"Dear Mr. Fraser," it started. "My name is Claire Beauchamp. Several months ago my ex-husband and I started IVF treatments at Preservation, UK. I am writing to you to let you know that there was a mix up at the lab."
“Wasn’t that the lab you went to, Jamie?” Jenny asked, her voice penetrating the fog he had been lost in and dragging him back to the present. Seeing his blank look, Jenny sighed in exasperation and repeated, “Preservation, UK, the lab that agreed to pay all that money in the lawsuit for mixing up the sperm?”

“Aye, it’s the same one but what’s this about a lawsuit?” Jamie asked bewildered.

“Honestly, Jamie, do ye no read the news or watch tv? I ken ye’ve only been living back in Scotland for a few months but it’s been headline news all over the world for months and months now. A couple was going through IVF and the lab mixed up the husband’s sperm with someone else’s and she got pregnant. Baby must be well over a year now.” Jenny raised a dark brow in inquiry.

“Aye, I think I read something about that awhile ago. I thought they were English though?”

“They are English but the mother is a doctor working locally in Glasgow. The husband left her and returned to England, but she stayed.” Ian clarified.

“He left her to raise the bairn alone?” Jamie was shocked.

“Mmphm.” Answered Ian.
"They sued the clinic as if the bairn was a curse no’ a blessing?” Jamie was amazed and a little heartbroken.

In a perfect world he’d wish for a child of his own and, God willing, maybe he’d have one some day. But knowing what it would take to start a family for himself, were he to find the woman brave enough to take a chance on him and willing to go through medical procedures to become pregnant, he knew he’d have fallen on his knees in gratitude no matter whose biology created the child.

“Weel, in fairness,” Jenny put in, “the ex-husband got the settlement, the ex-wife was named in the suit because they were still married when he filed it against the clinic. Turns out she wanted no part of it, though. The wikileaks emails revealed that she only asked for one thing.” Jenny said recounting the salacious details.

“Aye?” Jamie asked intrigued.

“The name of the biological father.” Jenny said. “The settlement happened months ago but it’s back in the papers because the details were just leaked. The paper claims someone sent them the hacked emails about the terms, though the paper didn’t discover who the biological father was. But the name of the clinic was one I’d heard of before so I thought it had to be the one you used. That’s what reminded me of the story.”

“Ooch, weel neither here nor there, are ye heading back into Glasgow soon?” Ian, Jenny’s husband and Jamie’s CFO asked.

“Aye, we’ve got the conference call with United LQ mid-week and I need to run through the proposals.” Jamie in fact needed to get back soon. He rose to start gathering his belongings and tidy up his room.

While technically he owned Lallybroch, it was Jenny and Ian’s home. Jenny lived here with the children full time, Ian commuted back and forth splitting time between Glasgow and the farm. It worked well for everyone. Jenny tended the sheep and was experimenting with soft cheeses in her limited spare time. With three children, she had plenty of room to spread out, but the office and the laird’s bedroom were Jamie’s private domain. Though he tried his best to clean up after himself and not be a nuisance for them when he was back in the city.

Ian rose, his stiff knee making his limp more pronounced than usual. “I’ll let ye get to it then, wee Jamie’s got a match in Broch Mordha in an hour. But I’ll see ye Tuesday night.” Ian gave Jamie a side hug as he brushed past shouting for Jamie’s namesake to get his gear packed up and “no forgetting the mouthguard this time!”
Jamie had dismissed the IVF story almost as soon as his tires hit the highway to Glasgow for the start of his work week, choosing to focus instead on the meetings he had planned for the coming week. At 30, Jamie found himself the improbable inventor of the world’s best hangover cure.

Tongue in cheek, Jamie himself admitted that need for creating the product and its ultimate success came about due to his own hard work -- and the application of trial and error. It took a lot of failed attempts, taking a little of what he learned in each place he’d lived and a lot of hangovers before he got the formula just right. More time was devoted to testing, packaging, distribution and marketing. After five years of intense effort, Jamie found himself labeled an “overnight” sensation. That always made him laugh.

Jamie had spent a good portion of his 20s, after tests proved he was in remission, and following the unexpected shock of his father’s death traveling throughout the world. He supported himself as a bartender (no’ a mixologist, thank ye very much, Janet), and he was a good one. Charming, easy on the eyes and a natural polyglot, Jamie never lacked for interesting and well paying work.

Having survived a serious cancer at such a young age, knowing as both he and Jenny did the transient and sometimes unfair nature of fate, he embraced whatever opportunities came his way. He knew men and women all over the world and had lived in over a half dozen countries by his own choice, moving around whenever he had a chance to go live and work in a new place he’d never been.

Yet in every place he worked, no matter race, creed or color, the universal complaint heard most often from patrons were the difficulties inherent in trying to treat a hangover. Working in an industry that was the root cause of the difficulty, Jamie set out to find a “cure.” God knew, it wasn’t anything like the cures that actually saved lives-- his own came readily to mind-- but it was a small service that would improve the quality of life for lots of people. In a very small way, and with no little irony, Jamie thought of it as paying it forward.

The launch of the hangover curing soda called Slainte eight months ago had been the result of years of experimentation, refinement and product development culminating in a runaway success. He’d had the good fortune of finding a crackerjack chemist in a woman named Geillis Duncan. He promptly put her in charge of manufacturing and quality control. Jamie started small, using his cousin Jared’s facilities on the outskirts of Paris to refine the process and soft launch the product using Jared’s very impressive wine distribution channels.

Jared’s contacts and mentoring had saved Jamie months, if not years, of work building brand recognition. Jared’s buyers created the kind of social media buzz that made the product a poster child for successful word of mouth marketing.

Sales were so strong that when it came time to find a permanent home for the company, Jamie could have picked almost anywhere in the world and leapt at the chance to come home and make it locally. In addition to overseeing all of the various production and distribution channels, Jamie was, for now, the face of the brand. At 6’3” with broad shoulders and red hair there was little he could do to fly under the radar.

Enough footage of his early bartending skills had come crawling out of the wood work, regulars, tourists, promos filmed long ago for other reasons filled You Tube and Facebook -- more than...
enough to keep the masses entertained as they “discovered” and repurposed old postings of him in action from Thailand to the Bahamas.

Looking at it as objectively as possible, Jamie admitted he was quite a ham. He had nailed pretty much every trick in the book. He could look at clips of himself years ago and laugh--a good bartender was also a good performer and he played his role well.

There was also the unavoidable curiosity that came with his life story: mother and brothers dying in a car accident when Jamie was in primary school, Jamie’s own cancer diagnosis and the sudden death of his father all made for an unusual back story. Jamie was not naive about how it all played in the media. But that didn’t mean he had to like it.

Jamie was hoping to convince Fergus, the company’s incredibly photogenic sales manager or his cousins Rupert and Angus, who worked under Fergus, to consider taking over more of the PR duties to try and preserve a little of his privacy. Murtagh, for all of his dour countenance was a crackerjack marketer and had already scripted a line of commercials featuring Egg Head and Lard Bucket (as he jokingly referred to them).

“And the best part of all, I just need to buy them lunch on Monday afternoon and listen to them talk aboot their weekends and how they’d be up shite’s creek without a morning dose of Slainte The damn ads practically write themselves!” Jamie laughed when Murtagh said that, picturing it all too clearly.

For all of the difficulties and harsh realities fate had served him up in his first twenty-five years on the planet, now he was feasting on good fortune and sunshine. Jamie knew better than to take even a minute of it for granted. He’d dropped out of university to devote his energy to getting well. After his father died, he’d needed to get away and travel, lose himself in a life beyond the sorrow and sadness that had marked too many days of his youth.

Jamie might not have a degree but he considered himself an educated man, he had life experience and good sense. His team would be the key to his success and whatever he didn’t know at the moment, he could learn over time.

He wished with all his heart his father was alive to see this all come to pass. Brian Fraser would have been satisfied to know Jamie was happy and healthy, still he’d have been quite amused by how his son had made his mark in the world.

Thinking of Brian Fraser reminded him of the IVF story. Being back in Scotland, spending time with his sister’s brood made him increasingly aware of his desire for a family of his own. Thanks to his father’s foresight he had a chance of doing that for Brian was the one who had insisted that he bank his sperm a decade ago when they learned Jamie had Hodgkins Lymphoma.

Mortified at the idea of talking to his father about masterbating into a cup, Jamie could barely look at him, face flaming bright red. His father was insistent and would not let Jamie’s youthful immaturity get in the way of the conversation. Brian presented it in a very matter of fact manner.

“Jamie, I ken ye dinna want to think of such matters and I’d no’ mention it if it wasna for the fact that the oncologist was insistent about it. The chemo might make it impossible for you to father bairns in the usual way. There will never be another time to decide so I must talk to you of it now.” Brian’s eyes held him, willing Jamie not to turn away or hide. The subject matter of children far too dear to his heart to let it go entirely.
“Lord knows we have enough of a fight on our hands as it is to get you healthy. I ken that’s all yer thinking of now, as it should be. For me, though, well, the work of a parent is to use what ye learn in life and pass it along. Your Mam,” Brian began and Jamie saw his lashes get wet with unshed tears. Jamie swallowed hard, Brian almost never spoke of his mother or brothers.

“Ye kent I loved her well?” Brian’s eyebrows rose in question and his son nodded. “There is no finer feeling, my son, than sitting with your wife in front of a fire of an evening, holding her and feeling your child moving within her,” the tears did fall then. Jamie nodded again, he could not speak.

“So, even if you canna picture it now I want you to have the choice, and if you dinna do it now, you might never be able. So if it were me, I’d take the chance and tell you to do the same just in case.”

Brian had guessed right, starting a family, having a wife, all of that was so far from his frame of mind that it wasn’t real to him. Left up to his own devices, Jamie would not have done it. But, for his father’s sake, for his peace of mind, there was nothing Jamie wouldn’t do. Jamie knew that his father was scared of losing him, having lost two sons already. His father had been Jamie’s rock and his support had been what got Jamie through, helping him find the strength to keep going on some very dark days. So he didn’t regret preserving the chance to make Brian a grandfather. Fate, unfortunately had once more intervened and Brian never lived to see any of his grandchildren, hadn’t even seen Jenny wed Ian.

Many times since then Jamie had sent prayers of thanks to his Da for having thought ahead. His father was right. His greatest joy would be to have his own children’s feet pounding the familiar paths of Lallybroch, shouting laughter, calling up to Heaven loudly enough for his parents and brothers to hear and be comforted that they all lived on through himself and Jenny and the family they kept close.
I am kind of having a Sally Field at the Oscars moment here. Thank you everyone for the encouragement and comments!

“Jamie, lad, this arrived for ye from Jared’s office.” Mrs. Fitz, his admin turned toward him as her salt and pepper hair came a little loose from her bun, and handed Jamie a battered, padded manilla envelope upon his return from a late lunch.

It was covered in stamps and dirt. He could see from the cross posting that it had originated in Scotland. He wondered what it was. He didn’t remember ordering anything from Scotland to be sent to Paris and all of his friends and business associates used email or text to communicate.

He absentmindedly set it aside as he dialed the online video conference call number. The brand was moving into more countries in Europe and he had meetings with United LQ, one of the largest distributors of liquor from Spain to Greece.

Two hours later, Jamie felt a great sense of satisfaction. The deal was outlined and he and Ian had managed to hammer out the numbers and the production schedule. They’d checked in with Marsali MacKimmie, the foreman of the manufacturing facility, to run the figures by her. He’d meet with Geneva Dunsany in legal in a few days to review the fine details but he couldn’t have been more pleased. Everything was a go.

He and Fergus would need to coordinate with marketing to finalize the PR plan for the continent. He wondered if it would be possible to launch “Operation Lard Head” as Murtagh had begun to call it. That would depend on whether the Angus and Rupert brand of Scottish humor would translate well across cultures. His gut said yes, which would relieve some of the “deer caught in the headlights” feeling that occasionally happened when he was in a public setting with friends and family.

His work life was unfolding well. Personally, he was doing fine but he had yet to meet a woman he was interested in and reluctant to play the field (he hated that euphemism) -- that was not what he was looking for. In his twenties he travelled from job to job, so casual was all he could offer.

Now that the business was more stable, he wanted something of substance in his private life as well. As a bartender, he’d spent much of his time observing couples-- from first dates to anniversary celebrations; from falling in love to indifference or loathing. He wanted to get it right, hoping for a love like his parents shared. So, for now, Jamie was content to move slow and trust that he would know the girl for him when he found her, as his father promised he would.

Jamie started to pack it in for the day. As he rounded the desk, he absentmindedly grabbed the battered package and tossed it into his messenger bag (no’ a man-purse, thank ye, Janet ). He spent the last of the daylight hours at the gym before grabbing dinner and heading home.

As Jamie let himself into his flat he noticed it was quiet for once. He should not have taken the apartment in this area, but it was close enough to work so he could walk and he was in the heart of downtown. It also, unfortunately, was less than five blocks from the largest hospital serving the
metro area.

Most days he could mentally filter the noise of sirens and other street sounds out but tonight he admitted that the rare silence felt soothing. He opened a beer and the box of pizza. He turned on a match for background noise and reached into his bag to jot a note to himself about following up with Marsali on shipping rates and delivery times.

His hand accidentally grazed the package, forgotten in the recesses of the bag and he pulled it out. Jamie turned it over in his hands. Beauchamp it read and the street address was one he knew he’d heard before but couldn’t place.

Jamie thought it must have been sent from one of Jared’s connections since the name on the return address was French. He moved to open the flap and noticed the letter had been forwarded several times, following him around Paris until it landed in Jared’s office and had been sent on from there.

It had made a long round trip, sent from here and returning here months later. He wasn’t surprised at the delay, only that it found him at all. His last six months in Paris had been chaotic. He had moved a few times in quick succession. First, when the building he was living in was badly damaged in a fire, though no one, by the Blessing of St. Florian, had been injured, then to the temporary shelter the landlord had arranged for several weeks, then he finally found a sublet. Jared’s had been his last forwarding address. By the time the letter found Jared, Jamie was already back to Scotland.

Jamie tilted the envelope. A cascade of papers fell into his lap and a glossy photo of a chubby baby with beautiful brown eyes and the most remarkable head of auburn-- almost red-- curls stared up at him. A stretchy yellow flowered headband held the ringlets in place.

There was something familiar about the picture but he couldn’t think what at the moment. As he organized the papers into some semblance of order, he realized it was a letter addressed to him. A very thick letter of six or so pages.

“Dear Mr. Fraser,” it started, “My name is Claire Beauchamp. Several months ago my ex-husband and I started IVF treatments at Preservation, UK. I am writing to you to let you know that there was a mix up at the lab.”

All the air whooshed out of his lungs. Jamie reached blindly for the photograph again trying to puzzle it out. Willie, he thought, taking in a desperate breath. That is who it reminded him of, Ah Dhia!. Willie’s hair had been that exact shade- a cross between Jenny’s darkness and his red. The eye color was not Fraser at all. It was a lovely golden whiskey brown; but the cat like shape and the lashes colored dark at the ends then light moving toward the lid were both deeply familiar as he saw the same every morning in the mirror.

His heart was in his throat as he quickly searched in the envelope, rustled through the pages; this was the only picture. He stared hard at it, in wonder and in awe. He lurched for his phone. His hands were shaking so hard that if not for speed dial he might never have been able to make the call.

“How old?” He demanded without preamble.

“How old what?” His sister asked, confused.

“The lassie, the bairn in the story wi’ the clinic, how old would she be?” He couldn’t keep the tremor out of his voice.
“Lassie? I dinna think the paper reported the gender of the babe.” Jenny said doubtfully.

“Never mind that, do ye remember?” Jamie tried to hold it together, wanting to reach through the phone and throttle the information from her.

“Holy Mother of God! Yer no saying----” Jenny breathed.

“Age. Now, Janet!”

“I guess the babe’d be at least a year and a half, maybe nearer to two. “ Came the response.

“How old when they have their first teeth? The little ones at top and bottom?” Jamie said staring at the photo, his own lips turning up a little as he counted four teeth and took in the cherubic, drooly smile he had missed the first time around.

“Oh, 6 to 8 months or so for our lassies. It depends. Kitty got them late, Maggie early. Tell me what’s happened, brathair.” She demanded.

“I got a package today from Jared,” Jamie began, “sent to me from Scotland by the looks of it some time ago. Just caught up wi’ me now.” Inexplicably he felt his eyes well up. “Jenny,” he said, having to stop to clear the lump in his throat, “it’s Willie to the life, except for the color of the eyes.”

“Oh! Show me,” she begged.

He was confused for a second thinking how to do that but then snapped a quick shot of the photo and texted it while he remained on the phone. He heard the soft ping as it transmitted to her end and then her sharp intake of breath.

“Jesus, Mary and Bride!” Came the quick reply. Then a demand, “What’s her name?”

“I dinna--” Jamie realized he hadn’t even finished reading the first full paragraph. “I havena read the letter that came wi’ it.” He confessed.

Suddenly Jenny was laughing despite the surreal situation.

“Weel, normally I’d ask if ye’d no’ jumped to conclusions then? But I’d ken a Fraser on any street corner anywhere in the world so there isna much room for doubt.” Jenny said.

“Hold on I’ll see if I can----”Jamie broke off, finding it impossible to read and talk at the same time.

As he was busy skimming the letter for information, Jenny waited patiently, excited by the possibility for she and Jamie cherished family above all else. They had lost so much of it in their lives.

Jamie caught phrases here and there such as “prior to her birth we discovered her blood type was B, my ex and I are both A and we knew he could not have fathered her.” and “I hope I have not made a mistake by reaching out to you in this way. I know it must be a shock. Due to recent events, I find myself on familiar terms with that feeling.” Jamie smiled at that.

Then further in the letter she wrote, “I wanted nothing to do with the lawsuit, I found out about the court case on the same day we left the hospital. Frank filed it on his own and a short time later, he left us.”
Jamie’s heart clenched hard. Her use of “we” and “us” connected deeply within in him --and he felt a sense of sorrow and even anger on her behalf and with it an overwhelming need to provide safety and protection to both mother and child. A confused jumble of emotion he didn’t quite understand.

“When I learned that the clinic never informed you about the baby, I knew that there was one thing that I did want from them, after all. The identity of the father.”

A page later he read, “I am enclosing a picture of her. It’s a little out of date, but one of my favorites….I keep writing this letter, adding pieces of it day by day, putting off having to place it in the envelope because I am not sure I will have the courage to send it.”

Jenny could hear rustling as he turned the pages, and waited in an agony of suspense.

Finally on the bottom of the sixth page he read, “Given the way she came into the world and the fact that both she and I almost did not make it, I named her Faith. Faith Julia Beauchamp…..I did not amend her birth certificate even after learning your identity, not because I was trying to make a statement one way or the other but simply because it felt wrong to do so without knowing what you wanted. So much of what has happened has been without your consent that I believe that the only one who has the right to make that decision is you. It is only a small thing but in this one thing I can offer you a choice. I learned a bit about you (Google is ubiquitous) and I think-- I hope at any rate-- that you might want to meet your daughter. All you have to do is contact me.”

Jamie forced himself to return to the call with Jenny instead of reading the letter in more detail.

“Faith Julia.” Jamie finally spoke her name aloud.

Jenny let out a small “Oh. Faith Julia Fraser.” Jenny repeated. “Tis a lovely name. She is beautiful, mo chrìdhe.”

Jamie almost corrected her, almost said not Fraser but she was right. It sounded perfect to him as well.

Jenny did not want to break the connection, she wished she could drop everything and come into the city to be with him, lend him whatever strength she had.

Jenny still remembered the shock of losing their mother, Ellen and their brothers, Willie and Robert, in a car crash. She and Jamie had left the house that morning, Robert too young to go yet and Willie had a morning dental exam . Ellen was planning on dropping him off at school around lunch.

Jenny remembered walking to the principal’s office, Murtagh’s solemn expression as he ushered them into the car. Jamie squeezing her hand so tightly the whole way home; it was bloodless by the time they reached the house.

She thought about sitting with Jamie and her father in the oncologist’s office, waiting with him for the test results that would tell them whether the cancer treatment was working. Jamie held her hand so tight that her fingers ached, but she didn’t ask him to let go.

Then, the time Jamie had burst through the A & E doors after hearing about Brian, it was she who held onto his hand until it lost all feeling. Separated by phone lines, her hands ached in memory wanting to hold his now.

“Jamie---” she started but closed her mouth, overwhelmed and having no idea of what she should say.
“Aye, Jenny, thank you.” Jamie said, knowing her heart to be too full to even make a start, as was his. “I will catch you up, soon as I may.”

“I love you.” Jenny said simply and broke the connection leaving Jamie to contemplate what to do.
This Is Bloody Awkward

Chapter Notes

Truly, thank you all so much. Fair warning this chapter will be followed by a very short bridge chapter and then...

His body was telling him to get up and go to his daughter now. His mind told him arriving on Claire Beauchamp’s doorstep unannounced would scare the hell out of her.

He forced himself to read the letter fully, learning about mother and child in more detail. Those six pages were a remarkable synopsis of his daughter’s life and he marveled at the thoughtfulness that had gone into the drafting of it. Claire had painted the broad outlines of who they were and what filled their days so he would know and not have to imagine what it was like.

He found out the Julia had come from Claire’s mother and she had lost her mother, actually both her parents in childhood. Jamie grunted, finding it sad they had that in common. It turned out that Claire was not just a doctor, as impressive as that was by itself, but a surgeon. When she was working at the hospital, Faith went to their infant day care facilities. A neighbor who was a grandmother several times over filled in as needed for early morning and late night shifts.

Faith had, thus far, achieved every milestone in the book early: rolling over, sitting up and had just started to walk and talk in earnest at the time the letter was written. She liked dogs, books with tactile pages (a term Jamie looked up, smiling as he read all about Pat the Bunny) and music of all kinds. Normally a baby with a sunny disposition, she could occasionally be stubborn especially when hungry or tired. Jamie laughed, Jenny said the same about him now and again.

The birth was difficult, placental abruption, which he promptly Googled then wished to God he had not. How easily mother and child could have been lost. Repudiated by Frank Randall, mother dead, what would have happened to wee Faith? His stomach clenched hard and he put his head in his hands, running them roughly through his hair, reminding himself that they came through it, they were safe.

His head came up and his eyes settled on his half eaten pizza. He grimaced with distaste, slamming the lid on the box and, needing to burn off some energy getting up to throw it out immediately. Returning back to his flat he continued to pace the apartment in an effort to calm himself. When that didn’t help, he poured himself a shot of whisky. He convinced himself once more of the folly of knocking on her door at once but he needed to do something.
As he wore a rut in the floorboards, he thought about what he would say. He rehearsed the voice mail he created in his head a half dozen times. He wondered when would be the best time to leave a message now or in the morning? He had the wording down perfect, and he needed to take some step forward or he’d continue to tie himself up in knots. Best not to keep putting it off.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

He was running through the words of the message in his head again when he belatedly heard someone say, “Hello?”

Scrambling, he realized it was not VM but her.

“Miss Beauchamp?” He inquired, to be sure she hadn’t changed her number.

“Yes, this is Claire Beauchamp, how can I help you?” She really was a Sassenach, her English accent unmistakable.

“This is...my name is James Fraser.” He heard her suck in a breath.

He had to get this out before it became even more difficult. “I just received your letter. I moved around quite a bit when I was living in Paris and I returned to Glasgow a few months ago. It took awhile for the letter to catch up to me here.” He paused, thrown off by her live presence on the phone and suddenly uncertain of his words.

“I am glad you called. I wasn’t sure what to think,” Claire admitted but honesty compelled her to add, “No, that is not quite true. I thought perhaps the publicity and the complications were a bit too much for you-- not that I would have blamed you for that-- but I didn’t think you would ever call.”

“Do ye--” Jamie started softly then he realized his voice was too choked with feeling for her to hear him. He cleared his throat and began again, “I mean, is it ok that I did call?” At that he heard a small laugh that sounded like relief.

“Yes, of course. I am very glad you did, Mr. Fraser---” she started.

“Jamie,” he said correcting her. “We have a ...a daughter so please, call me Jamie.” Jamie stumbled over the connection.

“I’m Claire,” she said. There was a long pause. “This is bloody awkward, isn’t it?”

He laughed out loud, “Aye, it is.”
“Would you like to meet Faith?” she said, taking the bull by the horns.

Jamie let out a long shuddering breath he hadn’t known he was holding “I think-- I hope at any rate-- that you might want to meet your daughter. All you have to do is contact me.” True to her word, as simple as that.

“Yes, verra much. Though I am no’ sure where or how and I ken you must be sick of the press and other folks looking at you with all the recent articles.”

“Indeed,” Claire acknowledged, “and while I didn’t think you would contact me after so long, I still, uhhmm, well, cyber stalk you a little so I know you have your own issues with the press as well.” That earned her a surprised huff of a chuckle. Claire defensively added, “Sorry! That probably makes me sound like a nutter but I hope that perhaps -- you might understand it a bit?”

“No worries, lass. I ken the need,” Jamie confirmed.

Claire smiled to herself listening to him, charming as any highlander born and bred and her mind fixed on the best way to do it.

“I think it might be easier if you were to meet us here. It’s a quiet street and the building has a few apartments in it so people are less apt to put two and two together.” Claire offered, a little wary of having Jamie in her home but knowing that for Faith staying in familiar surroundings, keeping to their usual routine, was the best way to avoid being accidentally caught in the crosshairs of tabloid photogs.

“Aye?” Jamie was himself surprised but could see the protective instinct that had motivated the offer. His heart sped up. The idea of a child seen in a picture was nothing compared to knowing he would soon be holding his child in his arms.

“When would be a good time?”

“Would tomorrow afternoon work? I have an early shift and we’ll be home anytime after 4.” Jamie’s fingers shook taking down the information.

He rang off then pulled up his map app as he still couldn’t place the familiar street name. When he finally found it, he laughed out loud, suddenly delighted with his noisy apartment. Her building was parallel to his on the next block over, down a small dead end forming a little neighborhood court, a perfect place to raise a child in the city. Jamie shot his sister a text so he could put her out of her misery.

As Jamie crawled between his sheets that night his fingers traced and retraced the lovely lines of his daughter’s face. He wondered what Faith would be like now. Jamie figured she was about eight or nine months in the picture. How had she changed? She’d be walking and talking up a storm
judging by Jenny and Ian’s children. Was she curious? What did she like to play? Would she still have curly hair?

His mind raced with memories of his own family long gone, his parents and his brothers.

He thought of his father often, Robert had been just a wee lad, barely out of nappies, and he didn’t have many memories of him at all.

His mother, ah, well she had been the heart of the house and he felt melancholy when remembering her. But she had loved them fierce when she was alive.

Jenny and he both made an effort to talk of their parents with her bairns. Wee Jamie looked more like his uncle and grandmother Ellen. Maggie and Kitty had Brian and Jenny’s coloring, the surprising echo of someone long gone but dearly cherished.

Tonight though, Willie was much on his mind. Jamie had been his little shadow for most of his childhood until that fateful day when suddenly the world came to an end in the blink of an eye.

Too wrapped up in grief, Jamie had clamped a lid down tight on the hundreds of moments he had shared with his big brother and hadn’t consciously brought them to mind since. Willie had been good natured and patient, the perfect foil for Jamie’s more mischievous nature.

He was too wired for sleep but he didn’t mind. Jamie carefully placed the photo on his end table and turned off his light and let the memories come.
I decided its more like an amuse bouche... hopefully whetting the appetite for Chapter 6...

Jamie patted his inner coat pocket one more time, making sure the little package he had so carefully put together and wrapped was safe, though his mind knew nothing could have happened to it between his apartment and the door he stood in front of now.

Earlier that morning, he’d forced himself to stick to his normal routine, arriving at work promptly at 8 am, same as usual. He should have felt exhausted from tossing and turning but was strung tight as a bow and frizzled with energy.

Ian dropped in on him so many times Mrs. Fitz gave him the one brow raise by lunchtime.

Wonderful woman Mrs. Fitz, had a way of letting you know she knew something was up without being nosy.

Jamie shrugged but in a way that communicated yes, something was indeed up but he couldn’t tell her just yet.

Ian didn’t breathe a word either, knowing Jamie had no new information and that a casual comment could be overheard or place added pressure that he didn’t need.

Jamie had known Jenny would call Ian soon as their call was done.

He appreciated Ian’s steady presence but his silence was the biggest show of support he could have made. Jamie managed to stick it out until 3 pm. Long enough not to raise too many eyebrows when he left for the day.

He made a note to himself to review all the emails and double check all the spreadsheets he’d put together, trying to give a credible semblance of working, as the hours crawled by. He had no memory of exactly what he had said and done that day.

Ian was the one person Jamie made a point to see before he left the office.

Jamie already had a foot across the threshold of Ian’s office door when he gave a little start to find Murtagh sitting in the office with Ian running through promo budgets.

Murtagh caught the look passing between brothers-in-law and stared hard at Jamie, then at Ian and back to Jamie.

He scowled even harder at whatever he saw in their faces.

“Lunch tomorrow, a charaid?” Murtagh asked, like Mrs. Fitz, no fool Murtagh.

Ian broke into a huge smile looking at Jamie’s answering grin.
They both knew Murtagh would have kittens when he found out about Faith.
I hope it was worth the build up, it was a joy to write imagining it would be.

Jamie raised his hand poised to knock when an unexpected high pitched squeal of laughter and thumping of feet penetrated through the front door. Suddenly his knees felt weak and, needing to feel some support under him, he quickly turned around to press his back against the door.

“Ah Dhia! She was real!” he thought.

He lowered his head a bit and used his legs to brace his body against the solid wood, counting his inhales and exhaled. This was a trick he had learned during cancer treatments. The blackness quickly receded and feeling returned to his fingertips.

He was just about to push off the door and turn to knock when he felt himself falling backwards. He hit the floor with an audible thud. Having no notion of what happened, he just lay still, the breath knocked out of him once more.

His vision was blocked suddenly by a small dog coming in so close to his face his eyes lost focus. A sticky lick—no wait—a kiss?—on his forehead.

This was followed by a hushed, “Boo-boo?”

The body tilted away from him allowing his eyes to focus on the improbable sight of his baby girl, auburn curls in two pigtails, wearing muted pink overalls and carrying a sodden biscuit in one hand, much of it worn on her face (explaining the residue coating his brow).

She waited intently. He remembered to breathe.

Looking into her adorably smeared but worried face, Jamie couldn’t help but smile.

“Aye, lass, but yer kiss made it better. Thank ye!” He assured her and, not wanting to scare her by reaching for her, contented himself with a gesture which looked like the approximation of a courtly bow from his prone position.

“Mama, he’s better!” Faith nodded, head turned to her side, satisfied by the day’s rescue.

Jamie shifted his gaze and found himself looking into whiskey eyes the same shade as his daughter’s.

“Mr. Fraser, I presume?” Curly hair and raised eyebrows.

“God, she is lovely.” The thought came unbidden to his mind and he was startled to realize he wasn’t thinking about Faith.

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For a man thrust into fatherhood, Claire marveled at his ease with Faith. He didn’t crowd her or try
to win her affections in any obvious way. Instead, he followed Faith’s lead and let her do as she was accustomed, somehow intuining that the novelty of a new person to talk and play with would naturally draw her to him far more effectively than chasing after her.

Jamie and Faith were sitting on the floor beside the coffee table working on a wooden shape puzzle. Claire watched as her daughter turned into a flirt, something she had never seen her do. Even with Claire’s good friend and a favorite of Faith’s, Joe Abernathy, Faith never played the coquette. Claire was amazed to hear her daughter cooing and watched her batting her eyelashes in his direction.

Claire realized this was no passing fancy when she returned from putting Faith’s backpack in the hall closet to find her reverently placing Jane, her favorite doll, a beautiful Jumeau Bebe given to Claire by Uncle Lamb when she was a child herself, into his outstretched arms. Faith didn’t even let their babysitter Mrs. Crooke touch Jane. A high mark of favor, indeed.

Jamie had been leaning with his back against the couch but sat up straighter intuiting the import of the matter at hand. He gave the doll a serious once over, weighing some significant consideration. Faith, standing up, was almost eye level Jamie and shifted her weight back and forth anxiously awaiting his verdict.

Holding the absurdly feminine toy between his large hands should have made him look silly but didn’t. Claire couldn’t hear what they were saying but picked up the deep rumbling undertones of his verdict followed by Faith’s high pitched squeak of a reply. All of his attention was focused on Faith and his interaction with her was completely genuine.

The exchange was so adorable, she snapped a couple of pictures. Claire added a few more as the afternoon went on, wanting to document Faith’s first time meeting her father. She was touched by the fact that, respectful of her home and Faith’s privacy, Jamie hadn’t so much as asked if he could do so himself.

Now, she watched Jamie building blocks side by side with Faith, Faith reaching over every now and then to take away a block from Jamie’s tower for her own or offer him one of hers.

Jamie was saying mildly, “Ye ken that’s the last of my purple ones. Do ye no’ want to leave me that one?” His eyebrows raised in entreaty.

Faith shook her head, smiling.

“But, lass my tower’s almost done and it was to be my crowning glory.” He said mournfully.

At this Faith giggled, for his tower was already twice as tall as hers and more blocks wouldn’t make much of a difference as far as she could see. Faith could tell Jamie was not convinced, though and she really wanted all the purple blocks. Her eyes narrowed, a look of determination stole over her face.

“Jane says red is better.” She declared.

Faith herself clearly had no use for the red ones, they were stockpiled in the middle between the two of them, mostly untouched.

“She does?” Jamie turned to Jane, sitting up on the coffee table overseeing all the construction.

“Mmphm.” Jamie grunted a Scottish noise in response, if not in consent.

“Weel I suppose I could. But do ye no’ think the princess would prefer climbing up a purple spire to go to scout her kingdom?”
Claire watched Jamie watching Faith from the corner of his eye, not directly looking but she knew he was drinking her in. She could feel the way he hummed with quiet delight in spending time with Faith.

Claire felt her face flame bright red as she realized that her long dormant libido had suddenly sprung to life. She was acutely aware of how long she had been celibate - longer than Faith had been alive, in fact. Jamie was striking to look at, an imposing figure but very handsome, so look she did.

However, her eyes were drawn to him for other reasons, too. At one point he caught her staring at him and raised his brow over their daughter’s head in inquiry. She blushed furiously.

“I’m sorry,” she said on a little embarrassed laugh. “I can’t help it. I keep catching a gesture here and there or an expression on your face and all of the sudden I think that you look so much like her….or I guess she looks like you.”

Claire waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “I expect I’ll get over it soon enough. I just never expected to see it so clearly. Back before...before meeting you, when all I had were pictures online I thought that except for the shape of her eyes, the resemblance wasn’t obvious in the look of her.”

Claire paused, gathering her thoughts. “Now that I see you beside her, it’s clearer. The eyes obviously, a bit in the rest of her facial structure, too, but it’s...more in the way she carries herself.” Claire shrugged a little helplessly fearing she wasn’t making much sense.

Jamie smiled widely, his ears going a little pink at the tips. He’d noticed one or two such things but hadn’t spent nearly enough time with Faith to really see it.

Faith was toddling away from her parents freeing Jamie for the moment. He slowly reached his hand upward to Claire’s which was resting on the edge of the sofa cushion. He gave her time to pull away but she let him take her hand.

“Claire, I canna say how grateful I am to ye.” Jamie stared straight into her eyes.

Had she ever seen eyes that blue before? She could feel a slight tremor running through him.

“Never imagined, I never expected---” suddenly his eyes filled with tears.

Rather than become shy or try and bat them away in an effort to assert some misplaced sense of masculine pride, Jamie let them fall, let her see the depths of his emotions. He was so different from Frank. His willingness to allow her to see his vulnerability only made her more aware of the strength of him.

Jamie appreciated that Claire didn’t rush in to smooth over the awkwardness, nor did she try and pretend he wasn’t baring his soul to her. She simply accepted him, raw emotions and all and that stirred something inside him. Her small hand in his was nevertheless strong and he clung to it like an anchor.

He took in a breath. “When I saw the picture ye sent, I kent her straight away. I brought some pictures of my family, in case ye’d care to see?”

As if she would say no? Claire’s mouth was bone dry.

She knew a bit about his history. When she learned his name, the company had not yet launched so what she could find was rather limited. A report on the auto accident that killed his mother and brothers, his father’s obituary, Jenny and Ian’s wedding announcement. Then a couple articles on
the start of Slainte and its relocation of production facilities to Scotland.

Since his product hit big, though, the archives grew and more details were added, including the cancer treatments he’d undergone, videos of him as young man from all over the world were posted, allowing the public to get some feel for the carefree days of his past, living his life working in bars (no’ living my life behind bars, ye ken, Janet). These were bare facts, dates and events with no connection to the live flesh and blood man holding her hand.

As she nodded, Jamie moved to sit next to her and pulled out the precious package he had so carefully put together and wrapped safely in his pocket earlier in the day. He didn’t want to bore her to death, like looking at someone’s vacation photos and stopped, suddenly uncertain.

Claire squeezed his hand and waited for him to make eye contact.

“Tell me about them, your family,” she urged, touched by the anxious thought behind his hesitation.

He could tell she meant it and he let out a relieved chuckle.

“I’ll no’ go too many generations back, lass, ye needna be worrit,” he assured her.

After making sure Faith was happily entertained watching her favorite show about magical musical toadstools, she and Jamie spent time talking and generally getting to know one another.

Jamie was saddened to learn she was without any family at all, having been orphaned at 5 and losing her only relative a few years ago. Perhaps for that reason, Claire loved the pictures he brought and the stories he told her. When she saw the images of Willie, she gasped out loud.

“Oh, he’s beautiful, I can almost see how Faith will look in a few years’ time!”

Jamie smiled at her genuine response. Willie at ten, defiantly long hair, curly and wild down to his shoulders was indeed a sight to see. He was gratified to know that the strong resemblance he’d seen was undeniable even to Claire who’d never known him in life. Jamie also brought pictures of Ian and Jenny and their children. None had Faith’s gorgeous auburn coloring but all had the cat eyes and those outrageous Fraser lashes.

Faith turned then and smiled, coming to her feet and wandering over to her mother.

Jamie’s stomach growled audibly. He’d barely eaten anything that day, feeling nervous and slightly nauseous.

“Food?” Faith asked, hopefully. Her look of rampant hopefulness making Claire smile.

“Well, sweetness, I guess we know which side of the family you get your appetite from. Two peas in a pod are you and your Daddy!”

“Peas!” Faith demanded. Claire laughed, a high musical sound.

She stood and held her hand out to Faith, “Come darling let’s see what we can find, peas and carrots and maybe some chicken? You’ll join us, Jamie.” Said as a statement of obvious conclusion.

Distracted as she was, Claire didn’t notice as she and Faith wandered to the kitchen Jamie hadn’t moved a muscle, he simply could not. Just like when Claire opened the door on him and sent him reeling, his head was spinning once more.
Since hearing her voice on the other end of the line, he had imagined this going a hundred different ways. He had expected it to be awkward, stilted, uncomfortable, wondering what Faith would make of a 6’3” stranger, would she be scared of him? Would she give him a chance?

He’d had a quick call with Jenny in the morning trying to settle his nerves.

“Do ye think she’ll like me?” He’d asked.

“Of course she’ll like ye, Jamie, all the bairns love their uncle Jamie.” He’d loved the don’t be such an idiot tone of her voice, it was such a normal reaction that he found it oddly comforting. “You’ve a good heart, my dear. They all look up to you. Besides, am I no’ always saying yer just a big kid yourself?”

Jamie was feeling much better.

But then she said, “the person ye should be worrit about is her mother. If you need to impress anyone it’s her.” Though Jenny was, after all, only speaking the truth.

“Aye, I ken that. I hope we can talk a bit, mebbe see what she proposes.” He said.

“Weel, I expect it’ll take a bit of time. She’ll no be used to sharing the lass and given the way her husband treated her, she’s mayhap no’ verra trusting. If ye do run into stormy weather, brother call Gowan & MacKenzie-- but ask for Ned, ye ken he’s the more ruthless of the two,” Jenny observed, causing Jamie’s blood to freeze like ice in his veins.

The thought of having to win parental time with Faith in a lawsuit pushed all kinds of buttons. It was the last thing he wanted to do-- it had been the furthest thing from his mind. He was tempted to shoot the messenger and tell Jenny exactly what he thought of such a thing but he knew she was only trying to protect him.

“I thank ye, Janet,” unable to keep his tone light, Jamie made an effort to end on a better note, “I am hoping that since she invited me to meet, she likely is prepared to work with me on it. Wish me luck.”

Jamie had done his best to push the thought of custody battles from his mind, yet the implications of it had seeped in and colored his day even as he deliberately refused to dwell on the issue.

Though he took the precaution of coming prepared, anyway, to win Claire over. He wanted to assure her that he posed no threat to Faith, to draw her a picture of his own childhood so she’d know his dreams for Faith’s life, too. Jamie never anticipated how intuitively she’d read him; that a handful of stories from his childhood would allow her to see into his soul.

Somehow, over just an afternoon, Claire understood what it meant to him, having Faith. The grace she’d granted to him just then, her inclusive gesture, of fitting Faith effortlessly in his family line, connecting her to his past and his future with just a handful of words.

He’d felt it all afternoon but now he knew it in his heart, Claire would help him and Faith forge their relationship, as if it was already a foregone conclusion, his place in her life and hers in his, as if it had always been there, and always would be. He knew he’d have no cause to contact Ned or any other lawyer.

The afternoon had been magical. He felt a bone deep happiness, elated in a way he’d never experienced before. Ah Dhia, what had he done to deserve such welcome acceptance from Claire and his daughter? Overwhelmed, Jamie did what came naturally to him and, closing his eyes and sent up a prayer, the Gaelic words spilling quietly from his lips, calming to his racing thoughts.
As Claire came back into the room to see what had been keeping Jamie, she noticed he’d not moved from his place on the couch. He was murmuring something in Gaelic, a language she heard often enough but understood only a little. She didn’t need to know the language to recognize a benediction.

Her heart did a skitter step and her throat closed tight with an answering pull lower down. She’d been trying to ignore her body’s response to him since hearing his lovely deep voice with its rolled “Rs” on the phone.

Claire had spent any number of nights worrying herself about what Faith’s father would be like. The Jamie she read about online and in the archives, at least on the surface, had a lot of appeal. As the mother of a daughter, a surgeon in a male dominated field, she couldn’t help wondering what kind of man he would be and prayed he would be a good man, the kind of man who would support a daughter to become anything she dreamed she could be.

His chief chemist, the head of legal and his plant manager were all women, which must have raised some eyebrows, though neither the PR team nor Jamie himself had ever traded on inclusiveness or gender balance as a way to bolster corporate image. That gave her hope that he would raise their daughter to be confident and independent. He was handsome, smart, and had a self-effacing humor in interviews she’d read. In person, he was all of those things and more. Seeing him with Faith had touched her in ways she could never have imagined. He had a good heart, of that she was certain.

Claire had been prepared to make his meeting with Faith a good experience for both of them, she even had a box of Faith’s favorite activities set aside-- new picture books, music cued on the stereo, and a train set that Faith loved but had so many pieces it was only brought out on rare days, out of line of sight but nearby just in case a little bribe or distraction had been needed to smooth the way for father and daughter.

The reality was, she needn’t have bothered. Jamie was a natural with kids and she knew he was the kind of adult who was comfortable with them, he wouldn’t need help finding things to do with Faith. Just as importantly, Faith clearly adored him. She wanted to pinch herself.

When he pulled out the photos of his family and told her a little of each one, deliberately minimizing the sorrow of their loss to emphasize the joy they gave to him during their lives, she felt the weight of all of the unknowns and what ifs inside her lift and something else fitted itself into place that lightened her heart. There was a rightness about his being here with Faith and with her that thrilled her and scared her to death.

Claire felt a little lightheaded. Once, in their medical school years, Joe Abernathy, had talked her into bungee jumping at New England Gorge. Crystal blue sky above, roaring river below. They’d strapped her into her harness, metal clips jingling, bound tight with the wide belts digging into her sensitive places, the anticipation of awaiting her turn, hearing the screams of surprise, joy and fear from the rest of the group.

Her hair whipped around her face as she stepped out on the platform, spread her arms and dove graceful as a bird, wind rushing so fast it forced tears from her eyes, the only sound the surge of air in her ears as she dropped weightless, free. The intense snap when she hit the limit of the rope, blood rushing to her head as her heart got caught between water and clouds. The relief, the thrill as her displaced body tumbled end over end sailing through the sky.

She felt exactly like that girl of long ago, giddy foot planted firmly on the ledge looking straight down, with her other foot leaping confidently into the unknown, having no idea of what came next, just standing there watching him express his thankfulness to God for the gift of his daughter. Months later she would come to recognize that this was the moment she fell head over heels in love...
with Jamie Fraser.

Claire processed information physically, tending to rely on her senses more than her intellect. Seeing him there, she did what came naturally to her. Jamie startled when Claire’s arms came around him. His face was tucked into her chest so he could hear her heartbeat, so his rhythms would slow to match hers. Some unconscious part of him recognized the power of her touch, understood that her intention had been to offer him the tranquility in her heart as a balm to the rawness in his.

After a moment, he brought his arms around her hips, then higher. When she felt his hands splayed across her back, she pulled him into her tightly. With both hands he managed to cover most of her back. Having set out to try and soothe him, she recognized the irony of it. It had been a long time since a man had offered her the simple comfort of a hug and she stayed for several extra heartbeats then pulled away a little, looking down on him.

“Ready to come to the table? I’m not much of a cook but you won’t starve.” She waited patiently for him to open his eyes. When he did, she smiled at him and said, “Pease?”

A lovely rumble of laughter greeted her.

“Aye, I’d love to have dinner with my lasses.”

He’d said it without thought, his expression went from tender to embarrassed in the blink of an eye. She merely tilted her head. Jamie nodded and followed her to the kitchen.
Always Take A Murtagh

As they handed off their menus to the waitress, Murtagh waited a little impatiently for her to get out of earshot then turned his gaze to Jamie and leaned in.

Jamie said nothing as he reached across the table and handed Murtagh his phone. Claire texted the pictures from yesterday over to him before he’d even gotten in his own door last night. He knew each one by heart, having looked his fill already.

Jamie watched with anticipation as his godfather patted his pocket to retrieve his glasses, putting them on in preparation to scroll.

With a start he realized he’d never see either parents need to reach for reading glasses. They’d both died before living enough years to have aged into gray hair.

With his daughter lacking grandparents on either side of her family, he found himself doubly grateful for the irascible old bugger.

Their had always been an unusual relationship. Jamie was just a lad when his Mam was killed but he remembered enough.

He remembered the way both is Da and Murtagh had looked at Ellen when, for her 30th Birthday Party— a big event held the year before her death, with two hundred guests and fancy tables with flowers from the gardens pouring from urns and a live band set up under a tent on Lallybroch grounds— she’d come down the stairs wearing a formal red dress, silky with a deep décolletage and red high heels. It was like seeing sun coming out after a long, cold winter.

He knew his Da and godfather felt the same way for as he glanced over at them, they wore identical expressions of awe. No one greeted her as she turned the second floor landing and caught sight of the three of them standing there, both men stunned into silence.

That didn’t feel right to Jamie who called up enthusiastically, “Ye look beautiful, Mam!”

His mother blinked, then noticed Jamie decked out in full kilt standing to the side of his Da and smiled in delight.

“Why, thank ye kindly, good sir. Its nice to know ye have such gentlemanly manners, lad. They’ll work wonders for ye when you get out in the world.”

He could feel his face get a little hot. When Jamie was pleased his ears turned a bright pink and a flush rose up across his chest. Same thing happened to his Mam so she gave him an extra smile of recognition.

Jamie saw though that directly after, her eyes strayed back to Brian’s and stayed locked on his as he ascended the last steps to greet her. Their conversation was muffled, but Jamie didn’t want to hear it anyway, it would likely end in the two of them snogging, which was nothing he needed to see, again.

So he turned to Murtgah only to find the man still watching Ellen, his eyes had an expression in them that made his wame feel a bit funny. As an adult Jamie had understood the longing that he’d seen there that day, the futile hunger never quenched.

He also remembered that it was Murtagh in the weeks and months after Ellen’s passing that had
kept the remaining Fraser bodies and souls together. Brian had good days and bad ones after but Murtagh always seemed to be there when needed, getting the kids supper, to school and back, the little things here and there that kept the house a home when the grief overwhelmed Da.

In the ensuing years Jamie had wanted to ask his father about the odd relationship he and Murtagh shared, both loving the same woman and yet best friends, but he didn’t dare to do so.

Nor could Jamie speak of such matters to Murtagh, either. One of the solid pillars of the relationship between his father and godfather was that neither man discussed Murtagh’s feelings for Ellen.

How much did Ellen know of Murtagh’s feelings? Clearly Brian not only knew, he’d counted on Murtagh to stand as stalwart guardian over his children to see them safe as he came to terms with the loss.

To surface that thorny topic would cause reverberations that might lead to even more losses for the family. But Jamie had eyes, a heart and sensitive soul that knew what lay beneath the surface nevertheless.

For all the complexities and complications of their family, Murtagh had loved both his parents and in that loving helped he and Jenny keep their memories alive. Having him here to share the surprise of Faith was a deeply satisfying feeling and Jamie eagerly awaited his reaction.

Glasses firmly perched on his nose, Murtagh looked down as Jamie watched his face; he didn’t disappoint. Jamie knew he was looking at:

Jamie straightening Jane’s bonnet as Faith beamed her approval elicited a puzzled expression of inquiry from Murtagh.

The two of them playing side by side, Faith with an animated look of determination and Jamie trying to be subtle about staring at her from the corner of his eye. Both had the same habit of squeezing the right side of their mouths down in identical lines of concentration. Jamie watched as Murtagh registered the fact the picture had captured that unexpected moment of symmetry and his bushy eyebrows rose all the way up into his forehead.

Murtagh scrolled forward and chuckled seeing Faith’s gleeful joy as the tower toppled over, colorful blocks frozen in mid-tumble, Jamie scowling in faux-horror.

He grunted when he saw Faith reaching for a piece of carrot from Jamie’s fork staring hard at the close up image of the girl’s face and lingered over the obvious shape of her eyes.

Jamie couldn’t suppress his grin when he heard a quiet, “Ah!” from his godfather.

Knowing that he had arrived at the picture of Jamie holding Faith in his lap reading her favorite story. Any lingering doubts Murtagh had were dispatched. In that image, looking at them head on, her face directly in front and close to his allowed for easy comparison; the shared Fraser features were unmistakeable.

Murtagh sighed as he looked at the last one, Jamie caught completely unaware tucking his daughter into bed. Not much of her was visible, just her curls exploding on her purple pillow as he kissed her cheek, with her wee hand patting the scruff of his face.

Whatever Murtagh had been expecting, this wasn’t it. Surprise was not quite the word. As he
handed Jamie back his phone, Jamie saw Murtagh’s cheeks were damp. But his smile was huge and the delighted twinkle in his eye warmed Jamie’s heart.

Jamie had always been the child of his heart, the one most like Ellen in looks and temperament. Murtagh found himself increasingly grateful as the years passed for the connection.

If Ellen couldn’t give him the one thing he’d wanted from her (the moment her eyes met Brian’s, she longer had it to give), in the end, she’d given him something perhaps even more precious. Murtagh found he didn’t begrudge the trade, for all that he’d had no choice in the matter anyway.

Murtagh looked Jamie over, it was impossible to look into his face and not see Ellen’s eyes staring out at him. But for all that Jamie was his mother’s son, a fair bit of Fraser was in him, too. The reservoir of strength that lay in him, the sense of duty and loyalty that had been shaped by his father.

The sharp jolt of their loss had worn away but Murtagh found it was still with him, perhaps more rather than less as the years passed. He and Brian had managed to bridge the divide that threatened when, as a giddy young man fresh from from his first semester at university, he’d brought Miss Ellen MacKenzie home to Fraser lands to meet his folks during a break at the Edinburgh College of Fine Arts.

They’d been in the same Into to Form class. The first day they’d walked in to discover a nude model standing in the middle of the studio without so much as a by-your-leave. Instructed to find an open canvass and begin, Murtagh had been gobsmacked, trying hard to look at anything other than the model’s puckered nipples, big as shillings, staring straight at him.

He heard a snicker, a little mix of naughty and genuine amusement and raised his head. That’s all it took, one glance at her fiery mane and deep blue eyes, crinkling with embarrassed laughter over the top of a easel. He’d fallen instantly in love.

They’d been seeing one another, but not wanting to appear foolishly impulsive, he’d never told her how he felt. He’d played it cool, casual. The fall break was only a couple of days, too short for her to make the long journey back to the home she shared with her two brothers, so he’d invited her to come home with him. He was excited to show her the glens and hills of Broch Mordha, the color palette that had inspired his artistic roots in the first place.

The crisp fall air beckoned and they’d gone out for a walk over bramble and bush where they’d been spotted by Brian Fraser, out riding to check on the coos in the far field. He cut quite a fine figure, did Mr. Fraser, atop that pure white beast.

Her head came up just as he was about to dismount. Distracted by her arresting looks, he’d been thrown off his horse and dumped unceremoniously into the mud at her feet.

She burst into laughter, but it wasn’t unkind. Brian replayed the last couple of minutes in his own mind knowing full well he’d been showing off, riding Donas to impress and had just made a cake of it. He couldn’t help but join her, his rueful barks of amusement filling the air.

Unfortunately for Murtagh, Ellen had taken one look at Brian’s chagrined smile and fallen instantly in love. The spark between them almost a tangible object spinning through the air.

Murtagh knew it was a wonderfully romantic story, but the pain of it not being about him was an aching wound, even years after her passing.

Brian had proposed to Ellen just before Hogmanay, she was still only 18, marrying him meant
leaving University. Yet both Ellen and Brian knew from the second they met nothing else would do.

So they persisted over the vociferous objections of her older brothers and Brian’s father, who (disgustingly) met Ellen and decided he wanted her for himself. Strange man, Simon Lovat.

Brian and Ellen were thus left on their own, no family on either side to smooth the way for the couple. Brian must have had a sense that there would be trouble for them. Perhaps that was why he’d come to see Murtagh before he’d even proposed.

A sign of respect, Murtagh knew, and the only time Brian had ever acknowledged what lay between them.

“I ken I’m asking something of ye that I’m no’ so sure I’d be prepared to give ye had it gone the other way, but would you stand wi’ me, be my best man?”

Torn between wanting to tell him to go fuck himself and fear of what his life might become without Ellen MacKenzie in it, Murtagh took a deep breath and reconciled himself to the inevitable.

It gave him some comfort knowing how deeply Brian had loved her, that and standing godfather to their bairns. A different kind of creation maybe but there was a true artistry in it for all that.

Murtagh was startled out of his reverie by a sharp noise from Jamie, clearly intended as an invitation to be nosy. He waited until their food had been laid before them and started in.

“I take it ye didna know about the wee lassie?” Jamie shook his head. “Did ye date the mother for awhile? Where did the two of you meet?”

Jamie filled him in on the details of his afternoon and evening. He mentioned Claire’s name as often as Faith’s, and Murtagh consciously made an effort to keep a knowing grin off his face.

“What’s to be done then?” He asked and Jamie understood what he meant.

“For now Claire suggested that we no’ make a formal schedule but bid me to come when I can. I’ve offered to walk them over to the daycare at the hospital in the morning so I can meet the staff and have my contact information added to Faith’s file. She, that is Claire, is working late so I can pick Faith up in the afternoon and drop her off at Claire’s and meet her sitter, Mrs. Crooke. This weekend Claire asked if I’d accompany them on a picnic in the park, simple stuff, really. Did I tell ye she can count to twenty?” That set him off again on a litany of Faith-related accomplishments.

Murtagh smiled to himself. He had known the Fraser siblings all their lives. More importantly though, he knew the man and woman that had raised them.

Murtagh took in the body language, recalled the last snap in the series and the look of desperate longing in Jamie’s face as he kissed his bairn good night, the quiet excitement and pulse of energy that thrummed through his body when, like now, he spoke of Faith and of Claire and he understood what Jamie couldn’t yet articulate.

He knew very well that once a Fraser gave his or her heart, it was irrevocable. Brian and Ellen moved mountains and defied both their families to be together. Jenny had known almost from the moment she met Ian that he was hers-- no matter that they were bairns themselves.

Whether because of the moral code with which he was raised or due to genuine desire, Jamie Fraser wasn’t about to give up the family he never knew existed, not now. He had found them, and he was going to keep them.
Parenting is not a Spectator Sport

While the notoriety surrounding the recent wikileaks articles had died down considerably, both he and Claire wanted to preserve their privacy as long as they could. Only a small, trusted handful of Jamie’s close family and friends knew what had happened and Claire had only told Joe.

The press had no inkling thus far. Jamie bought a car seat and sometimes drove on days when he needed to transport Faith. If he and Claire were taking Faith on an outing together, they sometimes arrived separately. He’d also taken to wearing a beanie to cover his hair and often wore sunglasses. He refused to be too paranoid about it, the nip of winter was still occasionally in the air and he’d noticed that people tended to pay less attention when they were bundled up. His focus was on spending as much time as he could with Faith and getting to know Claire.

Jamie had seen or spoken with Faith every day, becoming familiar with her routine and Claire’s variable work schedule. He began to get a feel for his daughter’s moods and personality, the things she liked to eat, what interested her.

Mrs. Crooke was delighted that her early mornings and late evening hours were fewer and farther between with Jamie stepping in as he may to help Claire cover early morning drop offs and afternoon pick ups at the daycare centre and supper and bedtime when Claire had evening rounds. Mr. Crooke had just retired and they wanted to spend time together. Juggling schedules was a learning curve but they both made a real effort to accommodate one another; neither of them wanted to burst the fragile bubble they were currently existing within.

When Claire had an early call or Jamie late meetings, an unavoidable happenstance in each’s respective line of work, they would shift things around so Jamie could start his day with his daughter, instead of ending it. On those mornings, Jamie would skip his early run, getting to Claire’s while Faith was still asleep. Claire would bid him a quick good morning as she hurried off to get to the hospital.

Her not too subtle plan was clearly to throw he and Faith together as often as possible and build their bond. He didn’t mind and in repayment of such trust he did his best to pay attention to the things she thought most important for Faith and hope he’d be able to keep his actions consistent with hers.

Faith was especially adorable when she first awoke, her hair resembled a bird’s nest full of twisting strands, chirping away to herself as she did her best to make her bed and get herself dressed. He respected how Claire was fostering her sense of independence and responsibility. So while it would have been quicker for him to help her do certain tasks and speed her along, he didn’t rush in first thing and take over the morning chores. Instead, he’d wait until the chatting grew to an audible pitch before checking in on her.
Faith would squeal in delight on the mornings he popped his head in to greet her. Her smile, the best part of his day. He’d take stock of how far she’d gotten on her own. Then he’d lend her a hand to straighten the bed, pick up the remaining impedimenta strewn across the floor. Then they would put the finishing touches on the day’s ensemble. Sometimes tights would need to be rerouted, snaps realigned. Faith had very definite ideas of color and pattern matching, which he’d learned to, if not accept, then at least ignore.

“She picks her clothes out the night before and lays them on the bench near her toy box.” Claire had explained. “I used to buy things that all matched and try and keep the outfit together but gave that up soon enough. The pants will be in the wash or the sweater’s gone missing, or Faith wants to try something else with the tee shirt.”

Jamie didn’t say anything as he followed her around while she showed him where everything was kept and how it usually worked, but something must have shown on his face as he took in tomorrow’s ensemble of mismatched green hues. She gave him a rueful smile.

“It’s fine, she is learning to figure out what she likes. Better clashing clothing as a toddler than a terrible tattoo as a teen.” She sagely observed.

He’d responded with noncommittal, “Mmphm.”

The combinations could be somewhat arresting, at least to his eye. But, in all fairness, he’d never paid a lot of attention to what Jenny’s lassies wore.

Then again, he had two good eyes, did he not?

One day shortly thereafter, a morning both parents were booked, it was up to Mrs. Crooke to cover. Jamie had picked her up from daycare to find her in yellow and red striped pants and a neon pink and orange floral shirt. He snapped a picture of her and texted it to Claire, sans comment.

“Your way of saying she needs better parental guidance?” She texted right back.

“Never a chance.” He replied with an emoji of someone crossing his heart.
“Bright lad,” came the response, delighting Jamie.

By far the most difficult part of getting Faith ready in the morning had been the hair. When he tried to comb it out, Faith would squirm and cry out when the comb hit a snag. Jamie was slightly traumatized by his first forays into being her stylist.

Claire had a deft touch and was able to ignore any protestations from Faith, brush never hesitating, simply getting what needed to be done done. Jamie thought that was the same pragmatic attitude that likely made her an excellent surgeon. Whether due to skill or familiarity, Faith seemed to tolerate it better from her than him.

After one particularly trying morning, in which Jamie gave up and shoved a hat onto her head instead of continuing a losing battle, he called Jenny. He’d never once heard his nieces complain or whine (nor had Ian come to think of it) and both of their lasses had hair longer that Faith’s.

“Please, tell me how? This morning there was a stramash like to wake the dead. I’m no’ going through it again, so what do ye know that ye havena seen fit to tell the rest of us?”

Jenny laughed but she knew that Jamie hated admitting defeat and worried he was hurting his daughter.

“Detangler,” she confessed promptly, “it’s sold in a wee bottle at the salon. It costs the earth but ye spray it on the hair before you comb and it takes care of most of it. As for the rest, divide the hair to sections, then take hold of one section at a time, grab the locks in one hand near the crown and hold tight wi’ the one hand whilst combing wi’ the other, it pulls less. Ye just slowly work the tines through and don’t pull down too hard.” She advised.

“Any other tips?” As long as he was already throwing himself upon his sister’s mercy, he thought he might as well go all in. Jenny hummed a little as she thought.

“She likes music?” Jamie mmhmed in the affirmative.

“Grab yer tablet and load it up with OK, Go videos, all of them, ye can’t go wrong. She’ll be nicely distracted until ye get the hang of it.”

Three mornings later, Jenny received a text from him.
“Blessings of Mary and Bride upon you, a miracle!” With a photo of Faith taken from behind her head, reflecting her face in the mirror, smooth, whole head with shiny ringlets aglow.

Half a minute later one more text, “Tho I canna taker her to the gym wi’ me. I’m scarrit what the lass might try!” With a picture of Faith mid-twirl in imitation of dancing on treadmills from Here It Goes Again and a big smile emoji.

The new morning hair protocol was such a hit, even Claire remarked upon it, praising him mightily. Jamie’s ears grew pink, perhaps he was getting a handle on this parenting thing after all.

Mornings were a rushed time of the day and perhaps that was why Jamie preferred afternoons and evening with Faith. He would leave the office, just a little earlier than usual in order to make the pick up and got to spend a few hours with her. While he had outfitted his own flat with enough child paraphernalia to keep Faith safe, more often than not, he’d bring her to Claire’s, letting himself into her flat with a spare key. Claire didn’t mind his being there and it was often much easier to keep Faith occupied on her home turf which allowed him to finish out his work day from Claire’s living room with minimal interruption.

On Claire’s later shifts, Jamie would prepare dinner with Faith. Claire laughed the first time she’d walked into the kitchen to see him in her “Kiss the Cook” frilly apron, a gag gift from Joe, who meant the kiss part to be aspirational but also knew how terrible her culinary skills were.

She’d framed the card that went with it and hung it near the stove. It read:

“Dearest LJ,

If the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,

Your best chance is with a scalpel, not a spatula!”

Jamie kept using the apron, anyway. He liked the silly domesticity of it and it was, after all, hanging right there; it might as well get some use.

Living alone, Jamie rarely cooked but now he looked forward to it. He joked that he knew her kitchen much better than his own. Claire joked that he knew it better than she did, too and it was true.

Faith was curious about everything and willing to do her part, like her mother she was a doer and
not a watcher. It was an easy way to spend time together. Claire had a colorful step ladder that Faith used to reach sink and countertop.

She would climb up to stand next to him and mix and stir and wash vegetables. They experimented with vegetables and sauces, different kinds of grains. He’d rarely given much thought to planning a meal but Faith gave him a great incentive to do so. Besides, she made it fun. If she liked something, you knew it, if she didn’t her lips would pucker and sounds of protest would quickly emerge.

Any veg that could be dipped apparently passed muster but she had suspicions about all leafy greens. Her deepest reservations concerned spinach and kale. They were “slimy.”

Thinking himself clever, he made a chicken noodle soup one evening and slipped some chopped kale into it. He popped the meal in front of her and, not making eye contact, picked up his spoon. She eyed it fishily without doing the same. He knew she was watching his spoon as it travelled from bowl to mouth.

“No’ hungry, Faith?” he tried to sound matter of fact.

“What’s it?” She finally asked.

“Chicken soup. Ye like it, and I used the swirly noodles with all the colors.” He helpfully added, focusing on positive attributes.

“Mmphm.” Her mouth formed a hard line.

Jamie bit the inside of his cheek, recognizing where she had picked that expression up.

“Carrots and potatoes, a little onion, too.” He added, she loved all of those.

At that moment, a shred of the kale slipped off of his spoon and hung unceremoniously from the underside directly in her line of sight.

“Nooo!” she cried out. Her pouting lips started to shake and tears suddenly maring her round
cheeks.

Her voice rose in pitch and volume. “Out! Out! Ickies!”

The look of hurt betrayal in her eyes was far, far worse than spending a half an hour trying to pick out all the kale bits before ultimately concluding it a lost cause. As he stirred her mac and cheese, a reparation offered for his transgressions, he realized that he should have made two versions, a larger one he knew she would have no objections to and a smaller version with the kale to try.

When Claire came home, he promptly confessed.

“You brute! Is it the sin of commission for adding in the offensive veg or the sin of omission for selective ingredient listing that you seek absolution for, my lad?”

“Both.” he admitted. “The look on her face,” he shook his head back and forth. “The memory will give me the nightmare for sure. Her eyes grew big and her lip started to quiver. Ye’d ha’ thought I’d added Jane into the soup!” He shivered in memory.

“Parenting,” she blithely observed, “isn’t a spectator sport. It can be a messy business. Te Absolvo, Jamie.” Claire made the sign of the cross and kissed his cheek.

In sympathy perhaps, she ate an extra helping of the tainted soup and pronounced it delicious, he smiled as his ears turned a light shade of pink.

When he couldn’t be there in person, Jamie contented himself with a brief call. They found that while Faith was still too young to be interested in talking on the phone she adored “face-timing.” Faith would always end calls by giving him a “kiss” which, in all good manners he would need to return, with great enthusiasm.

Then Faith would invariably say, “now Mama!” and insist he do the same with Claire. His antics never failed to make her laugh and Claire smile. Jamie found himself oddly comforted by it, knowing that no matter what stressors and difficulties Claire had faced at work, at the end of the day, he put a smile on her face.

His favorite times by far though occurred when their schedules aligned and the three of them could have dinner together. In the quiet domesticity of her cozy kitchen they became accustomed to one
another, in the small acts of setting table, passing bread, doing dishes. Jamie would always stay and help Faith with her pjs and put her to bed.

Claire looked forward to such evenings as well. She tried to be discrete as she watched from the doorway. She knew he didn’t mind her there but she wanted to give Jamie as much time with Faith as possible, trying her best to make up for the missing months between father and daughter. Not because it was her fault, but because had the situation been reversed, she understood how that loss would make her feel and what might help her make peace with it.

Whether Jamie told a tale from his own childhood or Faith picked out a book from her shelf, he was always entertaining. He had a lovely ear for dialogue and the characters sprung to life whenever he told a story.

Then he and Faith would play a quick round of modified “I Spy.” A simple way to teach her Gaelic. Each would go around the room and point to something and say the English word and then the Gaelic one, taking turns. The furniture, the stuffed animals, the images on artwork lining the walls. If Claire was still in the doorway, Jamie would usually include Claire in the game.

Every time he pointed to Claire, Faith would say Mama, but then when he would point to himself she just giggled or shrugged. This was an oddity not even Claire could explain. They’d given her lots of choices: Pa, Papa, Dada, Daddy, Dad, even Father but she refused to be rushed. He did his best not to feel a little disappointed. *Ah, well, give it time,* he would remind himself.

Jamie would kiss her forehead and whisper good night. Often, afterwards he and Claire would sit together for a little while before he left, sharing some wine and talking of things Faith related and of their own days as well.

Jamie came to understand how challenging her job was, how deeply she cared for her patients. He began to read her better, to know when something was bothering her. She had a terrible poker face but he was impressed that she would set such matters aside when she was with Faith. He understood without asking that Claire didn’t normally unburden herself. Jamie didn’t think she let too many people close to her heart. He didn’t mind in the least that he was becoming one of those few.

The only fly in the ointment thus far had been the unavoidable fact that Claire was a toucher, reaching her arm out when wanting to get his or Faith’s attention. She was also a hugger. She would sometimes give him a sweet kiss on the check in hello or good bye. He thought it must just come naturally to her and she probably had no idea she was even doing it at all, let alone with deliberation.
When they would sit together, he noticed how expressive she was with her hands, they’d roll out or curve up, accenting her story. Every now and then she would catch him staring at them and smile in question. What could he say?

*I look at your hands because I imagine how they might feel on me? My mouth goes dry thinking of how you held my hand the other day when we walked with Faith to the car but you didn’t even realize you’d done it?*

*When you hug me as we laugh helplessly about something Faith did that day, you have no idea how much I want to pull you tighter in my arms, how badly I want you to do it again. Have you not noticed that I always let you determine how closely we are held together and for how long?*

*That you’ve set me on fire and I have to curl my hand into a fist and bite my tongue to stop myself from showing you exactly what I want those hands to do next?*

Jamie said nothing, of course and yet...yet something got stuck between his heart and his mouth at such moments and he wondered if she felt it too.
As the spring warmed the air, winter lost its grip and the days grew a little longer, they had been able to spend more time out of doors and she was such a busy little bee that even though it took twice as long to get anywhere, he loved rambling walks with Faith.

Today, in fact, the unusually warm weather was making it difficult to concentrate. Jamie’s eyes kept straying to the window. He’d not seen Faith for a couple of days and he missed her. Claire’s face flitted briefly across his mind as well, Jamie pretended not to notice.

Suddenly, there she was; his cell phone was ringing.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Claire observed, “Fancy a walk home?”

Jamie was out the door like a shot. His office was located a short distance away. The daycare itself was set in the administrative building that made up part of the hospital complex and it was located nearby on a quiet shade lined street. By the time he’d arrived, Faith had her backpack mounted and Claire was holding her hand.

Unselfconsciously, Jamie grabbed the other and they started out, the three of them lined up, and falling into an easy rhythm. Every ten paces or so he and Claire would tighten their grips and swing her for a “flying step” which thrilled her.

Faith spotted a dog tied up outside a post office and pulled at them to let go their hands, shrieking in delight. The dog’s ears barely twitched and he was a lab, so not much danger of an aggressive response. Jamie kept an eye on the interaction. After a bit, Faith tired of petting him and was ready to continue.

“And what’s he called, lass?” Jamie asked, playing their game to help her learn Gaelic.

“Cu!” She responded and laughed when a dog started to bark.

As they continued, they kept spotting objects and practicing.

“Eun!” she said when he pointed at a bird in the sky.

It was Faith’s turn and she pointed to a flower wanting the Gaelic word.

“Flur,” Jamie supplied and so it went a few more rounds.

To test the waters Jamie pointed at himself but Faith just shrugged, not answering. Then she pointed to Claire.

Jamie was a little puzzled.
“Ye ken verra well who yer Mama is.” He teased her.

“Not your Mama!” Faith declared. Well, true enough.

Jamie smiled, bioreannach, meaning woman was the correct answer. But as he looked over a Claire he caught sight of her, her mind elsewhere, the sun hit her in an odd way and the combination struck him as rather ethereal.

He now knew Claire well enough to be able to see where Faith had inherited the delicate structure of her bones, the far away looks she had when daydreaming, and his relationship with Claire was such that when he caught these glimpses, they were precious to him. He wanted to savor and remember them always.

Having Jenny, Ian and Murtagh to turn to especially now made him acutely aware that Claire had no family of her own, a thought that made him feel responsible to safeguard her.

If, God forbid, something were to happen to Claire who would tell Faith what her mother had been like? That her quick thinking under pressure came from Claire or her beautiful eyes? So while she was distracted, he looked his fill to capture this moment in his mind forever.

Then he squeezed Faith’s hand in his, knowing they were both watching Claire.

“Aye, well yer mother is a Sassenach.” He said off hand.

“Sessen-” Faith repeated.

“Sassenach, lass” Jamie said firmly.

“What?” Claire’s attention now recaptured. “I’m a what?”

“’Tis the Gaelic for an Englishwoman in the Highlands.”

“Hmmm. Makes me sound rather exotic.” Claire mused.

“Ye are at that, Sassenach.” He confirmed.
We All Need Someone to Lean On

One evening, Claire arrived home after ten pm, an unusually late time for her. She’d texted him earlier to let him know she had an emergency surgery.

He watched from the living room as her keys fell from her hand onto the side table by the door. Her body utterly drained of energy. She closed the door using her backside leaning against it after it closed. Her coat still on, head hung low. She made no sound but looked utterly bereft.

Wordless, he came to her, his eyes never leaving hers as he gently took the umbrella from her hand, then loosened the belt on her coat. He watched her face as he moved his arms behind her to ease it off her shoulders, and suddenly hers came instinctively up into him. His mind understood her actions were a response to his.

Disoriented at first, Jamie didn’t move. Did he mean to do that? After a pause, he decided that answer was very much yes and he pulled her into him harder. She fitted her head to his chest and wept quietly. Jamie held her, hoping his touch could provide some comfort.

With sudden insight he realized why she was always using her hands, always the one reaching out to offer a touch as a palliative. Those hands, small and strong, capable in ways so far beyond his ken spent all their working hours inflicting damage in the desperate hope of spurring the body toward eventual healing.

How hard must it be day in and day out to know, beyond any doubt, that your hands hurt people? Every. Single. Day.

Coming home, to her refuge how could he not have comprehended her need to touch in kindness and compassion? And if she needed to be able to give in that way, how did he miss that she also needed to receive the touch of another to heal herself as well? To be shown that someone understood that necessity? And he’d what? He mentally recoiled as he realized just what he had been thinking. He believed it to be an unfortunate habit of hers, an imposition.

Jamie’d been out of his depth since the moment he opened her letter. He’d thought by not reacting to her frequent touches that he was somehow being noble, drawing lines and boundaries for fear of --- he bit back a snort-- wee idiot! Fear of what? Claire? This woman who’d only ever wished good things for you? Who had only believed good things of you? In retrospect she’d asked so very little of him in return. In resisting her touches, he’d unconsciously rejected her. He cradled her tightly to him, trying to make up for it.

He felt Claire’s knees give way then and no power on earth could have made him let go of her just then. Jamie picked her up in his arms and walked her to the couch, sitting down with her in his lap.

“Shhh mo nighean donn, shh a graidh.” he murmured over and over.

No longer concerned about keeping physical distance, recognizing how essential a sense of connection was to her, he rocked her gently, whispering Gaelic words, prayers really, in her ear. He always found its rhythm appealing and calming. In all honestly, at that moment, he could use some soothing himself.

Jamie pulled away a little wanting to look at her face, pulling her curls from her forehead to do so. The action reminiscent of the way he did the same with Faith, her hair the same color, the same texture and, just then, as precious in his hand. His eyes traveled over her face, the sadness and the
pain written on every feature. He pressed his lips to her forehead.

He briefly switched to English.

“Do ye want to talk about it?” he whispered.

She made a soft little sound of distress that cut him to the bone. Her eyes closed, a tear racing down her cheek.

She forcefully shook her head no. He placed one hand behind her head and pulled her body gently against him again, stroking her back.

“It’s fine, Sassenach. I’m here, let it go, aye? Let it go.”

And Claire did, weeping a little harder, borrowing from the strength of him, tears falling more rapidly as she thought of how contrary the world was in which an act of anger sometimes caused irreparable harm but then small acts of kindness could start the process of healing those left in its wake.

He held her until Claire cried herself out. She must have grown quite heavy in his arms, his legs had probably fallen asleep. Claire tried to find the motivation to move. But he was so warm, he made her feel like nothing could harm her so long as he was with her. The beat of his heart in her ear soothed her own.

He kissed the side of her forehead, kept his lips pressed tight against her ear, every now and then she noticed the words and rhythm would change but it didn’t matter.

It was all the same thing really, the comfort of being held safely in the arms of someone who cared.

In the end she found she couldn’t move after all, and she allowed the gentle rocking of Jamie’s arms to lull her to sleep. She woke the next morning still dressed in scrubs in her own bed, Jamie long gone but the feel of him stayed with her for a long time after.
On his own for an entire afternoon with Faith, wandering through the city, Jamie reflected that Claire was largely correct, even if the place was your home and you knew it like the back of your hand, it looked different when you had a toddler in tow. She’d said it not in doubt as to his announced plans for occupying Faith while Claire borrowed his car to run a couple errands necessitating hauling and carting, but in helpful advice.

He’d scoffed, pretending to disguise the noise as a cough. He assured her they’d have no trouble at all and would meet her at the neighborhood grocery store later in the day. A certain gleam in her eye let him know she wasn’t fooled for a second and knew bravado when she saw it.

The truth was Claire did everything with Faith so well that he was determined to rise to the occasion. Claire had been nothing but supportive of his efforts to date. There was no earthly reason why he should feel competitive in this regard but some primal instinct in him demanded that he prove himself as worthy and as capable as she, else what purpose was his role as Faith’s father?

Superfluous up until now, some neanderthalian part of him wanted to be considered essential. To Claire or to Faith, he couldn’t say exactly and ruthlessly shut off his self-examination.

He had confidently embarked for their inaugural outing, borrowing Claire’s stroller, some top of the line pram with dual-axle in-line steering and all terrain wheels. Faith loved when they went fast so he contented himself with a modified run, going along at a good clip. She would urge him to move quicker by high pitched noises that he was happy to oblige.

This worked very well indeed in the park but once they hit the regular streets, he was forced to slow down, less due to overcrowding as due to Faith’s curiosity. After a half an hour he started wondering how was it that children were not regularly maimed in the daily course of their travels, if Faith wasn’t flinging her arms out, grazing her hands across everything from parked cars to dogs to bushes along the sidewalk, then she was inexplicably dragging her feet below the stroller’s footrest. Twice now he’d been caught unaware and narrowly avoided scraping her foot.

Jamie had been blessed with exceptional hand-eye coordination. It was how he was able to learn and perform all kinds of barkeep slights of hand that impressed to no end, and while he was not Mensa material he was fairly bright, if he did say so himself.

It was rare for him to come across something he couldn’t conquer, whether by force, stubborn determination, or wit.

The original plan was to grab the bus to take them to the science museum but the thought of having to corral an unusually active Faith while simultaneously trying to remember how to fold the
ridiculously complicated contraption with levers and releases and locking mechanisms defeated him. A new sensation, which he didn’t care for in the least.

Luckily, Faith spied a playground near a local school, just the thing to burn off her excess energy. Jamie caught some of her enthusiasm. The playground looked just like the one he’d grown up with on the grounds of his primary school. Swing set, simple slide, monkey bars.

Finally a landscape with which he had some passing familiarity! He knelt beside her and unfastened the various straps and clips. She flung herself out of the seat giving him a sweet hug.

“Swing!” She cried and ran eagerly toward the four-seat set.

As if in slow motion, Jamie watched as she cut straight in front of a kid who was just pumping through his backswing, his feet came kicking out for momentum.

He shot forward and managed to place his body between hers and the kid. The glancing blow on his hip knocked the kid a little sideways and killed all his momentum.

"Hey!" he protested.

“Sorry, lad, are ye ok? The lassie didna see you.” Jamie smiled in apology, knowing the kid was not hurt in the least.

The same could not be said for his hip bone which was smarting from the thick sole of the boy’s boot. When he turned to look at Faith she was trying to scotch her little bottom onto the wide green seat, oblivious regarding her near miss. Just as she hauled her body up to sit, he saw that it was set far too high for her.

He made a reach and was too late as she hoisted, failed to reach her destination and promptly slid hard into the packed earth. He knew that must have smarted.

She turned her soulful brown eyes to his. Jamie knew from watching Claire in such moments not to react. Claire always kept her response calm and matter of fact. So he tried to imitate her.

He wiped any grimace off his face and casually asked, “Do ye need a hand?”

He breathed a sigh of relief as she decided she was fine and there was no need to cry. That solved the immediate problem but not the main issue. She was simply too small to stay in the seat and she badly wanted to swing.

In the end he didn’t dare go too high but as he held her in his lap, one arm with a vice-like grip around her middle, they managed to have a fun time anyway.

The monkey bars were a hit, too. Faith had been watching kids on them for awhile. So when they went over to the apparatus, Jamie was already calculating how to get behind her to safely allow her to climb while still moving quick enough to get in front of her when she launched herself onto the bars.

From what he could see, she’d never make that leap safely, nor would her arm span allow her to move from bar to bar even if she could hold her body weight to do so.

Fortunately, Faith wasn’t a climber by nature so she didn’t immediately race up the ladder. She looked at the ladder, the cross bars, and Jamie, back and forth, calculating.
Making her decision she stood under the center, facing him. He watched, wondering what she was doing.

Then, with all the authority of a Queen, she imperiously commanded her minion, “Up!”

That seemed a wee bit high handed to him. He crossed his arms and stayed put.

“Up! Up! Up!” she repeated, a little louder each time.

Jamie pretended to be looking around for something on the ground, spinning to gaze behind himself, behind her, to the left and right making humming noises of inquiry all the while. She quieted.

“Hmm. Lass, have ye by any chance seen yer manners? I coulda sworn we brought them with us today?”

She giggled and put her arms up into the air and said expectantly, “Pease?”

“Oh,” he clutched his chest in mock relief, “There they are, that’s verra good. I wouldna ha’ cared to go back home to find them!”

He swooped in and lifted her up and over to every bar in imitation of the big kids, much to her delight. Jamie felt like he’d hung the moon.

The slide, however, brought both of them down to earth and rather rudely.

While the ladder up resembled a stairway and was safe and easy for her to climb, the design had never been intended for use by little ones.

He didn’t know that the damn thing was a rocket launcher. It came with absolutely no labels, warnings or helpful tips.

One second Faith was gleefully chirping the next she was crying loudly, flat out on her tummy, scrapes on both knees and one hand. And they were one of her favorite pairs of pants, too.

He cleaned her up as best he could, Claire, naturally had a wee first aid kit stored in the cargo pockets of the stroller. His gut clenched in visceral reaction each time he looked at her scraped knees. What he really needed was a little soap and water.

Remembering a large cafe a block away, he quickly strapped Faith in and set off. He left the pram, without even trying to fold it, just outside the door and carried her inside.

The lovely smell of bacon greeted them, as did an unfriendly “Oi! Ye dinna mean to leave yer buggy in the middle of the road?”

“Sorry, sir,” Jamie said, holding Faith a bit more aloft so he could see the trouble. “The wee lassie fell and I need to clean her up a bit. Could we use the WC?”
Jamie could tell the man wanted to say no but by this point the few customers in the place had all turned their attention to the exchange. The gruff man nodded and Jamie made his way to the back of the restaurant.

In all fairness, perhaps Jamie could not be blamed for not appreciating the difficulties of single fathers with daughters needing to use public facilities.

Yet as he pushed open the door to find two men at the urinals, Faith’s eyes large as saucers, this being a new experience for her, too; he quickly concluded that men’s public facilities, as a general proposition, were, in every respect, not family friendly.

It would have been marginally better had Faith been a lad and he did briefly consider walking into the ladies or begging the next woman going in to help his daughter.

All his options equally bad, in the end, he manned up and, for that matter, so did Faith. Jamie aggressively pre-cleaning every surface he thought she might come into purposeful or accidental contact with and then vigorously washing every exposed part of her with liberal application of soap and water directly after.

Carrying her back out to the street, he noticed that if they didn’t get a move on he’d be late meeting Claire at the grocer’s.

Trying to move quickly, he did his best to settle and take care of Faith’s wounds, pulling up her pant legs to apply first aid cream and bandages to her cleaned skin (wincing anew now that he could see the scrapes more clearly) and, during the process, continuing to berate himself for not understanding that Faith had been too young to safely use the primary playground, for not thinking through their afternoon plans better, for not practicing opening and closing the damn pram, for not making a list of local shops and restaurants with unisex facilities and for, in general, being an incompetent fool.

His teeth hurt for grinding them together and his lips had stayed in a tight compressed grimace the entire time. So much for his first solo outing with Faith. All he’d proven was that he was a liability.

He looked at the time again and started shoving the bandages and cream back into the kit. He was still facing Faith, kneeling next to her, her pant legs still rolled up exposing bruised knees.

He knew he was at the wrong angle to put the kit away, it’d be easier from behind the pram, but he
persisted. When it didn’t fit in easily, he forced it, angrily shoving it back into its little pocket, mangling it and jostling the seat under his daughter in the process.

All the while Faith watched him, looking at him like he was some stranger. She made some little sound as he reached forward to pull her pant legs back down. His head came up and he looked into her worried face, her expression so like the first time he laid eyes on her.

He heard a soft, plaintive “Kiss?”

Jamie’s anger abruptly lifted. Everything in Faith at that moment reflected the very best of Claire’s good example, her nurturing soul, her loving touch. He’d thought on the basis of a few weeks familiarity he’d prove himself worthy of her example?

