or destructive way, more inquisitive than anything else. Always looking. Always learning, figuring things out, absorbing the world like dry ground absorbs the rain. A personality trait that would come in particularly handy given his current occupation. It did make Caitriona wonder which ancestor in his past was responsible for that strand in his genetic code. She was betting his mother. She didn’t know why she thought that, Johnathon hadn’t been all that forthcoming with information about either of his parents. It was more of a feeling, she guessed. “Do you remember much of them? Your parents? Your Grandmother?” Caitriona asked softly, smoothing her hand back and forth, gradually working her way up to follow the curve of his ribs from breast to back.

“Bit and pieces.” Came the equally as quiet admission. Caitriona excitedly cautious to get the slightest peak through a curtained window into a world that was both precious and heartbreaking for this man she loved. “I remember the odd thing or two about Grandma and Dad, but not much about Mum.” The surface beneath her hand expanded as Johnathon took a deep breath, “I think she had long hair. Not straight, not curly, more wavy I guess. Dunno the colour, but I think it was like mine.” He paused and Caitriona could almost hear his thoughts trying to sharpen the focus on a long lost image in his mind, blurred around the edges now with the passing of time, “I do remember her voice. I think she used to sing to me but I could never remember the words or even the tune.” Johnathon gave a slight shrug, “It’s hard to know what is real now and what is something I’ve imagined over the years.”

“I’m guessing pictures aren’t a possibility then?” If they were, her blonde bed mate wouldn’t have been wondering, he’d have known, but Caitriona decided to ask anyway.

“Of Mum? No.” Deep regret tinged the edges of his words, and for a moment Caitriona thought she’d made a terrible mistake in pursuing more details. “I didn’t find out until much later, but while Grandma and I were at Dad’s funeral, my uncle was back at the house, burning every picture he could find of her. Anything with Mum, with Dad, even Grandma and all the old photos of her parents. Everything. Nothing left by the time we got home.” A shiver ran through down her back. Caitriona couldn’t even begin to imagine a world where you couldn’t call your mother or your father, let alone never being able to go and pull out one to the dozen or so photo albums that resided in her parent’s living room in Ireland and take a look back in time at your own parentage. Bastard, her mind spat.

The strong arm laying down her back lifted and flicked the edge of sheet over them, heated bodies
now cooling in the early morning light. “It was the only time I ever saw my Grandmother hit anything. When she came home and saw what he'd done, she walked up to him and smacked him straight across the face then told him to get out of the house.” A hint of pride sounded in the deep tones echoing under her ear, “She just stood there, Toe to toe with him. All of about 5 foot and my Uncle was big bloke too. Well over 6 foot, or he always seemed it to me.” Hands drifted down her back, slowly drawing large circular patterns as he spoke, “Remember it as clear as day, Grandma with her hands on her hips like she was daring him to say or do something. He never did though. He packed up his shit and moved to one of the overseer’s houses. I didn’t understand, not really, what had happened until years later when I found out what he’d done.”

“He deserves more than a slap.” Caitriona’s fingers circled a slight bump on one of Johnathon’s rib, the nodule clearly the result of healed break from sometime in the tall man’s past, “Did he ever explain why?”

“No.” Johnathon’s hand slowly moved in long slow circles, stroking the soft skin in the curve of her back, “If I had to guess, I’d say it was because he hated the fact that my mother married my father.”

“Your uncle didn’t like your mother?”

“No. The opposite.”

“Ah..”

The irony of the conversation wasn’t lost on Caitriona. One man having feelings for a woman that he would never be able to have. Sounded uncannily familiar. Made worse, if there was such a thing, because the two men in question here had been brothers. Caitriona couldn’t even begin to imagine how much more difficult something like this would be if Johnathon and Sam were brothers. Good god, she cursed silently, the words unmitigated disaster springing to mind.

“I don’t know if that was the reason for sure,” Johnathon wondered aloud, “I never could get him to admit to it. The closest he ever came was admitting in a rage one night, that he couldn’t stand the sight of me because I had forced Mum to stay with Dad.” The hands on her back stilled, “I had, and I quote, ‘ruined it all.’ ”

“You?” Caitriona lifted, propping herself up on one elbow and studying Johnathon’s face, “What on earth could you have done? You weren’t even a year old? You were only a baby.” No sooner had the words left her mouth, when Caitriona realised that it was precisely because Johnathon had been a baby that had been the issue. If there had been an opportunity to turn things around, which Caitriona suspected, similar to her own circumstances, there would never have been a chance to begin with, but, if there had been, once you put a little baby into the mix, the dynamic would be changed forever. Add in a set of completely different societal expectations, typical of her parent’s generation and Johnathon’s uncle was, in a sick and twisted way, right. Any chance of Johnathon’s mother leaving his father, for another man would have gone from highly unlikely to a definite improbability. “Sounds to me like he is full of shit Johnathon. How long had your parents been together before you came along?”

“Married for just on a year when I was born. But they’d been seeing each other for a couple of years before that I think. I’ve only got other people’s word on that part.”

So this wasn’t a shotgun marriage, Caitriona’s mind stated. The man laying beneath her hadn’t been an accident or an unfortunate byproduct of two many drinks and a moment of poor judgement in the back of a car or something similar. “Was anything ever said about your mother wanting to leave your father or her not being happy with him?”
“Not that I’ve ever been told.” Johnathon’s blonde head shook, “Not sure anyone except Mum would know really know the answer to that one. Can’t see behind closed doors. Maybe her and Dad were having problems. Never going to know. Plenty of things look different on the outside to what they really are.”

That was certainly true, Caitriona reflected. How many times had she been shocked to find out couples, friends that she thought she knew, people that had looked every bit together, in love and perfect, only to find that they been at breaking point for months. Separation seemed to come out of the blue to everyone else, but to the people actually involved, it rarely came as a surprise.

“Hope it wasn’t that way for Mum, but who knows.”

Caitriona saw the flicker in his eyes. Small and it passed in less time than it took for her heart to beat, but it was there. This was a tender spot. One that had been poked at probably his whole life. Had he been reason? Had he caused his mother even a moment of regret? Had he ruined his mother’s chance at happiness? Caitriona had seen the terrible thought flash across his mind. Oh Johnathon, her mind sadly sighed, her heart aching for the hidden pain destructive thoughts like those could bring. Thoughts made all the worse because there would never be a way to resolve them. There was no one left to ask. No real way to ever know. Caitriona herself wasn’t sure what she would have done, had she found herself married, with a baby in her arms and hit with the sudden realisation that she didn’t love her husband and wanted to be with someone else.

Would she stay? For the baby’s sake? The romantic side of her mind wanted to believe that she would leave. Take the baby and leave. Be with the man she loved and live happily ever after. That’s what should be the perfect solution.

Real life, however, was very rarely, if ever, perfect.

Caitriona tightened her arm across his chest, “I think if your mother wasn’t happy, people in the house would have picked up on it.” She placed a soft kiss on the naked skin near her cheek, “Someone would have said something. Your father would have known.”