*Who you jivin’, Fraser?*

He’d been the one who, in his hubris, decided this one afternoon would be his parenting litmus test. *Pride goeth before the fall, true enough*, he thought wincing again looking at her knees. Faith thought he was upset with her and why wouldn’t she? Indulgent self-absorbed idiot!

Jamie kept his eyes on her as he breathed counting the inhalations and exhalations. After a calming few breaths he found he was able to let go of his own shortcomings and failings to focus on the thing that really mattered. He smiled at his daughter with a full and a grateful heart.

“Och, lassie, I’m that sorry ye got hurt. And yer Da has been an wee ass! I beg yer forgiveness, *mo nighean donn*.“

He gently leaned down and kissed each knee, took her small hand in his, turned the palm over where it was scraped and kissed it as well.

Then he leaned in and gave her a score of tiny kisses on her face, while she laughed. Last, he fitted his mouth to the fold between her neck and shoulder and blew an enormous raspberry which caused her to scream in a fit of happy giggles.

Rude noises and toddlers, always a perfect pair.
When Claire pulled into the parking lot her eyebrows rose high as she took in the sight of a very frazzled Jamie and a much worse for wear Faith. Torn, slightly bloody pants, hair standing on end, it was actually hard to judge who had the worse afternoon looking between the two. But Faith smiled when she saw her mother and was clearly fine overall, if not content.

They decided to only pick up a few essentials and put the stroller away to allow Faith a chance to stretch her stiff and sore knees by walking around the store. Before they went in, however, Jamie asked Claire to show him again how to operate the stroller and insisted that she deploy it once more so he could practice. Two tries later, it was stowed perfectly in the trunk.

As they walked the aisles, Jamie filled her in on his and Faith’s no good, terrible, rotten, horrible day.

What she had meant, Claire reflected later on, was to let him know that she had complete confidence in his ability to handle anything. From maniac swinging grade schoolers to murderous slides, to unsanitary bathrooms.

So in the checkout aisle, when Faith threatened a meltdown after her demand of a lollipop was refused and she got that gleam in her eye, when her body started to vibrate with frustration, Claire suddenly remembered she needed to look at something in a far off aisle to allow Jamie handle it instead of interfering. She left their line of sight but circled back around and watched the scene unfold from just across the way.

Jamie tried to distract and deflect the tantrum that had been brewing but was not successful. Claire might have given in for the sake of the poor people in line behind them but it didn’t matter what she would have done. Privately, she thought it was about time for the bloom to be off the rose of Jamie and Faith’s relationship.

Both of them had been on excellent behavior for the last few weeks. Faith’s infatuation with Jamie continued unabated. She rarely pitched a fit in his company and Jamie, for all his natural ability, still needed to find his footing and be comfortable as her father. In retrospect, after the day he’d had, she probably should have offered a hand.

Still, she thought, circling back to her initial instinct to let him take this one, from her experience nothing made you understand what it meant to be a parent than having a Murphy’s Law kind of day.

“Miss Faith, the answer is no. We’ll be having dinner soon. Come, mo nighean donn, we need to finish checking out and get home.” Jamie was using his very best reasonable parent voice.

“Ollipop! ...pease?” Faith’s bottom lip started to curl. She looked around for her mother. So did Jamie, for that matter but no fool Claire, she was long gone. Jamie was on his own and knew it.

“We’ll just pay for what we have, thank ye kindly.” Jamie told the clerk pulling out his wallet. Hoping that the loss of an audience would see the matter dropped.
“I want a pop!” Faith raised her voice.

Jamie tried to remain calm, bagging up the groceries and paying the lad at the register. As he started to move away with the bags to clear the area Faith let out a blood curling scream that split Jamie’s guts open.

He tried to keep his face completely expressionless. He tried to ignore the censorious looks from fellow shoppers who all developed amnesia as if they themselves had never had their own children pitch a fit in a store or hadn’t seen it happen to someone else.

Instead, he gave his daughter his full attention. Claire watched as he knelt down so he was on her level.

“Faith, ye’ll no be screeching like a banshee in the store.” He said firmly and gently took her arm to usher her forward.

Faith dug her heels in as hysterical tears fell, screaming “No! No! No! Gimme one!”

Stubborn Scot to stubborn Scot they faced off. Jamie’s ears started to turn a bit red. She could see both of them sticking their determined chins out and staring one another down. Both their bodies rigid and tense.

“If ye dinna stop screeching and get a move on, lass, ye’ll no have cookies tonight.”

Faith could care less, she was holding out for the joy of instant gratification and continued to carry on.

“Or a book for bed.” Jamie added.

Faith didn’t budge or quiet.

Claire could tell Jamie was close to wanting to simply pick her up and allow his physical strength to determine the matter since he certainly could move her without her cooperation.

"Faith, ye have lost cookies and a book. We’ll keep yer bath wi’ extra bubbles if ye move right now,” he warned her.

“Oh dear,” Claire thought, “However will we get her to bed tonight?”

But she had underestimated Jamie. He was the more ruthless of the pair.

“But if ye dinna move, lass, ye’ll get no bath and Jane will be spending the night alone.” Said with a low pitch of menace, Faith immediately understood the man was dead serious.

“No Jane?” she asked.

“Alone. And Outside.” Jamie emphasized the peril.

Faith had quieted, a feat of strength taking all her effort to do. Jamie had gotten to his feet, sensing victory and started to move away.

Faith took four huge hiccupsing gulps of air and then shot forward trying to catch him. Claire was
stepping out in front of him. Jamie spotted her and gave her a sheepish grin. She gave him a smile of reassurance. She knew how hard these moments could be.

“Jane’s ok?” Faith called plaintively.

Jamie didn’t stop, hoping that Faith would spot Claire and move faster to be reunited with her mother, if for no other reason.

“Wait!” Faith called. Claire saw Jamie’s step hesitate but he kept moving toward her and the exit.

“Da! Wait, Da! For me, too! Stop, Da, pease!” Faith started to run to him.

Jamie skidded to a stop. Claire, so close she could feel the breath as it whooshed out of him. Claire’s eyes shone with unexpected tears as his locked on hers and his mouth fell open in surprise. An expression of joy lit him from the inside.

It was the first time Faith had called him Da.

*Oh God, Faith, his wee lassie, today of all days!*

As Faith caught up to him she flung her body around his long, strong leg. Claire made a quick grab and divested Jamie of the groceries he was carrying so his hands were free. Jamie squeezed Faith to his leg briefly, letting her know all was well.

Then he registered Claire’s maneuver. He scooped Faith up in his arms, holding her tight to him, kissing her cheek before settling her on his hip.

Claire felt his body pulsing with emotion. She was flooded with such a feeling of love and hope for her daughter and for the man beside her.

It was as natural as breathing, when he stretched his free arm around Claire’s shoulder, leaned down and kissed her high on the side of her forehead. Her overriding thought was of how perfectly they fit together.
Claire could tell there was something on in Jamie’s mind and he was hesitating to discuss it. They were putting Faith’s toys back in her storage chest while she brushed her teeth.

“Is there something wrong?” Claire finally asked, not knowing any better way to begin.

Jamie dropped the truck he had been holding to the box with a thunk and turned to her. He realized she was genuinely apprehensive so he smiled in reassurance.

“It’s no’ much, Sassenach, but Saturday next is the Quarter Day Festival at Lallybroch.”

Claire looked at him blankly.

“Tis my home, where Ian, Jenny and their bairns live, where I grew up. I normally visit every couple of weeks and stay the weekend, I havena been back since...well, ye ken.” He grinned at her.

“Mmh?” Claire wondered if he was trying to tell her he would be away for a time.

“Aye. It’s in honor of the old days when the laird of the Fraser lands would call all the tenants to him to pay rents and catch up with friends and neighbors. My family puts it on once a year. We have some traditional games and special ones for the children, pony rides, there’s usually an afternoon game of shinty or footie. In the evening, we host a smaller gathering with food and drink, great music. A welcome to the warmer weather.”

“Sounds lovely.” Claire said a little longingly.

“The thing is...this year it will be a bit different. Slainte will be sponsoring it, using it as a celebration of our first year so it will be larger than usual, better funded, too. We leased a large field that joins wi’ ours for more room. My cousin Jared, the one who gave me a start when I lived in Paris, will be coming. He’s showcasing some smaller vineyards that he thinks should be better known. The band this year is really good, we’ve a large tent for the dinner and dancing. The Quarter Day games will be open to the public more or less, but the evening celebration will be on the grounds at Lallybroch and is just three hundred or so, by invitation only.” Jamie explained.
Claire’s eyebrows rose up inviting him to spit it out.

“I need to be there a couple of days before and maybe a day after. I am wondering if it would be a good time for the lassie to meet my family?” Jamie asked, a look of hopeful anticipation in his eyes. Claire hesitated.

“Won’t you have your hands full? I can’t imagine having a toddler in tow would be convenient.” She’d tried to picture it.

Claire also tried to ignore the implications of Faith being somewhere other than with her for any length of time. They’d never been separated overnight before.

She had thought she was prepared for this, knowing some day Faith and her father would have a relationship like this, separate from her; but she felt unexpectedly shut out all the same.

“It is a busy time,” he agreed, “but there’s also many hands around to help. She would love it there and I would love to show you my home and have ye meet my kin. Will you and the lass come with me? Spend a few days at my home? We’ve plenty of room. You and Faith can take the laird’s chamber? It’s quiet and private; I’ll bunk in with the lads, they won’t mind.” Hopeful eyes met surprised ones.

Claire ignored the happy dance that started jumping inside. Jamie often spoke of his family and colleagues at work; she couldn’t help but be curious about them.

Likely, those who he’d told about Faith were curious about her, too. The more she thought of it, the better the idea seemed. Arriving at a time when everyone would be busy preparing for the Quarter Day festivities would cast the spotlight on something other than Faith and that would be more relaxing. Less pressure on host and guest alike and she did want to meet Jamie’s family.

“You aren’t worried about the press? Especially if it’s a promo event of a sort for Slainte?”

“I’m no so worrit about the day, you’ll be two in the midst of the crowd. I’ll be running sunup to sundown, if ye see me a’ tall, I’ll likely be on a field at a distance. You and she will go round to the different games and spectator areas-- she’ll find it great fun to watch. We’ve no’ invited any press for the evening party, besides, the lass will be asleep by the time the dinner and dancing starts. There’s been no a peep about ye or the lass, lately. I’ve no been doing the same publicity events. When ye arena out at parties and galas the press tends to forget about yer existence. It’s easier to
keep a low profile than most people credit. If ye dinna do much, then no one finds ye all the interesting anymore. No one is poking their nebs into my business or yours at the moment.”

Claire understood his thinking in this regard.

“What happens if she calls you Da in front of everyone?”

Claire thought she’d made an excellent point but that damned Scot just smiled in pure happiness.

“I’d like nothing more,” he said with a chuckle, “and in front of family, well, they ken so it’s expected, aye? If that happens Quarter Day during the games and it’s clear she’s speaking of me, and if someone overhears it, we’ll just tell them she calls everyone Da.” His eyebrows wriggled up and down, which was his way of winking, having never learned the fine art of closing only one lid.

Claire laughed at that considering how long it took Faith to do it for him in the first place. Hearing him put it that way it did seem unlikely that such a scenario would unfold but if it did that was a plausible explanation.

“All right, Jamie, we’d love to go with you, thank you. It sounds like fun.”

*****

As they rounded the bend Claire let out a gasp spotting the manse in the distance.

“Oh, Jamie, it’s beautiful.”

Larger than she expected but enchanting with the blending of architectural styles of different eras, she could now see the kitchen gardens set near the side yard, and in the distance rows of flowers along winding paths.

“Aye.” He’d agreed, glancing in the rearview, Faith was still out like a light.

Her face pressed hard into the side of the car seat, she’d wake warm and soft with little crease lines
Jamie’s hands shook a tiny bit and he could feel his heartbeat speeding up.

He was bringing his daughter home. *Ah Dhia* that his Da could only have lived to see this day!

The baying of a hound announced their arrival before the car had even circled the drive.

Claire watched as a little girl and an older boy emerged from the house followed closely by a small, dark haired woman.

As Jamie put the car in park, Faith started to wake.

Jamie greeted wee Jamie and Maggie first but then reached into the back seat, hoisting a still sleepy Faith up, resting her on his hip.

She’d want to stretch her legs in a minute or two but for now he snuggled her up against him.

Jenny threw her arms around him, taking care to not startle Faith.

“Oh, tis wonderful to have ye home, *a brathair* !” Jenny waited a beat or two for Faith to turn toward her.

“Hello Faith, darling. I’m yer Auntie Jenny. It’s lovely to meet you,” she said tickling Faith’s leg.

Faith blinked, noticing her new surroundings and the radiant smile of the woman next to her, just taking everything in.

Claire was rounding the car to introduce herself when, to everyone’s surprise, Faith launched herself straight into Jenny.
Jenny, emitted a small oomph and Faith grabbed hold of her aunt’s hair, securing herself firmly.

Claire watched Jenny’s eyes close as she buried her face in Faith’s neck breathing her in as she held her.

With a start Claire realized Jenny had never expected to be able to hold her brother’s child in her arms, hadn’t believed she’d be an aunt any time soon.

She’d known it would matter, but she hadn’t appreciated just how much. Unconditional love and joy for their daughter poured from Jenny.

Claire’s eyes stung and she had to force air through the tightness in her throat. She glanced away from Jenny and toward Jamie. That was a mistake. Fathomless blue pierced her heart, reading her perfectly, knowing and not concerned that she would read him the same. Overwhelmed, it was she who looked away.

The dog she’d heard earlier barked again.

“Oh, dog?” Faith asked tentatively, confused by the size of the enormous beast ambling toward them.

“Oh, aye, Faith that’ll be Bran, he’s a braw laddie.”

The dog’s ears pricked up hearing Jamie’s voice and he came to greet his master. Jamie was on his knees rubbing ears and scratching Bran’s back.

Jenny let Faith down and she promptly joined her father playing with the dog. Claire and Jenny smiled at one another.

“If he had a saddle, she’d ride him everywhere, I expect.” Claire said a little wistfully.

Jenny noticed Claire’s eyes stayed on Jamie as she said it. Jamie laughed.
“Aye, Sassenach, he’s a fair hand rounding up the sheep but gentle, Bran would let her, too. Wouldn’t you, ye lovely wee marsh-mellow?”

By this point the dog had overturned in ecstasy, legs straight up in the air as Faith rubbed his huge belly.

Claire pulled her eyes away from the scene and introduced herself to Jenny, Jamie’s namesake and Maggie. Maggie was a couple of years older than Faith but Kitty and she were around the same age. Though, Kitty was just waking up from her nap and Ian was with her.

Eventually, they managed to corral everyone inside and sort out various bags, rooms, porta crib assignments and the like. Claire and Faith settled into the enormous Laird’s Room. It’s warm wooden panels, marble fireplace and canopy bed bespoke a forgotten era. The mullioned windows opened onto a view of the fields far beyond and the crumbling tower upon which the family title, Broch Tuarach was based.

In the two days leading up to Quarter Day, Claire came to appreciate Lallybroch as a living thing. Teeming with animals, plants and people everywhere, of course, but the home itself had a personality all it’s own.

Comforting, warm, it talked to you, did you care to listen to it. Even with workmen rushing about and dozens of small details to track and follow, the peace of the place settled over her and seeped into her bones.

Visually and especially for the niece of an antiquarian, full of treasures to explore. Every room in Lallybroch was crammed with Fraser family history. Bibles with ancient family trees, broadswords, chamber pots, targes, old candelabras, butter churns, soap molds, brass tubs, dirks, tartans, old plates and furniture, first edition books, framed letters going back hundreds of years to say nothing of the very impressive wine cellar with offerings from at least a hundred years ago.

Each generation of Frasers, it seemed, had produced at least one artist and walls and shelves all over Lallybroch bore the fruits of their combined labors. A mural adorned one whole wall of the Laird’s chamber, courtesy of Ellen MacKenzie Fraser. It was an elaborate landscape, almost as captivating as the one outside her window.

In Jamie’s generation, that artist had been his older brother, Willie. Claire could see, based on the work that he produced before dying so young, that he would have been quite special, even in this family of creative souls. Several of his paintings and beautiful wood carvings were hung in various rooms.
Over the next couple of days, the house filled. Murtagh and Fergus arrived and Jared Fraser came in from Paris that evening. All of them had summarily been put to work, even her, ensuring that everything for the Quarter Day Festival was in the ready.

There had been no obvious plan in assigning various tasks, she would have sworn that was true. Yet each Fraser had made an effort to find something that needed to be done with Faith, or with her.

“Oh, what have we here?” Claire said the next morning, finding Murtagh, wrists deep in bread dough. All the children, including her daughter, standing around the table or kneeling on chairs punching and kneading the dough.

“Rolls!” Exclaimed Maggie.

“Toast!” said Faith.

“It’ll be lumps of paste if ye don’t attend to yer business, weans.” Murtagh grunted.

“Hit it harder!” wee Jamie encouraged.

“Like that?” Faith was smacking the table for all she was worth by that point, in imitation of her cousins. She was enjoying the novelty of staying in a house with children her age to play with.

“Excellent.” Murtagh declared as Claire poured her tea to steep.

“Miss Kitty?” Murtagh asked. The littlest Murray raised her head, “will ye grab the baking sheets?”

Claire was almost done fixing her mug but the industrious elves at the table had not stopped in their work.

“Aye, that’s perfect, James.” Murtagh said to young Jamie. “Ye got all the letters in yer whole name done wi’out any help. Now we’ll have to see if the letters’ll hold when baked?”
“Mooo!” said Faith.

Claire’s spoon scraped the cup as she looked up. Faith was sitting in Murtagh’s lap as he put the finishing touches on his creation.

Claire looked over his shoulder. He’d made a perfect rendition of a herd of highland coo. In bread, no less.

“Och, lassie, can ye tell me how many coos are going into the oven?” He and Faith put finger to figure and began the tally.

Claire laughed out loud at the scene. A less likely preschool teacher she’d never seen and yet his sweetness was undeniable, despite looking like a grumpus. She kissed the top of his head on her way back out to the fields. She couldn’t help it.

Yesterday, she’d wandered to the kailyard near sunset to find Fergus and Ian coming over the rise, pulling Kitty and Faith in a red wagon returning from evening set up at the public fields.

Fireflies had come out and were starting to blink on and off.

“Kits and Faith, look up, my ladies and see how the flying stars have come out to greet you.” Fergus was saying.

“Ooh, Uncan, look!” Faith exclaimed.

For some reason Ian’s name and title had blended into one word. Ian stopped the wagon next to the rear door just as Jamie came out to meet them.

“Oh, aye, Neath, quite bonnie.” Ian agreed, blending the words Faith and niece.

Jamie laughed delightedly guessing he’d just missed an Uncan exchange.
He looked so content. Almost part of the landscape himself, with the deep purple of twilight
behind his red hair, arm draped in casual familiarity over Ian’s shoulders.

“Da, Da, Da…” Faith started chanting. Jamie made Scottish noise as he plucked her from the
wagon and flung her up into the air. She squealed as he easily caught her again, kissing her
forehead.

“Sassenach!” He exclaimed when he caught sight of her.

He wandered toward her and the three of them relaxed against one another and watched the light
show until the cool air drove them toward home.

Claire had never been anywhere like Lallybroch, it’s warmth and love spilling from every nook
and cranny. She could feel it’s magic weaving around her heart.

The night before the Quarter Day Festival, the family staying at the house gathered together for a
more formal dinner, as tomorrow evening each would be far too busy to really spend much time
with one another.

The children ate at the table in the kitchen tended to by Laoghaire, the Murray nanny, while the
adults gathered in the study for a pre-dinner drink.

Everyone was busy talking in small groups and catching up.

Claire wandered over to a four panel wooden carved screen. She recognized the illustrations as
*Treasure Island* with pirate ships, smugglers caves, rearing stallions, snakes popping out of trees,
an elaborate map. It was beautifully rendered, polished to a high sheen.

Ian saw her interest and walked over to her. Claire caught the sound of the mismatched steps. Jamie
told her he lost a leg after a rare infection could not be controlled by any other means but an
amputation below the knee. He moved quite well, everything considered.

“That’s Willie’s work. He and Murtagh.” He told her.
Claire glanced behind Ian and looked at the small bearded man on the couch talking with Fergus, Jamie’s sales manager. Where everyone fit into the family relationship-wise, was something she was still a little fuzzy on.

Her expression must have conveyed her surprise.

“Ooch, Murtagh is a graduate of the Edinburgh School of Fine Arts. He’s a verra fine artist.” Ian confirmed. “He taught Willie the carving. Many happy an hour they’d spent together that way. Murtagh discovered that it didna pay too well, though. So his job is in marketing and promotions but he still has the skills to do fine work. Come to think of it, Murtagh and Willie made Jamie a Noah’s Ark full of all the animals one year for his birthday. I’ll see if I can get it down for wee Faith, she’d like to play with it I expect.”

“When is his birthday, Jamie’s I mean?” She found herself asking.

“Just the past month, May 1.” Ian told her.

Claire gave a little start. Faith’s had been May 12.

She still wasn’t sure that she had done the right thing in that regard. Their meeting had been so new at that point that she hadn’t been able to find the right way to ask Jamie without it sounding like she was trying to put false pressure on him to declare Faith as his own publically. Neither one of them was ready for that discussion and wouldn’t be until the relationship between all three of them had a chance to season itself.

They both knew that once back in the spotlight, their ability to move about the city anonymously would be lost. Loathe to squander this peaceful time together, fearing what might happen should they get caught up in a media storm once more, in the end Claire said nothing about it. It would change everything between them and there was a risk that it would destabilize whatever future path they had hoped to travel.

So while Claire had been planning on a little celebration, inviting a few children from the daycare and Joe, a few of her close work friends, she never completed those plans. There was no way to explain Jamie’s presence.

Until Jamie and she were ready to talk about amending the birth certificate and what came next, Claire had resolved to steer clear of any conversational topic that might force the discussion before
he was ready. It didn’t matter in the larger scheme of things, Faith was so young, after all, she’d never remember one way or the other.

Well, obviously it was not so easily resolved, she still felt a bit guilty not saying anything about it. But then a thought struck her. She rolled her memory back over the time frame and couldn’t remember where Jamie was on either day. Though he hadn’t come back here, to Lallybroch, and Jenny hadn’t come into the city either.

Claire reached out to touch Ian’s arm. He looked down seeing an expression of eagerness in her face.

“Ian, do you think I have time to do something in the kitchen just before dinner starts?”

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The evening meal was lovely, she quite liked all the Fraser men. Fergus had been a wee scamp growing up and he still had a mischievous glint in his eyes but he was incredibly appealing.

She learned that Jamie had discovered him living in a makeshift housing area in a run down section of Martinique near where Jamie had been staying. Jamie was employed by a large chain of resorts with properties all over the Caribbean.

He’d been leading a special two week training programme for employees from all over the islands and spent a good deal of his downtime walking around on the Island. He’d caught Fergus, who was fourteen at the time and an orphan, trying to pick his pocket.

“I would have succeeded if not for that girl in that suit with the little--” at this Fergus made a gesture to convey some kind of fastening at the chest and at the hips.

Jamie laughed wicked and low, a sound that melted Claire’s insides, he caught his sister’s censorious look though and cleared his throat.

“She turned his head in exactly the wrong direction and he caught me red handed.” His accent held a lovely lilting quality.
Jamie chimed in with the rest of the story.

“I forced him to come wi’ me by telling him I’d call the cops on him otherwise. I made him sign up for a correspondence course to finish school and put him to work behind the bar with me. The best bar back I ever had. He kent his job and the clientele and made sure we had what we needed in stock every week. Even now, he reads a room better than anyone else I’ve ever met. Charming sod, ye could sell rain to a Scot.” Jamie said in obvious affection, Fergus gave a little smile to hear the praise.

Just then the children came bursting forth from their after dinner game of flashlight tag. Leery, leading Kitty and Faith by hand rushed to try and catch the older ones from interrupting dinner, but no one minded the kids.

“Miss Claire, the...in the back, it’s ready.” Leery said. Claire made her excuses, informing the group that she’d be back shortly.

Just as she was putting the finishing touches on the simple pound cake with fresh strawberries and cream that she had set to bake and then cool while they ate, Jenny came in to see what was what.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise as she took in Claire’s finishing touches of icing and arranging the candles.

“My brother led me to believe yer no’ much of a cook?” Jenny realized that might have sounded a bit harsh and smiled to lessen the impact.

“Oh, I’m not.” Claire agreed unconcerned. “But I can make a cake!” She declared happily but then a little anxious frown crossed her features.

“I --er-- hope you don’t mind, dinner was delicious and whatever you have for dessert is sure to be, too. But both Jamie and Faith have birthdays in May, hers was the 12th. I didn’t have a party for her; it seemed too complicated. I couldn’t have the party you see, without inviting Jamie, that wouldn’t be right. But, then, I couldn’t figure out how exactly to explain his presence there either. Here, it’s just family and everyone knows so I thought we could have one cake they could share so he’d get to celebrate with her? That is so long as you--er wouldn’t mind?” Claire finished a little lamely.

Claire realized too late that Jamie’s company employed most of his family members and he’d
likely already had a celebration for his birthday at work. Her face grew a little pink. Her fingers beat out an anxious tattoo on the counter.

Jenny looked at her for a long moment, this newcomer who her brother watched with his heart in his eyes.

She had a very good idea what he would think of Claire’s gesture and swallowed the sigh that formed on her lips, *no help for it, then*.

Jenny’s only path here was forward, to welcome her as she had welcomed Jamie and just hope what she saw in his eyes would soon be reflected in Claire’s.

Smiling broadly, Jenny said, “No, Claire, ’tis a wonderful idea. He’ll love it.”

Jenny went in first to pour glasses of some of Jared’s excellent chilled champagne. Ian gave her raised eyebrows, which she answered in kind.

Jamie’s eyes grew wide as he watched Claire enter with a cake which she placed in front of him.

His birthday had been weeks, a lifetime ago.

Faith, fascinated by the cake had exclaimed “ooh!” and came to explore what her parents were up to.

Claire picked Faith up and placed her in his lap.

Jamie noticed that Jenny had come to stand just behind him and his heart beats tripped over themselves when he felt her hand on his shoulder. Jenny knew then, whatever Claire had planned, and thought he might need some moral support.

It was then Jamie saw the icing in the center had a “J” with two horizontal lines so that the centerline of the J formed the centerline of an “F.”
Claire smiled reassuringly when she saw his expression then gently touched her fork to her glass. Holding everyone’s attention, she looked at each face around the table and then spoke from her heart.

“I wanted to thank you all for inviting us to celebrate Quarter Day with you. I know we’ve only been here a short time, but there is a special feeling, being here. I spent my childhood with my Uncle Lamb. He was an antiquities scholar and we lived for short periods of time in many places. I didn’t move to England after Faith was born. I--well, it wasn’t really my home, you see. I’m not sure I ever really had one. Scotland became my choice because even though they’d never met, it was home to my daughter’s father.”

Jamie made a soft sound that carried loudly in the silent room.

“When I learned that Jamie and Faith shared a birthday month, eleven days apart, I thought maybe you might be willing to indulge me and we could celebrate their birthdays together, even if it’s a little late. I’d like to propose a toast, if I could, then we can light the candles and sing?”

At this Claire raised her glass, joined by everyone but Jamie, whose hands were holding Faith.

“To your lovely home and family. These last few days…” Claire’s voice started to warble and she cleared it. “Thank you for opening your hearts to our daughter, for giving her a sense of her history and her place. I couldn’t have imagined anything quite as wonderful as this but the hope that she’d find something like it…. this is why I stayed in Scotland. Mothers’ hearts are full of dreams for their children, some come true, some never do. My dream is that one day she will come to love it here as you do and to know that it is as much her home as yours. To Lallybroch.”

Jenny’s eyes flew to her brother; his face was buried in the back of Faith’s hair. She knew he wasn’t able to look at anyone.

She felt him shudder and her hand tightened on his shoulder.

She had begun to see, all too well, what it was in Claire that had so captivated him.

If there was a dry eye around that dining room table, it likely belonged to one of the children.

As for the adults, well, there wasn’t one to be found as the family lit the candles, sung their happys
and father and daughter leaned in to blow out the candles.
The promised early morning rain was moving on just as Claire and Faith reached the outer fields being used for the Quarter Day festivities. It had been a muddy walk over but the sun would soon dry out the paths. Not that such matters had dampened enthusiasm amongst the crowds. It was approaching mid-day and the place was packed.

Music could be heard coming from several different areas over the the fields. A small demonstration of traditional highland games was in full swing as were the various activities for children from sack races to sheep wrangling. Faith tried her hand at winning a goldfish with a ping pong ball. Faith (luckily) had a terrible throwing arm.

Every now and then, they would catch sight of someone they knew from Lallybroch in the crowd. Ian tended to draw the eye with his unusual gait and Jamie’s hair and height made him easier to see. They didn’t go out of their way to greet anyone, though. Mindful of Jamie’s observations, they remained two lost in the larger crowd.

Claire and Faith checked out the various strength challenges, impressed by the size of the competitors. She watched participants tossing around massive hammers, stones and logs. Not for the first time, Claire found herself thinking about the national psyche of the place.

How the games had remained the same generation after generation, still more or less using implements that were used then. Gooseflesh ran down her arms, these men, in kilt and boot, could have walked straight out of a rift in time.

From the corner of her eye she saw Faith standing in front of a cluster of women just as awe-inspiring as they readied themselves for a go and smiled for there was progress writ on today’s fields, too.

“Good luck, ladies!” She cheered them on as she reached her hand down to Faith and moved her a safer distance from the action.

After a time, they meandered through the crafts area, exploring everything on offer: gloves and socks made locally, candles, honey, fine metal, leather goods, cheeses and vegetables of all kinds. Nibbling samples and touching the knitted items as they went.

“Ooh...What’s it?” Faith asked on a reverent sigh after stumbling on a soft blanket in her favorite purple hue.

“Och, darlin’ ’tis made from the finest alpaca, no’ more than 10 kilometers from here.” The squat man with a pipe hanging off his mouth proudly declared.

Faith pleaded with her eyes. Claire wasn’t certain if bargaining was part of the expected entertainment but her Uncle Lamb hadn’t carted her from hither and yon without teaching her a thing or two. By the time they were done she’d parted with £70.00 (down from £100).
She watched as Faith hugged the bag containing her new lovey to her chest, careful to keep it out of the damp path but she caught her surreptitiously rubbing her cheek against the soft corner that peeped out of the top. She smiled, knowing she’d gotten the best of the negotiation.

The afternoon sun was in their eyes as they made their way over to the bleachers set up for the shinty game. Though by the time they sat, the sun was behind them. A light breeze rising as the afternoon lengthened.

Faith had spotted Jamie right away, of course, and then noticed Jenny, Murtagh, Fergus. By that time, though, Claire had spread out the little picnic lunch she assembled from the various food stalls. A tempting array of snacks had kept Faith content and her mouth too busy for idle chatter.

It was a coed game, that much was clear but Claire wasn’t entirely sure about the teams or the rules. The players were wearing t-shirts of varying plaid designs in muted colors with Slainte prominently displayed. It looked as if Jenny and Jamie were on opposite teams.

Jenny had a wicked hook and didn’t shy away from muscling anyone who crossed her path out of the way. The game was physical. The smack of the ball against caman audible as were the grunts and calls of the players.

Claire watched for a bit and then concluded that whichever team Fergus was on, his only goal was scoring with a pretty blonde woman flirting right back.

The game looked like it might be winding down. Claire finished packing their food away then asked Faith if she wanted to visit the ponies. Just then, Jenny got in a particularly good shot.

Claire heard an appreciative cheer behind her, followed by young Jamie asking, “Did Mum score?”

She looked over to see Ian standing hand in hand with his son watching the field of play. She raised her hand as he smiled his hellos at them.

Faith called out “Uncan!” and pulled Claire up, urging them to Ian’s side where she promptly offered her lovey for inspection.

“Och, verra soft!” Uncan dutifully agreed.

Then Faith and wee Jamie began inspecting some bugs underneath the row of seats behind them.

Claire and Ian were chatting, eyes off the field when a sudden yell and the unmistakable sound of a collision rent the air.

Claire knew without looking that she would be needed. Wide eyes met steady ones.

“Faith?” She asked, even as Ian reached his hand out to the lass.

“I’ve got her. It’s no’ Jenny, she’s fine, I can see her still standing. Dinna worry, Claire. I’ll get the bairns back to the house. We’ll meet you later.”

Claire spun quickly and, running onto the field, reached into her bag for the kit she kept on her person at all times. There was a small crowd gathered around the centerline of the field.

With all of the efficiency of a master drill sergeant she split the crowd and was down on her knees next to the three people splayed out on the ground before she had even registered what she was looking at.
A woman, red cleats, long blonde hair, startlingly green eyes, another woman, short brown hair, shorter skirt—no, it was a skort—and glasses, not moving and a man, naturally, Jamie.

There was that kind of muted murmuring that happens at sporting events when players are injured. Claire caught Jenny’s eyes and with a minimum of mostly non-verbal communication was able to confirm that the first responders had already been called. They were housed under a special first aid tent set up between venues. They’d arrive momentarily.

She only hoped Ian had gotten Faith off the field and looking elsewhere. If she saw her parents, she’d want to come see them. No telling what might happen but there were too many people around to want to risk having to pass off anything Faith might say as accidental.

She eyeballed Jamie. His problem was obvious, though treatment for him could wait. He had a cut along his thigh. It would need stitches.

Red cleats was moving around but in pain, the skort was still flat out. Claire thought red had a dislocated shoulder, skort undetermined.

Skort then. Her skin was gray. A, B, C the three part emergency assessment vital to such situations.

Struck out at A - airway was compromised. She wasn’t breathing. Jamie was about to start chest compressions when Claire shot her hand out and stopped him.

“No, that’s—“ rather than explain she pushed at his body, understanding he was in the way, Jamie quickly moved to the side.

Claire dug her hands up and under skort’s back and hoisted her into a half sitting position, her body braced against Claire’s knees as Claire’s arms came around to the front of the woman’s chest.

Claire made interlaced fists just under her rib cage and then heaved for all she was worth, once, twice and a wheezing sound from skort told her she was on the right track, on the fourth squeeze a piece of rubber came flying out of the woman’s mouth.

Along with some water and what looked to be some fruit from lunch. An audible, grateful wheezing inhale told Claire that she had successfully cleared the blockage. Color was slowly returning to the woman’s face.

“You are alright.” Claire told her. “That’s it. Just shallow breaths, in and out. You’ll feel a lot better in a minute.”

Jamie was on the woman the second he saw she was out of immediate danger. He handed her a wet towel for her face and checked the rest of her out, even as Claire was doing the same.

“Lass, are ye ok? Anything else hurt?” She gave a grunt of negation to his question, still trying to get her breath back.

On a smaller wheeze Claire heard her breathe out, “Jaaaymee-EEE” in a rhythm that obviously had a hidden message.

Jamie chuckled in relief and responded with an answering grin, “Gen-EEEEVA . Tell me true, are ye ok?”

Claire smiled recognizing Wall-E calls— one of Faith’s favorite movies. By this point Geneva had readjusted her glasses and could see a bit better.
“Yes, Jamie, honestly I am. I borrowed my niece’s mouth guard, I guess I should have just skipped it?”

Jamie hugged her to him.

“Ye scarrit the hell out of me, dinna do that again.”

“Oof, get off! You’re a bloody mess and I just bought this skort!” She declared.

“Well, if I’m bleeding it’s because of you and yer wicked handmaiden -determined to take me out ye were! Between the twa of you and Jenny, I stood no chance!” Jamie pretended to be affronted.

Jamie was bleeding more heavily now. Claire quickly wadded up some bandages from her kit and pressed them firmly into Jamie’s leg.

He gave a grunt of pain.

She slapped his hand over the cut instructing, “Press here, hard, don’t move around too much.”

Jamie nodded at her but then turned to the other woman.

“An’ speaking of which, Geillie, how’s yer shoulder?”

Geneva gave a soft cry and turned her head around to find Geillis hurt though she had managed to sit up. Her eyes were closed and it looked like she was trying not to throw up or pass out. The shoulder needed tending.

Jamie crab crawled over to the woman.

“Geillie?” he asked. “Are ye ok?”

The woman’s eyes opened. She was clearly in pain but heard him.

“No.” She responded.

“Geillie?” Claire said to get her attention.

Her eyes shifted to Claire’s.

“I’m Claire I’m going to help you. You have a dislocated shoulder. Have you had one before?”

Geillie shook her head no.

“I know it’s painful but in just a minute or two you’ll feel much better.”

Jamie made to reach over and help.

Claire put her hands on his chest and pushed him backwards, repositioning his bandages.

“You stay right where you are. Damned stubborn Scot! Did you not hear me before? What do you think you’ll accomplish bleeding all over the place? Sit still, apply pressure. We need to stop the bleeding. Geillie will be fine, Jamie. I will take care of her, ok?” Claire reassured him holding his eyes. When she saw he understood she turned back to attend to Geillie.

With Jenny and Fergus’s help, she soon had Geillie in the right position. It took bit of maneuvering and two tries to pop the shoulder back in and she was sweating considerably before it was done.
“Oh, that feels much better!” Geillie said.

Claire gave her a quick rundown on aftercare just as the first responders came onto the field. They transported everyone off the field back to the first aid tent.

Jamie had declined the recommended visit to the Urgent Care clinic in favor of Claire stitching him up right where they were.

The ladies would be transported although Fergus had offered to drive them to save the ambulance fees. Geneva sat next to Geillie a comforting arm resting on her leg, the only part of her that Geneva didn’t think was hurt just then and waited for Fergus to pull up.

Claire numbed Jamie’s leg. There wasn’t a whole lot to look at in the tent so they all watched Claire work.

Jamie saw a small neat row of stitches appearing. Her hands automatically making the movements.

“Sassenach?” he began.

Her eyes came up.

“I...what ye did for Geneva? I dinna think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“I told you I was a doctor.” Claire downplayed but smiled when she said it. It had been nothing, every step drilled into her years ago.

“Aye, but there is a considerable difference between understanding something and knowing it. I wouldna figured it out in time. You saved Geneva’s life, Claire. I dinna ken how to thank ye for it but---”

Claire’s hands were still busy with the sutures so she contented herself with gently headbutting him and resting her forehead against his as she softly chided.

“Shh, you. That’s my job, it’s what I do.”

Jamie laughed as his hand reached behind her head and he pressed a lingering kiss of thanks and murmuring the same to her brow.

“Ladies? Shall we go, the car is just outside.”

Jamie glanced up, having forgotten that anyone else was with them. He watched as Fergus ushered Geillie and Geneva to the car. His eyes locked on Geillie’s and she smiled sheepishly and waved as she left.

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Claire gently closed the door to the Laird’s room after making sure Faith was sound asleep and straightened her emerald green wrap dress a little as she turned.

She looked up to find Jamie ambling down the long gallery hall wearing a kilt with a blazer and a black Slainte t-shirt. The cotton worn and faded, it likely would feel soft as Faith’s lovey, she thought.

“Is the lass asleep?”

“Yes, but I’m sure a last cuddle from you won’t keep her up, she’ll be out again soon as her head
hits the pillow. We had a big day.”

Claire watched him make his way toward her.

*Jesus, the way he moved.*

“Y-your-- leg not troubling you?” *Babbling tongue tied idiot!* Claire admonished herself.

“Nah, I was in great hands and it’s no’ in a place that chaffs.” Jamie smiled, continuing to come towards her in slinky strides, as much big game cat as man. Something about the plaid changing his walk or his balance.

Perhaps it was just her, Claire thought. For whatever reason, she was especially aware of his body and how it moved within.

She normally tried to forget how freaking hot he was. He was her daughter’s father. Period, end, finito.

From the very first, she’d felt that pull, but normally she could pretend it came from the pit of her stomach and live with the white lie.

Oh, but *not* when he was wearing *that* ... *yum*, no.

Now, she couldn’t help but be aware that the clenching in her body originated far lower down.

Claire made a funny humming sound in her throat as he brushed past her, the faded wool of his plaid caressing her hand. She shivered at the sound his heel made on the hardwood.

That caused him to pull back from the door just as he was about to open it. He turned his astonished gaze to hers and she could not hide her blush.

“Something I can help ye with, Sassenach?”

Jamie deliberately stepped in closer to her, rubbing up against her the tiniest bit. Not so much it was obvious but in a way that made her feel... *why that ruddy Scottish bastard, he knew!* He knew damned well how good he looked in his kilt.

A walking inducement to anyone with a pulse.

Too flustered to do anything about it she tried to soldier on.

“Uhm, no. I’ll just go down and ---” Claire lost the train of her thoughts as his hand came up into her hair, light as a butterfly.

He was watching her closely. Pinned under that deep blue gaze, she had nothing to bluff with. His head moved closer to hers, she tried to move a little away but his body mirrored hers and followed where she led.

Aware of his mouth *thisclose* to hers, the sound of the soft rumbling noises he made, the smell of his soap, sandalwood and cedar. She tried to take a steadying breath but found herself panting instead.

“Sassenach?” Softly intoned on a whisper.

“What--what are you doing?”
She swallowed and looked up to find him watching her closely. His face so close she could feel the exhalations of his breath. If she moved a fraction of an inch he’d come straight into her.

Claire stared hard at his lips, tender and just a little sunkissed. He hadn’t shaved in long enough that the hair was just turning from prickly to malleable.

How would it feel against her tongue? She wet her lips.

He made a little sound that caused her eyes to lift up. He was staring at her mouth with as much intensity as she was his. An aching need spread through her.

She moaned a tiny bit imagining him leaning in with his body, trapping her solidly into the wall.

Unable to help herself, Claire pushed all the way back imagining how it would feel, the cool plaster behind her, the heat of Jamie in front, pressing inward until their bodies were joined.

He moved with her, but not pressing against her. He kept the sliver of space between their bodies. *Oh, please!*

His fingers traced her hair once more.

She squeaked a little and her lips parted as she shifted her weight on her tiptoes unconsciously reaching up toward his just as he spoke.

“Just getting this out of your hair, Sassenach.”

He said matter of factly and handed her a piece of crinkle paper from a box that Faith had been playing with earlier.

Claire looked at his hand rather stupidly. Then she understood what he had said.

“Oh, oh. Well, ah.” She couldn’t seem to form a coherent thought.

“I’ll see ye under the tent, shall I?” A raised brow of dismissal as he stole into the Laird’s room to kiss his daughter good night.

Chest heaving, Claire tried to slow her heartbeats down as she slumped against the wall and sighed too loudly to hear Jamie collapsing against the other side of the closed door trying to catch his breath as well.
Into the Mystic/Kiss Me

Chapter Notes

I am not typically someone who would recommend a reading and music pairing. However, there is something that cuts me about the way Van Morrison delivers the line I don’t have to fear it, I want to rock your gypsy soul right before the horns that haunts me. Also Kiss Me- Six Pence None the Richer if ever there was a song of joy about the heady goofiness of falling in love sweetly, that one is it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After dinner had been served, the dancing began. Jamie was correct, the band was wonderful. There were dozens of couples already dancing. Claire had made her way over to the elaborate bar set along the tent’s side wall. She smiled as she caught Jamie’s eye, he was headed in the same direction.

A blonde haired man, jeans and a button down slid off his stool just as they converged at the edge of the bar. Jamie laughed happily and greeted him, shaking hands and ending in what Claire had come to think of as a particularly masculine kind of embrace customary for old friends.

“John you’re a bit far afield, would ye be here in yer official capacity?” Jamie teased.

“Perish the thought, no! I’m off duty, I didn’t even bring my badge.” He replied.

Claire’s eyebrows rose.

“Claire, may I present detective constable John Grey?” Claire found her hand grasped in a crisp warm one.

“Enchante, Ms.---” he trailed off hoping someone would supply the missing information.

Before Claire could speak up Geneva announced, “That is Ms. Dr. Beauchamp, to you, DC Grey!”

John’s mouth broke into a wide grin.

“Geneva D!” He arched his brows at her. “My goodness, you do live well, in such company.” John was hugging Geneva to him.

“The good doctor saved my life today, I’m not speaking in euphemism, John.” Geneva said in all honesty.

Claire’s cheeks grew a little flushed. Having heard enough praise over what she considered to be rather routine services, Claire diverted attention away from herself by asking,

“So I take it you and Geneva are acquainted?”

John’s eyes stayed on Geneva’s and then flicked over to Jamie’s, trying to discern the story there but politeness dictated he respond.

“Our families go back for generations.” John assured her.
“How are you adjusting to the wilds of Scotland, my dear?” He asked Geneva.

“It’s been a lovely change of pace from Helwater.” Then she glanced at Jamie, “Shut yours ears, Mr Fraser, if you please. We are building a great company, one I’m proud to work for, and Jamie’s a great boss. But, of course, you would know that, wouldn’t you?”

Claire made a uhmmm? Sound that went unanswered, her only response Jamie’s demure smile.

Geneva continued, “Care to demonstrate a little of what earned the two of you back to back Bartending Flair Championship trophies?”

“Bartending what?” Claire asked.

“I told you, I’m off duty.” John attempted to decline, but that was all hogwash, it’s why he had come, after all. That and to see Jamie.

John was a glutton for punishment. For some reason he always thought that this….infatuation with the man would wear itself out. That one day he’d see Jamie and his heart wouldn’t flutter in his chest. That day was not today, and not when Jamie was looking like that and in kilt, no less. John knew he hadn’t managed to get over James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser yet.

It had plagued him since he was a teenager. His family was on vacation at a resort in Belize. He’d been only 17 at the time and unexpectedly found himself targeted by a gang of very drunk islanders. To this day he had no idea why they had singled him out. The obvious, of course, with the maturity of years, he’d come to understand that much. But why him? Why that day? Why attack a lone teen boy minding his own business?

He’d been sitting in a makeshift hut bar well away from the usual tourist spots and had just grabbed a second beer when he was thrown to the ground and looked up to find himself flung into the dirt and surrounded by an angry gang carrying crude weapons. Scared witless, he braced himself, wondered if his mother would know he’d been thinking of her, how Hal would cope with the loss and prepared to go down fighting. Then, out of the shadows came Jamie Fraser. Neither one of them had gotten out unscathed. They’d both eventually healed, though Jamie had paid the higher price. Yet, he’d never held it-- any of it-- against John.

When John found himself at loose ends, uncertain what he wanted to do with his life but knowing he needed a little time away from his loving, but ever present, family to figure it out, it was Jamie who’d welcomed him and put him to work.

They’d had a hell of a good time for a couple of years and yes, won some modest acclaim in certain circles. But that had been several years ago and both he and Jamie had moved on. John felt a bit rusty and said as much to Geneva.

However, Ms. Geneva Dunsany was an excellent attorney, in part due to the undeniable fact that she never took no for an answer.

Jamie had known this was coming, of course, for that matter so had John. He’d not seen John in several months and was quite pleased John managed to make it in time.

He and Fergus had set up the lighting for dramatic effect and the band had been clued in beforehand. It was time. Jamie flipped the hatch on the bar.

“Lord John?” his eyebrows rose up in invitation as he raised index finger and thumb to his lips and whistled loudly calling Fergus to them.
Claire watched in amazement as spotlights turned on and John and Jamie, with Fergus’s timely assistance unleashed a performance worthy of a Vegas review— in the very best way possible. As the band played a perfectly cued set, Jamie and John flipped, spun, juggled and poured in a dizzying array of choreographed moves that had the crowd cheering.

Peppered here and there Fergus would tell wickedly naughty jokes or Jamie would tell a funny story from his past. More than just bottles and ice flying, slight of hand and shadow moves, shots were set on fire, inverted in pyramids, shaken and poured in long rows, passing their end results out to be shared among the crowd.

Still rattled a bit from their earlier encounter in the hall, Claire was conscious of wanting to keep some distance from Jamie. She deliberately sat a stool at the far end of the bar closer to John’s coverage area.

She was therefore in the privileged position of being able to sample a little bit of everything they were making. By far her favorite trick came in the form of the the rainbow shots that poured five different colored shots from the same cocktail shaker. Very pretty and quite impressive.

By the time the show had wound down, Claire thought she’d had just enough to drink to not be self-conscious when Jared Fraser tapped her on the shoulder and asked her to dance. As she floated away in a lovely haze of good times, Claire realized it had been a very long time since she’d enjoyed herself so much.

Jamie was officially off duty, sweat soaked shirt gently cooling in the breeze that was lifting strands of his sister’s hair as she sat next to him. They were on the bench under the huge oak tree the tent was erected around. Each branch lit with fairy lights, twinkling and sparkling as the leaves moved around. It gave a particularly ethereal glow to the scene.

They watched the band adjust and shift, the iconic strands of Van Morrison’s Into The Mystic began and guests started coupling up. Lord John, a man of many talents, was walking upstage now, strapping his saxophone onto the clip around his neck.

Many a night in his younger days had been spent listening to John play, the instrument reflecting the man’s every mood from giddy joy to mournful heartache. Jamie smiled to see him with it now and was glad he’d been able to talk John into coming up for this. They were not performance perfect but enough of it had come back to them to justify their reputations and all the onlookers had had a great time.

The male lead opened:

*We were borne before the wind,*

*Also younger than the sun,*

*Ere the bonnie boat was won….*
Jenny watched as Murtagh spun into view with Claire in his arms, she looked over, knowing even as she did so Jamie’s eyes would have unerringly spotted her the second she was in range.

Jamie briefly debated it but there was little point in prevarication, he’d shared his heart with her since they were children, she knew what was in it whether the words were spoken or not.

“Da said I’d know her when I met her, the lass I’d love,” he began.

_And when that foghorn blows_
_I will be coming home_

“He just never told me I’d love her like a lunatic. No’ sleep at night for dreaming of her, no hour of the day no’ filled with thoughts of her.”

_I don’t have to fear it_
_I want to rock gypsy soul_

They watched as Murtagh gripped Claire firmly and swung her around. She whooped with laughter. Her smile warmed Jamie right to his backbone just as John’s sax started the iconic horn break.

Jenny sighed and turned to him, knowing his eye would be glued to the dance floor.

“You ken fathers talk differently to their daughters?” She asked and watched Jamie nod. “They tend to be more protective of them, want to keep them safe?”

Jamie glanced for a second sideways at her. He kent _that_ all too well.

“What Da told me was something else. He warned me to guard my heart because there’s no taking it back. He said it was like the ducks imprinting. Once a Fraser finds his love, that person becomes his home. If ever parted, a Fraser will fight to the death to get home again.”

Jamie mmphmed.
They watched Murtagh as he and Claire swayed together; John continued to blow, the melody filling the tent. The look on Murtagh’s face let them know he was imagining a time long before tonight and a different girl entirely.

“I think that’s what killed him, Da, I mean. His home had been lost. For years he tried to get back again and couldnna, it wore him down in the end.”

Jamie made a sound of protest.

“Nah, Jamie dinna say it. I kent he loved us and would have done everything he could for us but I also know it took all his will to keep going day by day.”

And together we will sail into the mystic

Come on girl,

Too late to stop now

“I’m no so much worrit about dying just now. What I need to know is how do I live wi’ it? Nothing feels the same, nothing looks the same. Not since the day I met her.”

Jamie appeared so displeased about it Jenny laughed.

“‘Tis a mighty inconvenience to be sure, but a brathair, it has its compensations, ken. You’ve had sex and plenty of it, I’m sure. But I’d wager my last farthing ye’ve never made love. If ye think ye dinna sleep well now, wait till yer lying next to her and ye wake up in the dead of night, already panting and shaking with need and no idea why only to realize that every cell of her body has been calling out to every cell of yours. Ye dinna ken how rare that kind of passion is until ye experience it for yourself, though most folk never will. On those nights you’ll start aching even before ye can touch her. Ye willna get back to bed until ye take her, the two of you so deep in each other ye couldn’t say where one begins and the other ends. There is no feeling in this world like it.” She sighed.

Jamie’s face turned beet red. Jenny often could do that to him in the span of a couple of sentences. It didn’t help he was watching Claire just as the song ended pressed up to Murtagh giving him a cute but sloppy hug of thanks.
How many shots had John poured down her throat? Quite a few by the looks of it.

They both watched Claire as she turned, laughing at herself while she tripped a bit trying to exit the floor. Face flushed from the dancing and her own silliness, she looked radiant.

“I dinna ken what to tell ye, lad. Though I think I know what Da would say.”

“Oh, aye?” Jamie was all ears.

“Aye, Father would tell ye: Jamie, the Lord gave ye a rare woman. Dinna fuck it up.”

*************************

Jamie intercepted Claire just as she was about to exit the dance floor.

“Sassenach, dance wi’ me,” he said huskily as he made a bow, knowing how it set his plaid swinging and hoping she still found it fetching. Claire laughed and curtsied in return.

The female lead had come back on mic. The guitar strings started a distinctive open, Sixpence None the Richer, Kiss Me. His eyes flew to Jenny, standing back under the oak looking straight at him and laughing her pot-stirring head off. Minx, she had switched around the song order.

Kiss me out of the bearded barley

Lightly beside the green green grass

Jamie loved this song and Jenny knew it, the perfect tempo for a couple’s dance-- not so slow it was awkward to hold someone you were not sleeping with and not too fast that you couldn’t move cheek to cheek and spin a girl around.

One thing Jamie could say for Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp, the lass knew how to move. Hips swaying to the beat, he felt the answering throb deep down as his heart quickened. He rocked his leg between hers, then they were gliding together around the makeshift dance floor.

A heady feeling, his pulse beat in his ears, his palms drifting down her back to where he imagined
he could feel two little dimples. He clasped her tightly to him as he slowed their movements. In response, she rested her head on his shoulder.

Their bodies floated together in time to the music, her pelvis connecting firmly with his, ass gyrating ever so slightly against his fingertips. Instinctively working in tune together. He never wanted the song to end.

*Strike up the band and make the fireflies dance*

*Silvermoon’s sparkling*

*So kiss me*

He breathed in the scent of her, not even pretending he was doing something else and all the while the lyrics invited him to do exactly what he’d been yearning to do for weeks.

Claire’s skin was flushed, her hair had come down around her shoulders. Her wrap dress revealing the tender skin between her breasts and yes, he’d noticed the chill in the wind had caused her nipples to harden. Delicate fingers played with the hair at the nape of his neck. He shivered. Claire’s cheek touching to his, making little circles as she softly hummed along with the song. He recognized that she was tipsy, not drunk. But still, he told himself, ‘twas his duty to help her keep her balance by clenching her a little harder against him as he led them away from crowds that she might accidentally twirl into.

*Kiss me beneath the milky twilight*

*Lead me out of the moonlit floor*

They were still pretending to dance but really he was just reveling in the joy of moving their bodies in harmony, loving how she felt gliding against him. He tucked his face against her ear and breathed gently against the delicate apex of her neck and shoulder. When he made a deep noise in the back of his throat she clutched him tighter in her arms. Somehow, a little bit before the song ended, they ended up near the back of the oak, on the far side where it was deserted.

The only illumination at this end of the tent coming from the fairy lights strung high up in the branches above. He pulled back to look at her as he moved one hand up to stroke her hair. His fingers traced her collarbone. They stared deeply into one another’s eyes. Her hand tucked against his chest.

Jamie’s body was rousing to hers, she had to feel it through his kilt. An aching need rising up, both
of them panting a bit and all the while their eyes stayed glued to one another. Her free hand snaked over his hip then pushed around to his back moving so slowly he could feel each individual digit petting the soft folds of his plaid as they traveled around his body. An aching moan on a breath when Claire firmly cupped his buttock, pulling him even closer. She was grinding up against him; there was no other interpretation for her movement and he groaned loudly.

Suddenly, they were knocked off balance. One of them had caught a root underfoot. Jamie twisted their bodies at the last moment so it was him who hit the ground first.

He grunted as he felt the root that had tripped them up under him. But he couldn’t bring himself to care just then. Claire had landed flat out on top of him, their arms still locked together. Her leg fitted between his, tangled in his plaid.

Jamie felt her body change position, inching up against his. She was floating now right there above him. He was holding his breath and released it slowly, feeling a little dizzy.

“Sassenach,” he murmured as his hand came up and cupped the back of her head moving her mouth toward his.

“Yes--” she said in a whisper that was agreement and not a question.

“Oh, lass---” his mouth slightly open and he paused to savor the moment.

He could feel her lips as they parted, hovering over his. Jamie closed his eyes willing her to kiss him.

Caught on the edge of eternity, he didn’t dare move. The demands of his body held in check by a thin thread of will.

“Oh thank god! Dr. Beauchamp, come quick, Geillis is in trouble!”

He felt her tongue flick out slightly, it might have nipped his upper lip, he couldn’t be sure.

“Please Dr. B-- Claire!” Her head snapped left and he turned his dazed eyes to follow.
“John?” Jamie questioned, head and shoulders rising up off the ground, confused, his nerves completely jangled.

“Geillis, I think she is having an allergic reaction to the meds given by the EMTs.”

He gave a grunt of surprise and pain as Claire used her elbows and levered herself off his chest and abdomen.

Quick as a shot, his arms aching and empty. His body crashed down to the ground. Jesus, Mary and Michael! His harsh breaths his only company, his heartbeat still racing.

Chapter End Notes

I really am sorry it didn't happen in this chapter but I pinky really really really swear it does in the next one! Cross my heart.
Like On A Date?

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for comments and questions and most of all for caring about the story enough to want more!

FWIW their first kiss -- in rough form--was drafted awhile ago and I couldn’t let go of how that unfolded.

Having Faith popping into my head and demanding her due-- to which I agree she is quite entitled-- changed the pacing and several of the beats came as surprises to me.

Who knew Jamie was going to invite Claire to Lallybroch (originally he went alone) and who knew she was going to be so damn adorable when she got there?

Readers of this story have stuck with it, cheered it on, loved and at the same time decried the slow burn. You have continued to like the story, to find it funny and sweet, tender and touching and sexy through 33,800+ words of a love story before the first kiss. I’m very grateful for everyone letting it breathe and season so it could take on a life of its own.

For all that, this chapter does end the UST, it is in the next chapter that you’ll be appropriately rewarded for all your patience (that is my goal, at any rate).

Like On A Date?

“How is she doing?” Claire asked as she dropped her keys on the table near the door.

She had been delayed waiting for an open surgical theater. Jamie was the one who came to relieve Mrs. Crooke after work.

Now that Claire was home, he knew he should get going but he didn’t. Jamie was enjoying the sight of her. He’d missed her the past few days, their schedules hadn’t aligned to spend any time together.

Jamie also couldn’t stop thinking of their long weekend at Lallybroch. His mind skipped over dozens of moments.

Large ones: watching her save the lives of Geneva and Geillis. Geillie had needed an epi shot, which Claire had in her wee kit. And small: stumbling on Claire surrounded by all the bairns in his study, blinds pulled tight, lights off, sitting under a makeshift tent of sheets and blankets, making shadow puppets on a pretend camping trip. And life altering: looking down at his lass, laughing as he pretended he couldn’t reach the candles and the expression of determination on her face when she decided it was up to her to blow them out. The feel of Claire in his arms floating under the fairy
lights as he breathlessly waited for that kiss that never was.

He badly wanted to talk with her about it all but sensed they’d both needed a little time to think about things since returning to the city.

So instead he talked of the mundane, the routine.

“Och, the wee lassie was plumb worn out from feeding the ducks. The new construction around the park started. They are rerouting the foot traffic. Ye have to go through that alley. They havena put in a crosswalk yet so ye need to hold her hand and remind her to look both ways. Oh, and there are all kinds of performances lined up in the park over the next few weeks. She’ll tell you all about it tomorrow I’m sure.”

Jamie started reaching for his coat.

He hesitated though and Claire noticed. She noticed everything about him these days.

She’d been grateful, in a way, that her work schedule had been brutal since their return. She’d hoped it would keep her mind busy, that a little distance would help her think more clearly. When he was near, he filled her senses completely; but, lately, even when they were apart, Jamie had become her constant companion.

Claire couldn’t stop thinking of the Jamie he’d shown her at Lallybroch. Like an awakening of his soul the second his feet knew they were home. His joyful step taking her through the gardens, inviting her to rootle to her heart’s content, his laugh of delight coming upon her a lost couple of hours later, reaching down to help her up, not caring that her fingers were covered in dirt. Listening to him have a heart to heart with his namesake on the intricacies of clan relations, the importance of tradition, and wee Jamie’s duty to set an example as the first of the next generation of Frasers, no matter that last name was Murray. Stumbling upon him in his mother’s art studio with Kitty and Faith, their hands covered in finger paints and working on what had to be the ugliest group art project she had ever seen. It now hung on her fridge- it’s mustard, brown and gray swirls made her grin every morning.

If she let her mind wander, Claire could feel the heat of his palms gripping her backside. The graceful rhythm of his glide as they danced, his arousal when she pinned him, and the aching need she felt, after that half second where her tongue touched his, to complete their kiss.

They had somehow crossed a line at Lallybroch. Immersing herself in his world had released something inside of her and she couldn’t contain it, not now, not if he felt the same.

The longer they didn’t talk about it the harder it became to start. It was a risk, and she’d feel foolish if she had misread the situation but unless she was prepared to prod him, they’d be grandparents before he’d make the first move.

Remembering his hesitation, hoping she was right, she inquired, “Something you wanted to ask me, Jamie?”

She watched as his body relaxed itself a little bit, she hoped in relief.

“Sassenach, would ye--”

Jamie’s ears turned bright red. She flushed herself, her skin itching to touch him.

“Would ye want to have dinner some night?”
“We have dinner rather often, did you have something special in mind for Faith?” Claire had to be sure she knew what he’d meant, this was too important.

Jamie’s heart was pounding, did she not feel the same? Did she not understand?

“What do ye think about, I mean…. dinner ….wi’ just the two of us... you and me?”

Jamie’s eyes darted away. Claire felt her insides quiver and squelched the bubble of laughter that threatened to spill over.

“You and me? Like on a date?” She teased.

Jamie misread her playful tone and suddenly the perils of asking Claire out while they were still learning how to support one another as parents seemed all too real. Had he seriously miscalculated?

“Stupid, wee fool!” he thought; he could kick himself. God, the last thing he wanted was to make things awkward for them.

“Och, never mind, Sassenach, I ken ye think the notion foolish. I’m sorry to have asked. I’ll see you tomorrow night. You’ll come get Faith around 6?”

He turned and brusquely packed up his belongings, using more energy than necessary in his haste to get out of there before he made more of an ass of himself.

He had the door open when her hand on his arm stopped him.

Claire leaned across his body, brushing her breasts against his forearm as she reached forward closing the door to prevent his leaving.

Jamie wished he hadn’t noticed, distracting before Lallybroch, it was all consuming now. You’ll start aching even before ye can touch her.

Jamie could not look at her, cheeks burning, ears bright red.

Claire got her hands up on both his shoulders and physically turned him then dropped her hands down and reached for both of his. He squeezed them in encouragement, hoping she could salvage the mess that he thought he’d made of it.

“I would like dinner with just the two of us, Jamie.” She told him honestly and he could see she meant it.

“Can you stay a minute so I can talk with you about something?” She asked.

“Of course, anything.” That came out in a breath.

Claire guided Jamie to the living room couch and they both sat. But she picked up his hands again immediately.

“Do you mind…” she held up their joined hands.

Jamie shook his head, he dinna mind a bit.

“I meant what I said.” She watched him intently. “But I’m also scared.” Claire’s courage abruptly fled and she looked away. This was so much harder than she had imagined.

Could she really tell him her troubled thoughts?
“Dinna hide, lass,” Jamie thought as he watched her struggle.

He had no idea what to say to her at this moment. He settled for squeezing her hands.

She turned back to him and he saw her draw in a deep breath.

“After I sent that letter and didn’t hear back from you, I wondered. And then, suddenly your face
and name were popping up everywhere with the Slainte launch. But still I heard nothing.” Claire
had been staring at their joined hands but looked up as he made a little sound of distress.

He opened his mouth to remind her why he hadn’t, but she released a hand and shot her fingers to
his lips to quiet him.

Jamie groaned softly, it could have been a further sound of entreaty on his part but he knew the
truth of it-- his was in pure reaction to the frisson of heat that shot down his spine with her intimate
touch.

“I know, Jamie, you don’t have to say it. But I wanted you to understand why I--” She was looking
at their hands, not meeting his eyes.

“I thought you didn’t want to get involved, that you might not have wanted anything to do with
Faith or perhaps you thought I was being opportunistic because of the timing. And Faith, well,
having spent time with her, you can see…..I knew if her father would only give her a chance, just
get to know her, he’d love her, too. I think Frank might have, if he’d just waited a bit.”

At this Jamie could not help a derogatory mmphm conveying his judgment of Frank’s actions.
Claire’s lips tightened briefly then she continued.

“But he wouldn’t. I was powerless in that situation. I couldn’t say anything to convince Frank to
give us a chance. So before I met you, when you were a name on a piece of paper, I tried my best
in the letter to explain it to that, James Fraser, whoever he was, hoping if I used my words to paint
a picture of what she was like and if he knew I wasn’t the kind of person who would make it
difficult, then that man, her biological father, would want to meet her. But he never called. I built
up a negative opinion of him --that unknown, faceless Mr. Fraser because I was heartbroken for
Faith. First Frank and then, I couldn’t help but think…..” She blinked hard and didn’t look at him.

Jamie grabbed her hand which hadn’t reconnected to his and held it hard against his thumping
chest. But waited her out, wanting to hear everything she needed to say.

“I told myself that it didn’t matter, what happened with Frank. He didn’t want us and I told myself
that I didn’t need him. When Mr. James Fraser never called, I told myself that was fine, too. I
didn’t need him either, I didn’t need anybody. I’d done fine on my own. We’d just soldier on as we
had done all along.”

Claire’s voice grew soft, hesitant. “But then…. Jamie, I discovered--” she sighed, out with it,
Beauchamp, she mentally cajoled herself.

“I haven’t had anybody to share this with.” Claire made a grand circling gesture with her hand
meaning to encompass all of it, learning how to be Faith’s mother, raising her on her own.

“I could have been content, you know.” She looked up sharply, almost glaring, defiance in her
tone. Not knowing what else to do, he nodded in agreement.

“I could have continued to fool myself into imagining I was ok on my own…. until that James
Fraser ended up being you. Everything changed when you came into Faith’s life.” She admitted.
Jamie could not remain silent. “Sassenach, I came into your life, too.”

“I know. That’s it, exactly.” Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, as if the truth of the statement made her heart break.

Would he never, ever be on solid ground with this woman? Jamie thought as every muscle in his body seized in sympathy with his churning wame.

“Jamie, I didn’t know, before I met you, I had no idea. I watch you day by day falling more in love with Faith.”

A grunt of acknowledgement from him.

“I am overjoyed for her and for you. Jenny and Ian, the kids, even Fergus and Murtagh knowing them now, I--”

Oh God, Claire thought, am I really going to confess this?

“It’s alright, Sassenach, whatever it is, say it.” Jamie encouraged.

“Oh, Jamie, I envy you. If Faith does something you have a whole phone book of family to share it with. Then they will tell you all about you or one of their kids at that age. Lallybroch.” The word drawn out on a sigh of longing he felt in his bones.

“Ever since being there, I realize what is it to belong not just to a family but to a place, to a people, a way of life that goes back generations. No one in my life knew my family or remembers me from Faith’s age. I didn’t really understand just how…alone I had been until…”

Claire paused to try and gather her thoughts. Jamie made a sound of distress. But she shook her head forestalling anything he might say.

“I didn’t have anyone to call, not in that way. But now there is you.”

Aye, there is me, and I’m not going anywhere.

Her eyes locked on his. “Your clan, your family, Lallybroch will always be there for Faith and I am so grateful for that but right now, for this time I have you, too and you…. Oh Jamie, you always take my calls and ask me to tell you everything.”

Jamie, unable to stop himself, moved so he could cradle her face in his large, warm hand, moving his fingers back to cup her behind her ear.

“You cannot imagine-- I cannot tell you--- how different it is. You make me feel….”

Claire cleared her throat, took in a breath and looked him dead in the eye. “I know it’s selfish of me but now that I know what it is to have it, I’m….I don’t-- want to be so alone again.”

Claire couldn’t hold his gaze, she acted as if she had revealed a painfully shameful secret.

He was overwhelmed, feeling so much love of her and for her. It wasn’t only Faith he was falling for day by day; and he could feel himself fall a little harder as she exposed the bruising on her heart.

Then she swung her focus back to him and Jamie was spellbound, he didn’t dare blink.

“But on top of being selfish, Jamie. I’m greedy too. For even though I know what I risk, when I
look at you, I burn Jamie. For a little while I told myself that what I felt was just our connection as Faith’s parents. Then I told myself my feelings were those of a friend. But that isn’t true. There is another feeling that comes up from this place inside of me and suddenly I don’t care what could be lost. It’s a wave of heat rolling inside me and I can only think how much I want to throw myself into the flames.”

Jamie watched it all play over her face-- the fear and the hope, the desire which seemed to flare between them the instant they saw each other.

Helpless, Jamie called her to him, called her as his body demanded, as her body ached for him to do. The deprivation of weeks welled up and spilled over. Emotions brutal and gentle, all mixed up inside him, and the only thing he knew was that he needed to take her pain into him and give her all the tenderness that filled his heart.

He hovered over her lips and flicked his tongue in and out, along the edge of her lip, feeling its softness as he lowered his mouth onto hers. She sighed as their lips slid over one another’s and their tongues met in hesitation.

Jamie moaned, an embarrassingly loud noise of gratitude that transmitted its longing to her core. No longer gentle, he poured all the desire he felt for her into that kiss. His senses rejoiced as Claire met him with equal need. She set his whole body tingling.

She made a sound like a hitching sob as her fingers wrapped tightly in his hair. The slight tug of pain answering lower down his body had him groaning in response. He changed the angle of his head and deepened the kiss.

Tongues no longer uncertain but joyfully exploring one another. The smack of their lips almost as erotic and their breathy moans. She made that noise deep in the back of her throat again, it was making him desperate.

She pressed her whole body harder to him, his hands splayed across her back urging her to rub more of herself against him. He needed-- oh God! How he needed. The sounds she made enflamed him. His only thought: more more more.

He felt her hands spasm in his hair as she gripped him harder. He’d never been this in sync with anyone. It was hard to say who was leading anymore. They were moving together, anticipating, meeting, joining, moving apart, thrusting back together. Jesus, what would it be like to have her naked and panting against him with those wee noises she was making?

Starting as comfort, it would end as something else entirely.

But some shred of recognition remained and he knew they couldn’t leave the conversation where it ended. He needed her to know she was safe with him, that he would protect her heart.

On a groan he pushed her back from him. Dazed confusion in golden eyes as she slowly came back to awareness.

“Lass, if ye continue wi’ that, I’ll no be able to stop.” His voice impossibly husky. “And as much as I want to carry on wi’ it, we need to figure this out before it goes any further.” He was breathing hard, so was she.

Claire nodded in shaky agreement. She moved off his lap with an increasingly awkward awareness that let him know that, like him, she’d had no idea she’d been sitting in it and grinding up against him. His body wanted her right back where she had been but his mind was thankful that
she had broken contact. He waited a moment for his blood to cool so he could gather his thoughts.

When he was ready, he turned his body to face her and reached out for the hands she placed in his.

She nodded in encouragement. He smiled at her, he couldn’t help it, for the joy of being well understood.

“Sassenach, I ken yer scarrit, but ye needn’t be. There’s the two of us now.” His eyes raced over her face, unable to stop looking at her.

The intensity of his feelings had nothing to do with Faith. Yet, everything they did impacted her so she needed to be their guiding light.

“Do ye think we can strike a bargain, the two of us?” He asked, feeling his way slowly. She nodded.

“I dinna know where this, what lies between us, will lead, but I feel it too. God, ye must ken that much?”

She smiled at that as Jamie pressed her hand hard to his heart. It was beating very fast, almost kicking her palm in its intensity.

“I am thankful you feel like ye can talk of such matters wi’ me.” He kissed her hand as he held it. “I hope I am always the first person you want to call and I will always make the time to talk to you. Always.”

Claire saw something shift in his eyes, a look of resolve came over his expression.

“Claire, I make you a vow and to a Scot a vow is no’ just words, ‘tis a sacred oath and I’d ask ye to do the same if ye feel ye can.”

Claire nodded and he continued.

“Faith is the blood of our blood and bone of our bone. Can we pledge that we will remember her and do honor to one another as her parents? That when it comes to our lass, we will help each other be the best parents she can have? For whether you and I are together, she will be ours together ‘til our lives shall be done.” The intensity of his stare gave truth to his promise.

“Oh yes, yes I agree!” Claire breathed, relieved because he did understand.

Jamie dove in for a hard, hot kiss that melted her insides and left her dizzy.

“Thank you, Claire.” Jamie kissed her hands still held in his and gave a small relieved chuckle.

“Sassenach,” he said leveling a look of pure desire at her, “by chance do you ken if Mrs. Crooke can babysit Friday night?”
The Date

Chapter Notes

In which I say Thank You!

Claire caught herself fussing over whether her outfit for dinner was the right choice. The second she noticed, she firmly turned her thoughts away to more practical matters. Faith’s dinner was almost ready, she could hear Mrs. Crooke bustling in the kitchen and Faith’s high pitched chattering.

She kicked off her flats and put the heels back on, briefly admiring the way they elongated her legs and firmed her rear. *Stop it!* she admonished. But, she thought taking one last lingering look at her backside, there was no use cutting off her nose to spite her face, the heels would stay.

She heard Jamie’s knock on the door and was tickled by the formality of the act. He had a key, for goodness sake, but he wanted their first date to feel special.

“I’ll get it, Mrs. Crooke.” She called as Faith shot forward, hopping foot to foot waiting for her mother to open the door.

“Is it Da?” she asked, knowing perfectly well it was.

Claire picked her up in order to get her free of the door, nestling her at the familiar place on her hip. Thanks to a recent growth spurt, Faith was almost getting too big to do this comfortably. Jamie was revealed to her slowly as the door moved inward but he made no move to cross the threshold.

“What’s it?” Faith asked.

Neither of her parents were paying any attention to her. Claire stared at the huge bouquet of wildflowers in his hands, absurdly pleased. The last time someone gave her flowers it had been Joe Abernathy when Faith was born.
“Those, my sweet girl are flowers from your Da to me, shall we put them in a vase, perhaps the pretty blue one?” Claire asked moving to take them from Jamie’s hand.

As she noticed Jamie’s frank look of appreciation she gave herself a secret high five, the heels were definitely the right choice!

Faith reached out to her father, Jamie caught her out of the air and, kissing her cheek, put her feet on the floor as Claire once again tried to take the bouquet from him.

“Och, no Sassenach,” he said. “These arena for you, mo nighean?” Jamie held out the flowers to Faith.

“Me?” she asked in squealed delight.

“Aye, of course.” he said. “To thank ye for the gift of sharing yer mam wi’ me.”

Claire exclaimed a brief “Oh!”

Absurdly pleased that his gesture was so well recieved, Jamie blushed. Faith carefully gathered the flowers to her. She was nearly dwarfed by the fronds, peeking between stem and stalk to make her way to the kitchen to show Mrs. Crooke.

As they both watched her go, Claire caught Jamie staring at her.

“I dinna ken if I’ve ever seen ye looking so bonnie, Sassenach.”

“Oh!” Claire repeated like an owl.

Suddenly, she was back in high school and the star QB finally noticed her! She pirouetted, batted her eyes, thrust her bust out then stuck her leg out this way then that way.

“You like?”
“Mmphm.” He said and pulled her to him in a hard, long kiss.

*****

The evening that had started off so well only got better. Jamie ignored trendy spots in favor of a hole in the wall where the proprietor’s mother still made all the deserts. There were less than a dozen tables. The low ceilings and candlelight added to the intimate setting.

The wine was exceptional, and the food did not disappoint, but it was the man that made her evening. Jamie had impeccable manners, courtesy being hard-wired into his DNA, but this evening he was especially solicitous of her.

They talked mostly of their pasts, the places they’d each lived, most memorable escapades, how they fell into their careers. By tacit agreement, they didn’t talk about Faith, taking one another back to a time before they had labels and were only themselves.

Claire realized she had ceased thinking of herself as anything besides a mother or a doctor. It had been a very long time since she had been plain old Claire Beauchamp and nothing more. A long time since anyone had asked her about herself. Since she had talked of her childhood, what she majored in at school, her guilty pleasure playlist.

She knew he was charming, but had no idea that up until now he’d only been idling. He’d opened the throttle and found a higher gear. She was vaguely aware that she was being courted but it was more than that. Having made the decision to explore the road they were on, Jamie was holding nothing back.

The deep dirty laugh that set her insides on fire, lingering looks on her lips, small shifts in weight as they sat next to each other in the cozy booth. His fingers traced elongated loops around the back of her hand, pressing deeper into her palm, fluttering along her wrist.

This was no sweet courtship; he was doing his damnedest to seduce her. He fed her small bites from his plate, watching with interest as his fork disappeared into her mouth, then lifting the fork to his own lips, drawing the tines out slowly, tongue chasing non-existent crumbs off his lips.

Against the steady onslaught of genuinely appreciative masculine attention, she never stood a chance. She could almost fool herself into thinking she actually was as interesting as he found her.
Heady stuff that.

Well, resistance being futile anyway…. Claire licked her lips, ran her tongue over the fork a wee bit, just to see if he was paying attention, then biting it slightly so it got caught up on her mouth. His stifled groan answered that question.

She moved her own fingers in his, catching him in between on the webbing of the skin, then gripping just one finger rhythmically in imitation of the act. A hitch, hidden in a swallow of wine that almost choked him and a small shudder went through him.

He slid his body closer and extricated his finger from hers on the pretext of reaching for his water glass. She found that same arm draped casually around her shoulders, his fingers dropped and he was just reaching the outer edge of her breast. She shifted her hips that last little bit. Now they were touching all along legs and torsos.

Her free hand dipped daringly onto his inner thigh. He leaned into her hair, bringing his lips next to her ear. She could feel his breath causing gooseflesh to ripple down her arms.

“If ye dinna stop that lass, you’ll no’ get cake.”

He nuzzled her, sticking his tongue out and flicking. Claire let out a moan disguised as a huff. She nuzzled him right back, put her lips on his ear.

“What if it’s not cake I want?”

She blew a little, he shivered and pulled her a bit harder against his side. The wine was hitting her and she drew him to her for a kiss, nipping along his lips a little roughly. He growled as he broke away.

“Christ, Jesus Claire! Do ye have any idea what yer doing to me?”

“Not enough! Not nearly as much as I want to!” Came the immediate response.

He had no conscious memory of how they got home or what they said to Mrs. Crooke. He didn’t
care. His only thoughts were of her.

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He hadn’t had more than a couple of glasses of wine which meant that he was intoxicated on this woman, who felt like liquid heat in his arms, kissing him for all she was worth.

“Christ, Sassenach. I canna think when you----”

But Claire couldn’t stop, not for a moment, her sense of urgency pushing her on, pushing him backwards, lips locked, palms fitted firmly to his chest. His knees crashed against the little settee in the corner of her bedroom, he made a last minute grab securing her to him as they went down together.

With a yelp of surprise, Claire landed in his lap, legs splayed as she wriggled her bottom to settle more firmly against him. His hands raced up through her curls, propelling her lips back to his.

Jamie’s fingers spasmed when she made that whimpering noise. It was followed by a squawk of pain and he immediately let go.

“No! Harder.” Claire’s plea of need had his fingers rushing back at once.

He felt her quivering against the cotton seam over his crotch. His hands moved lower, gently cupping her rear in encouragement.

He chuckled low and dirty, his lips sliding over her jaw, the sensitive place behind her ear. Her tongue dancing along his roughened cheek, nuzzling her lips against his scruff.

“Mmm.” She hummed.

Her slender fingers cupped the side of his chin and she kissed him hard once more but then Claire pulled back, leaving her fingers warm against his cheek as they stared at each other.
Claire hovered for a heartbeat, open mouth floating just a hair’s breadth from his. Dancing above his parted lips.

Jamie was thrown back to Lallybroch, to that exquisite moment under the fairy lights.

His breath audible in the stillness and he said what he wished he had that night.

“Do it, Claire,” he whispered.

He felt her eyelashes fluttering against his cheekbones. Her eyes moved over his face, watching him.

“Do what?”

“Anything ye like.” A ragged plea, “God, Sassenach, everything.”

Her eyes narrowed and she moaned driving her mouth downward.

Then he was lost, utterly lost in the sensations of skin and heat, wetness and desire.

On a groan, he reached his powerful hands with deliberate intention, meeting the smooth skin of her inner thighs as he stretched her legs wider bringing her into closer contact with him.

She hissed out a noise of gratitude.

The skirt had ridden up to the point that it presented no obstacle at all.

_Ah Dhia!_

“Ye feel so good, Sassenach. The heat of ye. I can feel it, even now.”
He gripped her arse and ground her center harder into him, his pants growing damp underneath her.

She made a mewling noise that shot straight to his cock followed by a nip on his neck. She sucked in a little.

“Harder.” He growled suddenly understanding the appeal of being taken rough.

She laughed, “You like that do you? Good, so do I.”

Then she did it again. Jamie anchored her hips as she rolled and thrust against him.

“Oh lass, that’s it.” He said in grateful appreciation.

Sexual energy radiated from her so powerfully he felt helpless against its pull.

Claire was making all sorts of noises, panting in breathy pulses; he tried to make mental note of what kind of responses each touch elicited but he was hanging on to his civility by a thread.

“Jesus H--” Claire came up for a gulp of air.

“Do that again, Sassenach.” He begged, whimpering as she dug her fingernails hard into the back of his skull.

She plunged her tongue back into his mouth and was rewarded by a guttural cry when the image of her hands between her legs pressing his head against her while he sucked and licked her came into his head.

“I love the way ye smell, Claire. It’s driving me mad.” He said bluntly. “Ye feel so good. I need to feel yer skin--”

He kissed her neck, rasping out pleasure sounds of his own. She arched her head back to give him
more access as her fingers raced down her blouse unbuttoning in record time.

Her breasts were just visible when she leaned forward. He moaned; she had no bra, her dark nipples contrasted with her pale breasts.

She moved to get off his lap and undress further when his palms cupped both breasts. His thumbs flicked over her nipples. She hissed out a breath, frozen in place and couldn’t move.

Jamie watched her face as he pressed the underside of each breast. He felt the nipples harden further then pulled her toward his mouth.

Claire looked down, “Ooohhh.” Crooning as she watched his tongue snake out to her puckered nipple.

She ran her hand down the back of his head, running the silken strands through her fingers, making urgent little moans as he kneaded and gently licked.

Jamie placed a hand firmly behind her back, pushing her further against his mouth. Her silky blouse couldn’t match the smooth skin on the underside of her breast. Fascinated, he lightly rubbed his lips in an arc tracing the firm shape of her, his stubble inflaming the soft tissues.

Her fingers tightened in his hair.

“Please.” She whimpered.

Jamie had been holding himself in check but now allowed his hungry mouth free reign and he worked her: lips, tongue, teeth.

She was half standing over him, helplessly trapped. He chuckled, hearing the quickening of her heartbeat echoing against his ear. His hands reached lower and cupped her bottom up and under her skirt.

“A thong?” He said in wonder as his hands made contact with her naked flesh.
She laughed in delight -- using her fantasy lingerie drawer had paid off, after all.

He made a noise that made her insides tremble.

“The things I have dreamed of doing with yer wonderful round arse, Claire.”

He worshipped her flesh, massaging her butt cheeks. Jamie looked up then, meeting her eyes as he slowly slipped her panties down her legs. She moved to step out of them as his fingers reached out to her slit.

“Oh Claire.” Jamie moaned.

She was so wet, slick and swollen.

“I love watching how different your body becomes as I touch it. The way your nipples harden, and yer lips puff, and then ye part yer legs and that wee bud...mmphm, that one just there peeks out. Knowing how good this makes ye feel does all sorts of things to me, too.”

He pressed his cheek hard against her belly scraping up and down its flat plane. She pulsed against him as he spread her with his fingers.

“Jamie, keep doing that thing with your middle-- there like that….yessss!” She hissed out grinding against his fingers urging him deeper.

Jamie lifted his face upwards and captured a puckered breast between his lips, then sucked in hard. Her whimper had him pulling her back to straddle above him once more.

“Christ! More, please Jamie, please use your teeth!” She commanded.

He vaguely wondered if he’d ever been harder, the strain of his confinement was crossing the line from pleasant ache to painful throb.
Her moisture was beginning to run down his fingers.

Jamie moaned deeply when he felt her hand brush against his cheek and realized in her eagerness she had grabbed her neglected breast and rubbed its hardened nipple against his cheek.

He wondered if he sucked hard enough would there be milk, snorting at the ridiculousness immaturity of the thought. Good lord did all men harbor a piece of their juvenile selves in a part of their brain?

Then he couldn't think at all, drowning in sensation as she pulled his head so hard into her chest, it temporarily cut off his breath. He moved his tongue rapidly, scraping his mouth roughly against the tight edges of her areolas, first one then the other.

She was riding his lap in tune with his increasingly urgent fingers. Her panting and moans turned to soft cries and he knew she was building toward her orgasm.

An alarming sensation crawled up his spine; Jamie realized he was so turned on he felt close to spending.

He hadn’t taken off a single article of clothing. He broke from her causing her to groan in want and disappointment.

“I’m sorry Sassenach, I canna wait, I must have ye!” He kissed her lips, tongue playing with her upper lip, then lower as he shifted their position.

He unbuttoned his cuffs, then the rest of his Oxford but was too impatient to finish taking it off.

He used the temporary reprieve of her weight off his leg to unfasten his belt and pants. He thrust them down his legs in all of two seconds, without bothering to take them or his shoes off. He grabbed for her once more.

“Come to me, Sassenach.”

His eyes locked on hers, she watched him as she swung her weight back down. A sigh of pleasure
as her naked breasts pressed against his exposed chest. The warm heat of him contrasting with the cool of her skin.

Both of their nipples hard and aching as the moved against each other. His fingers grabbed her arse again and he settled her to his lap.

Claire desperately needed to feel more of him against her. She whipped her legs around his middle and ground herself tightly to him.

His shirt tail was caught between them, preventing her from impaling herself but with only that thin layer between them what she could feel of him had her moaning in appreciation.

“You’re bloody huge everywhere,” she observed. That got her a half groan, half laugh.

But the longing in his eyes mirrored the depth of her need. She rode against him, frustrated at not being able to close that last gap, she thrust again and again needing more.

“I want to mark ye, Claire. I have to make ye mine.”

Heedless in her desire, Claire would have agreed to whatever he wanted.

He took in her befuddled eyes, losing their focus as she chased her pleasure his heart was beating so hard in his chest he wondered if she could feel it against hers. He kissed her bruised lips hard.

“Anything, anything, please I’m so close….” she begged.

Her desperation communicated itself like a foreshock to his sex.

His fingers curved from her hip to butt crack as his lips fastened over the juncture of shoulder and neck.

She could feel the heat of his cock rising up between them. The sensation of his mouth, his five o’clock shadow soft in some spots, sharp as a knife in others as he fitted his mouth against her neck, she whimpered.
Jamie deftly flicked the offending shirt tail out of the way and lined himself up so she could thrust home. He guided her with arms wrapped tight around her as he pulled her body hard toward him just as she thrust forcefully down.

His howl of gratitude as her wetness eased his entry, as he felt her walls, first resisting his intrusion in their tightness, then giving way in blissful completion echoed around them.

Claire couldn’t catch her breath. Her nipples were tingling from the pull of his increasing suction on her neck.

He filled her completely, her clit struck against him driving an electric shock straight into her core.

*Oh, fuck!*

She circled her hips, urgent. His huge hands pushing her down hard on his cock as his elbows squeezed her even closer. Her whole body enveloped by him and he a seamless part of her.

She moaned and felt him lengthening inside her in response. The twitching of her core curling up her spine.

Claire rose up again just as he moved his hands down to her hips bracing her firmly as she drove herself back down. Jamie made a keening sound of shocked urgency that drove Claire over the edge.

A high pitched wail followed by a litany of “I’m coming, oh God, coming now, oh Jesus!” made him lose it entirely in an embarrassing echoing cascade of mindless chanting of his own.

She thought she heard him reciting Deo Gratias in Latin but it might have been Gaelic.

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Her forehead was pressed against his as their hearts raced, gulping in air and trying to make sense of the last few minutes. Calling that a few minutes was generous, Jamie didn’t think it had lasted much more than a minute. Her arms and legs were wrapped around his body, they were still joined. He kissed the side of her head.
“God, Sassenach, I’ve never wanted anything more than I wanted you just now. I’m sorry, lass it ‘twas over before it had even begun!” He laughed self consciously.

“Don’t be an idiot!” She said huffily.

Jamie looked at her then and reevaluated what he misread in her tone, not huffy, then.

She looked like the cat that ate the cream, well pleased despite his breaking the land speed record.

He raised one brow up in inquiry.

“That was the first…” she trailed off and looked at something fascinating in the dark recesses of the ceiling. “...orgasm I have had in two and a half years. And you, my lad, arena allowed to be sorry for any of it!” This a teasing declaration.

He looked at her in open-mouthed surprise.

“I’m the first man you’ve had sex with since before Faith, aye?” He asked, looking for clarification.

“You already know that.” Red blush started snaking up her chest into her face, even turning the tips of her ears pink. “I mean I haven’t been able to uhmm, since I --- since the middle of my pregnancy.”

“Ye havena mmphm? No’ even by yerself?” He asked incredulous.

She went from mildly abashed to completely humiliated in ten seconds flat and made to rise off him, wanting to flee and hide her mortification.

He grabbed her at once, holding her fast.
“Sassenach,” he said as she squirmed.

“I never should have told you. God, I am an idiot. Can we drop it, please?”

She raised her eyes toward his, unable to actually make eye contact. Jamie forced her chin up and her eyes to meet his. He just waited her out.

“Jamie, if you make it a big deal, it will just make it harder mentally for me-- I needed to---God, so badly for so long and the more I needed it, the further away it got and what if I can’t do that ever again? You’ll feel like I don’t enjoy it even though I do. You felt so good that if you don’t want to do it again, I really think I will die and I don’t want to -- at least not that way. So can we pretend I never said anything, that I haven’t scared you off and that I am not a freak?” All of this was said on one breath.

She’d already sat through two embarrassing examinations with her doctor only to learn no medical reason lay behind her drought, which, as she now knew, was right. So why had she opened her mouth? The frustrations of the last several months caused her eyes to well up, then spill over, which only pissed her off more. She angrily batted her tears away.

Jamie’s mind raced wondering what to address first. Well, he should probably start with the obvious.

“Claire, lass, I want you. Can ye no’ feel how much?”

He pulsed and flexed his cock without moving the rest of his body and she was shocked to discover she’d been so wrapped up in her revelation that she hadn’t noticed him firm and harden inside her.

She wriggled, she couldn’t help it. She wanted him so much she could scarcely catch her breath.

“Ye ken we’ll no’ be able to predict whether ye will or ye won’t again by talking, aye?”

Claire laughed on a hiccup of feeling and nodded.

He got a wicked gleam in his eye.
“So, I’m done wi’ the talking.”

Her heart started singing with joy for this man to whom she could spill her deepest secrets and fears. He stood up, still joined with her and kicked off his shoes, walking out of his pants on the way to the bed. Unbuttoned shirt still on, taking it off would have required he let go of the woman in his arms. Never a chance.

Then he proceeded with a slow, steady seduction of reassurance.

A couple of times he caught her attention wandering away as she approached her peak. He noticed- but said nothing, letting her do as her body willed.

He did the only thing he could do which was to tell her in filthy, thrilling detail how she made him feel, tell her what being with her like this was doing to him. Jamie kept her present and out of her own headscape as much as he could.

“I love how you feel against me. Wrap them like that, yes, Christ woman, you’ve legs for miles.”

He was pressed tightly against her, kissing her over and over. His weight was on his elbows, his forearms resting on either side of her head his hands entwined over the top of her skull, cradling her with enough power to make her feel his passion held in check. He grunted as she flexed her inner walls.

“Sassenach, yer so tight, I feel like I’m going to burst!”

Claire laughed at the mental picture that painted in her head but continued to do her kegels. Good bless Cosmo! She felt his testicles contract.

“Not yet you bloody Scot!” She warned.

“I feel like yer pulling my balls through the top of my heid, no promises,” Came the heartfelt reply followed by a surprised exclamation as Claire placed both her hands firmly against his cotton covered forearms and quickly rolled him onto his back then came down hard, impaling herself on him.
“Jesus, fuck, Jamie!”

He was so large in length and girth, he filled her completely causing her clit to be stimulated on each thrust. She was balancing her hands on his chest. Her breasts bobbing in erotic counterpoint.

“Yer beautiful, lass.” He hoarsely exclaimed and his look of wonder and happiness nearly undid her.

“Oh Jamie, Jamie I---” she said pinned by his fathomless stare.

Helpless she could not look away but could not bear to reveal so much so soon. Her heart was in her eyes as was his.

Claire sensed she was about to jump off a cliff and had to veer away, had to pull herself back from the edge.

Jamie felt the change in her instantly.

“ Mo ghraidh ?” He questioned.

“Lay back down and don’t move!”

Claire needed to alter the emotional mood, and did it the only way she could in that moment. She shoved his chest hard and pushed him back down on a grunt. She came off him with an abrupt heave.

“Sassenach!” He growled denied the heat of her, cold air like a slap in the face.

Claire had to get out from under those eyes that were not only seeing too much of her but showing too much of himself as well. His confused expression melted her and she leaned forward and kissed him in reassurance.
“I have an idea, stick with me.”

_Gladly and forever_ , the thought flittered through his brain.

He stopped thinking two seconds later when she straddled and resheathed him in reverse cowgirl position.

“Ohhh!” She cried.

All thoughts fled, complications sidelined, the world narrowed to this moment, the sensation of him filling her up, stroking her as she clenched down in the most thrilling agony ever. She couldn’t feel her toes for the tingling, panting and losing her focus. Her lovely round ass tempted him beyond all caution.

He grabbed her hips and helped her keep the rhythm. Then she slowed and carefully leaned back toward his chest.

Jamie leaned up a little, moving his arm around her, fingers finding her swollen clit.

The touch helped calm her and she edged off a bit. How was it he could reach everywhere at once?

“How tall are you, anyway?” She breathed.

The question was so unexpected he answered her promptly, “6’3.”

“Praise wingspan!” Heartfelt from Claire, he chuckled as he touched her center and his fingers made an unexpected squelching noise. He moaned, doing it again just to hear it once more.

“Oh Claire, yer so wet...So fucking wet....” He said in genuine wonder.

She’d never heard him swear; it turned her on, which naturally replicated the phenomena.
“God Jesus, more!” He commanded and she complied. His digits were coated, she was panting once more, making all sorts of lovely noises. He shuddered, needing to feel more of her ass. He lay down again opening his own legs, parting hers a little wider.

Her legs spread, causing her ass cheeks to loosen temptingly as she circled around, fluttering. He grabbed both globes and spread her cheeks in time to her thrusts.

Claire was tightening, both of them moaning and he felt her dripping response.

“Not...a….one-off--” She managed to say as he slipped his thumb firmly against her ass.

“Oh fuck!”

Claire spasmed uncontrollably and this time Jamie’s balls did seize up, his back arching off the bed as his orgasm ripped through his whole body.

He sensed her shifting off him and laying her head on his sweaty chest, not bothering at all about it. His arms came tightly around her and he kissed her deeply.

“Mine.”

He whispered into the air around them as his mind swung free and sleep claimed him.
Deep in the night Claire awoke to Jamie’s lips against her neck, rumbling in low laughs. It was pitch black in her room. She rested her cheek against his, half awake. He felt her rising awareness and moved to kiss her, still laughing softly.

She broke from his lips for long enough to ask, “What?”

He moaned as her tongue homed in on his open mouth, she nipped his lip as she gave him a dirty flick.

“Nothing, really, just thinking of my sister. She thinks she kens it all. Normally I try no’ to give her an inch but she told me---well, the upshot was that if I ever got ye in bed wi’ me, she didna think I’d get much rest. She was right.”

Claire wondered briefly what could have precipitated such a conversational context between siblings but then Jamie was sliding her under him and she ceased to worry about it when he rocked his growing length against her.

Their torsos were touching and Jamie couldn’t stop kissing her, he tried to keep his weight off her as much as he could. It wasn’t easy when she kept pulling him down for kisses, when he could feel the pebble hardness of her breasts teasing him, when her hips tilted up and made lazy circles against his aching cock.

“God, Sassenach, put yer fingers on my ass and pull me..oh!” He moaned.

Claire’s hips rose in tandem with her squeezes of his firm backside, he was teasing her all along her slit, but didn’t make any move to complete their joining. Everything was twitching and the glide was making her incredibly hot.

He flattened his lower body against hers and returned the favor in slow, firm circles, teasing them both. The joy of learning her body made his heart thrum. The darkness heightening their senses.

Claire wanted more and slid her hands up his backside to his lower back, biting his shoulder a deliciously sharp pain to go with the pleasure. Now she was rising up searching for more friction, unaware of the whimpering noises coming from her throat.

Her hands moved up his mid back and she froze. Jamie stilled.

He’d been so caught up in the feel of her, needing to touch and be touched by her that he’d completely forgotten.

Belatedly he realized his shirt was still on-- it had to be a wrinkly mess by now. She’d had no idea, of course.

Wordless, Claire traced the lines all over his back, scar tissue thick and twinned in some places, thin as a thread in others. Smooth taut skin, unnaturally bare of hair where circles, not stripes of injury had occurred. The damage was extensive, and had to have come from more than one source.

Claire realized her eyes were closed, unnecessary as there was almost no illumination reaching the room. Yet she knew why she was doing it, she was processing the landscape of his body using...
touch alone, creating a map of him in her mind’s eye.

She slid out from under Jamie and he sat up to give her room to rest her back against the headboard. But then she came close to him, up on her knees and slid his shirt off his shoulders.

She threw the shirt off the side of the bed.

Then she flung herself hard into him, resting against his lap, wrapping her legs firmly around his midsection to anchor herself to him. She was so slight against him, despite her curves. His arms held her tightly to him and waited while she continued exploring him with her fingers and palms.

After a minute or two she said, “Ok. tell me.”

“It happened when I met John. He was young, no’ even 18 yet. Sometimes paradise is no’ welcoming to those who are a little different. Somehow he ended up in a local bar verra late at night. I’d gotten off shift and had a new scooter, so I offered to drive a mate home, an excuse to drive around. I saw him there, he just looked so out of place and the vibe was ugly. When ye work so many late nights ye get a feel for crowds. Anyway it was enough to make me stop. By the time I reach him there were six or seven of them. They’d thrown him on the ground, someone had a chain, there was a knife He panicked and made the mistake of turning his bottle of beer into a dirk. He was only trying to use what he could find to defend himself. But that was the excuse they’d needed. They broke their own bottles in half. John’s a good fighter but more gently reared. He didna ken how to fight dirty. And at six against two the only way ye walk out is by getting dirty. He learned quick enough though.”

“You won?” Claire said incredulously.

“Oh aye. We’re both alive, ken? We didna so much walk out of there as crawl but we both were able to walk again, after a time.” He said matter of factly.

“Does John’s back look like yours?” She blurted before realizing that was none of her business. Jamie didn’t mind.

“Nah, he’s got some scars but I’m a very big target compared. He’s scrappy and he doesna ever give up. I may have saved him but he saved me, too, there at the end.” Jamie admitted. “Shall I turn on the light? Do ye need to see it?” Jamie asked.

“Only if you need me to see it, or if you want to turn on the light yourself, but no, I don’t need to see it now. I do need something else from you.” She told him as she came back into his lap and twisted them so his back was against the headboard as she climbed astride him.

It was different, not being able to see her eyes. He felt the loss of it even as he recognized she became less self-conscious, maybe freer to play in the darkness. Naked and slippery as an eel she slid over him.

“Ohh, Jamie, can you feel your cock, trapped against me?”

He moaned in response, weeping in his need. She grasped hard between sure fingers. He hissed as he tried to catch his breath.

“Oh, Sassenach, please.” he whispered.

She slid her body down to the bed. With no light he wasn’t sure what she was doing and startled to
feel the heat of her mouth closing over him. Firm, flat tongue, teeth rubbing ever so slightly along the ridge of him.

“Christ!” He exclaimed and then moaned when she laughed while still holding him in her mouth.

Then he felt her hands moving in counterpart to her mouth and the sounds she made as she moved on him seemed particularly loud in the blackness surrounding them.

When she gently pulled a ball into her mouth he yelped. “Mother of God!”

“Tssch. What would your parish priest say, good Catholic lad, such blasphemy!” She laughed then deep throated him with no warning.

“Please, Claire, I need—–”

Jamie’s hands thrust through the curls at the top of her head and for a moment Claire was sure he was going to pull her off of him. She thought it came as a surprise to both of them when he instead pushed her firmly down.

Her jaw was aching a bit, it had been a long time and she was out of practice. Yet Claire couldn’t get enough energetically working him as he strained and grunted and groaned in appreciation under her.

Was there any feeling like having a man under your power when he was so happy to be there?

“Oh, Sassenach!” He groaned as she licked and swirled, loving the unique tang of him.

She rose over him, mouth up and down, fingers in and out, moving unexpectedly all over him.

Did she know when she made those wee humming noises it made his cock vibrate? Jamie was having a hard time putting coherent thoughts together though one came through loud and clear.

“Come to me, lass, I must touch ye.” He begged, his strident tone making her heart speed up.

She shifted to straddle him and let out a cry as he expertly flipped places with her.

He kissed her breathless then said, with considerable satisfaction, “now we’ll see how ye like it!”

His mouth fastened hard on her nipple as his fingers landed inside her. He traced tiny kisses and small bites all down her middle and then settled himself between her splayed legs. He inhaled her scent audibly. She could feel her body’s response to that bit of dirtiness. His naughty laugh let her know he was well aware of what he was doing to her.

“Since I must go to confession anyway, let’s make it worth the good father’s time, aye?”

*****

It was a little after eight the next morning by the time she and Jamie decided to awaken for the day. That funny half shy first morning learning one another’s routines. Claire offered to check on Faith and get breakfast started while he hopped into the shower.

Claire found herself cracking into a smile for no reason as she ground the beans for coffee. She was just finishing up the pancake batter when she heard a high pitched shriek followed by a startled bellow of shocked surprise. She quickly turned the heat off the griddle and ran toward the bedroom only to be met by a screaming Faith bolting from her bedroom.
“Mama, Mama!” Claire’s nervous system immediately engaged for action to offer what medical assistance she could.

“What happened?” Claire used her Dr. Beauchamp voice in order to stay emotionally neutral. If he was hurt badly she didn’t want to scare Faith.

“It’s Da’s---Mama his vagina is on the wrong side!”

Claire looked up to find Jamie wrapped in a towel staring in abject horror. She raised a brow of inquiry.

“It’s ok, Da. Mama can fix it.” Faith confidently assured him, “She can put it back in!” Faith, satisfied by the day’s rescue, went to the kitchen in search of breakfast.

“I-- she--” From Jamie’s chest to the top of his head was bright red.

“Forgot there was a toddler in the house, hmm?” Claire was struggling so hard not to laugh.

He shuddered. “Nooo.” He said in a way that really meant yes. Claire bit her bottom lip.

“I didna realize it wasn’t you, Sassenach. When I heard the shower door open.” But then went on to confess the entirety of the error. “So when I turned around….it took me a moment to realize why ye weren’t three feet taller and by then it was too late to go the other way.”

At this Claire became hysterical, no lady-like tittering for her. She was laughing so hard, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“I’m s-so-sorry!” She managed to squeeze out.

Jamie couldn’t hold it in any longer and too started to see the humor in the situation. Claire hugged him to her as they hopelessly fell apart giggling.

“Oh God, Claire. Oh Jesus! I shoulda used the lock I suppose?”

“That might be an excellent solution if Faith hadn’t learned how to pop the lock weeks ago. Toddlers and bathroom privacy are are rare as sightings of the Loch Ness Monster. Though reminders about knocking wouldn’t come amiss. She knows boys and girls are different. I think I even have a book somewhere on her shelf.”

Jamie shuddered, “It better no’ be a pop up book. I’ll have the nightmare for sure.”

Claire laughed but then became very aware of why he’d made that particular comment and of the fact that he was only wearing a towel.

“Did you, uhm, need me to take a look? I could...offer a professional opinion, perhaps see about ….putting it back in?”

He whipped his head off in the direction of the kitchen and then looked at the bathroom door.

“The bedroom door has a much better lock.” She told him. “And I am known to be especially good when someone needs rapid treatment. I took the precaution of pouring Faith a bowl of cereal.” She added.

“Get in here!” Jamie said as he reached for Claire, kissing her breathless as the lock snicked closed.
Sorry guys I can't figure out how to embed the texting conversation between J + C I'll try and clean it up and post it later. Its over on @abbydebeaupreposts at Tumblr if you want to read it.

*Operation Lard Head*

There were moments when Jamie had to literally bite the inside of his cheek to stop the words *I love you* from slipping off his unguarded tongue.

If it were up to him, he'd have married her the first morning he woke in her bed. Instinct warned him to go canny. Claire never discussed her marriage or break up with Frank except in the broadest of terms and that worried him. Jamie sensed the struggle inside of her. He just didn't know if she was wrestling with a broken heart or her own demons.

They had a couple months to plan, to dream, to just be. He wanted every single day of that time for them, to have her to himself, to become hers.

In the fall, Faith would be transitioning to preschool. Jamie knew that before they picked one that she'd be happy in, they would need have a plan to handle the public aspects of what was going to happen.

There was no question in his mind about amending the birth certificate and he didn’t think in Claire’s either. If anything their relationship solidified their unity of thought. The key point of decision lay in the timing. He delayed the discussion wanting them on solid ground as a couple first.

Claire thought she’d understood what being in the whirlwind of the press once more would be like. Jamie knew different. It was going to be like living in a fishbowl and, with no false modesty, he understood he was a big fish in a small Scottish pond.

For all its salacious aspects, the press coverage on her was relatively tame. She had been the flavor of the week with the press striking then moving on quickly. They might have come back around a
few times smelling fresh meat but again, it was hit and run. Jamie garnered a certain amount of coverage all year round and there was no way to escape that fact.

Complicating matters, Slainte was picking up market share faster than projected. Jamie was facing considerable pressure to expand operations to meet demand.

A rival company, originating in France with a product name of Babbelas was attempting a run at Slainte. Jamie had Geneva and Geillis researching both its ingredients and following the money behind it’s development.

On top of that they were having some trouble ensuring consistency of vendor deliveries to keep production schedules as planned. The pressure cooker was about to heat up. He could feel it coming.

Jamie dragged his mind back to the conference room table where he was meeting with Murtagh, Fergus and the rest of creative.

“The concept tested well across nations in the focus groups.” Murtagh told him.

“I’m not surprised, ye did a good job, rehearsals tomorrow?” Jamie verified.

“Aye, we’ve plenty of space in the lunch area and it’s not too complicated. I’ll hold our wee camera, it’s not exactly commercial quality but good enough and we have a bit of editing software for a rough cut. I’ll be able to show you those by the end of the week in case we need to do any fine tuning. We booked the studio with their in-house crew directing and doing the sound for the top of next week. We’ve time enough to get it right before the pros take over.”

“Operation Lard Head?”

“I canna help it, the name just stuck.” Murtagh smiled.

*****

By mid-morning on the following day Jamie had already put out two fires, metaphorically
speaking. Mrs. Fitz had been just as frantic as he and was giving him the old rolled eye from the inner window that let him look out onto the rest of the floor.

Now they were having a problem with their Osha supplier. It was one of the special herbal ingredients that made the product work so well.

But it was hard to grow in controlled settings and could only be cultivated in the wild in certain parts of Canada and the United States. Their last delivery was low, even factoring the seasonal ebb they’d been warned about this month. If their next delivery produced similarly low numbers, they would end up short during this critical production period.

Jamie’d spent the last twenty minutes trying to chase down the head of the supply company that was giving him the runaround. He left messages three places offering to meet in person.

Half the team was working on tracking down an alternative Osha supply but right at the moment, this man was his only source of supply. The rehearsals were scheduled to begin in a half an hour and that had been occupying the rest of the team.

Jamie’s skin prickled just then and he looked up completely astonished to see Claire, coat half on, cheeks red with exertion, Faith in tow, striding around the corner with Faith’s purple backpack in hand. Mrs. Fitz was just about to launch into gatekeeper mode when he leaned his head out of the doorway.

“What’s wrong?” He called out as he reached out to hoist Faith up and ushered Claire through his door, closing it firmly on Mrs. Fitz’s openly curious stare.

Faith gave him a loud smack on the lips in greeting and he smiled even as he checked her out. She seemed fine to him.

“Jamie, I’m so sorry. I know, I wasn’t scheduled to go in today and the daycare is closed for a professional development day. But a man I operated on two days ago needs to go back under It’s a tricky procedure. I really have to be there. The Crookes just left to go visit their daughter. I misplaced my phone and couldn’t call you in advance----”

He put Faith down on the floor and his arms around her. “Shhh,” he whispered as he kissed her forehead and hugged her briefly.
“It’s fine, Sassenach.” Jamie wasn’t sure how he would reorganize his day, but there was nothing else to be done.

“I know it’s dreadful timing. I feel awful about just dropping in like this. I packed a few toys, her iPad and a lunch.” Claire apologized again.

“Go, we’ll make do. Tend to yer duties.” He reassured her, smiling down at Faith, “the lassie and I will be fine won’t we mo nighean?” Faith nodded up at her Da with an answering smile of her own.

The last thing Claire needed was to expend precious time and energy worrying about him or Faith. She needed to focus on her surgery, especially if it was delicate enough they’d called her in on her day off.

Claire reminded Faith to be a good girl as Jamie opened the door to let her go. She kissed his cheek with another word of thanks and started down the hall. She brushed by Geneva on her way called out rushed hellos and disappeared around the corner.

Mrs Fitz was just about to launch into the third degree when Geneva cut her off, striding into Jamie’s office.

“Is Claire ok?” She asked puzzled at seeing Dr. Beauchamp at Slainte.

She’d thought Jamie was dating her but he’d never said as much and she hadn’t seen Claire since Quarter Day.

Her eyes spotted Faith standing a little behind Jamie.

“Oh, goodness, what a pretty girl. Is she Claire’s?”

“Aye.” Jamie said, it wasn’t a lie, just not the whole truth.

“She is really quite impressive, isn’t she? It’s a bit intimidating knowing there are women like Claire in the world. I can barely get out of my own way most days and she is a doctor and a
mother? Well, she at least gives me hope that it can be done!” Geneva smiled as did Jamie. Geneva was crazy for children, always had been.

Geneva knelt down on the carpet in front of her.

“I’m Geneva, what’s your name?”

“Faith.”

“That’s a lovely name. How-----”

Jamie wanted to cut off the cross examination from his legal eagle and interrupted the conversational flow.

“Did ye need something Eva?” Geneva was momentarily distracted but did look up, suddenly remembering that she had come in on a mission. She reluctantly rose to her feet.

“Yes, actually, the Osha supplier says he’ll meet with you but he’s got a plane to catch later today and he’ll be out of Scotland for the next month. You’ll need to leave in fifteen or twenty minutes to get to him on time.”

“Iffrin !” Jamie exclaimed.

“I know but at least I convinced him to meet with you before he left. We still don’t have Geillis’s analysis of the Babbelas product. The interruptions in deliveries might be unrelated, but if they are squeezing the market, we have to be prepared. You already know how difficult it is to find reliable sources for it. We have to keep our current supplier happy.” Geneva smiled with some sympathy as Jamie ran his hand roughly through his hair.

“Aye, Eva, I thank ye for setting it up. I’ll let you get back to your day.”

This was a very pointed dismissal and Geneva could not ignore the command. She gave one last lingering look at Faith and went back to her own office.
Well, no help for it, ten minutes later, Jamie dropped Faith off with Ian.

“Uncan!” Faith exclaimed, wide grin of greeting.

“Neath!” He gathered her in a huge hug.

Murtagh was passing by as Faith started chanting Da, Da, Da. He quickly looked over his shoulder as Angus and Rupert rounded the corner and scooped Faith up to distract her while Jamie extracted himself and made ready to leave.

“MurTagh, Tagh, Tagh, lass.” he said emphatically, hoping to disguise her vocalizations as Jamie walked out of the office. He needn’t have bothered as Angus and Rupert were wrapped up in an argument over who was going to say which lines.

************

The group had made good progress running through the various ads targeting the expansion into European markets through the United LQ deal inked earlier in the year. Murtagh was reluctant to continue going over lines.

Angus was a natural, not giving a care to the presence of the camera but Rupert was clearly not comfortable in front of a lens. He looked directly at the camera in such self conscious awareness that he practically glowed a neon sign with ACTING! blinking on and off over his head. That wouldn’t do at all.

In order to break Rupert of his self-consciousness, Murtagh decided to project the feed onto two monitors mounted in the lunch area so they could see themselves and just let them talk as they normally would, no thought to the camera. He hoped it would desensitize the experience for Rupert.

Rupert had dressed in jeans and a dark green Slainte t-shirt.

Angus, on the other hand, collected off beat t-shirts and today’s choice was a brown tee that read:
All Mushrooms Are Edible...Once.

This one courtesy of MoTown Mushrooms, a small specialty farm in Vermont.

The two of them were arguing the finer points of why Spongebob looked like a kitchen sponge even though his parents had been free form sea sponges resembling loofahs.

“I’m just saying it’s a recessive gene, that’s all, like a bairn having blue eyes even when the parents dinna have them.” Rupert was explaining.

Behind him, Murtagh heard a sharp cry of alarm and then Ian’s unmistakable gait as he hurried along the wood floor toward Jamie’s office.

Remembering that Faith was their unexpected guest for the afternoon, Murtagh left the camera rolling on it’s tripod and pivoted to lend a hand.

“Here, Mrs. Fitz, let me just wrap the towel and hold tight, wee bit of pressure.” Ian was saying as he wrapped the hand in a kitchen towel and held it up and over her head for her.

Murtagh saw Mrs. Fitz sitting in her office chair with long faint streaks of blood running from hand to wrist.

“What’s amiss?” he asked.

“The letter opener, the one shaped like a dirk?” Glenna was saying, her eyes still wide and pain-filled. “It’s as sharp as a wee stabbie, slipped and cut my palm.”

Several minutes passed and still they couldn’t stem the bleeding. By this point Faith had come out of Ian’s office to see what was happening.

“I think we need to take her to the clinic, she’ll need stitches.” Ian confirmed as he lowered the dish towel the third time to verify that the bleeding wan’t stopping.
“My auto is a stick shift. I don’t think I can manage to---”

“No, dinna fash, Glenna, Ian will drive ye there and then take ye home in his car, we’ll get yours to you later tonight when we check on ye at home.” Murtagh kissed her cheek lightly. “I’ll tell Himself what happened. Ian I’ve got Faith, ‘tween Fergus and me she’ll be fine. Just make sure Glenna is seen to, aye?”

And with that, they managed to gather Glenna’s belongings up and get her down to the parking area and off to the clinic.

When Murtagh returned Egg Head and Lard Bucket had moved on to discuss the relative merits of Scottish industry in the world.

Fergus, pragmatic to the core, decided he couldn’t be two places at once. He needed to be in the lunch area observing the dynamic duo, taking notes, catching anything they said that might be used in later ads and needing to tend to the lass.

Well, so. The lass was hungry, she had a lunch box, they had a lunch area, he needed to be in the lunch area ergo….He and Faith sat a bit to the side at a small table slightly off-camera. Geneva had just placed her lunch on the same table and was moving the chair out to sit down to join them. Faith was sitting on a few large directories, a makeshift booster seat but just as captivated by the entertainment in front of her as everyone else.

In fact, now that he’d taken the time to notice, Murtagh could see several other people from the company engaged in similar activities of eating and smiling along with Angus and Rupert as they bantered with one another.

Angus was moving his hands about as he interjected, “and I’m saying thanks to Scotland, the world has whisky, penicillin and insulin, telephones and faxes, golf and bicycles, postage stamps, television, the steam engine and-----” his voice rose up in dramatic tones, “the cure for the common hangover!”

“Weel, so we do but that’s mostly self defense. Did you know we hold the record for the longest running hangover in the world?” Rupert informed him.

“Go on wi’ ye?” Angus wasn’t actually surprised by this fact.
“Lasted four weeks.” Rupert confirmed. “Ken, it seems as if we do have a lot of words for drunk in Scotland.”

“Ye think ye have good recall of them?” Angus had a familiar, speculative gleam in his eye.

“Better than you!” Rupert confirmed, just warming up. Doing this sober would make for a change.

“Oh? Let’s hear it then, I’ll give ye a fiver if ye can break my record of 30.” Angus bet but then added, “Pub conditions, aye? Thirty seconds, no repeats and in alphabetical order.”

Rupert grunted. He moved his head from side to side, cracking his neck. The lunchroom was crowded with colleagues drawn by the internal feed from the monitors and money was starting to change hands along the sidelines.

Angus looked at him, “Ready?” Rupert nodded. “Ok, 3, 2, 1 go!”

“Badgered, banjaxed, bladdered, bleezin’, blootered, buckled, cabbaged, goosed, guttered, hawfcut, hammered, lashed, leathered, mangled, minced, mingin’, oot yer tree, pished as a fart, rat arsed, reekin’, rubbered, sloshed, steaming, stocious, tanked up, warped, wasted, wellied.”

The crowd broke into cheers and applause.

“Oh, 28-- too bad ye just missed it.” Angus announced.

A smattering of nos! And money changing hands once again, a reckoning for the winners and losers in the crowd.

Rupert had worked up a sweat but his competitive spirit was awakened.

“Two for one ye cannot do better.” Rupert challenged.
“Yer on. Prepare to weep, my lad. Ready?” Angus widened his stance, danced a little like a boxer entering the ring.

“Without repeating any of mine.” Rupert reminded him.

“Like I need to use yours? Ok and…Go: awa wi it, Bernard Langered, disguised, etched, fecked, foo, footered, howlin’, legless, jaiked up, mad wae it, mashed, minkit, monkey full, mortal, nicely irrigated, oot the game, pie-eyed, paralytic, pickled, plastered, rendered, ruined, stowed, stotten, steamboats, tooteroo, torry-ed, tramlined, troubled, zombied!” A huge cheer broke out. Angus had defended his crown matching his record!

Rupert laughed and congratulated him. They pulled up two chairs, still on camera and sat down.

It was clear Rupert had long since forgotten about the lens and was perfectly at home now. He pulled out a ten, handing it and a cold can of Slainte to Angus.

At this Rupert tapped his can of Slainte against Angus’s and said, “Slanj!”

Angus pulled his can back last minute.

“Oi! Whatcha doing? Ye don’t say slanj that’s what a bawheeded twonk or an Englishman on holiday says!” He looked truly put out.

“Stop being a tosser!” Rupert retorted.

“I mean it. If yer no’ going to say it right I’m no going to stand wi’ ye on the telly.” Angus declared.

“Christ man, the wheels turnin’ but the hamster’s long deid.” Rupert shook his head.

“It’s slahn-ja-va, no’ slanj. And ye put the accent on the wrong end!” Angus insisted.

“Ye witless bawbag, that’s what I said, slanj.” Rupert went again to clink the soda cans.
“Have ye no pride, man? That’s no' a proper toast, and ye dinna ken how to clink the can proper either.” Angus was disgusted.

“Yer being a twatwaffle.” Rupert told him.

“Ye clink the top of the can and the bottom of the can for a proper toast.” Angus informed him.

“Says who?” Rupert was genuinely curious.

“Me granny, that’s who. Always, tops and bottoms. Even with the wine glasses. Like so--” at this Angus demonstrated, clinking first the top rim and then the bottom of the can and repeating, “Tops and bottoms! Now, you give ‘er a go.” He encouraged.

Rupert looked askance at him. Angus nodded and Rupert drew in a breath.

“Aye, weel, as Homer Simpson says,

‘to alcohol! The cause of – and solution to – all of life’s problems. ’”

Then Rupert tentatively reached his can over to Angus and clinked, “Tops and bottoms!”

“Hey-- that’s no’ good. Ye need a better toast than that!” Angus admonished.

“Why?” Rupert asked to Angus’s deep sigh.

Angus shook his head so the back of his hair swung free of its thong. He cleared his throat and held up his can, seeing others gathered at the tables raise their drinks to join in the toast.

“He is not drunk, who from the floor,

Can rise again and drink some more;
But he is drunk who prostrate lies,
And cannot drink, and cannot rise!
Tops and bottoms !”

At that he got many around the room clinking tops and bottoms of their improvised drinks be they in glasses and cans and bottles. Rupert was grinning, enjoying the opportunity to watch Angus in his element, and stone cold sober at that.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rupert saw Faith tentatively approach with her juice box in hand. He smiled at her.

Murtagh was about to run forward and pull her back, though what he would do with her he didn’t know, everyone else was gathered in the lunchroom and, no fool Faith, she wanted to be near the action.

He let out a small cry of alarm when Geillis reached her hand out to him from behind. He hadn’t even heard her approach. She was carrying a thick folder, no doubt some kind of analytic report for Jamie.

“Whose child is that?” She asked staring. “I swear I have seen that hair before.” This said in a speculative tone.

“Ah, that is Faith, she’s Claire’s daughter. Claire had an emergency and Jamie offered to cover but he’s meeting with the Osha supplier.” Fergus supplied from behind them.

They all stood round the camera watching the monitors. Some people are naturally more photogenic through a lens, Murtagh thought, and Faith was luminous.

Her pink cheeks and bright green jumper set her skin and hair off beautifully. Every eye was on her and the conversational hum of the room seemed to quiet.

“Oh, apple?” Rupert was asking Faith as she held up the box for his inspection.

Rupert gently touched his can to her juice box, “Cheers!”
He made to clink tops and bottoms with her, Faith complied but had an odd look on her face.

“That’s no’ what my Da says.” Faith informed him.

Murtagh felt his heart literally stop in his chest. Praying that Rupert would be his usual un-curious self he chanted please dinna ask in his head over and over.

It was now completely silent in the room.

“Oh?” Rupert’s only response.

“He says lang time deid.” Faith announced.

“Aye, lass that’s an old one, right enough.” Angus put in just as Faith reached her juice out to tap Rupert’s can once more.

Just then Angus let out an enormous burp, surprising Rupert into releasing the loudest fart Murtagh had ever heard. Both sounds amplified by the microphones they were still wearing.

Not missing a beat a tiny, delighted voice squeaked out into the silence.

“Tops and bottoms!”

To the raucous delight of the crowd who all toasted that one.

“What the hell are ye doing!” Jamie hissed from right behind Murtagh causing the man to jump ten feet off the ground in fright.

Were his compatriots at Slainte trying to give him a heart attack?
Murtagh noticed that Jamie hadn’t yet registered Geillis’s presence, and he wasn’t sure whether Jamie had noticed how packed the lunch area was.

Murtagh quickly grabbed his arm, nodding in an exaggerated way at Fergus indicating he needed to corral Faith as quickly as possible, as he shoved Jamie out of the doorway and back toward his office.

Jamie backed down as soon as he saw Fergus moving toward Faith and allowed himself to be borne back. When they were safely in his office, with Faith and the door closed, Murtagh filled him in on what had happened with Mrs. Fitz and Ian.

“The truth is I wasna focused on the wee lassie, Angus and Rupert had gotten going and it was like the floor show at a Vegas casino. Everyone was caught up in it.”

“I ken, it’s fine, Murtagh.” There was no point in getting upset. Jamie sat Faith on his lap and pulled out some sticky notes and colored pencils for her to play with while she sat with him at his desk.

“Even if some suspect, and I don’t why anyone would, no one here would breathe a word. They are loyal, we are a family.” Fergus reminded them.

Jamie looked one to the other.

“It will come out anyway, at some point. My only concern is that Claire feel herself ready for it, that it no’ come as a surprise. She had some bad experiences before with press.” Jamie explained.

“She is right to be concerned.” Fergus agreed. “It could make things hard for Faith in school or with friends.” Seeing Jamie’s stricken face he quickly added, “But she’ll adjust with time and be fine.”

Just then Geillis knocked on the door, Jamie beckoned her in with a wave of his hand as he nodded for Murtagh and Fergus to go, thanking them for watching her.

Geillis rarely sat for meetings and this one was no exception. She dropped the folder on his desk and began pacing but her sharp eyes watched as he took in the contents of her report.
“Not a duplicate of our formula.” He observed.

“True, I think the combination of herbs is quite standard but there is an ingredient that I can’t unmask. The analysis isn’t exact, it breaks things down but doesn’t necessarily tell me each combination that made up the formula they are using.”

“Our Osha supplier swears he isna selling to them, do ye believe him?” Jamie asked.

Geillis laughed, “I wasn’t there, you were, you tell me?”

Jamie gestured to the report, “According to this, the answer is no.”

“Not for that specific product. But you can buy an ingredient and compound the raw material with another and create something that masks itself in the testing.”

She looked thoughtfully at him. “But you know, if you wanted to, you could interfere with the supply chain of a competitor just for the hell of it. What would stop someone from buying it up to choke off availability and just holding it for a time, disrupting the production of a competitor even if they themselves don’t need the ingredient? They can create chaos and later on can resell the product if they don’t need it to recoup the money they spent, meanwhile their competition is weakened.”

“Christ, ye are a devious wee thing!” Jamie said, not without admiration. “And if ye wanted to pay them back in kind, what would ye do?”

“I would hit them sideways, but not in the way you are thinking.” She said.

He raised his brows.

“They will expect it, you see. And to be honest, based on my testing there is nothing unique or even proprietary about their formula. It would be a waste of time and money to try and create a similar problem for them. You need to find a different pressure point.” She mused. “What has Geneva dug up on them?”
“Nothing yet, she’s still chasing the subcorps down through Nevis and the Caymans. There are several layers of subsidiaries to peel away.” Jamie was frustrated.

“No one is that good at hiding, something will turn up. In the meantime, we need to focus on ensuring our suppliers are delivering on time and in the amounts we need. I can reformulate a little bit using what we have on hand without impacting effectiveness, the taste might be a little different but not enough that a normal consumer would notice.” She offered.

“Do what ye can.” Jamie decided, taking another look through the report. Geillis’s back was to him, looking over the floor.

Just then Faith piped up, “Park?” Jamie half heard her. “Pease?”

“Hmm? Aye, mo nighean. Let me just finish up.” He said distractedly.

Geillis half turned to him, “Shall I leave you to it?”

“Aye, thank ye, Geillie, I’ll catch up wi’ ye tomorrow.” Jamie said as he maneuvered around Faith to return the folder to Geillis as she was exiting the door.

Jamie had to fire off a few emails, update Geneva on his conversations with the vendor and return a half dozen calls, one of which was to Ian. He had just dropped Glenna off at home, four stitches and some pain meds but she was feeling fine. Geneva and Fergus offered to take care of Glenna’s car. Everything else he needed to tend to could wait until tomorrow.

“Ready, lass?” He asked as soon as Faith had finished packing everything back in her bag.

“Yes, Da! Park and ducks!” She urged, pulling him along by his hand.
Good Vibrations

“Good Vibrations” Claire asked in astonishment as she held the baby blue toy in her hand.

Jamie’s ears went pink but he doggedly carried on.

“A vibrator.” He said.

“Well, er--yes, obviously. Why?” Claire could hear the starch creep into her voice, as much as she would have preferred to be completely clinical about it.

“Well, ye ken sometimes it uhmm.” Jamie looked away, red creeping into full flush now. “I heard that many women find them verra helpful.” He explained.

“Did you?” she said. Jamie backed up three paces hearing the note of menace in her voice.

“From whom, Jenny?”

“God, no, Sassenach!”

But something had given him away, some tell.

Her eyes narrowed. “Then who? Who did you hear this piece of sage womanly wisdom from?”

“Marsali…” he said quietly.

Not for nothing, Claire was learning to read Mr. Fraser and knew enough to pay attention to what he didn’t say as much as did.

“And?” she demanded.

“Geneva.” He admitted.

Her arms crossed in front of her, she tapped her fingers on the opposite forearm and waited him out.

He added, “and Geillis.”

“What?” She shrieked rounding on him.

“Perhaps I’m no’ explaining this right.” Jamie ran a hand through his hair.

“You got that right!” Claire huffed as she launched.

He had time to get his hands up in front of his face as the toy bounced off his forearms.

“Why in the hell were you discussing our sex life with them?” Embarrassed to enraged in under a minute.
“No!” Jamie quickly tried to correct her impression. “What do ye take me for Sassenach?”

Her look of withering scorn caused him to flinch. He tried to explain.

“I wouldna. It’s only that there is a new mmphm shop just opened off Centre and they were talking over lunch about it. They didna ken I was in the little conference room next door reviewing a new campaign. I needed the extra tables to spread out the photos. Anyway the door was opened and the discussion went on for a bit-- what ones were the best, for what reasons. So, I went there a few days ago and picked up one of the ones they talked most about.”

Claire’s sense of outrage had calmed somewhat.

“But still, why?” she asked.

“Would ye maybe sit with me?” Jamie gestured to the couch.

Claire let out a martyred sigh and gracefully acquiesced.

Jamie tried to grab her hand but she pulled it back. He reached again and held firm. She would not look at him so he waited. And waited.

Finally she looked at him.

“You have been struggling with this for a long time and I dinna pretend to ken what ye need every time. But I’ve noticed that most of the time ye need a certain amount of pressure on yer…..” The flush had returned to his face.

“Clitoris?” She bit out with medical precision. He nodded.

“And to be honest, Sassenach I’m usually way ahead of ye and there are times when it takes a while to catch ye up and even then sometimes it doesna happen for ye. I ken it’s no’ as….satisfying for ye as it could be if we just had a wee bit of help.”

“Oh?” Claire’s indignant tone impossible to miss. “So basically I’m a lot of work?”

The look he gave her caused her feel slightly ashamed of her attitude but she squelched it. She practically vibrated with righteous indignation.

“Next you’ll order porn channels for the TV.” She humped.

“We can try that, too if ye like.” He stared her down.

Damn it how the hell was he on the wrong side of this one? He was trying to do a good thing. He never expected Claire to feel a stigma about it or think he was judging her and, for that matter, didn’t appreciate her judging him.

If it works, it works. Why did she have him on the defensive? Why was he letting her?

“You ken usually it’s the man who feels threatened by sex toys.” He observed.

Direct hit and she didn’t like him calling her out. He watched her normally easily readable face shut down, a hardened expression came over her.

Jamie forgot sometimes that Claire had her own doubts and uncertainties. He loved her confidence and self-assurance. That she might think herself less than he did seemed impossible to believe.
“I’m sorry if I offended ye, Sassenach. Or gave ye the wrong impression. I thought….Why shouldn’t you be in charge of your own pleasure? I thought ye might like that, think it fun. God, Claire, I thought we could talk about anything under the sun.”

He sounded a bit surprised and disappointed in her. She was having none of that.

“Maybe we could, I wouldn’t know, you didn’t discuss it with me at all you just decided.” She said.

And just like that, the moral high ground slipped from his feet.

Chapter End Notes

I will post Chapter 20- Jealous Jamie a little earlier -on Thursday. And it is much longer. Seems to me we are all gearing up for an angsty fall ... I hope I catch the mood right...
Jealous Jamie

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20- Jealous Jamie

“I ken I’m the one who greenlighted the idea but, still, I miss you already and it’s not even the weekend yet, Sassenach.” Jamie rumbled into the phone.

Slainte was sponsoring a rugby match in Inverness Saturday afternoon. The advance team left town Thursday for the planned promo stops leading up to the match. The game was a good one and with so many from Slainte coming in for the event, Jamie rented out a sky box at the stadium.

“Concentrate on the company, Jamie. Have fun with your friends. Do what you need to do. We’ll see you in just a few days.” Claire hesitated. “I miss you, too.” She whispered as she crossed from her office to the hallway heading into her afternoon surgery.

“See you Sunday for dinner.” Jamie rang off.

Claire did sincerely miss him. He was like a force of nature and she felt his absence. But, a part of her was looking forward to a little time to herself. She felt a twinge admitting that but she wasn’t used to the constant presence of a lover. Frank was not a fair comparison. During her marriage, most of her time was occupied by school and work. Frank’s was largely occupied with...well, best not to think of that.

She’d only realized now, having Jamie as a point of comparison how different a relationship could be.

Jamie’s general default in spending time with Faith in her home had seemed like a great thing before she and Jamie started dating. It helped keep Faith’s routine consistent and neither parent had to navigate through transition issues that could knock a kid for a loop -- especially a tired toddler at the end of a long day. But now that they were a couple it presented all sorts of complications neither one of them had been prepared for, let alone discussed.

It still caught her up short when she saw his toothbrush in the cup next to hers, when his dry cleaning appeared in her closet, when her hand touched his book on the nightstand. At the moment the only coffee she could find in the kitchen consisted of the exorbitantly expensive Kona beans he loved rather than her medium roasted store brand ones. Well, that part was nice, she admitted.
When the mildly sweetened cereal she bought for herself but pretended was for Faith was replaced by some God awful healthy oat bran grossness that Faith actually ate, Claire decided to fight fire with fire. After they finished the last box of Jamie’s Oaties she kept the box, bought what she really wanted -- Rainbow Sugar Flakes-- then took the bag the cereal came in and placed it in the empty box of Oaties, throwing away the incriminating cartoon themed box hers had come in. Then she bought two more boxes of Oaties, put those in the front of the cabinet and hid hers behind them. There-- she felt better.

When her cable TV package was upgraded to roughly 1,000 channels she didn’t need or want, she reprogrammed a special remote for herself and Faith with the ten channels they watched.

Bit by bit a Jamie make-over was taking over. Normally she didn’t pay that much attention so the fact that she’d noticed at all made her wonder what else she wasn’t picking up on. They’d need to have a discussion about it-- about a lot of things-- soon.

There were compensations, though. An inner glow lit her as she thought about waking up together over the last weekend to find Faith’s foot lodged firmly against her sternum, the rest of her sprawled over Jamie’s chest.

It took her breath away, how they looked together. Faith’s cheek, red from the heat of the internal furnace that was Jamie, resting against his bare chest, inexplicably tender. Compelled, Claire snapped a picture but hadn’t realized how loud it would sound in the quiet stillness of the morning. Faith’s body jerked in response, still asleep but as she moved her head, her long curls tickled Jamie’s exposed skin.

His arm came up instinctively around Faith. She watched as his fingers registered the form and shape of her. Claire knew the exact moment his subconscious recognized who it was. The smile on his face melted her heart.

Eyes still closed, he kissed the top of her head. Then his arm loosened and came to find her. She had been sitting up against the pillows and his hand landed on her thigh. Not the body part he had expected. He patted it in affection nonetheless.

She picked up and kissed his hand. He cupped her cheek and urged her down to the pillows as he opened his eyes. She arched over Faith and kissed him quietly, murmuring a “Good Morning” as she did so.
“Aye, it is.” He tried to speak quietly but the deep register of his voice boomed out anyway.

Faith jumped awake this time, “What’s it?” disoriented she moved her small hand up and over her curls to get them out of the way and squeaked at seeing Jamie.

“Da!”

“Mo nighean.” He pulled her to a hug while tickling her as she shrieked. “Why are ye no’ safe and sound in your own bed? ‘ He teased, “ye stole all the covers and yer poor Mama woke up cold!”

“Noooo!” Faith huffed out between laughter. Though Jamie stopped tickling her -- such things best in small doses.

“Where is your bed, Da?” She asked looking around in confusion.

Claire raised her eyebrows, letting him know since he started it this one was all his to handle. She lay back against the headboard and settled in for the show.

“My bed? Oh, well Mama and I share this one.” He said trying for a move on folks, nothing to see here tone of voice.

“Tonight you share mine.” Faith declared. Claire bit her lip trying not to laugh.

“I would like that, of course, but your bed is too small for me and you, lass.”

“Mmphm.” Faith considered, “Then you take it and I’ll share with Mama.”

“Absolutely not! And before you get any more ideas, the answer is no, I will not sleep in yours and let you and Da in here. We’ve had this talk before-- you picked out your big girl bed and I picked out mine.” Claire said jumping in before this got out of hand.

Faith tried to stare her down, but to no avail.
“Lass, if you go and brush your teeth and get dressed in the next five minutes you can come with me to the coffee shop. We’ll grab fresh rolls and stop by the newsstand for the paper. Do you think Mr. Gordon brought his dog to work today?” Jamie got Faith redirected and out of the room.

As soon as she cleared the threshold of their door, he pulled Claire back down into the bed with him and kissed her breathless.

“Sassenach, that has to be the best way in the world to wake up.” He nuzzled her neck as his arms started roaming, “and last night was the best way to go to sleep. Thank you, leannan.” They lost track of time.

“Da!” Faith’s voice right in his ear shocked the hell out of him.

His lips broke contact with Claire’s and he turned his face to Faith’s standing at the side of the bed. The rest of his body was still engaged in prior activities, however.

“You’re fingers are touching Mama’s butt!” Faith observed.

Jamie’s mouth opened then closed. He had no idea where to go from here.

Claire’s head shot up and she made an exaggerated stretch of the neck before looking behind her.

Feigning surprise she said, “Oh goodness me, so they are. I wonder if that is the kind of thing Handsy and Pawsy were talking about when they said we needed to respect other people’s personal space?”

“Handsy and Pawsy?” The smile was evident in Jamie’s voice.


“Library book and the title is R-E-S-P-E-C-T” Claire corrected.
“Yer joking?” Jamie said in a very quiet undertone.

“I’m not clever enough to make that up!” Claire assured him.

Handsy and Pawsy had made a couple more appearances since then. Faith appeared to consider herself the new sheriff in town. Claire thought Jamie had tolerated it reasonably well but all in all, Jamie’s self-created break was fairly well timed.

She’d been on her own with Faith and being one of a duo with her was familiar. What were the implications of becoming a trio? She hadn’t considered this aspect of it. The analogy to introducing your toddler to your new boyfriend just didn’t cut it. Jamie was her father. If they were not together in the future, he was still going to be parenting Faith with her. That gave her both comfort and concern.

They had definitely missed a step, she and Jamie. So focused on getting things between themselves in order, they hadn’t thought about whether they needed to prepare Faith for a change in their relationship. She sighed.

This was yet another chapter in her imaginary alternative reproductive technology parenting book, tentatively called, What to Expect When You Were Expecting Something Else Entirely.

Every place her eyes rested, something of Jamie’s was in view. Unable to recall the last time she’d spent the night alone another startling thought popped into her head. Good God, had they accidentally ended up living together? Completely disconcerted, Claire hoped this weekend would help her think things through a little better.

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Thursday passed, as usual, in a blur, but Friday evening she and Faith had a girls movie marathon, Tangled and Frozen. They did their nails with purple sparkly polish and sent Jamie mani-pedi pictures. He sent them back miss you kisses and funny photos of the team in Inverness.

The Insta page for Slainte was fun to follow. The shots of crowds at every place they went stood as irrefutable testimony to their growing popularity. The OLH series of ads was running on TV and in print materials and Angus and Rupert had a twitter feed offering uniquely Scottish advice or insults, depending on their mood. The effect was exactly what Jamie had wanted.
Jamie let them run it entirely on their own. If he had to manage the messaging, make it too corporate controlled, it would cease being interesting. He didn’t fear noise and signal. Though, they definitely wandered into a few hot zones by not being completely scrubbed and tone neutral. But even that worked perfectly, as far as Jamie was concerned.

On this outreach trip, Jamie was fielding just as many questions about them and their ad campaign as himself. For once there was a completely different slant to these interviews-- less focused on his personal life, his family and past and more on the expansion of the brand and several of the wittier posts from Angus and Rupert.

Jamie was more than capable of handling all of it like a pro. He deflected all personal questions while he conveyed Slainte’s support of their no BS duo -- character, he reminded reporters, was what made Scotland the best place in the world-- it’s people and it’s products it’s world outlook all uniquely their own.

The next evening, Claire was going out with Joe. It was a long standing date, a year in the making.

Joe had been more than a friend to Claire during her time in Scotland. They learned the ropes of the medical system together and he’d been her rock as things fell apart with Frank.

She had suppressed her feeling of relief when Jamie first mentioned he’d be away that weekend. It had saved her having to say a word. It wasn’t that Claire didn’t have a guilty conscious about it, she did, a bit.

Yet, why should she have told Jamie about it? It wasn’t any of his business, was it? And anyway he wasn’t even here, he was hours away. She didn’t owe him any explanations.

Having married Frank before she turned twenty, Claire’s life had been upended by the divorce. It hadn’t been easy. For most of her adult life, Frank had been the primary decision maker, unquestionably the one in charge.

That first year, Joe had set goals for her, small, attainable steps along her route toward getting her life under her own control. This year Claire set her own goals, mostly focused on managing single motherhood. Cheering her on as she spread her wings, embraced motherhood and learned to trust her own instincts were the Abernathy family in general and Joe in particular.

This marked the second anniversary of Frank’s desertion. So this evening Joe would take her out
and get her blind stinking drunk and tell her how great she was doing.

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“So, LJ, tell me how you really are?” Joe asked. Claire tried to read the look in his eye.

“Do you mean how are the terrible twos treating me or how has it been to take my first lover since my husband walked out on me?”

Yeah, so the margaritas were a little strong.

“Both.” He invited and squeezed her hand.

She smiled but he was relieved to see it was a genuine smile.

When Claire told him that the long absent Jamie Fraser had finally decided to check in on his daughter, Joe had been concerned. What kind of man ignored his child for months then suddenly dropped in out of the blue?

Once the full story emerged, though, he felt mollified. For weeks now, Claire had been Jamie-thising and Jamie-thating him. Very soon he would have to engineer a meeting and check out this paragon for himself.

Claire acted like the guy was the king of men or something. If it sounded too good to be true.....Though for Claire, he hoped Jamie really was everything she thought he was.

“Well, Faith is two going on twenty-two, as you know, so I have high hopes she’ll raise me well.” Claire joked. Her eyes softened a bit. “He’s very good with her and for her.” She said quietly.

“And for you, too?”

She nodded, her eyes misting a little. Joe was a bit alarmed.
“What aren’t you telling me?” He demanded.

Claire knocked back the dregs of drink four and took a breath.

“Do you remember how I had no idea how to balance a checkbook after Frank?” Joe nodded. “How I couldn’t stop ordering pizza on Friday nights because that was what we always had even though I hate pizza?”

“Is he very much like him then?”

At that Claire laughed as she shook her empty glass, catching the server’s attention for a refill.

“Good lord, no. In so many ways they are complete opposites.”

Joe cut a bite of his burrito and force fed her, trying to give her something in her stomach to sponge up the alcohol.

“Mmm, is there anything better than melted cheese and spice?” Claire said as Joe added another bite.

“But in some ways...in retrospect Frank wasn’t domineering in general. He only had such a strong presence because of me. Because I ceded any power I might have had in our relationship to him almost from the start. Jamie, on the other hand, is a very forceful personality.”

“He hasn’t been rough with you?” Joe asked concerned.

“No,” Claire drew the word out thoughtfully as she took a large gulp of her fresh drink. “Not in any way I haven’t enjoyed.” She blushed. Joe laughed.

“Good for you, LJ, you deserve a little something something.” He told her.
Claire smiled but then sighed.

“He’s intense. Jamie’s like a giant moon pulling everything around him into his orbit. You know I was hesitant to start anything with him. Very cautious as a matter of fact. Yet, Joe I am not sure I could have avoided it even if I had wanted to.”

Joe raised his brows. It was an interesting observation.

“Forget for a moment that he is who he is to Faith. If I had met him on a...blind date say, I think the attraction would still have been there. When I am with him, there is just....the most powerful connection. I’ve never felt anything quite like it. When you add in Faith it’s....overwhelming and I can’t figure out if that is because of him or because of Faith.”

At this Claire made a large wave, “I think he could swallow me whole and yet when I am with him he makes me feel like I could conquer anything.” Claire gave a self conscious laugh. “Oh, listen to me, quite the deep thinker. Am I even making sense anymore? After Frank, well, you know how hard things were, how much I had to learn, how I needed to become different….to become me.”

Joe bit his tongue caught in an age old debate over marriage. At war between wanting to tell her that the sense of connection she felt that pulled two people together was the best glue in the universe when you were with the right person-- the person who helped you become the strongest version of you in the world and wanting to tell her that she was perfect as she was, that the control and independence she had worked so hard to obtain was a noble and worthy goal all it’s own. Both statements were true; but he wasn’t sure she would value his confirmation of the latter nor believe in the truth of the former.

In the OR the woman was fearless, in charge and confident. Outside the OR? Frank put her in the shade and she was slowly emerging. He wanted Claire as certain and as sure of herself in every other part of her life as she was in the surgery.

Joe’s impression from the beginning was that Frank was one of those guys that didn’t really “get” women, thought all would be right with the world if women were only more like men, which always in that context meant “less difficult.” Which was a shame, especially with a woman as intricate as Claire.

Joe himself loved women, loved particularly the strength of them, the complexity, the very things that made them different from men. His wife was at the top of the list but Claire a close second. As Gayle reminded him often enough, a woman was a whole universe of opportunity.

A man had the world at his fingertips with the right woman by his side. All she needed from her man was a little nurturing, a bit of warm sunshine, a quenching drink of water. Too much or too
little, like any living thing, she would wither on the vine or choke on the weeds. Frank was a terrible gardener. He never figured out what he had growing under his nose the whole time he had her.

“You scared?” Joe tried for humor, five drinks in was not the time for a serious conversation on something so essential.

“Terrified but like a roller coaster, thrilled all the same.”

After they finished their meals, they grabbed after dinner coffees in the small, cozy bar located at the street front of the building. They people watched for a bit. Claire rested her head on his shoulder.

It was nice to have some time with him. It had been a long time since they’d met up for a coze. She had sobered up enough to walk home by that point. He took her by the hand and walked her through the park, forgetting about the detour, though by the time he had dropped her by the door, she was a bit more sober than last year. That had to be an improvement.

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When Claire woke the next morning, later than usual, she wondered at the quiet. Usually Faith was jumping on the bed by 8 am. She was shocked to see it was near to ten. She had arranged for Mrs. Crooke to swing by at 9:30 and take Faith for her swimming lesson. Well, that was a bit of fortunate planning.

Even better, as she came into the kitchen, she saw Jamie sitting at the table. She smiled hugely as he cracked a Slainte and wordlessly offered it to her. It was cold, refreshing and immediately curative.

How had he known?

Jamie watched her with hooded eyes as she swallowed down the drink. She looked so innocent standing there, smiling like she was glad to see him. Maybe she was. She was alone, after all, to his considerable relief.

Unable to help himself, he’d come by early, shushing Faith lest she wake her mother and briefly checked on Claire, to make sure she had fared well in the night or so he told himself. Just in case she woke up, he penned a note telling Claire that he and Faith were together and would be back shortly.

Then he and his wee lassie went out for breakfast to their favorite diner. He could use the fuel, having been up pacing for hours the night before, a caged animal all energy and no outlet. Jamie also wanted to look into his daughter’s face to remind him why he needed to keep his shit together.
They fed the ducks near the fountain before heading back. Jamie had intercepted Mrs. Crooke on the front stairs. She’d packed Faith’s wee kit for swimming when she babysat for Claire the night before. Jamie pressed some extra cash into her hands and suggested lunch and a movie afterwards.

He needed to get a few things straight with Claire and he needed to have her all to himself to do it.

Once she finished the drink, Claire noticed Jamie was not returning her smile. Her expression faltered and she sat down heavily realizing suddenly that he was back early. What could be wrong? Had something happened in Inverness?

“Who is he?” Jamie demanded with a snarl.

She did not care for his proprietary tone one bit.

“Who is who?”

“Your date from last night. Tall, dark, handsome? Likes touching you when you’re speaking. Ring any bells?” Jamie bit out.

“How did you---” Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Are you having me followed? Watched? Spying on me?”

Jamie snorted at this. He’d missed her, plain and simple. He’d driven straight back from the match, leaving Ian and Fergus in charge of the remaining Inverness events.

By happenstance, he’d been stopped at a light with a direct view of the bar, lost in thoughts of waking her up sweetly when he got to her place.

He simply could not believe his eyes when he saw her in a booth by the window snuggled up with another man. He’d parked the car and certainly watched her after that. Shaken to his core, scared of the impulse he had to confront the man directly, Jamie had forced himself to leave after a time. The last thing they needed was the publicity that would come if he engaged in a bar room brawl.
Who was he? Why had Claire told him Mrs. Crooke would be taking Faith for her lesson Sunday morning but not the fact that she’d be babysitting for Faith Saturday night? In the early wee hours of Sunday morning, pacing as he recalled that conversation, it became shaded in different meaning. He took in her guarded, guilty expression.

“Lass, ye ken ye canna lie well, it’s all written on your face. There isna a need to spy on ye.”

“Hmm, well then, there is no need to tell you anything, since you have already figured it out.”

Claire abruptly rose and started walking out of the room. In a flash Jamie was on her, grabbing her arm and forcing her to turn toward him.

“Let go of me!” She bit out.

“No!” His voice shook with suppressed anger, “why, Sassenach?”

“I do not have to answer to you, Jamie Fraser! If I want to go out, I’ll go out, if I want to go with a man or a woman or an entire army I will.” She was so angry it was becoming difficult to think.

Jamie was breathing heavily.

“You are mine Claire, mine and mine alone.”

She scoffed, instantly triggering Jamie.

“Are ye saying I have no claim to you?” His hand gripped her arm hard. His face right up against hers.

“Only what claim I give to you and only so long as you respect the boundary I set, and to be clear, right now you are way over the line. I will not be ordered about like a child!” She pulled free of him, her lips unfurling in a snarl of indignation.
Deep breaths forcing a calm she didn’t really feel allowed her to continue speaking.

“I--- last night was the second anniversary of Frank’s --when he left. I --we tried to put it back together even after he’d filed that stupid lawsuit. I was willing to try counseling to put our lives back together but it ..he couldn’t do it in the end ... and after a few weeks he said it was goodbye for good.” She said it softly and yet it reverberated like a scream in Jamie’s gut.

“And so to mark the occasion you go out and pick someone up at a bar? To prove a point?” His hands curled into fists as he raged.

“Don't be ridiculous!” Angry whiskey eyes flashed on menacing blue.

“Do not call me ridiculous! I canna believe what I saw with my own two eyes. Ye left our child at home while you went to a bar and ---”

Claire growled in warning and Jamie stopped speaking. She rounded on him.

“How dare you-- you fucking bastard! You have the unmitigated gall to say that to me? To take me to task for an evening out? And just where the hell were you for months and months? Do you have any idea what I’ve been through? I don’t think you understand what it's been like for me, Jamie.”

“Then tell me goddamn it! Talk to me! Make me understand! You have barely discussed Frank in all this time. You never speak of your marriage, your life before. Where is all this coming from, Sassenach? Ye dinna strike me as a--a woman of loose morals.”

Jamie couldn’t believe he’d said that last part out loud. But he’d lost his temper and his tongue was faster than his brain.

“Men!” She spit out. “You think women are marvelous creatures as long as we follow your orders and do as we are told. But the second we dare to speak our minds, to stand up for ourselves, you lot need to find a way to put us in our proper place! You want us to warm your beds when it’s convenient for you and you certainly like us well enough when you need a place to stick your cocks. Hypocrites! Which is it? Am I a Madonna or a whore? And who gave you the right to judge? I will not be shamed by you or any man. I have worked so hard these last two years to become my own person, to try and heal----” Claire pursed her lips in a thin line.
A sense of shame rose up in Jamie. He’d let his pride take things way too far. He walked toward her, arms outstretched, a peace offering.

His heart crashed to his knees when she batted his hands away forcefully.

“When I was too young to know better, I voluntarily gave another a claim on me. I vowed to love and honor him and even to obey him though I almost choked on that word in the church the day Frank and I were wed. But -- what was it you said? A vow is not just words? I honored my vows with everything in me and I gave him everything I had. Frank took it all and...walked away. I compromised every single thing I held dear and it took me months to begin to get even a semblance of it back.”

Claire was shaking with the memories of bitter regret. Jamie swallowed hard. He’d badly miscalculated and he knew it.

“Joe Abernathy. He is a doctor on staff with me. We went to medical school together. He and his wife are two of my dearest friends.”

Jamie’s heartbeats abruptly slowed down, he knew it was petty of him, the relief he felt at hearing that the man was married and they were only friends.

“We have a ritual on the anniversary. He takes me out and gets me drunk and listens to me rail against the unfairness of it all. I give myself one day each year to be resentful, to wallow in self-pity, to admit that as much as I love being a mother, as great as the gift, being a single mother is hard. Raising a baby alone is all consuming. And news flash in case you missed it: as much as this came as a surprise to you, I assure you that this wasn’t the life I had signed up for, either!”

Claire’s voice was rising again, pissed beyond anything that she even felt the need to explain, as if she needed to defend her actions.

“And Joe let’s me whine, let’s me laugh and cry and feel sorry for myself for this one evening out of the year. He doesn’t judge me for it. Joe listens to me. He loves me even when I am at my worst. Then he tells me that I have done well, and that I have done right even though nothing has turned out like I thought it would. He helps me see that I’m a good person. And I’m so grateful for his support because he reminds me that I am trying my damnedest to be learn how to be a good mother even though I didn’t have one myself.”

This last said on a choked sob that nearly broke him. Then she seemed to collect herself and her backbone snapped to rigid attention.
“And you, James Fraser, can go fuck yourself! If you think so poorly of me then…..GO!”

She thrust her hand out gesturing to the door. Her eyes full of tears moments before now blazing with hurt and anger.

“I won’t stop you! We can exchange calendars and set up a formal schedule for Faith. Maybe I’m better off alone, after all.”

Claire moved to brush past him and Jamie reacted. Panic crawled up his spine and overtook his ability to reason.

“No!” He roared.

Her threats, her willingness to cut him off from her so ruthlessly caused him to choke on the words and they wouldn’t come. He could only express himself physically. He threw her against the wall and kissed her hard.

All his sorries went into that kiss, his lips told her he was on his knees and begging her to forgive him. She was stiff and unyielding at first. But she could feel him trembling, his skin cold and clammy.

She felt what he was trying to tell her, the outpouring of emotions seeping from him and into her and she melted. Angry, desperate kisses followed with no beginning or end. Finally he lifted his mouth from hers.

“Sassenach..It’s my fault. I said more than I meant." His eyes bore into hers. "When I saw you last night I couldna understand why ye never said anything to me in all the time beforehand. It -- I try to tell you if Faith will be with Mrs. Crooke or with someone else so you know, just in case something happens with her or me. So when ye told me about Sunday morning but not last night….” Jamie had no idea if she could understand what he’d been thinking.

Yet he recognized that what had been in his head wasn’t important anymore. The only thing that mattered now was her.
“I’m sorry, so very sorry. Tell me ye dinna mean it. Please! Tell me you ken yer no’ better off alone, that you understand we are better together?”

His eyes welled up as she continued to stand there silently watching him. Claire hated this feeling. She knew she had gone over the line, tore a chunk out of him not just for what he had done but because she had never been able to clear the air with Frank. So much stayed bottled up inside her.

Why hadn’t she expected to see this side of him? He was a passionate man full of deep emotions. Once again she was struck by how different Jamie was from Frank. Frank could have cared less, he’d not have reacted in the same way.

No, it was Claire who’d been unable to contain her feelings of jealousy when she smelled some other woman’s perfume on Frank. A part of her thrilled at seeing Jamie’s possessive streak. A part of her resented it.

Balanced on the tightrope between the two. Which did she value more? The connection to Jamie or her independence?

Jamie felt her wavering, he sensed he was hanging on to Claire by a thin thread and that was terrifying. He rested his forehead against hers and cupped her head in his hands.

“Please, Claire. Tell me you forgive me.”

His fingertips touched her skin, feather light. He steeled himself as she stayed silent. Understanding he might already have lost her. He pushed the words out through the thin stream of air reaching his lungs.

“If you want to go separate ways, then I will do as you say. We’ll set up a shared calendar for Faith. I’ll respect your wishes if you truly wish me to go.”

It killed him to say it. She could tell that at once.

The truth was that he was right, she’d hidden her plans. Though she hadn’t thought of it as a safety issue regarding Faith. She had focused only on her own feelings and thoughts. She hadn’t fully considered his, not in regards to Faith or to her. This wasn’t all his fault.
Her eyes flicked up to his. They had a lot to discuss, the two of them, his becoming a permanent fixture, however innocently, of her home and what they should be saying to Faith, where the boundary lines should be drawn. Though right now neither of them was the right frame of mind to speak as tactfully or caringly as such a discussion required.

Claire did not doubt the depth of his feelings and tried to find the courage to speak up about her own more ambivalent ones.

Knowing she wasn’t as sure as he was, or maybe it wasn’t as simple for her as it was for him, Claire tried as best she could to explain the mixed emotions running through her mind.

“I feel that is what I should want, I should tell you to leave.” She said, her voice quavering as she considered. “But, I don’t run from things.”

Jamie’s head snapped up. Then that hint of his familiar cocky smile played on his lips.

“Ask me to stay, Claire.” He demanded.

She almost bristled back up again but she felt on safer ground embracing his arrogance rather than the other, more intense emotions wafting off him.

“I want you,” she said instead, not quite able to give in completely. “Badly,” she added for good measure.

Jamie took her hands and forced them up against the wall above them, holding her wrists with one hand as he slowly bunched her night shirt upwards and cupped her bare bottom.

She expected a look of triumph in his eyes, smelling victory. But the look he gave her made her feel boneless.

The reverence and gratitude in his eyes caused hers to spill over with silent tears, even as she hated him for not having any faith in her, for forcing her to tell him things she hadn’t been ready to think about even in her own head.
The whirlwind of emotion between them pulsed and spun. Then he gave her a bewildered look as if stunned by the feel of her in his arms.

“Claire, I’ll not---” he swallowed. “I dinna think I can go gentle.”

His hand, the one pinning hers shook so hard she felt it pulsing down her fingers. Suddenly they were no longer standing on safer ground.

Pushed and pulled simultaneously in directions she wasn’t sure she wanted to go and undeniably borne along on a rip tide moving too swiftly for her to do anything other than try and keep her head above water, Claire felt herself surrendering to it.

“Then don’t. Let me feel it, everything.”

With an urgent cry, Jamie hoisted her over his shoulder, the only thought fixated in his brain was to have her naked under him. He threw her on the bed, locked the door and then tore her nightshirt clean off as he moved to cover her.

The stiff fabric of his clothing rubbing her sensitive skin. She inhaled deeply. Sweat and fried eggs, the unfamiliar scent of where he’d travelled from. He’d hadn’t showered in a day at least. A raw earthy delight to her senses.

He kissed her hard once more, whimpering. Then, he gathered her and held her tightly to him and started whispering in her ear. She thought he was speaking too low to understand but then realized he was no longer speaking English.

Only one time before had she seen him so overcome by emotion that he could only express himself in the words of his ancestors, taught to him by his parents, now lost, and she couldn’t help calling it to mind now. How humbled she had been watching him as he sat in her living room giving thanks to God in that language for the gift of his daughter; and just like that, he *wrecked* her.

He was repeating a few phrases and she caught a few Gaelic words she knew: *tha mi*, which she knew meant *I am* and then other words she didn’t know. Something that sounded like “gool” and she thought she caught a *duilich* at one point, she knew that meant sorry.

Jamie let out a sob, tender and guttural, unable to contain his emotions, he stopped speaking. Claire moved her hands over his back, feeling the now familiar landscape of bumps and marks under his t-shirt, trying to bring him back to himself.
They’d almost lost each other. She forced his head up and she kissed him with a desperation she couldn’t hide. She panted and gasped, having no words with which to reach him. An animalistic need rose within her and she clawed at his clothing.

His jerky movements hindering as much as helping the process. When at last he was naked he gripped her arms again and threw them above her, pinning her wrists on the mattress with one hand while the other braced on her shoulder.

She arched her hips seeking him. “Jamie!”

She rasped as she squirmed but he held her firm, thrilling her even as she wondered if she’d have a few finger tip shaped bruises tomorrow.

She heaved herself up, then bit his shoulder to get him to move. He bit that delicate spot on her neck then blew gently against it causing gooseflesh to spread to her nipples.

“Shhhh, Sassenach. Be still.” He hissed.

“Please, mark me!” A yearning demand that made his heart sing.

“Look at me, Claire.” He ordered.

Something in his voice compelled her to give in.

“I ken ye wish I didna make ye feel this way almost as much as you love it. You’re scared by what it is between us.”

She could not admit this to him and wanted to pretend it was not so, that the passion in him that turned her knees to jelly didn’t find it’s answering mate in her, just as wild and primitive. Their mutual want and heat and need was so rare. Instead of protecting it together, they’d done considerable damage to it with careless words and raw emotions.
“Me, too, mo ghràdh. Punish me for my own sins, Sassenach but dinna let a ghost freeze your heart. Your heart is mine, Claire, no matter how hard yer fighting it. Feel yourself now, lass, the ache of it leaving you as helpless as me.”

His words stole her breath causing her to shiver in anticipation under him. It didn’t matter anymore. Her fears, her longing for safe and predictable, for routine and ordinary. None of it mattered, for he wasn’t that and could never be so to her. He was risk and fire and passion and desire.

“I feel the wanting every time I’m inside ye.”

At last he came deeply and fully into her and both of them moaned. He was coiled, once again a being of pure energy, pure sensation. Then he shot forward and thrust home again and again, emphasizing his message.

“Every. Single. Time.”

She braced her legs and arched up to meet his next movement, pausing, strung tight as a bow and, on a sharp cry, shattered. The surprise of it catching both of them completely off guard.

Her eyes were shut tight, a tear squeezed out of one. Jamie twitched with every contraction, struggling to hold himself still as she twisted under him. He locked his jaw groaning in unison with her, watching her come apart. Jesus God.

She sighed deeply and her legs went soft and pliant. Jamie leaned down and kissed her hard. She felt him throbbing hot and heavy between her legs, reminding her he was still in her, needing her, too.

“Ye canna imagine how it feels, Claire, to have you grip me so tight, coming with me inside you. It’s like you’re sucking me into your soul with you and you want to squeeze everything I have to give right out of me.”

His words had her burning anew. Her stomach rolled over and her hands started tingling. A thrill rocked up her spine as he thrust hard twice quickly-- moving her bodily up into the headboard.

“More, please, hard like that!” She reached up and brutally kissed him, biting his lip, sucking his tongue hard into her mouth.
Letting him know she wanted to master him even as he was pressing his point, possessing her. She needed him to be as hot and senseless as she. Claire’s only desire to goad him into overcoming his customary restraint. She drew a little blood and he yelped.

“Biting me are ye, wee little vixen. Well, you’ll get what ye deserve!”

He pulled out suddenly and Claire moaned in disappointment, struggling against the rock solid hold he had of her hands. Jamie was teasing her, bouncing his cock firmly on her clit, the zing of it running through her -- all a temptation and burning want that refused her the one thing she had to have. The slip/slap of it followed by the sharp, high noises from her had him focusing on the unexpected eroticism of sound filling the room. Claire, it seemed, heightened all his senses.

If he let go of her, she’d be on him in an instant and he had no idea what he might do then.

“Christ, you fucking sadist! Jamie, please!” She begged him. She was sweating, her body heaving and poised on the edge.

He moved deliberately, notching his cock just at her entrance, he swivelled his hips feathery movements that only stoked the flames and didn’t put her out of her misery.

She was shaking with anticipation as was he-- he could barely manage to keep her hands over her head.

It wasn’t going to last very long when he finally gave in.

He dove and swooped over her, teasing more, sweat dripped from his forehead and chest onto her lily white skin. The sound of their breathing growing increasingly strained.

“Please, please I need you.” Claire was thrashing her hips trying to catch him and pull him in.

He drew her gaze to him and she could see deep inside him. She couldn’t look away.
He grunted an inquiry. She shook her head not wanting to say it.

She was so wet, everything plumped up, a sucking sound was drawing him in even as he fought hard to prevent himself from giving in.

He prompted her.

“Yer mine, are ye, no?”

When she nodded he almost relented. It shook him to the core, the thrill of it almost unbearable.

Then a thought struck him, understanding rose within him. He let go of her hands and gave himself to her completely. His own heart was the only thing he could control. She’d have to make up her own mind whether to return the gift in kind.

Surprised, she looked up at him. He stared, memorizing her face. He kissed her gently, wetting her cheeks with unchecked tears. She held his gaze watching him pull back from the kiss.

His arms trembled, poised but he spoke in a completely different tone this time.

“Be mine, Claire?”

“Oh, yes, please, Jamie!”

She keened as together they thrust home.

Chapter End Notes

Cuddles in the big bed inspired by the comments Indi made on Chapter 19-- thanks!
The Minister's Cat

THE MINISTER'S CAT

He’d managed to repair the rift with Claire, but the wound was freshly scabbed over. Their easy interaction had yet to return to it’s natural rhythm.

They’d gone through perhaps their politest week ever. Lots of Whatever you think best and Would you mind if we kinds of conversations with one another, lest they accidentally trample over raw nerves.

His greatest fear was that he’d dampened whatever it was that had drawn her to him and fueled the spark already lit inside him from her. Without oxygen, it would be smothered.

The other night started off unexpectedly rough. When he arrived home, he noticed Claire hadn’t yet started dinner. Opening doors and pulling out drawers revealed a dearth of options. Thinking back he realized that neither of them had gone grocery shopping that week.

Faith bounced up and down behind him then ran back and forth underneath his outstretched arms as he conducted his fridge survey. Dressed in her red Ugg boots and the soft pink leotard with ruffled tutu he’d ordered for her new ballet class, she was singing London Bridge under her breath. When she got to the end of the verse he squeezed her between his arms and lifted her up planting a wet raspberry on her neck.

“Dinner?” she asked.

“Well, My Fair Nighean, I think we must order in. What would ye like?”

Jamie would have asked Claire but she was in the bath. Just a few days ago he’d have thought nothing of slipping inside and helping scrub her back. Just a few days ago, she wouldn’t have barred the door against him. Now he couldn’t even bring himself to knock lest he cross an invisible line he couldn’t see.

“No more milk….Don’t has juice...yes, water. Food soon.” He heard Faith reassuring Jane in a sing-song cadence.
By the time Claire emerged from her ablutions, the table was set and dinner was served. His look of appreciation had her smiling in return.

“Relaxing soak?”

Claire ah-hummed in answer. Then her smile faltered as she looked at the kitchen offering.

“Pizza.” He said unnecessarily. “I ordered you one with veg and half sausage, not knowing what ye’d prefer.”

“Err- did you happen to get a salad?”

“I didna ken you’d want one.”

Claire spent a couple of minutes rootling around in the kitchen looking for alternatives. Jamie gamely tried to maintain his cheerful mood but it was getting harder to do.

“I figured we couldn’t go wrong with pizza.” The conviction in his voice wavering slightly.

“Yes, well, when you assume…” Claire’s censure of him hurt.

“Aye, well, when you locked the door to the bath I hadn’t much choice in the matter.” This said in a neutral a tone as possible.

Her back was turned but he noticed the set of her shoulders. He also watched those shoulders rise and fall and relax as she took in a few breaths and let go of her tension.

When Claire turned around she saw the tableau before her in a new light. He’d tried. The candles were lit, the table set, there was a tiny posy in the center. Faith must have picked them as the offering consisted of slightly mangled plumage easily obtained by a walk around their courtyard.

Her eyes rested on Faith’s. She wore an anxious expression on her face and Claire’s immediately softened. She kissed the top of her head as she set down her plate with her peanut butter on an
apple. She didn’t miss the quick expression between father and daughter nor the twin sounds of their exhales.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have a chance to go shopping yet this week.” She acknowledged. “I have a dislike of pizza.” she added unnecessarily.

“I can go tomorrow, if you can grab Faith in the afternoon? I can use the car and take her in the morning, unless you need it?” Jamie offered.

“It’s your car, Jamie.” She reminded him softly.

An entire world passed between them on that one sentence and Jamie heard it, too.

“We should talk after Faith is settled, aye?”

Heart hammering, he tried to empty his mind lest he jump from one bad conclusion to another.

She reached over and grabbed his hand giving it a squeeze. He looked into her eyes, trying to read the expression he saw there. She nodded once in reassurance. He nodded back. Serious then, but not fatal.

He quickly diverted the conversation away from that rocky coast and asked Faith about her day.

“Did you show Da your new library book?” Claire asked.

“Oh it’s a Wednesday! I forgot to ask. So what did ye pick out?”

“I’ll grab it, I think you’ll be surprised.” Claire jumped up and went to get Faith’s book bag. As she returned she heard the two of them laughing which put a smile on her face in turn.

“That’s fair disgusting.” she heard Jamie agree. “Though my vote is tuna fish.”
Faith snorted and then giggled.

Claire gestured a *what?* as she came back to the table.

“Grossest pizza!” Faith filled her in.

“Ew, that would taste horrible. But everyone knows pineapple is an abomination.” Claire said firmly as she handed Jamie the book.

“Cats?” He asked. “What happened to dogs?”

“Cats is soft and you pet them and they purr!” Faith said as if it was obvious.

“Her friend Tahmas got a new cat. I think he’s been bending her ear about it and Mrs. Crooke has cats.”

“Did you ever have pets growing up, Sassenach?” Jamie asked.

“No, I’ve never had anything. With Lamb we moved too often and Frank was allergic. I can’t imagine Lallybroch doesn’t have a few cats though?”

“Oh aye, we’ve a bit of everything. Jenny kept birds and Willie and I had the dogs but Mam always had a cheetie. Excellent for mice and such.” His expression turned whistfull in memory.

He handed the book to Faith.

“Do ye have a favorite in there?”

Faith unerringly turned to a picture of a blue-gray fluffy persian with brilliant green eyes.

“Very pretty.” He complimented. “Can ye meow for me?”
Jamie asked, delighted with her wee imitation. He made a fairly good happy cat himself complete with pretend head bumps and rumbling purrs that made both Claire and Faith laugh.

“Shall I clean up dinner while you get Faith ready for bed?” Claire offered.

She stood up with them and rubbed her face in imitation of his cat just to see him smile as they made their way out of the kitchen.

He uncorked a bottle of red as they sat down together in her cozy living room. A room he’d grown to associate with comfort and peace. He only hoped he would still feel that way tomorrow.

She took the glass he poured for her and he touched the rim of it with his own very lightly. Claire caught his whisper of lang time deid which he said so often just before taking the first sip of wine that she thought it was simply reflex rather than conscious thought.

She took up his other hand in her own, eyebrows rising. The hand wrapped around his wine glass shook a bit but he made a sound for her to continue.