“Maybe. I know Dad loved Mum.” Caitriona could hear the soft smile in his voice and was grateful that not all Johnathon’s memories were tinged with greyness of never knowing, “I remember him telling me he did.” Johnathon slid an arm out from beneath the sheet, giving a slight grunt as he extended and arm, reaching the extra distance, straining, but at last wrangling his phone from the far bedside table. Propping the device on his chest, he pressed a fingertip to the back, unlocking it and scrolling through a handful of pictures, stopping at the last one. “Here,” He tilted the screen towards in Caitriona’s eyeline, “It’s the only picture I have of any of them.”

Blue eyes blinked slowly at her and shifted from her face to the phone. She knew what Johnathon was offering. The invitation to not only look in through those windows of his past, but come inside the room with him. All the way in. To share things with her which were so personal to him, things that clearly still hurt, things that Johnathon just as clearly considered so precious that, up until right now, he had rarely spoken of, in any intimate detail. Broad sweeping outlines of his past, yes. Johnathon had told Caitriona the basic generalities when they’d first started seeing each other. She hadn’t pushed because, even then, before Caitriona had gotten to know the man laying beside her, it had been blatantly obvious that anything to do with his parents and his childhood stirred up strong emotions. Strong, deep emotions. Personal and private.

Taking the phone from his hands, Caitriona silently studied the image. The coloured picture showed a small boy, no more than a toddler, dressed in miniature denim jeans and equally tiny work boots that looked liked they almost came up to his little knees. A blue and black checked shirt covered his tiny torso, the ends of the long sleeves rolled up, the thick collar, turned neatly
down beneath head of blonde hair, so shiny, it was almost golden in the bright sunshine. Caitriona’s face split into a brilliant smile, “You?” She glanced up at Johnathon’s face.

“Me.” He nodded, “I was maybe two and half I think.”

For the briefest moment Caitriona wondered if someday, she might be the photographer taking a similar picture of her own little blonde haired boy. Was that something she even wanted? Yes, her minded whispered, with the right man. Yes. That was something she wanted. “Johnathon, you look adorable.” Caitriona commented, pushing the thought, slightly unusual for her, having never really considered the prospect of having children before, to the back of her mind. “Little country boy huh?” She gave Johnathon a playful nudge, kissing the edge of his scowl before returning her gaze to study the picture.

Looking like that, Caitriona mused, inspecting the miniature version of the man she knew, Mister Mischief would have been able to get away with almost anything. It would have been impossible to say no to him, if for nothing more than the cuteness factor alone. Taking the opportunity presented to her, Caitriona studied the image carefully. Johnathon, was standing beside the kneeling form of a broad-shouldered man, whose back had been to the camera. A tall man from the looks of things, dressed almost identically to Johnathon, the only exception, a large cowboy hat adorning his dark haired head.

The pair in the picture were in front of an impossibly large tractor tyre. The older of the two appeared to be wrestling with an even larger spanner, at least a foot, maybe two feet long. The tool’s end, attached to one of the bolts around the hub of the tyre. Johnathon’s tiny arms raised full stretch above his head, his infant hands wrapped around one end of the spanner in an apparent effort to help, his little feet barely touching the ground. A small black dog, or it may have even been a puppy judging by its size in comparison, sat patiently at Johnathon’s feet, it's tiny dark head tilted up, watching the whole thing with interest.

“That’s Boots,” Johnathon pointed a finger at the little dog, his face lighting with a brilliant smile, “Dad brought him for Mum when I was born. Mum called him Boots because he always slept in Dad’s work boots. He was good little dog, had him for a few years after I lost everyone.” The fingertip moved from the animal to the man, “And that,” His finger touched the shoulder of man, “That’s Alexander William Chase.” Caitriona felt the heart beneath her head miss a beat, “That’s my Dad.”

Named after his father, Caitriona’s mind sounded, knowing now where Johnathon’s middle name, Alexander, had originated. It was a good thing, she mused, Johnathon William just didn’t have the same ring to it. Johnathon Alexander Chase worked much better in her estimation. She studied the image of his father. Clear reflections of the man in the picture echoed in the body laying against her. The same tall height, the identical square set of his broad shoulders, strong wrists and arms. Caitriona suspected Johnathon was more like his father than just the sharing of a name. The dark hair though, jet black from what Caitriona could tell, now that was distinctly different from both the golden haired boy in the picture and the grown man in her arms. This pictured seemed to validate Johnathon’s earlier hypothesis that his blonde hair had come from his mother. It definitely looked like it hadn’t come from his father. “I think you look like him,” Caitriona ran a hand across Johnathon’s shoulders, “Specially through here.”

“A bit.” Came the concession, “His hands always seemed huge to me,” Johnathon smiled, flexing his own in comparison, “Think that was just because I was so little. Everything looks big when you’re little. I don’t really remember too much.” His voice went distant a moment, “I do remember, very clearly, him picking me up and sitting me on the sliprail fence that overlooked long paddock.” There something in his tone that made Caitriona still completely, almost giving her the sense that
she should hold her breath, as if the slightest sound would somehow shatter the reverential
moment. “His hand was here,” Johnathon’s hand splayed out across his chest, “So wouldn’t fall.
He told me I had to always do what I thought was right. No matter what. Even if it hurts. Even if
you hate it. Even if you don’t want to. You do what is right.”

So that’s where he got that from, Caitriona’s mind sounded, that unbendable sense of honour that
seemed to be her lover’s default setting. His father. Tears misted in the back of her eyes as she
realised Johnathon had spent his entire life living up to someone he’d barely known and yet,
respected so very deeply that it made Caitriona’s heart ache to think that Johnathon would never
hear his father tell him he was proud of him.

“I remember the words so clear and his hand.” Blonde brows knit, “I wish I could remember more.
For the longest time,” The deep voice so soft, it was barely above a whisper, “I wished that I could
reach in through the picture and just turn Dad around, so I could see his face. Just once would be
enough. So he could he help me remember what he looked like, really looked like.” Caitriona felt
his body give a bit of shudder, as if Johnathon was brushing away snow from the shoulder of his
coat. The memory fading, the solemn quiet broken, his voice brightening, “Got the hat somewhere
though. So that’s one thing at least.”

Too close, Caitriona realised. The subject was too close for Johnathon to keep going. He’d closed
the door, not to keep her out, but because he couldn’t be in there anymore. Maybe the door would
swing open again when she least expected it, as it had this time, or maybe it would stay shut
forever. Either way, Caitriona was content to give Johnathon that space. She was on the inside
now. Right there with him. He’d shared with her something she hadn’t anticipated or even
expected and his sharing of it had filled her with a feeling so precious and wonderfully intimate it
was hard to describe.

Caitriona gently put the phone down on the flat surface of Johnathon’s chest, and lifted, drawing
herself up, wordlessly taking his face in her hands and holding his gaze, just staring into the ocean
of blue for a long series of heartbeats. She could see all it, right there. The pain of wanting to know
the unknowable. The memory of a father that he never really knew, slowly being lost to the
ravages of time and the acceptance that Johnathon would never be able to find the answers he
wanted. It made her soul cry out for him and at the same time, Caitriona couldn’t help but feel the
warm flush of pride when at the thought that the little farmer’s boy, who’d had lost everyone he’d
ever cared about, shouldered the blame for something that was never his fault, had still somehow
managed to grow into an intelligent, responsible, deeply honourable man who refused to let his
past dictate his future. A man who despite it all, hadn’t turned bitter, or wallowed in self pity. The
hurt was still there. Caitriona stroked his cheek, fingers grazing back and forth along the line of his
jaw, feeling the tickle stubble on his chin, a man who despite it all, was still able to smile, to laugh,
to care and to love.