They talked through two bottles of wine as she slowly unwound the tight coil of her twisting thoughts.

Claire spoke with delicacy, understanding some of what she needed to say was going to hurt him, though he knew she hadn’t realized how deeply the scalpel she wielded cut.

Near the end of the second bottle she told him, “when I was a little girl my uncle would take me to the shore and we’d stand at the water’s edge. He’d show me the colors of the water so I could see the shallows. I always needed to know where the drop off was before I went for a swim.”

“Do you regret it?” Jamie asked softly.

Her beach holiday memories were not what this was about.
“No!” Swift and emphatic, then suddenly worried, “do you?”

He shook his head firmly as he made a kind of Scottish noise.

“Once we decided to dip our toes in, we were going to get wet. It’s just that….Jamie, you want to dive out beyond the breakers and I feel like I’m in danger of drowning.”

Jamie looked away not wanting her to see the misting in his eyes.

“Don’t.” She begged. “I don’t want to get out of the water, Jamie. But my feet need to be touching the sand.”

He closed his eyes.

“Do you understand?”

“Aye.” And the hell of it was he did.

Afterwards, she got ready for sleep and he wandered around the flat turning off lights and tidying. Looking with new eyes, he could see the truth of what she had said. He seemed to be in every corner. Now that she’s pointed it out, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d spent the night in his own apartment. A slow act of attrition entwining their lives.

She was already in bed when he crossed to their bathroom. Her bathroom he corrected. Her bed, her flat, her life. Not theirs.

Maybe he should leave tonight? But his head was swimming and his body felt numb. Tomorrow he’d try and figure things out. Tonight he only needed to think about not thinking about Claire.

Jamie closed the bathroom door quietly and turned the shower on as hot as it would go. He kept the soft dimmers on low. He let the water wash over him, warming his cold skin. Do. Not. Think.

He doused his head. In retrospect, the fact that they hadn’t gone shopping was a good thing. Less
of the things he liked in her pantry. Jamie was taken aback to feel anger slipping in. He had no wish to travel that deadly road. This wasn't her fault. She'd given him so many gifts, including the gift of her honesty and trust and he would not repay that by faulting her for it.

Stop thinking, he reminded himself. He lathered in the shampoo. He rinsed.

He tried to envision giving Claire what she thought she wanted. A throttled back, polite, dignified courtship. Mmphm, perhaps. Unbidden he thought of her naked underneath him. He snorted. Did she imagine she’d make well-mannered wee noises?

Then he thought of the worn velvet box he’d been carrying around for weeks like a lucky charm in his messenger bag. It and its contents passed down through generations of Frasers. Should he bring it back to the bank vault, then?

He made a sound of frustration. It was no use.

He couldn’t get her heartbeat out of his veins.

He grabbed the soap, a French milled bar that was one of her few extravagances and ran it end over end in his hands because it smelled like her. Jamie stared at the large bubble that had formed on his forearm and put the soap back in the dish.

Then he reached over and scraped his nail through it, popping it just as Claire had popped the lovely soap bubble dream world he’d been living in.

It was crushing to hear her explain what she was feeling. He was so ready for Claire to catch up to him and fall head over heels. He wanted her to draw him into all the private places in her head and in her heart.

To dwell inside her as she lived within him, filling all the empty spaces and deep longing that he’d kept from acknowledging even to himself by constant moves from place to place, not finding anywhere he knew he belonged until now.

No wonder all his belongings were strewn from one end of her flat to the other. He hadn’t been looking for a place. Once again, Jenny had been dead fucking right. He’d searched the world over to find her. Wherever Claire was, she was his home.
He bit down on his sense of loss, trying to adjust his expectations. His chest hurt. He forced his head back under the spray. He couldn’t stop the tears but he didn’t want to feel them fall.

He was the one drowning.

He bit his bottom lip, forcing his emotions back under control. Do. Not. Think.

Then he heard the sound of a squeak as the door slid open. He felt soft butterfly kisses all along his back. Claire turned him around, her eyes glowing warm in the soft light. Her arms enfolded him. He pulled back and reached for her hand to lead her out of the shower.

She shook her head and pulled him under with her, leaning him against the back wall of the shower.

Her soaked curls weighted almost straight. The water pooled and ran over their skin as she pushed him slowly down to the floor and straddled him.

Her lips fitted tight to his ear and she whispered fiercely, “I meant it, Jamie.”

Here was no doubt, no hesitation. Here, their hearts ruled their minds. Jamie let go of the jumbled confusion and of his fears and chose to trust in what her body was telling him.

His back squeaked as it made contact with the tiled walls behind him.

Claire hitched herself up and extended her hand, reaching above them. She knocked everything that had been resting on the carved shelf above, bottles and bath products crashed all around them. She gave a cry of alarm, checking to see if he was hurt. He smiled at her, not breaking contact.

Her body twisted as she looked around the shower floor. Claire made a grab for what she wanted. Giving him a naughty smile, she upended the conditioner, slickening them both. Their twin ahhs as she moved over frictionless terrain had them both laughing, joyfully exploring this new playground.
His hands slipped and slid all around them. Her hands moved behind and to each side of his thighs, anchoring them as their bodies moved away from each other. The pulse and beat of the shower cascading in delicious rhythm hitting her sensitive skin. His fingers stroked, causing her to groan in a most uncivilized manner. A flick of a knuckle, a turn of hips as he shifted his body.

Now the water pounded directly on his head. He closed his eyes, going by touch and the indelicate noises escaping her throat.

After, when he could catch his breath and feel his legs again, he stood and turned off the cooling water. Then he looked down. He took in the upended shampoo, soap bubbles surrounding her, the fallen loofah, shaving cream, toothbrush and the now empty conditioner bottle and Claire, sprawled on the floor, limp, flushed and thoroughly pruned. The loveliest mess he’d ever seen. She caught his eye and they laughed. Despite everything!

Dignity be damned. He craved every wanton, extravagant, unmanageable moment.

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Jamie had reconciled himself to going home and spending the next few nights at his place. He wasn’t looking forward to it. He got up early to get a few necessities for their --- Claire’s --- kitchen. Then he’d walked Faith to daycare, resisting the temptation to hug her extra tight knowing he wouldn’t be seeing her that night.

He did his best to paste on his happy face and get through the day. Yet he knew he was both short tempered and morose. He just couldn’t find his normal equilibrium.

It was so out of character that by the end of the day, Fergus had taken matters in hand. Ian, having been elected messenger, strode into Jamie’s office and quietly closed the door. Jamie looked up in surprise. They had no meeting scheduled.

“Come out tonight, Jamie. Fergus, Murtagh a couple of the lads.” Said in that tone it was less invitation as order.

Jamie’s eyes revealed his shock before the mask slid forward and a smirk appeared at his lips.

“And why would I do that?” He asked.
“Ye look like you could use a night out.” Ian said, not backing down but also careful not to force Jamie into a conversation he didn’t want to have, either. Fergus was much better about that sort of thing.

Jamie lowered his eyes and let out a sigh.

“That obvious?” he asked.

Ian made a strangled sound but his smile was sweet, not mean.

“No one ever went wrong trying to view the world from a different perspective.”

Ian had been right, Jamie acknowledged as they drank down the third round. If nothing else, he’d earned a reprieve from his lonely flat.

“So did ye have a big fight?” Angus asked, not resting on formality.

“Nah.” He replied. The silence stretched.

“Mmphm. I’ve never seen ye so crabbit.”

Jamie only grunted in response.

“Ken, the way this works is ye tell us what happened and we tell ye how to fix it.” Rupert said, amused.

Jamie looked from one to another, flicking his eyes in dismissal when he got to Ian.

“Based on the collective wisdom of the five of ye, only one of whom is actually in a relationship at present?” At this all the lads but Fergus protested. Fergus just smirked.

“If Jamie doesna want to talk about it, let it go, aye.” Murtagh jumped in.
“Whatever it was, just apologize.” Fergus told him.

“For what?” Jamie asked.

“Does it matter?” Fergus asked. Jamie felt the stirrings of a smile on his lips.

“No! Whatever ye do, man dinna do that!” Rupert advised.

“No?” Jamie’s brows rose in tandem with his voice.

“You canna let a woman think yer too eager to please her.” Rupert informed him.

“Aye, gives her too much power.” Angus agreed.

Jamie darted a quick glance at Ian who rolled his eyes.

Jamie tucked his grin in his glass and polished it off, finding it almost immediately replaced by another round.

“Is it her ex?” Angus asked in a sympathetic tone.

Jamie shook his head.

“Things ok with your--- with the wee lassie?”

Rupert avoided looking at Jamie but made eye contact with Murtagh who didn’t so much as blink.

Jamie’s heart squeezed. He’d wondered, seeing Faith on the monitors the day of the rehearsal, how many would put it together. Claire had been right, after all. It wasn’t so obvious in the look of
her, but Faith had several Fraser mannerisms that he could now see very clearly.

Anyone who knew Jamie well would, after observing her, see them, too. He knew the rehearsal footage with Faith on it would be reviewed by Murtagh and the boys.

He wasn’t surprised so much as not quite as prepared as he should have been. He could not completely shield her but he could protect her. Jamie did so by claiming her.

“My lass is well.” Ah Dhia, the relief, pride and joy of it!

Ian’s gasp was audible over Murtagh’s grunt but when Jamie looked at his Godfather there was a twinkle in his eye.

“But there is an ex somewhere in the recent past?” Angus pressed.

Fergus nodded in confirmation.

“Mmphm. I never figured ye for a homewrecker.” Angus said mildly.

Rupert laughed at that. Ian made a sound of outrage.

“A lass could do worse than having Jamie for a mistress.” Rupert piled on.

It was rare they had any advantage over Jamie and he wasn’t going to pass up such a plum opportunity.

“Shut yer gobs!” Murtagh exclaimed giving Angus and Rupert a death glare. “This is no matter to be making light of and I hope Jamie can rely on yer discretion. Ye know Jamie, so ye ken that’s no’ what happened.”

Both their heads swiveled to stare at Jamie.
“Claire would never deceive anyone in her marriage.” Jamie told them. “Neither would I. Perhaps I am being pretentious in saying so, but I wouldn’a put my own behavior wi’ the lowest common denominator.” Jamie said. “I canna tell ye the story just now but I promise ye, when I can, I will.” It was all he could promise.

“Dinna fash, Jamie. Yer secret’s safe wi’ us.” Rupert assured him as Angus nodded in agreement.

Jamie never thought otherwise.

“So why the bad mood?” Fergus returned them to the start of the conversation.

Jamie stared at his drink.

“It’s complicated.” Was all he would say.

“Claire’s marriage ended rough. It can take time to heal from that.” Ian ventured.

Jamie flicked his eyes to the right. By long practice, Ian knew that meant yes. He placed his hand on Jamie’s arm in solidarity.

“You know,” Fergus began thoughtfully and Jamie tensed. Fergus had great intuition but could be quite ruthless and he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear it. “Women in general are hard wired for competition. I don’t suppose you would consider--- ”

“No, I damn well would not!” Jamie interrupted speaking in precise clips and cutting this line of thought off immediately.

Fergus smiled in acknowledgement.

“Well, in that case, I think your best option would be to play hard to get.”

“What!” Murtagh and Jamie said at the same time.
Jamie looked at Ian but instead of a confirmatory eye roll, Ian had a look of speculation and interest in his eye. Jamie made a hand gesture indicating he was interested in Ian’s opinion on this matter.

“It is true, Jenny was the one leading the chase.” Ian started, Jamie growled and Ian hastened to clarify, “no’ that I didna want to be caught! Just that with my circumstances….Ye ken well enough, I was the one

This being a reasonable explanation, Jamie decided he didn’t need to defend his sister’s honor, after all. Besides, Jenny would likely clot him did he touch a hair on her beloved’s head.

“Your situation is a bit complicated but it offers up possibilities, too. You will see her often because of Faith. You of all people know never to take anyone for granted. But people do, even if they don’t mean to. It doesn’t hurt to remind them by becoming less available. Absence, or at least remoteness, makes the heart grow fonder, I think.” Fergus concluded.

“I dinna think the lad is wrong.” Ian pursed his lips thinking over the idea.

“What about….?” Angus wriggled his brows.

“Well, if they are fighting surely the mood isna right so it’s no issue.” Murtagh made a dismissive hand gesture.

“You must be joking? We are the gender that wants sex because we are fighting, or we have the headache, or are breathing. Whatever the problem, that is the preferred solution.” Fergus scoffed.

“Unfortunately, Murtagh is right. Why buy the cow when you get free milk? And having developed a thirst for it…” at this Fergus gave a particularly gallic kind of shrug. “To be effective, you must create need and when you create need you get want. When a woman desires something bad enough she will move mountains.” Fergus sighed a lusty sound that slightly disturbed Jamie.

“Aye, Jamie’s in it for the long haul, lads, he’ll just have to suffer through it.” Ian concluded.

“Still, he’s been through much worse in his life.” Rupert said supportively.
This pronouncement was met with grunts all around.

Jamie looked at the five of them as they nodded at one another in sage solidarity. Wee idiots all.

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Yet as the days passed, Jamie started to seriously consider Fergus’s advice. He did seem to be the one always texting or calling. He was the one who initiated physical contact with her at the slightest indication of interest. He felt like he was working overtime and she was, to coin an expression, phoning it in.

Perhaps he needed to flip their dynamic? If he was more distant would she want to pull him closer? Would she finally see what he did-- how perfectly they fit together?

He’d put it in practice in the next day or so, today though he was on a mission. Jamie had been working on a special surprise for Faith. He’d hinted at what he wanted to do with Claire and, without giving it completely away, had gotten her approval. Today was the day.

Jamie arranged for John to meet him at Claire’s to give him a hand setting things up. He needed John’s help with Slainte as well so having a little time to themselves would work out fine. Once he had been able to explain the disquieting issues surrounding Babbelas and ask for the help he needed, he and John focused on preparing for their new arrival.

Jamie checked his watch. Claire was picking Faith up from daycare and would be home soon. He and John were almost done but needed to put together the new climber in the corner of the living room.

When Jamie returned from the utility room, tool chest in hand, John had a framed picture of the three of them, Faith tucked between her parents, in hand.

“That’s Faith?” John asked quietly without turning around.

“Aye.” Jamie confirmed.
The photo was his favorite. He had been very pleased when Claire had it enlarged and framed. Faith and Claire, their heads so close together it was difficult to tell whose hair was whose, so similar with matching warm-as-brown-butter eyes. Yet Faith wore his smile, had his bones, looked at him with love and adoration wearing the same expression on he wore looking at Claire in that moment.

“How?” John choked out.

Jamie didn’t hesitate. John was every bit as much his family as Fergus, Ian or Murtagh. He trusted him with his life and, more to the point, trusted him with Claire’s and Faith’s as well.

There were things he could say to John he wouldn’t say to anyone else. Murtagh was short on practical experience. Jamie still thought of Fergus as a kid and Ian would surely understand but everything Ian might say in response would be a reflection of his relationship with Jenny. The Fraser siblings were extremely protective of each other which, perversely, made Jamie careful about what he asked of Ian.

With John, Jamie didn’t need to worry about picking and choosing his words. Once Jamie started, he found he couldn’t stop. He paced back and forth while the whole story came pouring out of him like a cataract of water over a broken dam. He didn’t realize how badly he needed to unburden himself until that moment. John listened for the most part and in his steady, supportive presence Jamie shared everything. His missteps and triumphs, his struggles and dreams. John interrupted only once.

“Randall, you say?”

“Aye, Frank is the first name. A professor of history, ye know him?”

“No. At least I don’t believe so. But I do wonder if he is related to Jack Randall.” John ventured.

“Jack?” Jamie asked, clearly not making the connection.

“Black Jack Randall, from the Daily Smearer?”

“The Mirror? Not the arsewipe who’s always going after grandsire?”
“One and the same.” John confirmed.

While Jamie and Jenny didn’t, as a rule, interact with their father’s father, Lord Lovat’s altercations with the rag paper were infamous. Notorious “reporter” Black Jack Randall was often at the center of the scandal, or at least making any story sound more lurid. Some of what was reported was true some of it was not, but Randall didn’t seem overly concerned about the distinction.

“Can you or Hal find out for me?”

At the end of the rest of the story John just stared at him shaking his head. He stood and walked over to the window, gathering his thoughts. Then he turned back. Jamie saw him break into a smile and heard John chuckle. Jamie smiled in return.

“Christ, man, only you! Trust your instincts Jamie, they’ve not steered you wrong yet. Complications aside, I cannot imagine how wonderful this is for you and your family. Congratulations!”

John enveloped Jamie in a huge hug.

“Oh God, John!” Jamie said.

“Da!” Faith exclaimed.

Neither Jamie nor John had heard them come in.

Claire watched Jamie and John break apart. Neither man was yet aware of her presence. Jamie was looking at Faith but John was staring at Jamie and the look of naked hunger in his unguarded eyes shocked her.

She hadn’t asked Jamie directly whether he and John had ever been more than friends and roommates. It hadn’t seemed relevant or necessary. When Jamie noticed her though, the look of naked hunger in his unguarded eyes reassured her no end.
Her heart did stutter again, though, as she watched the men become aware of the company in the room and each deliberately masked their respective expressions behind the facade of polite, but distant interest. Claire knew her own expression would give her away and averted her eyes crossing the room to greet John with bright tone and happy smile.

“John, this is our daughter, Faith.” Jamie said.

Claire, not having heard Faith’s greeting and nor been privy to the previous conversation, did a double take.

“Mo nighean , can ye greet our guest proper?” Jamie encouraged.

This was something they had been working on. Faith held out her hand and shook John’s.

“Good afternoon, nice---” She said, then stopped, glancing at Claire for the rest of the words.

“To meet you.” Claire helped her finish. “I didn’t know we’d be seeing you today, John. How have you been?”

The adults made small talk for a few minutes. Then the box in the corner thumped. Faith obviously heard it for her head swivelled over in it’s direction at once. A small sound of protest came from the box.

“What’s it?” Faith asked in hushed tones.

Jamie was pretending not to hear. Claire had an inkling of what it was and a quick perusal of the room, with the cat scratching post, tower perch and cat toys confirmed it.

Claire watched Jamie, she loved it when he hummed with happiness. He’d told her that he wanted to mark his own special first with Faith, having missed out on first smiles, hugs, laughs, words, steps. He’d pretty much spelled it out and in the process had laid it on so thick, she’d briefly thought about calling him on it. But she’d been caught up in his enthusiasm and decided she’d play along with the “surprise.” There was no reason not to. Faith would be over the moon.
A solid meow this time followed by a loud scraping noise.

“Da!” Faith at this point was beside herself and tugging and pulling on Jamie’s arm.

“Did ye need something, lass?”

“The box!” She insisted.

“What of it?”

“Come see?” Faith asked with a solid yank that Jamie, this time, allowed to propel him off in the right direction.

They approached the box carefully, circling all around it. It was now meowing in earnest.

“What do ye think it could be?” He asked pretending puzzlement.

“It’s a cat!” No dumb bunny, Miss Faith.

“Mphmm. Perhaps we should let him out, then?” Jamie proposed.

“Oh, please!” Faith answered.

Jamie bade Faith to kneel down next to him on the floor and encouraged her to place her hands on the top of the box as he carefully pulled up.

The kitten wasn’t put off by the high pitched joyous cry coming from his mistress. His dignity was, however, much affronted. He stared at her, then calmly leapt up out of the box startling Faith into falling back on her butt.

Whereupon, the kitten, a beautiful smokey gray Scottish Fold with huge eyes of pale celadon green
promptly bounded onto her lap and began kneading her leg, purring loudly enough that Claire could hear him as she came to sit down beside Jamie.

“Oh!” Faith exclaimed and giggled at the seesaw motion of ample paws that tickled and slightly hurt as the kitten dug in with his tiny nails.

Her hand slowly reached out to his back and she stroked up and down, his hind legs jumped up as her fingers neared his tail and he purred even louder. Then he spun around two times and settled in.

Off to the side, John watched the whole thing unfold. He took a few pictures to show Minnie, who, he knew, would be completely thrilled that they’d been able to do something special for Jamie.

John wouldn’t tell them the whole truth, of course, it was sufficient for them to know the lass was special to Jamie and they’d found a perfect match for the kitten. Minnie would figure it out, eventually. A regular bloodhound. Hal would take a bit longer but he’d also come to it as well.

When Jamie called and told him what he needed and that it was for a “special wee lass” John thought he’d meant Claire.

John knew Jamie couldn’t return his affections in the way he wanted. So he wasn’t jealous, not really. He was very happy that Jamie found someone like her. Claire was a woman who knew her own mind and her air of confidence was powerfully attractive.

He had no idea about Faith but she was the very best kind of surprise. Bright and curious, gentle and expressive. She had a lot of her mother in her, he noticed. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why Jamie fell in love with Claire.

John remembered the way Jamie looked as he watched them dance at Lallybroch. He had never seen the man look at anyone the way he looked at her. He was doing it now, though she was so caught up in playing with the kitten she didn’t notice.

John came out of his reverie to hear the tail end of what Jamie was saying to Claire.

“John’s sister-in-law runs a Scottish Fold rescue organization. She is trying to make changes in the law so breeders are held to higher ethical standards. I asked John if perhaps Minnie kent anyone with a kitten that needed to be adopted and cared for. She was able to find yon cheetie and John
brought her here for Faith.”

Claire reached out to stroke the kitten under his chin. He promptly upended himself and put his paws in the air, still content in Faith’s lap.

Jamie laughed and added a belly rub. “He’s a nice thrum to him, aye?”


“That isna a proper name for a cheetie. Perhaps for ye Sassenachs but no in Scotland!” Jamie exclaimed.

“Pussie, pussie-boudrons where have you been, I’ve been to London to see the Queen.” John quoted. Jamie laughed in response to hearing the Scottish nursery rhyme.

“Adso.” Jamie declared staring right at John just as John took a drink of water. “We shall call him Adso.”

At that, John spit the water straight out, laughing hysterically.

“No! Jamie, no! You really can’t. What would I tell Minnie? And if Hal ever heard of it….” But John was smiling.

“Adso, as in The Name of the Rose?” Claire asked, not understanding the connection.

“No as in an acronym for the Agency of Development, Security and Observation. ADSO. John’s older brother is a Minister in MI-5.”

“You actually gave Faith the Minister’s Cat?” Claire asked causing both John and Jamie to start laughing once again.
The Three Ravens

THE THREE RAVENS

The first time Jamie caught her in a lie he questioned his own hearing. He’d never expected it but, of course he should have. All children lie, he knew from personal experience. Faith told him she’d finished her chores and, per their agreement, he turned on her favorite show.

On his way to the kitchen, Jamie was attacked by the cat, wailing and carrying on, clearly unfed. Deciding the wee kitten shouldn’t suffer for Faith’s error, he’d dispatched relief as soon as he might and then decided to check her room. Her clothes sat neatly in the basket, not put away.

Jamie quietly crossed to the living room and shut the TV off. It didn’t stay quiet for long.

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Claire shifted her bags and twisted the key in the lock then heard Faith scream. Alarmed she dropped everything in the entry hall and burst into the living room. Faith’s face was streaked with tears and she was taking huge hiccuping breaths.

“No, Da! Gimme it!” Faith made a lunge for Jamie’s arm.

This being a David and Goliath proposition, she was miles from her goal. She only reached to about his belly button with her arm stretched as high as it could go.

“Toadies!”

Jamie calmly replaced the remote on a high shelf causing Faith to shriek, an earsplitting noise that had both adults wincing. Faith threw herself at Jamie and continued to scream, a knocked-down, dragged-out full-fledged tantrum.

When she started to hit him, Jamie pressed her arms down at her sides. Claire watched in sympathy as he tried to get his ears out of the line of fire and was only partially successful.

Claire waited for a break in volume then spoke up.

“What’s all this?”

Faith was inhaling a breath and looked over. She let out a cry of relief, not outrage, and came running to Claire.

“Mama, Toadies! Pease!” Faith hugged Claire around her legs and squeezed her tight.

“Shhh, love.” She knelt and looked around for some tissues, then finding a handful thrust down in front of her.

She smiled her thanks at Jamie and cleaned Faith up as best she could, though the tears and snot seemed never ending. She hugged Faith to her as she went boneless and allowed her mother to comfort her.

Claire made soothing noises, patting her back, feeling the incredible heat of her, the slight dampness where Faith had sweated through her shirt.
“There, there. Do you think you can tell me now?” Claire pulled away, encouraging Faith to stop slumping against her, hoping that reasserting dominion over her own body weight would return emotional control.

“Da took my show.”

The accusation was accompanied by plump little hand forcefully pulling her curls back from her face. She looked so like her mother in that moment that Jamie’s equilibrium shifted a bit to see it.

Claire resisted the urge to look at Jamie.

“Hmm, why?” She asked.

“He’s mean.” Faith glared at Jamie. That expression was familiar, too.

Had circumstances been different Jamie would have laughed but he was still a bit rattled by how quickly she’d gone off the rails and, to be honest, disappointed in her behavior.

“That doesn’t sound at all like your Da. Come, Faith out with it.”

“I missed chores.” She admitted.

“Well, are they done now?” Claire asked.

“Uhuh.” Faith answered, casting Jamie a sidelong look.

“Perhaps if you ask for the remote instead of demanding it, you’ll get it.”

“No, the lass willna.” Jamie said flatly.

“Why?” Faith allowed a petulant tone to creep back into her voice.

“Because, as ye ken fine, I had to do some of yer chores. Ye’ll no get your show for that. Then you lied to me about the fact that you’d done them, and ye’ll no get TV for the rest of today or tomorrow because of the lies.”

At this pronouncement Faith let out a wail undoing the considerable progress Claire had made calming her down.

“Jamie, that’s a bit harsh. She’s too young to understand the difference between a truth and a lie.” She’d tried to use a gentle tone but the rebuke clearly bled through.

“How do ye suppose bairns learn those things, eh?” Jamie’s hand gestured to underscore his point. “Their parents teach them!” This said with conviction.

Faith watched her parents as they argued. Jamie was aware of her eyes bouncing back and forth between them but Claire seemed unconcerned by their audience.

Claire glared at him and pursed her lips.

“It’s unfair to punish her tomorrow for something she did the day before. She’ll never remember it by then and you are guaranteeing another tantrum tomorrow afternoon.”

In saying it outloud, something else occurred to Claire and she went from annoyed to paranoid in less than ten seconds. Without giving herself any time to rationally process the thoughts popping into her brain, she told him what she thought of his discipline methods.
“And we both know you are doing this on purpose because I’m dealing with her tomorrow afternoon, not you. You’re trying to get in a little payback and using Faith to do it.”

“The hell you say!” Jamie could not possibly hide his shock.

Faith’s mouth hung open, staring at her Da, who almost never lost his temper.

Jamie swallowed hard then said in a low, surprised voice,

“Ye---ye think…..my God, Claire.”

He shook his head and glanced very briefly at Faith as he brushed past. Claire heard the side door open and close.

She found him sitting in the grass, his back up against the only tree in the courtyard. Claire handed Faith her ride on truck and made sure the side fence was securely latched, then eased herself to the ground beside him, not touching but within easy reach.

Jamie was unable to speak, raw emotion still coursing through his veins.

“Jamie?” Claire waited for him to react but he stayed quiet.

All she heard was his breathing, steady ins and outs. It was a comforting sound and she found her own breathing catching his rhythm as her subconscious counted out the breaths with him.

After a minute, he reached his hand out to her and, although he still hadn’t looked at her, found hers and clasped it.

She smiled a little, stubborn Scot! He would not rescue her from her own improvident words. He would offer what comfort he could and wait her out until hell froze over.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly. “I know you aren’t like that.”

“I’m trying to imagine what I ever did to make you paint me as such a man, Sassenach. I canna think of a time I have ever been spiteful to ye or inclined to make a wee bairn suffer to make a point.” He said quietly.

Claire heart plunged. She seemed unable to avoid saying things that hurt him lately.

“You haven’t and you aren’t.” Claire affirmed on a sigh. “But you and I have different approaches. You see things more black and white whereas I tend to see shades of gray. You are more of a disciplinarian, I’m more of a talker. I know you were doing as you thought best and it had nothing to do with me. Truly. I’m sorry.” She said again.

Jamie finally turned his body to hers. Instead of looking at her face he kept his eyes on their joined hands.

“I’m no’ around tomorrow because it’s what you want, not me.”

Claire started to explain once more but he cut her off. He hadn’t meant to bring it back up again.

“No...shh. I ken why ye are doing so. I dinna mean to make ye feel bad about it, truly. I have no quarrel with what you said you needed. I might not like it, mind.” Jamie shot her a quirk and she smiled in return. “We arena always going to see eye to eye on things. Ye’ve had Faith and the raising of her alone for her whole life and now I barge in and have ideas of my own. I just....we need to work together.”
“You aren’t barging in and you know it. As to co-parenting? I have no experience and neither do you. What we don’t know, we have to learn together. But you and I are starting from different points. It was just Uncle Lamb and me. There are whole worlds out there that people grow up knowing about: having siblings, what a successful marriage looks like, how to work with another parent. I don’t. My life is a lot like... going on a journey without a map.”

“So what do ye do?” He asked softly, his hand brushing an errant curl from her forehead and finally looking at her eyes.

“You invent yourself. You have no choice. You take what you can learn from other people and go forward as best you can.” The breeze gently lifted the curl he’d just tucked back so he only caught half of her forlorn expression.

“But you always wonder if you are doing it right.” She confessed. Jamie made a Scottish noise of acknowledgement.

“My Mam and Da never disagreed in front of us bairns. Sometimes she’d give him a look and he’d hear about it later on but at least they were united in front of us. It didna matter would they do it differently themselves. I think Faith understands the difference between lies and truth. My concern is that if we dinna set rules, then next time it willna be a tiny lie but a big one. I dinna ken if ye are right or wrong about what she’ll remember. I’d like her to remember to be truthful. But, I ken ye will do as ye think right tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what you are trying to say. Does her punishment stand or not? If Faith is to be raised by us as a team, like your parents raised you, we need trust between us.” Claire looked at him hard. Her brow furrowed and her inhalation sounded like a stutter step to Jamie. Then she swallowed whatever it was that was on the tip of her tongue about to spill out. He made a noise which drew her eyes to his.

“Sassenach, one day I’ll know you so well that when your lips press tight and you rabbit your nose, I’ll hear the thoughts in your head. My ears will be so attuned to every one of your sighs and I’ll be able to tell if you are frustrated or annoyed. And most of the time I’ll even ken if I’m the cause.”

Jamie’s smile echoed her tentative grin.

“In time, I’ll understand every touch of your hands and I’ll know what you are feeling without your saying a single word.”

He leaned in and kissed the apple of her cheekbone.

“But that day isna today, Sassenach. I canna read your mind so I need you to talk to me, even when it’s hard. Please tell me what troubles you.”

She drew another breath in and he nodded at her.

“Frank was distant those last few months but not angry. At least not in front of me. We were both shocked when we read the test results, of course. But he was very even tempered and that kept me calm. He was his usual polite self with everyone, the clinic, the doctors, his own colleagues, mine. He never even told anyone what had happened until after she was born.”

Claire paused here to gather her thoughts. Jamie had not expected this conversational turn and he watched her, carefully, as he always did whenever she talked about Frank. He was fascinated, in spite of himself, wanting to know everything about their relationship. It was part jealousy and part defense mechanism.
“He stood by me. Or at least I thought he was standing by me. It turns out he was only standing next to me. When I signed up for natural childbirth classes he refused to come. He said it would be too much to ask of him and could I forgive him for not being able to go with me. What could I say other than of course, darling? But that also meant that when things started going so terribly wrong I was alone.”

Jamie focused on breathing steady, looking only at her hurt-filled eyes, anything to keep from making any movement that might interrupt her willingness to talk of this and at the same time the feeling of dread was spreading in the pit of his stomach.

“I was...well it was exhausting and painful, of course. But then they couldn’t control the bleeding and Faith’s heartbeat fell. I remember how cold I was...so cold. I’ve seen my share of bleeding patients. But this was,” Claire was shaking her head back and forth, “like nothing I’d ever seen, or heard or smelled. The human body has about eight quarts of blood in it. Judging by the amount I’d bled I had maybe half of them left. I started to panic-----”

An involuntary sound of deep distress came out of the back of Jamie’s throat. He seemed as surprised at the noise as Claire.

“I didna mean to interrupt ye, Claire.” There was a pulsing tick at the base of his jaw and he was breathing in rapid, shallow puffs. “I want ye to talk about it. I just get so angry when I think of it and I canna imagine how Frank could--”

From the corner of his eye, Jamie caught a look at Claire’s tight-lipped expression and he immediately shut his own. His reaction was only making her feel worse.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach...If ye loved him, he must have been a good man and I’ve no right to judge.” Jamie was judging all right, but not her. He had no doubts regarding the purity of her steadfast heart or her soul full of courage. “Please tell me the rest.”

Whatever else Claire might have said on the subject of Faith’s birth was lost. She picked up the story in a different spot.

“Then the lawsuit, I already told you that I had no advanced warning. By the time we were in counselling for that brief time, I discovered I already heard the world differently than I had before. I picked up on the inflection of words, tone of voice, nothing he said I could accept at face value because the last three months of Faith’s pregnancy and the first couple months of her life my whole relationship with Frank had been a lie. I was listening for the sound of the other shoe dropping. So I focused not on the words anymore but on space between. It takes far too much energy to live like that -- constantly on guard. I didn’t like myself at the end of our relationship.”

Jamie grunted, but couldn’t imagine Claire as the woman she was describing.

“I had turned into someone who was suspicious all the time. I had no confidence in my own instincts anymore. It was the worst time of my life. I had this beautiful baby who was happy and sweet and full of love and I was unable to give her the mother she deserved because I wasn’t a person I even recognized anymore. Do you understand?”

“Trust is more than one thing for you. Trust of me, yes but trust in yourself, too.” Jamie interpreted.

“In a way. I’m saying that I need to believe the things you say. I don’t want to have to guess what you really mean. Sometimes you hide behind a mask of polite deference. With us in a relationship now, I am never sure whether you are ok with something because you truly are ok or whether you
are saying ok because you want to please me because we are dating. If we break up I am terrified you will tell me you were pretending the whole time. I’ll find out you never agreed with my parenting decisions and you’ll start to disagree with everything I try and do. As we build a life together as parents and as partners, I need it to be real. I have to know you are who I think you are and it’s ok for me to be who I am, too. If not then I will be right back in the place I was before, with Frank. That thought is unbearable.”

Claire shifted her weight a bit and let go of his hand but stayed looking right at him.

“I don’t think it’s in me anymore to blindly trust anyone ever again. After Frank, I mean. I know it’s unfair to bring that into our relationship but I can’t help it. You don’t have to tell me everything. I am not asking you to bare your soul. Everyone is entitled to their privacy -- and maybe even their secrets. But when you tell me something, Jamie, it has to be real. Do you think you can do that?”

He didn’t even have to think about it.

“Aye.”

He grabbed her hand again and was surprised to feel her gripping him tightly. His eyes never left hers.

“This is as serious as it comes. Jamie, I need your word of honor that my life won’t be built on deception. So do I have your personal vow to me and our daughter that in the life we build together, I will never have cause to doubt who either of us are?”

“Ye have my word, Claire.” He told her.

“I’ll hold you to it.” She breathed a sigh of relief and released her grip a bit. “Then does her punishment stand or not?”

“If it’s my decision, she’ll have no TV and if she asks why I’d tell her because she lied yesterday and a lie has very serious consequences.”

Claire nodded and then fitted herself within his arms as they watched Faith play in the yard.

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It had been three days since Jamie had seen Faith or Claire. They’d moved from being together nearly every day to a schedule where Jamie would have one afternoon and dinner during the week and spend weekends with them. It wasn’t what he wanted at all. He had no idea if the new routine was helping either he or Claire better define their relationship or give her fresh perspective.

He kept himself busy. With Claire’s consent, he began to look into preschools for Faith. He had also been working late nights and thread by thread unravelling the Babbelas ownership structure. Geneva had managed to track down and diagram the various corporations and subcorps that underpinned the structure of the organization. They were far larger than Jamie had originally believed with many points of entrée into the market and their potential to make a serious run at Slainte was evident.

John had been able to find out a few things, including the fact that one of the principals of the parent company, a man called St. Germain was banned from entry in the UK due to a conviction for bribery several years earlier. The rumor was that he was up to similar tricks now and had an influential benefactor in his pocket. John still hadn’t uncovered who that person was.
Jamie had gone as far as he could that day. Exhausted, a feeling that was slowly replacing his customary normal sense of well-being, he set out to get Faith and go shopping. He bought a wee pot of mixed herbs for Claire’s window box and new grape bubble bath (which turned the bath water purple, of course) for Faith. They were small and silly things but he really enjoyed the feeling of putting smiles on their faces.

“Mmm. That smells delicious!” Claire was inhaling as she came through the door to the kitchen. She kissed Faith then him, long and lingering. His body simply felt better when her arms were wrapped around it. Just as he set the oven mitts down on the counter to pull her closer, Faith squeezed in between them.

“Did ye need something, mo nighean?” Jamie raised a brow as he looked at her. Faith threw up her hands toward her father and said, “Hug!” Jamie was about to tell her to wait her turn when Claire bent down and picked her up. Faith pushed at her chest and squirmed hard.

“From Da!” Faith insisted, getting in a good, if accidental, kick in Claire’s abdomen. Claire made a sound of pain and put Faith down again.

“Ooh!” Faith said immediately and looked up, concerned. “Kiss?” Claire smiled to let her know she wasn’t really hurt.

“I’ll do the kissing around here, my lass.” He leaned in and kissed Claire, quite chastely just to the left of her breast.

“Better, Sassenach?” He asked, peeking up around her chest and straightening. Claire blushed at the unexpected gesture.

Jamie picked Faith up for her hug, squeezing her tight, telling her how much he’d missed her these last few days.

Faith planted her hands on either side of Jamie’s cheeks and then gave him a buss on the lips.

“I love you!” She said.

“And I, you, lass.” Jamie assured her as he slid her down to the ground.

When he next looked up, Claire was staring intently at him. Then her eyes slid away and she started to blush once more. This time his own cheeks heated up as well. He opened his mouth, about to speak when the timer buzzed loudly.

Saved by the bell was the thought that flittered in his brain, yet he couldn’t help but think, as Claire moved away from him opening the wine and pouring it with her back turned to him, that he’d blown an opportunity as well.

For the rest of the night, Faith made her preferences clear, insisting that Jamie do everything for her from cutting her food to overseeing her bath to helping her brush her teeth. When Claire told her it was time for her book, Faith pretended she didn’t hear her. When Jamie reminded her by holding the book up and beckoning to her, Faith immediately complied.

Claire noticed he looked a little run down and he could probably use a long, hot shower and time to...
himself. She tried stepping in and taking Faith’s nighttime routine, but their daughter was making her preferences on this subject crystal clear. Still, she tried one more time.

“Would you like Adso in your room tonight?” Claire asked her, hoping to find a welcome mat with a little good will.

“No, I’m fine.” Faith told her. Well, then. Claire thought.

“Hold up a second, Sassenach, I havena seen him in a few days.”

Faith immediately changed her mind and Adso happily curled up on the bedspread as the dryer dinged. Jamie shook his head, understanding what she was trying to do but giving her leave to let things be for now. Claire turned her attention to finishing house chores.

“If ye rub his nose just there he’ll ask ye for some more.”

Jamie brushed Faith’s finger as he showed her what to do. She giggled at the loud purring response then laughed when Adso butted his head forcefully against her small hand. Jamie opened the book and began.

When Claire came to the edge of the doorway to listen, Faith jumped up off the bed and told Claire to “Go away!” slamming the door in her face.

Claire tried not to be upset about it and felt a little better when she heard Jamie’s rumbling voice through the door, “Faith that wasna a nice thing to do. I think ye hurt yer Mama’s feelings.”

“I missed you.” Faith said by way of explanation.

“Ah. I missed you, too. Ye ken we are all trying to find our way here, yer Mama, too. Extra patience, lass, that’s all that’s needed.” He told her confidently.

“Mama’s gots lots of patients.” Faith observed.

Jamie laughed, not sure if she was being sincere or had mixed up the terms given her mother’s career.

Later that evening, while they were reading in bed Claire thanked him for how he’d handled things with Faith. But he heard the doubt underlying the compliment.

“Dinna fash, Sassenach.” He put his book down and kissed her. “If it helps any I think she wasna trying to be rude. She was just expressing herself the only way she knew how, just then.”

Claire nodded but her tight expression didn’t ease.

“You are her whole world, surely ye ken that?”

“Not today, apparently.”

“Ian and Jenny’s bairns go through something similar now and again, they dinna seem to take it seriously. Do ye want me to ask them about it?”

“No, I am sure you are right. I’ve been waiting for months for her to be able to really communicate with me and now that she does, I am finding sometimes I don’t like what comes out.” Claire smiled at her own unrealistic expectations.

“Yer a wonderful mother, Claire.” Jamie reassured her.
Claire took his hand and placed it against her cheek and moved over to sit in his lap. Jamie reached over and turned the lights down low. He held her close. He could feel how tense she was, he knew she had all sorts of thoughts racing around in her head. Then he remembered that he might help her by giving her a guidepost.

“All children play favorites, I did, my sister, too, depending on who we thought the soft touch that day. By this time tomorrow, Faith will be singing your praises.”

He showered her with kisses, slowing unpeeling her in layers. Refocusing her attention and relaxing her, making her pliant enough to lay down. He threaded her hands in his and stretched them above her head, covering her body and kissing her lips.

“Shhh mo gràdh, she loves ye. How could she not?”

It was as close as he could come to a verbal declaration himself. But he could show her. Loving one another this way was like breathing air, essential, elemental and effortless. Why couldn’t everything else fall into place so easily?

He focused on her, only her as she opened herself to him.

“Trust me, Claire?” Jamie flicked his tongue so she knew what he meant.

“Yes.” She breathed.

“May I try something?”

“Anything.” She agreed.

Jamie had already got out the blue toy he’d bought weeks ago. When he did, he’d noticed that it was no longer in its original wrapping and smiled to himself. When she saw it, Claire inhaled sharply but was otherwise relaxed.

“I have dreamed of you like this. What would I do with you if I had ye naked and willing?” Jamie flicked it on, surprised at first by the speed.

“Turn it lower.” She told him.

Jamie tried but the damn thing had no directions on it, no instinctive buttons. He made a sound of frustration.

Claire lifted her head and noticed his difficulty. She laughed softly.

“Here,” She thrust her palm out and took it, “let me do it.”

She deftly pressed and turned until it was set the way she wanted it and handed it back to him, brows raised. He briefly thought of teasing her about it but luckily sanity returned just in time.

Jamie was absolutely delighted that she had been experimenting. But he also had a care for her pride. Claire hated being backed into a corner and he had no intention of doing that to her -- especially over this.

“Lie back.” He commanded as he got acquainted with it. Her thighs trembled and her core became slick and jumpy.

“Ye look so beautiful, Sassenach.” He told her as he blew air over her.
She made a sound of need and grabbed his head, pushing it down. He chuckled, but was strung tight every time he felt her hands pushing the back of his head.

He was as turned on as Claire. Finding it difficult to position the toy and himself separately, Jamie’s tongue grew numb.

“Please, Jamie!” She groaned.

“Anything!” He responded. “Tell me what ye need.”

“There, just oh God!” She wailed.

He grabbed her hand and thrust the toy into it.

“Come, lass, show me the right way.”

And then watched in fascination as she did, learning exactly what she liked and how to do it.

“I need you.” said on a groan. Her legs kicked out spasmodically.

He knew her body, could tell she was close. His arm was splayed over her from hip bone to hip bone, securing her and he tightened his grip as her body arched up, testing his hold. She liked this feeling, he knew, the safety of confinement, connection and commitment.

“I have ye Claire. I love watching ye like this. Show me. Let it go, aye?”

He put his head against her thigh, his eyes moving between her hands and her face as he thrust fingers where she needed them most.

Her body arched up and he kept her with him, not letting go for a second, fingers stretching in counterpoint to her movements.

She keened and her whole body flushed. He anchored her to the bed and she lost herself. He released his hold when she started whispering “Jamie, Jamie, Jamie....” Over and over again.

The smile on her face matched his. He gently slid home. He let out a surprised groan.

He’d never felt her so wired. It was exciting and completely different.

Claire was still reveling in what had happened and it was a minute or so before she realized the toy was still on, vibrating against the mattress. She made to turn it off but his warm hand closed over hers and moved it back to her core.

“Again?” He begged.

The pulsating shock of it against her skin and the answering sensation on him made him lose his breath.

He gritted his teeth, “Christ, Sassenach!”

“Like it?” She said equally breathless.

“Feels so good.” He confirmed. “So tight and everything tingles.”

His eyes were losing focus as he chased his pleasure. They were both panting into one another. The anticipation spreading from his center to his extremeties.
He thrust particularly hard and she pressed down on it even harder. She moved with him and his heart beat at a million miles an hour.

He grabbed both her hands in his, throwing them above her head. He tightened his fingers in between hers and began chanting in her ear. Words of joy, words of praise, words of longing, words of encouragement, words of entreaty. He thrust harder and harder still, her body and his on fire.

Then, in a louder voice he begged her, “Come wi’ me, Sorcha. Let me feel ye, please!”

He held out as long as he could but then stilled, unable to stop himself, too far gone to wait a second longer. His head fitted to hers as he groaned helplessly. He felt her hands cup his buttocks, pulling him tighter into her. Then a surprised moan as her release, slow and deep, began.

Some time later he heard her ask, “Who’s Sorcha?”

“Tis yer name in Gaelic.” He saw that she still looked confused. He kissed her tenderly and held her to him as her breathing slowed.

“It’s you. It’s always been you.”

**************

Claire planned an outing for them on Sunday. She was excited to introduce her two favorite men to one another. They drove a little way outside the city to a windswept park and met up with the Abernathys.

This was a fairly significant step for Claire, Jamie knew. Up until now, he met very few people from Claire’s life who had known Frank or had been a friend to Claire during her pregnancy and divorce. He’d met a few playgroup parents but he’d never gotten a vibe from them that they had known her back story. This was different and signified opening the door a bit wider to the time when the connections between them would become public. Claire watched as Joe took in the measure of the man who had occupied so much of her life these past several months.

Jamie greeted Joe with warmth. Joe, however, held his judgment in check as they engaged in small talk and then stumbled upon their mutual love of romantic high seas adventures. That alone might not have persuaded Joe. However, coupled with Jamie’s masterful touch with Gayle, the deal was sealed.

Gayle, at eight months pregnant was experiencing the challenges of adjusting her balance to the gravitational shifts caused by the baby. She’d been, as Scots would say, fratchety of late and an overt reminder to take extra care of herself or the baby was usually met with a little bite in response. Joe watched, slightly bemused, as Jamie handled her like a pro. He gave her extra water, kept all the picnic food within easy reach of her arm, even estimating her inability to lean over the table well. Jamie made sure she was able to shift in and out of the picnic bench easily, knew where the restroom was, and even sweet talked her into an extra helping of chicken and he did it all without once making Gayle aware that he was up to anything. A very smooth mover was Claire’s man.

Joe caught the end of the story she was relaying to Jamie.

“Well, that was it. I guess I fell in love with him when he was looking the other way.” Gayle was saying. Joe smiled and reached over to pat Gayle’s hand.

“Oh I was looking the whole time, and you know it. Your big brown eyes sucked me right in.” Joe
looked at Jamie and smiled. “Until you fall in love with someone with brown eyes you think brown eyes are boring. But then you realize there is nothing that compares with the warmth and comfort of them.”

Gayle sighed a little and Joe caught Jamie looking at Claire a sweet and shy smile on his face.

Claire surprised them with kites. Joe and Jamie unfurled their fighter kites and quickly learned how to maneuver the reels. They were playing like little kids, dive bombing and swooping down on one another, talking and laughing.

Jamie watched as Faith sidled up to him. He conceded the field to Joe who reeled his own kite in and sat beside Gayle as they watched Jamie kneel down beside his daughter.

He placed his hands over hers to help her get the feel of it. Pulling left and right while it dove and looped and rode the air currents. When she tired of it, Jamie loosened his hold a little bit to let her try and reel it in.

“Da! It’s not working.” Faith’s tongue was trapped between her upper teeth and her lip, brow furrowed in concentration as she tried without any success to use her muscles to pull it in.

Gayle smiled at him and Joe knew she was imagining Joe doing the same with their little one.

Claire had just finished throwing away their garbage and had the picnic basket packed up and resting nearby. She was standing just behind Jamie and Faith. She had the feeling Jamie was talking to her but his eyes never left the kite aloft in the clouds.

“Aye, lass kites are fun. But in the end, ye always need someone on the ground holding the strings.”

His body was completely absorbed in the task of rolling in the lines, swaying in accompaniment to his arm movement as he finished his thought, “someone who’ll let out the line to send ye soaring as high as ye can in the skies but who’s also strong enough to reel ye in.” Just then he looked up and caught Claire’s eyes. “Takes a good touch.”

“You can do it.” Faith reassured him.

Jamie looked at her and wagged his eyebrows.

“Aye, that I can.”

Joe caught Claire’s eye and they both smiled at Jamie’s self-aware clumsy attempt to send her a message. Captain subtle.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught Jamie’s head turning. His eye had been distracted by three ravens sitting upon their picnic basket. Claire was enchanted by the birds. Jamie, however, picked up a rock and threw it forcefully scattering them. He had a look of extreme distaste on his face.

“What?” She asked.

“Bad luck. Harbinger of troubles or death.” Jamie immediately crossed himself as Claire stared agog.

“Jamie?” She exclaimed.

He seemed to come back into himself with a surprised shake and caught sight of Joe and Gayle,
Claire and Faith looking at him.

“Highlanders are a wee bit superstitious.” He gave them a self-deprecating smile.

“Up for a climb?” Jamie asked.

He pointed to a spot well away from the direction the ravens had gone, Claire noticed. Jamie grabbed a blanket and walked alongside Gayle, keeping an arm on her while Joe kept Claire company, holding Faith’s hand.

They all lay out against the grass and stared up at the clouds.

“Adso!” Faith called out looking at a cloud that had a tail.

“A dynoaiser.” Claire added.

“A dove.” Gayle called.

Jamie said, “A feather.”

“A heart.” Joe pointed overhead.

All in all, a better ending than the three ravens that had spooked Jamie.

**************

When they arrived back home, Claire took a little time to weed the courtyard and Jamie started packing up his stuff.

“Where you going?” Faith asked.

“Back to my flat.”

“No, Da!” She said, immediately tearing up. “You stay!” She grabbed his stuff and started unpacking it immediately.

“Shhh lass, it’s ok.” Jamie knelt down and stopped her from throwing the last of his things on the floor.

He felt awful but there was no upside in letting Faith know that.

“I’ll be by for dinner in a couple of days.” He reminded her.

“Pease stay?” Faith was wailing louder now.

“I canna.” Jamie told her firmly.

“I go with you?” She asked. Jamie’s heart squeezed.

That option had never occurred to either he or Claire. He wasn’t sure what she’d think of the idea but today wasn’t the time to ask. Given Faith’s issues with transitions, they’d need to work up to it and both be prepared.

“What of poor Adso, then? He’d miss you.” Jamie told her instead.

“He’ll come.” She said as if the solution was obvious.
Jamie uttered an amused chuckle even as he shook his head.

“Nay, lass. His place is here, as is yours.” He started repacking his now unfolded clothes.

Claire came through the door just as Faith finished upending his duffle which hit the floor with a smacking sound. She let out a surprised wail and then started crying in earnest.

These mood swings were becoming more and more prevalent and he didn’t know if it was in reaction to the unfolding situation between himself and Claire or simply her age that was responsible.

Claire took in the mess and but before she could ask any questions, Faith was pushing Claire aside and went toward her room. The crying had stopped so Claire let her have a little time to compose herself.

Jamie started packing yet again but she placed a hand on his arm and stopped his busy work. She pulled him into an embrace, her skin still warm from her time outside.

“Want to tell me about it?” She asked softly.

“No, Sassenach, it’ll pass.”

He pulled away and finished the last of the repacking and then closed the duffle securely before Faith could make more mischief.

“Well, I should be off.” He told her. “Thank ye for a great, great weekend.” He smiled as he leaned in to kiss her.

“I’m ready!” Faith announced as she dragged a shopping bag full of assorted clothing, toys and one very confused feline into the room.

“Where are you going?” Claire asked, amused at first.

“Home with Da.” Faith said as if it was obvious. “He said yes.”

Claire’s eyes shot to Jamie’s.

“No, Faith I dinna. I said ye needed to stay with your mother. We’ve talked about lying before.” Jamie turned his laser gaze on her and Faith started to weep.

Jamie was caught between wanting to underscore a lesson he was trying to teach her and wanting to hug her tight and reassure her.

“You stay or I go, pease Da!” She repeated and flew off into another crying jag. She grabbed at his legs and cried “Pease don’t go away.”

Jamie looked at Claire who gave him a helpless kind of a shrug and made no move to intervene. So much for team parenting. He thought. It was impossible to not be moved by Faith’s upset. It was the toddler equivalent of how the adult in him was feeling about it, too.

His eyes started to well up and he knew he needed to do something, anything to not let the tears fall. It would only frighten Faith and confuse her. He kept his eyes on Claire because he could not do this if he had to look at Faith.

“Stop crying!” He said in a forceful overly loud voice, one he’d never used in front of Faith before. She closed her mouth.
“I need to go, Faith.” This said in a firm but not unkind tone.

Jamie started moving quickly to the door. He’d never left her without a hug and he didn’t want to do it now but he also could not put her through the whole leave taking thing all over again. She was just beginning to react to his movement, he could sense she would catch him if he lingered even a second and the difficult transition process would begin again. There was nothing he could do to ease the loss. He needed to go, it would be upsetting but at least he could make sure it wasn’t a long, dragged out process.

He gritted his teeth and made himself open the door and go through.

“I love you, and I’ll see you soon, nighean.” He said in as gentle a voice as his emotions would allow and closed the door behind him.

He practically ran to the sidewalk so he didn’t have to hear her distress.

Yes, he was a coward.

“Och, Jamie, lad ye arena any such thing.” Jenny told him a half hour later when he called to talk to her.

“I just--- she was standing there covered wi’ tears and snot. It was like I was shot out of a cannon, I was moving away so fast.”

“On wee Jamie’s first day of preschool I wasna concerned. He was excited and he’d never had a problem with moving one place to the other before. He’s a braw laddie, ken?”

“Mmphm.” Jamie replied.

“So if anyone was to be crying it woulda been me. I walked him inside, helping him find his cubby and put his lunch away. I was congratulating myself for not being a weeping fool when he just threw himself at my feet crying and carrying on like I was abandoning him on a street corner. I’m just looking down at him wondering what to do and he’s getting wetter and wetter with his tears and his face all red and his teacher says to me, “Go. The sooner he canna see you the quicker he’ll move on with his day.” She was right. When I came to pick him up he was happy as could be and couldna wait to come back the next day.”

“I was hoping Claire would rescue me from having to play the bad cop.” Jamie confided.

“Oh? You and she discussed it beforehand?”

“Well, no, not exactly.” Jamie admitted.

“She doesna strike me as stupid, your Claire. Maybe she just didna ken what ye were thinking.” Jenny speculated.

“Perhaps not.” Jamie conceded.

“And knowing you, brother, you jumped into the fire straight away and did what ye thought was best before letting anyone else catch up.” Jenny observed. “Jamie, it will be fine. You are kind and patient and a wonderful father, truly.”

Jamie scoffed but Jenny knew he was pleased anyway.

“Faith will get used to whatever schedule you and Claire decide is best. It won’t always feel like
yer ripping your own arm off. I promise.”

“Aye, well, I’ll hold ye to it.” Jamie told her.

**********************

On Wednesday Jamie went to Claire’s and was delighted to find her cooking dinner in the kitchen.

“Sassenach, I thought Mrs. Crooke was picking Faith up?”

“Well she did but I did get home a little early and thought I would at least get supper together. Chicken ok?”

Jamie kissed her, “Aye! I’ll just put my bag in the bedroom and wash up.”

Later, after several glasses of wine, as they were getting ready for bed, a slightly worse for wear Claire accidentally tripped over the bag. Her legs got tangled in the strap and set it scuttling across the bedroom floor. It upended and papers started spilling out. She bent over to put them back in when her eye caught on the title.

*Fraser Trust f/b/o Claire Beauchamp and Faith Julia Beauchamp* attached to the back of it was Jamie’s Last Will and Testament. Claire was not a nosy person. She herself was a stickler for privacy in the worksite and would never countenance a violation of that willingly at home, either. But the documents were about her. Her and Faith and she sat down on the bed and read.

“What the hell is this?” Claire shot up as soon as Jamie came into the room. He had the grace to turn a bit red but his gaze was steady as was his voice.

“It’s what it looks like.” He confirmed.

“I don’t want your money.” She told him flatly.

“Aye.” He agreed.

“Then why did you leave half of your estate to me and half to Faith?” She asked.

“Claire, you are the mother of my child and she is my child. All I want is to protect the two of you.” He told her reasonably. “I knew when I saw them I must do it now.”

“Saw who?”

“The ravens.” Jamie said as if she should’ve known the answer already.

“What?” Claire was completely bewildered.

“At our picnic. When I saw them, it reminded me how short life can be. I’ve been remiss. I shoul da thought to do so long before this week but when I saw them I kent I couldna wait another week. I’ve come close to dying, Claire. I needed to do something.”

“What?” Claire hadn’t sensed anything more than a general tiredness of late which she’d chalked up to late hours and stress. She was alarmed now. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing has happened. But the point is we never know what fate has planned for us.” Jamie said darkly.
“But Jamie why all this? You deeded Lallybroch to Faith?”

“No! It’s yours as long as you are alive. And for Jenny and Ian while they live as well.” He corrected. “Ye ken solicitors have their own language, it’s worded according to their custom and yes, eventually, it will be shared equally by our----it will be Faith’s.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed but she moved on to another point.

“You named Jenny and Ian as guardians for Faith?”

“Well who else?” Jamie asked. “If you and I were dead, who else do ye want to care for Faith? Jesus, Claire you yourself are an orphan and ye dinna have family that I am aware of. Surely you can understand why I would want to make sure there are provisions in place to protect Faith?”

“You didn’t want to discuss this with me beforehand?” Claire’s face was burning. Jamie looked at her. She was pissed.

“Perhaps I should have.” He conceded. “But can ye honestly tell me you’d name someone else?”

“Jamie you talk about being a team and co-parenting. You are usually so agreeable and deferential to me that when there are issues with Faith I sometimes feel like there is something wrong with me because I am not intuitively on the same page as you. Here is a perfect example where we should be working together and you don’t think to include me. Unlike me, somehow I don’t think you are going to be up late at night castigating yourself for not being a better team player. You think you are right and being right means everything to you. And for the record, I know how to balance a checkbook.”

“What has that to do with anything?” He asked bewildered.

“You appointed Ian as trustee, Jamie. Why not just make a sign that says “she’s a gold digger” and hang it around my neck instead? I don’t want any of your money. I never asked for anything. Take my name off. But I’ll tell you this-- it hurts to see in black and white what you really think of me. You don’t trust me at all-- not even to oversee what you’ve left for Faith.” Claire was fuming now.

“Are ye mad, woman? Yer a surgeon Sassenach. I dinna think you’d care to turn CEO and spend all yer time in an office crunching numbers and expanding production markets. Christ talking with ye is like hitting my heid against a brick wall. Look, Claire I did what I thought was right. If ye want to think I’ve treated ye ill because of that then that’s your right. But that wasna my intention!”

“Jamie how do you expect us to create an environment of trust together when you don’t trust me at all? Whether it’s resolving discipline issues with Faith or handling her money. And tell me, what is it with men and money? I told Frank to go to hell when he used to tear into me because I out earned him even though I turned over my paychecks to him to deal with and God knows if I could have pulled that lawsuit and stopped him from making that about the money, I would have. It’s not any different, you and Frank both use money as a means for control.” Claire was pacing the bedroom carpet at a furious clip so she missed seeing the horrified expression come over Jamie’s face.

“I. Am. Nothing. Like. Frank.” He was standing stock still, his hands balled tightly at his sides, sweat broke out on his forehead and his color had gone from pale to red.

“No? You both feel free to make decisions on my behalf without consulting me. You both have a way of keeping your thoughts hidden from me and then making me feel as if I’ve wronged you!”

“Sassenach,” Jamie choked out, “do ye even ken what yer saying?” When she was angry these days, she lashed out and he was her preferred target and maybe she’d had enough to drink to be
careless but, still, her words hurt.

“I’m saying stop treating me like the plus one on the invite list. I’m not a wee lassie” Claire said in cruel mimic, “I’m a doctor, which means I must be reasonably intelligent. I don’t need your protection! Stop making decisions about me without consulting me. I won’t stand for it, as well you know. Come talk to me, I will listen. I don’t need to lead but I have to walk beside someone, I can’t walk behind anyone ever again.”

Claire’s arms were crossed tight against her body and the angry set of her jaw said she was primed to tear into him some more.

Jamie was exhausted. Their bedroom, her bedroom would not be the quiet refuge they both needed tonight and he decided to cut the day’s losses and go. It had been a brutal week and was only half over. An argument with Claire swinging out of the blue left him completely sapped.

He silently packed up the paperwork she’d uncovered. He reslung his messenger bag over his shoulder as he made ready to go. His eyes cast over her body from feet to riot of curls. He softly kissed the top of her head, her arms stayed tucked under her bosom but he patted them anyway.

“I’m no trying to lead nor make ye follow. I dinna mean to upset ye. I’m going to go back to my place so you can get a good night’s sleep. I’m sorry I upset you.”

Jamie crossed to the door but then changed his mind and came back to stand in front of her.

“I’d lay the world at yer feet if I could. If it makes ye feel any better, Sassenach, most of my estate is just the Slainte shares. So that’s all Ian’ll be managing as trustee. There’s no’ much cash, at least not right now. I ken you provide very well for yourself and Faith all on your own. Ye dinna need me for that. But, even so, it makes me feel better that I’ve done what I could so that if Slainte eventually does cash flow and I’m dead, it’ll be there for you if you ever should need it. Ye said you hoped Faith would come to think of Lallybroch as her home?”

Jamie searched her eyes and she nodded in agreement, she meant every word of that.

“If I’m no around to…..” Jamie looked away finding this hard to think about. “If she has to grown up without me, the one thing I can do is make sure she has a place to call home. And I thought maybe….you might--- That ye felt something for the place yourself and I had to be sure you kent you could come and go as ye pleased.”

Jamie wasn’t looking at her but Claire felt emotion stirring inside him just beneath the skin and bone of him.

“I may never be able to tell you everything that is in my heart.” He whispered as if uncertain he should be saying anything at all. “Even if I tried to make a start, I wake up every morning and find more things inside it than the day before.”

Jamie cupped her jaw and then traced her cheekbones. He smiled a little sadly. Claire felt her own pulse thumping wildly in her veins.

“Your face is my heart, Claire but how can I tell you these things? What can I say that doesna sound foolish when ye say it out loud? What I did with Lallybroch? It’s poor recompense for the miracle of the two of you in my life and it gives me comfort that at least now you know a little of what is in here.” He touched his own heart and kissed her hard, then backed out the door.
It had been almost two weeks since the disturbing conversation she and Jamie had in her room. Jamie had not been absent, at least not from Faith’s life. No. That situation continued on as usual. But he had not stayed overnight since. Once Faith was asleep, he returned to his flat.

Last Saturday, for the very first time, Faith had spent the night at Jamie’s. She’d even taken Adso with her. For the first time in her adulthood, Claire was utterly and completely alone for a weekend with no duties to tend to. She’d hated every hour of it, staring at the clock. She missed her daughter. She also missed Jamie. She had to turn her phone off and tuck it away in a drawer to stop herself from obsessively checking it and sending texts to him. Feeling isolated and uncertain of her next steps, she began to wonder if she was looking at this the right way.

“For you, Lady Jane, I have all day,” Joe stood and came around his desk and led Claire over to the sitting area. “What’s up?”

He listened as she filled him in. He hummed and grunted at all the right spots.

“Joe, he should have talked to me first!”

“Yes, he should have.”

“How can he expect us to parent as a team when he doesn’t?”

“I’ll be honest, LJ I see these as two different things. The will and the trust-- I am tempted to say “I’m a doctor, not a lawyer, Jim!” Claire smiled at him and made the Spock sign in jest.

“Look, set aside the mechanism. I cannot fault him for wanting to legally protect you and Faith. You never should have let Frank walk away with all the money.”

Claire’s sense of outrage was such that all she could do was utter a high squeak of indignation. Joe laughed, not to piss her off but because she was being so adorably Claire at the moment.

“Stop, LJ! I’m not talking about the settlement with Preservation, UK. I am talking about all the rest of the assets. You should have taken more in the divorce than a flat with a mortgage. I don’t think he was saying he didn’t trust you. Lawyers do things a certain way and I am not sure it’s fair to blame him for how things get phrased. Whatever else those documents were, they were not a condemnation of you as a person. Don’t forget, now I’ve seen for myself the way he looks at you.”

“How does he look at me?” She asked momentarily distracted from her high dungeon.

“Like you hung the moon just for him.” Joe answered. “On the parenting and presenting a united front? Well, I can’t fault him there, either.”

“Mmmm?”

“Gayle and I did this thing when we got pregnant. Maybe you’ll find it helpful for you, too. We went to visit a parenting coach.”

Claire smiled at Joe and he returned the favor. Gayle hired a coach for everything from organizing the spice cabinets to developing her career.

“This one was really helpful.” Joe told her. “We did talk a lot about things like our discipline philosophies, how to tackle chores and baby duties, expectations we had of one another as parents. She had a great analogy and I’ll paraphrase as best I can. She said we were like the pilots of an
airplane and the child was sitting in the back. Our job is to control the plane so it can fly as smoothly as possible until the end of the journey. Pilots keep all important decisions up in the cockpit. She asked us to imagine sitting on a plane and overhearing an argument between pilots over the intercom.”

Claire chuckled trying to picture that.

“Yea, exactly. So whatever you do, don’t scare the passenger. You must be firmly in charge, use clear communication, keep turbulence incidents to a minimum. Seems to me that Jamie understands that and he’s right. Have you ever made a list of the important things you want to have Faith understand growing up?”

“No, I’ve never really thought of it.” Claire told him.

“Well do. She had each of us make a list of the top ten personal traits we wanted our child to have by the time he was grown. The two of you should compare lists and then you can figure out which things are most important and how you will help support one another to see that she learns what you think is important.”

“Like what kinds of things and how will we ever agree on what is important?”

“You two already agree on at least one thing.”

Claire raised her brows.

“Neither one of you can tolerate lies. He has told you it’s important to him that Faith be truthful. And I know you feel very strongly about the need for honest words between you and Jamie. Start there.” He suggested.

********************************************************************

When Claire rounded the corner she was surprised to see Ian waiting just outside Faith’s daycare. It was too late to adopt an expression of composure so Claire didn’t even try. Seeing her face, Ian tried to soothe her.

“I happened to be walking by when I noticed the time and thought I might just catch you. I promise, wasn’t lying in wait. Would you let me walk you and my niece home?”

Faith, naturally was thrilled to see him. It took a block and a half before the novelty of telling Uncan all about her day wore off and he was able to turn back to Claire.

“I canna remember a time in my life when he wasna there, he and Jenny. Our parents were close.” Ian began. “The Laird Broch Tuarach and his bride were quite the romantic story in our parish. Everyone kent how both their families disowned them. The only selfish thing Brian Fraser ever did was fall in love with Ellen. She was the only thing he ever wanted for himself alone. I wonder if he thought losing Ellen and his sons was God exacting a price for their being together? Brian raised them to think of responsibility, duty, honor and obligation. It goes way back, hundreds of years of tradition. Whenever a personal desire clashes with a larger obligation, Frasers have a harder time than most reconciling how they feel and what they must do. Ye ken Frasers are a stubborn lot?” He observed.

Claire snorted.

“Stubborn? Pain-in-the-ass mule is more like it!” She declared. Ian chuckled.
“Aye, sometimes if you kick their backsides they might budge.”

“Really? In my experience the most you get is bit for your trouble.”

Ian nodded, “They do stand firm when they think they are right, and it’s rare for them to think they are ever wrong.”

They walked a few paces in silence.

“I’m not mad at you, Ian. Or Jenny.” Claire hoped he knew that but said so anyway. “And I do not care about the money. I never did.” Her cheeks pinkened. “What I can’t forgive him for was not trusting me. I’m not about to quit my job and go off the deep end spending Faith’s inheritance. And I do trust you both. If Jamie and I died you would be wonderful parents to Faith.”

Her hands gestured wildly in frustrated counterpoint to her words.

“But he just did it, never asked my opinion, never said a word. Why not tell me what he had done? It’s been hard for me to wrap my head around it. And it’s not like this is a new personality quirk of his. Sometimes he acts like a dictator. He says he wants us to be a team, to be partners but he wants to control all the decisions!” Claire’s face was heated. Her chest flushed with upset.

She couldn’t believe all the things she had just blurted out. Why was she spilling all this out to Ian of all people? He was in Jamie’s corner not hers.

Then she thought about it a half a second. Because, Jamie wasn’t ready to talk to her about this yet. All their conversations lately had been about Faith’s schedule. He’d been politely distant for the last two weeks. Leaving right when she got home from work, taking every one of her calls but she’d noticed he didn’t pick up the phone or text just to talk to her. Ian was as near as she could get to a conversation on this with Jamie.

“He meant it kindly, Claire. He wasn’t telling you he didn’t trust you, he was telling you he didn’t want to burden you.” Ian said softly, his eyes resting on Faith as she turned back toward them wondering at their slow pace. Claire’s eyebrows rose.

“I’m no sure how much ye ken about the situation at Slainte?”

“I don’t care but I don’t think I’m business oriented. When Jamie speaks of it my mind tends to wander off.” Ian smiled at her blush.

“There is a competing product in France. Well funded. There have been a number of hacks into our system trying to get the exact compounds. We think it’s the Babbelas guys. They are better connected for US markets and we are concerned Slainte will lose the ability to control the market.” Ian noticed Claire’s eye starting to glaze over.

He stopped then in the middle of the sidewalk, watching to be sure Faith had held up and not crossed into the street. She had.

“To maintain our edge and expand to US markets, Jamie will need to leverage the company.” Claire gave him a vague look. “Borrow against the value of the stock or sell equity in the company to outside investors to raise cash.” He clarified. “An over-leveraged company is weaker and might become a takeover target. Jamie is worried that he’ll lose control of the company. If that happens, Jamie can’t protect our employees from being reassigned, relocated or fired. We have over 300 employees. They are his responsibility. Even if everything works out, Jamie has to also plan for unthinkable things like what happens if he dies. His death would be very problematic for the company.”
“Aside from the obvious, why?” Claire asked.

“Because his shares are valuable but the company has no cash to buy them from his estate. Jamie is uninsurable, you ken.”

“Sorry, you lost me.”

“In most companies, in Slainte as well, the company buys life insurance on key employee owners. There are shareholder agreements that require the heirs to sell shares back to the company. That way the company can keep operating and the family gets the cash it needs to survive, to administer the estate and pay the death taxes, Jamie’s cancer makes him uninsurable. Without the cash to buy the shares, whoever inherits Jamie’s estate controls the shares and the company. Slainte is worth millions Claire, surely ye must ken that?”

“I honestly never gave it a thought.” She told him.

“Well, you’ll take my word then. The company has value but we reinvest all our cash earnings in expanding the production. If we dinna do that then our competitors will outpace us and the company willna keep its doors open for long. Figuring out how to protect his legacy and his people, Claire, all his people that was what he needed to do. So he made me trustee. I work there, I understand the issues and I ken his dream is to keep things going for our employees and their families as much as for the Fraser clan. He made the best choice for them and Faith-- and even for you, Claire. If he’d named you as trustee, you’d have to manage the company. If ye drift off when he is trying to discuss it with you, he likely understands ye’d hate to have to run things. It wasn’t what you were meant to do and he kens that.”

“What about Lallybroch?” Claire asked.

“Claire, if something happened to Jamie tomorrow can you honestly tell me you’d feel comfortable going back and forth with Faith unless you knew for sure it was yours as much as ours?” Claire’s hot blush was all the answer he needed.

“I still don’t understand why he wouldn’t just talk to me. Tell me what he wanted to do before he did it.”

Ian snorted.

“He came to me before telling his Da about the cancer. The wee idiot wanted to know if maybe I could help him keep it a secret from his family so they wouldn’t have to be burdened with his care or worry for him. You ken about Fergus and John?”

She nodded.

“When he was sick, he developed a real aversion to needing to ask anyone for help and an even bigger commitment to taking care of those he has helped. He’s a good man, Claire, one of the best I’ve ever known. He isn’t inclined to spend a lot of time discussing what needs to be done beforehand. He never complains, he just gets on with it. It was never about thinking you were anything other than capable and intelligent and responsible. He just wanted to find the best way to protect everything around him as best he could.”

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Claire was running late and Jamie had to cover for her today. She knew he’d not minded grabbing Faith but it would be yet another change in their routine. Nothing was working out as Claire had hoped. Everything felt off and she wished it could be like it had been right when she and Jamie first
started dating. Faith was suffering the most as she was the one caught in the confusion. Claire kept hoping her temper tantrums would start to ease.

As she opened the door, her heart fell. So much for that hope, she could hear Faith crying already. They were in the kitchen when she came in. Faith was in full meltdown mode.

Claire hadn’t even opened her mouth to ask when Faith blurted it out.

“Da hit me!”

“What?!?” Jamie and Claire exclaimed at the same time.

Claire looked at Faith, really looked. Her left cheek did seem a bit redder than the right. She took in the disarray around the table and gave Jamie an even harder look. She saw the hurt and the anguish in his eyes.

Claire made a decision. She asked Jamie to give her five minutes and she picked Faith up to take her to her room. When she came back Jamie had his back turned and was looking out the window by the sink.

“Ye speak of trust Claire but ye dinna ken the first thing about it. I ken I’ve made mistakes with you and with Faith. But never did I imagine you’d think me capable of such an act.” The set of his shoulders communicated defeat.

“Turn around.” She asked. “Please, Jamie, I have some things to say and I won’t do it talking to your back.”

He turned slowly, she flinched seeing his expression. He was so angry his lips were white. There was a tick in the corner of his eye and his breathing was erratic.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” She asked.

“What do you think happened? I didna buy red apples this time, I bought green ones. Ye came home just as she finished looking through the fridge.” He looked miserable and she didn’t dare laugh but sometimes what set Faith off was so odd that it was funny.

“I understand now why you were so concerned with teaching her how serious the consequences of a lie could be. I am sorry that I didn’t take it as seriously as you needed me to.” Claire said. Jamie’s expression changed immediately.

“You dinna think that I hit----”

“Of course not.”

“Then why not just say so when she was here?”

“I said so when I told her to stay in her room until her Da and I had figured out what her punishment should be. I-- uh wasn’t sure how you wanted to handle it and I thought we’d discuss it first then go talk to her together, if that’s ok with you?”

Jamie’s eyes got very wet but he didn’t try and speak, only nodded. Claire walked forward and put her arms around him. He let out a lovely moan of pleasure that she was in complete agreement with.

They stood together for a few minutes enjoying the feel of one another. She lay her head against
his chest, her ear listening to his heart. Hers beating louder when his hand came to hold her head even closer.

“Then when that’s done, would you stay?”

“Did ye need something else?”

He tried to wrap his head around the fact that she was the one asking. He hadn’t deliberately set out to play hard to get. He had been trying to experiment with easing the transitions for Faith by having her spend time in different spaces hoping that physical change from one space to another would ease tantrums. That meant he spent less time at Claire’s.

“Yes. You. I’ve missed you. But I’ve missed us more.” Came the muffled reply from his chest.

Claire laughed as she heard how his heart responded in double time to that admission.
The first photograph appeared in a local blog highlighting last week’s fundraiser for Claire’s hospital. The event was a charity ball that Slainte had agreed to sponsor before Jamie had even met Claire. They arrived separately, sat at the same table but Joe and Gayle were interspaced between them. He hadn’t been paying her undue attention. There was nothing overt in the setup that might have made them take extra precautions.

Claire looked beautiful in a simple black dress and peek-a-boo pumps. They’d each gotten up at various times to mingle through the crowd during the course of the evening. He’d wanted to stay at her side but he resisted that urge. Jamie was aware of the unconscious pull of her, drawing his eye again and again whenever she was near. But he couldn’t help that, he’d have a better chance defeating gravity.

She knew almost everyone in the room, it seemed to Jamie. He overheard more than one person complimenting her skill or thanking her for her care of them or a family member.

Joe had taken up the task of introducing their sponsor to all the board members, patrons and important staff. Jamie charmed them, danced with everyone from shy administrators to avaricious wives. Having dispatched his duties, he was free to finally ask her to dance without raising any eyebrows. At least, that had been the hope. He’d been itching to have Claire in his arms all evening. It was a slow one and Jamie meant to enjoy every second of it. Looking at the picture, he clearly had.

“It wouldn’a help to tell ye that yer a muckle sized clot-heid. What’s done is done.” Murtagh concluded as he clicked through to show him.

A sea of mmphms went around the room as Ian, Fergus and then finally Jamie looked their fill.

“Well, at least it’s a decent picture of you both.” Offered Fergus.

Ian smiled at his brother in law and Jamie shrugged. It was a beautiful picture, in any other context.

He and Claire were pressed up against each other, quite striking as the lights glowed behind them.
One of her hands was resting on his shoulder and the other held firmly in his, snuggled up against his heart. A warm embrace to be sure and maybe that would have gone unnoticed save for the look of rampant desire and adoration in both their eyes.

Jamie, as it turned out, had been looking at a lot of pictures lately. He was putting together a slideshow for Ian and Jenny. This coming weekend was their tenth anniversary and to celebrate they were hosting a dinner. Very small, family only. But that would include Ian’s parents, John and Margaret Murray.

Jamie was looking forward to getting away with Claire. They’d each juggled their schedules and taken a week off, starting tomorrow. It had been the best summer of his life in many ways but not a restful one. He missed the simple pleasures of swimming and hiking around Lallybroch, wanted to show Faith all the things his own parents had done with them when he was a lad.

It would also ease his sister’s mind, he knew, if he were there while she and Ian took off for a couple of days to Paris alone. Though, it wasn’t really necessary. Laoghaire, John and Meg would be there, too. This further widened the circle around Faith of those who knew the story. But the Murrays had known Jamie and Jenny their whole lives and stood as particular friends to Brian and Ellen.

As part of the slide show, Jamie wanted to include pictures of Faith. He’d asked Claire what she had that he could use. Claire shared her digital album. The folder contained about three hundred pictures of Faith but only two dozen of Claire herself growing up.

There were three of Claire with her mother, all taken somewhere between the toddler and preschool years. Her mother was quite beautiful. Lithe and feminine. In the black and white saturation, Jamie got only a hint of what her natural coloring would be. There was a gap with no pictures from Claire’s infancy and none of her father at all.

Then starting at about the first grade time period, several pictures appeared with Claire and a gentleman he assumed was Lamb. Yet none were taken in a conventional English setting. The backgrounds varied, he saw desert landscapes, mountainous regions and lush forests. In some pictures it was just Claire, in others she was part of larger groups. In her teenaged years she looked slightly uncomfortable caught in the camera’s lens.

There was a picture of Claire on what had to be her wedding day to Frank judging by the boutonnieres in his and Lamb’s lapels. She looked heartbreakingly young and …. happy. Radiant if he allowed himself to be honest. He tried not to focus too much on the ones of her life with Frank but he couldn’t seem to help himself. Jamie rolled through these quickly, slowing down near the end of the folder.
There was one picture of Frank holding a positive pregnancy test, grinning from ear to ear. One of Claire’s flat belly with an ultrasound wand rolling in goop and, in the distance, a computer monitor too far away to show anything. Sadly, she seemed to have only of herself really pregnant. It was of her and Gayle at some reception. He loved how clearly the picture showed the outline of her beautiful belly, fabric stretched tight.

“Da, I’m done!” Faith announced coming into the living room trailed by Adso.

“Ah. Did ye remember to fill the water dish?” Jamie inquired.

Faith gestured to her wet pants where she clearly spilled water in the attempt.

“Uh-huh.” She confirmed.

Jamie smiled and turned her show on, conveniently allowing him to finish up the project for Jenny and Ian.

He copied six of Claire’s pictures for what he needed and added a few more he’d taken of the three of them, of Claire and Faith at Lallybroch and of himself and Faith as well. Then it hit him. He ran through the pictures one more time to be sure. There were almost no pictures of just Claire and Faith between the time she was born and the time he met them. Every other picture was Faith alone or together with other people. He recognized Joe, some of the other children at the daycare, a terrific one with the nurses in the NICU.

He felt again that sudden fury at Frank Randall, no doubt exacerbated by seeing proof of the fact that at one point in time, he’d made her happy and they’d built a life together. Jamie knew it was irrational but he also knew his feelings arose from more than just jealousy. How would his daughter feel when she looked back as an adult and had such a spartan record of her own beginning?

He transferred all the pictures he had to Claire’s folder and then immediately ordered a real photo book for Claire full of the best pictures from both of their collections. Jamie vowed to do a better job creating such memories in the future, helping Claire tell Faith the story of her family.

He was just finishing up when his phone started pinging. When he counted five in quick succession he knew something had happened. With a sense of dread he opened the text.

*Slainte Founder Dating Mystery Woman*

*Jamie Fraser, Entrepreneur of the Year, Done Playing the Field?*

*Who’s That Girl-Woman?*

His heart sank. All three of the biggest papers had the photo. The last headline was from *The Daily Mirror*, with a Jack Randall byline and trotted out a chorus line of the sweet young things that
were, prior to meeting Claire, his “go to” choice for public appearances. They were all from a local modeling agency that Slainte had a reciprocal marketing agreement with. The headline was deliberately baiting but if he were honest, Jamie would admit there was some truth to it.

The women were usually around ten years younger than he. That had more to do with the fact that models started careers in their late teens and early twenties and not due to any preferences of his. Jamie had never dated a single one of the ladies he was paired up with. Usually the arrangement was a two-four appearance deal with the model. It worked well. There was never any expectation of a real relationship and the press scrutiny was never an invasion of privacy since both parties wanted the exposure.

Jamie “read” all three of the articles, each less than 100 words and then sent a couple of texts out to Fergus and Murtagh concerning “damage control.” It was a very good thing they would be leaving in the morning and out of town for awhile.

Jamie was already making dinner by the time he realized he hadn’t warned Claire about the articles. If anyone had contacted the papers tipping them to her identity, she’d be caught unaware. He tried calling but her phone went right to VM. He sent a text and an email. Shit!

As dinner baked away in the oven, Jamie did his best not dwell on the fact that he hadn’t heard from Claire. He didn’t get worried until the food was cooked, oven off and Faith started to complain about being hungry. He grabbed crackers and a sweater.

“Come mo nighean, let’s take a ride and go find your mother.”

Jamie opened the door, ushering Faith out in front of him. He crashed into her in less than ten steps with an “Omph!” throwing his hand out to keep her on her feet.

“Mama?”

Jamie spun his head following Faith’s line of sight.

“Sassenach?”

Claire was in a crouch position, scrambling quickly to her feet and wiping her eyes as she rose. He watched as she forced a smile on her face.

“Oh, Faith. How are you?” Her voice sounded unnaturally loud and patently chipper and she would not look at him.

So, she’d seen the headlines. His stomach curdled. As gently as a man holding nitroglycerin, Jamie carefully ushered her into the flat.

“We were going to come get you, I’m hungry!” Faith told her.

“Well, then let’s go see what Da has made for supper.” Claire deliberately kept abreast of Faith, forcing Jamie to silently follow in their wake.

As he entered the kitchen Claire’s back was to him getting the food served. When she turned around her expression was grim and her eyes had a haunted look to them. He took the plates from her hands, placed Faith’s down, then theirs.

“Dinna stand on ceremony, Faith, dig in.” He instructed her then spun back quick as lightning and grabbed the countertop behind Claire. Neatly trapped, she was forced to stand still.
Jamie brought his head in close to her and whispered, “I’m sorry, Claire.”

She had a moment of clarity when she realized what he’d been thinking. She felt the soothing warmth of his body next to hers and moved her arms behind her, palming the backs of his hands in her own, leaning her body into his.

Joined, hands to hearts, Jamie’s nervous system relaxed instantly. He pressed his arms tight to her as her fingers squeezed his. She notched her chin against his shoulder.

“Not your fault.” She told him.

He sighed audibly and kissed the side of her head.

“Are you ok?” Jamie pulled back, wanting to look at her face.

Claire gave him a soft half-smile. “Later,” she promised.

Jamie had always been impressed with Claire’s ability to shelf the day’s troubles and focus on Faith. She engaged in small talk and kept Faith chattering away through the meal. She barely touched her food, though and her smile never reached her eyes.

Just as they were finishing up the landline rang. It was a shrill and unwelcome sound. Faith leapt from her chair and bolted for the handset.

“No Faith, don’t!” Claire exclaimed.

She shot Jamie a panicked look and ran after their daughter. She wasn’t quick enough, Faith was bringing the phone to her ear and Claire visibly reacted to the sound of the voice on the other end. She made a sudden grab of the handset and kept pulling until the phone detached from its mooring in a puff of drywall, leaving a mark in its wake. Faith let up a huge wail, badly frightened. Somewhere in the distance, she heard the phone start to ring again.