In the quiet of the hotel room, Caitriona silently made a vow, hoping, but not really knowing for
sure, if two parents might just be watching over the little boy in the picture from wherever they
were. If she did nothing else in her life, Caitriona would never let Johnathon Alexander Chase face
a loss like that again.

Not on her watch. Not while his heart was in her keeping.

Not now.

Not ever.

Without breathing a single syllable, Caitriona held his gaze and raised herself up, sliding her body
across Johnathon’s until she straddled him, aware of the naked skin on naked skin. Taking one of
the large hands currently resting on her folded thighs, Caitriona gripped Johnathon’s wrist and spreading the long fingers wide, turning his empty palm towards her. The throb of his heart moved the skin beneath her fingertips as it pulsed in his wrist, his chest rising and falling as he breathed beneath her, deep blue eyes found hers. Unguarded, honest and steady. Slowly, Caitriona pressed his palm to her breast, holding it against her skin, directly above her heart.

Johnathon didn’t speak. He simply took her hand, fingers running along hers, as if he was feeling his way. Lowering it, he pressed Caitriona’s palm against the surface of his chest, the slow steady beat, drumming under palm.

The world seemed to narrow, as if everything else suddenly ceased to exist.

Not the hotel room.

Not the walls.

Not even the bed.

Nothing.

In a quiet stillness, a place where words would never have been enough, the connection between them as strong as the need to be together, two people silently said I love you.

Real life may not always be perfect, but this, Caitriona reflected, falling into the endless blue, was about as close to perfect as anyone could get.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry everyone, but this will be the last chapter for two weeks. Thank you to you all for your comments and for reading. A special thanks to those of you who are new readers and took a chance on something different. All your feedback is greatly appreciated. Have a wonderful couple of weeks everyone and stay safe.

Next Chapter - Back to the dark with Kate with the maniac.

Cheers and thanks again.
Silence

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains depictions of the aftermath of domestic and sexual violence. Please proceed with caution.

The sound came from somewhere far off. Somewhere off in depths of the pitch black that was all encompassing.

Move.

The words, no more than a faint whisper, like the shadow in the corner of your eye that you are never quite sure if you really saw at all.

You have to move.

Had there been a noise at all or had she imagined it.

Move.

The voice seemed stronger now. Louder, more insistent, cutting through the suffocating darkness she was floating in.

Get up. Move.

Other sounds slowly began filtering through the inky black. The rasp of her lungs slowly pushing air in and out. The thrum of her heart beating. Slow, steady, hypnotic. From somewhere further off, the gentle trickle of water running. If it wasn’t her imagination, perhaps a dream.

Move, the voice urged again. You have to get up. Before it’s too late. Move!

Neither imagination or dream, Katherine Carmichael finally recognised the voice as her own. She blinked, first once and then again and again until the black void filling her vision slowly dissolved. Unconsciousness begrudgingly slinking back, loosening it’s deathly hold, first to a smoky grey, and finally, to the bleary technicolour that seemed so bright it almost hurt her eyes.

Fragments of memory, darted across the back of her eyes as she tried to order the scattered thoughts into rational logic. Of words she said, of Stephen’s dark face. Of pain. She was on her back, Kate realised, the white patterning of their bedroom ceiling stared silently down at her.

On her back.

On the bed.

In their bedroom.

Kate tried to lift her head, immediately regretting it a moment later when her vision began swim and a wave of sickening dizziness brought bile rising to her throat. Moving wasn’t as good idea as
she’d told herself it was. Sharp searing pain descended. White hot tendrils, racing through her temple, her eye, her back, her side, her nose. Not even her teeth seemed escape the onslaught.

Groaning, Kate lifted a shaking hand to her head, the memory of what had happened became clearer now. Reality came crashing back like the tidal wave that crashed through the tranquility of a tropical island paradise.

Hit.

He’d hit her…The baby, her mind screamed.

Hands immediately fell to her swollen abdomen, frantically feeling for any movement and finding none. Don’t panic, Kate chanted, the doctor within trying to calm the expectant mother laying vulnerable, weak and terrified on that bed with her.

Turn on your side and don’t panic.

Fingers curled in the tangled bedding, the fitted sheet giving her the leverage she needed. Drawing her legs up, pushing, pulling and hauling, Kate eventually, awkwardly, managed to flop onto her side. God please, her mind begged as palms pressed against warm skin stretched tight over her unborn son, please no.

The relief was almost overwhelming when at last, a small foot kicked out in rebellion at having been disturbed. Tears prickled the back of her swollen eyes as Kate soothed her hands back and forth. “You’re alright.” She whispered, letting the tears fall, “It’s alright.” The words as much for herself as for the small soul inside. Getting her hands under her, she slowly pushed herself upright.

Head spinning, her heart now pounding so fast in her ears she could hardly separate the beats, Kate swayed unsteadily on the edge of the bed, every ounce of concentration she had focused entirely on breathing. Just breathe and hope the dizziness will pass.

Looking down, her nightdress though torn along one seam, was bunched around her waist, the milky white of her upper thighs dappled with lurid purple bruised flesh resembling fingerprints. Like a train emerging from the darkness with of a tunnel, the stark realisation of exactly those marks meant hit deep inside her. Part of her felt broken and yet, another part of her found some comfort in the thought. Denying the monster in the house was no longer a possibility. Decisions were easier now. First thing first. She had to get herself up. Had to get moving.

Shaking fingers lifted to touch the swollen bridge of her nose, the bone beneath misshapen and bent. Broken, Kate knew. The slow ooze of blood leaking, with the aid of gravity, down the back of her throat, left a thick coppery taste in her mouth. A soft sound drew her attention and she looked down to see a slow circle of red spread across the torn material across her thigh. A second drop followed the first as a fresh trickle of blood slide down her upper lip and dripped to the surface below. One eye, puffed and swollen almost shut was too painful too touch, so she didn’t. Ribs ached as she tried to suck in a deep breath, finding it almost impossible to catch fill her lungs with the oxygen she knew she needed.

Jesus Christ.

Running a shaking hand through her hair, as Kate leaned on her knees and concentrated on breathing. There was no staying now. No making it work. She couldn’t stay. Not now. “I’m sorry.” She whispered, from behind closed eyes, tears coursing down her face. Her family, Emma, even Johnathon. She couldn’t protect them all. Only one. Her son was all that mattered. Staying here was more dangerous than leaving. She couldn’t protect her son, if she was dead and for the first
time, Kate thought that was a real possibility. She didn’t quite know how she was going to do it yet, have this baby alone, but she’d figure it out. She had to. Right now, all she had to do was grab her phone and her purse and leave. Just get away. Think about the rest later.