“Claire?”

“Don’t answer it.” Claire said as she dropped down by Faith to offer her some comfort.

Jamie was half listening to Claire’s soothing apologies to Faith, but he was intent on getting to the bedroom phone to play back the message.

“Dr. Randall, I know you are there. We both know you are hiding something. My cousin gave me all your contact info. You know how persistent I can be.” A pause and then in a much harsher tone he heard, “You also know that the truth carries a weight no lie can counterfeit. Either you can cooperate with me, or I shall be forced to use methods less pleasant than talk. Call me back.” He rattled off a series of numbers which Jamie didn’t bother to write down. Black Jack Randall. So he and Frank were related.

Jamie’s hands were involuntarily clenched in a tight fist. Fucking bastard! He forced himself to relax and uncurl his fingers. He walked into the hall and, seeing Claire occupied with Faith in the kitchen, quietly shut the door and placed a series of phone calls himself.

Faith was helping Claire at the sink but Jamie could see her hands were shaking as they passed the dishes under the faucet. He plucked the plate from her hands and turned the water off. As they made eye contact she shook her head imperceptibly. She wasn’t up to talking.

He held her gaze then announced, “Faith, lass change of plans. We’re going to surprise Uncan and
Aunt Jenny by driving up to Lallybroch tonight. Can you make sure to put Adso’s toys in that wee bag in your room?” Faith’s eyes got big and she let out a shout of glee.

“Adso and Kitty and Maggie!” Faith ran off to do as he asked.

The second Faith was down the hall, Claire’s body slumped into him and she let out a grateful sigh.

“Sassenach?” He ventured. “Just get yer things together. Faith is all packed up and I dinna need much. I’ll get started on loading the car.”

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An hour outside the city, Faith was sound asleep. Claire held her tongue until she was certain of that. Jamie had held himself in check the whole evening. His reserve and wellspring of patience never more appreciated than now. But she could feel him vibrating like a tuning fork, so, on a breath, she began.

“I hadn’t seen the papers, not until after he began to call me. I got out of surgery a bit early and when I looked at my phone I had ten missed calls. Eight of them were from Jack Randall. So was the call tonight at the house. You know who he is?”

“Aye, he’s made a particular sport of going after my grandsire. Simon Fraser, otherwise known as the notorious Lord Lovat. Jenny and I dinna know him well. He disowned our father when he wed our mother.”

Claire, never able to hold a blank face, had no hope of concealing her startlement at this piece of news but she didn’t dwell on it.

“I’d met Jack several times when I was married to Frank. They weren’t that close but they’re cousins or some such. I thought something had happened to Frank. I couldn’t imagine why else he would be calling me.”

Jamie let out a sigh. Kicking himself, no doubt, for not telling her about the picture earlier in the day. She placed a comforting hand on his leg assuaging his guilt.

“Don’t, Jamie. It won’t help. Seeing that picture, that was just the spark that made him curious, if it hadn’t been that it would have been something else. But hearing about his connection with Lord Lovat makes me wonder.”

“What do ye mean, Sassenach?”

“He did ask if we were dating. I got angry and told him it wasn’t any of his business. And he laughed and said fate was a funny thing and he couldn’t imagine how I had ended up in the company of the Frasers. He said I couldn’t hide forever. I hung up on him. He called back again and again. I turned off my phone.”

“That’s all he said? Asking were we dating?”

“Yes, in that first call that is all he said. I don’t think this is about Faith, Jamie. I guess I knew Jack was a reporter but Frank and I hadn’t really talked about it. Jack never reported on anything to do with the baby or the divorce and I know the clinic never gave your name to Frank. That part of the negotiations was kept completely separate. Besides, if Jack knew who you were, wouldn’t he have
just run with the story already? Maybe it’s some ax he has to grind with you or your grandfather?”

“But at the house, ye seemed scared. You pulled the phone off the wall, Sassenach. What else happened?”

“I was annoyed, not frightened at first. He called the hospital and posed as a family member of one of my patients. That got me back on the phone and he had this...tone in his voice. He said he knew things about me, about my past. He asked me who I really was. He knows perfectly well who I am! When I told him so, he laughed, and said we all have our secrets and mine would eventually be revealed to him. And the call ended and I headed home.”

“Did you think he was threatening you or only playing games with you to get you to tell him something?” Jamie tried to keep his mind from jumping to conclusions.

“Well, I certainly didn’t like how he was speaking to me, but it wasn’t until I listed to the message he left on my cell as I was arriving home that I got chills running up my back. Jamie, he said “Frank never told you, did he?” I have no idea what the hell he meant. And he also said “For the sake of my daughter I’d better call him back.” As he rang off he was humming this really old song. I know I know it but I can’t remember the words. I...think my parents sung it to me when I was a child. That is when it all started to scare me, Jamie. Even the song frightened me and I am not sure why.”

Jamie was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. Between the message on her cell and the more ominous message left on the home phone, Randall was threatening Claire and Faith, no doubt about it. He forced himself to sound matter of fact and not scare her more by the depth of his own feelings.

“Would ye play the message for me?”

“I...I can’t.” she said on a whisper. Jamie looked over at her. Her eyes were troubled and started filling up with tears.

“I know it was stupid of me but I deleted the message. It..I couldn’t stand to listen to it again. Does that ever happen to you? Sometimes a sound or a smell evokes something inside and you are suddenly someone else and somewhere else?”

If he thought her words odd he didn’t say but simply shook his head no.

“It doesn’t happen that often to me but every now and again I feel a little like I’m not in my body. Like I’m not exactly myself. Maybe that is why Black Jack’s calls upset me so much. What could he have meant, Jamie?”

Jamie held her hand in his, kissing the backs of her knuckles and rubbing his hand over them reassuringly.

“I dinna ken, Sassenach, but we’ll figure it out. He willna harm ye, and I swear he won’t lay a finger on our daughter.” Jamie pledged.

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Despite arriving late at Lallybroch and a restless night of almost no sleep, Claire rose early the next morning. Faith was sleeping between her and Jamie and the two of them were both dead to the world. They looked like they’d stay snug for a while and she needed to get some air.

Claire was the first one up. It was still a bit dark outside when she took her tea into the back
garden. She ignored the cold dew on the grass. Breathing deeply, she let the healing strength of this magical place calm her fears, helping her think more clearly. Her reward was watching the light of a new dawn rising over the peaks in the distance and it filled her with gratitude. For this home, for this family, for their daughter, for this incredible man, and for the crazy, improbable life she was living. A sense of peace settled over her. Just as the sun cleared the crest and lit the fields surrounding the house, Claire was enveloped in the warmth of Jamie’s plaid. She leaned back into his strong chest, his arms came around her pulling her into his body. She let out a sigh of heartfelt contentment. Her hand came over his forearms and she leaned her mouth up to his ear.

“Thank you, Jamie.”

“Mmphm. Ye looked a little cold.”

“I don’t mean for this, though it is welcome, too. I mean for bringing me here, for wanting me beside you and…I wish could find the right words.” Claire was silent for a few minutes.

Jamie’s pulse was racing as he waited for her to continue. She pulled away from him and bent down putting her mug on the grass in front of them. Turning around in his arms, she placed hers securely over his shoulders.

“Do you want to know what it is really?”

Mmphm.

“You move with me Jamie, not against me, even if I’m heading in a direction you’re not sure you want to go, you’re willing to give it a try. But it’s more than that. When we talk together I know you listen to me but you make sure that I hear you as well. You stand up for me and you stand up to me and I’ve never had that with anyone. I don’t think many people ever do.”

She looked deeply into his eyes, her breath catching in her throat with the weight of what she was trying to say. Her hand tightened at the base of his neck. “I never knew a relationship like this was possible. Do you have any idea how intoxicating it is? To be with someone who cares more about us than about me or himself?”

Something deep and incendiary spread through Jamie’s body and he trembled. He leaned down and, in stark contrast to the brutal possessiveness he was feeling, brushed her lips, feather light. But his voice shook when he spoke.

“Please, Claire, I need you.”

Claire’s heart jumped seeing the look of desperation in his eyes. They both looked back at the house coming to the same realization that they couldn’t be alone there.

“Where?” She asked.

Jamie grabbed her hand and urged her onto the path through the garden. He felt delirious, his skin on fire.

“I’ll find a place.” He promised.

Claire was vaguely aware of her sodden nightgown picking up more dew as he bore them steadily up the path. Her slippers were squishy and her toes were cold but she didn’t care. She’d caught the rhythm of his blood and she was feeling crazed, too.

Madness, the word pulsed in her head but the word she actually uttered was “Hurry!”
Jamie gave a small grunt of relief as the stables came into view. He led her into the side tack room.

Here, they’d preserved the original old barn doors by hanging them across the opening on metal rollers that fit the space but provided no closure or privacy. If anyone entered the stables and walked ten feet back, their presence would be obvious, but he couldn’t wait long enough to find a better location.

He maneuvered her, pressing her body against the hard grain of the door using it to pin her in place as he leaned in to kiss her. Claire wanted this just as much as he and she tilted her mouth up, letting him seize her. She moaned as his tongue danced with hers. Claire eagerly pushed his sweatpants down, freeing him.

Her cold hand made contact with him and it was his turn to moan.

“Touch me like that again!” Jamie begged.

Her fingers teased him in pattern with their kiss. Firm and sure she stroked him.

His mouth tore back from hers and he breathed her in.

“You feel wonderful.” She told him. The heat and pulse, velvet and steel.

His rough stubble rubbed against her as he kissed her neck. Claire pulled on his cock, pushing her cheek into his face, urging him not to stop. The desire almost overwhelming. Pure sensation, chasing the thrill.

He groaned as she sank to her knees heedless of the dirt floor and the clumping on her wet hem. Her backside made contact with the wood and it reverberated in squeaks and thuds that they ignored.

She parted her lips, tongue twisting and sliding along the underside of his cock, her hot mouth welcoming him. She played with every ridge and curve, round and around, orienting herself. Jamie watched her lick from base to crown setting a steady rhythm, her hands reaching behind his ass and pulling him closer to her. She played with the sensitive spot behind his balls.

“Claire!” He gasped when she sucked him to the back of her throat. “Dinna---”

Her eyes rose up. He lost his train of thought.

“Hmm?” She prompted, knowing the vibration would feel nice.

“Dinna stop!”

Jamie’s hands cupped behind her head and his fingers tangled up in her hair. She slowed down now, taking her time, enjoying the feel of him sliding as far down as she can go, making little sounds.

He can tell she loves doing this for him and he pushes in so firmly that she chokes a little but doesn’t stop. The next time she rolls him in, her hands are on his ass again, pulling him tighter.

Jamie’s hips begin to snap forward of their own accord, helping create the depth she craves, his hands holding her head steady now. Claire moaning in gratitude nearly undoes him. He speeds up, beginning to lose control.

Claire wants this, wants to swallow him down, loves the taste and smell of him, loves even more
the feeling of power and possession, temporarily forgetting she is dying for him to be inside her. When he stills his body, she opens wider in preparation and is surprised when she feels him loosening his grip and pulling away. Her dazed eyes look up.

“Another time, Sassenach.” He promises reading the disappointment in her eyes, “I said I need ye, and I mean to have you.”

On an urgent, hungry kiss he tastes himself on her lips. She can feel his fingers gliding across her nightie, rucking up the hem. Then Jamie’s hand is on her bare buttock, pulling her into him. Letting go of the nightgown, trusting it to stay trapped between them, his other hand grabs her butt as well. Claire cannot stop touching him even now, her hand moves back to his cock, making him throb with desire.

Claire let out a half scream as Jamie rounded her ass, pushing forward. She spread her thighs bringing the hard length of him between them, rolling against him even as she continued to work him with fingers. He bucked against her. She knew how slippery she was becoming.

“Please.” She panted.

Jamie moved his fingers up and under her haunches and lifted her, impaling her, leaning her against the door for leverage. So thick and so alive inside her.

He was groaning over and over. Claire’s high pitched panting sounds wrenching from her on each plunge. Slamming again and again, the door vibrated and the sound of it echoed in time with his thrusts. The old wood rubbed into Claire’s backside, occasionally scraping Jamie’s knuckles as he knocked against it. The bite of it only adding to the fury.

“J---aime” She called out. “Jai---me!”

Claire pushed her hand against his shoulder trying to slow him. His mouth hovered over hers.

“Claire?” He didn’t seem to have any voice left.

“I want to look at us!”

At her bold statement his fingers lost all feeling and as one they both lowered their eyes. He slowed their movements enough for them to enjoy the sight. He was rigid and glistening and she said the first thing that popped into her head.

“Oh!” Claire said. “You look beautiful.”

“Christ, Sassenach!” Jamie said on a laugh, completely undone himself by the vision of their joining.

“Touch yourself!” He demanded.

“Mmmm.”

Claire lifted her fingers to his mouth and he sucked them inside. She released the breath she was holding. Wet, warm, wicked twinning tongue dancing all around her index and middle fingers. He groaned as he greedily sucked causing her to shudder in response. His eyes were closed now and she watched his lips, the way his cheeks hollowed out with his efforts. The look of rapt enjoyment on his face. Thus distracted, it took her a few to remember her original intent.

Claire brought her fingers down to her soaked core, hyper aware of Jamie’s gaze following the trail
of her digits. The soft exclamation as they slipped into her folds.

“Oh God.” He said softly.

“You like?” She needed to ask because she couldn’t look away long enough to make eye contact.

“Yes.” He hissed.

He liked it enough to readjust her against his arms, he pushed more of her weight against the creaking barn door to allow his arms to lengthen, creating more space to see her pushing and tapping. Her fingers dipped down to massage the base of him as he moved in and out of her. She split her index and middle fingers, and held him in a vice while circling the base of her thumb over her clit.

Jamie almost lost it when her other hand started flicking her nipple. First one, then the other.

“That makes ye jump all the way down…” He panted.

Claire shifted her fingers again, laughing at his reaction. “And that makes you jump in-- Oh fuck!” Jamie found a way to move that changed the pressure.

A feeling like thunder started to roll through Claire’s body. Jamie’s body started disintegrating in answer.

“I’m going to-----” was all Claire managed to get out and she bucked hard against her fingers and him, using the door for leverage. Pumping her buttocks, shuddering over and over.

He held her as she rode it out. Twitching and shivering, head thrown back, the graceful lines of her neck held rigid.

When she was almost finished he grunted “My turn!” and came on a deeply satisfied groan.

Jamie and Claire made their way, somewhat sheepishly, back to the main house. Claire’s face started to blush when she noticed her tea mug wasn’t where she left it and had obviously been returned to the kitchen. They entered the side door and ran into the small bathroom under the back stairs, to assess just how disreputable they looked. Both of them smiling at one another in the half reflection of themselves shown in the tiny mirror above the sink.

Giggling, they struggled to clean each other up. Falling over one another in the compressed space, bumping heads, kissing one another silly. She couldn’t stop touching him, stroking him. They kept knocking elbows and knees.

He closed the lid on the toilet seat and sat, bringing her to him. He loved this playful side of her. He meant only to tell her so, to hug her and share a cuddle. Through the thin material of her gown he kissed her belly, then teasingly tongued her nipple.

But the teasing turned into desire and he kept right on sucking until the material was damp. She felt his fingers slip up and under and slide inexorably higher. She moaned as he played with her wetness.

His head dove underneath. He placed his mouth over her and sucked, rubbing and moving within her.

Jamie needed to see her face. He pushed the nightie up, thrusting it into her hand, forcing it out of the way. She watched him, knowing instinctively what he wanted. He hummed and moaned tasting
her. Her belly clenched as she realized he was ravenous, feasting on her, on them, he couldn’t seem to get enough.

Claire shoved her hand into her mouth and bit down hard, trying to stay quiet. Oh God she was going to come. Right now, watching him devouring her as if she were the nectar of life, right here, under the back staircase with the family just a couple of rooms away.

Jamie smiled against her, feeling like a god as she quaked over and over again. He kissed her tenderly between her legs and did his best to smooth her nightgown into neatness as it fell back around her legs.

When the feeling returned to her legs, Claire turned around and opened the hot water on in the faucet. He leaned across her in the small space to reach it, too, and she felt his hardness pressing against her ass. Involuntarily her rear moved back into him. He gave a soft grunt of surprise. He was rock hard. Not even thinking about it, she spun and dropped down to her knees, needing to finish what she had started in the stables. Her head squeezed against the porcelain underside of the pedestal sink, she opened wide, using her tongue to guide him in.

“Christ!” He hissed, trying his best to keep his voice down.

He couldn’t see much of her in the awkward space. His eyes darted around and he caught his reflection in the mirror. Sweat dotted his brow. His lips grimaced as the painful pleasure overtook him. His eyes were hooded and unfocused and then his mouth hung open as he panted.

He watched his reflection as she played with his balls, firmly, knowingly. It didn’t take very long, he had been weeping already.

Jamie’s hands gripped the sides, the ceramic cool and solid, he closed his eyes.

“Oh Claire!” He moaned as she drew him all the way down, making coughing noises as he emptied himself deep in her throat.

After, he pulled her into his arms. They were smiling hugely at each other, kissing, tasting themselves and sharing in the giddy joy such intimacy brought to lovers.

They cleaned up once again and tried to sneak up to their room to change. They both looked like they had been doing what they had been doing. Claire desperately hoped they smelled more of stables and the nice company soap than sex. As they emerged from the bathroom, Meg rounded the back stairway. Oblivious, she gripped Claire around the shoulders and, giving her no choice, pulled her toward the kitchen.

Jamie was so tempted to sneak up to their room, but he couldn’t leave Claire to face the music alone. On the way, Claire used Jamie’s plaid as best she could to hide her disheveled gown but there was no way to hide her glow of satisfaction. They entered the kitchen just as Jenny was placing pancakes on the table for the family’s early risers. Jenny’s eyes grew wide and her nostrils flared. She smirked at her brother. He looked like a man well pleased with the world and the smirk turned into a genuine smile as Jenny’s heart filled with happiness for him.

Claire avoided eye contact with everyone save Jamie, whose one brow raise was enough to send her into giggles again. She took a seat at the counter facing the griddle. But winced as her butt came into contact with the hard wood stool and nonchalantly lifted one side of her butt off of it.

Jenny was staring at her but Claire pretended not to see. Jamie came around behind the grill to steal a couple pieces of the rasher of bacon Jenny was placing on a serving dish. When Jenny saw the
state of his knuckles she gently touched the back of his hand.

“Next time, a braither, wait long enough to get to the loft, that barn door splinters and, unless I miss my guess, yer lady’s got an arse full of them.”

Jamie stared her down and gave her a cheshire grin, but the effect was ruined as his face slowly blushed crimson.
Later that afternoon, Claire and Jamie took a walk with Faith. They went to view the sheep in the far pasture and made a detour on the way back home. Faith was holding wee Kitty’s hand and Bran was “guarding” them, which, from what Jamie could tell, consisted of trying to steal bites of the package of crackers they were sharing between themselves.

“This is where your parents are buried?” Claire asked as they approached a large, mossy gray headstone.

“Aye, them and a good many more Fraser ancestors. The cemetery goes back to the late 1600s.” Jamie said very quietly, with the reverence that came naturally to such places. “Willie and Rabbie, as well.”

She followed the direction of his gesture. Seeing the smaller stones, Claire gasped. Jamie grabbed her hand in his.

“I’m sorry Sassenach, perhaps I shouldna asked you and the lass to come wi’ me. It’s only that...Jenny and I, we’re both in the habit of visiting, especially when it’s an important date. ‘Tis a foolish habit, maybe, to talk to stones as if they can help you recapture the past, no?”

Claire shook her head. “I don’t think so. I think it’s a lovely thing to do. I don’t even know where my parents are buried. Lamb never took me to visit their graves. I’m ashamed to say I never even thought to ask. What do you talk with them about?”

“Oh, this and that. Like I’d do were they still alive. I talk about what is happening. Today, for example, is Janet and Ian’s tenth anniversary and I reassure them that they are doing well. I tell them what the bairns are like. That Kitty is walking but no’ talking as much as Maggie did at the same age, how wee Jamie is doing in a house of sisters. I let them know I’m doing fine and that I miss them.” Jamie smiled at her. Then teased,

“I sometimes whisper things to Willie I dinna want my Mam to ken.”“I feel I’m interrupting. Do you want me to go, give you some privacy?” she asked.

Jamie squeezed her hand. “No. I’d like ye here, if ye dinna mind?”

Claire shook her head.

“Good.”

Jamie walked with her to his parents’ stone. Claire did the math. Brian Fraser had died ten years and ten days ago.

“Da, this is Claire Beauchamp.” Jamie said by way of introduction. “She’s...vera special to me, and
you and Mam you would think she’s special, too. The wee sprite with Kitty is our daughter Faith. Yer fourth grandchild. Da, I know that when ye insisted that I go to Preservation, UK, ye never dreamed this would happen.” Jamie laughed and gave Claire a side eye.

Claire let go his hand and moved hers to the headstone as she knelt down on the grass. Jamie watched as she traced the letters of Brian’s name before she spoke to him.

“Your granddaughter Faith is a beautiful soul. She has the Fraser eyes and temper, or so I’m told.” Jamie chuckled at that.

Claire turned to give her attention to Ellen and her fingers did the same.

“She’s curious and clever, which Jamie tells me comes from the MacKenzie side of the family. Faith looks a lot like her uncle Willie. She loves it here at Lallybroch. When we come, she spends most of her time playing with her cousins and she loves going with her Da to the stables. Did you know she calls him that? It took her quite some time to decide the matter. It probably won’t come as a surprise to you to hear that Jamie is a natural...Thank you for raising such a wonderful son so he could be such an amazing father to Faith.”

Claire heard Jamie clearing his throat. She was snapped out of her musings, embarrassed as she realized she’d been speaking her heart aloud. Jamie was very touched by her words and was sending up his own assurances and lost in his internal reverie when he saw Claire’s fingers still and she suddenly reared back and landed hard on her bottom.

“Claire! Are ye ok?” Jamie knelt down beside her and ran his hands over her body, checking her over to see where she was hurt.

“I--I’m ok.” Claire stilled his hands. She made to rise, Jamie beat her to it, reaching his hand down to help her up.

“What happened?”

“Nothing, really. I just noticed the date your mother and brothers died.” Claire took in a breath. “It’s nothing. October 20th is my birthday. I was just surprised. I’m sorry I scared you.”

“Da!” Just then Faith sent up a shriek and Jamie spun and ran toward her. She started to bawl and he noticed that Bran had successfully snagged the remaining crackers from the bag she was holding.

Nothing left on the ground but a little plastic baggie floating out on the wind. Jamie chased it down and by the time he’d captured it, Claire had the girls well in hand, walking back toward Lallybroch.

As he came into the courtyard, Jamie saw his sister sitting quietly on the stoop, snapping beans with wee Jamie. Jamie walked around them on his way into the kitchen when his progress was halted by Claire drifting out onto the stoop, two mugs in hand.

He took a large sip and she laughed as his eyes grew big. He swallowed and then kissed her hard. Nothing like a wee nip to warm the insides. They enjoyed their drinks, catching snippets of Jenny talking with her son. A charming and sweet conversation set against the rhythm and snap of their task.

“Mam, we should be married!” young Jamie exclaimed.
“What my wee man?”

“I want to marry you.” Jamie repeated.

“Marry me?” Janet’s eyebrows rose up to her hairline.

“Aye! So you’ll never be alone and neither will I. Its perfect!”

Under her breath, grown Jamie heard Claire whisper, “His new favorite word…” Jamie chuckled, knowing it was true.

They had all been subjected to grandiose announcements of perfect toast and perfect cartoons and perfect shoes and perfect dogs-- to wee Jamie everything that he liked in the universe was not just good but perfect.

“Yer Da might have an objection to that.” Janet was saying.

“Nah, he won’t mind he loves me.” Jamie said confidently.

“That is verra nice of ye my lad but you’ll find a love of your own when it’s time. As for me and yer Da, you ken tonight it’s our own wedding anniversary so finish up yer chores and I can make him a special supper!”

Jamie and Claire exchanged smiles with Jenny as they headed upstairs for a shower.

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In deference to the children’s earlier bedtime, they’d given them an early supper and pushed the adult dinner back until later in the evening. Claire sat with Faith in her lap, Maggie curled up at her side watching the slide show Jamie put together.

She was stunned anew by how beautiful Ellen Fraser had been, chuckled at the before and after pictures from ten years ago contrasted with now and the series of everyone at ten years old. Jamie also had pictures of family as infants and everyone tried to guess who the baby was.

Faith was fascinated by it all but particularly delighted when her own image appeared blow up on the projector. She called out the names of everyone she knew when they came to the Quarter Day photos.

Claire noted that he’d also included images of her as a child. As he scrolled through them, Jamie told many stories about the family, painting a shared history that had everyone laughing.

Later, Meg and John presented Ian and Jenny with special tickets to an opera two nights from now in Paris. They’d leave tomorrow before noon and spend the next five days in the City of Light. Jamie knew Jenny was very much looking forward to it.

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Dinner was simple but lovely. The Lallybroch dining room was made for special occasions and every time she sat at that table, Claire felt at home. They were enjoying after-dinner drinks and talking among themselves.

“Ten years ago. Do ye remember the wedding toast I made that night?” Ian asked, eyes burning bright.

“Aye.” Jenny’s voice was steady but her fingers clutched her wine glass tighter. She glanced over
at Claire and explained, “our Da’s grave was barely covered over in fresh dirt. It had taken me the better part of a year to get him to ask me to be his bride and we’d already postponed the wedding day once.”

Jenny smiled at Jamie and Ian put his hand on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Ian told me he’d be damned if he’d wait one day more to wed with me. For our wedding toast he said----”

Interrupting, Ian stood and cleared his throat and gestured with his goblet and waited for everyone else to give him their attention.

“I said, I’d rather face a lifetime of unknowns with you than a life of certainty alone. I’d rather have hard times together than easy times apart.” At this Ian tapped Jenny’s glass gently. “But I also made you a promise, do ye remember?” He smiled at her and she nodded her head.

“I told ye that I canna promise to fix your problems but I promise you won’t face them alone. That I have kept that promise to ye, Jenny, is the one thing I am most proud of. To you, Janet, for being the glue that holds all of us together.”

As the family drank in honor of Jenny, she stood. Ian stared at her. “Sit.”

She said gesturing for his compliance.

“You are the love of my life Ian and I dinna mind telling everyone so. When I think of all the things that had to line up in the universe for you and me to be here together in this time and in this place... it makes me count my blessings. Meg?”

At this Ian’s mother cocked her brow and gave Jenny her full attention.

“Do ye remember what you said to me on the night before my wedding?”

“Oh, aye, my dear I remember it well. You were the daughter of my heart well before my son got up the courage to ask ye to marry him.” Meg reminded her.

Jenny smiled for Meg had become the mother of her heart as well.

“Meg laid it out flat so I knew what I’d be getting into. She said that for all I loved him and he me that if I thought that would be enough to make a successful marriage then I was in for some unpleasant surprises. All relationships take good communication, willing hearts and realistic mindsets.”

Meg spoke up then. “And I was right, no? You canna rest upon how things were betwix you in the past nor yet rely on hope of good things coming in the future. Ye must be prepared for working on it together, day in and day out in the present.”

Jenny took up the story again, “And you told me that relationships really are a 50/50 partnership. No one half of a couple puts in half of everything needed each day. Somedays you’ll find yer the one putting in 80% of the effort and some days you’ll only have 20% in you to give, do you recall that?” Jenny asked her.

“I do. And that I knew you and Ian would have a long and happy marriage because you had each found the one person in this world who’d make sure no matter how either of you woke up that day, between you both there would be 100% love each day, one way or the other.”
“And ye werena wrong, Meg. It’s been that way from the start, so Ian, I raise my glass to you for helping create this incredible life we share and being my best friend through it all.”

As the evening progressed, they all drank a fair bit more than they should. John and Meg had long since retired and the four of them had sprawled out, collars unbuttoned, shoes kicked off under the table, whisky bottle passing between them.

Last time he’d brought Claire he’d been so busy. Excited to bring Faith and to show both of them his home; but anxious about introducing Claire to his family, uncertain whether she felt the same pull between them, worried about how Faith would handle being in an unfamiliar place. This time, it felt like the homecoming he’d needed very badly. True, in the back of his mind he was thinking of Claire’s penchant to become more amorous with drink, but he also loved the fact that the two of them both seemed to glow with happiness when they were here.

He and Ian had been quietly discussing Randall’s odd statements and further attempts to get information about Claire and Jamie. What might be motivating it-- the feud with Simon or a beef he had with Claire because of something with Frank? They didn’t think he had the real story because he’d have published by now.

Jamie knew the ladies were half listening to them but wasn’t sure how much they comprehended as they were also doing a good job of making their way down to the bottom of the bottle of whisky.

“Maybe instead of trying to find the one with the least amount of flaws, we should be telling our bairns to look for someone with the best flaws — the ones that complement their own.” Jenny urged, looking like a wise owl with her large eyes.

Claire laughed and clinked her glass and they drank another shot.

“You know there is a perfect solution to your troubles with Black Jack.” Jenny said.

“Oh, let’s hear it Madam Sage.” Claire encouraged on a giggle.

“Ye should get marrit.” Jenny was slurring her words a bit.

Jenny didn’t quite clue in on the stunned silence from the table that greeted this pronouncement.

“Marriage is a protected relationship under UK privacy laws. Black Jack can go after a girlfriend or lover, a co-worker, a rival or a friend and write whatever he wants to. If he finds out something juicy he has the green light to publish. But he canna write about something that violates the privacy of either Claire or Jamie if they are a married couple.” Jenny nodded. “So, get thee to kirk, Jamie.”

“Jesus, Jenny.” Jamie whispered.

Ian groaned and put his head in his hands but then he deliberately placed his hand on Jamie’s arm.

Jamie looked at him and Ian shook his head slightly letting Jamie know that he hadn’t told Jenny that he’d taken the ring from their safe deposit box. Jenny’d come up with this idea all on her own, she hadn’t been trying to prod her dragging-his-feet-brother into pulling the trigger.

Jamie looked at the bottle again and realized whatever she was thinking had no effective filter in place. Jenny seemed to focus once more on everyone around the table, taking in Jamie’s stunned expression she tsked.

“What do ye mean Jesus Jenny ye love her more than life itself and I canna read Claire as well but I’d stake my best shirt she’s no’ trifling with yer affections, either.”
“Jenny, love.” Ian broke in at this point. “Let’s leave the foot right where it ’tis — in yer mouth, before your brother shoves it down yer throat, aye? It’s my wedding anniversary and I’d like to spend it with a living bride before her brother gets other ideas.” Ian smiled and was able to relieve some of the tension.

Jenny seemed suddenly to realize she’d been a little too free with her opinions.

“Oh, Jamie…Claire, I’m so sorry I shouldn’t have said a thing. My big mouth. I’m…Oh! Jamie.” Jenny’s eyes started to water, which didn't improve matters, only confirmed that she believed the truth of what she said.

“Shh.” Jamie stood and helped her get up as well. “It’s fine Janet, ye were trying, in yer odd way to help. Dinna fash. It’s your 10th anniversary and Ian and you shouldna be worrit about anything at all.”

Jamie kissed her as she and Ian made their way out of the dining room.

Awkward.

Silence.

Why was the clock in the hall so loud?

Jamie looked around the room, avoiding Claire’s gaze.

Finally he said, “I’ll clean things up shall I and meet you upstairs?”

Claire’s head was in her hands and her shoulders were shaking. *Shit, she’s crying?* This was so much worse than he’d thought. He was reconsidering the merits of sororicide when he heard the giggle.

Then it came again. “Sassenach?” He asked.

“I’m sorry.” She snorted.

“Your face, Jamie!” Claire looked at him and the laugh spilled over.

She kissed him soundly. Jamie smiled to see her finding amusement over this but he couldn’t laugh with her — at least not at the moment.

They managed to clear the dining room and get through the essentials in the kitchen, leaving the rest for the morning.

While she was brushing her teeth, Jamie had lighted all the candle sconces around the room. The rich blue hues of the room and his fiery mane set off in the candlelight made her feel all kinds of happy.

Claire was laying on the bed, watching him as he crawled in beside her. He rolled so they were facing each other, side by side. Smiling, she ran her fingers lightly up and down his arm.

“Let’s hear it.” She invited.

“Hear what?” He gave her a puzzled look.

“What you said to Jenny to put those ideas into her head.” Claire was looking expectantly.
Unfortunately for Jamie, he hadn’t told her anything. His mind worked to figure out what to do with this problem. He just could not find an angle that would make any sense. And he definitely couldn’t reach into his messenger bag and pull out the ring. It would only convince Claire that it was an insincere offer prompted by Randall’s poking around. He turned it around as best he could.

“Claire,” he gave her a cock-sure grin, “I’ll marry you tomorrow, or next week or next month or next year. The second you ask me, I promise I’ll say yes.”

As he’d hoped, she laughed.

“But no’ because Randall scares us into it. Too much of your married life has been dictated by Randalls already, so I’ll let ye take yer own sweet time about it.”

While the comment had a bit of a sting, Claire was still smiling. But then she turned serious.

“Jamie I have only been officially divorced for a year. I couldn’t possibly begin to even think about that now.” She told him. Jamie carefully kept all expression from his face and didn’t look at her, lest he show too much. Disconcerted by the silence, Claire exclaimed, “we have only known one another six months!”

Jamie forced an amused mmphm between his lips and he kissed her hand. Damn Jenny’s impertinent tongue!

“Claire this isn’t the 18th century, you needn’t marry unless it’s something ye want to do. Not for the sake of expediency but because it’s what feels right for you, in here.”

At this, Jamie reached across her body and cupped her breast in his warm hand, needing to feel the beating of her heart just then.

“Marriage is a sacred union, especially for Frasers. I mean to marry but once in my life. So I’ll do it proper, in a way that would make my mother proud. I may not be the first man ye marry, Sassenach, but I warn ye now, if you take me to the altar, I swear I’ll be the last. You can make an honest man of me any day ye like. But it’s you who’ll do the asking, aye?” He said with far more bravado than he felt inside.

“And if I decide to wait until hell freezes over?” She teased.

“Then I’ll wait beside you until yer ready, lass. I’ll be standing next to ye wearing the warm parka.” He smiled at her.

Claire opened her mouth but Jamie cut her off.

“And if yer never ready, then so be it. Dinna fash, Sassenach.”

Claire huh-hummed and came in for a kiss which he returned in spades. His eyes were a particularly lovely color in the amber glow.

“Claire?” He asked, between kisses.

She had her lips fastened on his neck, which made him giggle. He normally didn’t make such noises and she laughed into the hollow of his throat as her fingers brushed his hardened nipple. She did it again, he shrieked and she was once again delighted.

“Cut that out!” He told her. “I’m trying to be serious here!”
She snorted and he giggled, wondering for the first time if maybe he’d drunk more than he thought.

Claire could feel the fruits of her labor and grabbed his backside to squeeze him tightly to her. Jamie momentarily lost his train of thought and enjoyed her efforts.

He took both his hands and cupped the back of her head. His thumbs rested on each side of her head just in front of her ears. Her fingers threaded into his curls and she pulled hard.

“You feel so good against me.” Claire loved the strength of him, the hard muscles contrasting with her softness.

His hips moved in accord with hers, though they were not joined, only teasing each other. Jamie’s spine shivered in anticipation, her cognac eyes locked on his, the lush core of her coming into contact with his hip, his thigh, his hard length as they explored with hands and lips, limbs entwined.

Claire shifted her weight and then she was bringing him home. He moaned as he felt her welcoming warmth. Jamie watched her body move with his, soft in the candlelight, realizing that here, in the Laird’s room, where generations of his kin had created even more generations of his kin, was about as good as it would ever get. There would never be a more ideal place or time.

“Claire,” He breathed.

“Yes?” She whispered.

“I love you.”

“Good.”

Claire spun him onto his back. He made a sound of surprise. She rose over him, moving against him, reveling in the feel of him inside her. Her hands found his and she threw them up and over his head, threading his fingers in hers.

She thrust against them using the leverage to piston her body as he arched his hips up to increase the friction.

She came down and kissed him hard as she brought their hands down closer. Her skin was flushed with exertion and she was only half paying attention to what her body was doing.

Their physical connection had grown out of the self conscious phase. They had the freedom of not overthinking, feeling the joy that came with trust.

He moved his mouth to the slope of neck and shoulder and she felt his scruff. She moaned and her hardened nipples grazed his chest. Claire laid herself as flat as she could, pressing torsos together wanting to feel his heartbeat pounding against hers. She moved her body, playing, rocking her hips in small circles, riding him. He groaned in her ear.

Claire leaned up a little, unclasped their joined hands and moved hers to cup his cheeks. She kissed the apple of his cheeks and then his lips, pulling back to look him directly in the eye.

“You know I feel the same way about you, don’t you?”

He grunted a question mark.

He could feel his pulse pounding like a drumbeat in his ears.
She nodded. “Almost since the moment we first spoke and I heard you rolling your “Rrrs”?”

This said in a teasing lilt elicited a small chuckle from him.

Claire stopped moving altogether and looked down upon him with her heart in her eyes, In the quiet stillness, he heard the truth in her voice.

“It began the day we met. The first time I held you in my arms, I remember thinking that it felt like everything I’d lost, I’d found again.”

Jamie’s astonishment showed on his face and he flipped them so she was now the one on her back. He gripped both her hands in his, entwining fingers once more.

His mouth hung open like he was trying to draw in enough air to say something, but he didn’t speak. Mightily aroused, he was kissing her everywhere at once, neck, breasts, ribs, lips.

She moaned.

His hips rolled against hers, several long, powerful thrusts. Then came a surprised whisper in her ear.

“Forgive me, Sassenach?” He begged on a desperate pant.

“For what---?” Claire’s question was interrupted as Jamie unexpectedly climaxed, shuddering over and over again, coming loudly and without warning.

“You absolute---!” Claire was about to say something uncomplimentary.

“I ken, whatever yer thinking to say, I agree with ye, I am that and worse! I love you.”

He kissed her hard, nipping her lip playfully as he pulled away. He looked into her eyes and smiled. “And you love me.” He kissed her once more.

“So, hush woman, I’ve work to do.”

With that, he raced down her naked torso, ending between her legs where he proceeded to make it up to her.

Claire, having spent the day watching him love her, wasn’t about to stop now. She was braced up on her elbows, staring down at him between her legs.

“I almost died this morning when you did this after that ridiculous sponge bath in the the Harry-Potter-Privet-Way-Loo but--”

Jamie made a grunting sound and moved in a way that had her collapsing back onto the pillows, eyes rolling back into her head and pausing to catch her breath. Gooseflesh prickled out all over her torso despite the relative warmth of the room.

“This time, not even a wet towel…” She panted as she levered herself up again, one hand desperately clutched a fistful of hair near his ear trying to get his attention.

A hard tug and Jamie reluctantly lifted his eyes to look at her, moving away from his choice location between her thighs.

His mouth was sloppy wet and his eyes dazed. A rush of feeling flushed through her body and she shuddered just to see him so.
“Christ on toast Jamie,” she breathed, “that is the filthiest…. Sexiest thing you’ve ever done!”

He chuckled deeply and spread her legs wider to accommodate him. His hands clenched down on her hips, his movements deliberate, calculated and slow, using his tongue and lips as he wanted, toying with her, changing rhythm and pressure to arouse and spark her senses.

The pressure rose up, her fists grabbed handfuls of the bedding as she twisted sideways and bucked her pelvis trying to dictate.

Finally she resorted to begging and a chanting of his name, “Jamie, Jamie, please, Jamie, oh God!” rose steadily louder.

Finally, oh yes! finally he rose up and pushed into her in one solid motion. His arms gliding up and under her until they were pressed tightly together, his hands gripping up and over the top of the mattress making a wedge cocoon of his body to hold her within. He slid his body down along hers, then firmly upwards to finish the thrust.

Slow, and deliberate, the sensuous control of it every bit as effective as the wild pistoning of before and infinitely more tender.

He cradled her in the vice like grip of those arms. She didn’t mind, feeling the depth of the love inside him. For her. For them. Cherished, safe, a different passion gripping her deep inside.

Her head rose a fraction off the mattress, she needed her face next to his, needed to hear his breath in her ear, feel the air on her cheek.

She clung tightly to him, nuzzling her face deeper into the crook of his neck and shoulder and panted.

He could hear her, feel her breath as well. Then he felt her teeth sink into the top of his shoulder. A hard, deep mark that she had no conscious awareness of doing. He moaned.

He clutched the back of her head harder to him, wanting the mark to scar him forever, to remind him.

He wanted this to go on and on as he thrust with enough force to drive the breath from both their bodies. Tender and fierce at the same time. Her mouth released him.

“Oh God, Oh, Jamie!”

Claire’s body started to shake hard and she was keening so loudly that her voice was bouncing from the walls.

“Sassenach,” he panted. “Give me your mouth!”

She turned her face fractionally and he took her lips in a passionate, moaning, endless kiss.

She clung to him as she squeezed and shuddered.

His hands left the mattress and cupped her head hard to him. Protecting her, sheltering her, loving her with such an undeniable honesty, she felt her own heart opening fully to his.

“Love you, love you, love you.” she whispered over and over in time to the contractions of her body.

“Oh God! Oh, Claire!”
Physically drained, every cell in Jamie’s body relaxed. He was aware that breath by breath his heart was filling up with a dizzying elation and, with eyes closed tight, he floated on a sense of...rightness?...He struggled to think of the word.

Ah yes, perfect. Wee Jamie’s word of the week. Perfection he’d never even imagined possible.
They held hands the entire way back to Glasgow. The magic of Lallybroch had once again woven it’s spell over them.

From her first “I love you” he felt the change in his heart. She was steeped into the very bones of him, bonding them tighter than he could ever have imagined. The freedom to love her and be loved by her filled him with wonder and gratitude.

Over long days hiking and tranquil nights making love, he poured out his heart.

“No really, those were my first thoughts. Faith was a wee rattan and you were the loveliest thing I’d ever seen.”

“I thought you were just accident prone.” She joked. Then her expression changed and her smile went serene, he caught the glimmer in her eyes.

“Happy?”

“Very.” She confirmed.

They literally could not keep their hands to themselves. It was the small touches, the hot, lingering looks, the shared confessions in whispering voices snuggled up close to one another.

Claire would run her tongue along her upper lip just before speaking, walk with an extra swivel in her hips, give him a secret smile, stretch extra deep while taking a break from weeding the garden when she knew he was watching from the yard, and he would be unable to look away.

She’d stifled more than one laugh watching one of the children tugging at his shirt for the second
or third time to get his attention. *Men were so easy*, she’d think giving herself a high five and a wee pat on the back. Once or twice she thought he’d known what she’d been up to. His look suggested she would pay for it later and she couldn’t wait for the moment he’d come to collect his due.

She’d had him dancing a merry tune to her bidding most of their vacation week until he suddenly turned the tables on her. They’d taken the kids into town for an ice cream. Lord, the way the man ate an ice cream cone! Holy Jesus, he hummed as he “talked” to his ice cream swirling his tongue and it sounded so familiar to her ears. Then she realized it was the sound he made when settling himself down for a (his words) proper English breakfast. He laughed that low dirty laugh as her blush deepened.

Jamie also found a way of looking at her as if she were the last morsel of chocolate in a world of famine. Once he noted it’s considerable effect on her, he unleashed it at will.

What he did to her!

Their leavetaking was a bittersweet process. Transitions being more difficult for Faith now. It pained the two of them watching her crying as she hugged Kitty hard in farewell. Faith was never so happy as in Kitty’s company.

Claire smiled thinking about their last rainy afternoon together. Ian and Jenny had returned and Young Jamie and Maggie were stuck like glue to their parents’ sides as they bustled about unpacking and catching up on what had happened while they were gone.

Claire had taken the youngest two outside as soon as the rain stopped. The sun was out and she wanted to get to the garden chores. Just as she finished stowing the last of the tools back in Jenny’s wee kit, Jamie had come up the stable path. It still made her blush thinking of their lovemaking in the barn a week ago. He saw it and gave her a delighted smile. She might have stared at him forever if not for a pair of giggling mop tops. Kitty and Faith.

One dark of hair, the other light as the sun that was streaming over them. Jamie stood beside her quietly enjoying the sight of the girls playing together with total abandon. Her eyes drifted to him, as they often did when he was near, then back to the girls again. On another pass, Jamie raised his eyebrows at her bemused expression.

The girls were hugging then pointing delightedly at one another, covered in mud after jumping into puddles all over the kailyard.
“Thick as thieves.” He laughed.

“Or sisters.” She said wistfully.

“Aye.” Jamie caught a shimmer in her eyes that nearly undid him.

Always she was stretched between two poles: one representing the hope in her heart and the other the pain in her past. He tabled the need to throttle Frank all over again. That this woman should have to live with such doubt, afraid of wanting too much. What he wouldn’t give for her to see the possibilities of a future with no constraints or doubts —to see him for himself alone.

He grimaced and bit the inside of his lower lip thinking of Frank’s rejection of Faith. To look at her now, her ruddy red cheeks, her adorable fat wee bottom encased in purple and green striped leggings soaked after Kitty’s two footed plunge into a particularly deep plash, the smile that lit his life, and imagine anyone daring to abandon her was blood curdling.

Jamie shivered and got himself back under control, mentally castigating himself for losing his focus. None of these uncharitable thoughts would help her. Claire. The very act of sounding out the syllables in his head brought him joy. The world snapped back into focus and everything else fell away.

When she moved her head to look sideways at the girls again he gently placed his finger under her chin and turned her face back towards himself, his thumb stroking her cheek.

“Claire, I love you and Faith wi’ all my heart.” Claire couldn’t hold his gaze. “Sassenach.” Jamie waited her out until at last she had no choice but to meet his eye.

“I’m no’ going anywhere. You’ll never have to go through any of it alone again, if ye wanted more.” Claire watched as his lips curled upwards. “And if ye dinna then Faith will always have her cousins, her aunt, her uncle, Murtagh. She’ll no’ be alone either.”

Jamie wasn’t looking for an answer, had no intention of boxing her in. He’d only wanted her to know how he felt. And, having no care for his own dignity but very well aware of hers, Jamie Fraser, best friend, lover, favorite (albeit only) uncle and father, turned and, with a roar, starting giving chase to now ecstatically shrieking girls joining them in their plunders.
But now they were heading back. Back to work and complications, reality. It was time to start dealing with things.

“Sassenach, shall I tell ye?” He’d asked her, now for the third time.

She told him no while they were at Lallybroch, knowing time was precious and changes were coming soon. His look seemed to urge her to have courage.

“I guess you’d better.” She braced herself.

“Black Jack has published three articles this week. The first about me and my grandsire. He dredged up the mess wi’ my Mam and quoted some choice bit that Simon had to say about my Da, repeating some rubbish about my Dad being a hatchling or a selkie enchanting my Mam. My grandsire is a bit of a nutter, ye ken? He always was into the occult, seers, fortune tellers, astrology. When asked about the success of Slainte, Simon reportedly said it ‘twas a flash in the pan. That got some blow back from the lads down the pub, and a rival paper ran a story about the strength of the brand.”

“Too soon to tell if it’ll hurt sales?” She ventured. But he laughed.

“All publicity is good publicity in this arena. Anyone who is a fan of the drink will feel a need to support it and anyone who doesn’t like it isna going to change anyway. But we always get a pop in sales when we are mentioned in gossips because people who haven’t tried it yet will pick up a can or two to see what the fuss is o’er. Besides I have the Annual Pub Crawl a couple nights from now and the press loves covering us for that one. Yehavena changed yer mind about wanting to come wi’ me?”

“God no! My first surgery the next morning is scheduled for 7:30 am I can’t imagine going out bar hopping then having to drag my ass in the next day.” Claire reassured him. “What were the other two articles?”

“One was a long shot lens of us from Broch Mordha when we took the kids to the show. It’s of our backs and we are holding hands. Ye canna see much of the children and no faces.”

“And the content of the story?”
“Essentially a fluff piece on me dating a single mom wi’ four children. I had Geneva call the editor letting him know he’s flirting close to a legal line there and if we see pictures of any of the children in the papers again he’ll be answering to a court no’ just her.”

“Sounds tame enough, so far.” Claire ventured.

“Aye. But the last article didna seem to be connected to any of the others but it was Randall’s byline. An interview with three couples going through IVF at Preservation UK and taking about the more stringent guidelines they put in place after the lab mixed up case. He referenced you and your divorce.”

“And even though it doesn’t seem connected you think it is?”

“It’s no’ a topic that Black Jack’d normally cover. Feels like a pointed message, no?”

She swallowed hard. “Well, I suppose it was inevitable.”

Jamie gave her a mmphm. “I think skipping the Pub Crawl is a good idea - no need to paint a target on yer back or mine.” Jamie smiled reassuringly at her and she returned it with a tiny one of her own. He changed the subject.

“I set up visits with a few preschools in the area for later in the week one only had openings when ye were working. Shall I cancel?”

“No, keep the meeting and if you like the school enough we can book a second visit, will that be ok? Tell me about them.”

He’d done a rather thorough review of the options within walking distance or a short drive from the hospital and Slainte HQ. Everything from traditional secular to exclusive preparatory to parochial options, from stand alone programs to schools where pre-k to graduation were offered.

“What did you decide on the all girls’ option?” Claire asked. Jamie sighed.
“I still dinna ken what I think of the idea.”

Claire bit her tongue. She’d tried to be as hands off as he’d allowed, not directly interjecting unless specifically asked, wanting to make up for all the other life decisions he’d not had a say in up until now. Having attended dozens of schools herself, she had a very laid back approach to schooling questions in general, in addition it was only pre-school and Faith was a very flexible learner, she’d be happy in almost any environment.

“I love the idea that she’ll never think girls are not supposed to be good at math and science. I dinna want her to be judged based on labels but I also dinna want her doing that to boys either. Och, Sassenach I’ve spent a good amount of time researching this six ways to Sunday. I ken the theories about it. Then I look at Faith, she’s no’ a theory. I ken that lassie’ll stand her ground come hell or high water. She’s a wee sponge-- takes everything all around her in so I dinna think she’ll be closed-minded no matter where she is schooled. To me with such a wee lassie, co-ed feels right.”

Claire was smiling as he struggled to give voice to his thoughts, to what it meant to be the father of a girl in today’s world. It was good to know she wasn’t alone struggling with the questions, either.

“For what it’s worth, I agree.” She told him.

Jamie mphmmed her.

“Was there a school ye wanted to see that didna make my list?” He asked her.

“Hmm. Well, Frank always had high regard for Kensington Academy…” She ventured. “It was one of the reasons he agreed to purchase the place on Georgie Road.”

“The flat is his ?”

“The flat is mine .” She said emphatically.

Claire listened to the sound of the wheels on the roadway, the revs of the engine, the low babbling conversation Faith was having with Adso and Jane. “The bed, incidentally is mine, too. Bought after. In fact, he took most of the furniture.”
Jesus Jamie thought as a petty relief rushed through his gut. *I’m such an arse.*

“Sassenach?”

“Mmm?”

“Kensignton doesna have a preschool program. And I am no’ rational where *he* is concerned. I’ll no’ pretend otherwise. Try and be patient wi’ me, aye?” His lips curled up in a sheepish smile that she knew was sincere. She huffed a bit but her lips twitched.

“I love you.” He told her. When she didn’t reply at all, let alone in kind, he looked over at her. “I am sorry.”

She sighed. “I love you too.”

He heard it though and had to ask, “But?” Her lips were pressed in a small line. “Please Claire, just say it.”

“Why is *my* past more important than *our* future?”

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They were both very impressed with the Gaelic school. The head administrator was also a teacher and the entire vibe was positive. The fly in the ointment was that Claire didn’t speak the language and would have a hard time emphasizing Faith’s lessons at home.

“Don’t let that be the deciding factor,” the administrator advised, “it’s not uncommon for children here to have one parent who isn’t conversant. If you want to learn yourself, there are ongoing workshops for our parents.”

The Waldorf School was another solid choice. Jamie was slightly leary of the pride they seemed to take in not teaching children to read before the second or third grade. Though he was suitably impressed by the fact that they prioritized personal responsibility, empathy and service to others and de-emphasized standardized testing and academic standing as a measurement of a child’s
success.

City Prep was the most impressive by far. A modern campus with amazing studios for the arts and science labs, incredible curriculum and the children were all incredibly bright and, in fact, really friendly, at least in the lower school. They skipped the tour of the upper class buildings. The lunch room would rival any local restaurant and the playground was a dream come true. However, the Dean of Admissions interview was an experience they both found off-putting.

Questions such as what is your child’s greatest life achievement? Were answered with Jamie’s characteristic wry humor. “Convincing the cat to let her put him in a dress for afternoon tea.”

Her biggest strength? “Her pout. Renders anyone o’er the age of 18 putty in her hands.”

Last book she read? “Goodnight Moon. Faith is the daughter of a doctor, ye ken? So she picked up on the nuances of the story and saw right away that the bunny was having an existential crisis brought on by his untreated OCD.” Jamie deadpanned. Claire, knowing they would never want Faith at the school threw her support behind Jamie.

“Well, honey, to be fair, that is why the room is decorated with a picture of the three bears at their therapy session just above the bed. Good mental health is such an interesting theme for an artist, don’t you think?” Claire put in helpfully.

St. Paul’s was the only school Jamie had to tour for himself. It was the tail end of the day and he brought Faith with him. He met Olivia, his tour guide, at the cathedral. She was a bubbly TA in the kindergarten classes and an aide for the after school program. The school was one of the oldest private Catholic schools in the country.

Jamie loved the school. The uniforms reminded him of his own schooling back home and he knew from that experience how seriously Jesuits took their roles as mentors and teachers. There were both clergy and lay men and women on staff and the facilities were good— not as spectacular as City Prep but far more welcoming with warm woods and cheerful colors, not modern glass and steel.

Everything about the tour reassured Jamie. He liked the way Olivia would tell him little bits and pieces about the school and the educational strengths of their program in between focusing on Faith and keeping her engaged. Olivia seemed genuinely interested in Faith and didn’t hesitate to stop whatever she was supposed to be relating on their pre-planned tour to deviate onto a different area if Faith showed any interest at all. That was how they ended up on he bleachers in the school gym watching Faith and about ten other children playing dodgeball.
“Father Bain was wondering if you could stop by the admissions office for a chat? I can take care of Faith here if you would like and you can pop by and grab her when you are ready to go?” Olivia offered.

Jamie’s visit with Father Bain went swimmingly well. Father Bain was new to St Paul’s, having transferred from a more working class part of the city. He had only been presiding over Sunday services for about three months or so and had never been charged with running a school of this size.

Jamie, a minor celebrity in his own right was exactly the kind of well-known parent that Father Bain would want associated with his parish and the school especially as he was trying to find his feet in this new area.

Well versed in Catholic protocols and raised with an innate deference to clergy in general, Jamie struck the right balance between differential to him and self-confident about his own attraction to the school. The only hitch came at the end of the conversation.

“There is a small issue that will need to be addressed.” Father Bain told him as he made to leave.

“Oh, aye?” Jamie inquired politely.

“We don’t seem to have a record of the christening of a Faith Fraser?” Father Bain ventured, his tone conveying a very deliberate undercurrent of censure. “We admit children of all religions, or, these days, those who sadly have none at all and so it is not that she must be a Catholic. It is just that for this year’s preschool class we are full. There is a waitlist. Our practice is to give priority on openings to members of the church first then fill in as needed.” Father Bain left it there.

“Och. Small misunderstanding.” Jamie said confidently. “Faith uses her mother’s last name. Beauchamp. Faith Julia Beauchamp and we are a Catholic family. Ye can contact Father Kenneth at Broch Mordha for my particulars.” Jamie told him firmly.

“The mother’s name? My that is most... unusual.” He was silent, ruminating.

“Claire’s people are from France..” Jamie told him, knowing all manner of unique circumstances could be attributed by the natural suspicion of Scots to all things French.
“I see. Well, I’m sure we will be able to locate her records between now and your return visit.”

The following afternoon a cascade of events began that ended in a disaster Jamie could never have predicted. It started, innocently enough, with a visit from John.

“Got a minute?” John popped his head in Jamie’s office.

Jamie smiled when he saw him but noted John hadn’t returned the sentiment. Worse, John shut the door before sitting down in the small seating area. He bade Jamie to come from around his desk and join him.

“Remember when you asked me to try and figure out what Black Jack might be up to? And you also asked me to find out where Claire’s parents were buried?” John asked, Jamie merely nodded wondering what he was driving at. “I couldn’t find any burial records anywhere in the UK. I couldn’t even find death certificates.”

“You’d think an accident that killed two parents and left a 5 year old orphan would have made the papers.” Jamie venured.

“I agree.” He pulled the papers he brought out of their envelope and handed them over.

Jamie read for a few minutes then said, “I am not entirely sure what I am looking at.”

“When I couldn’t find anything on Claire’s parents, I decided to try and find Claire’s information then work backwards to find her parents. Do you know how unusual it is to have a baby born in today’s society without finding documentation out the yin yang? Weight, height, time of birth, APGAR score. But there is almost nothing to be found about Claire’s birth-- no hospital records, no newspaper announcement. I pulled Claire’s birth certificate from vital records bureau. You are holding the revised document from 1994 that was when Lambert Beauchamp adopted her. He had the British Government reissue it. Claire was apparently born mid-ocean. The name of the vessel is The Amandine and the latitude and longitude recorded it in the middle of the Pacific. The birth date recorded on it is October 20, 1988.” John pointed out the fields he was referencing and Jamie followed along as he did so.

“A few other things stand out on it. The last names of both parents is recorded as ‘Beauchamp’ and her father’s birthdate says ‘unknown.’ Usually the mother will list her maiden name on the document. I suppose it might be possible her parents had the same last name but….” John
shrugged. “The records didn’t get me any closer to finding her parents. I couldn’t find a record of either of her parents’ birth certificates, even knowing Julia’s date of birth— recorded in Claire’s birth certificate as May 1, 1958. Nor could I find their marriage license. There was no record of Henry Beauchamp at all. This is where things start to get a little weird.”

“Start?” Jamie wondered, brow raised.

“Well, become weirder at any rate.” John huffed a chuckle. “I went to the Home Office in London and pulled Claire’s original birth certificate. Jamie it’s printed on vellum, not regular paper. Not only does it feel old, it smells it, too. The space with the information, names and dates, been ...erased and written over.” John pulled the copy of it out and thrust it back into Jamie’s hands.

“It’s hard to see on the copy but when you hold the actual document up to the light, look at it from the back, the document feels tampered with. Follow my line of reasoning for a moment. See? There and there. It looks like on the original birth certificate Claire was born November 20, 1986. There is a faint line there and there you can make out the date’s been written over.” John pointed to the discrepancies.

“Ok. So Claire Beauchamp appears to have been born with conflicting records of her birth? Yer saying she... what? Sprouted out of nowhere?”

“Yes.” John told him simply. “Here is the thing, The Amandine is a real vessel, capable of being sailed in the Pacific. Care to guess it’s owner?”


“I hit another brick wall at the Home Office. Frustrating. So I went to see a guy I know— he’s a kid actually. Name of Stephen Bonnet— a hacker. Spent some time in juvenile lock up for getting into ADSO’s computers a few years back. Hal was by turns livid and full of admiration. Bonnet says he’s clean these days. He runs algorithm programs crunching data. Anyway I asked him to run the names in various combinations: Lamb, Claire, Henry, Julia, Beauchamp and he got a hit in, of all places, Scotland.” Here John paused for a drink of water and went through his notes.

Jamie watched him carefully. John seemed to know exactly what was in his notes already, so he was stalling and that made Jamie’s stomach clench.

“A Mrs. Graham, 22 years ago, called her local Inverness Constabulary to report that a guest at
their B & B had asked Mrs Graham to babysit her daughter while she went to an appointment. She
never returned. The daughter’s name was Claire. The name used to rent the room was a Mrs. Julia
Henry who, no surprise, paid cash for her stay. On the mantel, the DC who came to investigate
noted a manilla envelope was prominently displayed addressed to a Lambert Beauchamp. The
letter appears to be quite innocuous. Just a nice recitation of the activities of mother and daughter
during their holiday. Visits here and there-- a few history museums, some sightseeing, excitement
over an upcoming Samhain festival they were looking forward to. I have a copy of it. Read that last
paragraph.” John requested.

Jamie read it out loud.

“Thank you, Lamb for suggesting that Claire and I get away and rest. You know how hard and
difficult it’s been since we lost Henry. How I long to turn back the clock to a time before any of this
had happened. Claire misses her father terribly, as do I. You are our only family now and Claire
needs you more than ever. You have been and will remain the best uncle a niece could ever have.
Your loving and grateful sister, Julia  -- Sounds like she kent something might happen to her. John-
- what is the notation on the bottom of the page? ”

Jamie pointed out where it said C/R DOA/CND ID=JSA Closed per directive of DCS, Designation
TT.

“I couldn’t get a complete answer. I asked Bonnet to work on it. Look, Jamie, it might be nothing.”

“Out wi’ it John.” Jamie sensed he was on the edge of something.

“All I know for sure is that C/R means Cross Reference which is usually a designation of related
files and DCS is the Defense Clandestine Service.”

“What’s that to do wi’ Claire?”

“I have no idea.” John told him. “But it also doesn’t get us any closer to answering where Claire’s
parents were buried nor explain why she told you her parents died in a car crash when its clear
Henry died before Julia. Going by the information on her birth certificate, it also means that the
timeline isn’t quite right -- she was around six when she was orphaned, if the revised British birth
certificate is correct. If The Amandine birth certificate was tampered with she might have been as
old as eight and not at five as she told you.”
“Christ, John, do we even ken if her mother really died? Mayhap she just abandoned her daughter?” Jamie rubbed his temples.

John stayed glued to his seat as Jamie’s hands fisted his hair and rubbed the back of his skull vigorously, fighting the urge to touch his friend in reassurance. Jamie’s hand went to the back of his neck and he stretched and moved his head, finally looking up and catching John’s eye.

“What?” Jamie asked.

“I hate to cause you further concern, Jamie, but all of this does indicate that Black Jack knows something. Yes, he is toying with Claire but he is not making things up from whole cloth. He knows her story is a bit off.”

What had Claire told him about her conversations with Black Jack?

_He said he knew things about me, about my past. Then he asked me who I really was. .. He said we all harbor secrets and there was something not right about me. .. He told me that you’d soon figure out I wasn’t the person you thought I was and we’d no longer be dating. _

Jamie felt ice water run through his veins remembering the other things Black Jack said:

_Frank never told you, did he?...For the sake of my daughter I’d better call him back._

“Damn all Randalls! Damn Black Jack Randall and Frank Randall, too!” Jamie exploded as he came to his feet. He took a deep breath and locked eyes with John. “Can ye ask Hal?”

John heard the reluctance in his tone and nodded at once. He’d known since seeing the C/R DCS notation he’d need to make more delicate inquiries. He knew Jamie did not want to place Hal in a delicate position but, then again, ADSO had the ability to delve into things unseen. If Hal could help Jamie, John knew he would do so. As John headed out Jamie called out one last question.

“John, what was the date that Mrs. Graham reported Claire’s mother as missing?”

“Uhmm,” This time John did pull his notes out. “October 21, 1994. That’s funny. October 20th is
Claire’s birthday. Seems odd a mother would leave her child on her birthday.”

Jamie went a little pale. Claire’s mother disappeared the day his mother and brothers had been killed. Not too far from Lallybroch as a matter of fact. It was yet another odd coincidence.

Jamie spent the rest of the day in an fog trying to think logically, rationally about what to do. The burden of unwelcomed and uncertain knowledge weighed heavily on him. He kept remembering things Claire had said to him, promises he’d made to her.

*Do I have your personal vow to me and our daughter that in the life we build together, I will never have cause to doubt who either of us are?*

*The truth carries a weight no lie can counterfeit and I know you are hiding something Claire.*

*Does that ever happen to you? Sometimes a sound or a smell evokes something inside and you are suddenly someone else and somewhere else?”*

How had it all gone so spectacularly wrong? His impulse had been motivated by wanting Claire to know where her parents were buried. It was unutterably sad to him that she knew so little of them. That she didn’t even have a picture of her father to remember him by. He couldn’t imagine Faith not knowing who he was and he owed everything to Claire for making sure her daughter’s life would be different from her own.

The worst part was Claire didn’t even know there was anything amiss. It would fly out of the blue and rip her world right out from under her and she’d never even see it coming. What could he tell her? Your uncle lied to you? You have two birth dates you might be 28 or 30? I’m not even sure your parents were married? named Beauchamp? are dead? How could he just drop a bomb like this on her?

His meeting with John only left him with more questions and no good answers to give her.

Especially now. He couldn’t think of Lallybroch anymore without picturing them together, inexorably entwined in heart and hearth. His entire body vibrated remembering the first time she said it. Cocooned tightly in one another’s arms triggering his release when she chanted *love you...love you..love you.*
Something was deeply wrong here, he knew it, he just didn’t know what it was. “Vow to me and our daughter that in the life we build together, I will never have cause to doubt who either of us are....”

No, he decided firmly, he couldn’t. He loved her with a fierceness that demanded he vanquish all her enemies, seen and unseen. He’d created this burden and he would bear it for now. He must protect her heart, spare her the agony of uncertainty. It was the only way he could keep his vow to her and his daughter.

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He woke from his nightmare imaginings, breathing hard and sweating. Her hand on his cheek, wet with tears.

“Jamie? Love? Are you ok?” She was half sitting up and touching him to reassure him as much as herself.

“Bad dream.” He told her.

“Do you want to tell me?”

Jamie placed his hand over hers and pressed her palm deeper into his cheek but stayed silent, the nightmare too real and too horrifying to discuss. He’d dreamed he’d been in the car instead of Willie. But when he looked over at his mother, the head slumped against the steering wheel had Claire’s mass of sable curls. Looking into the rear view mirror, he’d seen Faith’s, not Rabbie’s, lifeless form in the crushed car seat.

Keeping this from her was torturing him and he almost told her. Luckily sanity prevailed at the last minute. His relief would come at the cost of giving her this burden. He could reduce the dread in his heart only by placing it in hers. How cowardly an act that would be? She was his. His to love. His to care for. His to protect. He clenched her hard against his body and compressed his jaws together as if worried the words might spill out accidentally.

Claire could feel the tension in the cheek under her hand. Whatever had happened in his sleep was with him still. He needed her, that was all she knew and for her that was enough. She came all the way on top of him. Her kiss was pure, designed to drive the demons from his mind but she sensed it at once, a powerful urgency in him that welled up and took over her senses, too.
Claire’s heart was pounding in her chest when he flipped them. She made a soft moaning sound when entered her without preliminaries, his cry of joinder shot straight down her spine as they fused together. Jamie took her with hard, deep thrusts that knocked the air from her lungs. She came within minutes on a loud moan followed almost immediately by him. When it was over he lay still like the dead but didn’t loosen his grip and kept her locked against him for the rest of the night.

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The lunchtime trip to St. Paul’s gave him another shock, this one rocked him to his core. He met Claire at the entry to the school. She was all smiles and his heart lightened to see her. She bid farewell to her tour guide and took his hand in hers.

“Ye like it too?” Jamie asked.

“I really do. The classes are designed with developmental milestones in mind and with a lot of flexibility to adapt to individual learning styles. I thought Jesuits were far more rigid but here it seems they really care as much about how to teach the children as what to teach them. It would be a good place for Faith.”

“Well, I am glad ye like it, Sassenach. Means my recent donation isn’t for naught. Though we still have to get past the waitlist to get her in. Let’s meet wi’ the father and see what he’s to say, hmm?”

Claire felt all the blood drain from her face when she saw him. He hadn’t recognized her, why would he? She was just another nameless unimportant woman, after all, her only worth defined by the man she was with. She forced herself to not react.

“Ah, Mr. Fraser? And Faith’s mother? Good, good. Please sit down. I would like to thank you for your generous donation to the school, Jamie.”

“Think nothing of it. I am hoping, though, you have been able to clear up that matter regarding the baptism?”

Claire felt her blood run cold. No matter, she told herself, she wouldn’t have left Faith under his care anyway.
“Unfortunately, no. We have a record of an inquiry about baptising a Faith Randall who is your child’s age, but no Faith Beauchamp.”

“Faith...Randall?” Jamie squeaked. He caught Claire’s eye. She shook her head.

“She isn’t baptized, Jamie. Why didn’t you tell me this was an impediment to her enrollment? I would have told you earlier.” Claire asked quietly.

“It didna occur to me that ye hadna baptized her. Yer Catholic. Ye named our daughter Faith for heaven’s sake. I ken it’s important to ye.” He said with certainty and conviction.

“Yes, I am. And it is. But Father Bain has his own ideas about what is important. And who should be Catholic. Frank and I had made all the arrangements. The week before the service, he decided he couldn’t stay married to me. He was in a terrible crisis he sought solace with our local priest—we belonged to the parish near the university.” Claire interrupted her explanation to glare at Father Bain. “Speaking of which, aren’t you a little far afield?”

The father bristled. “I was transferred here a few months ago.”

“Hmm. Caused enough trouble at St. Kilda’s did you? Got you out of Dodge before another scandal?”

Jamie was personally rather shocked by her words and tone. He couldn’t imagine talking to a man of the cloth so rudely. His censure must have shown on his face for she addressed her next remarks to him.

“Do you remember back in the spring before you and I were a couple and I came home one night completely worn out?” Claire asked him, completely ignoring the squirming Father Bain.

Jamie nodded. How could he forget? It was the first time he’d ever seen her utterly exhausted and heartsick, the first time she’d let him comfort her by holding her and gentling her until she fell asleep in his arms. The moment he realized why she was always touching and hugging him and Faith.
“You held me and let me cry.” Claire reminded him. “I’d lost a patient that night. A young mother of three. She’d been beaten to death by her husband. Frank and I knew the family from church. He’d been beating her for years, they say. Everyone knew it. Less than a year ago he’d beaten her so badly she miscarried. I counselled her that for her health and her safety and that of her children she needed to get help. To leave him, go to a shelter. She couldn’t bring herself to do it. Each time she came in with black eyes and torn skin, I tried a little harder to get her the help she and her children needed. But she told me Father Bain kept urging her to try harder, be less demanding, be more understanding and compassionate towards her husband. That it was her duty. Her duty. To go home and get the shit kicked out of her.”

“Claire-- “ Jamie interrupted. She knew he wanted her to moderate her language.

“Fuck Father Bain.” She said very precisely. “I had it all set up with the intake coordinator, safety plan in place for the children, the school, lawyers everything all set. Then Father Bain once more talked her out of it. The last time I saw her it was on a table in the OR. She’d been so badly beaten that I had no idea who she was until after I called her time of death and noted it in her chart. Faith isn’t baptized because Father Bain told Frank that he could either have his annulment or our daughter baptized but not both. If an annulment was important to him, Faith wouldn’t be allowed the sacrament of baptism.”

“What?” Jamie asked genuinely shocked.

“Oh yes, indeed. You see, Frank was entitled to annul our marriage so long as he had no children.”

“Why could ye no baptize her yerself, Sassenach?”

“Because Father Bain won’t have a bastard sitting in his pews on Sunday.” Claire spit the word out and Jamie hissed.

“Bastard? Bastard? My daughter isna a bastard!” He responded. “And even so what difference does it make? Ye can still baptize a child wi’out a father.” Jamie said logically.

“Not in Father Bain’s misogynistic world.”

“I will not be dictated to by a woman like you.” Father Bain shot out. “And I won’t apologize for having higher moral standards than some of my less well informed colleagues. The ecclesiastical requirements are very clear.”
“I have heard enough of your opinions on the topic you needn’t repeat yourself. Children must have fathers and fathers cannot get annulments. Frank was placed in an impossible position. I told him I wouldn’t be going to St. Kilda’s after he left anyway. I’d seen first hand how the church had been running things even before that night and had quite enough of the church for the time being. Frank was able to get his annulment.” Claire looked him over carefully and glared at Father Bain.

“Though I suppose I should thank you for one small mercy.” Claire threw out, “Thanks to you Frank was eager to sign off on the revised birth certificate and remove his name as the father. That part was at least easy.”

Father Bain’s eye narrowed. Then he said with satisfaction, “you have been gravely misinformed, madam. When I went back over the parish records searching for the baptismal record I cross referenced the birth certificates as I wanted to be sure I wasn’t missing anything. If I’d found the baptismal record, I could move her to pre-enrollment and needed the birth certificate for that process anyway.” Father Bain looked over to Jamie and gave him a smug smile. “It was a very generous donation, after all. Frank did get his annulment but the registry never recorded the revised birth certificate. Your daughter is still legally his child. Faith Julia Randall.” With a flourish Father Bain produced a copy of the birth certificate.

Jamie, stupefied, took it in hand.

Chapter End Notes

Go look at the artwork that is actually on the walls in the beloved book Goodnight Moon. It's a little weird. Next Chapter: From Here to Paternity
From Here to Paternity

Jamie didn’t say a word until they exited the school. Angry yes, and clearly at her. Claire tentatively reached her hand out to his but he abruptly turned on her. His tone pitched low with an effort to not let it rise over his normal speaking voice.

“If ye’d ha’ told me she wasna baptized afore now we coulda made arrangements at any point this summer with Father Kenneth back home. Did ye no’ think to mention it when we were at services in Broch Mordha Sunday last?”

Claire decided to give him this one.

“You’re right, of course. So much has happened it wasn’t in the forefront of my mind. I’m sorry to have wasted your time looking into St. Paul’s. But surely you must see that even if I’d mentioned it and her baptism wasn’t an issue, I’d never have agreed to have Faith enrolled here.” Claire paused then gritted her teeth. “I’ll reimburse you for the donation you made to the school.”

“God Jesus Claire, ye think that matters? How did ye no’ ken Frank was still the father?”

She wore a baffled look that caused his hands to curl into fists. When he followed the direction of her gaze he let out a deep breath and slowly uncurled each digit. Then unable to think of what else to do with them, he shoved his hands into his pockets.

“How would I know that? I’ve never needed her birth certificate before now! Frank and I settled things and I gave all the paperwork to his lawyer. The daycare is for the staff only and it’s not like my story went unnoticed. They never asked for her vital records. Her pediatrician and I were in school together. I have no family to visit and no reason to travel out of the country so Faith has never needed a passport.”

Jamie said nothing but continued to walk, setting a brutal pace.

“Jamie?” She called urgently. He ignored her and kept charging ahead. “Please, will you just stop and look at me?” She was wasting her breath, feeling at once like a fool and totally defensive even though she’d done nothing wrong.

Damn idiot was stalking off in the wrong direction, clearly expecting her to blindly follow as he led
them god knows where, straight over a cliff for all she knew. She watched the back of Jamie’s head
disappear around the corner but she herself was rooted to the spot.

The loss of her patient felt just as fresh now as it had a few months ago, the helplessness and the
futility as she realized there was nothing she could do for her anymore, trying to accept the hard
limits of her abilities as a surgeon and as a caretaker. But it was more than that, so many thoughts
all jumbled together. The worst was the feeling of powerlessness her inability to be in control of
her own life, of Faith’s future. A pawn playing a game whose rules she didn’t understand, the
outcome of which always seemed predestined to leave her worse off. Her heart felt heavy in her
chest. She’d been so sure that she and Jamie were an unstoppable team but at this moment, she felt
completely alone.

“Oh, do get ahold of yourself, Beauchamp!” Her Uncle Lamb used to say that the only thing as
horrid as a lifelong bully was a lifelong victim. Decided, Claire abruptly turned to the left and
headed back to work. She had no idea when-- or even if-- Jamie would realize she wasn’t just
waiting around for him to unleash his considerable ire on her but he’d figure it out eventually.

After a late afternoon splenectomy, Claire felt infinitely more in control. It was rather fascinating
how holding someone else’s life in your hands could bring much needed perspective. She only
hoped Jamie’s mood had improved as well. She found him rocking Faith to sleep. Only by virtue of
his size did their daughter still look small enough for rocking. It had been several months since
Claire had been able to comfortably sit with Faith on her lap like that and Claire felt an unexpected
sense of loss at the realization.

Jamie’s hands were wrapped protectively around Faith’s body and she was drooling on his
shoulder. He hadn’t yet noticed Claire, preoccupied as he was murmuring into the girl’s ear. The
look of peace in the faces of both father and daughter softened her own.

Sensing Claire in the doorway, Jamie made eye contact. He gave her a rueful upturn of his lips in
acknowledgement and nodded when she inclined her head toward the kitchen. Her back was to him
as she fiddled with something in the sink. Hearing him approach she turned to him.

“Did he do it on purpose?” Jamie asked her.

“Did who do what on purpose?”

“Frank. Do ye think he did just enough to have Bain put the annulment in train then instruct his
lawyer to no’ bother wi’ filing the paperwork?” Jamie speared her with a look of intense
watchfulness.
“Why would he do that?” Claire was genuinely baffled.

“Same reason he told Black Jack your numbers and where ye live—to cause trouble.” Jamie’s tone said the rationale was quite obvious. Claire made a scoffing noise.

“No.” Claire was emphatic. “Jamie if you only knew what it had been like for the two of us, he just wouldn’t have done that. When Frank left, I -- was at war with myself. It had been so hard for him and I thought he’d done the best he could and put everything behind him. I thought we might be ok in the end. So I struggled between being angry with him and understanding why he did what he did but I am positive he didn’t deliberately do anything to harm me or Faith. He’s not a vindictive person.”

Jamie snorted.

“Don’t judge him, you have no idea what he has been through.”

Was she defending the arsehole who’d made her life hellish for months? He would never understand women. The look on his face was plain as could be and she smiled at him.

“I know, Jamie. It was terrible for me when he left. The end of my marriage was a shock and everything I have told you is true. That’s only my side of it, though. Frank’s feelings are his own and he comes by them honestly.”

“How can ye stand there and defend that --that bastard!” He raged.

Claire’s cheeks turned bright pink.

“I will thank you to not use that name in this house.” She said in her best clipped and starchy school marm voice. “It case it hasn’t occurred to you, but for Frank Randall our daughter would be a bastard.”

“The hell you say! That wasna my fault!”

He’d come flying at her, to do what, exactly, she couldn’t have said for he stopped short of
Claire tried hard to keep still, willing herself not to react, uncertain of his level of control. Jamie in a temper was a sight to behold. Apparently his mood of earlier this afternoon hadn’t quite dissipated. She looked pointedly at his hands, once again fisted and his blazing eyes trying to cut through her like a scythe. He loomed over her.

She inhaled a deep breath. Jamie seemed to realize he was in her personal space and deliberately turned away, pulling out a chair with a bit too much force and sitting down heavily at the table. He placed his head in his hands. Claire knew he’d be upset with himself if he thought he’d scared her so she sat herself down at the table next to him, deliberately reaching out and touching his upper arm. He shuddered in a breath trying to master his emotions.

“Jamie,” Claire said very quietly, “none of this is anyone’s fault. None of us would have chosen this.”

“Me.” He choked out, from behind his hands.

“What?” Her voice registered her complete surprise.

Jamie’s hands came down and he gripped one of hers in his.

“Me... I would. I would choose it. I ken it’s not the normal way of things but it brought me Faith and it brought me you, Sassenach. I dinna begrudge the gift. I’m sorry for yer pain but I’d never have had ye if not.” He said in utter sincerity.

Claire had no earthly idea what to say in response but she was trying to make a point.

“Frank had a child before, with his first wife.” Jamie hadn’t known Claire was his second wife. Then something occurred to him.

“Ye were stepmother to his bairn?” One more thing she’d never talked about in the landscape of things she’d kept hidden from him.

“Not exactly. Frank’s first wife, Mary Hawkins was her name, she did have a child. But it turns out that the child wasn’t Frank’s. The child, Denys Randall, is the child of Frank’s other cousin, Alex--Black Jack Randall’s younger brother. For a man like Frank, for whom ancestry is everything the betrayal was unimaginable.”
“Mmphm.” Jamie’s response.

“Put yourself in his shoes for just a moment. Imagine Frank’s excitement watching his pregnant wife, awaiting the birth of his first child, buying booties and flowers and putting a crib together only to discover the child was not his. Then learning he had been betrayed by his wife and cousin. Alex was the best man at his wedding for God sake! It wasn’t until after Alex died of an asthma attack that Frank was able to even consider having another child of his own. After we married, I wasn’t able to conceive and we learned that Frank wouldn’t be able to father a child naturally. Imagine saving all your money, asking your wife to undergo painful hormone shots, cycle after cycle of disappointing attempts. Then finally the news you have prayed for comes--your wife is pregnant and this time everything would be fine, it would all work out. He used to sing silly songs to my belly and Faith would always kick furiously when she heard him.”

At this Jamie rose from the table. He turned his back to her unable to look at her. He remembered the ultrasound picture vividly. The pain of imagining her with him, his touch upon her swollen belly, his voice the first male voice his daughter heard cut into him.

“It was an easy pregnancy, everything was going fine until we did the amnio. Imagine being Frank and finding out that this child, the one you’d worked so hard for, undergone all manner of indigities to have, that you were certain would instantly erase all the hurt that came before and would give your life meaning turned out to be your very worst nightmare instead.”

“Stop!” Jamie choked out. “She is everything to me! How can you talk of her so?” Every button he had was being pushed and hard. He could not speak of this calmly.

“What if you were to find out she wasn’t yours, Jamie? After committing to her heart and soul? What if we learned she wasn’t yours?”

“Oh but she is mine.” He said emphatically.

“What if Frank changed his mind? How would you feel knowing someone you didn’t know, are predisposed to think of as your competition, even your enemy, made a claim to Faith and you suddenly had to share her with another man? I insisted that Faith’s biological father be contacted and given the choice to become part of her life. Frank had to live with the knowledge that agreeing to parent Faith meant parenting with a stranger who’d be in our lives for decades to come. How easily would you be able to accommodate a total stranger who would displace your claim and seek to usurp your role as a father? Especially if you’d thought the child would be yours unequivocally? Could you trust that whatever bond you had with her would be strong enough to hold your family together? Knowing the truth would always lay between us and the child would never, ever be just
yours? Would you be satisfied with such a life?”

Claire watched his face, his jaw clenched, a tick pulsing as he fought hard for control. She’d made her point, she thought.

“He is not perfect. Might he have told some inadvisable things to Black Jack about me? Perhaps. But I don’t think he was trying to hurt me or Faith. Something terrible happened to him, twice. So do not cast aspersions on his character. He’s not evil incarnate. He’s just someone who tried to be honest regarding what he was feeling even though what he was feeling didn’t necessarily show him in a good light. I didn’t like what happened between Frank and I, it wasn’t pleasant. I try not to judge him too harshly because of it.”

Jamie sensed the opening her words provided. He was more than halfway to his office before he’d finally figured out she wasn’t walking next to him. He’d felt like an idiot, of course, but also like everything was flying out of his control. Then too, the weight of his guilt for holding onto the information he’d uncovered about her pressed inward and he’d reacted by striking outward— going on the offensive and thus compounding his sins. He couldn’t make it right, but he needed to try and make things better between them.

“And me, Sassenach? Can ye maybe understand why I feel as I do and maybe no’ judge me too harshly as well?” He sighed in relief as she walked into his outstretched arms. He kissed the top of her head and she felt him nodding. He took her hand and walked her into the living room, sitting down beside her on the couch. She snuggled up against his side.

“Jamie, isn’t the important thing right now is to figure out how we go about fixing it?”

“Aye.” Jamie agreed.

Claire reached up and cupped the back of his head in her hands, bringing his lips to hers.

They exchanged a long look and reading it in his eyes, Claire smiled.

“So I take it you’ll want your name on the form?”

“Ye need ask?”
Between kisses she managed to bring up one last important detail, “And her name? What shall we name her?”

Jamie’s head came back and he searched her eyes. “What do ye mean, Sassenach?”

“Is she a Beauchamp or a Fraser?”

At that Jamie sucked in a ragged breath. He was trying to be all 21st century cool, she could tell.

“I dinna care-- so long as it isna Randall, I’ll be fine.” His off-hand delivery wasn’t fooling her a bit.

“Really?” She asked, “So maybe we should combine our names?” Claire smiled. “Maybe Beaucher? Or Freachump?” Jamie snorted.

“I dinna think I can spell either of those. But I may be open to persuasion, aye?” He pulled her into his lap, tickling her gently as she squirmed like a fish on a hook.

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The call came, as such things often do, out of left field.

“This involves your family as well, Jamie.” Perhaps if John hadn’t said it, he wouldn’t have dropped everything and met the Grey brothers in London. Hindsight was a bitch.

Before noon, Jamie was on an unscheduled chartered plane. John met him at the nondescript side entrance to ADSO, taking a freight elevator down instead of up.

“Isn’t this a little too...Kingsmen?” Jamie tried to joke. But when the elevator doors opened and he got a look at the elaborate offices hidden in the basement, it suddenly did seem a little too 007 and he hesitated exiting. John placed a hand on his arm urging him forward.

“Steady on.” He encouraged, letting Jamie know he wasn’t alone and to take heart from that at
least.

Jamie was pacing the room when Hal entered. They shook hands but Hal dismissed any further small talk by urging Jamie to have a seat on the leather sofa and producing an official looking document, pushing it across the coffee table until Jamie could see it clearly. It was a security clearance acknowledgement, a non-disclosure agreement and a copy of the penalties for violations of the Official Secrets Act which included incarceration and being branded as a traitor.

What. The. Fuck.