Hunting through the destruction that had been their bedding, Kate searched for her phone. It had to be here somewhere. She turned over edges of the sheet, lifted pillows, looked in the folds of the thick comforter, all the while fighting with dogged determination against the shortness of her breath and unsettling blurred vision and pounding in her head. Pushing slowly to her feet, she wavered and thought for a moment that the dizziness might overwhelm her. Steadying herself, she waited for the wave to slow in intensity as she made her way to her bedside table. Damned phone had to be here somewhere. She remembered using it so it had to be here.

She was about to pull open the top drawer, when a sound, or rather the absence of it, made her blood run cold.

The water had stopped running.

The shower had turned off.

Stumbling and staggering, one hand supporting her pregnant belly the other gripping the wall for stability, Kate made for her dressing table.

Her handbag, sitting on the polished surface, her coat, draped over the edge of the nearby chair. She would grab it and go. Escape now the only way forward. Get out, her mind chanted. Get away. Run. Kate was concentrating so hard that she never heard the footsteps close in from behind.

“Katherine.” Smooth tones sent a shiver down her spine, a sudden fear that she’d never really felt before seized her, instantly stilling her feet. Kate knew exactly how the deer in the headlight felt now. “Let me help you.” A hand reached out and softly gripped her elbow, “I think you need to sit down.” Stephen pulled out the chair, “You’re as white as a sheet.” The gentleness of his actions was so incongruous with violence that had preceded them that it made Kate’s head spin.

“Stephen..don’t.” She didn’t know why she didn’t just lash out. Push him away with what little strength she had and run. Perhaps it was the persistent weakness, perhaps it was bone rattling fear, but even to her, Kate's protestation sounded eerily half hearted. It was as confusing as the rattled thoughts that floated around her head and the slack response of her limbs to even the most simple of commands.

“Now come Katherine.” Clad only in a stark white bath towel, wrapped around his waist, his naked skin still damp from the recent shower, Stephen's voice was drifted close to her ear. She felt the sticky dampness as Stephen wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “Sit down, before you fall down.” He nudged her towards the waiting chair, “Rest there and I’ll get something to help clean up a little.”

The edge of the seat hit the back of her legs and Kate over balanced, plopping heavily down into the chair. She watched as Stephen turned and disappeared back into the bathroom, returning moments later with a damp cloth. Shaky, breathless and feeling like at any moment she might topple over and yet, paradoxically, the innate urge to move was so strong Kate could almost taste it. If only her vision would clear. Her mind felt like snow globe that had been shaken and was spinning, drastically lurching from side to side.

“Here,” His dark head leveled with her as he knelt in front of her, reaching up to dabbing the slow trickle of blood beneath her nose, “There. That’s better.” Green eyes surveyed the damage, “You might need to rest in the house a few days I think.” He murmured, running the cool cloth over the
swollen skin beneath her eyes, “But it’ll be alright. You’ll be as beautiful as ever in a few days.”

Surely Stephen couldn’t be seriously trying to compliment her about her beauty when she was sitting here covered in blood. Maybe she was dreaming after all. Only this dream was more like a nightmare. She’d wake up soon. All dreams, even nightmares, end eventually. Her eyes drifted closed as her head spun so viciously that her stomach threatened to rebel. “I think I need to go to the hospital.” She murmured, rapidly swallowing, trying to make sense of it all and not empty the contents of her stomach onto the floor. This is more concussion, the doctor inside her knew. This wasn’t normal. This was something serious. Her head felt like it was slowly filling with thick honey, a persistent throbbing pain behind her eyes seemed to be steadily growing with each passing moment. Her heart felt like it was beating triple time and yet she still felt breathless, like she was running a marathon for hours and hours uphill.

“Oh come now.” Stephen crooned, ignoring her wince as the cool cloth touched a tender part of her shattered nose, “I’m sure after a good nights sleep you’ll feel better.”

“No.” Kate swayed in the chair. Something was really wrong here, she could sense it. She gripped the arms of the chair, feeling the cold sweat begin to break out over her body, the knuckles on her curled hands white, as blood began to be shunted back towards her body's most vital parts, “Stephen, get me to hospital. Now.” Her words began to slur and she felt her left side began to tingle.

Brain hemorrhage, her mind screamed. “Please,” Kate begged, cradling the unborn son inside her, the icy tendrils of fear reaching out of the darkness at her, seeping in wherever it could, like a cold winter wind under the gap of an ill fitted door. Her legs were beginning to numb now, her breathing beginning to slow despite her need for air and the heaviness in her mind calling her to let go. “Call an ambulance.” Kate tried to fight it, tried to push back the black, knowing her very life depended on it. “God Stephen, please,” She wavered, her eyes rolling back into her head as fought, struggling to hold onto the light, “Please call…Johnathon..please…John…”

Like tide, the sinking darkness could be held back no more. “Please.” Blue eyes closed as her head rocked back, “Johnathon…” Kate thought she heard someone calling her name, but suddenly it didn’t matter anymore.

Sound and everything else, the pain, the fear, even the beating of her own heart, faded slowly away.

Leaving nothing but complete silence.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter:

Mr Chase deciding it is time to share something he has deliberately hidden from the world and from one Miss Balfe before it is too late.

Thanks everyone for reading and commenting and you all have a great week and take it easy out there.

Cheers
Johnathon grabbed the last clean shirt from the hanger and made a mental note to get laundry done before he found himself having to selectively recycle clothing using the well-established smell test, as used by college students around the globe. It was something in that room, he concluded thoughtfully, finding a dark green shirt, his least favourite, but he didn't have much choice in the matter given the limited selection and his second change of clothes in the last handful of hours. He’d joking suggested to Caitriona that the room needed a cleansing or something equally as illogical but, when Caitriona’s phone had rung, yet again interrupting the last of their remaining intimate time together, Johnathon began to rethink the level of seriousness with which he might revisit the idea of supernatural intervention.

Tucking the long tails of the button up shirt into the top of his pants, then slowly rolling the sleeves up until they loosely circled the middle his forearm, Johnathon pondered the situation. If anyone had of asked him what he might be dealing with in the past twelve hours, he’d have probably grumbled something about benefit dinners, tight dress shoes and having to sit through inane conversation with people he had to pretend to be polite towards.

God.

If only, Johnathon’s tired mind sounded.

One large hand reached out and snagged a leather belt, twisting and treading the end through the loops of his jeans. Instead Johnathon had found himself dealing with a threat of mortal harm from a certain co-star, a pregnancy scare from his ex-girlfriend, who Johnathon was privately convinced, was in far more trouble than she was letting on, and then the apparent arrest of the very same co-star of the death threat fame, who would have given their left nut and probably their right one too, for the chance to be in the position Johnathon himself had been in with Caitriona when the damned phone call of interruption had sounded.

And that hadn’t been the end of the frustration either. The interruption, a call from the production studio as it turned out, had brought with it a real kick to the rear end. The executive in question had asked, no, Johnathon mentally corrected, had demanded, Caitriona be on the first available private jet back to Glasgow.

Away from New York, away from any paparazzi, away from any unwanted attention, and, though the studio didn’t know it, away from him. the former, Johnathon could agree with if he was pushed, but the last one. No. He wasn’t a fan of that idea at all. Johnathon hadn't been expecting to see Caitriona at all this weekend, but not that she had been with him, he wanted to squeeze every last moment together out of the opportunity that he could. Caitriona leaving early than her scheduled take off much later in the day, had thrown a complete spanner and toolbox into the works.

Time that Johnathon thought he’d still have today, had been ripped away with that studio call. They had an hour if they were lucky. One hour. The very thought of the limit made the remaining time somehow seem even shorter. For the longest moment, Johnathon gave serious consideration to throwing it all to hell and just getting on the plane with Caitriona. Flying across the Atlantic with her and not be separated by a thousand miles. A distance that emotionally Johnathon knew was going to feel at least ten fold when the reality of what being apart set in.
But, Johnathon blew out a long breath and sat down on the edge of the bed, there was still work to do in New York. Work he couldn’t just shrug off. People were counting on him, expecting him to solve these cases. Families were trusting him. As much as the idea of spending time with Caitriona was overwhelmingly appealing, Johnathon couldn’t ignore the heavy weight of responsibility that settled firmly across his shoulders.

He wasn’t the only one who had work commitments, he mused quietly, bending and starting to apply shoes and socks. Caitriona staying here with him wasn’t exactly an option even without the disaster that was Sam Heughan. Throwing an entire production into chaos because one of the main players decided she wanted to spend some more time with her real life romantic interest wasn't something Caitriona would do. Not that he would ever want her to either. Her work was as important as his and Johnathon never wanted to be the reason Caitriona might give up on that. If she ever wanted to leave her career of her own accord then that was perfectly fine with him, but Johnathon wasn't about ever make it an either or situation. Caitriona could no more walk away from her commitments that Johnathon could his.

While he admired the highly vocal and spirited argument his tall dark haired lover was currently involved in on the phone in her own hotel room, Johnathon had the distinct feeling nothing short of a national disaster was going to stop the inevitable. Not with the photos that had apparently surfaced within hours of Sam’s release. Photos that showed a very intoxicated Sam Heughan at the arrest site beside a wrecked and ruined luxury car. Where and how those photos had magically found their way into the public domain, was, as of yet, an unsolved mystery.

Johnathon had already decided he’d look into that as soon as he had the time. Something about it just didn’t sit right with him. In any case, to say things had rapidly gone into the shithouse was the understatement of the year. The PR department was in reputation control and they wanted their stars home. Now. Safely tucked away in Scotland. Hidden from the glare of the tabloid and wider press. Hunker down and let the shit storm pass.

Either way, it was a good bet that the upcoming week wasn't going to be you're average easy going production week, if such a thing even existed. It was going to be full on, hectic and locked down tighter than a fishes asshole. Laying low and working long hours was going to be the order of business. One that would probably start the moment Caitriona’s feet touched Scottish soil. Even if Johnathon could somehow ignore his responsibilities and go with Caitriona, chances were they wouldn't get to spend much time together anyway until the weekend.

“And so it begins.” Johnathon murmured as he tightened one lace, lifting his leg and starting on the other. They would have to deal with distance for the moment and, he sighed, the press attention this was going to bring.

Johnathon had figured early on that sooner or later, he was going to have deal with media and the requirements of image control that came along with the woman he was choosing to spend his time with. He was under no illusions that being with Caitriona meant, at some point, he was going to have sacrifice at least a little of the privacy he’d personally, spent a lifetime cultivating. It was as unavoidable to him as the living the perils of his law enforcement work were going to become for Caitriona. Being with Johnathon meant she would be exposed, at least in some capacity, vicariously through him, to the darker side of humanity and evil horror that he often dealt with in the pages of cold cases he worked. It was part of his life and so, it would be part of hers. Just as this new media consideration was going to become an aspect Johnathon would need to consider. Whether he liked it or not, Johnathon was going to have to learn to deal with the loss of privacy and entertainment industry related downsides. All part of the give and take, he supposed. If they were going to be a relationship together, one that went further than rush of release in a bed over a weekend away, then they were both going to have accept some of the less favourable aspects of their separate working lives. If the weekend was indication, they would figure it out together, Johnathon reasoned with a
soft smile.

Despite all the interruptions and what not, they had somehow still managed to spend good portion
of the impromptu weekend together. Hectic or not, interruptions, phone calls and all the rest of it,
Johnathon wouldn’t have traded a single second of it. He’d never expected for this to get this
serious this fast. Didn’t think he’d fall so completely. Not after Kate. Not after everything he’d
been through.

Somehow, Johnathon wasn’t really sure how just yet, but somehow, Caitriona had been able to
break through the pain and fear of being hurt again and had given his heart a chance to beat again.
Without Johnathon even realising it, Caitriona had him. In everything she did and said, in
everything that she was, inside and out. She had him. Johnathon had doubts about love before.
Debated with himself if the thing even existed. It had meant nothing more than a kick in the guts
for him in the past. Just when you thought people could be trusted, that they wouldn’t leave, that
things might be alright, it always turned bad and before you knew it, you ended up with alone and
your heart or life in pieces.

That was what love, in all it's different forms, had been for him. His mother. His father. Both dead
before he could even known what love was. Then later, as younger man, the first woman he’d ever
really felt something other than a passing interest in, had died, right before his eyes. Killed by a
bullet meant for him. One hand lifted, fingers pressing the material of his shirt against the skin
beneath his arm, the slightly circular indent, a lifelong marker of the bullet and the scar he would
always carry. Healed and almost invisible now, but every now again, it ached, like the bad memory
it would always be.

Johnathon stood, gathering up his wallet and silver watch from the surface of the bed. Then there
was Kate. Someone he'd would have probably stayed with, had events not unraveled the way they
did. It was well and truly over now, but Johnathon had loved her. It wasn’t the same as what he felt
for Caitriona now, no where near it, but it had been love. Or at least some form of it. If he was
honest, Johnathon knew he still felt something towards the woman and he suspected he always
would but knowing what he did he now. Knowing how it felt to be with Caitriona, the difference
was night and day and there was no going back from that

A thumb pressed the metallic clasp of his watch closed, the soft click sounded loud in the silence of
the room. Everything about this relationship was different. Johnathon knew it as surely as he knew
his own name and yet, when he’d tried to quantify that difference into some tangible quality, he’d
come up with nothing more than, it just was. After all, his scientific mind reasoned, how do you
quantify a feeling. One like the feeling Johnathon got when Caitriona walked in the room.
Whenever she spoke. Whenever she held him. Whenever she touched him. It was like nothing he
had ever felt. Intense, strong, deep and yet, Johnathon took a breath and let it out, safe, steady and
right.

So safe that he found himself telling her things that he rarely allowed his own mind to think about
it, let alone share it with another human being. The desire to share that which he had previously
hidden had felt right, so he’d done it. Done it and didn’t regret it. Not a single for a second. His
eyes drifted to his open suitcase. The top pushed back, leaning upright against the wall. The
smallest sliver of the corner of two large envelopes barely visible where they poked out from under
the luggage strap. Silently padding over, strong fingers slowly pulled at the smaller of the two.