“This file is not the complete story. To get the rest of the information I have to go through separate channels and while John and I have the security clearance to review everything, it will take some weeks to arrange the same for you. Although it’s incomplete, enough is contained to fill you in on some of the missing pieces of Claire Beauchamp’s story but it will not be easy to hear nor without side effects. Almost everything in here is under seal. That means even though you have the requisite level of clearance to review the information, you may not reveal the contents of it to anyone, that includes Claire.” Hal held his gaze as Jamie’s eyes widened and he looked over at John whose mouth held a firm line with a pained expression in his eyes. They must have read the uncertainty and fear in Jamie’s eyes.

“You can walk away, Jamie, if you’d rather not have to live with the knowledge of what’s in the file.” John offered as Hal nodded.

“This decision is entirely in your control. However, once you open it, Jamie, you can’t go back.” Hal reiterated. Pandora’s Box. Jamie thought it over.

“If it were you, Hal and this was about Minnie would ye want to know?”

“No.” Came Hal’s immediate response. When Jamie looked at John again, he wouldn’t meet his eyes. “And if it were only about Claire maybe I’d never have given John leave to call you down to London. For reasons that will become apparent, John told me about Faith. You may well hate me for showing this to you, and you will certainly resent it. Yet, I think you will never regret being forearmed with the information for the sake of yourself and your family.”

As soon as he heard that, Jamie knew he really had no option. He picked up the pen from the table, when he was done initialling and signing everything in triplicate, he pushed the offensive forms out of the way and reached for the file. Hal’s hand on his stilled him at once.

“We are still looking for more information. What’s in there will tell you the what but not the why.
The files I am searching for may contain more details, better explanations. As soon as you have a higher clearance you are welcome to join John and I in finding out. We will likely need to look at files stored in several agencies before we can get the whole picture. But that part can wait. What we already know and have access to is enough to give you some idea of what you are up against.” With than ominous pronouncement, Hal handed the folder to Jamie. He read through its contents quickly.

“Her uncle changed her name to his?” Jamie stood up, unable to keep still. He rubbed a hand across his neck as he paced.

“Yes. When his niece was discovered the Home Office, specifically the Defense Clandestine Service was already involved-- and no, we don’t yet know the connection there.” John started to explain. Jamie watched as he shot his brother a warning glance that he didn’t quite understand. “But it appears that it was a relatively simple matter to scrub Claire’s birth certificate.”

“So she wasna born Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp?”

“No. Nor are her parents Henry and Julia Beauchamp. Or rather Julia’s married name wasn’t Beauchamp.”

“Who was Henry then? Where did he die, for that matter where did they live? How did she come to be born on a ship mid-ocean?”

Hal shrugged. “We haven’t found a single record of Henry’s existence. No birth certificate, school or military enrollment, no financial or tax data, no marriage license or death certificate. For all we know Claire’s mother didn’t know who fathered Claire.” Hal said bluntly.

“Bullshit. Henry is real.” Jamie said immediately, catching the smirk John sent Hal’s way. John knew better than to try and fluff him off, Hal was still learning. Hal smiled and then continued.

“I also can’t tell you which birth date for Claire is correct but I am leaning toward the November 20, 1986 because, if you look at the bottom of the third page...just there--” Hal pointed when Jamie got there. He waited a moment for Jamie to catch up.

“Aye. I see. Claire’s uncle told the charge officer that he would take care of the particulars and furnish something they could use to base the revised document on.”
“Yes, but he also noted that they changed the birth date when they issued the final revised certificate to Lamb, though there is no reason given for the change.” Jamie pushed the folder back toward Hal.

“But as soon as I’m cleared we’ll be able to figure out the answers by finding more files with better information?” Jamie asked and saw Hal nod. “Well then, I must say the twa of ye are like old biddies getting hysterical for no reason. Nothing in what ye gave to me seems like the end of the world.”

Jamie caught it then, the long look between the brothers. Reading the expression play out on John’s face, Jamie steeled himself as if expecting to feel John’s fist sink into his stomach.

“There is more.” John confirmed, gesturing for Jamie to sit back on the couch.

A thicker file moved toward Jamie and he eyed it with some distaste, reluctant to touch it and yet compelled to do so. Jamie began to read. Hal watched him carefully as he read. The lighting quick shifting of denial, anger, and bargaining marking his attempted absorption of what he was seeing.

John knew the moment Jamie had put the pieces together-- the situation regarding Claire’s unusual childhood, the codes on the bottom of the letter her mother Julia left at the B & B just before she disappeared and the new devastating information from that very same cross referenced file.

Jamie thought back to those notations: C/R DOA/CND ID=JSA Closed per directive of DCS, Designation TT. This was it, this was the file itself.

The police report was brief and to the point. The driver had no ID on her; however, the car was registered to a Q.L. Beauchamp. The dead body next to the car was found on the evening of October 20, 1994 the same day and less than 10 kilometers from where his mother and brothers had been killed.

Oh Christ, no! Some part of him had known it then and yet he willed himself to finish reading the report.

At some point between the preliminary report and its top secret classification, the local constabulary had been able to determine the identity of Q.L. Beauchamp and then the woman’s connection to him and Claire. Once the ID had been circulated to the Home Office, the DCS had ordered a full shutdown of all further local investigation and the matter was dropped completely.
Jamie turned the page and he saw the cross references in the file from the letter found with Claire explained:

C/R DOA/CND ID=JSA

C/R=Cross/Reference
DOA=dead on arrival
CND=Craigh Na Dun
ID= Identification of body
JSA= Julia St Amand

Then the second set of references from a different file, also now labeled for classified status, contained the following case notations:

C/R DOA/A82 ID=EMF & sons

Closed per directive DCS, Designation TT. Jamie translated the ID at once EMF= Ellen Mackenzie Fraser and sons.

Jamie felt his body go numb. He hadn’t heard that name in many, many years but he’d never forgotten it. Jamie shook his head back and forth in negation.

John reached his hand out to touch Jamie and he looked up to see the tears welling up in his friend’s eyes. Jamie could not stand to be touched just then. He made a feral sort of noise in the back of his throat and moved out of John’s reach.

“Don’t.” Jamie warned.

He read it again, twice more trying to take it in and each time it’d been harder to catch his breath.

The pictures were horrific. The car had sustained enough damage that Jamie thought it a miracle it
had been able to drive as far as it had. He could see the distinctive ring of standing stones at Craigh na Dun rising in the background of several of the photographs. Jamie found it hard to look at the woman’s dead body. Half her face swollen and dark with blood and bruising, the other pristine.

He’d recognized her at once from the slide show he’d prepared for Jenny and Ian’s tenth anniversary there could be no doubt about her identity. She’d looked so beautiful holding Claire in her lap. No vestige of that beauty remained behind but it was her nonetheless.

DCS had manufactured a false death certificate for Julia Beauchamp (not St. Amand, he noted) showing her place of death on the English side of the border. There was no record of Claire’s having been in Scotland when her mother died, instead there was an Affidavit signed by Lamb stating that Julia and Claire were living with him in England where he had a temporary teaching job at Oxford at the time of Julia’s death. They’d hidden any connection between Inverness and the Beauchamps behind a carefully constructed facade. The fact that Julia used a false name at the B & B obfuscated the matter nicely.

His hand was shaking so hard he needed to put the file down on the table. Dhia the blow hit him with the force of a cannon shot to the gut.

Why had Claire’s mother kept driving? She’d fled away from civilization, away from the reach of police and first responders. There was nothing at the end of that road but a pile of stones.

He’d never thought of it even after hearing Julia was his daughter’s middle name. As the full import of it hit him, Jamie’s chest seized and black spots appeared in the periphery of his vision. His daughter, named after the woman who’d killed—Then John had him, laying him out on the sofa and pressing a shot of whisky to his lips.

“I’m alright!” Jamie said for the fifth time and batted John’s hands away. “What in God’s name was the woman doing at Craigh na Dun?”

“We don’t know.” Hal told him.

“I dinna ken she wasna found near the crash. My father only told me that it happened on the A82 and the other driver was dead.” Jamie told them.

“And your father obviously told you the name of that driver as well.” This Hal said as a statement and not as a question but Jamie nodded anyway.
“My God.” Jamie said. “Christ.” Jamie turned his helpless gaze to John. ‘My family...it’s become Claire’s as well. This will tear her apart.”

“Then it’s a good thing you are forbidden from divulging this information from her.” Hal said sharply.

Jamie stared hard at him. “Ye expect me to go back to Glasgow and pretend I dinna ken what I just read? To keep this a secret from Claire?”

“Your Queen and country require you to do so.” Came the emphatic response. He looked so shocked that Hal relented a little bit. “I did warn you.” Hal reminded him.

“So ye did.” Jamie agreed grimly. “My hands and tongue, it seems, are tied. Yet ye dinna ken why the information has top secret classification?”

“No. But if DCS is involved it’s something of critical import, impacting national security. I can try and get permission for you to share some of this information with Claire but I can’t guarantee that will be granted and it will take time to arrange.”

“Where does Black Jack fit into all of this?”

At this John spoke up, “At a guess, I would say that when Frank and Claire applied for their marriage license something came up. Perhaps documents weren’t lining up. Or it could simply be that Lamb confided in Frank. From what Claire told me on Quarter Day, Frank and Lamb were both more or less in the same professional field maybe they were close?”

“Mayhap.” Jamie conceded. “And from Frank it’s a short distance to Black Jack.”

“If Jack continues to harass Claire or you, call me at once. In the meantime, John has temporarily been reassigned to ADSO.”

Jamie nodded to show he was listening. Hal reached a hand to Jamie.
“Jamie, I have always felt my family in your debt for what happened in Belize. Greys always pay their debts but the weight of it has been considerable, given the impact on your life. I am sorry for having to pay you back in further burden. But I promise we will get to the bottom of this.” Hal said softly.

“Hal, neither you nor John owes me a thing. I’d do the same tomorrow and hand them my front side as well.”

“Most people would not.” Hal said simply.

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“Will you be alright?” John asked on the way to the tarmac. Jamie didn’t move his line of sight which was fixed firmly out of his window. John watched his shoulders shift in a sort of shrug followed by a Mmphm. “I am so sorry, Jamie.” John’s sincerity was evident and Jamie turned his head.

“For doing as I asked? How could I fault ye for being good at yer job?”

“Should I fly back with you?”

“I dinna need a babysitter, aye?” Jamie told him. “What I need is to know what the hell is going on, ye will help me a good bit more by continuing yer work here. What does TT mean?”

“I have no idea. That designation appears to be specific to DCS and no other agencies use it.”

“Are ye still in touch wi’ Bonnet?”

“Yes.”

“Will ye ask him to find out what he can about Craigh na Dun? I canna get the images of her out of my head. Claire’s mother wasna there by accident. What about the place was worth dying to reach?”
Jamie managed to keep his grief at bay until he was in the air. He couldn’t fathom dealing with Ian or Murtagh and especially Claire at the moment. Tomorrow was soon enough to try and figure things out. Tonight he just wanted to forget.

He made a call. Then sent a text to Claire letting her know he wouldn’t be home that night and would see her the next day. Then he did something he almost never had since finding out about Faith. He turned his phone off and put it away.

It was a short flight and he planned on being well on his way to intoxication before wheels touched down in Scotland. He inhaled the scent of the whisky then threw it back downing it in one swallow, poured a second then a third and leaned his head back in the seat, closing his eyes.

The photos were etched on his brain now. Julia St. Amand. One hand stretched above her and pointing at the huge stones rising up on the horizon and her other hand clenched hard into the dirt beside her as if she’d been clawing into the earth willing herself to reach her destination with single minded determination. But it had been too late. She never made it there or anywhere else again.

Then, too, a bitterness he hadn’t expected crept in. Didn’t Julia care how badly hurt the occupants of the other car were? What kind of person would be capable of doing that? Yet Claire was a healer. Had she really been raised by a killer?

Jamie told himself to throttle back on such thoughts. Car accidents were just that: accidents. She wasn’t drunk driving, she hadn’t set out to hit his mother’s car. He had no idea what the reconstructionists had concluded about the crash-- his impression-- and that of his father-- was that the other driver was responsible. Yet now Jamie was second guessing his assumptions. Given how fast DCS shut down the inquest, no official cause of the accident was ever determined.

Jamie’s thoughts turned pragmatic. Given Julia’s own injuries, it was very unlikely she would have been able to render much assistance, but still. To have driven away, to be so unaware of the damage to her own vehicle. Why Craigh na Dun? Why had she abandoned Claire that day?

“Oh Claire, mo chridhe. Christ, what a mess.” Spilled from his mouth. And Murtagh? And Jenny--what about his sister? How would any of them find the way to live with this?

Jamie let out a mocking chuckle as he realized that question need never be answered in the end for he was the only one of the bunch required -- no allowed?-- to live with the knowledge of who Claire was-- to him and his family. Jesus, God. Every birthday, every visit graveside, thinking of
his daughter’s name. And the bigger mystery of the stones, now turning more sinister in his mind.

Round and round the mulberry bush his thoughts chased themselves with all the mindlessness of the monkey chasing the weasel. Jumping from thought to thought, emotion to emotion.

He’d been on the runway in Scotland for some time, he realized when Geneva popped her head through the cabin door. “Jay-meee, Oi! Why aren’t you answering my calls or texts?” She let out a surprised “Oh.” She read his mood immediately and only asked, “where to?”

“Anywhere there is more drink and no one kens me.”

By the time they emerged from Geneva’s neighborhood dive, Jamie was very drunk indeed.

For the first couple of hours, Geneva tried, alternatively, to get water and bread into him to slow him down and soak up the alcohol. But seeing this for the lost cause it was, she eventually joined in. He didn’t need a co-worker, a lawyer, a subordinate, or a tactician. He needed his friend. Eeva had been that long before he hired her. She’d, in fact, provided a small amount of start up capital years ago, having met him through John. When everyone else thought he was just a bartender with a pipe dream, Geneva has seen his potential. They shared a solid affection and respect for one another.

Jamie was a good man, one of the best she’d ever known. For the last several months he’d been preoccupied with Claire and Faith and happier than she’d ever seen him. Now, though, he looked like he’d suffered a shock. She knew better than to ask. Tight as a drum, was Mr. Fraser, whether in his cups or out.

Knowing he was far too wrapped up in his own troubles to pay too much attention, she found herself, between shots, unburdening herself, telling him all about her own recent heartache. A tumultuous love affair with someone who put her through frequent makeups and breakups, dangling the idea of marriage and starting a family one minute, acting like a stranger the next. He draped an arm around her, and let her cry on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry for it Eeva. Yer a bonnie lass wi’ a kind heart. Dinna fash, you’ll find someone worthy of ye someday.” He assured her, kissing the top of her head and leaning her head on his shoulder, passing her a somewhat clean napkin from the table.

“I mean, I just want a simple life. Go to work, someone to meet at the end of the day, a baby to
hold to my heart. I don’t want a big house or fancy car. Just a family of my own. I know it will be challenging but well-- look at you and Claire!”

“Oh Eeva,” Jamie said gesturing in a grandiose sweep of arm, “Claire...God she’s just so...I mean ye’ve seen her, aye?” His brows wraggled causing Geneva to laugh as she nodded.

“You lucked out with that one and Faith. What a gorgeous little spitfire she is! And no question where she gets it from.” Geneva gave him a sly grin.

“She and the wee lassie are my every heartbeat.” Then his eyes suddenly teared up.

Geneva made a distressed sound, she touched his face gently, “Jamie, talk to me.”

His mouth opened and she leaned in prepared to hear whatever he had to say. But he turned sharply away.

“I think I’ve had more than enough.” He announced, throwing some bills on the table as he abruptly stood, lost his balance and almost keeled over.

Geneva caught him as he tripped on air. Holding his arm firmly across her shoulders and clutching his side to keep him upright she made her way carefully out of the bar. Night had fallen by now.

“Where to?” Geneva asked in earlier echo of their prior conversation.

“Hmm, bed. If I can just get myself horizontal, I might wake to find myself alive.” He joked. “Christ, I’m drunk Eeva. Attorney client privilege, though.”

“Doesn’t work that way, my lad when you’re stumbling down a public street. Look, I’ve had a bit too much to drink to get behind a wheel. Shall I call you a cab or... my place is around the corner, my guest room is yours.”

Jamie didn’t reply, completely absorbed in the struggle to stay upright. Her place then. Geneva hadn’t realized just how much Jamie weighed. Nor how hard dead weight was to maneuver. By teeters and toddles and sheer brute force, she’d managed to get him through her door and poured
him onto her spare bed. She stripped his boots off and made sure she left a can of Slainte and some aspirin on the nightstand then turned in for the night.

When Geneva awoke at 6 the next morning, he was gone. There was a beautiful bouquet on her desk when she got in to work.

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By the evening, Jamie was able to keep his emotions under control. He had touched base on various issues with Slainte with both Ian and Murtagh and managed to sound halfway normal. It wasn’t perfect, he knew he was avoiding eye contact with both of them. He hoped he’d do a bit better tomorrow and each day moving forward. He just needed to shutter the information from ADSO in a locked box in his head, not call it to mind around his family. He made it through a brief call with Claire about dinner plans. He’d picked up Faith and resisted the urge to crush her to him and glue himself to her side.

“I missed you yesterday.” Claire told him as she came up behind him for a hug. Jamie couldn’t stop his hands from shaking as he pressed them to his chest tightly. He forced himself to behave normally and let go of her hands. He moved the sauce off the burner and turned around. The simple comfort of her arms, the soothing sound of her voice reassured him and he took strength from that. His kiss was possessive and passionate.

“Are ye hungry?” Jamie asked when he found his voice again.

“Ravenous.” She told him. He nodded and then turned back to the stove, filling the plates. “I didn’t mean food.” She whispered coming on tiptoe to kiss the back of his neck, her hips pinning his to the counter.

What opportunities her suggestion presented vanished in a flurry of orange and yellow polka dots as Faith came bounding in.

“Da, Jane says dinner!” Jamie smiled as he saw Faith pull out the fourth chair at the table stacking books and boxes on it until Jane’s head could be seen over the top of it. Claire gave him a “drat” kind of smile which he returned over his shoulder.

Just as they sat, Jamie grabbed both their hands. He first kissed the back of Faith’s hand and then Claire’s as he continued to hold them both, drinking in the sight of them. Claire gave him a puzzled smile.
“I just wanted ye both to know how precious ye are to me. The best part of my day is coming back at the end of it to be with you.” He squeezed both hands and picked up his fork.

By the time he was ready for bed, though, he was ready to throttle his daughter. She’d been an imp all night. It had started with spilling her milk, then knocking over the vase of flowers Jamie had brought home and put on the dinner table. She’d left her room a mess, squeezed toothpaste all over the top of her toilet seat, refused to allow him to shampoo her hair and pitched a fit when she discovered the book she wanted as her bedtime read had been returned to the library. Nothing he said appeased her and she was not even trying to get on his good side. Worse, she was antagonizing Adso as well. The next time the cat shrieked in indignation Claire huffed and threw her book on the table.

“If you touch that cat again, you will have no show tomorrow, young lady!” Claire informed her.

The yowl came just as they turned off the last of the living room lights. It was followed by a sharp cry from Faith. They both hurried down the hall, Jamie opened Faith’s door wider and Adso raced out. Faith was covered in tears with a long, ugly scratch down her arm. Rather than sympathy, Claire provided tough love as she cleaned and dressed the wound in a businesslike manner.

“I warned you. No show tomorrow.”

“No, Mama, pease!” Faith protested.

“It’s bedtime, not another word or else Faith Julia Beauchamp!” Claire kissed her on the forehead. Jamie leaned in and held her tight.

“Rest ye now, lass, tomorrow will be a better day.” He kissed her cheek and tucked her in, sitting by her bed for a few minutes while she settled.

He joined Claire in their bathroom, readying for bed. They exchanged meaningful looks in the mirror. He watched her face blush pink as he watched her, her eyes dipping down to the towel wrapped carelessly around his middle. Beyond blushing himself after his shower, the rapid rise and fall of his chest confirmed he was not immune to her gaze, either. He started to brush his teeth.

Yet something else crossed his mind. Hearing Claire use Faith’s full name reminded him….of things he wanted to forget, yes, but also of imperatives. God all he wanted was to lose himself in
her and forget everything for just a few hours. But he couldn’t; this was too important.

“Clrr, did mmp mpout morms?” He asked around the brush in his mouth.

“Oh, no I didn’t get a chance to call her. But I did call Frank and asked him about the birth certificate.” Claire heard the brush clatter in the sink and watched Jamie stand up straight. He eyed her in the mirror.

“Ye what?”

“Called Frank. I asked him about it. First he’s heard of it. He was all apologetic about it. He said he would call the lawyer. Funnily enough, Frank is coming to Scotland soon for a conference.” Claire scootched in beside him at the sink and pasted her brush.

“Oh?” Jamie tried for casual but he must have been well short of the mark. She spit out the paste and ran the brush clean under the water. As she turned it off she looked back at him.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Starchy Claire was his least favorite Claire, he thought as she made a stabbing gesture with her toothbrush. Damn good thing it wasn’t a dirk.

Jamie unarmed her, taking her hand and peeling her fingers open. He gathered her to him.

“I’ve had the hell of a difficult few days, Sassenach. If ye have any soft feelings in ye for me tonight, I beg ye to sheath yer wee claws and I’ll do the same. I need to be with ye, mo ghraidh.” He kissed her with a longing and tenderness that shot straight to her center.

So softly she had to lean in to hear him he added, “Even more than that, Claire, I need ye to hold me to yer heart and let fall asleep in yer arms.”

Claire’s eyes roamed over his face, trying to read him. Her hand came up and stroked his cheek when she kissed him.

“Are you ok?” Her eyes widened as she felt, rather than saw, a tiny shake of his head. Claire desperately wanted to ask if they were ok but she feared the answer and kept silent as he walked
her to bed.

Jamie wanted to reassure her but he wouldn’t lie to her. He laid her out before him, unwrapped her like the gift she was then his hands ghosted her skin. Fingers whispering over the delicate lines of her neck, her clavicle, her beautiful breast, flying up to the baby smooth plane of her cheek. His hand wrapped around her neck once more, feeling the tiny bones, the round fullness of her throat. He could crush all the air from her in an instant and yet he was the who felt fragile, as if she could break him with a careless flick of her fingers. He brought his forehead down to hers.

“I love you, Claire,” He told her. “Never in this life or any other would I hurt ye. Tell me ye ken that.” His breath warm on her skin.

“Jamie, you’ve been on edge since we came back from Lallybroch, did something happen back home?”

Jamie made a moaning sound, at once thrilled by her casual reference to Lallybroch as their home and heartsick with knowledge unshared.

“You are my home, Sassenach. My place is by your side, protecting you and the lass keeping ye safe. Always.”

Intense blue blazed hotly into her. For a moment she saw it, an overwhelming grief behind that inscrutable mask he wore and then it was gone but he was shaking with emotion and she knew she hadn’t been imagining it.

Suddenly chilled to the bone, Claire reached for him, rolling them over, desperate to pull him back from the place his mind had wandered the only way she knew how.

“I love you, James Fraser.” She brought her lips to his, feeling the soft rasping of his cheek against hers and she felt the wetness there, she watched as tears spilled over his lower eyelids and rolled helplessly down his Viking cheekbones but he never made move to wipe them away nor averted his gaze.

A powerful tenderness had her tongue lapping up each cheek and then kissing him as if she could anchor him to her with her lips and body.
“Yes, make that sound again, Jamie.” She urged as their kisses deepened. Her nail trailed along the tight line of his ribs, scraping against his erect nipple. She chuckled when he grew even louder. “More?” A rhetorical question if ever there was one.

He hadn’t meant to be passive tonight, in fact, he’d wondered if he could be gentle at all with her. There were demons inside him clawing to be free. Yet he found himself yielding to her now. She was leading this dance and that had opened a different part of her to him. Laying his body bare even as he shielded his thoughts, exposing everything of himself he could to her. Jamie, her supplicant begging for her mercy, her forgiveness, her trust though she didn’t truly understand.

He let her do as she willed, surrendering to the waves of sensation she created within him. He groaned helplessly, palms pressed tightly against the mattress, trying to use his hips to encourage her to give him what he wanted.

Her leg rubbed against the wiry hairs of his thigh and calf. Those incredible, capable hands, dexterous fingers dipping, rubbing, rolling along his skin, driving him insane.

“Harder, Sassenach!”

He could smell her arousal as she shifted over, above then down again. Grunted as he felt the sharp bite of her teeth. Tight and loose, soft and hard, smooth and rough, the contrast of touch and feel as she slowly built the tension between them.

“Jesus, woman! Now!” He begged.

When, at last, she’d had her fun, when she thought it impossible for him to get any harder than he was, she levered herself over him. Now it was she who sighed loudest at their joining. She paused, head back, eyes closed for just a minute. When his hands rounded her hips in urgent plea she finally gave in to her need riding him hard and fast; finishing first and collapsing, utterly spent on his chest. Her sweat soaked torso molding to his in a boneless fusing of skin and satisfaction.

“Come back, Claire.” He whispered to her needing her, still. She didn’t sit up but flexed her pelvis to let him know she was paying attention. “That’s it, stay wi’ me, love.” His strong arms on her back, pinning her from waist to shoulder as his lower body pistoned into her. He felt her hands lock around his biceps, and her inner walls squeeze along his length.

“Feels so good.” She murmured, her hips picking up speed and gyrating to increase the friction.
She moaned as she felt him swelling. On the brink, “Come now, Jamie.” She tightened her muscles and felt him shudder as he arched up in release. His hands tangled in her hair and he kissed her over and over as his heartbeat slowed and he slipped from her. Unwilling to let her go, he rolled them on their side, keeping her pressed to him and letting exhaustion claim him at last.

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They’d enrolled Faith in the Gaelic school. She would start in a couple of weeks. The director had been understanding about her birth certificate but insistent on having it on file soon.

“I did write for the form-- Oh-- wait-- it might be in today’s mail.” She told him. “But I think Frank needs to sign off on it.”

“We dinna need his help. We can include a copy of the settlement with Preservation UK and my DNA match. The regulations say that the Register can approve such changes if there is proof of alternate paternity.” Claire didn’t miss the bite of his tone. She smiled at him hoping to appease his temper.

“If Frank signs the form there is no need to ask the Register to review other documentation nor worry whether our proof is acceptable to them. Frank’s signature will speed thing up and make it easier. Besides, I think there is a way to get this all done before Faith starts school. Can I take the car next Wednesday? I know you have the rugby match in Edinburgh that afternoon but can you get a ride from Fergus or Murtagh?”

“Aye, I can but isna that the day the daycare is closed?” Claire’s uh-hum confirmed the correctness of his memory. “I thought ye said ye were taking the day off to take Faith shopping for the new school year?”

“That is true but when I looked over the list from the Gaelic school I discovered that I can order most of her stuff through the school’s online site. So I thought instead I would drive up near Inverness to meet Frank for lunch. I’ll take the form with me and get his signature and then we can just send it in.” This said in a breezy tone fooling no one.

“Isn’t Mrs. Crooke having her wee procedure done that day?” He said very carefully. The long pause did nothing to calm his racing heart.

“Yes. She won’t be able to babysit that day or the rest of the week. I thought Faith and I could have a nice outing.” She wouldn’t look him in the eye, “Frank suggested a picnic at a nice spot with some interesting flowers and local plants-- oh you may know it actually being from near there-- Craigh na Dun, the standing stones?”
He forgot to breathe and didn’t hear a single thing she said after that. Earlier that same day John had emailed him letting him know that Bonnet had started his research. Between 1700 and 1900 fifty-five people had disappeared near Craigh na Dun and five bodies had been found within a 100 yards of the stones according to eyewitness accounts, personal diaries, letters, newspaper and police reports. After 1910 the records became harder to find. John didn’t think it was a coincidence that DCS had been formed in 1915.

“How many incidents has DCS scrubbed in the last hundred years?” Jamie wondered.

“We are working on it. I thought you would want to an update sooner rather than later. Bonnet won’t get access to classified files, so his information may come in quicker than mine.”

“Och, I ken, John. I dinna mean to sound ungrateful. I just feel like we dinna have answers.”

“We don’t. Only more questions.” John put in succinctly.

Jamie shook off the memory of that conversation and when he returned to himself, he had Claire’s arms in a vice-like grip and was repeating the word no, no, no in time with the light shaking of her body back and forth in emphasis.

“What?” Claire knew he’d be upset but this was far more of a reaction than she’d expected. “Jamie, ow! Your fingers are too tight!” His shocked expression and immediate release of her let her know he’d been unaware of what he was doing. Jamie stepped well clear of her.

“Sorry, lass. I didna mean-- “ Then he was stalking toward her once more. “Ye canna go to Craigh na Dun!” His gaze was wild.

“Why not?”

“It isna safe there.”

“I am sure Frank would never have suggested I meet him at a dangerous place.” She bristled.
“Your word, Claire. You will give me your word that ye willna ever go there-- nor anywhere within 10 kilometers of Craigh na Dun!”

“Jamie what the hell is the matter with you? Ever since we left Lallybroch you haven’t been yourself. I can feel a distance between us and it’s scaring me. Are you sick again? Is it…. “ Her hand came forward to feel his forehead and check him out. “...has the cancer returned?” Jamie made an emphatic negative sound.

“I’m fine.” The weight of what he was keeping hidden from her pressing down on his conscience made his words sound clipped. “Dinna change the subject. We were talking of ye no’ me! Promise me, Sassenach that ye’l no’ meet Randall there. Swear on the life of our daughter that ye willna allow Faith anywhere near that man and ye won’t be alone wi’ him ever.”

“Jamie, for god’s sake I was married to him for a long time, he is not my enemy and he wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Please Claire. Ye ken I love ye and only want to keep ye from harm. I would never ask if I didna have a good reason!”

“Ok then, tell me why.”

“I told ye, it’s no’ safe.”

“Why?”

Jamie’s mind raced. What reason could he give her? “People go missing from there.” He nodded as if he’d proved his point.

“People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman or journalist.” She retorted. “Do you have a good reason for why I shouldn’t go there?”

His gut was screaming at him that she needed to keep away from the area, that Faith could not be allowed to go. His thoughts churned.

Claire had no idea her mother had died in the shadow of those stones. Bound by duty to queen and country and his word to Claire, he couldn’t tell the truth nor could he lie.
Jamie wanted to howl. He could think of nothing that would allow him to walk between the fires that were fanning the flames of his fears. Christ! The set of her jaw let him know how angry she was at him.

He found himself getting equally mad at her, though he knew it was unfair of him. He wanted to pound his fists into a wall. An impotent rage fill him and overtook his capacity for rational thinking. She should be willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Whether she knew why or not, wasn’t the issue. She needed to do as he said for once!

“You willna meet Frank there, stay away from him. Ye’ll give me your word, Claire.” Jamie leaned into her, she could feel the heat of him and smell the pungent odor of his fear, which she had mistaken for anger.

“Or what?” Her arms crossed in front of her chest and she gave him a mutinous look.

Stubborn as always, why the hell did she fight him at every turn! “Do. Not. Try. Me.” He said.

Her eyes narrowed. “I wasn’t asking for your permission, Jamie. I’ll rent my own car. May I at least borrow the car seat?”

“No need. I’ll be staying here wi’ Faith that day. As will you!”

“Oh, will I? You are so irrational about Frank and I won’t indulge this temper tantrum of yours any further. I am sure when you have time to calm down you will apologize to me and we can move on from this ridiculous quarrel.”

“I forbid it! You will do as I say. I am ordering you to stay put, Claire.” Jamie watched as she puffed out an incredulous breath and her eyebrows rose into her hairline.

“You forbid ...you order?” She exploded. “I do not have to follow your orders! What makes you think you are entitled to a say in it at all? How dare you even try. Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I am the man who loves ye! Who wants to spend my life wi’ ye! I am the man who would protect you and our daughter with my body and hand ye my soul.”
He could see she wasn’t paying any attention to him at all, wrapped up in what she thought was a jealous rage on his part or a lover’s power struggle but which was actually a bone deep fear of losing her, of something terrible happening to Faith. She had no idea what her words were doing to him. His words wouldn’t reach her, he knew that much.

Jamie grabbed her hand and pulled her along in his wake, dragging her into the bedroom. He still had one hand firmly around her wrist as he reached out to open the front flap of his messenger bag with the other. He fumbled a bit but finally managed to extricate a worn velvet box from the pocket. He used his other hand to pry it open gasping in triumph when the top popped up at last. He dropped to his knee and looked up at her.

“Marry me, Claire.” He thrust the open box at her.

“You must be joking!” She spit out.

“I have never been more serious in my life, Sassenach. I love you and you love me. I want ye to be my wife.”

Clare stared at the ring, then him and then made a helpless gesture with her hands.

“Do ye no’ like the ring? It belonged to my--” Jamie suddenly stopped, the import of that left his mind in a whirl. He hadn’t even thought about it since coming back from London, what it would mean to propose to her with his mother’s ring under such circumstances. “I...we can pick another…” He said with less conviction.

“Oh, I see. So when we were at Lallybroch you said you won’t allow Jack Randall to scare us into getting married but the second Frank shows up all your big talk goes out the window and suddenly you propose? What happened to wanting me to be the one to propose to you but only when and IF it felt right to me? What happened to your promise to wait for me, in parka no less, to be the one to ask even if it meant waiting until hell froze over?” Jamie squirmed under her the weight of her accusatory gaze and he sat hard on his butt. He could feel the panic set in but he couldn’t look away. “My God! Jamie, all it takes is for the possibility that I might want to meet Frank, a man I have known for many years, for lunch and suddenly you feel the need to mark your territory? How flattering. I wonder which marriage vow you think is the most important…hmmm? Love, honor and obey --Oh! Obey! Have I guessed that right?”

Jamie’s face was red with rage and he gaped helplessly at her.
“Ye ken that isna fair, Claire. I’m no’ like that. I only want to see ye and Faith safe.”

“You know how I feel about being manipulated! You know how hard it has been for me to learn to trust again. I—I thought you were different, I thought what we had was something s-s-spec—”

Claire could not stand looking at him. Adrenaline flooded her body. “I think you need to leave now.” She told him.

“Sassenach…” He stood and held his arms out. “Please, Claire. I’m sorry I upset you. I have reasons for telling ye no’ to go near Craigh na Dun and especially to no’ take Faith. I dinna trust Randall and neither do you if ye’d stop and think about it. Ye had to have known how I’d react to ye telling me ye were taking Faith with ye to see Frank. Especially with the things that have been going on with Black Jack.” She turned from him and he gently touched her face to get her attention once more. “Ye ken my heart.” At this Jamie brought her hand to his chest. “Ye ken me.” He pleaded with her. “I made you a promise and I meant it.”

“Which one did you mean? The one where you promised that you’d let me do the asking and if I never felt comfortable doing so that was fine with you? Or the one where you said I’d never have have cause to doubt your word? You ken my heart as well, and you know me. Better than anyone else ever has. You are keeping secrets, you don’t even deny it. You won’t give me a rational reason for why I shouldn’t meet Frank and yet you expect me to do as you say and follow your orders. I’ve told you many times before that I will not be ordered about like a child nor treated as if I were a second class citizen in a relationship ever again. Damn you, James Fraser, you know how I feel about people trying to control me! How impossible it would be to place my blind trust in anyone and that is what you are demanding from me now.”

Showing her the ring was a huge miscalculation. To her marriage was a trap, not a sacrament. The irony of having this fight over Frank Randall, the very man that made her fear marriage in the first place, was more than he could take. He needed to do triage now. He had to stop the bleeding and focus on what could be saved.

“I was wrong, Claire. Forgive me for making ye feel betrayed by my actions. Ye are right, there are some difficult things I am dealing with right now and I’d give my right arm to tell ye but I canna. But ye do ken my heart and ye own my soul. Tis up to you to decide if ye can trust yer heart wi’ me and place yer soul into my keeping.”

“You can’t seriously expect me to say I’m ready to do that right now?”

“No?” He challenged.
“I’m too upset to think clearly. Do you understand what you are asking of me?”

“Aye, I do, the question, Sassenach is do you?” Jamie’s brows went up and he took her hand in his. “I’m asking to be your partner in life and with Faith. If ye dinna want to marry me, that is fine, Claire, truly. I had been carrying that ring around in my bag for awhile and I -- well, it doesna matter anymore. I only wanted ye to ken how I see our future-- it’s always together with me at your side. I’m asking ye to work wi’ me and get Frank off our daughter’s birth certificate and myself on it as soon as possible. Ye dinna feel the same sense of urgency about it as I do but it’s verra, verra important to me. And I have my reasons, though I canna tell ye what they are, for begging ye to stay away from Craigh na Dun. I’m asking ye to no’ meet Frank there. I’d prefer ye no’ meet him at all but I ken ye arena inclined to listen to me on the matter. If Frank is so important to ye that you’ll risk breaking wi’ me to prove yer point then so be it.”

“That is not what this is!” Claire said hotly, “You want me to blindly trust you but you won’t trust me!”

Jamie conceded her point. “Perhaps yer right to see it that way though that isna what has ever been in my heart. I dinna want Faith to be around him. I’ll ask that ye honor my wishes in that regard. Frank doesna care about Faith and never has. I love her wi’ every cell of my body. I respect that ye see it differently and ye dinna want me to give ye orders and such. But I hope ye will simply agree no’ to have Faith with ye if you decide ye must go to see him. Claire, ye arena imagining it, I have things I canna discuss with you yet. I did make ye a vow, aye? When I do tell ye something, it shall be the truth. As soon as I can tell ye more. I promise I will.” Jamie took her in his arms and studied her face. “I love you and I need ye to stand by my side now more than ever, even if I canna tell ye why.”

“Damn you, James Fraser.” She said in a small, broken tone. “I need to think and I can’t do it around you right now.”

“I’ll go then. But first ye must do one thing for me. Please. Promise me ye won’t take Faith anywhere near Craigh na Dun and please for the love of everything that I hold sacred and dear please promise me ye willna go there either.”

Claire’s head was spinning but she heard the true fear in his voice. She didn’t like it but it wasn’t as if the place had any personal meaning to her. She had no real desire to scare him nor thumb her nose at his feelings on it.

“I promise Jamie, I won’t take her there.”
“And you, Sassenach?”

“I won’t go there either.”

The next morning as she and Faith made their way out the door, she noticed he’d found the change of form for Faith’s birth certificate. He’d filled part of it out and signed his name on the bottom. He left his DNA report with it.

She looked closely at the place where their daughter’s name was written. Faith Julia but he’d left the last name blank, for her to decide. She also saw that he’d had some trouble writing out the “Julia” as if a shaky hand had formed the letters.

He put a post it note on it with a one word message to her:

*Please.*
“Jenny? What on earth are you doing here?” Claire moved from the door to let her into the flat.

“To be honest, Claire, I’m no’ so sure myself. I have an appointment this afternoon in town and Jamie asked if I’d come in early so you could get on with your day. He told me you needed to go to Inverness? I’ll drop Faith off with him at the office before my doctor’s visit.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. So he hadn’t quite trusted her word and wanted to make absolutely sure she wasn’t taking Faith to see Frank. He couldn’t have known that she’d already cancelled her luncheon plans. Mainly because she’d refused to give Jamie the satisfaction of telling him. She was still too raw to talk about it with Jamie. They’d exchanged perfunctory Faith-related communications since their fight.

Mrs. Crooke had worked seamlessly as intermediary shuttling Faith between the two. However, she was out of commission for a few days and she and Jamie would need to feel their way back to working with one another again.

Sending Jenny as an emissary was high handed. He knew she’d not bar the door to her. Rather than get mad at him all over again, Claire realized that the action spoke to how out of his depths he must be feeling. It wasn’t like him not to confront an issue straight on. For that matter Claire was in the same boat as he.

She wasn’t even sure if she’d meant her words, spoken in haste and anger, to lead to ultimatums. Claire hadn’t decided if the principals at stake in their argument were worth losing Jamie over. She was still furious but time had tempered that into a feeling of frustration regarding their mutual stubbornness.

It had taken her years to separate her identity of self from that of first her uncle Lamb and then her husband. Years to understand her own strengths and what she could give to someone else. A longer time to become comfortable articulating what she needed and finally to comprehend that she deserved to have those things. Jamie was hurting and scared, she knew. But damn it, so was she.

“You don’t have to do that Jenny, you can tell your brother that Faith and I are planning on just hanging out here today.” The bitter tone of Claire’s bite was unmistakable.
Jenny gripped her arm firmly and led her to the couch. “Sit yerself down, now! Just what in the hell is going on with the two of you? Because I’ll tell ye right now I’m no’ about to play post office taking messages back and forth like we were back in primary.”

Claire wasn’t a confiding sort of person. To tell Jenny everything felt like a betrayal of the sacrosanct relationship she shared with Jamie.

“How much do you know?” Claire stalled.

“No’ much. He’s no’ found a good way to handle Black Jack - that’s been weighing on him since ye came to stay at Lallybroch. He’s on edge at work. Fergus, Murtagh and even Geilles have all made a point of asking Ian what they can do to help. Jamie’s worrit enough to have asked Ian and I directly to keep close to Faith. I ken ye want her baptized in Broch Mordha soon. He asked me to check the parish calendar and see when Father Kenneth is free. I suppose that means ye’ve decided to change her birth certificate?”

Jenny looked at her, Claire for once, managed to keep her face a complete blank.

“Is that what troubles him -- that Black Jack will make it a bigger story than if he wasna in the picture?” Claire shrugged, not wanting to say anything on this subject if Jamie hadn’t filled Jenny in about Faith’s existing paperwork. “When he asked me to come get her he sounded…. Well, a little, I dinna ken really. He’d throw his body between his daughter and danger. If it was urgent, he’d be here himself. He’s trying to pretend it’s all under control but there is an edge there. Most of the crew is at the game but he’s staying here. I ken if he sent me, you and he must no’ be on firm footing?” Jenny paused hoping Claire would fill in the gaps. Claire gave her a gesture that Jenny translated as “no shit, Sherlock. Go on.” Jenny let that one go, like clams he and Claire both.

“Babbelas’s numbers were better than the projections this quarter but the UK is still blocking the import here so market share still favors Slainte. The issue with a few of their raw ingredients isna resolved, but they are getting much closer to reformulations. Most of it is business as usual. I think the thing that worries Ian and I most, though, is Jamie’s been as tight lipped as a cistercian monk about his London trip last week. Ian thinks Jamie must have met with the bankers in London regarding the expansion plans but for some reason he didna tell the team about it nor did he take Ian. I dinna think it went well because Jamie’s been deeply troubled since.”

“Jamie was in London last week?” Claire’s shock was evident.

“Aye, did he no’ tell ye about it, either?” Jenny’s eyebrows rose high and her forehead scrunched up in concern.
“No he most certainly did not. But….come to think of it, he cancelled dinner at the last minute on Wednesday and that night he never called to tell Faith good night —-which he always does if he can’t be here and he was incommunicado until he came over the next evening. An overnight trip?” But Jenny had no idea.

“Ok, I spilt my news, your turn.” Jenny demanded. Claire stayed silent. Jenny reached a hand out to touch her arm. “Claire, I’ll tell ye right now the only side I’ll pick between the brother of my blood and the sister of my heart is Faith’s.” Jenny looked so fierce that Claire smiled. Jenny was fooling no one. She’d pick Jamie every damn time but her words were touching nevertheless.

“My ex-husband, he and Jack are cousins, you know? Anyway, he called to invite me to lunch. I can’t believe that Jamie is upset just because of a meeting with some bankers. Then again, I can’t believe he spent the night in London and didn’t tell me...Jamie wasn’t keen on my taking Faith to meet him.” Jenny was trying her best to follow Claire’s non sequiturs. “Jamie is keeping secrets that he refuses to share with me. He said as much and then he asked me to marry him.” Claire added moodily. Jenny made a Scottish noise of derision.

“Aye well, he’s a Fraser, no common sense, but we do have an abiding faith in keeping family protected under the same name and the same roof.” Jenny gave her a sweet smile that was tinged with some sadness. “What did you tell him?”

“That he had some nerve ordering me to stay away from Frank! I know Frank a hell of a lot better than him and he’s acting like a jealous lout!” Claire said hotly.

“So I take it ye dinna say yes to his proposal, then?” Jenny responded, a quirk of her lips impossible to contain though her heart ached for Jamie.

“Would you be here if I had?” Claire shot back.

“Auntie Jen!!!” Faith came screaming into the living room.

“Wee love!” Jenny flew toward Faith, joyfully sweeping her up as little hands wrapped tightly around her neck.

“Kitty?” Faith asked hopefully.
“No, lamb, just me today.” Jenny quirked her eyebrows at Claire. Claire sighed and gave in to the inevitable.

“Darling, Jenny has planned a surprise date for just the two of you. She wanted to get you a special….backpack for school next week and then she is going to take you over to Da’s office so I can run a few errands. Does that sound good?” Claire improvised. Whatever her difficulties with Jamie, it was unfair to put Jenny in the middle or Faith, for that matter.

When Jenny dropped Faith off at the office she had to work against the knee jerk reaction to meddle. Her resolve was tested when he started fishing for information.

“So she look ok, then?” He asked just as Jenny was about to leave.

“Fine.”

“That’s good, then.”

Jenny closed her eyes and sighed. “Are ye sure you know what you’re doing?”

“What do ye mean?”

“Rupert is a good lad but no’ terribly inconspicuous. If I spotted him, she will, too.”

Jamie looked away from her direct gaze. “He’s no longer there.” Jamie saw her gaze harden and strove for a better explanation. “He was only there in case she... because she told me she was going to see Frank Randall. I dinna trust him or his cousin and if she was going to do that... I couldna leave her in their company unprotected.”

“Even though she---” Jenny abruptly stopped her words (in mid sentence, for once) when she saw him flinch.

He looked so miserable that she took him in her arms. “Will ye tell me what’s really going on?” His
head shook just a little and he gripped her to him tightly for a moment. Then told her to be on her way. “I’m sorry for it, whatever it is, Jamie. I’m here if you need me.” She gave him a last squeeze of his fingers and let go.

“I’m counting on it.” Jamie told her in absolute honestly.

*****

Claire felt a little like she was playing hooky as she bought her ticket for the French costume drama she’d been dying to see. Renowned for its authenticity from the food eaten to meticulously crafted textiles and period perfect 18th century idioms, it was reputed to bring the past to life.

She’d not been to the theatre in ages and the production didn’t strike her as something Jamie would be all that interested in. The reviews had been outstanding and certain experiences were better on a large screen free from distractions.

The laundry hadn’t been sorted, they needed milk, she had a stack of mail to open but she was in a rebellious mood. She was also worried that left to her own devices she’d only work herself into further knots. A few hours of escape was just what the doctor ordered.

Claire had been completely absorbed by the intrigue at Versailles, watching in delight as Louis’s camel improbably strolled through the garden, when a manila envelope was dropped in her lap. Claire jumped and started to turn in her seat to search for the source when a low menacing voice and a steel point pressed tight to the back of her neck stopped her.

“Don’t turn around, Dr. Beauchamp and do not call attention to yourself.”

Claire kept her face toward the front but cast her eyes wildly about. Only now did she notice just how deserted the place was. Just herself and a scattering of five or so pensioners. Why had she sat so far toward the back? No one was nearby enough to notice anything amiss with her.

Claire wasn’t about to be anyone’s victim, as she readied her body to break free, his other hand landed on her shoulder with enough force to pin her firmly into her seat.

“Have you ever asked why there is so little information available about your childhood?”

Claire tried to ignore the sharp corners of the package digging into her lap, the feel of his warm breath on her, a sharp contrast to the cold of the object pressed against her.
“What?” She hissed, turning her face down and casting it sideways as much as she dared. He was ducking behind her other shoulder, in a cap and hidden in the shadows.

“What were your parents born? Where did they marry? What did they do for a living? Where did you come from, I wonder. Don’t you?”

“Stop it, Jack! This isn’t funny anymore. What are you driving at? I’m just a normal ordinary person. Your employers at the Mirror are going to fire your ass when I tell them how you are threatening me.”

“Jack, is it? No darlin’ tis not my name. But in a ‘roundabout way, the envelope is from him. Interestin’ you decided on a French period piece. Feels familiar, does it? In fact, I’ll bet my last Euro you haven’t even bothered reading the subtitles, Dr. Beauchamp.” This pronunciation said with such a heavy French inflection it came out sounding like bow-sham. “Do you like games? I do. Here is an interesting riddle-- why did both your parents have the same unusual last name? Bow-sham, Beach-ham -- I wonder if they had fights about how to pronounce it after they got married. Who do you think won that argument, mom or dad? We’ll meet again, soon. I can’t stop the story but you’ll at least have a day or so to prepare. It’s not free of charge, mind. I’ll come ‘round to collect in due time, sweetheart.” Another object was dropped in her lap. “Why don’t you look at that and we’ll talk about it next time I see you.”

Just then, the light in the theatre changed as the movie panned from an inside location to the full sun of the Versailles gardens once more. Claire was moving the two packages off her lap in order to leap up after him, determined to see his face and identify him, when her hand brushed against the second object. She glanced down, losing sight of her assailant, and her breath caught in her throat. The copper and enamel case had popped open and the picture nestled inside it gleamed in the reflected light of the screen.

“Tante Amelie!” She had no idea if she’d said the name out loud but it rang in her head. For a moment she stared at the small metamorphose mini-portrait in her hand, then she realized he was getting away.

Clutching everything to her chest, Claire hurried from the theater, pushing out onto the sidewalk in a disorganized mess. She caught sight of three men in the vicinity of the theatre. One was across the street, a good distance from her but as he turned the corner she caught a glimpse of blonde hair. He was tall and middle aged. The one to her left was rushing down into the tube. Average size, brown hair, no other features were visible. The last one looked like a gangly university student, backpack in hand, beanie on head, just getting into a taxi. A dead end.
Hours later, Claire heard Jamie’s key slide into the deadbolt. She carefully schooled her features, knowing how ravaged her face would look even to Faith. Jamie had spent the evening with her over at his flat and fed her dinner. A good thing, as Claire was certain she’d throw up if she so much as smelled food at the moment. When Jamie caught sight of her his mouth fell open.

“Claire?” Hushed concern and a barely contained need to hold her, to offer her the shelter of his embrace.

“Let’s get Faith off to bed, shall we?” She instructed tightly.

Faith unwound with the speed of a sloth. The agonizingly slow process strained Claire to the breaking point. Jamie knew if the lass asked for one more thing—be it another glass of water or even a hug, Claire would snap. He let Claire know he’d finish up with their daughter then come and find her.

Jamie tucked his wee sprite back into bed. He coaxed Adso up on the pillow next to her head and rubbed him. Set to purring, Adso buried his wee nose and snagle fang up to her ear and head butted her, giving Faith his best ecstasy thrum, which Jamie leaned down and matched in her other ear. Faith giggled and sighed further into her pillow, hugging her father’s head tighter.

Jamie chuckled and moved her hand to Adso, lightly drawing her delicate fingers along the bridge of Adso’s nose and behind his ears. Jamie kissed them both, then, in a silly gesture kissed Jane as well, reminding Jane to be a good lass and stay in bed.

Then he reached into the back of Faith’s closet and took out her special luminaire lamp. Faith smiled sleepily when she saw Jamie flipping the switch. Soft melodies played from the base as it cast up a starry night on her ceiling and walls. It always reminded Jamie of the fireflies that danced in the Lallybroch gardens in summer. He set it for a short run time, just enough to lull her into that final phase of going to sleep.

Usually he and Claire used the lamp as a bribe to keep Faith occupied so they could take a little time to themselves without fear of her interrupting. They needed time alone now, though not for that. It was time for him to find out what had happened today to Claire.

His heart had nearly stopped when he came in the door. Claire looked so grief stricken, had clearly been crying for a good long time. He could see the defeat in every line of her body, a deep sadness wafted off her that scared him. He was stalling, he realized, not wanting to confirm his worst fears and unable to live without knowing.
Claire was sitting on the bed when he found her. He hesitated a second then sat. A long minute passed in silence, then another.

“Thank ye, Claire for no’ going and for letting Jenny take Faith.” He said, pretending for a moment that the situation was simply a reflection of her earlier ire.

“I went to see a matinee of Grandes Eaux.” Claire told him. Jamie had known that. After Jenny texted that she had Faith with her, Jamie asked Rupert to come back to the office as soon as he knew she wasn’t going to be traveling. Rupert had appeared at his doorway shortly after Claire entered the theatre.

“Someone came in the middle of the picture and sat behind me.” Her body shuddered in memory.

“He didna hurt ye, now?” Jamie revved into high alert. “Was it Randall?” he asked carefully not picking a first name.

“No. I have no idea who it was. He pressed something to my neck. I thought it was a knife but --” Here she laughed a little unhinged, “it was dark and I was taken by surprise. For all I know it was a ballpoint pen. He gave me two things and some food for thought. He asked me if I was following the film in French or reading the subtitles.” Suddenly Claire switched into flawless French, which he’d never heard her speak. “I hadn’t noticed until he said it but he was quite right. I had been following without reading anything. He also wondered why my parents had the same last name and then asked if they pronounced it the same way. What made him asked that?”

“Your mother’s maiden name Beauchamp, too?” Jamie matched her choice of language and pronounced it bow-sham accordingly. At this Claire’s face turned bright red.

“I never thought to ask Uncle Lamb. It wasn’t until Faith was born that I knew birth certificates contained that kind of information but even then I never thought about how that might relate to my own records. I came home today and unearthed the box of papers from Lamb and found mine.” Claire thrust her amended birth certificate from when Lamb adopted her into Jamie’s hands.

Jamie barely looked at it, watching her instead. His own copy was locked in his safe at the office and he took it, and all the other information he had accumulated, out nearly every day as if staring at the papers long enough would conjure up the answers he needed.
“You’ve seen this before, then? And you recognized how unusual that was, didn’t you?” Claire wasn’t surprised that he’d run a background check on her.

Hearing her crisp English accent, every bit as pure as her French jarred Jamie. He had to tread very carefully here. He could not tell her. He’d half hoped and half dreaded that she had known her father’s real name had been Henry St. Amand but clearly she had no idea.

“‘Aye, I did.” He admitted switching languages again.

“That man in the theatre, was he right? Was one of my parents French and the other English?”

“I dinna ken for sure but I think it likely at least one was French.” Jamie said carefully in that language. “I speak French well, but not so well as you. Having lived in France myself, I know the difference between a native speaker and a fluent speaker.” Jamie told her. “Did ye grow up speaking French with Lamb?” Jamie had switched back to English.

“We lived all over, you know that. Some of the camp schools I went to were run by French nationals and taught in French. Lamb and I spoke English at home. I think children just kind accept things like this. At least, I know I did. I didn’t see it as anything unusual.”

“When ye grow up that way, it’s yer normal, Sassenach.” He would have touched her then to reassure her but he saw her recoil at the sound of her nickname from his lips. He cleared his throat. “Do ye remember anything else about the man?” Jamie moved his body back away from her on the bed, sensing her need for distance but not yet understanding why.

“He had an accent but it wasn’t French or British or Scottish.” She said thoughtfully.

“American?”

“No, a lilt though, softer blended sounds.”

“Irish? Welch?”

“Maybe.”
“What did he look like?”

“I have no idea. My impression is he was tall and not very old.” At Jamie’s raised brows she added, “His hands when they fell in front of me, I noticed they didn’t have wrinkles or age spots.”

“Did you try and follow him?”

“I did but he distracted me and by the time I was on the street he’d vanished.” Jamie watched as her face hardened and her body tensed. Whatever it was they were getting to it now.

Claire handed him a small oval box. He turned it over in his hands. She reached out and popped a clasp at the side and it sprung open. “This is Tante Amelie.” She told him.

Baffled he looked down. It was a delicate mini-portrait of a woman, etched in copper and painted. The kind of object a spouse or parent would have carried while traveling in past centuries, like a photograph. This one was quite unusual though, he could see at once.

There were small thin slivers of mica with a tiny oval cut out where the face would be painted with different costumes, hair length, hats. Ten in all, that could be layered over the portrait, two of which made Tante Amelie look like a man. Fancy dress, religious order, daily homespun.

“Like a mini paper doll?” He asked uncertain if he understood what he was seeing. She smiled briefly.

“They are known as metamorphoses.”

“Something ye had as a child?” Jamie guessed.

“No. At least not from the time I started living with Lamb. This is going to sound strange but he dropped it in my lap right before he left the theatre. As soon as I saw the face, I knew it was Tante Amelie. Not a toy I played with, but a person, someone I recognized. I have no aunts. Lamb didn’t bring girlfriends home-- if he even had any. I don’t--- I’m not sure why I am so certain. Until I held it I would have said I had no idea what it was. Frank might be able to help -- at least he’ll know someone who knows more about them.”
Jamie stayed silent but held out his hand. Claire placed the delicate object in his palm. Jamie turned it over carefully, looking at the lock mechanism, turning it over and placing each overlay on Tante Amelie. He looked at the back again, pushing and pulling with some delicacy.

Something slid and the back rolled upwards. A small piece of the inner frame was exposed revealing an engraving under the slide. *La Baronne de Amandine.* Chills ran up his back. He lay the exposed frame on Claire’s palms and watched her as she read the inscription.

“Baronne Amandine?” Claire looked up puzzled. “I know that name….” Jamie waited willing it to come so his burden would be lifted but after a moment he knew she still hadn’t quite gotten there on her own. Then he thought of something he could say.

“Tis the place ye were born.” Jamie told her.

“What?”

“On the birth certificate for where ye were born it says ye were born aboard a ship called *The Amandine.*” Jamie’s eyes darted to her birth certificate. Claire put the miniature down and looked at the papers again. She noticed the small inscription showing the vessel name and a few numbers scattered underneath.

“Could be the coordinates of the ship at the time.” He explained.

“Seems an odd coincidence.” Was all Claire said. Jamie nodded. Silence stretched out between them, but a restless pause, not comfortable and not welcome.

“Why didn’t you tell me you went in London last week?” Claire finally asked. Jamie froze.

“It was an unexpected trip, I didna ken I was going until just before I had to go to the airport.”

“You spent the night there, with her.” This was not asked as a question but he responded anyway.
“I went alone, Sassenach!” What was she driving at?

“Do not call me that!” Claire’s eyes filled with tears. “You promised no lies. Secrets, maybe but no lies!”

“I’m no’ lying. I was in London for a few hours then came back to Glasgow the same afternoon.”

“You slept with her!” The accusation was spat out in anger.

“Claire, the only person I’ve slept with is you.” This declaration was met with a huff of incredulity.

She flung something at him. His heart stopped. A collection of glossy photos of him and Geneva at the pub around the corner from her flat.

“Where did ye get these?” He asked hoarsely.

“The man at the theatre claimed they were from Black Jack in a roundabout way-- his words not mine. He also said he couldn’t stop them from becoming public at most he said he could give us a day or two advanced warning.”

Jamie nodded and then forced himself to look at each one, as she had done likely for most of the evening. He tried to see them as Claire must. But it was harder to do than it sounded for when he saw himself all he could see was the sadness in his eyes, the freshness of the shock he’d suffered at ADSO HQ. It was visible in every line of his face.

His arm wrapped tightly around Geneva as she spilled her guts in an attempt to distract him from his own sorrows. He could see so clearly how he tried to offer her comfort as a balm to his own troubles. The grief he was trying to process, the fear for Claire he was struggling to keep at bay clear to see on his face. The intuitive understanding in Geneva’s expression as she reached out to touch him trying to offer him solace.

These were not the pictures of lovers at all but of a shell shocked couple, each processing something traumatic that had happened in their own personal lives. The pictures were not salacious. They were a photo essay of friendship as salvation.
Geneva had slapped her pain on top of his in an effort to bandage the raw wound of his bleeding heart because he wouldn’t— couldn’t— share his pain with her— or anyone. She’d told him about hers instead and kept him company while he tried to regain his equilibrium. He looked away and shut his eyes tight in an effort to stop them filling with tears.

Eva was a good soul and a true friend. Suddenly the implications of what he was looking at hit him hard. Someone had these pictures, it was only a matter of time before they were published. Christ, poor Geneva, no good deed ever goes unpunished. This would create havoc in the lass’s private life and make her family irate.

“Do you love her?” Claire’s quavering words abruptly brought him back to the present and set his belly into clenching spasms of fear. An angry Claire was one thing, a despondent Claire quite another.

“I love you.”

“Stop lying to me! Admit it— admit you slept with her!” Back to rage, again but paradoxically, Jamie felt the ghost of lightness in his heart. Perhaps the fact that she was mad meant he had a small chance to fix this. For if she was mad, then she still cared.

“I wouldna say that, no.” Claire’s eyes rose up and Jamie quickly added, “For one thing that phraseology implies that Geneva and I toddled off hand in hand on a secret date which we most certainly did not do. For another, while I did spend a few hours at her flat, it was only because I was too exhausted and too drunk to stand upright to make my way home. I lay my head down and waited out the worst of it in her guest room. The room stopped spinning around 3:00 a.m. By that point, I was able to return to my flat and then I did sleep. Alone, mind.”

He sounded utterly sincere. Claire wanted to believe him, his tone, his eye contact, his demeanor all of it screamed truthful. The pictures though...he was leaning all over her, she was embracing him, laughing, trying to coax a smile from him, she was hand feeding him cheese and a cracker for fuck sake!

“I have never lied to ye, S--Claire.”

“You have some fucking nerve getting upset about Frank!” She said hotly. “When you are sleeping with Geneva.”
‘I’m no’ sleeping with Geneva. If ye only kent-- God, Claire! Dinna be a jealous besom. Geneva is no threat to you, it wouldna be anything either of us would ever do.’

Claire humphed. “Why not? The two of you obviously get along so well together!”

“She is my friend.” He repeated. “The pictures are a shock and I am sorry for them but if ye looked at them with yer head instead of yer heart you’d see it for yerself. There is nothing going on between us, never has been and never will be.” This said with conviction. “Claire, do ye truly mean to insult my morals by implying I’d be having an affair with someone at work and in the same week ask you marry me?”

“Why am I expected to just accept what you say as true? Hearing Frank’s name is enough to set off a possessive streak a mile long in you! What would you say if I treated you the way you’ve been treating me? If I told you you weren’t to see Geneva again?”

“Well, Claire that’s no’ really practical as I do see her every day at work…” Jamie suddenly realized how totally beside the point his statement had been and how unhelpful it was to remind her of this fact. “There is nothing going on between her and me. She is a kind lass and her work is vital to Slainte. Ye have no clue what yer implying and how wrong ye are, Claire. These photos will cause her no end of trouble.”

“And what of me? Or Faith? Any thoughts on how devastating these pictures will be to us?” Claire asked softly and saw the sadness in his eyes.

Jamie held out his hands to her, palms upturned. Claire didn’t move. His eyes were pleading with her but as she thought of the way he’d acted in the past and all the slights and missteps he’d made came flooding back to her and she dug her heels in. She could be stubborn, too, she’d see how much he liked it and tucked her hands under her armpits, raising her chin defiantly.

“I love ye, mo nighean donn, only you. These photos are meant to do us harm and they’re succeeding nicely.” Jamie noted.

“If you really loved me, you’d tell me what you know-- everything that you know and then maybe I could believe you about Geneva and what happened that night. But the pictures tell a different tale.”
“I ken sometimes I can be a brute and a fool, high handed and single-minded. I know trust doesna come easy to you. But I’ve given ye honesty.”

Claire’s mocking scoff came very close to putting him over the edge. He was holding onto his temper but it was slipping. His eyes narrowed. The fear was clawing at him and made him speak sharper than he should have.

“Here is some more truth for you. I’ll love ye and want you beside me forever but the woman I love wouldn’a ask such a thing of me. She’d notice this is tearing my guts out.”

Claire’s chest squeezed tight as she heard the depth of feeling behind his words. She forced her eyes away from the pictures and looked at him. He looked haunted and raw…and angry, too. She swallowed audibly feeling something like shame spreading through her.

“Geneva is no threat to you and she at least kent me enough to see that I’m hurting something fierce, scarrit and sad and tired to my very bones. She let me get tight and didn’t judge me for it. Instead she offered me….compassion. Ye might try to extend the same to her.”

Claire felt righteous indignation spring back up inside her. Was he kidding? If he thought she was going to feel grateful to Geneva for inviting him to spend the night with her, he had another thing coming!

“I need my family to lend me their support and give me a wee bit of their strength right now. I want it from you most of all and I pray you’ll accept my name and all that goes with it one day.”

Claire’s breath left her body in a puff of air. Was he really reminding her of his proposal while they were looking at photos of him and another woman? At this moment she felt only confusion.

“I’m sorry I did something that causes ye pain and will be embarrassing. But I will ask ye to look at the pictures again Claire, when yer dander isna up. In the meantime, may I borrow Tante Amelie? John Grey kens a historian or two as well.”

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The advance warning about the photos did do some good, after all. Jamie had taken a few of the pictures in to work with him and shared them with Geneva, which gave her time to square things up with her ultra-conservative family and her lover.
She and Jamie reached out to Hal and John together. A well timed call to the editors of the Daily Mirror didn’t stop the pictures from coming out, but did quash the initial slant of their story.

Instead of being a teasing “come hither” gossip piece about Jamie dating his in-house counsel, it was skewed as a watered down version suggesting that the owner of Slainte is happy to have an unlimited supply of a hangover cure.

Ironically, sales spiked off the press. This had likely only pissed Black Jack off, which Jamie was almost positive resulted in a tattletale posting in which a supposed company insider intimated that Geneva was having an affair with someone “high up” in the company. The exchange was clever in that it could be read either as saying she and Jamie were lovers and the pictures proved that but she was two timing him or that she had another love interest in the company ranks and was stepping out with Jamie.

Either way, he felt guilty that Geneva, perhaps because of her gender or her age or her good looks, was bearing the brunt of malicious gossip. But when Jamie tried to talk about it with her, she shut him down, turning bright red and asking him to please just drop it.

“Are we ok, though?” Jamie pressed. Geneva’s mouth opened in shock.

“Why wouldn’t we be ok?”

Now it was his turn to flush a light pink, “well, because the suggestion that you and I…that we have…I dinna want ye to think…” Geneva laughed then and so did he. It had been awhile since she’d given him a real smile.

“Have you ever thought of it?” She wiggled her eyebrows. He hugged her, he couldn’t help it.

“Course not, I ken vera well ye’d---”

“Tsk. I’d think the two of you would refrain from such unprofessional displays in the office.” Said a teasing voice in the doorway but her eyes had narrowed in that considering way she had. It reminded Jamie uncomfortably of a cat assessing its prey.

“Gellie!” Geneva jumped back and blushed once again. “We weren’t..that is I’m not---”
“Stop teasing the lass.” Jamie admonished lightly. “The poor girl has had to put up with enough.” Geillie gave Jamie a siren’s smile but demurred.

“I’ve found a work around for the problematic osha supply.” Geillie handed Jamie a folder with a thick report and a set of three formulas for him to taste test. "I’ve asked Marsali to come in next week to discuss production implementation issues with the team. That work for you?"

“Aye, finally some good news.”

That Friday was a banker’s holiday and the office was officially closed. But Slainte was an international company. His local team had the day off but their buyers and distributors in other countries were still at work. Jamie went in and had the office pretty much to himself.

A series of late afternoon conference calls had him tied to his desk well past dinner. When he hung up, he noticed his VM was full. Just as he was about to check his messages another call came in.

“Aye, Murtagh?” Caller ID was so useful.

“Dinna fash, I have the lasses wi’ me!” He told him. Jamie could hear the sounds of crowded street in the background.

“What?” He raised his voice to be heard over the din

“Give me five minutes to get the car out and I’ll call ye back.”

While he waited the interminable five minutes for the call, Jamie listened to his messages. The first one was concerning.

“Jamie, I’m at the market. I think we’re being …. followed? I guess you could say. We’ve gone to three stores and the same couple, a man and a woman are trailing in our footsteps. I’m sorry for calling you I just — guess I’m still spooked about what happened at the movies. I didn’t know who else to--- I feel uneasy.”
The second worrying. “Please call me back, Jamie. I am not sure what is going on. Joe has left messages -something else was posted online about you. I thought I saw Jack Randall waiting just outside the doors near the car.”

The third threatening. “Mr. Fraser this is Jack Randall, I am calling you for a comment on a recent instagram shots of you and an unidentified woman whom I think I’ll call Mrs. Randall-- oops I mean Dr. Beauchamp. Have I got it right? I’m fairly sure I have. The rumor is that you’ve dumped your legal eagle and you two are an item-- that or she’s practicing an unusual form of alternative medicine on you.”

Jamie’s heart was hammering and he quickly searched the internet. A series of pictures of he and Claire in flagrante delicto from weeks ago. That it was him was in no doubt. His red hair and overall physical appearance was quite distinctive and he was the one facing the camera.

The pictures were taken just after their Lallybroch vacation the night of the Pub Crawl event which he’d attended without her.

Missing him, Claire had texted a picture of her stethoscope nestled in her cleavage, wearing nothing but her lab coat, though only the outline and slope of her breasts were visible-- risque but not x-rated. Miss you see you tomorrow xxoo.

He’d planned on a late night and with her early schedule in the morning was going to stay at his place. She’d likely meant only to tease but Jamie’s reaction had been visceral. Besides, the music was so loud he hadn’t been able to rid himself of a killer headache. Mostly, he just wanted to go home and let Claire make him feel better.

Their likenesses framed at the bedroom window. She stood between his legs as he sat on the bench at the foot of her bed. The angle of the pictures indicated someone was taking them from the building kitty corner to her flat. The pictures were too grainy for ready identification of Claire, though Randall had been able to puzzle it out.

Randall hadn’t been far wrong despite the crudeness of his comments.

Jamie had texted her on the playful pretext of making an appointment and talked her into seeing just one last patient for treatment today. When he entered the flat she called him into the bedroom, she wore PJs and her lab coat almost like a robe. As a joke she’d pretended to be holding a clipboard. She told him to make himself comfortable and she’d be right in.
“Do ye want me to get undressed so ye can examine me proper?” He’d played along.

“Oh, well..yes, that would be more convenient Mr. Fraser. Unfortunately, we are all out of dressing gowns.”

“Och, well, I dinna mind if ye dinna mind.” He said as he started unbuttoning.

The look she gave him melted his insides. “No. I don’t mind at all.” Then she batted her eyes and slipped out the door.

When she came back in he watched her slack-jawed. Claire, alluring, walking with a cat-like strut toward him, making sure he saw her hips bum-bada-bumping and swaying as she came toward him.

She’d stripped off her clothes and was once again dressed only in her white doctor’s coat, stethoscope firmly trapped between her full breasts. Her long, fine legs ending in those spiky heels, the ones that made her arse look so fine.

“Some days Fraser ye get all the luck.” He murmured.

“Show me where it hurts.” She reached out to touch him.

It had been playful and sweet, then raunchy and naughty. But now, clicking through the coverage and the fuzzy, dim pictures those memories were forever tarnished.

Violated. His head thrown back in utter ecstasy as she knelt on the floor. The headlines on the pictures didn’t help matters at all.

*Looks Like The Tables Turned For Scotland’s Legendary Server*

Exposed. Her arms clinging to his back, head down and tucked firmly into his chest as he hoisted her up against him. That they were joined was implied.

*Barkeep-Turned- “Bouncer”: Slainte, James Fraser*
Desecrated. His red hair stark between her wide-spread legs, her forearm flung over her face, but no question of what they were doing.

*Scotland’s Best “Blow” tender Hard At Work*

He made a call. “Geneva--”

“Already on it, Jamie. I can’t do anything about what’s already been screen capped but we can get take down notices out tonight.” She assured him. “We’ll have the invasion of privacy lawsuits filed first thing Monday morning.”

“Good, thanks.” Jamie rang off when he heard his cell ring.

“Claire? What on God’s name happened?”

“We are fine, now, Jamie, Murtagh got us home.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.” Jamie was already rising off his chair and heading for his car.

“No!” She told him firmly. Jamie sat back down at his desk. He didn’t like the tone of her voice. “It will only encourage the paps.”

“I need to be with ye Claire, to hold ye in my arms. To make sure you are safe, you and the bairn.” Jamie pleaded.

“We are fine, ask Murtagh if you have any doubts.” A dismissive tone that froze him out.

Maybe it was a little crass of him but the plain truth was he could not segregate love and sex. To him, they were indelibly entwined. His temper was dangerously frayed and he was low on emotional energy. The pictures of them likely made her feel sick to her stomach but only served to remind him of the connection they shared and how deeply he was missing her.
Setting aside the act of it, he was withering from the absence of her touch. Yes, he wanted to make love to her but he could do without that if only he could feel her arms around him, the sound of her heartbeat in his ears, see the secret smiles she gave him, gaze upon the warmth of her whisky colored eyes. His life currently consisted of sleepless nights and lonely days filled with stress and isolation. Jamie knew from his own experience that these were particularly dangerous bedfellows. He was reluctant to say it. Then felt a sense of anger that she’d made him feel ashamed of being an honorable man.

“Claire, we havena made love since I asked ye to marry me. Everything’s happening so fast. I canna get my feet under me but I’m trying to. My life is you and Faith and I feel like there’s something pulling the two of you from me. Anchor me as I vow to anchor you, no matter what may come, we face it together.”

“I had a simple life before. Now nothing is what I thought it was. Not even me! I am surrounded by secrets and lies and reporters with vendettas. I need some time to think.” Claire told him.

His immediate thought was that she’d had weeks to think while he’d been strung out and left to twist in the wind but he needed to keep his focus and not give in to these feelings. She was right, she had been through quite a lot with more to come in the future.

Jamie knew she was afraid, of what he knew, and what she didn’t know, of their feelings for each other, of the that unavoidable fact that he was a public figure and that meant Faith would be too. Claire didn’t like being in a spotlight. She didn’t like not being in control. That went for public and private life. He knew that. They were both having trouble seeing how to fix things.

“Claire,” his voice quivered “Lass, I dinna ken what to do. I’ve told ye everything I can and how I feel, what I need and want from you and what I can give you. I canna do more than that. It’s up to you to choose.”

“It’s up to me to choose? Ha! So far my only choice seems to be throwing my lot in with the Randalls whom you are right I do not trust or throwing my lot in with the Frasers whom I know for a fact are harboring secrets about me. My choices consist of two bad options none of which with outcomes I can control. I have told you plain enough how I feel about that.” Her voice revealed her struggle.

“If ye’d let me be with ye, you’d feel my arms around you and how strong we are together. Ye’d no’ have these doubts, mo chridhe.” His voice thickened.
“It’s been a lot to deal with, Jamie. Setting aside things with us, what about Faith? In the space of a week there are intimate photos of you with two different women. You know it can be difficult to start a new school and make friends. What will her classmates’ parents think of her? Of us? She is caught in the middle of things that have nothing to do with her and it keeps happening. How much worse will it get when everything else becomes more public? And you want to marry on top of all of that. Right now, I’m overwhelmed. I don’t know if this is going to work.

“By this ye mean what, exactly?” His mouth tasted like the Sahara. The silence on the other end was ominous.

“Please Claire, dinna take Faith from me.” A broken whisper that seared her soul.

“I wouldn’t do that!” The quick reply was reassuring but facts are facts and he was scared to the bone.

“Claire, she starts school Monday. I left the birth certificate with ye two weeks ago and ye havena--"

“Why are you so quick to make negative assumptions about me? You want to have me trust you but where is the same trust in me? Sending Jenny even after I gave you my word….Look, more talking right now isn’t helping. I have to get Faith settled. We are safe. Murtagh is going to watch the house for a little while just to make sure. Tomorrow, I agreed to pick up Joe’s Saturday shift at the hospital. Would you like to take Faith or should I—?”

“Yes, please I’ll take her. I’ll see ye in the morning.” There was a long pause. “Claire? I love you. I will do anything to make this work.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Jamie.”

Claire was just settling into her bed with a glass of wine and the book she’d been meaning to read all summer when the phone rang again. Thinking it was Murtagh signing off she answered it without looking at the caller ID.

“I’m sorry to be calling so late, Claire but I just caught the news. Are you ok?” A tenderly familiar voice.
“Frank?” Claire knew it was him but had been caught by surprise.

“I wanted you to know I have called Jack and given him a piece of my mind. He’s crossed the line and it’s intolerable.”

“Oh! So you weren’t the one who helped him?” Claire ventured cautiously.

“Helped him? You know me better than that!” Frank’s tone of outrage was said in such a way that it reminded her of countless other conversations they’d had over the years whenever he felt his gentleman’s honor impugned. She smiled a little, feeling better somehow. Maybe the whole world wasn’t gunning for Claire Beauchamp after all.

“I must say that I felt more than a little weird looking at pictures of my ex with someone else.” There was no heat in his tone, it was said as more confessional in nature. “But I was trying to figure out how he knew it was you, your images are all rather blurry and I couldn’t remember him ever being at the flat.” Frank went on.

“It wouldn’t have mattered anyway, I’ve redecorated a lot in the last couple of years. Hmm, speaking of which how did you know it was me?” She asked and he laughed immediately.

“Well my dear, I don’t care how you try and disguise it, that round ass of yours is not only your best feature, but your most distinctive. I’d know it’s contours anywhere.” This said with such obvious affection that Claire found herself giggling. “As I said, looking at the pictures made me feel guilty and vaguely wrong but I just couldn’t puzzle it out. You know I hate unsolved mysteries.”

“And my round ass was what tipped Jack off as well? I had no idea he was on such familiar terms with it, too.”

“Oh God, no! He’d better not have been looking at it the whole time we were married or I’ll have to call him out! No. What tipped him off was the framed mirror over the bed.” At this Claire scooted herself forward and turned her gaze upward. She’d hung the pretty mirror there about a year ago, it made the room look bigger. “That mirror was Jack’s wedding gift to us. It’s one of a kind and he would have recognized it instantly. I’ve always hated it which is why I never took it with me when I moved out.”

“Really?” Claire said curiously. It wasn’t Frank’s style that was true—more rustic than refined. It
featured a window pane motif with weathered barn wood forming several framed panels and an old transom moulding for a topper. “I’ve always loved it...but maybe less so at this moment.”

“Its from Beaufort Castle, ironically.” Frank told her.

“What do you mean?”

Frank laughed again. “Honestly Claire how you could be the daughter of an antiquarian and the wife of a historian and have such a terrible memory for history and geography is beyond me. Beaufort Castle is the family seat of Lord Lovat.”

“Jamie’s grandfather?” Suddenly Claire understood. “I thought Jack hated Lovat?”

“Well, with Jack sometimes envy and hate and love get all mixed up.” Frank told her. “They had a small cottage industry on the grounds making household goods from the architectural features of dismantled older buildings. I’m not at all surprised that he got nosy and went to take a look nor that he bought things from the place, either.”

“I’m glad you called to tell me, Frank. I’d been thinking all kinds of ---”

“I was worried that you might be. Claire things ended badly and I didn’t handle myself well at all but I hope you know I’d never hurt you like that.” Claire stayed silent. “So Jamie Fraser, Slainte CEO is your new boyfriend?” He ventured. Claire waited a beat.

“Yes.” She confirmed.

“I see your type still includes flirting men.” At her outraged huff he added, “Forgive me. That was a terrible thing for me to say. I guess I still harbor a lot of guilt where our marriage is concerned.” Frank worked to change the subject. “Does he know about Faith’s father?”

“How could he not?” Claire puzzled.

“Ah. Well so everything is working out for you?” Frank asked.
“For the most part.” Claire was feeling so lonely and hearing Frank’s voice had reminded her very much of the early days of their marriage, what a great listener and sounding board Frank had been. In the background she heard the sounds of a crowd of people.

“Listen, darling I need to go. I’m expected elsewhere just now. I only wanted to call and let you know I am sorry lunch didn’t work out. It would’ve been great to see you. And to let you know I am not idly sitting on my hands where Jack is concerned. He can be a loose cannon but I’m trying get him to back off. You don’t deserve to be in his cross-hairs even if you are dating the grandson of one of his worst frenemies. Let’s not let so long go by before talking again, ok?”

“Yes, thank you for calling me, Frank. It was great to hear from you, too.”

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When she answered the door the next morning, Jamie’s hands rose up to take her in his arms for a split second before he remembered and they were shaking with the effort of restraint as he lowered them.

His body swayed toward hers, missing her touch, missing her scent, the feel of her hands. He clenched his fist to stop himself from physically connecting with her. His skin was on fire, he ached in his bones from lack of contact with her.

“Are ye ok?” He asked.

“Yes, but I'm running late.” Claire made to grab her bag and rush out the door. Jamie held out his hand and touched her arm.

“Claire, stop. Please, lass. I made a vow to you and you to me to honor one another for the sake of our daughter. Please, Sassenach, I dinna want to fight with ye. We need to talk about things.”

Claire could feel the heat of him, smell the wonderful scent that was his alone. She leaned toward him, unconsciously.

Then she winced as she thought back to yesterday at the market, being trapped there thinking Jack Randall was following her. Having Faith caught in the crosshairs. She knew from experience that the publicity would die out sooner or later and then it would pass. She didn’t like it but it was a
What stung was the fact that her life really wasn’t in her control. It wasn’t even Jamie’s fault, but his actions and attitude weren’t helping her feel much better about what was happening. Every time she thought about Jamie’s high handed response to her, to his double standards in telling her he wanted her as his life partner but then keeping secrets, claiming he wasn’t allowed to tell her what was going on. Then going off without telling her what he was doing, making unilateral decisions that impacted her greatly— all these things made her mad all over again. She was also hurt by his proposal, after telling her he would respect her decision on this matter and let it be in her control. The reality was nothing was under her control. She needed some answers, surely Jamie knew that much! Claire abruptly stopped her train of thought as she noticed she was bristling anew like a feral cat. Apparently, she wasn’t ready to let go of her anger just yet.

“Jamie, I can’t give you blind obedience and I was wrong to tell you if you loved me you’d tell me everything. Trust is built over time and has mutual respect as a foundation. I’ll be home by 6 pm. Maybe we can talk then?” Claire hoped talking together would help.

“Aye, if work runs late just text me.”

Faith came running down the hall and he knelt down so she could give him a hug. As he held her to him Jamie began to form a plan in his head. He had to call Hal and John, get a release for some of the information on the basis that Claire’s personal safety and that of his daughter were being compromised.

Maybe he could talk Claire into meeting Frank with him, instead of alone? He would suggest they ask him for his sign off in the birth certificate. Yes, he had hoped Claire would have done it the way he’d asked two weeks ago but wasn’t the important thing that it got done? If she trusted Frank, maybe they needed to meet so he could take the measure of the man himself.

He’d been lost in thought and was surprised to hear Faith squeak. He laughed and kissed her forehead as he stood back up.

“A nighean, thank ye lass, I needed that. So any errands to add to the list for today?” Faith giggled. “We need to go to the cleaners and get the oil changed on the car. Afterwards, shall we go to the little diner ye like for a bite and then maybe the park?”

By the time they had paid for the food and were heading out the door, Jamie had regained his equilibrium and his perspective. He had spoken with John but still needed Hal to give final ok regarding the parameters of the information he could share.
Claire was a strong and independent woman, two of the personal qualities he most admired about her. He’d treated her with kid gloves and not like the equal partner he wanted her to be with him. He knew she would agree to change her birth certificate. She’d see his offer of parley with Frank as the olive branch it was.

Perhaps if she knew he’d been planning on asking her to marry him for months, she’d understand that it had nothing to do with Frank. He’d screwed the whole thing up. Maybe if he explained it, she’d give him a second chance.

The press, well, Claire had likely been thinking of some measures she thought would be effective. Lord knew she had enough of her own experience with the press to have some good ideas. Perhaps they could discuss whether a preemptive strike in the form of a glossy cover article to beat Jack at his own game? He’d bet Claire would want to donate whatever proceeds they’d get for such a write up to a local charity. In the meantime, he’d ask her if she wanted a security detail or perhaps a move to a more secure building?

Jamie looked at his watch, in two more hours Claire would be home and he was determined to fix things. He couldn’t stand the way things had been between them. He missed her. He could feel a pull of anticipation and optimism that had been missing for far too long. He— no they— he and Claire together— needed to stop reacting and meet this stuff head on, on their own terms.

As the shadows thrown by the buildings that bracketed the alley leading to the park fell over them, Jamie glanced up. He automatically tightened his grip on Faith’s hand, knowing she’d soon spot the fountain.

The sun was shining down on the fountain and he could see a larger than usual crowd taking advantage of the lovely weather. He’d just bent down to catch something Faith was saying when suddenly her hand slid from his. It was all a blur from there. He could never describe what order things happened. A sharp pain in his arm, a bark, a shout in warning then suddenly everything stopped. When it was over, Faith was on the pavement.

*Jesus the blood.*
The Accident

He remembered the sickening sound of the thud. Faith’s loud wail that went right through him. The terrified screams of the people standing nearby. The lanky teenager lying in a heap on the pavement, his scooter tangled up with his legs.

Jamie’s whole body flooded with adrenaline, the scent of fear coming off him in waves and seeing Faith, *God Jesus*, the ground under her was turning red. He ripped off his tee shirt and pressed it tightly against her side. *God, no!*

“She?” She murmured, confused, trying to push his hand away. “Hurts.”

Jamie steeled himself and pushed down harder, knowing the whole time it was adding to her pain even as he slowed her blood loss.

“I ken *mo nighean*, it’ll feel better soon.” He lifted his head and turned it to the side, crying out, “HELP ME! CALL 999, Please!”

Jamie stared at his daughter, worried that a moment’s inattention would somehow cause her to slip from this world. He could feel the wetness beneath his hands. She was so small that both his hands easily covered her abdomen and chest.