Peeling back the flap, Johnathon thumbed through the stack of papers inside. He didn’t have to
read them. He knew exactly what they contained. The contents meant very little to him in terms of
who he had become as man, but what was in there, he eyed the envelope, had the absolute worst
track history of changing everything and anyone. Change who they were, how they acted, what
they thought. Even if they didn't change, sometimes just the knowledge of that the information that envelope contained was enough to be a problem. And worse, it was the proverbial double-edged sword. Hiding it was also a great way to start a fight and revealing it, was usually an even better way to cause problems.

Which is why, Johnathon had planned to show Caitriona later on today. When they both would have time together to work through issues in hopes of avoiding the pitfalls Johnathon had fallen into in the past. With the latest studio demands, that plan had been shot to hell and Johnathon found himself hesitating. Not because he thought Caitriona was going to be one of those people who changed, but because he had wanted the time to explain himself and the reasoning behind why he'd chosen to do this the way he had. The short time window made him question if now was the right time. Things were going great at the minute and what would it really matter if he kept this detail to himself for another few months. It wasn’t going to change Caitriona. Johnathon was already certain of that and to make sure nothing come back to hit them from around corners, Johnathon had waited this time. Deliberately putting in every protection he could think of to help Caitriona, to help them both if the topic ever reared it's ugly head. He had waited, waited until they would both be able to find peace of mind. All those possible future questions should now be short circuited by the pure power of logic reasoning.

Logic, Johnathon knew.

Logic he trusted and this time, he was determined to avoid any and all mistakes he'd made in the past. Given the safe guards, his blond head gave a slight nod, filtering through the options and the facts given the new conditions, maybe it would still be alright to show Caitriona now, even though time was short. For once, the muscle beating steadily in his chest, overruled the stunning logic of his intelligent mind. It was time, a voice from deep inside his heart sounded, she deserves to know. It was time. Decision made, Johnathon grabbed his jacket from a nearby chair, and tucked the envelope into the breast pocket. It wasn't as if he was showing her anything earth shattering or even particularly important, but he'd never wanted to be anything other than completely honest with her, so yes, it was time. The thought did cross his mind that there was a real possibility Caitriona might be upset with him for not telling her sooner. Broad shoulders shrugged, all he could so was explain to her best he could, in the limited time they still had. Johnathon felt sure Caitriona would understand, even if she didn’t agree with him completely, she would at least see his point of view.

Johnathon gave the envelope in his jacket one last settling tap before turning his attention back to the second, much larger packet. This one wasn't going to be so easy. His hand paused for a just a moment, the confidence in his decisions plummeting like a stone down a well. This one, unlike the first envelope, had never ever been shown to another living soul on earth. Even his own eyes had never read the contents.

Johnathon had, many years ago, had the contents scanned. A digital copy of the envelope’s contents created. Insurance in case something disastrous happened to the irreplaceable contents. The copy was now stored digitally on a private storage device and locked in a bank vault. Strong fingers tugged at the plastic heavily padded packet, the stiff edges crackling as he moved it, handling it with extra care so a to not harm the precious contents, as the widest section of the container came free the safe confines of the suitcase. Blue eyes studied the packet silently. The silver seal from the international bank, shining, unbroken in the dim light.

Slowly, Johnathon turned the envelope over, his thumb tracing a straight path, following the square of a protruding edge of the object ensconced inside. He'd never been able to open it. Never been able to ever read the information it contained.

“I’m sorry.” His deep voice whispered, his touch following the thick, straight edge, feeling the
spine of a book beneath the thick padded covering. Long fingers splayed out across the papered surface, resting there as if he were feeling the heat from fire on a bitterly cold night. “Never been strong enough.” Johnathon closed his eyes. He hated the weakness. Hated that he’d never been able to overcome it. He done many difficult things in his life. Some of it personal, most of it professional. Seen things he wished he hadn’t, spoken with people who had done things that made his blood run cold. When it came to this, Johnathon swallowed stroking the envelope with his thumb, he’d never been able to get past the fear of the hurt it might bring.

Standing stock still for a long series of moments, staring that packet, teetering on the edge of the cliff. No. He couldn't. That fear, the one he’d had his whole life, was still there. A fear so strong, Johnathon could almost taste it.

With a step backwards and a long swallow of defeat, Johnathon slowly returned the packet to its resting place.

There were somethings he would share today.

And one, he could not.

Chapter End Notes

Nest Week: Stephen and Kate.

I hope you are all doing okay with the virus situation. Thanks so much for continuing to read and comment and please, take care everyone.

Cheers
Control

Chapter Summary

Posting a little early because I know a bunch of people have recently found themselves in a position where they might be looking for something, anything to occupy their time. Here is my small contribution to hopefully making all this a little more bearable.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Katherine!” Stephen gripped the small shoulders, “Katherine!” Her head listlessly lolled from one side to the other as if she were nothing more than boneless rag doll, her eyes rolled back in her head, blank and empty, her skin as white as the tiles that lined their kitchen bench. Straightening he ran a shaking hand through his dark hair, green eyes surveying the situation. Time was short. Whatever he chose to do in the few seconds would dictate how his future looked.

Eyes flicked from Kate’s broken face to her swollen belly and back again. Options were limited. This would need to be handled carefully to avoid future ramifications. Blood, bruises and broken skin were going to need to be explained one way or the other the moment he called for help. And if he didn’t make that call..

“God damn it woman.” If Katherine was being overly dramatic for effect, she was doing a damn fine job of it. “You will not fucking leave me.” Cursing loudly and sliding one arm under Katherine’s legs and another under her shoulders, “You are mine and we are going to be together whether you like or not.” He grunted as he straightened jostling, limbs on the deathly still body in his arms falling bonelessly askew with every step.

Stephen’s intelligent mind sorted through the options available to him as easily as thumbing through magazines on a rack. He’d already settled on getting help. Now, all he needed was a plan to ensure he wasn’t accused of something that wasn’t his fault merely because Katherine didn’t want to do as she was supposed to do. Simplicity was best. Complexity only created doubt. Simple made it believable

Carrying Katherine from the bedroom, down the long hallway towards the wide staircase that provided the passageway from ground floor and main entrance to the different levels of the house, the pieces of the plan began to come together. Steps, he calculated as he carefully placed a bare foot on each tread, steps could be a potential hazard. Yes, he decided, a fall down the steps would suit his requirements to a tee. Stopping at the large landing that split the staircase in two before it wrapped around a corner, Stephen bent, placed his burden down on the thick carpet. Katherine’s breathing, dangerously slow and erratic. “Do not do this Katherine.” He muttered, awkwardly getting the felled woman’s body in just the right spot. “You will not disappointment me like this.” Manoeuvring, dragging, shuffling and wiggling, Stephen finally got the body in just the right position, his hand gripping the cool cheek, tilting Katherine’s face until it rested against very corner of the newel post, a small streak of blood, tinging the white paint pink. “Do you hear me?”

Leaning over her, he made a few more final adjustments to each limb. Twisting, lifting, bending them into what he considered a more natural position. There, Stephen sniffed reflectively before,
pushing off the ground and standing and casting one last eye over the scene he’d created. That looked much better than leaving her laying, all bloodied in their bed.

Acceptably believable. Everyone knew a pregnant woman’s balance was suspect at best. How could it not with a weight like that sticking out in front, he reassured himself as he turned and began sprinting up the stairs. All that was left now was to sell this little work of fiction he’d created to anyone who wondered. He would need to be out of breath if this was to work. After all, no loving fiancée wouldn’t be at least a little harried if the woman he loved had taken an unexpected tumble down the steps.

Taking the stairs two at time and running down the short hallway, Stephen snatched his phone from his desk. He contemplated changing into something other than a bath towel, but decided against it, for authenticity sake. Next came the crucial dialling the emergency number. Stephen knew everything he said would be recorded, could be analysed and dissected. This, he had to make sure everyone involved did not question.

He headed back towards Katherine not getting more than half way back down the stairs when a woman answered his carefully placed emergency call. Be sure to over emphasis, Stephen’s mind sounded. “I need an ambulance.” He panted, sprinkling a large dose of situational exaggeration over each and every word and hasty drawn breathe. “My partner tripped on the stairs and fell. She’s unconscious.” Raising his voice couldn’t hurt, “Please send help! She’s 8 months pregnant.” He threw in the last part for added effect, figuring people always seemed to ramp up urgency at the hint of an unborn child.

Curtly answering the obligatory standard questions of his name, Katherine’s name, the address, Stephen knelt at Katherine’s side. He hadn’t remembered her skin being this colour only moments before. A sickly grey. For a few fleeting seconds, icy fingers tickled the back of his neck. Her blue eyes remained closed, her chest now so still, Stephen wasn’t even sure it was working at all.

For the first time, the realisation of impending death stalked into Stephen’s depraved mind. Is she breathing, the far away voice in his ear continued to ask over and over. “I think so.” The words came out far softer than Stephen had intended, the cold touch snaking down his spine. Was she really going to leave him this time?

Following the instructions coming from the woman at the end of the line, two fingers, usually steady and sure, now trembling and nervous, pressed against Katherine’s neck, the smooth surface slick with small droplets of cold sweat. Faint and wildly uneven, but there, a soft pulse thrummed out of tune beneath his fingertips. Leaning down close to her chest, Stephen watched for any movement. Listened for the slow inhale and exhale, for any sign of that death was not closing in on the woman at his feet.

The black cloud was so he could almost feel it standing, just over his shoulder, watching, waiting. Death was not in his plan. He hadn’t wanted that. He had only wanted to teach Katherine a lesson. She had made him do this. Death was not an acceptable outcome. He wouldn’t have it. After what seemed like and impossibly long time, Stephen thought he heard the barest hint, no more than a soft sigh, escape Katherine’s pale lips. “Barely breathing. Please hurry.” The phone hit the carpet with a muted thud the dark shadow, stepping closer still. “Katherine, no.” Plans forgotten, plots thrown aside as something as unfamiliar as a stranger’s face on the street washed through him. “I can’t lose you.” Hands that had beaten, hands that had hurt, hands that had been cold and forceful, gently brushed the long thick strands of dark hair away from Katherine’s face, “Please Kate.” A normally cold forceful voice, wavered as Stephen lowered his forehead to hers, “Don’t leave me.” A single droplet fell from his face to hers as green eyes closed. “Please Kate.”

Images flashed behind his closed lids as his mind drifting back through time. Since he was four
years old and saw Katherine Carmichael playing in her parent’s backyard with that stupid dog that looked more furry horse than any dog he’d ever seen, Stephen had known, one day, he would marry that girl. Not a single day had passed, from that moment to this, when he hadn’t thought about her, wanted her, craved her. Stephen smoothed the dampness away from the pale cheek with the pad of his thumb, “It has always been you.” He bent over her body, transfixed by the visions of the past and feelings he’d always found confusing. Despite it all that had happened, all that she’d put him through, all that he’d done, all that he’d lost because of her choices, he had always loved her. She was high spirited, true, but even the most wild filly can be tamed.

Leaning back, a hand lifted and viciously swiped away the tears. If only Kate had just done as she was fucking god damned told. If only she had stayed with him instead of disappearing across the country to attend college. If only she’d come back instead of working at the fucking dive of a hospital. If only Johnathon Chase hadn’t stolen her from his own damned arms, just when things were finally starting to turn Katherine back towards him. He’d have won her back then if she had been alone. He’d have taken Kate and everything would be fine.

Everything would be the way they were supposed to be.

She wouldn’t be laying here.

Dying.

Fucking Chase.

Stephen stared down at the still form Katherine, eyes hardening with every flicker of misplaced rage. If she dies, he made the silent promise, then every single person that fucking motherless bastard Chase has ever cared about, goes with her.

A stifled scream snapped his dark head around. The large form of the head housekeeper stared wide eyed up at him from the bottom of the stairs, her mouth agape. “Have Anderson open the gates!” Stephen snarled, “And for christ’s sake, make sure you show them in here as soon as they arrive.”

The woman nodded mutely and took off with a speed belying her advanced age, towards the service corridor. In a matter of moments, Stephen knew, the entire staff would be roused. His staff were well trained. He made sure of it. Orders would be followed precisely. If they weren’t, there was plenty of space in the unemployment office. Sentimentality had no place in the running of his home. He wasn’t in the business of taking care of anyone other than his family. Business was business, not some charity adventure. Pushing the last fleeting glimpses of conflicting emotions aside and wiping the past visions of the woman he loved from his mind, Stephen gathered himself, the door slamming shut on feeling and emotions the dark haired man rarely acknowledged.

Emotions, he growled silently, signs of weakness. Weakness that wasn’t to be tolerated. Ignore them. Just ignore them and follow the god damned plan.

Optics dictated that he stay here. The very picture of the distraught fiancée staying by Katherine’s side for as long as he could. Or more precisely at least until medical personnel witnessed him there. As predicted, within a handful of minutes the staff was buzzing around like bees around the hive in springtime. The front double doors had been swung open, every security light, garden light, even fence lights had been illuminated to lead the way. Several staff, raised from their peaceful milled around, both inside and outside, all ready to point the emergency vehicle towards the main house. Stephen hid the smile as he heard several staff already propagating the lie he’d all but guaranteed. Katherine must have slipped and fallen, probably in the middle of the night, possibly going to get something to eat from the downstairs kitchen herself. Katherine had that well established habit of never calling for the staff during the late hours of the night so, to the outside world looking in, the
fall and the prospective reason behind it, did seem to make some modicum of sense. If the staff had arrived at the correct conclusion without a single prompt, Stephen mused, surely medical professional would do so as well, and those that didn’t, well, he could always buy their silence, if not complicity.

No one need ever know about the true events of the evening. After all, it would have gotten to this if Katherine had stopped when he had warned her.

“Sir,” Andersen, the businessman’s head of security, leaned on the banister, heavy grey eyes peering over the wooden edge of the polished rail, “The EMT just passed the gate.” He looked at Katherine’s unmoving form, taking in the marks on the woman’s face and flicking a glance towards his employer. “Ms Carmichael over balanced Sir.” It wasn’t a question. At best, a fictious statement dressed up as fact and both men knew it. “You tried to catch her, but she fell.”