*Save hersave hersave her*, the prayer echoed over and over in his mind. She was whimpering. His stomach was clenching, he swallowed hard willing it to settle.

“Shh. Faith, lie still, aye, I have you.” *Please, lass dinna leave me.*

He could do nothing but keep pressing tightly against the wound. He could not even hold her for fear of loosening the pressure.

“How much blood did Claire say the human body had? He shuddered helplessly as he watched the red overtake the white under his fingertips, the blood containing his daughter’s life force slowly ebbing out of her.

Powerless, his mind scrambled. Fragmented, panicked thoughts jumping in and out of his head. When his Mam and brothers were so senselessly taken from them, Jamie did his best to accept the loss and put his trust in God that there was a reason.

When he was diagnosed he never once asked, *Why me?* Truth be told, his first thought had been, *if it has to be anyone, Thank God it’s me, not Jenny, not Da.*

When his father died, it was a blow to be sure but knowing Da was at peace and with Willie, Rabbie and Mam eased the pain considerably.

But this? The pain of losing Faith? Even the flitting thought of something that horrifying coming to pass hurt worse than any pain he himself had ever suffered. Grief like a tidal wave threatened to engulf him and with it a rage building inside him which he fought hard to contain. For the first time, he questioned Fate.

*Dhia, please! I can stand a lot, more than most, have I no’ proven as much? She’s so small, please God, this time, I will beg! No’ this! Take anything ye like, anything else but dinna take my Faith!*
“Please, get help!” He shouted again, utterly forsaken.

Then he was aware of someone sinking to the ground beside him. A hand pressed another makeshift bandage, this time a black t-shirt, into his hands. With a grunt of thanks, he added it to the one that was now soaking through to his hands.

“The ambulance is on the way, not too much longer.”

Jamie let out a large huff of air and nodded gratefully. He stared intently at Faith’s chest willing her to keep breathing.

_Not now, please God not now! I beg you, I beg you, I beg you…._

Was he imagining it or had her skin grown colder? She was so pale, so still. Another small whimper of pain. She turned her head and her eyes met his. He did his best to smile at her though he welled up.

“You’ll feel better in a minute, lass. I’m thinking of Adso and how glad he’ll be to see you when we get home.”

“-Dso?” she breathed.

“Aye, can ye picture him in your mind, mo nighean?” Faith nodded a little, no longer making soft sounds of distress.

“Let’s pretend we’re with him, laying next to him, aye? He’s butting his furry wee head on ye and wants a wee scratch. Can ye feel him beginning to thrum?”

“Uhhuh.” Faith agreed.

Jamie squeezed his eyes shut briefly to clear them. He started to run his face against his sleeve, hoping Faith wouldn’t see her Da so distressed and start to cry herself, but as his wet eyes met sweating arm, he realized he had no shirt on. He focused on her face, noticed her delicate, feather-like lashes dark at the ends, lighter as they moved inward fluttering, once, twice then her lids completely closed and he didn’t think she’d notice anyway.

“Good lass.” He said “Imagine yer rubbing his wee nose and he runs his head along your fingers, so you can scratch his chin. He makes that funny deep burreee-burrumm and ye ken he likes that the best, no?”

At this Jamie did his best Adso happy purr. That earned him a ghost of a real smile from Faith. He continued for a few more rounds trying his best to take her away from her pain, the stares of strangers, the frightening situation they were in.

“I love ye, Faith. I’m here, ye arena alone.” He told her.

“Mama?” Faith’s voice so weak, barely a whisper.

“Just hang on, nighean. I’m bringing ye to her. I promise, love. Such a brave lass. Just stay wi’ me.”

_Oh, God, Claire!_

How could he tell her what he’d allowed to happen to their precious daughter? Five minutes, a lifetime later, the gurney was rolled up to them.
The first responders tactfully tried to edge Jamie out of the way to assess Faith’s injuries. Jamie didn’t budge, not comprehending, had heard them on some level but hyper-focused on willing all of his strength into Faith, he had no ability to process anything around him.

“Sir, ye must move! I need to see.” Someone physically bumped him on the back and shoulder trying to muscle him out of the way. Jamie shook himself out of his trance and quickly changed his position.

Jamie could not relinquish all contact with Faith. He knew the second he did, she would be lost forever. So he held her tiny hand in his while the EMTs worked.

In less than three minutes they had her loaded and rolling toward the van.

“Sir, you have to let go.” The attendant repeated firmly.

“No!” Jamie pushed back.

“It’s protocol!” His partner said flatly, trying to break Jamie’s hold on Faith’s hand.

“Our regulations state that no one can be transported in the ambulance with the patient. You can meet us at Mercy A & E.”

Jamie looked right through him. Voice of steel, eyes full of deadly intent.

“The only way you’ll transport my daughter wi’ out me, is if ye shoot me where I stand, for I will not leave her side!”

The EMTs traded looks. The man was smeared with blood, menacing and had a deranged look in his eyes; neither one of them felt up to taking him on.

“Russ, let him come with us, her BP is dropping.”

Jamie did not impede their progress and leapt in first, helping guide the stretcher to a locked position.

He immediately resumed his prayers. She hadn’t moved a muscle since they loaded her in the ambulance. He watched each tiny rise of her chest.

_Breathe, sweet Jesus just breathe. Please lass, dinna go, I beg you. God, no’ her, not today! Oh, not today!_

They burst through the ambulance bay into the emergency theatre in a rush of noise and confusion. Jamie was still holding Faith’s hand and caught sight of Joe Abernathy.

“Jamie?” Joe’s voice elevated in alarm taking in the sight of Jamie, shirtless, jeans covered in blood.

Not his blood, Joe realized as an alarming awareness stole over him.

“Moped versus pedestrian. He hit her dead on.” Russ explained and Jamie flinched at the first responder’s unfortunate word choice.

Joe listened intently to the hand off of vitals and basic information from them. They quickly shifted her body to a hospital bed and Joe’s team started to work immediately.
“Jill, page Dr. Beauchamp.” Joe said urgently. “This is her daughter. Try to intercept her before she walks into the eval room, tell her I’ll be out in a minute.”

Joe heard Jamie make a small sound of grief. He gripped his upper arm.

“We’ll take good care of her, Jamie, I promise.” He tried to reassure him.

Jamie implored, “Please, Joe, please help her!”

There was no point to calling Claire, she’d be in the A&E momentarily. Jamie quickly got off a text off to Ian and Murtagh and paced back and forth, his mind jumping from one thing to the next, unable to grasp anything tangible. He had started shaking now that the adrenaline was working through his system. He didn’t see anything around him, hear any words spoken, just walked in a small, tight line.

Yet he sensed her coming, and his head came up as Claire shot through the barrier doors. She took one look at Jamie and cried out in alarm, rushing to him and looking for his injury.

Jamie watched as the realization crossed her face, then her legs went out from under her. Jamie held her up, knowing once she knew, she’d never be able to forgive him, and would no longer welcome his supporting embrace.

“Faith?” She croaked.

“Claire, Jesus, Claire, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Jamie’s voice shook with emotion. The lump in his throat too large for him to swallow.

He felt as if he was dying inside and that thought brought him up short because Faith....oh his wee lass, his precious baby girl, actually *was* dying inside.

He stifled a whimper of despair. His hold on Claire kept him present and helped his mind focus. Claire allowed Jamie to sit her down behind the nurses’ station.

“Tell me.” Her eyes brimmed with unchecked tears.

“We were going to the park.” He didn’t feel the wetness rolling down his cheeks, didn’t notice how badly his hands shook, didn’t hear the tittering speculation of the nurses getting a good look at his bloody jeans and scarred back. “Ye ken the alley where they diverted traffic for the new construction?” Claire nodded. Jamie swallowed hard.

“Oh, Claire, I...I lost my grip on her hand. I didna even see the scooter. He came out of nowhere, going so fast and the next thing I knew... Oh God.” Jamie’s voice was so thick she could barely understand the words. “The blood, so much blood, Claire.” She made an inhuman sound then that caused the hairs on the back of his neck to prickle. He gripped her chair as hard as he could as if doing so would keep the shattered pieces of his life together.

“Why didn’t you hold her hand tighter?” Claire cried out, her whole body shook with fear, though it translated as anger directed at Jamie. “How could you have been so careless with her? You know what she is like when she sees the fountain!”

Her finger poked him, punctuating each word, glancing blows to his chest and arms as she raged. He welcomed the pain, wished she were able to tear him to shreds, anything to stop himself from knowing what his carelessness had done to their child.

“Aye, you’re right, Sassenach. It is my fault.” Jamie agreed, willing her to calm, if she could, even
as fear and guilt rolled through him.

Claire wrestled away from him, jumping to her feet and pushing past the nurses who were watching in fascination as her professional equanimity displaced. She went directly to the eval room. Jamie heard Joe’s surprised exclamation.

In a couple of minutes, he had Claire firmly by the arm and walked her out of the room. Jamie was standing in the hall just past the door himself. Joe looked up and called him over.

“We think she lacerated her liver, that’s why there is so much blood. Because of the bus crash yesterday our stores are depleted and Faith is type B, which we are less likely to have in any good supply. We need blood donors.” Joe looked speculatively at Jamie.

Jamie was pinned under his eagled eyed stare. Did Claire not tell Joe about him?

“I’m type A, I can’t.” Claire, despondent, was rubbing her hands up and down her sides, a burning pulse of energy with no place to go.

He looked helplessly at her. He couldn’t.

“I --I--” Jamie felt completely useless.

“Well? You’re B, it’s your chance to help inst----” She bit off her sentence too late.

She saw Jamie flinch, shrinking into himself. Claire pressed her fingers tightly to her lips, moaning as she felt the bile rise in the back of her throat.

As a survivor of a blood cancer, Jamie was absolutely forbidden by protocols from donating his blood.

It had been an unforgivable thought to begin with but to have given it voice? She needed to apologize, make it right but she kept her lips sealed tight. She had the insane thought that if she opened her mouth now, she’d start screaming and never stop. She absolutely could not look at at Jamie, couldn’t bear to see the hurt and anguish in his eyes.

Jamie watched it, the change coming over Claire. He knew she’d be filled with remorse already; but Faith needed her mother’s strength and resilience. Jamie dismissed the hurt he was feeling. He was the last person she needed to be concerned over. If Claire thought him unaffected then she couldn’t bear to see the hurt and anguish in his eyes.

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It had the needed effect on her. She didn’t soften but rigidly stood her ground. Triggered beyond the rational, Claire hung on to her sanity the only way she knew how, by ruthlessly honing her anger. The second she let go of that emotion, she’d collapse and any higher processing ability she had would cease. Fight or flight. Jamie, the only available target. Perversely grateful that their daughter had such a protective she-devil of a mother, he thought, “Ah, Sassenach, my fierce wee badger.” Her expression turned thunderous, she stuck her chin out and fisted her hands by her sides.

She had only spoken the truth of it. He felt worse than useless. Able to hurt and not heal. The pain of it made it impossible for him to get air into his lungs, close to crying again but he knew he couldn’t let her see him so.
“Jamie canna, he was treated for lymphoma as a teen. But I’ll do it. I’m B as well.” Came the certain response from behind him. Murtagh touched Jamie’s shoulder in a comforting gesture, and, as he brushed past Claire, he threw her a disgusted scowl.

Jamie made a very soft sound but Murtagh heard it and caught his godson’s shattered expression, it was beseeching him not to hold Claire’s improvident words against her. Murtagh shifted back until he was standing in front of her. He kissed her forehead gently. “Dinna fash, a leannan, if no’ for the shock of it, you’d have remembered about Jamie’s cancer. You know how much we all love that lass.” She was trembling with contained emotion and he could see the anguish in Claire’s eyes. He gave her a gentle touch of reassurance on her cheek.

As he walked toward the beckoning nurse standing nearby, he muttered to someone out of Jamie’s line of sight, “See if ye can find him a shirt while I’m gone, otherwise ask Fergus to bring one.”

Jamie didn’t have to turn to look, he could already feel Ian’s comforting presence on his right. Ian pressed his shoulder against Jamie’s anyway, a much needed gesture of solidarity and comfort. Jamie’s twisted wame instantly calmed and he was able to breathe again.

“We’ll be moving her into the OR in a few minutes, they are just finishing the scans now. Claire, you all can go to the fourth floor waiting room. We are short handed today. Normally, I’d think about having Roberts scrub in but it would take him a good twenty minutes to get here. She needs to be operated on now and I feel objective enough to do it. Is that ok?” Jamie and Claire both nodded yes. “I’ll send someone out with an update as soon as I know anything more definitive.” Joe said as he turned to go.

Claire reached out to stop him, and Joe turned back to her. Claire picked up his hand and pressed it hard to her lips. Her voice came out thready and stilted, she had to clear her throat twice before she could get it out.

“Joe, I have seen these hands perform miracles. Please take care of her.”

Joe squeezed Claire’s hand hard in acknowledgement and was gone.

Late afternoon became evening, stretching into night. Someone found him a shirt. Jamie knew that because his back wasn’t sticking to the faux leather chairs in the waiting area but he couldn’t even remember its color without looking down.

People drifted in and out of the waiting area. So many friends and family, nurses, doctors, even old patients of Claire’s dropped by. Jamie thought the team at Slainte had organized themselves into shifts, bringing in food and coffee at regular intervals. He’d be thanking people endlessly for their support. He’d known, of course, that his inner circle had pieced it together.

The raw footage of Faith’s impromptu toast at Angus and Rupert’s on camera rehearsal was accessible to almost everyone on the company server and every few days someone would run it just for a laugh. The eyes a dead give away to anyone who spent enough time with Jamie. What did it matter now?

Although Ian had tried to hide the evening papers Jamie caught a glimpse of the headline, two photos of him, one from the front, the unbearable hint of Faith’s sun-kissed curls glowing against the dark pavement and a full shot of his back, shoulders hunched. By turns bloody, battered and horrendously scarred, his form fully on display. The accompanying quotes of bystanders saying they heard him refer to Faith as his daughter.

The cherry on top, the ribald speculation about his body. Jamie always kept his torso covered, what
happened with John Gray wasn’t something he publicly discussed. Few people had ever seen his 
back, for that matter, it had been years since he’d seen it like that himself. The scars had faded a 
bite, but still, not a sight easily forgotten. Now the interest in uncovering the story would be 
relentless. Jamie couldn’t think about that right now.

He tried to nod and say the right things as one after another people stopped by, all taking time to 
talk to him, reach out their hands to touch him so he didn’t feel so alone. And yet, he was alone. 
As remote as any island because Claire wasn’t next to him, wasn’t seeking the comfort of his 
touch, wasn’t offering him the comfort of hers.

He managed a couple of one word replies. He didn’t have any ability to carry on conversations 
with anyone. His only thoughts of Faith and Claire and Claire wouldn’t even look at him. So every 
time someone asked him if he needed anything, tried to offer him food, he sent them to her. They 
needed to make sure she was getting their comfort, their help since he wasn’t able to provide it to 
her.

In the A & E he’d accepted her anger, had known she needed to wrap herself in it’s mantle to get 
through what was the worst experience of her life. He welcomed her pain, if only so she would feel 
it less. Now, in the family surgical waiting room, the hope he had harbored that once the 
immediate crisis had passed she would reach out for him faded. Jamie’s heart started to shrink as 
the rift between them grew, hour by hour and he had no way to bridge it’s gulf.

When the nurse popped out for the second update, she had a grim look on her face. Jamie stood 
right next to Claire but she didn’t appear to know he was there at all. Claire was utterly composed. 
She asked technical questions, using references and medical terminology he couldn’t begin to 
fathom.

Jamie desperately wanted to take her hand in his but the thought of her rejection stopped him from 
doing it. He badly needed her touch. He felt like he was falling apart and less than an inch 
separated him from salvation or damnation. If he were to reach out and she spurned him, he didn’t 
know if he could handle it.

He was right on the edge, everything in his body screaming, wanting, needing with no relief in 
sight, standing next to her didn’t help at all, only made him feel worse. If he didn’t force the issue 
perhaps in time she would be able to forgive him, he badly needed a way to keep some hope of that 
avive.

A world without Faith, without Claire was not survivable. Was this how his father had felt? How 
had he been able to carry on? Jamie was overwhelmed by a sudden and terrifying understanding of 
what it might have been like for his father. Jamie wondered whether his father had spent the rest of 
their childhoods resenting the hell out of the fact that because he and Jenny still lived he had no 
choice but to carry on.

Jamie forced himself to try and follow the conversation and attend to the nurse’s words.

“We’ve gone through a couple of units already. We are trying to stop the bleeding.” The woman 
put both hands on Claire’s shoulders. “Pray. Be patient. It’ll be longer between updates now.” She 
said.

Claire still would not look at him but Jamie could feel everyone else watching them. When he 
turned his head, he caught the looks of pity, the concerned glances. Between self-condemnation, 
the spectacularly graphic pictures in the paper and Claire’s alienation, he was burning with the heat 
of shame. His world was falling apart before the eyes of most of his friends and family and he was 
 perilously close to coming undone.
He needed to find some place he could think, he needed just a moment, a minute of peace to find
the strength to carry on.
He started when her hand touched his shoulder.

“I’m no’ a ghost, dinna mean to scare ye.” Jenny tried for levity even as her eyes filled with tears and she sat beside him.

His body language cried out for comfort but he didn’t turn toward her. She grabbed his hand anyway and wouldn’t let go. In the stillness of the chapel she sat wordless with him, looking at the crucified tableau hung above the altar.

Jamie squeezed her hand once tightly then deliberately released it. She looked up into his eyes and met a sea of pain. Her confusion over their broken connection evident. He shook his head to stop her hand reaching back for his.

“I dinna deserve yer mercy, so I’ll no’ ask it.” His roughened voice hoarsely whispered.

She stared hard at him. They had been through so many challenges but they’d always been together, able to hold one another up. To have him say that now? When it was the one thing-- the only thing ---she could offer him? Her heart squeezed.

“Jamie, mo chridhe ---“

“I kent to hold her hand tight just as we crossed that alley. Claire and I discussed it a dozen times or more. How she loved--” Both Jamie and Jenny caught their breath on it. Jamie cleared his throat, “--loves chasin’ the birds at the fountain. One minute I had her wee hand in mine, I swear to my Lord Jesus, upon my hope of heaven, Jenny, I had her. When she screamed--“

If she could have looked away, Jenny would have. This was too raw, too unutterably sad; she didn’t think she could bear it. Denied any connection save eye contact, Jenny willed herself not to avert her gaze and instead kept looking into that face she loved so dearly. To look and to see it’s devastation and not flinch, not close her eyes, not let him push her away. She drew in a huge breath drawing from deep within her and held her ground. Did he feel a little less alone? It was, after all, the only thing he would allow anyone to do for him.

“How did Da stand it?” Bewildered eyes met hers.
She let out her breath and opened her eyes even wider willing herself not to cry. Later. When Ian was with her, when he could gather her in his arms, she’d give in. But not now.

“Did I ever tell ye about Ian and Caitlin, I mean, after?”

Jamie shook his head. He’d known she’d lost the bairn when she was five months gone, of course, but he had been in Paris at the time, his apartment building had just burned down and he was running himself ragged trying to launch Slainte.

Jenny insisted that he stay put. There was nothing he could do, even were he there.

“Losing a child, one ye never even met it’s a different kind of sorrow. Ye grieve for all the things that might have been. She was real to me in a way that she wasn’t to Ian. I’d been feeling her move within me, knew she liked spicy foods, was a night owl.” She gave him a sweet, sad smile.

Jamie’s strangled, “Aye” barely audible. Before Faith Jamie wouldn’t have understood it half so well.

“I was in trouble even before we got to the hospital. Ian was beside himself. He blamed himself for no’ watching me closer. What that man thought he could have done, I dinna ken; but he couldn’ help how he felt about it. I went unconscious by the time we got to A&E. My blood pressure was too high. Pre-eclampsia. It was left to him, do you see? It was too soon for the lassie, he knew it straight away. Yet he also kent were it me, I’d have fought to keep trying, no matter the cost. But it wasna up to me.”

Jenny’s eyes darted over Jamie’s face. He nodded once. Her lips bent in a smile, but of pain.

“Sometimes, for the ones ye love, you’re forced to choose, as Ian had to and sometimes ye have no choice at all. I dinna ken which is worse. Ian will likely think one way and me another given our different experience of it. But I’ll tell you true, ye do things ye never imagined for love. I ken ye canna see it now, but it was an accident. You would ha’ changed places with her without giving it a second’s thought if it had been up to you. Sometimes it’s no’ up to us. Da had no choice. He did what he had to do to keep going. Just like I did, just like Ian did. If it comes to it, so will you, Jamie.’

Jenny managed to get her arm around him without him pushing her away. He stiffened, unmoving;
but she didn’t let go, pulling him closer. She moved her hand to stroke his curls as he curved into
the comfort of her embrace.

“After, Jamie,” She said softly in his ear, “you hang on, you say your prayers. Ye hold tight to your
family. Ye let them love you back, you let them comfort you because ye remember it makes them
feel better.” She felt him shudder and squeeze him closer. “That will start to matter to you again,
how they feel. Eventually, you start to heal.”

His shoulders started shaking so hard he was rocking both of their bodies with it. Loud sobs
wrenched from deep in his soul. She held on as his heartbreak echoed from the walls and snaked up
her spine.

Jenny bit the inside of her lip as hard as she could. She looked at the altar and prayed that Jamie
might find some peace in his troubled, restless heart, prayed that if the worst came to pass, he’d let
her be there for him.

Lord if I’ve never had courage in my life before, let me have it now, for him.

His tears soaked her shoulder and his huge head went slack. She felt him sigh and relax fully
against her.

When she thought he might be able to hear her again she added, “And then, Jamie, my love, ye find
a way to live wi’ it.”

A little later, his tears were all dried and he and Jenny were stiff from sitting on the hard benches.

“How did ye make your peace with Ian?” Jamie asked. Jenny made a snorting sound.

“You know me so well, do you?” Jenny’s eyebrows rose and her heart skipped seeing his lips rise
in genuine amusement-- not a smile but maybe a grin. “True enough, I wasna inclined to forgive
him at first. They left it to the poor man to break the news to me. He let me scream and hit him,
call him names. Everything I dished out, he took without a word of reproach, always had a
‘kerchief ready, held me when I let him, gave me space when I didna. To my shame, it occurred to
me later that I hadn’t seen him grieve or thought to ask him how he was doing. I found him in the
cemetery with her. He’d gathered rocks for a cairn. Ian started crying with the first stone and by
the second his hands were shaking so bad he couldn’t stack one over the other; so I knelt down
beside him and took the stone from his hand and I realized it had been a long time since I’d
touched him in compassion. That was a start. Real healing between us took time and patience, people to talk and to listen.” Jenny was quiet for a moment. They could put it off no longer. “Are ye ready, mo chridhe?”

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Out of his mind with fear, he allowed Jenny to walk him back to the waiting area. Crossing a small hallway, Jenny hesitated. Jamie followed her line of sight to the painting hanging near the doors leading to the active OR wing.

The sight of home made them both sigh. Jenny put her hand out, tracing the subtle hills and valleys, brushstrokes colored heather and burnt sienna and ochre. Each line and swirl dear to her. Her fingers caressed the E.M. Fraser scribbled across the bottom.

“I dinna think I’ve ever seen that one before.” Jenny said reverently.

“It’s in that book Murtagh has from the gallery in Edinburgh that carried Mam’s work. There’s a wee black and white photo of it in there.” Jamie told her.

He hadn’t seen the image since he was very young. He and Murtagh had spent a bit of time the last few years tracking down her work and buying it all back.

“What do ye think it’s doing here? I thought this one gone for good.” Jamie asked.

“Remember sweet lad, things may change but nothing is lost.” Jenny said to him using her best Mam voice.

Jamie huffed a small laugh, “First law of thermodynamics?”

Jenny shook her head. “Faith.”

Jamie’s breath came out in a warbly sob. She hugged him quick and ushered him through the door leading back to the waiting room. He clutched her hand and held it in his as hard as he dared. It made him flash back to the feel of Faith’s fingers in his, a burning sensation he could still feel running through his body the moment he lost contact. He squelched it. He had no idea if he could live with it, if it came to that.
But it was the thought of his father, how disappointed his father would be to know he raised a coward who wasn’t anywhere near the man he’d been that brought him up short, made him try, forced him to put one foot in front of the other. He thought of his mother, her painting was a sign was it not?

He sent up a prayer seeking forgiveness, asking for courage and for strength; wanting to trust Jenny’s belief that he could get through this.

His belly clenched as they rounded the corner seeing Claire in conversation with a nurse who had obviously come straight from the OR. She was intently nodding, asking questions, listening hard to the reply.

Then her head came up and her eyes met his; she broke into a huge smile of relief. It swept over him, turning his knees to water. Jenny swiftly pushed her body into his, bolstering him, allowing him to get his legs back under him once more.

Claire walked toward him, he could see the tears of relief in her eyes. She reached out to him just as Joe came through the door. Both she and Jamie turned at once.

“Joe!”

“LJ, Jamie, I’m sorry, I wanted to review her chart with you a little later but Gayle called and I’m needed on the birthing floor.” He grinned hugely. Claire jumped into his arms, Jamie side hugged him. “If you walk me down, I can fill you in along the way?” Claire glanced at Jamie who gave a soft shrug of his shoulders, no help for it.

Jamie started crossing the room to where his family clustered together. So he didn’t feel her outstretched fingers, longing to touch him as he moved out of reach. He didn’t see the sorrowful worry of her face or hear her wistful sigh as he was gathered into Ian’s warm embrace.

She gave Joe a tight smile as if nothing was the matter and, hugging her own arms tight to her body, lengthened her stride to keep pace with him as he rushed onward.

Jamie was about to sit down next to Murtagh when the OR nurse approached him.

“Dr. Beauchamp bid me to tell you to go ahead to recovery, you can sit with Faith. She’ll likely
remain asleep for several more hours, but you can stay with her.” Jamie practically ran the poor woman over in his haste.

As he entered the room, Jamie saw her brown curls first, fanned out on her pillow. An oxygen mask had only just now been removed. The tape that held it making indents in her cheeks. He kissed her forehead. The nurses were busily taping, moving and hooking various monitors up to her.

He tried his best to stay out of the way and listen to what they were trying to tell him about her operation and the recovery process. He nodded, pretended he was following it but he couldn’t seem to absorb much of the information. He just wanted to know what he could do to help their daughter, how serious the hurdles she was facing in recovery, was she still in danger of dying?

How he wished Claire were with him. He’d never felt more alone. He might have drifted off, but no, he hadn’t, just in that meditative state of deep thought. Yet when she entered the room his body reacted at once.

Claire’s eyes glanced briefly at him, then over to the monitors. Watching her reminded him of Quarter Day on the fields at Lallybroch. Dr. Beauchamp in her element. She was at home in her skin here, the mantle of Claire Beauchamp, M.D. worn like a second skin.

If only he could similarly envelope himself in the shroud of professional detachment. He felt completely exposed. All his synapses were firing off, nerve endings jumping around, tense. Waiting. Still, she said nothing.

“Sassenach?” He called to her on a whisper, his voice thick with emotion. “Is it that bad then?”

Her eyes glanced away back to the monitors and she made tiny adjustments in Faith’s IV.

“Please Claire. I havena understood a word the nurses said. Tell me what is happening in a way I can understand.”

Claire swallowed the lump in her throat. She couldn’t bear the look in his eyes. The pain and remorse she was sure was also mirrored in hers. Everything that lay between them would need to be dealt with somehow. How could they ever be the same?
Claire’s eyes fell on Faith, and back to him, he saw her occupational detachment beginning to melt away.

“Joe had to remove about one-third of her liver and her spleen. But the excellent thing about the liver is it will regenerate. She had three units of blood and is currently on antibiotics and a steroid to counteract infection. She also has four cracked ribs. Infection and swelling are the greatest risks now. But my daughter is a fighter.”

“She’s my daughter, too!” Jamie could have bitten his tongue.

Exasperated and exhausted, Claire chided, “You ridiculous man! You’ve been sitting here for at least half an hour, didn’t you look up even once?”

At this she gestured upward toward the monitors. Jamie’s head felt dizzy as if every drop of blood in his body had pooled into his feet. FAITH J. FRASER was the name illuminated on the monitor and in her patient chart.

He made a little moaning sound and locked his eyes on hers. Suddenly, there she was: his Claire. How had he thought her a remote island, or a professional automaton? She was the woman that he would love until the end of his days and even beyond, the mother of their beautiful girl and she was frightened, trying to get over the shock of it all, on overload and so precious to him.

“I signed the form the morning you left it and put it in the overnight mail to arrive at Vital Records the next day. The new birth certificate was in the post box when I stopped in on my way to work this morning.”

Jamie was holding himself, rocking back and forth in his chair. He looked fragile and haunted, like he was hanging on by a thread. Her stomach clenched and curdled. How had she forgotten? Aside from Faith, his was the dearest face in her heart.

Then she was kneeling down beside him, holding him so hard he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t mind. Air wasn’t a necessity anymore, only this, the feeling of his heart’s blood flooding back into his body.

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. She reached up and wiped the tears from his cheeks even as his thumb smudged the wetness from hers, sharing embarrassed grins. She was sure he would kiss her now, craving his tender touch. His lips parted but not for that; he had something else he
needed from her even more.

“Claire,” Jamie swallowed hard. “Earlier with Jenny, I was in the chapel trying to….” He stopped, mine racing. “I kent I’d lost Faith. I just sat looking at the cross and trying to imagine how I would carry on in a world without. Walking back to the waiting room, dreading each step wondering did our lass live or die and knowing I had nothing left. Jenny was standing beside me, but I was alone. So alone.” Jamie’s voice fell to a whisper and Claire had to lean in to hear him. “That was the hardest thing I ever did.”

Claire held his hand tighter, looking down at his long fingers, stroking them waiting for him to continue.

“Would ye be willing to pray with me? I need to ask God to forgive me my thoughts, for losing my way. I feel maybe I need this and so does the lass, too.”

Claire suddenly realized he was talking of having lost not their daughter but something that was, for a man like Jamie Fraser, more elemental, something fundamental. Not losing their Faith but losing his faith: in himself, in God, in her.

Both holding one of Faith’s hands, they reached for each other, their small family circle complete. A quiet peace stole over the room and they were joined together by that pulse of connection, he to her and their child, allowing the stillness to speak for them, connected by thought and hope and touch.

Jamie felt the energy radiating from Claire, as it often did, he noticed, when her hands lay on another. He’d no notion of the thoughts in her head at such times. Perhaps nothing. His mind, however, wasn’t empty at all. It was focused on the two brightest points of light in his world, actively redirecting the life force he felt flowing into him from Claire toward Faith. As he did so he prayed. He prayed for what mattered, for what was important in a way he’d been unable to do in the chapel with Jenny. Lord, that she may be safe. Her and her mother.

After a while Claire spoke into the silence, “She’s going to be ok Jamie, I can feel it.” She promised. Jamie, unable to speak through the depth of his feelings nodded.

Hours later, near the dawning of a new day, Joe stopped in, the proud papa of Baby Lenny. It had been a very long day and night for all of them, full of ups and downs. He looked at Claire, slumped over in a chair pulled up close to her daughter’s side, her head on Faith’s bed, eyes closed. Jamie had hugged him, having already sent flowers to Gayle’s room. He waited while Joe checked the charts, then beckoned for Jamie closer to the doorway, keeping his voice low so as not to wake
“She’s doing fine, Jamie.” Joe assured him. “I wanted you to know that the kid is going to be ok, and so is the dog.” Seeing Jamie’s baffled expression he clarified.

“The teenager who was on the moped that hit Faith, you asked about him in the A&E.” Joe reminded him. Jamie had absolutely no memory of doing so.

“What about a dog?” Jamie was hopelessly confused.

“The dog-- the one whose owner lost control of the leash? That is what got tangled between you and Faith and broke your grip on her hand. The police took statements from the woman and the kid on the bike.” Joe was also confused. Didn’t Jamie remember what had happened?

One of the nurses in the OR with Joe had come in mid-way through the operation to relieve another nurse whose shift was ending. She’d been in the A&E when they brought the boy in and spoken to the cop who’d helped the kid arrange for the removal of his scooter and who, when noticing he was hurt, escorted him to Mercy for treatment.

A dog getting his late afternoon walk made a run at a squirrel just as all three of them approached the intersection. His owner tried to hold the leash as the dog lunged and the leash got tangled up between her, Faith and Jamie causing the rope to zing up and whip out, driving Jamie’s hand from Faith’s as the dog knocked her off balance.

The police report concluded that the kid on the scooter, who had the right of way, swerved to avoid hitting the dog and overcorrected into Faith.

“So my hand didna slip?” Jamie said slowly, trying to work it out in his head. “And the boy was careless but maybe no’ reckless?” Jamie asked.

Joe was distracted as Jamie lifted his arm and rubbed his scalp vigorously.

“Jesus! Jamie, what happened?” Joe asked him, taking in the sleeve clotted with blood and pus. Jamie grunted and looked at it with an almost academic detachment.
“Dinna ken. Must have happened when Faith was hurt.” Jamie hadn’t felt it and the long navy blue sleeves hid the wound nicely. Though it burned now with a sudden ferocity.

Eventually they were able to pry the shirt off. Joe winced as he took in the long, wide cut.

“That might just scar.” Joe warned, he placed butterfly bandages all along the cut.

“God Joe, do ye think I care?” Jamie gestured at Faith and then the rest of his tortured body and Joe took it all in for the first time and laughed. Jamie gripped his hand harder and pulled him in for a brief hug.

“Thank ye, Joe, for saving Faith and for telling me about the lad, too. Now, go and enjoy your new baby.” Jamie encouraged.

“Get some rest, Jamie, if you can.” Joe recommended.

“I’ll rest in a bit.” He lied.

Joe smiled to let him know he wasn’t buying it and said good night, he couldn’t wait to get back to baby Lenny and Gayle.
And You Know That - Part I

The PICU was a terrible place to try and get well. The constant beeps and alarms, the little mattress puffing out it's air every minute or two, lights that never shut off, nurses, doctors and orderlies in and out all hours around the clock. A landscape so disorienting and alien, that Faith always looked hopelessly confused upon first awakening. Her beautiful brown eyes would float around the room without comprehension until they rested on his face or Claire’s.

She’d slept much of the last couple of days but by the third day, stayed up long enough to sip juice from a straw, reach her hands out to get their attention and even grumble a wee complaint, a rare and welcome sound of normalcy. Claire told him the real healing was beginning now that the shock of trauma had passed but the heightened awareness also brought more discomfort.

As he helped Claire scotch Faith’s body higher on the bed, their eyes locked and they shared smiles of encouragement— parent to parent. Jamie noticed then that their faces wore matching winces. Every painful twitch and ache traveling from their daughter’s body straight to her parents’ hearts.

Claire had been an absolute rock, ensuring Faith was getting the best possible care, double checking medication and dosages, making endless notes on her chart. Jamie hadn’t thought about what her life as a medical student must have been like or what it had taken for her to become a surgeon. Seeing her like this, though, had been eye opening. He could easily imagine her taking her residency in stride, being one of those rare individuals that thrived in stressful environments. She was adored by her colleagues and in turn had nothing but appreciation for their efforts. The experience, she said, had given her a completely different perspective on her work.

Jamie, by contrast, had no expertise to offer. He did the only thing he could do in the situation: be there. Whenever Faith awoke, he reminded her she wasn’t alone, that he was so proud of his brave lass and all would be well soon. Years ago, when he was recovering from the attack in Belize, John did something similar for him, just a quiet presence by his bed at all hours, repeating the essential facts: you are alive, you are whole and are getting better every day. It had been soothing to him and he hoped for Faith as well.

Neither one of them had gotten much rest, sleeping only when utter exhaustion claimed them and even then, for such short bursts of time it hardly seemed worth the effort. He on one side of Faith’s bed, Claire on the other, both leaping into action the moment they sensed a need. Claire always reassured though touches and hugs. Perhaps for that reason she was especially vigilant about sterilization. No one entered without a thorough scrubbing at the room’s tiny external sink as Claire hovered nearby ensuring complete coverage with soap and hot water. The third or fourth time Jenny had been through the process, she shot Jamie an annoyed look and rolled her eyes.

“Do you think it’s a joke?” She cried. “If so feel free to visit the patient in 612. He had heart surgery and was scheduled to go home two days ago but is intubated and fighting for his life today thanks to an infection that he acquired because someone — staff or a visitor was careless. An entirely preventable illness. Do you want that to be Faith?” She demanded.

Jenny registered the surprised expression on her brother’s face. Both he and Claire looked completely done in. Her brother’s whiskers were almost a beard, Claire’s hair looked a frightful nest, faces of sallow skin with dark circles around sunken eyes. She’d bet her last pound that neither one of them had had a hot shower, decent meal or more than a few hours of sleep in days.
Her heart went out to both of them.

“I’m sorry, I meant nothing by it, Claire.” She said mildly, “I do know to wash my hands before sitting with Faith. I was only trying to lighten the mood. I didn’t mean to cause you any concern.” Claire felt her eyes stinging a little, she’d over-reacted, her exhaustion catching up with her, she gave Jenny a smile of apology. “Perhaps you’d feel better if you went for a walk and got some fresh air? Jamie, why don’t you keep her company? You’ve hardly left this room at all. You could both use a little leg stretching.”

Claire’s expression turned panicky. “No!” Her wild eyes turned to Jamie, pleading, overcome with an irrational fear.

“Shh, dinna fash Sassenach,” He read her perfectly, reaching out a hand but stopping short, settling instead for brushing his fingertips over her hip. Once, Jamie would have taken her in his arms and butted his forehead snuggly against hers and relaxed into her strength. Their eyes would have locked on one another as he wrapped his hands in the silky strands at the back of her head. Cocooned in the warm intimacy of their shared world, Jamie would’ve whispered the reassurance she needed for her ears alone. Now, he merely dipped his head slightly and dropped his voice low, just like any two people having a semblance of a private conversation. What had once been theirs by intuition was now replaced by a stilted awkwardness every bit as foreign to their lives as the PICU itself.

“I’ll no’ leave her alone, not for a second. But Jenny’s right, aye? We’ve been cooped up for days, go for a walk, lass. Clear your head. Take your time, aye. You’ll feel more like yourself soon enough.”

“Are you sure?” She asked, searching his face. “You’ve been here just as long. I could stay. Maybe you and Jenny could take a little time?” Claire hesitated, the fingers of her right hand twitched, his cheek was floating just a breath of air away. Jamie took a step back, shrugging his shoulders as if it made no difference to him at all.

“I’ll do as ye say, Claire. Stay or go, whichever you feel best.”

Claire tried to read his face, sensing a hidden undercurrent in his tone that made her uneasy. Passivity of character was not one of his natural gifts. She was soothed when his hand cupped her cheek. “Go, lass, I’ll be right here.” He gave her a confident nod, and, with a lingering look at Faith, she left.

At first Claire had no idea what she should do with herself. She was on her second loop of the administration floor when she realized that she was finding excuses to not leave the building, as if, by remaining within its walls, she could somehow prevent anything from happening to Faith, a variation on her earlier insistence that either she or Jamie stay at all times with Faith. She’d lost all perspective. She gave herself a kick in the ass, mentally speaking, and forced her feet to carry her out into the early evening air.

Quite by surprise, she found herself a small time later standing in front of her own door. Clean clothes and a shower sounded like heaven and she was thankful her keys were in her coat pocket. The flat looked recently dusted and Adso came running when he heard the key scraping the lock but he didn’t yowl with indignation. Mrs. Crooke must have been over recently to feed him. She bent over and praised him, rubbing his belly as he capsized at her feet. As she crossed into the living room she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Oh, company.” She said stupidly staring at the improbable sight of Geneva and Ian sipping tea in her living room.
‘Och! Claire, is anything amiss?’ Ian was on his feet instantly.

“No…” She said drawing the sound out. “Jenny is with-- well you must know that, surely? What are you ---why?” Claire’s powers of speech abated and she gestured instead. Geneva gave her a sad smile, knowing that it wasn’t Ian’s presence that was discombobulating Claire.

“I have paperwork for Jamie,” At this she gave a little wave of a hand grasping a sheaf of documents. “Ian suggested I not drop by the hospital to spare --well.” Geneva shrugged.

Claire’s eyes took in the full but unzipped duffle at Ian’s feet. She saw clothing for herself and Jamie, Faith’s super soft purple Lallybroch blanket and, right on top, Jane.

“The path to hell, I guess?” Claire said, incredibly touched despite the circumstances by Ian’s overall thoughtfulness.

Geneva made to rise, handing the stack over to Ian.

“Just have him sign where all the yellow tabs are marked. I’ll send him an email and let him know to hand them back to you when he’s done.” Ian was standing now, too, intent on clearing out as well. Claire leaned up and gave him a kiss.

“Thank you, Ian. Faith will be so happy when she sees you.” Then she put a hand out to Geneva, “Would you mind staying a moment?” An awkward pause ensued until Geneva slowly sat back down on the couch and Ian secured the duffle.

She and Geneva needed to clear the air. The one good thing about Faith’s accident was that it neatly reset Claire’s priorities. Neither she nor Jamie needed the headaches of this sideshow. “I’ll be back soon as I’ve had a hot bath and changed.” Claire assured him walking him to the door.

She hadn’t even reached the chair when Geneva blurted out “I’ve never slept with Jamie.”

Claire paused, mid-seat, then finished her journey. “He told me that.” This said with no inflection. “Though, you can appreciate the adage that a picture’s worth a thousand words?” Claire added. “Jamie was rather adamant on the point but wouldn’t tell me anything more.”

“My father is a lord and quite political. Our family goes back to the time of William the Conqueror, staid, connected to everyone who’s anyone in society, traditional, judgmental. I’m gay.” Geneva told her. “When I told my parents...my father made my life difficult, blacklisting me from work just as I graduated. As if economic ruin would change my sexual orientation.” Geneva scoffed. “The Grey and the Dunsany families are close, I grew up with Hal and John. John told Jamie about my predicament. Jamie extended a lifeline to me when I needed it the most.”

“He’s a good friend.” Claire said softly. Geneva looked at her.

“More than that. I haven’t been home in three years. My father and I don’t speak. Earlier this year, Slainte sponsored a special scholarship program for foster children in the Lake District. My family hosted the event. My sister Isobel told me my father did not wish to see me in attendance. Jamie went to see them a couple of weeks before the event.”

“You are one of his. To protect, I mean.” Claire said softly, acknowledging Jamie’s pattern. Geneva nodded.

“When wants to be impressive, he...well... he is. He sat down for tea with the whole family. Jamie
sang my praises a little here and there and shut my father down the couple of times he made a side comment about my sexuality. Isobel told me that Jamie didn’t dodge the issue but …more like emphasized how irrelevant it was. She said after he left, she realized how clever he’d been, slipping in a comment here and there about my life in Glasgow and how well I was handling our expansion plans. A week later, my mother called."

“You went.” Claire said with certainty.

“Yes, on Jamie’s arm. I sat at the head table with my parents and we managed to be civil the whole time. It gave us a beginning. When he came back from London, Jamie was--I’d never seen him like that, he’d been gutted but he wouldn’t talk about it. The only time he smiled was when he was talking about you. How much you mean to him, how wonderful you are.” At this Geneva heard Claire’s sharp intake of breath “I was telling him about the latest fight my girlfriend and I had. What I wouldn’t give for her face light up the way Jamie’s does when he talks of you. But she blows hot and cold. I was only trying to keep him company and ended up crying into my cups. Those pictures-- what you thought you saw? You were wrong.” Geneva said simply.

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Over the next two days, Faith did so well, she was transferred from the PICU to a regular room. The relative silence of the floor allowed both her parents to breathe a little easier, sooth worn nerve endings. Faith was getting stronger every day.

Whenever Faith woke up, Jamie would place a soft kiss on her forehead and rise to wash his hands at the little sink against the far wall. Then he would reach out and stroke her cheek or brush her hair, hold her hand.

“Da, hands wet, cold?” She asked after several repetitions of the process.

“Sorry, lass, yer Mama reminds me I have to wash my hands well so they are free from germs. We dinna want ye to get a virus.”

She had large deep circles under her eyes, everything in her body was bruised and puffy. She looked like a balloon in some places, stretched tight and about to burst. He was as gentle as possible. He didn’t have a mother’s touch, of course, and he was no healer but he did as well as he might, hoping what little he had to offer her was enough.

Faith’s mphmm had him turning his attention back to her. He crossed to the bed and took a hand in his.

“Virus, what’s it?” Faith asked.

“Viruses? Yer Mama has told ye all about them--infections that live on germs, in our bodies and in the air, on yer fingers. Ye canna see them but they are all around us.”

“Da?”

“Aye, mo nighean?”

“Like God?” She asked.

“What?” Jamie was momentarily struck by the question.

“God’s everywhere but we canna see.” Faith said sleepily and closed her eyes.
Jamie chuckled softly. Well, God is like a virus was a new one for him. He’d have to remember to tell Jenny, she’d find that one funny. Not even God could form an over-inflated opinion of Herself when looked at through the eyes of a child.

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Now that the immediate danger had passed, he and Claire had a little time to catch up with other matters. Claire managed to slip away for modified rounds and Jamie forced himself to spend some time each morning and each afternoon in the larger common spaces away from Faith’s room and attend, as best he could, to work. Jamie started modestly, 15 minutes at a time and managed to extend it to half hour before his skin felt itchy and he needed to check back in.

While Jamie had infinite patience for Faith, he discovered himself otherwise oddly unsettled. In his dealings with everyone but their daughter he would get impatient and feel short tempered one minute and wonder why he cared at all the next. Fretchety is what Murtagh had called him when he came to pick up the documents Jamie was supposed to have signed and returned days ago. Jamie had responded with grunts and a bitingly sarcastic “leave off, Da!” Murtagh barely batted an eye.

“Did ye at least read through them?” He inquired.

“Aye.” Jamie had, in fact, done so earlier in the day though he only had the vaguest recollection of subject matter. It all seemed a little pointless. He thumbed through everything and saw with some surprise he’d made notes here and there. Plainly a part of his brain had attended to his task.

“Well then?” Neatly caught, Jamie had a pen thrust into his hand and been told in no uncertain terms to finish what needed to be done.

“Why you?” Jamie stabbed the pen at him. “Where’s Geneva? I havena seen her at’all.” In the silence that greeted his outburst, the answer came. Jamie huffed a curse. Geneva was trying to be tactful. The only sound for some minutes was the scritch scratching of the pen. When he was done he pushed the pile over to his godfather and rubbed his eyes wearily.

“When did ye last sleep?” Murtagh inquired. “In an actual bed, not hunched over a chair?” He added. Jamie made mphmm sound.

“I dinna need sleep, I need to get back to Faith, Claire has rounds.” Jamie pushed up to go.

“Mrs. Crooke is with them, why don’t you go to an on-call room and lie down. God knows you could use it.” Murtagh looked at his watch and noted the time. “Fergus’ll be over in a half-hour -- he’s got the new sales figures for you but those dinna need going over now. Fergus can relieve Mrs. Crooke until Claire is done.” Jamie whirled so quickly his back cracked.

“What I need is to be with my daughter! It’s the only thing her mother has asked of me -- to no’ leave her without one of us there and by God it is the least I can do! If I dinna need to see the figures today, Fergus can stay at Slainte and do his job instead of asking me to double the things I must attend to. Is it really so much to ask everyone else to pull their own weight?”

This statement was so patently unfair to his coworkers, who’d been covering for Jamie’s absence and regularly visiting in support of the family, Murtagh didn’t even bother responding.

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“How long has he been like this?” John was sitting in the family lounge with Murtagh, Ian, Jenny and Fergus, disconcerted by the visit he’d just had with Jamie and discussing what might be done about it.
“Ever since they moved Faith to the pediatric floor.” Ian answered.

“So a week.” Fergus added up the time. “He just gives you a dead eyed stare and if you can get a sentence out of him it’s a miracle.”

“He’s lost a noticeable amount of weight. I doubt he’s sleeping much either.” John observed. “He’s withdrawn. The only reaction we managed to get out of him was when Minnie asked if she should take Faith’s cat back with her and he threatened to disembowel her.”

“Where’s Minnie now?” Ian asked looking around for her.

“She and Geneva said they had errands.” John had been a little surprised when Minnie insisted on coming with him to Glasgow but he accommodated her request.

John had also overheard Minnie’s whispered conversation asking Claire to spare some time to speak privately with her before they headed back home. Minnie hadn’t wanted anyone else to know. In his experience, Minnie was always three steps ahead of him and Hal and it paid to keep on one’s toes in her vicinity.

“At least Jamie and Claire are no longer insisting that one of them be present at all times with Faith. That has to be progress, aye?” Murtagh ventured.

“Except I havena seen them together outside Faith’s room even once.” Jenny observed. “They don’t hold hands or each other, for that matter.”

“She watches him, though, when he’s not looking.” John said. “Come to think of it, she is withdrawn, too.”

“Did anyone else see when she tried to embrace him and----” Jenny started. But they had all seen something similar,

“Aye, he pulled away and turned his back I wonder if he even noticed.” Murtagh agreed.

“That has happened a couple of times now.” Ian noted.

“The distance between them is only growing. The longer it goes on the harder it is getting. They need time alone.” Fergus said.

“John, I ken ye canna speak of it directly but he’s no’ been the same since he met with you and Hal in London.” Jenny added. John bobbed his head in acknowledgement but stayed quiet.

“Is it that bad, then?” Ian dared to ask. John looked thoughtfully at the center of the table, as if a response would spring up from that direction.

“It is a matter of both delicacy and security.” Is what he finally said, then a little more, touching only on the outer edges of the issue. “He asked for permission to tell her a bit more and Hal was finally able to get that. It’s why I came to see him. I thought it would make him happy but his demeanor was flat, almost like it didn’t make any difference to him at all.”

“Perhaps Jamie thinks it has come too late to fix things between them?” Fergus wondered.

“Aye, that’s it!” Murtagh exclaimed. They all looked at him and he shrugged. “I ken a little of what it is like to love from a distance.” He gave a sardonic turn of his lips and looked pointedly at John.
At this John’s color rose but he cleared his throat and nodded. “He’s talking himself into giving up, practicing how to live without them being together.”

“Trying to protect what’s left of his heart, no?”

In the space of a few heartbeats, they all cast about for a solution.

“Well, someone has to tell her.” Fergus observed. Every head swerved toward Ian. He spluttered.

“Me?” They all nodded.

“You have the proper expertise.” Jenny noted. “Being marrit to a Fraser, ye can help her set realistic expectations before she makes an honest man of him.”
Upon reflection, Claire decided, Minnie didn’t look at all like a spy. She was barely five feet tall with fine porcelain features, straight blonde hair and the most charming dimples when she smiled. They were sitting in the doctor’s lounge, virtually empty, being a time of regular shift changes.

“When he caught you breaking into his office he had you thrown in jail?” Claire wondered, her tea momentarily forgotten as it cooled.

“No, he had me on the carpet in front of the fire.” Minnie chortled. “Then conveniently fell asleep and I escaped. I was on the run for the next six months but, bloodhound that he is, he tracked me down eventually.”

“Then arrested you?” She guessed, but Minnie shook her head.

“Married me. I had no choice, I couldn’t make bail and besides, I was pregnant.”

Claire was fascinated by their story. A little Mr. and Mrs. Smith vibe evident, with both of them knee deep in espionage and counterintelligence. When she said as much, Minnie’s blue eyes twinkled in amusement.

“I’m retired.” Minnie made a pish/pash waive of her hand. Her life now happily revolved around Hal and raising their boys. By the looks of it, she had another on the way. “Retired, but not blind or deaf.” She clarified. “Geneva called me when the pictures broke. She thought I could help smooth things over with her father and wanted some guidance.” Minnie took a sip of her tea, watching Claire over the rim of her cup. “Geneva has a very soft spot where you are concerned.”

“Me? Don’t you mean Jamie?” Claire was astonished.

“You saved her life, Claire and she loves Jamie like family so, yes also for Jamie and Faith. Geneva loves children and is very good with them. She views you as something of a role model. Geneva told me about the evening those pictures were taken, how haunted he seemed, and she couldn’t get a word from him about what had happened. So she pulled the plane’s flight plan, had an off-hand conversation with John, put two and two together and concluded they are doing something with Hal.”

“Are they?” Claire asked bluntly.

“I have no idea.” Minnie told her. “I don’t pry. It’s one of our rules. Hal is bound by the Official Secrets Act. We decided early on to avoid situations that might lead him to feel divided loyalty; it would be a great burden to be torn between me and his country. If the three of them really are involved, Jamie and John are likely also bound by the act and can no more talk of it than my husband.”

“And so when Geneva called?” Claire wondered how she fit into all of this.

“Well, while it’s true Hal can’t tell me anything directly, that doesn’t necessarily mean he doesn’t want me to know. He just can’t be the source of the information. On occasion, I take a little initiative and ferret things out. There are times when my ability to do so has come at great relief to the both of us.” Minnie smiled modestly while Claire considered.

“Jamie indicated that whatever had upset him had to do with me, with my past.”
“Oh?” Minnie encouraged.

“But he wouldn’t tell me anything more.”

“Perhaps he simply couldn’t tell you.” Minnie suggested.

“If it’s to do with my past, shouldn’t I be entitled to know what is going on?” Claire huffed indignantly.

“If it were me, I’d certainly want to know.” Minnie agreed. “Especially if some vile gossip columnist was intent on poking his nose in my business and making my life a living hell!”

“Any suggestions?”

“John showed me the miniature hoping I’d know who to send him to for proper analysis. To the best of my knowledge he’s still working with the department head at Cambridge University’s Art History program but in the meantime, I confess I became a little curious.”

“Yes?” Claire’s ears perked up.

“My father was a rare book and artifacts dealer. I grew up researching bits of arcana all the time. Your Baroness Amandine was indeed named Amelie—clever girl, how did you know? She was married to Pierre Henri, the Baron Amandine, obviously, and the family seat was located near Paris, the Chateau de Montrond. She was quite a character, holding seances, loved having her fortune read. She would host week long parties attended by absolutely everyone in society as well as a number of cranks and psychics. The Amandines had a collection of artifacts they claimed came from travelers who could open portals between worlds. She catalogued her various occult experiences in journals and letters. The collection was published around the time of the Napoleonic wars.”

“Really? You don’t happen to have a copy of the book?”

Minnie shook her head. “There is only one surviving copy that I know of and it’s at the Royal Antiquities Society in London. Amelie was childless and the title was inherited by her nephew, also named Pierre Henri, in the latter half of the 18th century. The family, by all accounts, remained at the Chateau until the French Revolution.”

Claire felt an unexpected sadness settle into her bones. “I suppose everyone perished in the Reign of Terror, then?” Minnie’s eyes grew wide.

“Why, no. That is the best part! According to the journal, Amelie’s great nephew, this would be Pierre Henri’s son Claudel, had the second sight and could foretell the future. He predicted all sorts of things that eventually came to pass, including the rising Terror. The family was able to get out of France with a good deal of their wealth in tact.” Minnie grinned.

“What does that have to with me?” Claire wondered.

“I don’t have the slightest idea, my dear. Whenever I’m working on something like this, I start with what I know, use the resources I have on hand and give my attention to the piece of the puzzle I am working on at the moment. That way I am not distracted by preconceived notions regarding what all means until I have made sufficient progress for the picture to start to come into focus.” She advised.

“Start with what I know and the resources I have.” Claire repeated thoughtfully. “Minnie, would you be willing to do a little more research?” With that, an alliance between Claire and Minnie
began to take shape as she filled her in on the circumstances surrounding her birth and coming to live with Lamb.

As they were ready to leave the lounge, Claire finally plucked up her courage to ask, “Does it ever scare you? That there maybe pieces of your husband that you don’t understand or won’t know what to do with?” Minnie patted her hand with some sympathy but she was smiling when she offered her reassurance.

“No, not ever. Whatever it is that is in your past, Claire, whether it frightens Jamie or not, he’s already decided it doesn’t matter as long as he can love you.” Minnie reassured. “And you must know how much he does. The question isn’t whether you trust Jamie, my dear, but yourself.”

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Claire was just finishing up the last of the paperwork for her patients. As much as she needed to be with Faith, she had responsibilities and duties that she absolutely had to attend to. She was placing each updated chart back in its cubby hole at the nurses station when Ian rounded the corner.

He smiled to see her with her hair in a messy bun, lab coat hanging heavily on her with pens and scraps of paper bursting from pockets. Each small detail a reminder of life returning to a more normal routine. All of it together, a signal of Faith’s improved condition. Yet things were far from normal.

Jamie was withdrawing further and further into himself. Earlier that morning he’d accidentally ripped the bandages off his healing arm in frustration at not being able to button his cuff properly. The wound started bleeding all over again. The resultant effect on his clean shirt, obvious.

When Claire pointed this out, rolling up the cuff to treat it, he turned on her and started peppering her with snide remarks. Claire, not usually closed-mouth in such situations, quietly withstood his berating and continued her care of him until Jamie figured out he couldn’t get a rise out of her. This only seemed to further infuriate him.

“Leave off, Sassenach, I dinna need ye!” He said, pushing her firmly away and striding to the door, hesitating at the threshold. “I need some air.” He bit out waiting until Claire nodded. So befuddled that he missed seeing Jenny staring at him in surprise as he barrelled past. Jenny found Claire slumped against the small sink but she hastily composed her features, giving Jenny a tight, rueful smile. Jenny made the stark observation that she thought Jamie was close to his breaking point and Claire wasn’t fairing much better.

“Good afternoon-- or should I say evening, to you? I was just on my way to see our lassie. Fergus texted me a half hour ago, said he managed to get Jamie to lie down in one of the on-call rooms.” At this Claire’s eyebrows rose. Jamie hadn’t, to her knowledge, attempted to get any real rest since Faith had been admitted.

“Wait up just a minute and I’ll walk down with you.” Claire requested.

They traveled for a few moments in silence before Ian realized the opening he needed wouldn’t just sprout out in front of him like a convenient highway exit. He took a deep breath, and dove in.

“Claire, are ye going to forgive him?”

The directness of the question caused Claire’s stomach to clench.
“Forgive him? For what? For what happened with Faith?”

“Och, no.” Ian shrugged. “That was an accident, between the dog and the sun shining in the kid’s eyes there was nothing Jamie could’ve done. He kens that. No, I mean for the things he canna say, for Frank and everything else.”

At this Claire shot him a chagrined look. She’d been trying so hard to not look back at the past couple of weeks fearing the weight of her guilty conscience.

“He’s been beside himself and fair torn up about it all. I dinna ken what I’d do in his situation but I ken Jamie and so do you. If he thought he had a choice about it, he’d have told you already.” They walked a few paces in silence. Then Ian spoke again.

“Do ye remember the week after Quarter Day, he flew to Paris for a couple of days?” Claire nodded. “He called me in the middle of the night remembering I had a meeting at the bank the next day. He asked me to fetch his mother’s wedding ring from the vault. Jamie planned on asking along, afore Jenny’s words at Lallybroch, and well before Black Jack and Frank turned up. He’s been carrying that box around wi’ him like some talisman for months Claire.”

“That long?” Claire’s voice quavered and Ian nodded in confirmation. “I’m not angry with him. He is angry with me because I….“ Claire took a breath. “It’s hard for me, it’s complicated.”

Ian chuckled a bit. “Aye, always is. Claire, I marrit a Fraser, ye dinna have to tell me of the complications. They’re a different kind of animal, no?”

Claire couldn’t help but laugh a bit. But she wanted to try and explain.

“It took me a long time to move past what happened with Frank. It was why I wanted to see Frank in the first place, so I’d know I had. But that was only one part of it, of course. Frank himself, I was over. The echo of his betrayal, feeling safe enough to trust someone else...I hadn’t gotten over that at all.” Claire’s brown eyes bored into Ian’s searching for some sign of understanding. Ian, patient as always, gave her a nod and time to collect her thoughts. “It scares me knowing whatever is coming is so serious he didn’t tell me, or you or Jenny. I pushed him, tested him, turned away from him when he needed me. I’m haunted by the idea that if I had been more trusting, if I had been accepting instead of … maybe Faith and Jamie would have been home safe. But, I didn’t, I wouldn’t. So, if anyone is angry it’s him and he has good reasons to be.” Then she paused, her throat warbling when she resumed. “It’s no wonder he has decided to wash his hands of me.”

Ian smiled but not unkindly. He wasn’t letting her off that easily.

“Claire, everyone can see how upset you’ve been at him. In the A&E and then when Faith was in the OR, you never looked at him, wouldna speak to him, or touch him. Jamie’s been raised to protect the things he loves and he loves you dear, even now. He’s scared and heartsick. But not angry.” Claire looked like she wanted to argue the point and Ian cut her off.

‘Think back, Claire, each time someone dropped by to visit or lend a hand, he always turned them away from himself to you. Do ye no’ see? He was trying to take care of you, make sure you had whatever ye needed, what might comfort you because ye wouldna let him do that for you directly. He’s barely left Faith’s side no’ just for her sake but for yours as well. He kens you blame him for Faith and canna let go of your anger for Frank and whatever it is he canna tell you. He’s trying to make it up to you but those walls ye have are still up. It’s been so hard to watch the two of you unable to turn to each other, especially now.” Ian stopped walking and took her hand in his. Shame flooded her and she couldn’t do more than give him a tiny look, not quite meeting his eyes.
“Jamie needs a woman who is strong enough to be his match, to stand by him whether it’s dark or light. I do understand Claire, you needed to be sure he was up for the job, so ye batted him around like a wee mousie to see would he stay or run away. He stuck with you, trusting you to come around. But whatever he is dealing with made it so he had no choice but to ask the same -- if not more--of you. I ken you see it as a betrayal of the vow he made to you to let your heart take whatever time ye needed to be free of doubt. No, Claire. I ken why you are angry with him and I understand why it might be hard to let go. He’s asking you to love him enough to forgive him everything he’s done and everything he could do. He asked it of ye even knowing that he may lose you in the asking.” Ian gathered his next words with care. “It’s easy to pretend you are strong when you have a semblance of control. But true strength lies in acceptance of what is, not what we wish it to be. He kens that. So my question remains: are you strong enough to be his, Claire?”

Ian willed her eyes to meet his, but when she did he saw her staring helplessly at him and took pity on the raw emotion he saw there.

“I ken a little about what it’s like to feel that vulnerable. Especially when the person you love with all your heart forces you to take a hard look at yourself and your illusions. Jenny did something similar to me when I lost my leg and lost my way for a bit. You maybe have some notion of how it is have to rehab?” Claire nodded and he continued.

“She cornered me and forced me to confront my own demons, for a time I wanted to blame the messenger instead of focusing on the message. Eventually she got through to me. Then I knew. Even if we were uncertain about the next step, our only way forward for us was one step at a time, together. It was hard but I learned to stop fearing every what-if and be grateful for what-is. We got through it, so could you, were ye willing, but you haven’t forgiven him. We all can see it.” Claire wanted to defend herself, to say something but no words came. Ian wondered if she might not quite understand what he really meant. Men and women thought of these things quite differently, he knew. Women were able to separate physical response from the emotional but men tended to rely on the visceral.

“Ye havena… mmphm….. “ Ian searched for the right way to say it. “Claire, you’ve barely touched him since it happened. He needs your healing touch as much as Faith, maybe more. Do ye no’ ken that?” Ian’s cheeks went a bit red.

“He hasn’t touched me, either!” Claire exclaimed hotly, as her own face turned red.

“How could he? He respects you too much to go where he’s not wanted.” Ian implored.

“Respect is it?” Claire said sardonically. Ian smiled at her tone.

“Aye, well Jamie is sure of his own heart, but he has his pride, Claire, all men do.” Ian acknowledged. “No, Claire,” he concluded, “if he is to be welcomed home, it must be you. He’ll never cross that threshold uninvited. I know I’m overstepping my bounds, but he’s…ye must have noticed how distant he is becoming?”

“I have, and it’s alright I-- I appreciate your talking to me, Ian.”

“Jamie seems invincible, aye?” Claire nodded her agreement. Ian grabbed both her hands in his and spoke softly. “Ye should remember anyone can be broken if someone hurts them enough.” He warned, causing her heart to skitter. “And ye know better than anyone that broken things can be healed if someone helps them enough, too.”

Having spent days avoiding it, Claire allowed herself to feel the heavy weight of judgment but she acknowledged that she’d been given a gift as well in understanding that it was up to her to repair
the rift between them.

Ian stopped with her in the open doorway of Faith’s room. They saw Fergus just closing a book he’d been reading to her, Faith’s eyes were closed; she looked like she was asleep. He smiled when he saw them, rose and kissed Claire lightly on the cheek.

“Jamie is in the second on-call room on the right. Do you want me to stay for awhile?” Fergus offered.

“No, Fergus, but thank you so much for staying as long and you did. And for getting Jamie to take a break. I don’t know how you did it.” Claire said.

“I’ll walk you out,” Ian told him, “Claire, I’ll just run down to the cafeteria on the way back, if ye dinna mind?” Ian waited until he saw Claire nod her head then added, “I was planning on spending the night here, anyway. She won’t be alone if ye want to take some time for yourself when I return.” With that Ian rubbed her arm, Fergus kissed her cheek once more and they went out the door.

Wrapped up in her own guilt Claire hadn’t considered that she was angry with Jamie. For weeks now, she had been testing and retesting his love for her, trying to maintain her delusion of a quiet, controllable life. Life wasn’t that simple. Claire had drawn a line of separation between them. She’d rebuked him when he needed her to soften and open her heart to him. She’d convinced herself that standing firm on principal proved how strong she was but all it’d done was weaken the two of them when they needed the solid ground they could provide one another.

Claire could not bear to think of how it had been for him since Faith’s accident. How he’d looked in the A&E, the OR waiting room, hour after hour by Faith’s bed, guilt-stricken and alone. She thought back to the pictures of him and Geneva, had finally seen what he’d asked her to see. The loneliness and sadness in his eyes. And this whole time Claire knew she was the one person who could have-- should have been able to look beyond her own fears and limitations to give him comfort and ease. It wasn’t anger that had stopped her from reaching out to him, it had been her own sense of guilt and shame.

Claire paused by the door to the on-call room. It’s interior familiar to her from her residency years. It was a compact cubicle with a bed, low watt night light and an end table. She took a deep breath for courage and stepped inside. She could see the shape of him on the bed but her eyes still hadn’t adjusted to the dim glow. He was resting on his side. His breathing told her he wasn’t asleep though she couldn’t see his eyes yet.

Claire quickly toed off her shoes, untied her hair and, to make her intent known, stripped down to her tee shirt and panties. Wordlessly she pressed her body to his. She fitted her head against his shoulder and sighed.

Jamie moaned when her body made full contact with his. She felt so good in his arms and it had been so long. He pulled her tightly to him. Her leg lifted over his hip, and her heel guided his rear closer as she wrapped arms around him. Claire moved her head slightly, looking for a kiss and felt the wetness running all along his cheeks. She made a small noise of comfort and kissed his tears, then his mouth, long, slow and tender. Her hand cupping his cheekbone, hitching herself up, pressing even closer, her chest molding to his so they could feel their heartbeats pulsing in unison.

Jamie emitted a whimpering sob. His hand cupped the back of her head, mouth opening to take her in harder and deeper. He fisted her curls possessively. The sharp roughness of his beard in her palm, the taste of fear on his tongue, the fierce desperate response from him left her breathless, trembling in need.
He broke away as she leaned up and stripped her tee shirt from her body, shucking her panties before throwing herself against him once more. She was panting in anticipation, her only goal to meld into him: one body, one beat, one soul, unerringly guiding him toward her destination.

At the last second, Jamie wedged his arm up between them and pushed her back.

“No...no Sassenach, ye have to stop.” He said with some finality, his chest heaving with the effort of drawing air into his lungs.

“Please Jamie, I need you.” An honest understatement of fact. She opened her eyes and looked at his hardened expression: resolute, determined and as distant as another planet.

“I canna do this anymore, Claire.” The grief in his voice, the deadened look in his eyes caused her heart to accelerate and bile rose in her throat.

“W-what d-do you mean?” She was starting to panic.

“I canna let ye tear my heart out again.” She heard him add in a quiet voice, “I dinna think this time I can find a way to live with it.”

“Oh, Jamie!” An aching whisper as Jamie moved away from her, no longer touching.

“What happened with Faith...I’m no’ the same man I was even a week ago.” He refused to look at her. “I canna go through that ever again, to just be...No. I canna, Sassenach. Ye can tear me limb from limb without a single touch.”

Claire’s throat closed up, she had to clear it in order to speak. “T-tell me how you…” Then she stopped, forcing herself to acknowledge the truth, to take responsibility for his present state of mind. “How what I did made you feel.” She whispered.

“Ye left me!” The accusation rang out in the small room. “Dangling over a chasm, exposed, alone. I kept waiting for ye to say something, anything that might let me know you wanted to help knit my heart back together. But my heart appears to be my own concern.” He grunted as he exhaled, a tiny ironic sound that normally was coupled with a small smile but not this time. His tone grew bewildered. “I dinna think when people talked of being heartbroken they meant it literally. I think I maybe have enough strength left to determine my own fate. So, if it’s all the same to you, Claire, I’ll walk away while I still can. I think I prefer that to being driven to my knees and forced to crawl.”

Claire thought she really might have lost him for good and her breaths came so rapidly she was starting to hyperventilate. He didn’t move to hold her, or say a word to assuage her distress. Suddenly, lightheaded, she felt sweat break out on her forehead, her stomach hitched as if she might throw up. She could hear him breathing in that very deliberate way he used when trying to control strong emotions. Trembling with the depth of her own feelings, Claire managed to move into a sitting position. For a moment she just watched him. He was laying on his back, face staring at the ceiling. His eyes, to her shock, appeared clear, no hint of any emotion at all but the fingers of his left hand were trembling. Not so remote, after all.

“Look at me.” She commanded.

He slowly turned his body and then his head as his gaze travelled up to her face. It’s harsh features softened a little as he took in the sight of her. Exposed by her nakedness and the raw feeling he saw on her face, he thought she looked as desolate as he felt. Then her chin came up and she took in a deep breath.
“Stop being so dramatic!” She admonished. It was a false bravado borne of her sense of desperation but then she saw it, a small movement at the corner of his mouth, the barest hint of a smile. Hope raced through her bones.

“I know you will forgive me, eventually, and so do you!” She told him with a certainty full of pretense.

Her hand grasped his and he let her hold it, she caressed her thumb over the back of his hand, lacing their fingers.

“I love you.” She said simply and heard the hitch in his breath. Claire pulled his hand to lips and kissed each exposed knuckle. His fingers hadn’t stopped shaking which gave her a tremendous shot of courage.

“Whether it’s beating on the outside of your body or inside, your heart belongs to me. Jamie Fraser, and you know it! I make you a vow this time, you stubborn Scot.” He cast his eyes to hers and one brow raised up. “I swear that the only direction I’ll ever make you crawl is toward home, to me.” Claire’s transparent face broke, unable to keep her fears hidden but she gave him a brave, wobbly smile full of an uncertain hope. She refused to look away even as her eyes welled up, causing his to start watering in response. His hand closed vice-like on hers and she had the opening she needed.

“I, uhm, I spoke with Ian earlier this evening.” She began.

“Aye?”

“Uh-hum. He asked me if I was strong enough to be your woman.”

“He what?” Jamie’s shock evident.

“Well, Ian was right to wonder. Yet, I hadn’t known the truth of it in my own heart until he made me look at it. I know I am. Jamie, I have no doubts anymore.” Claire wasn’t sure Jamie was able to understand, or any man really could, trying to navigating something like this across genders. “I wronged you and I want to explain if you want to hear what I have to say?” She looked at him. He nodded as he whispered agreement.

A wellspring of rightness was settling within her the longer they held one another’s hands and sat together speaking their hearts. She was home. Home at last. She picked his hand up again, unable to stop and ran it back and forth across her lips. He uncurled his fingers and cupped her cheek. His thumb gliding along her skin, tender and soft.

“So say.” Jamie encouraged.

“For so long I had no idea who I was. I had been defined by Frank’s vision of me as a young, inexperienced girl and that dictated who I thought myself to be for years. The truth is that I hadn’t realized that I had already forged my own identity long before Frank and I ended. It was part of why we ended but I only know that now. Inside my head, I mixed everything up. You must be like him and I must be like her the person I had been was when I was with him…...and the truth is I didn’t like her. She was...not weak but afraid to live her life for herself, afraid to ask for anything, unwilling to tell someone what she wanted and needed. Afraid of her own shadow and terrified of being displaced.”

Jamie made a small sound of negation that made her smile knowing how different the girl she had been was from the woman Jamie knew. But he really didn’t understand and she needed him to.

“After my parents died and I went to live with Lamb I was so scared of his warehousing me in a
boarding school that I never made a fuss about anything. I never asked him for anything or told
him I didn’t like something he wanted to do or eat or see. No wonder I had no idea who I was, I
wasn’t anyone at all myself; only a reflection of what I thought other people wanted me to be. I
didn’t like being in that girl’s skin. I thought it was about being able to stay in control. But that
isn’t what life is about, you can’t be in control. Change is inevitable. I think I told myself I needed
to be sure of you because I was so unsure of ...well, me.”

Claire stopped for a moment. Jamie dropped his hand and shifted. Her heart started beating double
time. Was this it then, had he lost interest in hearing her out? But then his arm settled around her
shoulders and his other hand came across her body to hold her closer. Cocooned tightly against
him, embraced and supported, she continued.

“What I realized was that my fears --that wasn’t me, the true me. Everything I threw at you was
pretense. They were the fears of Claire Randall, the problems and worries and obstacles in her
head. I couldn’t break free of thinking like that. So the real question was whether I could learn to
trust myself to know who I am. You deserve a to be loved by someone who is brave enough to
give her true self to you. For so many years I have been someone else. With you, I am simply me,
only me. In all of my life, all of my memory of me, no one I loved ever thought that was enough.
Only you, Jamie, because no matter my past, you insist that I accept myself for who I really am
inside and give me the courage to believe that is enough.” A small sound came from him, and she
felt Jamie nod. “The reason I am strong enough to be your woman is because when I am with you I
am allowed to be myself. I did a terrible thing to you. I treated you as if you were another and I
didn’t see you. Just like Lamb never saw me, just like Frank never saw me. It is a terrible sin and I
know it. So it is you who must decide whether you still want me, whether you can move past it.”

“And if I can?” His brow rose up in question. She let out a huge relieved breath and he smiled to
himself when he heard it.

Claire looked at him. “Can you tell me what has happened yet?”

Jamie shook his head no. Claire searched his face, her eyes taking in every feature. The exhaustion
of worry, sleepless nights and traumatic events had aged him these past few weeks. “If you can’t
because you are bound by an oath I can live with it. If you can’t because you are trying to spare me
worry or pain, I want you to reconsider. I won’t ever forget how you looked in the waiting
room…” Claire took a shuddering breath and tried to speak calmly. “I never should have left you to
face your fears alone. I wish I hadn’t. I wish I had allowed the two of us to share it. Yet, you expect
me to watch you carry the weight of whatever this thing is on your shoulders alone, when I know it
scares you so badly you have nightmares. I want you to know that when you can tell me
something, I need you to do that. I believe with my whole heart that whatever it is, the only way we
will be able to bear it is to carry it together.”

“We haven’t had any time to talk but I’ve rethought things as well. I can tell ye less than you may
like but more than I could before. I’m no’ asking for blind trust, Sassenach, but ye’ll need to
believe what I do tell ye, and trust me when I tell you I canna say more.”

She had tears in her eyes. He did too. This was it-- the moment of truth. Had she made up her
mind? Could she put her faith in him? A huge sigh escaped her lips.

“Oh mo ghraidh! Jamie’s heart started beating harder in his chest. “Ye dinna scare me, Sassenach”
He said with utter conviction.
“Good. Then there is a very simple solution to all this.” She assured him.

“Aye?” His voice came out in a thin warble and a tear rolled down his cheek.

“‘Aye,’ she agreed, ‘Marry me, Jamie Fraser. That way if I tear your heart out of you again, you’ll know it’s only so I can keep it safe with me.’” Her arms ached to hold him, she willed him to close the gap between them and she waited a beat, then two while he considered. “‘Pease?’”

At that he grabbed her choking out a groan and gripped her with a savage possession that caused a flood of relief. She made a mewling sound as his lips locked on her. Jesus God, how he loved this wee fierce woman. His heart swelled, the feelings she stirred in him impossible to contain. Hot and tender kisses followed. Claire was rubbing against him, needing to feel all of him. He rolled them so he could stand up and strip his clothes off.

Jamie stood before her, proud as Lucifer. She was reassured to see the proof of his desire mere inches from her. He stared her down as she gazed coquettishly up at him, a tentative smile as her tongue slipped from her lips. His fingers traced her cheek and chin and he stilled her when she would have closed the distance with her mouth. He looked down at her, smiling.

“I’ll marry ye, Claire but I have three conditions.”

He was momentarily shocked when she said “Mmhm?” and the vibration of her lips was right up against his cock. He hadn’t been aware of her move closer to him and yet she made no move to touch him. He knelt down in front of her and took her hands in his.

“First, we’ll be marrit in kirk, afore a priest, though ye get to pick the priest. And we’ll do it straight away-- none of this saying ye will when ye won’t. Even if we have to do it here in the chapel, we do it straight away.” He repeated firmly.

“Yes!” She breathed out and hugged him to her, kissing him breathless.

“Second…” He broke off. He had more to say. He held her head in both hands and looked at her. Claire’s eyes filled with tears at the tenderness in his. It was too much for him, what she made him feel. With a shaky thumb he brushed a tear from her cheek, focusing on her small, fine bones as his fingers ghosted her face.

She watched him struggle, swallowing hard a couple of times before he could get it out. Jamie looked a little lost but then a determined look came over his features.

“Ye must allow me to protect ye, Claire. You and Faith both. I canna...I willna...I’ve no life without you.” Jamie finally managed. He looked like a man braced for the gallows. “If I tell ye to do or no’ do something for yer own safety you must listen even if I canna tell you my reasons. I ken I am asking more from ye than you want to give, maybe even arena sure ye can give me but I wouldna ask unless---” Claire put a hand on his chest interrupting him.

“I am sure, Jamie. I understand. I will do as you say.” Claire tried to take a deep breath, “I don’t need more than your word. I trust you.”

Jamie’s eyes locked on hers. All the oxygen in the room vanished suddenly. She was as breathless as he, both of their chests heaving with emotion. He growled at her. Her eyes studied his face. She brought one hand up to cup along his jaw. Jamie leaned forward and kissed her deeply, making her quake. She squeaked when he fitted his mouth right over her ear.

“Third and final condition, Sassenach.” He started on a fierce whisper that she felt all the way to
her toes. “You’ll tell me ye love me every day, even when ye are feeling fratchety.”

As he pulled back, fathomless blue looked deeply into burnished brown, daring her to look at him and see the toll of these last few weeks. His fears, his needs and the vulnerability that had driven him to such desolation. Her tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. She cupped his face in her hands.

“Oh, I do, I love you Jamie, so much. And you know that!” Claire assured him. Ridiculous man!

He stood, intending to move her over and join her on the bed. Just as he was about to get a knee on the covers, Claire reached and grabbed his buttock pulling him closer to her as her smooth cheek rubbed up one way then down the other. With no warning she slipped her mouth over him and pressed downward. He was hot and hard and urgent against her tongue. Several exquisite minutes passed before he remembered he hadn’t finished setting out his terms.

“I mean it! Claire, every day!” He growled, fisting his hands through her curls and pulling in emphasis.

“Ah” She moaned and pulled up causing a hiss to explode from his mouth above her. “You haven’t said the same to----”

He stopped her breath when he kneeled down on the floor beside the bed. He pulled her to him and held her hard. She hummed joyfully feeling their naked forms pressed together. He softly bit her neck and rumbled in her ear.

“I love you Claire and ye ken it well!”

He kissed the tender backside of her ear, her neck, her lips. He pushed her back to lie down and then grabbed her behind her knees and pulled her to the edge of the bed. He spread her knees wider and slowly kissed up the inside of one thigh. He reared back and she expected the same treatment on her other leg. The noise she made when he thrust his tongue deeply into her made him chuckle. He added an appreciative Scottish hum.

“Oh Claire, it’s been too long since I tasted you.” He flattened his tongue and gave her a long, intense lick. “I canna get enough of it. God, how I missed you!”

He ran along her folds, circling her center as his arm came around her stomach, holding her immobile. She opened her legs even wider, trying to feel every firm, wide stroke. He was driving her mad. Jamie’s free hand clutched at hers moving it downward. In response, Claire placed it at the back of his head pushing him closer. She’d ceased coherent words and life whittled down to soft moans and pants. His hand found hers again and he brought it to her core. He pressed one finger over hers, making it clear what he wanted. She let out a wail that had him humming on her clit. He curled his finger inside her, then his tongue, alternating one to another. Jamie laughed when her ankles bucked hard on his shoulders, she started squirming. Jamie lifted his head for a moment and watched her. Her hand was moving quickly and her eyes flew open. The raw need in them had him struggling not to sheath himself instantly inside.

“Ye like that, Sassenach?” He asked, nudging her hand out of the way. She was making louder sounds as he used his thumbs to spread her open. “Come back, aye?” Her fingers flew back at once. “That’s a good lass. Show me how to love ye better.” His tongue was licking and slipping all over her fingers, it was a heady sensation. He slipped a finger inside and her whole body clenched down as she climaxed.

He helped her ride it out, gently stroking her as his head rested against her thigh, both of them
breathing hard. When it was done he reverently placed a kiss on her center. Jamie pushed her legs up and switched positions with her, bringing her on top of him, fitting into her as he held her body tight to his. She started undulating against him at once.

“Please…..” she whispered against his ear as she brushed her hair back.

Jamie fitted his mouth against her neck and teased his stubbled jaw against her sensitive skin. Her clit twitched against him and she let out an encouraging noise. His hand pressed the middle of her back tighter to him and he sucked hard against her neck as she whimpered, rising and falling on him in time with his breaths. The hand on her back rose higher and into her hair. He grabbed a fistfull and pulled with enough force to interrupt her movement grunting in his effort to restrain himself as she held completely still.

“Tell me!” Jamie’s eyes burned into hers.

She briefly thought of resisting, for the thrill of driving him wild. But a stab of shame put her back in her head and she remembered how he looked as the hours of Faith’s operation dragged. She looked into his eyes as she felt his hand clench tighter at the back of her head.

“I’m yours, Jamie. No turning back, no doubts. Yours forever and always,” She let him hear the truth of it in her voice, “and Jamie you’re mine? You said you’d marry me. Tell me again!”

For months she’d been resisting it, he’d wanted her to acknowledge that he’d staked his claim, wanted her to lay claim to him, too and uncertainty had caused no small amount of heartache for both of them.

Hearing her admit the truth of their mutual surrender meant more to him than anything else she might have said except this-- hearing her as needy as he, her own desire to know and be reassured.

“Aye, I’m yours. Jesus, God, Sassenach, don’t you know that? I always was from the first moment I set eyes on you after thumping my head against your floor.” He chuckled, and her heart squeezed tight into her chest and she sighed deeply.

His hand softened at once. Rather than pressing his point, which she had really hoped he would do, his face softened and both his arms fitted themselves against her back as he squeezed her hard in a shuddering embrace, pressing the side of his head against hers.

One hand came up to the crown of her head and pressed down on her skull. Holding her as close as he could.

“I love you, Claire.”

The tenderness, the overwhelming emotion flowing between them made her feel so fragile and she couldn’t bear it, close to tears and not at all what she needed. And that god damned gift of a man felt it, the truth of it inside her and instinctively moved to protect her, even if only from herself.

“Tell me what ye need, mo ghràdh .”

She wiggled against him, he could see the tell tale signs of a blush, starting from her chest and moving upwards to her face.

“You know what I need.” She emphasized with her hips even as her eyes pleaded with him for something more. Her hands gripped him as hard as she could once then released.

“I’ll no’ do it, lass.” He told her and she moaned in frustration.
“Do what?” She panted.

“Punish you.”

“I don’t want that, for god sakes. I want…” She thrust and then ground herself against him. “You know what I want. Please!” She begged.

He kissed her hard, then flipped her expertly and with no warning. Confused she tried to turn over. His hand on her lower back stilled her.

“Get on yer knees, Sassenach.” He commanded. Her heart sped up as she complied. She trembled in an agony of anticipation as he paused. Claire glanced over her shoulder trying to figure out what was happening behind her. Jamie stared transfixed at her spread before him, hair wild and untamed. She raised her ass in the air and made a sound of urgency as he buried himself in her. They both moaned loudly.

He’d rarely taken her thus and to do so now after long absence meant that the feel of it was like nothing else. Claire seemed to shake and shiver each time he came forward; he needed more and gripped her hips for purchase. She couldn’t think, her sighs and groans the only speech she was capable of, his grunts the only response. The force of him drove all the breath from her.

She finally got purchase on the bed and was able to rock back in counterpoint and he chuckled, thrilled to know she felt much the same as him. He snaked his hand forward onto her clit and rubbed in time with his thrusts. She was crying out now. He extracted wet fingers and rubbed her dangling breast.

“Please!” she moaned.

“Please what?” Breathless, he waited to give her what she needed.

She released her weight from her hands and dropped her arms down on the bed, raising her rear even higher against him.