Just like that, one confederate fell into step behind their general. A silent understanding passing between employer and employee.

“Yes Andersen. You know Katherine, always wandering around at night. Never taking care of herself.” Dancing red and blue lights bounced off the walls as the emergency vehicle pulled to halt under the covered portico, “Be sure the staff knows the details.” Stephen instructed as two emergency workers emerged from either side of the large van, each toting cases, presumably filled with medical paraphernalia.

As expected, they were ushered in short time to the main staircase, booted feet echoing as they climbed the steps towards their patient. The older of the two men, knelt beside Katherine, ripped open one of the cases and immediately starting to assess the woman’s conditions with various instruments. The younger of the pair, a man who looked to be in mid twenties, politely nudged Stephen away from Katherine, skilfully clearing the working area around her body, before he too knelled and began gathering medical data.

Many questions followed. Question about Katherine age, weight, the circumstance of the accident. Playing this part, was more difficult than Stephen had first anticipated. Reading the reaction of the two men working on the body laying still and silent on the stairs was difficult. They continued to remain calm, impassively removed.

Did they believe what was being offered as the reason, as the cause for the marks and bruises? It was frustratingly hard to determine. Still, Stephen made sure to answer each and every question, injecting the odd hint of emotion whenever he remembered to do so. Sticking to the determined plan, explaining every bump, every bruise, every lump as mere byproducts from the trip, by a pregnant woman, down a set of stairs in the middle of the night.

Straight forward.

Simple.

Calm.

Collected.

Clear.

The dark haired man made a mental note to ensure he supplemented Andersen’s paycheck, when the head of security related a similar story and an unsolicited corroboration of Katherine’s stair stumble when approached by the younger of the two emergency workers.
Apparently satisfied with initial information gathered, attention shifted from Stephen to the Katherine. Long needles connected to clear tubing was inserted in thin veins, blood pressure so low, the red life barely moved beneath the surface of Katherine’s skin. A tangle of wires attached to circular adhesive pads, stuck to pale skin across various points over Katherine’s exposed chest and belly. Modesty a secondary consideration to survival. Portable heart and foetal monitors began gathering information, displaying it on small screens and thin printed papers that snaked out of the ends of several devices. All of it signalled the increasing seriousness of both mother and child’s condition.

A sense of urgency descended, concentration narrowing, as training kicked in and both men set about attempting to stabilize Katherine’s condition, focussing down to nothing other than the two patients in front of them. One in the final stages of a stroke, the other at severe risk as it’s mother’s body valiantly fought to stay alive.

“We need to get her to hospital as soon as possible.” The older man addressed Stephen as his partner left, returning swiftly with a partially folded stretcher.

“I want her to go to NewYork-Presbyterian, not some second rate hospital of your choosing.” Stephen snapped, reaching across to close the separated edges of Katherine’s robe as she was lifted on the trolley

“Mr Cross,” The older man said amid the metal click of the brake releasing, hoisting one end of the stretcher and beginning navigating the long apparatus down the last few steps to the ground floor, “Your fiancée and baby are at significant risk here.” It was clear, at least the medical personnel, exactly what had both happened, and what was happening. Katherine Carmichael had sustained a head injury and was currently suffering a severe stroke. “The quicker we get your fiancée to expert medical assistance, the better her chances for recovery will be. Presbyterian will add at least another ten to fifteen minutes to our transport time.” The folded stretcher legs snapped down into standing height as they reached the ground level floor, finally clear of the stair treads.

“I want her to go the best.” Stephen repeated as he strode purposely alongside the gurney that pushed both mother and child through the entry way and out the door towards the rear of the vehicle.

“I understand that Mr Cross, however,” The paramedic explained patiently, waiting for his partner to scamper up the short steps and begin guiding the stretcher forward into the designated spot inside the ambulance, “My job is keep your fiancée alive, not to rate hospitals.” Locking the casters and stepping back, the EMT swung one door closed, “Are you riding with us to the nearest ER Mr Cross?” He raised a thick dark eyebrow, thoroughly unimpressed with the demanding man so caught up in his own importantness that he was willing to risk the woman he supposedly loved, not to mention the baby who’s fate was becoming increasing precariously.

The younger paramedic glanced up from his spot sitting beside the loaded stretcher, “We need to go Sir.” His left hand occupied by rhythmically squeezing the translucent bag attached to collar, currently covering Katherine’s mouth and nose, “Now.”

Stephen stepped back, eyeing first the younger man then his much older adversary standing at the door. “I will have someone follow you.” Words came out clipped and precise, “I expect to see my fiancée alive when she arrives or it will be your licenses.”

The soft hiss of the pumping air punctuating the quiet, as the paramedic met Stephen’s eyes and closed the remaining door with a click, “We’ll do our best, Mr Cross.” The older EMT muttered as he shook his head and made his way towards the driver’s seat.

“Be sure that you do.” Stephen snarled after him, turning on his heel and nodding to Andersen,
“Follow it. And have a car brought round. I want to be there when she arrives.”

Without another word, Stephen stalked into the house, slamming the heavy door loud enough to make the large double paned window shake. It annoyed him no end when ignorant people didn’t follow his orders. He had contacts at Presbyterian. Several of them in fact. Old acquaintances that would be only too happy to pay back the odd favour or two.

No. Any old hospital wouldn’t do. Stephen wanted Katherine where he knew she would be not only cared for but where he would have the upper hand. Still, he pondered as he climbed the stairs towards the now empty bedroom, he could always transfer Katherine the first chance he got. As soon as she was out of danger, he’d move her to where the situation could be better controlled.

Exchanging the bath towel for a pressed dress pants and a crisp white, shirt, the cuffs securely buttoned around his wrists Stephen set about gathering the basic necessities. His phone, his wallet, his coat.

Yes. Once Katherine had been stabilized, having her moved would be a relatively straight forward process. And if by chance there was to be any unexpected opposition, it would be minimised once he informed Katherine’s parents of her little accident. Her family would back any decision he made in regard to Katherine and her well being. Her father, in particular, was going to be adequately pleased at the opportunity to exercise some control over his eldest offspring.

Stephen studied the phone in his hands, debating the strategy behind calling the family now or delaying and calling them much later when he would have the majority of the situation contained. Later, he concluded, sliding his arms into the heavy coat and heading downstairs to the waiting car. Later would work better. Pulling the edges of his coat tighter around him, Stephen sat down in the back of the long Lincoln Continental, leaning back as one of his drivers took the wheel, altering their course every now and again as he received instructions via an earpiece from Andersen as to which hospital was their destination.

Stephen saw no point in damaging his reputational stature as being someone who took care of things with old man Carmichael.

Not over something as silly as a simple fall down the stairs.

Yes, Stephen leaned back, enjoying the ride.

He had everything, completely and utterly, under control.

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Chapter End Notes

Next Week : Johnathon and Caitriona

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depends how you view it, my workplace will be one of the last to be shutdown, so my writing time has taken a hit as work ramps up. I will try and post again next week but, who knows what tomorrow brings right now.

Take care everyone and to all who have ever commented, ever left a kudo, ever read even a single word of this story. Thank you.
Cheers everyone.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!