“Ha--harder! Please I need --God! Harder than that.” Jamie grunted his effort and she squeaked and hissed her appreciation. “Fuck, Jamie, yes!” She whimpered even as he caught on and became wild against her.

He was seldom aware of just how large his body was compared to her slender one, nor conscious of its power but at moments like these, when she gave him permission to give in to the physical demands of his body, when she craved it and was a completely willing participant he felt powerful, and a primitive, urgent thing rose inside him.

He held her in a vice like grip--his fingers would leave marks against her sensitive skin and he just didn’t care at the moment. He was staring down at the place they were joined, seeing the faint smudges of finger bruises he’d made by accident lost in the wet and heat of her.

Breathing with enormous effort, his heart hammering in his ears. Her moans only faintly registering. He was pistoning in her, working to time his movement to her pace, he felt like he was right on the edge of a precipice. His body was on fire, muscles spasming, but whether hers or his was hard to tell so overwhelmed were they in that moment.

Suddenly she convulsed against him. The vice-like grip of her on his cock unrelenting. His head came up and he saw her hands curled into tight fists. Her legs quivered and shook.

When she sucked in a wheezing desperate breath and her body relaxed enough for him to move
again, he realized what had given her breath back had stolen his.

Unable to do anything but obey the demands of his primitive instinct, he pulled back once, shot forward and came loudly, so hard his knees gave out and he lay fully against her. Completely lost in it.

“Jamie” she breathed out. His grunt her only response. “You’re crushing me.” Air flooded into his lungs and Jamie became aware then of his position over her and rolled off of her pulled her to him as he held her. Exhaustion overtook him and he was asleep in under a minute. Claire shifted and rolled so she was facing him in the bed. She reached her hand out and gently stroked his hair. He smiled in his sleep and everything in her melted.

“I love you, Jamie.” She whispered and saw the ghost of a smile play on his face. “God, how I do.”

She gave in then to tears of pain and shame and guilt. She cried out her fear and her self loathing, cried until nothing remained in her. Yet she couldn’t find the release of sleep, exhausted as she was; but at least he slept on, she’d held herself rigidly so as not to disturb him. Then his hand reached out and he brushed the tears from her cheeks. He pulled her to him and fitted his head over hers, kissing her head.

“Sleep, Sassenach, I’m here. There’s the two of us, now.”
In Which A Wedding...Och, You Lot Kens What Happens Next!

When the door popped open and he saw her, she was reaching for their daughter’s hand at the far end of their makeshift aisle looking so achingly radiant everything just stopped for a frozen minute. Like a bird on a perch gathering to take flight and soar, bubbles of joy surged through him.

Just then the sun broke through the clouds illuminating the hospital’s inner courtyard and he drew in a deep breath, his eyes looked all about him, memorizing every detail. Jamie saw all the little things their family and friends had managed to do in the short time they’d had to get things ready.

He smiled seeing the yards and yards of white gauze bandages someone had wrapped like fine lace around the seating area forming a makeshift aisle. The ridiculous collection of helium filled surgical gloves blown up like balloons, some with silly faces others with good wishes to the bride and groom. The oddest assortment of flowers he’d ever seen. He vaguely wondered if they’d gone floor by floor and raided patient rooms just to be sure the setting was suitably colored. Well, and it was. Their small group of family and friends stood up just then, seeing the processional about to begin. Jamie took in their various states of dress- casual and formal attire, whatever they had on hand, it mattered not, they were here.

Father Kenneth smiled at him and gave a nod of encouragement and, catching the movement, Claire’s eyes met his. She’d been kneeling down beside Faith and he watched her head come round to follow Claire’s finger pointing him out. Faith was looking at her mother and nodding in earnest. Her newly untethered arm, free of the IV lines, came up to her mouth and Faith blew him a kiss, which he caught and returned. Claire plucked it out of the air, touching her fingers to her lips and placing her hand to her heart.

Faith sat in the special chair from the peds unit and smiled. It was lovely to see the roses in her cheeks. Unable to wear anything fancy given her medical condition, Claire asked Jamie if he would mind a more casual ceremony. That way, when Faith was older, she wouldn’t look at the pictures of the day and feel out of place. Jamie didn’t think anything could’ve changed his mind but Claire’s anxious face had him rethinking it.

“When I gave ye my conditions, I wasn’t thinking about it like that.” He confessed.

“Like what?” Claire wondered.

“I hadna thought about the trappings, ye ken? The fancy dress and band, hen and bachelor party, wedding cake or guest list. None of that is important. For me, just having you and Faith is enough to make the day ours but it’s yer wedding, too Sassenach. I dinna want it to seem a slapdash affair.
If such things matter to you, we can wait to make a proper go of it.”

Claire knew by the set of his determined jaw that it cost him something to make the offer. She pulled him close to her. “I think,” she began carefully. “That we get to decide what is proper. What will make it special isn’t what we wear or finding the right cardstock for the invitations but that when you stand next to me it feels perfect to us.” Claire paused, their hands clasped and fingers entwined.

“But?” He heard that hesitation in her voice.

“Would you mind terribly if we got married in the courtyard instead of the chapel?” Claire said in a rush, running all the words together. “It’s just that the weather will be sunny all week, Faith hasn’t been outside since the accident and the chapel isn’t very—” His warm lips pressed against hers and she lost her train of thought enjoying the feel of him. Her hand stroked his cheek.

“Tell me what else.” They’d each sketched out the few ideas they had for making it work on the tight time frame.

He smiled wider, looking the two of them over one last time. Of necessity they’d all had to outfit themselves as best they could from their existing wardrobes. Faith, naturally, insisted on wearing her favorite color. Her simple dress of lavender was complemented by Claire’s richer eggplant. Claire sighed in pleasure watching him looking their way. No one could hold a candle to that man. For there he stood, awaiting the wedding march resplendent in his formal kilt, faded purple shirt to match his lasses.

Jamie’s heart melted when he saw that his wee gifts had gotten to them in time. He turned to Jenny who was standing right next to him, her arm threaded in his for support.

“Thank you, mo’ chridhe, ” he said, “they look bonnie, no?” Jenny followed his gaze, smiling as she nodded. Claire had braided the matching strings of pearls in their hair.

Jenny and Ian, Fergus and Murtagh, all of them had been running around like a whirling dervishes for the last day but they’d managed to get it all done— Father Kenneth (at Claire’s request), finger food, chairs, decorations, a cake and the license. They had decided against bridesmaids and grooms, there would be no formal sit down meal or toasts or dancing. Perhaps in the coming weeks they would organize a formal reception but for now, this was enough.
The reporter from the Scottish Star was there, Jamie noted. He and Claire had sat down for a tell-all scoop. The Star had paid them for the story and the fee went to a fund that provided housing for families whose children were undergoing treatment at Mercy. The thing would likely be posted online before the end of the day and all hell would surely break loose then. But he didn’t care at that moment. Time enough to deal with it tomorrow, this time was theirs.

John got up from his seat near the front. As he passed by Father Kenneth, standing near their makeshift bower, he kissed Faith’s forehead and then Claire’s cheek. John turned to look down the aisle where Jamie and his sister had been waiting to walk down the aisle. Like the guests, he, too had been charmed by Jamie’s insistence on being the one to walk to Claire but likely the only one Jamie could confide in about why it was important to do it like this.

“When a father walks a daughter down to her husband it’s an act of letting go. She is given away and must make a place with her new family. But Claire made a place for me in her family and I want her to know it was me that asked for her acceptance. When I am allowed to tell her about the accident, about Julia St. Amand she is going to want to run from the pain of it. She’ll think it’s her family’s shame and that mine willna accept it. She’ll wonder if we can ever look at her the same. It will break her until she can find peace. So I need her to know that my family, that Jenny and I especially, we chose her, we came to her. Maybe that will help.”

John cleared his throat raised his sax to his lips and Jamie’s wedding march Into the Mystic echoed off the glass of the windows facing the inner courtyard. Jamie took a deep breath. Jenny held his hand firmly and they stepped out together.

Jamie kept one hand in Faith’s and one hand in Claire’s as Father Kenneth went through the traditional ceremony. When it was time for the rings, Claire knelt to Faith and whispered in her ear, Faith tugged Jamie’s pleats and he knelt beside her chair. He would remember always the feel of her tiny fingers pushing the simple platinum circle down, the way her tongue stuck out just a bit as she concentrated. The feel of Claire’s hand still clasped in his right. He kissed Faith’s cheek. “I love you, mo nighean.” Instead of standing up again, Jamie placed his mother’s ring in Faith’s lap and asked her to help her mother as well. A perfect fit.

From over his shoulder his sister thrust something at him. Claire had a better line of sight and laughed as she took it. A ring pop, which he unwrapped and solemnly placed over Faith’s thumb.

“We all have rings!” Faith crowed.

They stood to be pronounced husband and wife and daughter. Jamie kissed his bride soundly and then quietly whispered in Claire’s ear. She nodded and went to sit down at the empty chair by Geneva, she nodded her thanks to Gillie, who was sitting on the other side and spoke in low tones with Geneva. Jamie grinned seeing the look of shocked surprise come over Eva’s face. Claire
nodded at Jenny who produced the small baptismal font, oil of Chrism and consecrated water liberated from the church when she'd gone to get Father Kenneth. Jamie beckoned Murtagh and Geneva forward.

“Father, will ye do the honors?” Father Kenneth gave Jenny a look of censure and Jamie a sharp-eyed stare. Jamie shrugged. “I may have married an Englishwoman, but I’m Scots to the very marrow of my bones. Yer here, family is gathered, no sense incurring the expense of a wedding and a christening when we could be done in one.”

“Aye, to be sure. Janet I’ll be seeing ye in confession tomorrow, then shall I?” Father Kenneth’s eyes twinkled as he began.
Claire blinked tears from her eyes seeing Faith push through their front door like any other child - full of energy and good cheer. Moving gingerly but entirely under her own power. She’d immediately gone in search of Adso and Claire could hear her sing song voice as she encouraged him to jump up on her bed. Jamie trundled up a few minutes after, arms heavily laden with everything that had migrated from home to the hospital.

Heedless of any desire for neatness or order, he dropped the lot at his feet and, swinging the front door closed with his toe, spun her as he backed her against it and kissed her senseless. Her arms came up and around and held him tightly.

“God it’s great to finally be home, Sassenach!” His voice was a little too loud as it travelled down her spine but she only held him closer.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she wasn’t sad, far from it. They clung together, enjoying the peace of their home, the feel of one another and the high pitch of Faith’s giggles coming from her room. They sighed together in relief and she felt his lips turn up in a smile against her cheek.

“I love you.” She whispered, and moved her lips until they fitted to his.

She made a needy sound in the back of her throat which was answered with a groan from him. She reached her hands up and under the tee shirt she’d liberated from his jeans. His hands cradled her face, thumbs on her cheekbones.

The ring he wore on his left hand, cool against her skin. Her husband. A secret thrill went through her. It shouldn’t be so. She had been married once already, understood what it all meant. But this man...she pressed her own ring against his shoulder blade as unobtrusively as possible simply to feel the joy of knowing she was his wife. Quite without thought she was tracing the shape of a heart with the back of her hand, using only the band wrapped around her finger. He started to laugh and stroked her cheek with his ring-- he’d noticed and she felt a little foolish. And yet...a feeling of rightness had settled over her from the moment they married. Somehow she’d understood that she’d been born for this man. He was her fate. Here, in this time and in this place, she was meant to be irrevocably his.
He rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed and he made that deep humming sound. He moved a hand to the back of her head. His lips went over her ear, “Sassenach?”

She was certain he was about to tease her for acting like a lovesick newlywed but, even so, that half-hitch as his lips parted sent shivers down her spine on his inhale.

“Can ye scratch where yer left hand is...? No-over over a wee bit ahh! There, that’s perfect...more...a little harder.” She laughed. Oh lord, *this man*! He was smiling now, into her eyes. She sighed softly locking her fingers into his belt loops and tugging gently.

“Why don’t you get Faith squared away and I’ll start dinner?”

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“More, nighean?” Jamie asked amazed.

“Pease?” Faith nodded and speared another stalk of broccoli. She’d inhaled the simple roast chicken and veg with a reassuring appetite. Jamie and Claire, long ago finished, sipped their wine in companionable ease and enjoyed the sight of their daughter - healthy and whole.

“It’s Friday.” Claire observed when the dishes had been dried.

Before the accident, they’d begun a Friday night family game tradition, the conclusion of which was always a winding down moment where they sat in soft light, remembered the best part of their week and picked a mystery bonbon from a sampler box of chocolates.

Claire thought it hysterical that Jamie started taping over the underside of the lid to prevent her from looking up her favorite ones in advance and remembered why he started doing it in the first place:

“Forrest Gump rules!” He’d admonished the first time he’d caught her.

“What?”
“Forrest Gump rules-- life is like a box of chocolates, Sassenach, ye never ken what yer going to get-- no peeking!”

“Honestly, Jamie, if there is a choice to be had, why wouldn’t you pick the ones you know you like best?”

Jamie rolled his eyes at her. “Everyone would just grab the caramels, ye ken that right enough then we’d all be stuck with a box that’s sure to disappoint everyone until we finished it and were onto a new one.”

“You know we could just buy an all caramel box...”

“Hush, woman. You got to pick lighting the candles as your part of this tradition, Faith picked the playing of games, and this one— the wee box of surprises — is mine, aye, and I say if it was good enough for Mama Gump, it’s good enough for us.”

“Fine, but when you get that gross ‘ what the hell kind of fruit is in that one?’ piece Do not blame me!”

Now, on this first Friday back, Friday Game Night looked like a lost cause. Faith, in a post feast stupor, was practically falling asleep at the table.

“Too tired darling?” Faith barely moved as Claire’s fingers smoothed her hair. Jamie caught the quick dip of finger tips against their child’s forehead checking for fever. The stroke continued on though, so he figured all was well.

“Mayhap just the sweetie?” He offered, in answer Faith gave the smallest hint of a nod and a wee smile. Jamie made to get the box.

Faith murmured “Candles?”

“Oh, aye, lass. A moment.” He placed the elaborate candelabra in the center as Claire dimmed the overheads.

The soft scritch as the match ignited. Faith rallied herself at that point and placed a hand on top of her father’s, he carried her hand with his to and fro as each wick took flame. Jamie loved the look
of his lasses this way, soft and warm.

“Shall I go first?” Jamie asked them. “Well let’s see…” Then he laughed, “I canna decide if my favorite thing is being here with the two of you right now or seeing the two of you in that sparkling sunlight just before we wed. You, Sassenach?”

“Our dance,” Claire said softly. “When John stayed after everyone else had gone and played just for us.” Claire stopped, her pinkening cheeks visible even in the low light. “How wonderful it felt to be moving together, as husband and wife.” Something shifted within her that he felt just then and his breath caught, remembering the moment with new understanding.

Their dance had been unplanned, a quip as John started to pack up his sax, leading to a silly dare, ending in that impromptu moment. She’d held out her hand when the music began.

“May I, Mr. Fraser?”

“I’d be honored Dr. Beauchamp.” Claire had mumbled something as he swung them past a row of chairs. “What, Sassenach?”

Louder she said, “I’m a Fraser, now.”

He was always conscious of her solitary existence relative to his own but now he could see he hadn’t paid enough attention. To mind the shadow and light living in her heart. Their wedding built a bridge spanning what was Faith’s by birthright and, he hoped, Claire’s by choice. The lineage, tradition, and heritage so essential to his understanding of life itself had all been reinforced and strengthened that day by ceremony and ritual, both wedding and christening. He’d hoped she’d look back on that day and feel the same sense of belonging as he in the observation of such rites.

That he succeeded thrilled him, that he completely failed to recognize the best gift of the day almost killed him. He’d have to rectify his oversight and soon. For now, though, he focused his attention on the litdest Fraser.

“Seeing Adso!” Faith said emphatically. “And my bath. And my bed!” She added for good measure.
“Ok, lasses, shall we?” He said opening the box.

later that night Jamie groaned as he lay stretched out, letting the evening breeze from the open window cool his skin. God, but it was so good to be home! Claire laughed seeing how he was hogging the bed. The chairs and hospital cots never designed for anyone his size. His eyes popped open when he heard her and he rose, taking her hand in his. Neither one of them had bothered with PJs, a fact borne home when he fitted them together in an embrace and shifted his weight slowly back and forth. Only now did she realize he had music playing very softly in the background.

“May I, Mrs. Fraser?” He asked, even though they were already swaying together.

It was different, naked like this. She felt slight in comparison with his broad chest, the firm arms, the top of his hips hit almost in line with her belly button. When he pressed her head against him, she fit her ear over his heart. The thump-bump singing to her blood as they moved slow and sure in the small area. She caught sight of his fine ass reflected in the window, the shine of red curls at the nape of his neck in the dresser mirror as they turned again. Her nipples grew hard as they came into contact with his ribs. One of his hands spread possessively across her lower back, fingers brushing against her buttock.

He loved the coolness of her skin when it first touched him. How soft it was, their soap never smelled the same way on his skin as hers. He loved the way her curves met the harder edges of him. Claire’s hands caressed him, tightening now and again as they whirled. He felt one of them slide toward his buttock, cupping it and pulling him into her. His getting-more-invested-in-the-end-game-by-the-minute arousal making its presence known, but they both ignored it. When he felt her fingers steal over his hip, he reach his hand to take hers. He notched it next to her cheek, near his heart.

His fingers rubbing absently against hers until they caught on her ring and circled it. He rolled it gently between his finger and thumb. She tilted her head up, questioning into his deep, luscious kiss.

“Claire Fraser, ye made me a father and now, I am a husband because of you.” He mused. “I dinna think I ever thanked you for it.”

“Oh, but you have thanked me many times, for reaching out to you and making you a part of Faith’s life.” Claire rushed to reassure him but he was shaking his head.
“For that, yes. But that isna what I mean-- for the gift of myself as a parent is maybe what I mean. You guided me, trusted that I’d learn as we went along, forgave me my mistakes. You helped me become a... good father.” He explained. Then, remembering his earlier oversight on their wedding day, “Please be willing to do the same with me as yer husband?” A slightly husky sound, that “h” in the word husband. “Be patient wi’ me, especially when ye ken I haven’t noticed things right in front of my nose. Help me find my way. Believe in me as your friend and lover as much as you do as Faith’s father and help make me a good husband for you.”

“What brought this on?” She asked. Jamie’s eyes slid way from her but she reached up to him and turned his chin back toward her. “Hey, Mr. Fraser, this is one of those moments where I am counting on you to help make me a good wife.” She heard his inhale on that comment.

“I wanted our wedding day to be special for you.” He began. They’d stopped dancing and were simply sheltering in place, heads close, arms reassuringly tight around one another. “I take for granted that when we-- that is my family-- when we make room for someone new, that’s enough to make it so. I assumed,” the ‘because I am an idiot’ was inferred, “by using my mother’s ring and the customs our clan going back generations, and having my family there to support us, you’d ken the name Fraser was as much yours as mine.”

“But I did!” Claire protested.

“Aye. But in my head I was only thinking about us accepting you-- that moment when we say this is who we are -and welcome to it. I thought problem solved, assimilation done. But I have precious little experience as a husband and naive expectations on top of it.” Jamie’s eyes searched hers. Claire watched him swallow hard, his expression so full of tender remorse it made her eyes blur even though she had no idea what he was getting at. “On our wedding day, after it was done, after all my family had gone, that’s when you gave yourself to us, but I didn’t really hear you, then.”

“But you do now?” Claire wondered.

“Aye, I do. Clear as a bell. You said I am yours, you are mine, this is us. Frasers all.” His words caught hard and he trembled, pressing his hand into her cheek to still himself. “Forgive me, my love. I didn’t understand what you were saying. I canna pretend it will no’ happen again. Likely, I’ll miss other moments just as important. Keep trying with me. Remind me, tell me again in case I missed it. I want to be a good husband to you. Promise you won’t give up on me?”

Claire nodded her head and her promise was written on her lips, a vow sealed with their kiss, returned by him with all the desperate love he felt for her. Both his hands held the back of her head, she was on tiptoes, trying to squeeze closer into him. She could feel him humming through his sternum, a vibration that thrummed inside her, too.
His length bounced and bobbed urgently between them, reminding her that they’d just been dancing naked in one another’s arms. He twisted and turned a little, a slight rolling motion that left a small wet trail across her taut belly. She moaned imagining how he must look trapped between them. Claire suddenly remembered they were home... home! And they can be as loud as they want, move against one another any way they need and she moaned again. She can’t reach his ass from this position but God all she wants to do is touch him, drive him insane if she can.

“Jamie?” She breaks, her tongue beating a mid-smack retreat. His mouth hangs open, he looks at her trying to refocus on her words. But those words are coming from swollen lips he’d just been kissing, his need to do so again distracting him. “It’s been so long since I had you naked with no one around to hear us.” She pushed him slightly backwards, dazedly, he complies, moving without even noticing. “I have been thinking about what I would do to you once we could finally be alone.” Claire keeps going until the back of his legs hit the mattress and then he’s falling and she with him. They land with a soft omph. “Have you thought about it, too?” He loves the coy flirtation in her voice.

“I’ve done little else, Sassenach,” He confirmed as he rolled them over- what a thrill to be back in a bed large enough to do that and not fall off. “I’ve missed the sounds we make together.”

“Such as--?” His fingers spread her and he teased his arousal along her crease.

“Those ones, there-- again, Sassenach like when I…” His finger grazed up and under her causing her to yip and then laugh. She got her teeth over his nipple and he hissed in turn.

Her lips whispered into his ear. “You can do better than that, can’t you?”

“What did you have in mind, wife?” He said breathlessly, finding himself unexpectedly brought to the point of entry and adjusting his plan accordingly. Her face flushed with pleasure and anticipation.

“I think I’ve had enough of us and our wee noises, husband.” A playful pull left him panting. “Make me scream!”

After, she slid down against him, one hand propping up her head, turned on her side. Jamie lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, empty thoughts and full heart, beginning to slow to its natural rhythm. He felt her smooth her ring against his damp skin much as she had done before. This time against his chest, over and around, a repetitive motion. He cast his eyes downward, watching her making lazy circles. Only now did he understand Claire was drawing the shape of a heart with her ring.
Didn’t the daft woman know he was already so in love with her he couldn’t see straight most days?
School is in session, Faith is adorable and puddles scare Claire
“Did you get them?” Claire asked without preamble.

“Good evening, Dr. Fraser, and how are you? I am doing well, thanks for asking.” Jamie teased, as if they hadn’t exchanged a dozen texts earlier in the day. He whipped out the shiny stubs and showed her. “Aye, good seats, too!” Jamie told her.

“She’ll be so excited. Shall we tell her tonight?” Claire wondered.

“Nah, let’s wait until Friday morning, otherwise our ears will fall off between her chirping and
having to listen to Beach Songs on repeat all week.”

Faith’s favorite children’s group, the Boom-Boomerangs, riding high off their new album, Beach Songs, was playing a special concert at the amphitheater in the park over the weekend. It was a small venue and every kid in Faith’s school had been talking about it. Jamie and Claire laughed about how cutthroat the competition had become for tickets and the ridiculousness of “other parents” even though they both recognized they’d be calling in favors so Faith could go, too.

Now, it was finally Friday and the concert was tomorrow afternoon. In a stroke of good luck, the following Monday happened to be Faith’s show and tell day. She had been anxiously trying to decide what to tell her classmates since yesterday, now she’d have no trouble. Claire and Jamie had been gleefully excited that morning, and she thought for sure one of them would accidentally blurt it out over breakfast after Faith asked, for the third time, what they’d be doing over the weekend. They refocused her attention by having her get Adso water, pack her lunch and pick out her shoes. Naturally, she went for her boots.

According to her father, Faith had insisted on buying silver and purple cowboy boots. Claire sniggered over the memory of seeing Faith labor up the stairs to the house carrying a box almost half as tall as she was.

Jamie’s sheepish expression said it all. “They spoke to her.” Was all he had said by way of explanation. Apparently, the school dress code had no restrictions on footwear and it had become Faith’s new creative outlet.

Though they’d worried considerably about how Faith would feel wearing the same blue skirt and button down every day given her decidedly opinionated fashion sense, she donned her uniform every day without protest. Even more so when, having been there a week or so, she shared the fact that one girl wore sparkly red shoes and wiggled her eyebrows at her mother. Claire pretended not to notice, so Faith turned the charm on her father instead.

“Da, you know what?” She started innocently.

“What, a leannan?” He asked glancing around the sink where he was busy washing dishes, distracted. Claire knew he hadn’t paid any attention to the conversation up until that point.

“My friend has pretty shoes.” Jamie looked at her as she anxiously bounced up and down beside him. His neck cranked a little further behind him and he caught Claire’s eye. The unspoken message in them had sharpened his focus at once.

Claire wondered if she would ever tire of this, the heart stoppingly normal domesticity of it. Somehow the sight of him wearing her apron in the kitchen, shirtsleeves rolled back, light hairs on his forearms turning a dark brownish color when wet, sent a thrill of happiness inside her that multiplied tenfold when she saw their daughter standing next to him, so tiny and yet so capable.

Mmmphm. Jamie reached under the grey water and fished out all the knives and forks, giving them a rinse and casting them aside even as his foot snagged Faith’s colorful step stool and slid it next to him in front of one of the basins.

An old pro by this point, Faith rolled up her own sleeves, the skin on the underside of her arm still noticeably different from where she wore an IV for so long. Then she plunged her hands into the soapy water and came out with a glass, which she rinsed.

“You were saying about the shoein?” Jamie looked down at her. Claire watched him scan their daughter’s head with an eagle eye, just to make sure all was well. Saw him focus on the blue bow
in her hair. It had come loose and was clinging precariously to one fat curl. There was something so perfectly normal in it and she watched him swallow hard.

“Mmphm,” Faith began and by the end of her tale, the man was putty in her hands.

“I’m no’ spoiling her, am I, Sassenach?” Jamie had asked the evening the boots came home, genuine worry in his eyes but she giggled anyway, she couldn’t help it.

“I love the fact that you love her enough to ask if you are loving her too much.” Jamie chuckled, catching the humor. “You know what I mean. At the store, did she ask or demand?” Claire wanted to know.

“Neither, she got this...brilliant smile and her eyes were just glowing. So I asked if they had her size.”

“The boots just….spoke to her, was it you said, hmm?” Claire teased.

“Aye,” he smiled. “Once they were on her feet, she began dancing. I could picture her there in her tutu, you recall, Sassenach? The one I got her.” Claire nodded, “Twas one of the first things I bought that I knew Faith would love to wear, no’ because she was a girl but because I kent her. I never thought I’d see her dancing ever again, twirling and spinning...happy like that....whole.” Jamie’s face crumpled.

Claire’s hand stroked his cheek, not missing the drop that fell from his eyelid onto her knuckle. She cleared her throat unable to continue for a moment nor bear such sad thoughts, either.

“She has only been aquisitional over fashion and is probably still too young for us to try and force her to stick to a clothing allowance.” Claire felt his hand cover hers as he waited her out gathering her thoughts. “I would give anything to have memories of being spoiled by my father.”

“God, Claire dinna make me weep!” Said the man with tears rolling in earnest now.

“Have I told you I love you today?” She sighed and he held her for a long, long time.

Faith had started school three weeks late but any concerns about trouble making friends, maintaining her energy for the full academic day, not to mention having to learn Gaelic, vanished within days. She’d thrived in her new class, chattering up a storm in both languages and throwing herself enthusiastically into all sorts of new experiences. She made one friend in particular, wee little Malva Christie. Malva was a beautiful girl with black, curly hair and smoke grey eyes.

Malva’s father was a police officer, lowlander and Presbyterian, in that order, thank you very much. His stern countenance was somewhat explained by the fact that he was a single father raising a precocious daughter. Tom didn’t have the Gaelic and, apparently, had no interest in learning it. Malva had a scholarship to one of the best schools in the city. If Tom didn’t care about their Scottish heritage, he was, at least, an enthusiastic supporter of getting a good education.

While Claire and Tom hit it off well enough, finding common ground in their outlander status, Tom and Jamie tended to be guarded and less cordial with one another. That made it very unlikely that the “getting to know you” lunch they’d hosted last weekend would be followed up by a kid-friendly family dinner any time soon. Still, the girls had a good time and Tom and Jamie managed to get on reasonably well.

When Faith first started, they had to deal with some press, following her and taking pictures -- her holding her parents hands as they walked into the building. One picture of Jamie carrying her in his arms at the end of the day when she’d been too exhausted to make it the whole way home on
her own two feet had been sensationalized due to the obvious similarity of their features when their heads were pressed side by side.

However, by the middle of October, and Claire thought not quite by accident, following their luncheon with the Christies, the press had stopped coming around allowing everything to fall into a routine. Claire joined the parental Gaelic language support group which met once a week.

Jamie insisted that they speak Gaelic on school mornings to help Faith transition into her day. Claire was pleased with their choice of school—she was—but she wasn’t a natural like Jamie or Faith and she was beginning to look forward to weekends when her brain didn’t have to slide into another set of words before she’d had her coffee.

Jamie had come up with his own creative solution to that, Claire watched as he bent over to pick up Faith’s toys from the rug and smirked as she remembered this morning’s “hands on” vocabulary lesson. A self-satisfied noise made her look up and she realized he’d turned around, toy in hand, and was facing her once more.

“Cut that out!” She said good-naturedly, knowing he’d guessed at her thoughts and she was in his arms before she’d finished speaking. His voice tickled the skin on the side of her neck.

“Come, Sassenach, tell me what ye learned today.” He coaxed. Her face flushed even redder and she felt his hand cup her backside even as she whispered the word in his ear. “Yer accent is coming along beautifully. Tomorrow morning is lady’s choice.” The tone of his voice made her knees wobbly as he swayed slowly against her. “All ye need to do is tell me exactly where ye want me to touch you and I’ll only move on when you name a new place.” He laughed as he felt her shiver.

“Tomorrow is Saturday…” Claire brought her mouth down on his.

“That’s too bad, Sassenach,” He returned the favor. His fingers splayed across her back and she was beginning to catch his sense of urgency. Between kisses he told her, “I was so looking forward to gettin’ more practice wi’ my...native tongue.”

She couldn’t help the smile that meshed awkwardly with that self-same appendage as it continued to drive her insane, but then they were both kissing and laughing at the same time.

“You,” He kissed her with far more purpose now, “havena told the lassie, yet?”

Claire was distracted for a moment, skimming her hand down the growing bulge of his flies. “You got home….hummm, Oh! I like that one, do that again….before I did.”

“Before...Shh! Yer hands are a little cold, no? Before I did what?” Jamie had lost all track of their conversation. Men, simply, put, couldn’t multitask. He started playing with her through the light fabric of her skirt.

“I just got home, I haven’t even seen her.” Claire kissed his cheek in a way. She should stop now before this gets out of control way.

Jamie sighed and pulled away from her, reluctantly. “Dinner first, then we’ll tell her during Fraser Friday Game Night.”

That night instead of Chutes and Ladders or Candy Land or Old Maid, Faith showed them how to play Freeze Dance, mostly as an excuse to listen to the Boom-Boomerangs and soak up her manic, happy energy over the concert. Claire couldn’t look at Jamie’s face, instead focusing on their feet as they shuffled around the living room.
The sight of Jamie’s trainers with Faith’s red socked feet standing on top made her feel as if she was about to burst into tears and she knew one look at her face would make him tear up, too. She didn’t want such a joyful night spoiled that way. Faith wouldn’t understand it. Instead she watched her two loves, twirling and spinning, happy and whole, indeed.

Marriage hadn’t made them parents, but it had made them a family. Being together like this was starting to knit something deep within her back together. Jamie felt it too, she knew. He’d lost that lean, haggard look, and lately he seemed possessed of an almost boundless energy. He was back on his game at work, finally able to really focus on the company and seeing it made her realize just how off kilter Jamie had actually been ever since learning about Faith.

The last few months had been a whirlwind. Sudden fatherhood, of a toddler no less, the slip and slide of falling in love and worrying over whatever it was that Hal Grey had revealed to him had forced him to expend a lot of energy just trying to keep his balance. But since bringing their daughter home, perhaps in the knowing the place was theirs, Jamie had settled into them and somehow became more him in the process, unlocking a love of him so deep within her it almost scared her.

Claire hadn’t been prepared for it. Not a bit. How many kinds of love would she feel, would they share before she lost count? The physical connection had pulled them from the start, a passionate pulsing in the blood that sang when the other was near. The shared love of a child binding them irrevocably together forever. A feeling of “us-ness” was another kind of love-- the fusion of belonging. The I love how you make me feel when I am with you, perhaps the most private, almost selfish kind of love that connects two people. All of these were present before they married. But now… she discovered a new kind of love of him and with it came the knowledge of a helpless vulnerability.

Maybe it had been building slowly up to this, but she would always pinpoint the change to an early October walk with Jamie while Mrs. Crooke and Faith played in the garden. They’d both gotten home early for once and the sun was still hanging low in the sky. It would be dark soon but the fact that the press had effectively been called off meant they had a wondrous freedom to do normal things.

Hand in hand, relaxed and no longer consumed with talk of Faith or their relationship, Jamie allowed himself to be the focus of their conversation. Not Lallybroch, not his sister or his parents or his past. For once, Jamie didn’t automatically steer things back to Claire or allow the conversation to drift to those darker things that pressed against the shadows. All of these things were held at bay.

Jamie spoke to her about what filled his days now with such passion that she was enthralled. He didn’t talk about numbers, start up cost, distribution channels or even the tough competition he was facing but how satisfying it was to accomplish something he’d been working on, the way it fed his intellect, the things that a lack of a formal uni degree made challenging for him, the new suggestions from customers for products or PR, laughing about what it would be like to implement a few of the worthier ideas, the meetings he needed to attend over the late fall in London, Tokyo and New York and who he hoped to leverage to take the business further.

It was like the power of his mind and heart had been unleashed and my God, but he was impressive. Claire thrilled in the knowledge that he was hers and she wanted above all to make sure things stayed that way. Now she understood Jamie’s occasional displays of possessiveness and the blazing jealousy that accompanied them; emotions she’d resented and minimized as nothing more than masculine arrogance. Claire recognized that need to claim as a defense mechanism stemming from self-doubt. She began to wonder whether she was interesting enough to hold his
affections and attention. It was a new and disturbing feeling. It wasn’t just sexual, it definitely wasn’t something she could intellectualize. Claire didn’t like the feeling, its intensity and illogic disarmed her and, yet, even so, there was a rush of pride that thrummed through her whenever she thought of him—just him—not them, not their family, not how he made her feel.

He noticed it, too. This new awareness of hers. She didn’t cling or cloy, hadn’t changed in that way but something had shifted in her. After they finally got Faith to bed that night, still vibrating like an excited string about the concert the next day, Jamie decided on the direct approach.

He lay on his side rubbing lazy circles on her hip and thigh. They were both fresh from a shower, wrapped in nothing but towels.

“It’s different, now, aye?” He ventured.

Claire smiled. “In what way?”

But her breath caught when she saw that desperate look in his eyes and he made a sound that let her know he was seeing it reflected in hers now, too.

He unwrapped her like a present and kissed her over her heart and that was the last tender thing between them until the end, when she held him tight while he shook and trembled in her arms.

Just on the edge of sleep he whispered, “When you say you love me now, it’s like...your whole body is saying it, no’ just your lips.”

Saturday morning dawned wet, rainy and cold. Sheets of it. However, the weather forecast was promising for later.

“It’ll no’ last but the morning, lass. Dinna fash.” Jamie told an anxious Faith, he grabbed his coat out of the front closet and patted his pocket, making sure he had wallet and phone.

“You take the car, Jamie, we can walk over and meet you.” Claire said.

“Are ye sure? I dinna want Faith catching a cold.” Jamie fretted and pretended not to see his wife rolling her eyes in mock dismay.

“You need to be all the way across town for this mysterious errand of yours and you know how slow the bus runs in bad weather.” Claire wiggled her brows hoping to encourage him to spill but Jamie only gave her a wolfish smile. “I’ll bundle her up and make sure she has her wellies on. A walk will burn off some of that excess energy of hers. Dinna fash, yourself, Jamie. It will be colder after the concert and I think we’ll all appreciate having the car to take us home.”

________________

Claire’s foot was poised just over the curb but she herself froze. She couldn’t look anywhere but at her reflection, rippling in the deep puddle that ran almost the whole length of the improvised crosswalk. Claire had always had a fear of puddles, not quite able to believe all they were was a concentration of water over solid earth. She thought something sinister lurked in their depths, hidden, fathomless spaces or maybe the passageway to a different sky and that if her foot stepped in she’d start to tumble into the unknown. Claire had never once told anyone this and had never stopped Faith from splashing through them (though her heart fluttered a bit and her throat closed up whenever Faith did so).

She became aware at that moment of the pull of Faith’s hand, of the dragging of her feet and suddenly wondered if she had inadvertently communicated this odd fear of falling into a bottomless
pit to her child. But, no, of course not. Something clicked in her head, though, staring at Faith’s horrified expression. Claire’s long hesitation at the curb had allowed Faith to become very aware of her surroundings. If only Claire had been able to keep moving, Faith probably wouldn’t have noticed where they were but Claire herself hadn’t even realized that this route might present some issues for their daughter. Oh, God. What a stupid fool she was.

Claire immediately turned Faith’s body away from the street. She dropped to her knees and hugged her close.

“It’s ok, baby. Really it is.” Faith’s wails got louder. Claire stared at the street. At what must have been the place it had happened and could not stop her own tears from falling. In the distance she heard the church bells ringing noon, saw people rushing by them, but let it all go. “We don’t need to go. It’s ok, Faith.” Claire was wiping Faith’s cheeks using the back of her hand.

“No Boom?” Faith’s mouth set in a trembling line.

“I’m sorry, this is my fault. Do you want to go home?” Faith cried even harder, Claire sat her butt down on the wet sidewalk and pulled Faith into her lap. It had been a long time since she’d held her this way but as she began to rock her, Faith started to calm a bit. Claire wanted desperately to dig her phone out of the bottom of her bag and text Jamie but didn’t have a spare hand.

Jamie was late getting to the fountain. Traffic was crazy. The sun was out, finally, but the streets were still a mess. Jamie saw no sign of Claire. Her phone went straight to VM and she didn’t answer his texts. He waited about five minutes, but something clawed at his gut and it hit him, this was the first time he and Faith had come back here since the accident. Jamie’s feet took off in a sprint before he even realized he was moving.

She smiled at him and seeing it, he slowed to a walk once he was across the street and saw her panicked expression replaced by something deeper than relief, he thought. More like salvation—and he, the cavalry riding to the rescue. John Wayne never cried when he saved the day, but Jamie’s vision blurred for an instant before her hand reached up, catching his and squeezing—in reassurance, in love and most of all, in faith and he knew exactly what to do.

“Och, here ye are. Goodness, my puir lasses, so confused they are sitting here instead of in our nice dry seats! It’s a good thing I spotted your pink coat, nighean.” Faith immediately jumped up and threw herself at his leg. He lifted her face until she was looking up at him. “I ken ye wanted to walk the whole way, but I got here late, would ye mind sitting o’er my shoulders the rest of the way?” Jamie asked. This was a very special treat. She loved “riding the sky”, digging her hands into his curly hair and being taller than anyone else.

“M’ok” She agreed affably and Jamie bent down, quick as a blink, he had her securely balanced with his hands clamped firmly down on her upper thighs. He felt Claire right by his side and then her touch as she hooked her fingers around one of his back belt loops. Together, they made their way forward.

Next time: Jamie plans a surprise, Mi

Next Time: Jamie plans a surprise, Minnie is a crack researcher and John uncovers a secret.
It had been so good for Faith to be back at Lallybroch-- good for her as well as for her cousins, especially Kitty who had fretted about their long absence. They would be leaving for the city in a few hours, but Jamie managed to steal away for a little while. Claire would have come with him had he asked, but he knew she was busy helping Jenny. Jamie loved the companionable silence he felt in this sacred spot. He let it’s peace wash over him as his feet found their way to his destination. He said a silent prayer, as he always did, before he spoke out loud.

“We willna been here on the 20th, so I’ll visit with you now, if that’s alright. There are times when all I wish in the world is to be able to sit and talk with you and Da, but I guess we do, in our own way. I ken ye don’t hold anything against Claire. It’s no’ her fault. But I wish I kent whether it was just fate that brought us together or something else entirely. I’d like to think ‘tis just one of those strange things but, to be honest, there have been far too many coincidences for me to accept the easy explanation. I promise, I will get to the bottom of it in time-- what it all means. But I also believe wi’ my whole heart that Claire was meant to be mine, that we were always supposed to be together so I dinna fear it, whatever it is; we’ll have each other to see us through. Faith...you’ll have heard from Jenny, I expect, that I almost lost her.”

Jamie’s fingers brushed the top of the granite stone and he kept his eyes on his own hand. He truly could not look to the left -- to where his father or his brothers rested. It was beyond his capabilities at that moment. He knuckled the tears out of his eyes with his other hand and cleared his throat, resolute.

“Faith is doing vera well! Has a great wee friend, started school, learning in the Gaelic. Ye’d be so amazed by her. Jenny told ye about the twins, aye? A boy and a girl, they think. She didna want to tell me about it until things were better with Faith. Thank you for raising us to love and support each other. She is such a good sister to me, always has been but especially now that I have a wean, too. Wears her heart on her sleeve, if ye can get past her right hook. I peeked in on Jenny reading a bedtime story to Faith and Kitty last night. Faith had her hand on Jenny’s stomach and she was petting it, kind of.” Jamie laughed at the memory.

“She was trying to wake the babies to play with. Jenny explained they couldn’a play just then, but maybe later. Faith also told Jenny that since she had an extra one, we would be happy to take the leftovers.” Jamie wasn’t surprised when he heard his wife’s laugh at that. She’d come to find him...to stand beside him and be with him and the gift of that made his whole heart sigh with pleasure. He wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her to his side. Clair rested her head on his
shoulder for a time, then placed the yellow roses she’d gotten on Ellen’s marker, leaving smaller remembrances for Willie, Rabbie and Brian.

“Ready to go, Sassenach?” Jamie felt her cold hand clasp his as they fell in step on the well-worn path home.

The beautiful oak tree on the rise was just beginning to change color, the snap of fall heavily in the air. Claire took a deep breath.

“Since Jenny announced that she was expecting, Faith has been chattering up a storm about babies all weekend.” Claire observed after a slight hesitation.

“Aye, wanted to know how to order one of her own.” Jamie confirmed, chuckling.

“Well...it’s not quite that simple, but its a little like that…. if-you-might-want-to-try?” The last part of what she said was expelled all at once as if she had been afraid to enunciate each word clearly.

He turned extremely carefully, afraid she would vanish like a deer into the wood if he startled her. His hand lifted her chin so he could look her in the eyes. His chest felt impossibly tight.

“Claire?” His voice dried up. He was trying to read her as she squirmed under his gaze.

“I’m sorry!” She said. “I know we have so much else going on. My timing is awful. I shouldn’t have----”

“Oh, mo chridhe, that is no’ what I meant at all! Ye’d be willing to-- to go through it all again?” He picked her up and spun her around in a tight bear hug. “Truly?” Jamie laughed his joy to the sky. When he put her feet down again she felt the solid trunk of the oak against her back but Claire found she was still dizzy on the idea alone.

“It won’t be easy.” She warned him, needing to bring them both back down to earth.

“Will....” He reached around to pull her hips closer, his knuckles scraping on the rough bark
behind her. “Before wi’ the lass, ye might ha’... ye almost.... Claire, I willna risk you.” He told her matter of factly. He pressed his head to hers. “I canna bear living in a world without you by my side.” Claire smiled a little sadly and touched his cheek.

“Every pregnancy has risk. Crossing the street has risk.” She winced even as she said it but then realized that analogy was so perfectly apt that she didn’t bother to correct it. “But no, the abruption I had with Faith isn’t common, it’s not something likely to happen again.”

“Tell me then, what needs be done?”

“Well.....” She began thinking back over the process, “I need to see my doctor, time my cycle so we know when to start hormone injections -- those are every day for a couple weeks so my body produces more eggs. Those get retrieved-- its a quick procedure, but I’ll probably need you to drive me to and from the clinic. Then, they’ll defrost your sperm, pick out some winners, fertilize a few of my better eggs. We go back for implantation and maybe we get pregnant.”

He was looking so happy she began to worry that he really did think it was easy as ordering a baby up. “Each round of treatment takes 6 weeks or so and we may need to undergo several rounds before it works-- if it works at all. IVF has only about a 40% success rate and its rare for it to work on the first round.”

“A babe! Mayhap, you’d be pregnant even before Hogmanay!” Jamie was lit up like the sun.

“We don’t necessarily have to implant the eggs right away. We could preserve the embryos and decide when the time works best for us.”

But he was kissing her, his hands cupping her face as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him, her fingers tightened around the short hairs just brushing his collar and he moved urgently against hers, hot mouth, invading tongue. There was nothing but the rustle of the wind through the branches, the smell of dirt and grass, and the salty sweet taste of him.

“Tell me.” Claire tried to get a few words out between kisses. “What you want.” A primitive nerve was running wild in Jamie, he couldn’t stop kissing her, hips jutting forward, grasping her bottom firmly by both hands and pulling her hard into him.

“I want this as soon as we may.” He let go of her rear. She glanced up into his face, she feels triumphant, almost giddy with it. Her whole body rejoices as he braced his arms on either side of her shoulders, deliciously trapped. Pinning her up against the tree. “Canna wait to see you so bonnie and round wi’ our second child!”
“Careful what you wish for my lad, I will be a lot rounder than you can imagine. My arse doubles in size,” she told him and received a happy growl and firm thrust in response. Her insides were a melted little pool of squish. “My feet get sore, my ankles swell up. Splotches all over my face and my boobs point straight downward.” None of this was dissuading him. But best she tell him honestly what was coming because it wasn’t always pretty. “I will be cross and short tempered and get really ugly stretch marks. They’ll fade, but not entirely.”

The daft man was still looking besotted. He made a *mmphm* sound in his throat and his face rubbed against her neck, hot, wet breath shivering in her ear. Grinding against her, teeth nipping ever… so… gently. She could not help but move her body against his with the knowledge that *nothing* she was saying was having any effect on him. If anything he was growing more urgent. One last confession to go, then.

“I’ll have a lot of gas!” The bastard laughed uproariously at that. “And for the first four months whatever I eat will likely give me heartburn or make me throw up.” He kissed her with such passion, she forgot what she was saying for a minute, her breath was strained and she forced herself to break away from those insistent, persistent lips. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Aye, Sassenach.” He said slowly, pulling his face away from hers so they were looking into one another’s eyes. “Yer going to be frachety and ugly as sin and blow up like a beach ball.” He kissed her again.

“Not to mention burp----”

“Oh, aye, I got it, *mo’ chridhe*, ye’ll be farting and belching up a storm; but as I have told you many a time, I love the wee noises ye make when we’re in bed.”

“You weren’t talking about *those* kinds of noises when you said that!” Ridiculous man! But he’d gotten her to laugh which was his intention.

Jamie was still vibrating with a certain kind of excitement. He brought her hand down between them, placing her palm where he wanted it. Her mouth hung open and he nodded.

*Here?*

*I can’t wait.*

*Now?*
Aye!

Their wordless conversation taking shape between touch and glance. She cupped him boldly, feeling the hard, warmth of him, pulsing with life.

“Oh Claire, I ken this is no’ the right thing to say-----” He groaned as she snaked her fingers down the inside of his pants and grasped him. “Oh Jesus!”

“Out with it-- honesty, remember?” She was laughing at him.

Jamie looked at her, mad wi’ power she was. He quickly hiked up her skirt, hissing when he encountered nothing but her buttccheeks, the string of a thin thong making his goal that much easier. When he had her where he wanted her, he pressed his point home and her breaths grew hoarse. That was more to his liking.

“Speaking of out wi’ it, Sassenach, would ye mind terribly?” His hips couldn’t stop moving but his zipper was proving a difficult obstacle. “Oh Jesus!” He repeated when she freed him.

He was flush against her now, his hands seeking a way through all the layers and around their half worn clothes. A frustrated grunt from Claire and then a breathy Oh as she maneuvered him up against her. Her hand still gripping his, she began to move him up and back, pressing his length all along the slick slide between her thighs.

“Jamie…” She wheedled, “tell me the “not right” thing you wanted to say….” Claire was shamelessly grinding now, but denying him entrance, a game he was letting her play for the moment.

She adjusted her stance wider and started circling her hips. Her panting was driving him insane! His face was heavy in the crook between neck and shoulder, his cheek so hot and his forehead dotted with sweat. That smell they made together rose up in the trapped space between them and he was panting in time now with her as he shifted his body weight to the forearms pressed against the tree, moving his hips, getting ready to steal the rhythm from her.

“That even though my brain kens….” He grunted as she circled her clit on his sensitive tip, “you’ll get pregnant because of technicians in lab coats, the rest of me just wants to whisper every naughty, dirty thing I have ever wanted to do to you. God, Sassenach, there is nothing more arousing than thinking of having baby-making sex with my wife!”
With that, Jamie was done with playing and sheathed himself inside her in one powerful thrust.

She was caught, butt scraping bark, legs locked tight around his middle. He wasn’t that much of a dirty talker and she really wanted to know what he would whisper to her but his words had unleashed something in her as well.

Her mouth pressed against his ear, “I love it when you fuck me like this.” She felt his whole body shudder and he made a strangled noise in response. “How soaking wet I get when you lose control?” It was no lie. They both knew exactly how wet she was, how unbelievably hard his body was and how the friction, the bite of the wind between their legs, the grunts he was making were driving them both wild. His legs were braced and solid, carrying their movement while his chest heaved with effort. His arms held her securely, solid as the rest of that body, harnessing all his energy to find the right angle for her pleasure. Just a slight change of pace and she cried out.

“When I know all you can think about is taking me, filling me. You make that ---Jesus!--- sound that one. I feel that one all the way inssssshit! Jamie, fuck!” She bit down hard on the top of his shoulder as an unexpected wave of sensation rolled through her. He felt her trembling and kept his rhythm. “Don’t stop...I’m close!” A breathless plea.

“Dinna stop... either..” He groaned. “Keep talking.”

“It’s so good...When you Fuck...me hard god--harder please oh! just like that!” Claire was tingling all over, Jamie was boiling with heat and desperate, too. “There is no one else like you..no one. I need you to come inside me, please, please come. Christ on Fucking Toast .” Her legs squeezed even tighter, her hands gripped his head. “I want your baby, Jamie, I need you to fuck me and give me a baby!” A giant wave of pleasure roared through them both.

He was making soft little sounds in the back of his throat. Completely spent, heart racing wildly. She thought if not for the tree, they both would have collapsed to the ground.

Claire would never, ever tire of making love to this man, just when she thought she understood him, he surprised her.

o0o

The first of Jamie’s fall overseas Slainte business trips began the following Tuesday in London.
Jamie was scheduled to be here for three days. Ian and Geneva were going to be there for two, then Eva was having an extra long weekend near Helwater to see her family, while Ian went straight back to Glasgow.

“Dinna fash, Sassenach, I’ll be home on Thursday.” He promised, but Thursday changed into Friday. “I’m sorry lass, something unexpected came up. I need to be in Oxfordshire for a night, but I will be there tomorrow for dinner,” He’d told her, “I’ve a plan to make it up to you.”

“Oh? Well, then you have a date!”

“Och, aye, that’s exactly what it is, Mrs. Crooke is baby sittin’ its all arranged. I’ll pick you up at 7:00.”

It was the unexpected call from John Grey that had him staying over the extra night and scrambling to a basement archive under a little used pre-modern history building at the far reaches of the Oxford campus Thursday night. This expedition, luckily, had resulted in unearthing information that was proving to be useful.

Earlier that same day, John had been knee deep in a different storage facility, this time in the bowels of the Home Office. John had been charged with tracking down all instances of reported missing persons that had a cross-reference of “TT” in police reports in and around the same time periods when people had gone missing near the stones.

That was very slow going. It occurred to John, somewhat belatedly, that there wouldn’t be a lot of cases to find. Claire’s situation had been unique and resulted in a higher level of local police involvement because she had been a child left alone in Scotland. However, most disappearances were adults, reports would be limited to a call or a notation in a file and a dead end. The TT designation didn’t pop p with much regularity in those old police files. They needed to widen the data pool or find a new way of looking for the disappeared or the designation instances of TTs.

This was why he had suggested the trip out to Oxford with Jamie. He’d heard that most of Lamb’s personal effects had been donated and stored in one particular building. To the best of the Dean’s knowledge, it had remained in boxes uncatalogued and untouched for years. Perhaps they would find something of interest there. Jamie had -- being in London anyway-- reluctantly agreed and John told him he’d pick him up at his hotel by 6 p.m.

But until then, John found himself stuck in a dusty archive room, going through yet another box of useless old police reports. Like the trumpet of salvation, John’s cell phone rang. “I have a favor to ask of you, dear.” Minnie said without preamble. “But you must promise not to tell Hal!”
John was on his feet in a flash. He made his way as quickly as he could to the medical district and to her doctor’s office, telling the receptionist who he was and why he was there, she instructed him to have a seat. After ten minutes or so, it occurred to John that everyone else in the waiting room was staring at him. He glanced up, over and around. His eyes widened as he took in the gestating mother posters, the little upside-down in utero plastic 3D pregnant sculpture, the poster of increasingly advanced pregnant mother and fetus development-- he shuddered, everything looks so….squished in there.

Great. Normally, John was comfortable in any environment but as the only man-- and a gay one at that-- at an OBGYN office, he wondered if God had it in for him today. Minnie-- damn her eyes, she knew he’d never say no to her but she’d also been careful not to tell him what kind of doctor she was seeing. Just then, the implications of the office hit him. Holy shit, she was pregnant! Again! Hal must be-- oh but wait! If Minnie didn’t want Hal knowing did that mean something was wrong with the baby? John hoped not.

He looked up as the little door opened, he half stood expecting it to be Minnie, but it wasn’t. John was still paused in a half-crouch when he realized just exactly who it was. She was unaware of his presence in the room as she crossed to speak to the receptionist and make another appointment. He touched her shoulder.

“Geneva?”

“John!” Geneva stared at him in surprise, never imagining she’d run into him here, of all places.

“I am here to pick up Minnie, not for myself….”John laughed a bit, “Obviously.”

Geneva smiled uncomfortably, she didn’t offer any explanations herself. It wasn’t any of his business, of course. Just then a nurse popped out from the same door Geneva had exited.

“Oh, Ms. Dunsany, you forgot your pictures.” John watched, flabbergasted, as a roll of ten or so pictures was thrust into Geneva’s hands. The blob on the glossy paper definitely had a head, a spine and four limbs of varying length...oh make that five!

“A...uhmm boy, is it?” John said awkwardly. Geneva was bright red.

“Er...yes. Did you say you were here to pick up Minnie?” She suddenly hissed.
“Yes.”

“Shit! I have to go before she sees me. Listen, I haven’t told anyone at work or...well, anyone at all really. I’m not quite at the end of the first trimester -- we were going to wait until the third month passed to say anything. Can I rely on your discretion?”

“Of course, Geneva.” John said at once, desperately wondering who the “we” she was referring to was. Just then another door opened and he could see Minnie out of the corner of his eye. “Go, now. Or there’s no keeping this secret for long!” Geneva was off like a flash.

“Is everything ok with you, Minnie?” He asked as he hugged her in greeting, ensuring Geneva made a clean getaway.

“Perfectly!” Minnie scowled. “I had to have a little procedure done. I am fine.” She said firmly. “But they wanted someone to drive me home.” John said nothing preferring to wait her out. Except, they were both masters at this game so neither one of them was budging. Finally Minnie sighed.

“I had to have some testing done, the baby is fine,” She told him. “And yes he knows I am pregnant. It’s actually not a secret-- I’m surprised he hasn’t mentioned it to you yet. But you know what a nightmare he is when there is anything in the least bit out of the ordinary where the kids are concerned. He would be an absolute mess if I told him in advance and, frankly, I don’t need the stress.” John smiled good naturedly. Minnie started absently patting his shirt. “What have you been up to? Covered in dust!”

“Research.” He told her.

“Mhmm.” She said noncommittally. “I’ve been doing a little bit of that myself. Lamb Beauchamp was a very interesting man, you know.”

“How did you know I was going to look through his archives at Oxford?” He was shocked.

“What?” Minnie was clearly taken off guard. “I had no idea-- but now that you mention it that does sound promising.” Minnie was trying to pump him for information.
“Minnie, what have you been up to?” John asked, a warning in his voice.

“Up to? What in the world could I possibly be up to?”

“Do not give me that innocent look, you can’t possibly carry it off well.” John told her.

“I’ll keep my secrets and you can keep yours.” She told him. “Now, get me home before Melton returns to find me gone and I’ll name you this little one’s godfather.”

00o

John almost had a heart attack when, over a pint that evening, Jamie announced Jenny was expecting twins. Good God it was an epidemic! John made a side comment joking first Minnie then Jenny (without mentioning Geneva) and wouldn’t it funny if Claire also turned up pregnant. Jamie didn’t laugh.

“Well, are congratulations in order, then?” He remarked but Jamie smirked.

“Ye ken it maybe a wee bit more complicated for us, aye?”

“Oh, I’m sorry-- of course?” John was flustered-- clearly having no idea and Jamie filled him in on the basics.

John and Jamie spent hours going through Lamb’s files, setting aside everything that had some potential value to review later. One of the more interesting findings was a bill of sale for Lamb’s yacht, dated several years ago. Given that the vessel was Claire’s birthplace, they wondered if maybe the ship might hold any clues—certainly the log books would be of great interest. At the very least they might be able to confirm the accuracy of the information on Claire’s birth certificate. They loaded the “interesting” boxes into the back of John's car. As he dropped Jamie off at the airport, John thrust a handful of files at him.

“You take this lot for sifting. I’ll call you early next week and we can compare notes.”

00o
With an odd sense of déjà vu, Claire opened the door to find Jamie holding a huge bouquet. He looked exhausted, dark circles under his eyes and unshaven but he’d obviously changed at the office, no longer in a suit or tie, but a soft chamois button down and khakis. He leaned against the door jam and took in the sight of her, smiling. His foot eased his overnight bag across the threshold and they leaned in to kiss just as Faith squeezed between them and tugged Jamie’s sleeve. He lifted her up for a good long hug but his eyes stayed on Claire. Wanting, needing, yearning.

“Ye smell almost as sweet as the flowers.” Jamie told Faith, sliding her down to the floor again.

“Mine?” Faith asked making a reach for them.

“No, wean, this time, they are for your Mama.” Jamie held them out to her. Claire took the bundle from his hands, passing them off to Faith to carry to the kitchen. She needed him in her arms just now, more than the stems needed the water.

Breast to chest and warm, broad hands rubbing slow circles on her back, the sensual fabric of her shirt sliding through his fingers.

“Have your eyes always been so blue?” She asked stupidly. The sight of his wry little smile made something skitter across her heart. Her fingers traced his scruff and she kissed him slowly, deeply, so carefully.

“I thought of nothing but you for days.” He told her. Her cheeks flush hearing this.

Part of him wants to push her against the wall and ravish her. He settles instead for reacquainting himself with her cheek bones, the hollow at the base of her neck, the way her ribs flow under her breasts. Her lips are on his cheek, his ear lobe, giving him a wee nip. His lips ghost that sweet spot under her jaw for just a minute, because any longer than that and they won’t make it on time for their dinner. He resists temptation, it’s a special day, after all.

The look in her eye when they exit the taxi has him flushing with pleasure. She makes a wee joke about whether he thinks they’ll make it to dessert this time. They were back at Chride, the restaurant where he took her on their first date. Same table, even.

Fall menus this time, not spring offerings. They order cocktails but hers isn’t sitting quite right so he finishes them both. A hearty red was selected accompanied by a plate of assorted crostini- slow
roasted artichokes with mint and pecorino, prosciutto with parmesan and sage, Walnut pesto with thyme and goat cheese. She gripped his hand as he offered a bite to her, allowing her teeth to linger on the meat of his thumb before she pulled away. A drizzle of olive oil escaped, moving toward her chin, Jamie leaned in and licked it off, looking surprised as he pulled away that he had done so.

“I missed you.” She says, kissing him boldly, tasting the herbs on his tongue, exploring the red wine on his lips. “I’m famished,” she’s rewarded by a hitch in his breathing.

They open a second bottle and share an arugula salad with lemon, olive oil and truffle pecorino; and the proprietor, upon hearing its her birthday brings a new round of drinks to the table. The red is going down smooth in small doses but the whisky isn’t so he toasts her with the wine but finishes her drink and his own.

She watches him raise the glass to his lips, the way they part and his throat as he swallows it down. His fingers play a delicate tattoo on the rim even after he’s set it down on the table. She’s stared too long, caught in her private contemplations. Nothing would stop the red splotches on her cheeks so she smiles at him instead and she takes his hand and holds it in her lap.

He leans in, twirling a loose strand of her hair between his fingers, his lips closing in on hers. “We should take Faith to the zoo.”

“What?”

“I love polar bears, who doesn’t, right? They’ve got one now,” Jamie made a wild gesture with his arms, “huge ….furry.”

Claire looks hard at him, his eyes are having some trouble focusing on hers and he is bobbing his head as if he hears music playing.

“Are you...drunk?”

“Me?” Jamie asked surprised. He paused. “I dinna think so...why do I seem so? Cause I tell ye, Sassenach,” at this he lightly smacked what he could reach of her backside, “I’m a Scot, we ken how to hold our drink.” He unfurled his rrrrs with abandon giving her a confident smirk.

Claire nodded, flagging their sever and ordering more water and bread. She ran the soft doughy
chunk through the oil left on the salad plate, popping the bite into his mouth. “Good, isn’t it? Here, wash it down with this!” She deftly exchanged his wine for water.

He opened his mouth as if to protest but changed his mind and kissed her instead. “You take care of me so well, lover.”

*Lover?* Claire blinked at that.

In between shared plates of mushroom risotto, black trumpet, porcini and parmesan and crepes with chicken, spinach and gruyere, she never stops touching him, twining fingers, pressing her leg against his. It reminds him powerfully of their first meal here, how hot and eager they’d both been.

That craving in his gut that made him take her again and again and still awaken wanting. He watches her with an avidity that makes the wine unnecessary to heighten the pleasure of this meal. He is surprised to find his nose buried in the crook of her neck. Still, though, feels right.

“My chin fits perfectly right here, aye?” He observes. Claire giggles as the air from his lips makes her squirm. Jamie is momentarily distracted by her chest. “The best part of kissing your neck are the dirty thoughts I get watching ye try and catch your breath. I canna wait to see the view from between your legs tonight.”

Claire moaned. “It’s been days.”

“Really?” He teases, as if he hasn’t ached for her, too. “Ye mean to tell me ye didna ring the devil’s doorbell while I was away?”

Claire sniggered. “And what of you, are you my blue balled lad?”

“No’ for much longer, Sassenach.” He hummed against her ear.

His fork becomes their fork. Jamie loses all sense of time or what he is eating or drinking focusing on her, what he wants to show her with his body, his mouth later. He was sloshed after the first bottle and now it’s quite a bit over that. The fork misses her mouth on an errant gesture of his hands telling a story about his meeting with John earlier that day. The cheese from the crepe smears on her cheek. She laughs helplessly at how silly she must look and then at his attempts to clean her up.
“Suck it off.” She dares him. He chuckles and stills her cheek between his hands. He licks her— not a romantic, delicate movement but a sloppy, feral gesture that makes her laugh.

“God, do you ken how fucking happy I am that yer my wife, Claire?” He tells her with true depth of feeling. “I love you!”

“I love you, too.” She tells him. He draws her in closer.


“Perhaps,” she concedes, “Though, in this instance, I think it’s rather more important who I love last.”

“That’s me!” He says with the charm of a three year old. She kisses him softly.

“That’s you.” She confirms.

“It’s your birthday.” Jamie tells her with sudden sobriety that feels like a splash of cold water on their cozy evening.

Claire’s eyes fill with tears. She’d been avoiding this thought all day long. From the moment she woke up alone without him, unable to decide if that was a good thing or bad. She herself cared nothing for her birthday. There was no one to make a fuss over her growing up and over the years Lamb forgot the day as often as he remembered it. Her only desire was to try and make this day a little more bearable for him, if he’d let her.

“I know.” Claire can’t meet his eyes. “I’m sorry.” She goes to wrap her arms around him. She can barely stand to talk about this at all but it can’t be left unsaid, either. He stops her and pulls back, bringing her chin up until her eyes meet his. Gone was the silly mood of earlier in the evening.

“Dinna ever be sorry, Sassenach. Last weekend, I was thinking a lot about Willie and it occurred to me that the one thing he enjoyed above all else was giving people presents. He’d spend hours in his little workshop planning and making wee gifts for all of us.” Claire nodded, remembering the ark Faith played with their first visit home. “I think he’d be overjoyed that yer birthday is today
and so happy to replace such a sad day for our family with a day of celebration.” He reached into his pocket. “I hope you like this.” He said suddenly uncertain but thrusting an envelope at her.

Claire tried to hide her surprise, she didn’t need presents, truly hadn’t expected anything -- the flowers and dinner and his company more than enough. She carefully opened it, read it, read it again and looked up at him -- eyes full of questions.

“Maison de Genouilles? Isn’t that the incredible restaurant where they grow everything on the farm….It’s in the south of France?”

“Aye, the owner is a real wizard, they say. This year Master Raymond is doing a verra special fall workshop, three weekends this fall where ye stay at the farm and take classes wi’ him. I had to make special arrangements and get you credentialed-- the class is limited to 12-- that was why I was late to meet you and Faith for the concert.” Jamie looked a little anxious, her lack of enthusiasm worrying him. She was scanning the brochure about the restaurant.

“You know no matter how good the teacher, I likely won’t ever be more than a middling cook?” Claire said tentatively. My god, this must have cost the earth!

Jamie laughed out loud. “Och, aye, Sassenach! That’s no’ why. Tis a special series, by invitation only -- ye must be a doctor and selected for it. On herbal medicine. Raymond will be joined by ----”

“Yi Tien Cho!” Claire breathed as her eyes quickly read the rest of the information. “He’s -- why he’s world famous! My God, this isn’t just any fall workshop its advanced training in materia medica and botanical phytochemistry!” Claire threw her arms around him and her smile was bright as the sun. His toes curled seeing her light up. “How-- three weekends!” She breathed, trying to imagine the logistics.

“I ken, mo ghraidh, but when we were in hospital wi’ Faith I was in the elevator and overheard the chief of alternative medicine talking about it and I...well, I hope ye dinna mind I put your name in for consideration-- I was so proud when they picked you! It wilna be easy to manage the schedule but I’ll be here for two of those weekends, I’m no’ travelling. For the last one, we’ll both be away but I spoke to Jenny and Ian. Faith has a four day weekend-- a wee break from school. I thought perhaps it might be alright if Mrs. Crooke dropped the lass wi’ Ian and he brought her to Lallybroch?”

“You did all this for..for me?” She whispered.
“Me? Not really, your own reputation is what got you in. I just started the ball rolling. I truly want ye to go, I was thinking that it may get a wee bit harder for you to take time for yourself when we have two so…”

“Two?” She muttered distracted.

“Aye.” He said with such conviction she stopped reading and looked up. There was heat in his eyes, she flushed when she caught his meaning. He was making slow, lazy circles over her upper arms with his finger, goosebumps rising in his wake. She cleared her throat.

“Speaking of which, I started.” She told him.

“Started what, Sassenach?” He was watching his finger tracing over and around.

“The shots.” She heard his powerful exhale.

Jamie’s fingers skidded to a stop and gripped her instead. He looked up at her face, eyes roving over her, she nodded in confirmation.

“Oh.” He breathed, she’d taken him completely by surprise.

“It’s only the first step, I have to take them for a few more days and then we go to the clinic and they retrieve the eggs. There are no guarantees it will work this round or even the next.” She needed to ground them both, prepare him for the realities and possibility of months of disappointment.

“Claire…” Her name a choked whisper on his lips. She felt his hand trembling where it still held her arm.

“I guess I’m not going to get cake on this visit, either, am I?” She tried to joke but her mouth went dry looking into his eyes.

Yup, deja vu all over again. A hasty settling up and departure from the restaurant, a cursory exchange with Mrs. Crooke and a firmly locked bedroom. He was leaning against their door, avid,
Had Claire not seen him stumbling over his feet on the way to the taxi or heard his five minute musings on whether eyebrows were facial hair and his unflagging declaration of love for hers--

“They’re perfect, the wee furry fringe for yer forehead.”

Claire sounded that one out in her head again before replying.

“Not curtains for my eyes?” She joked.

“Och, no, Sassenach, that honor belongs to yer eyelashes!”

She wouldn’t have known he was drunk at all. She thought he might be using the door to hold himself steady.

“You, naked. now.” He ordered, each word crisp and precise.

Which was hilarious considering how disorderly his progress was in trying to divest himself of his own clothes. Claire fought the urge to laugh and kill the mood. The truth was, sex with Jamie in a baby-making mood was hotter than hell. She hadn’t stopped thinking about their encounter at Lallybroch.

Claire heard the thud. She bit her lip to keep a straight face. This was absurd! He’d forgotten to take off his shoes and his pants were tripping him up.

“Stop. Wait you’re going over! Jamie—- God! I can’t wait until your birthday, I’m going to get just as drunk as you are now and see how you like it!”

“Canna.” he said confidently.

“Oh? And why not?” She huffed.
“Tsk an’ you a doctor no less, lass” he said reprovingly.

“What does that have to do with anything? I’ve been a doctor the whole time I’ve known you and you’ve seen me drunk a dozen times at least!” Claire busied herself helping him undress.

“Oh, aye. But by the time my birthday rolls around you’ll be pregnant sorry, Sassenach....” he looked at her consideringly.

“Such an ego! You know it’s not really up to you or me. While I hope the implantation takes the first time, it took several months the last time…” Her voice trailed off seeing his face. She quickly rolled his socks off his feet.

“You, lass, are terrible at pretend and roleplay.”

“What?”

“Now I am yer husband, am I no?” He scowled.

“Yes.”

“And you are…. my dutiful wife, are ye no?” His brow quirked up.

Claire wasn’t so convinced about the “dutiful” part but his face told her there was only one acceptable answer. Besides she was indeed busy doing wifely things at the moment, sliding his pants off his legs.

“Of course, husband.”

Bad at roleplay, was she? Well they would just have to see about that!

“Good because I am a dutiful husband. As such, I do my wife’s bidding.”
“Really?” Claire came to stand, naked, between his splayed legs. His warm hands slid up her hips to her arms, he watched them trace across her shoulders and then down to her breasts.

“Aye, I will do anything she asks, for I do love her dear.” He brought a nipple his lips and kissed it, sucking in then releasing it with a pop. Then he saw the bruising across her lower abdomen. His eyes, alarmed, looked at hers. But she shook her head and shrugged. Jamie gently kissed each one before resting his head between her breasts as she held him.

“And my wife wants a baby.” He kissed her belly once more, then gently spread his hand wide across her stomach, avoiding the angry red and yellow marks. He stared at the way her stomach muscles clenched when she drew in a deep breath.

“Your baby.” she clarified. That got her a strangled hitch as he breathed in.

“And tonight, my wife tells me her body is preparing itself for me, for us, for our baby.” Suddenly they were out of whatever pretend roleplaying they had been doing. He looked up at her face. His eyes were having trouble focusing due to more than just drink. “I am in awe of her strength and heart and the love she has brought to my life and so tonight…” Jamie’s hand cupped the back of Claire’s head and pulled her down to his lips, kissing her deeply, aggressively with all the feeling inside his heart. “I will worship her.”

His eyes were transfixed on her face but then just as suddenly he slipped back into the playful place he had been. Claire understood he needed it like this, needed to make this first birthday of hers special, change his normal associations of this day from sorrow to hope and knew the overflow of feelings were threatening to drown him. And on a fundamental level, she knew he needed to have a more tangible… physical role -- even if it were pretend-- in creating a new life especially given how turned on the idea of making her pregnant made him.

“And my wife kens me so well.” He said as if reading her mind. “That she realizes I must also be allowed to play my part and do my duty.”

“Husband!” Claire squeaked when she felt his fingers unexpectedly along her crease. “What….what duty is that?” Her arms were balancing her body weight on his shoulders and she was moving with his hand.

“To drive her crazy…. to make sure her body is truly ready to accept my…” He paused and his face flushed.
“Talk to me, husband.” She told him reaching her hand to his hard length and pumping slowly up and down. “Say it to me, whisper it in my ear or moan it from between my legs. I want to hear…. your duty is to make sure my body is ready for your seed? Is that it?” Claire stroked and rubbed the tip making him groan and his eyes roll back in his head. “It’s not so hard,” At this she was just lying — *Christ was it ever hard!* “After all, I am your wife. Tell me all the filthy, naughty things that run through your head when you think about baby-making sex with me.”

He pushes her back on the bed, slowly kisses her over and back. His hands force her knees to bend and then he deliberately presses her open, nice and wide.

“I wanna do nothing but fuck you, fill you, breed you.” *Holy shit.* Jamie Fraser had a baby-making sex kink.

His tongue is exploring her, opening her, loving her. He looks up and she smiles at him. Her hand touches his cheek for a moment.

“How pregnant will ye be Claire when I look up from here and can only see the swell of your body, a great wall blocking my view of that face as it breaks on my tongue?”

She moans at the thought. He places a hand on her flat, tight stomach moving slowly upward to cup her breast. “When I reach my hand out and canna reach your breasts without running up and over our child growing large within you? When I touch ye here,” he pinches her nipple and she cries out. “And ye tell me to ease off because you’re too sensitive and I can see how full they have become,”

“Oh fuck!” Her hand forces his head back down between her legs.

“Please Jamie!” She urges, keeping her hand on the back of his head.

He uses his thumb as he traces her clit, slips a slick finger deep inside her.

“I canna wait until yer so belly-full I must take you on all fours, and pump into you from behind. I’ll put my hands on that arse and run them up and down your body and feel the baby kicking between us and you’ll be so ripe and bursting with life.”

Jamie was making sloppy, slurpy sounds now. She needed it but not as much as she needed to hear
his voice. Jamie with no filter in baby making mode was the most unexpected thing she’d ever encountered. He was driving her to her climax, she couldn’t help it and started shaking.

“Jesus, Claire!” He is pulled from his fantasy by the very real reaction he is getting. She was arching hard, seconds away and he worked faster.

“Keep….talking.” She pants. He grabs her hands to help him where she needs it most.

“I want to feel you come, opening for me, making yourself so ready for me. Then, you’re going to let me fuck you hard and fast, you want it don’t you? My come inside you?” Her body convulses on a sharp cry that doesn’t stop for long, shuddering moments.

“Next time you come, I want you begging and screaming my name, aye?” He tells her as he thrusts himself deep inside her. No more patience for preliminaries, not when she is this wet, this swollen, this plump. “You’ll let me fuck you however I want, fuck you so hard. You’ll beg me, beg me to come in you, to give you my cock.” He kisses her and moves with incredible force, hard, sharp thrusts that hit that sensitive spot in her that still hasn’t stopped contracting. His forehead presses on hers and they are breathing heavily into one another’s open mouths.

“Please, Sassenach, talk back.”

“Deeper, I need you deeper inside me, please.”

Jamie leans back and grabs both her legs, placing them flat resting against his abs and chest. Her ankles are by his ears and he grabs a foot. He turns his mouth and sucks a toe in.

“Fucking Christ!” She calls out. There is something so impossibly dirty about the way his tongue slips and twists and twirls on her toes that she ends up grinding harder and harder but can’t find the friction.

He leaves her legs on his shoulders then leans all the way over, until she is folded in half, his body resting against the backs of her thighs. His pushes in one long stroke and their eyes go wide at the sensation.

“It feels so good when you fill me up like this. You’re huge and so hard and you make my….” Claire couldn’t say it, blushing a deep crimson.
“Your pussy, aye? Say it, Sassenach.”

“Oh shit, Jamie!” She is pulling at his arms and they are locked solid and shaking with effort. Their eyes watch as they grimace and smile, mouths open, straining, pressure building higher and higher. Every cell connecting them is engorged, and stretched tight.

“I canna, please Claire please….” He is begging her, needing her to send them over.

“I want you so much, I’m so ready for you. Fill me. I want your cock to come inside my pussy. Please... Jamie!”

His hands were on either side of her head, holding her face completely still so he could look at her. They lost control then, together and completely. The look on his face as he chanted “I love you. I love you. I love you” a memory she would carry forever inside her.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Happy, Sad, Confused
“Well, my first impression was that he looked like a frog!” Claire confessed. Her husband’s face was pressed against the side of her neck and she couldn’t see his expression but knew from the way the bed was shaking that Jamie was trying to stifle his laughter. “He came to hereabouts,” she added, the side of her hand cutting just below her breast. “But despite that, his personality is so vibrant, he seems larger than life.”

“And the healer? Yi Tien Cho?” Jamie asked, the question sounded somewhat muffled. When she didn’t answer right away he lifted his head. Her eyes grew soft and she kissed his lips.

“He is one of those people that instantly calms a room. Not by force but rather by its absence. Both men were beyond impressive and for completely different reasons. I have a journal full of notes, my head is exploding with all kinds of ideas. Did you know that -----” Claire continued but Jamie ceased trying to follow what she was saying about organic chemistry and compounds, something to do with herbs and plants.

He made a mental note to invite Geillis for dinner soon. She was the only one he knew who was as interested in this kind of thing as his wife. They would happily keep one another company for hours, no doubt. For himself, it was more than enough to simply watch her. Jamie grinned as her hands flew out in all directions, her eyes lighting with enthusiasm and, best of all, her warm body curled up next to his. God, how he loved her. It was almost worth her leaving to feel the joyful thrum that swam in his blood upon her return. Her first weekend at Maison de Grenouilles was an unmitigated success. And tomorrow, tomorrow they’d--

“Sassenach?” He cut her off as the thought came suddenly to him. The egg retrieval appointment was tomorrow. Fertilization and implantation were steps a little further down the road.

“Humm?” Claire asked.

“Sorry, I dinna mean to interrupt but I forgot what time I’m to meet you tomorrow and I want to send myself a reminder.”
Claire gave him an amused look. “Excited are you?”

“Ye have no idea, Claire. Truly.” Jamie watches as her body pinks up; he hopes it’s a flush of pleasure not bashful embarrassment. His hand went instinctively to her stomach and he sighed as she covered it with her own. “But I dinna have the time in my book.” He prompted her.

Claire noticed that he’d taken to doing this more and more lately, writing down notes, setting multiple alarms, confirming dates. Not normally forgetful in the least, she wondered whether he was just anxious or if he genuinely thought he’d miss out on an important appointment.

“I sent you an email from the taxi on the way home,” Her lips met his in an effort to soothe. “And another to Mrs. Fitz. I hope it’s alright that my message wasn’t explicit. I just said to remind you to meet me tomorrow at 3 pm.” His eyes asked the question for him. “When people know, it raises expectations and when things don’t happen right away, they won’t hesitate to ask invasive questions and give you all kinds of well intentioned advice that is meaningless when you are going through it. And if you have a glass of wine at a party or God forbid someone sees you buying tampons at the store….” Her voice dropped so low Jamie had to lean in to catch what she was saying. “Could we keep everything private-- just between us-- for now? It got to a point where all of Frank’s friends knew every detail and I have been on the receiving end of that particular look of pity enough, thank you very much.”

Jamie could see spikes of wet well up in her eyes, but her mouth was set in a tight, determined line that told him she was resolute. Jamie knew she didn’t want to revisit hurtful memories of her previous life, and he’d be damned if he’d be the cause of more stress. He nodded agreement and cleared his throat.

“Pardon my interruption, lass. You were saying, about the …. alkaloids?”

Claire smiled and allowed her attention to be shifted. “Nothing, I must be boring you to death.”

“Yer enjoying the workshop. I want to hear every detail.” He admonished. “Besides, Faith’s run down of every single thing we did while you were gone dinna give you a chance to get a word in between dinner and now.”

“I think our daughter enjoyed having her Da to herself. You definitely packed a lot into the weekend.”
“We missed you though.” He told her honestly.

“We?” she teased, freeing her hand and moving it downward. He let out a gasp of surprise.

“Aye, shall I show you?” Jamie didn’t wait for a response and moved over her in a ferocious wave of gratitude at having her laying beside him again.

*****

Jamie was nervous. There was always that little skitter his heart made in a medical setting. Having heard more bad news than good within such walls, and with the fresh memory of Faith’s hospitalization, Jamie supposed not much would help ease him. Claire, on the other hand, was fine. She lay on the examining table, one arm thrown over her head reading a magazine.

“It’s a simple procedure.” She said, not lifting her eyes from the page. Jamie turned and paced back the other way.

“I know.”

“This won’t take much time. I’ll just be a little woozy after.”

“Mmphm.” He spun around on his heel and ran a hand determinedly through his hair.

“Good lord, sit!” She ordered.

He was just about to make up his mind whether to do so or not when, on a perfunctory knock, a nurse sailed through the door. It took a bit of time to set everything in position, Jamie kept out of the way as much as he could, but he seemed to be standing every place “Hiya-Frasers-I’m-Anna” needed to go.

“Let’s take a look at you and see what we have for eggs.” Anna said brightly. “We still haven’t gotten the sperm from your lab.” Anna told Jamie as she turned the ultrasound machine on and
took the wand in hand. “Luckily, the eggs don’t need to be fertilized straight away but we’ll need the specimen before Friday for a fresh process. We can always freeze the eggs though. Just let us know in a couple of days, ok?”

“Ye should have everything ye need. I signed the release and messengered it to Preservation, U.K. over a week ago.” Jamie told her.

“You mean the lab you transferred the specimens to? Preservation, U.K. ceased operations months ago and the deadline for moving everything passed over the summer.” Anna said on a smile, assuming he’d simply forgotten.

“What?” Jamie heard himself ask as if from a great distance, his eyes met Claire’s shocked ones. The rush of white noise filling his ears made thinking difficult. He fought down the urge to throw up. What had happened? How had he never been told? Did the messenger company drop off the releases or not?

“They went bankrupt. The company was hit with a bunch of lawsuits a few years ago and, in the end, their reputation was so damaged they couldn’t keep their doors open. But every patient was given notice and time to move everything to new storage facilities. You would have gotten several letters or emails?” She told them.

“Perhaps the notices were sent to Jared and he took care of it?” Claire said softly, with a hopeful expression. Jamie’s heart fell to his feet.

“Aye, that must be it.” He lied for Anna’s benefit but he shook his head a fraction of an inch letting Claire know he wasn’t mistaken. This was not the time or the place for this conversation. He had the fleeting thought that somewhere Frank Randall was laughing. This was quickly forgotten when, less than five minutes later, Anna put the wand down.

“I’ll get the doctor, now.” She said. Jamie’s head came up at the sharp tone of her voice.

“What’s amiss?” he asked instantly alert.

“The doctor will be right in.” Anna repeated, but her cheeks were splotched with red and she didn’t meet his eye. Jamie waited until her back was through the door and he was at Claire’s side at once.
“Mo chridhe?” He gripped both her hands in his. Claire was shaking her head but she squeezed his fingers tightly and he knew he hadn’t imagined it.

“I’m not sure.” The doctor in Claire refused to speculate. Better to get the information first hand.

Sometime later, Jamie carefully ushered her into the car. He vividly remembered the drive over to the clinic the buzz of knowing they were taking the next step anticipating holding a new child at the end of their journey. And Claire. She bubbled over with such joy these days. For all she tried to temper his expectations, he knew how much she longed for another child, too. He remembered parking the car. Texting Claire he’d be up soon. Walking through the cold bite of the afternoon, answering a quick call from Geneva before hopping into the elevator.

Yet he found himself, an hour later, staring out of the windshield at nothing, seatbelt biting into his side with no memory of the return trip.

He could feel Claire’s eyes on him. Knew without looking that her glass face would be wearing a worried expression. He hadn’t said a word since their meeting with Dr. McEwan. His fingers shook just a little as he slid the key into the ignition but he made no move to start the car.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked him. Jamie’s tongue ran along his upper lip, thinking. He turned to her.

“I would if I kent what to say.” He gave her a rueful half smile. “I’m no’ sure if I’m meant to be happy or sad, Sassenach. So I’m sitting here mostly just confused. And you?”

But she only shrugged and looked away. He hated not being able to see her eyes. She was doing it on purpose and probably feeling the same way. In the silence, he spoke again.

“I didna get any letters from the clinic, Sassenach. Maybe they sent them to an old address but I think it may be too late, the samples are gone.”

“I gathered as much.” Claire was finally looking at him again.

“So whatever chance we had of Faith having a sibling that way isn’t possible.” Jamie said, stating the obvious.
“Does that even matter?” She wondered, “I mean, given the circumstances?”

“If the testing comes back positive, then it will matter. But if not, then maybe we’ll never be able to and I….” This time it was he who shrugged his shoulders, having no answers to give. Claire reached her hand out to his, squeezing it tightly before slumping down helplessly in her seat.

Dr. McEwan had wasted no time, coming into the room within moments of Anna’s exit. She wove the wand with deft precision, explaining as she went.

“Claire, you’ll remember several months before you got pregnant with Faith, the clinic was able to determine that your ovaries were producing eggs but they weren’t capable of surviving the trip into the uterus?” Claire nodded.

Jamie squinted at the screen pretending he had an idea what was happening—every place the wand traveled looked like blobs—some dark and others in lighter shades.

“The procedure you had on your left fallopian tube repaired some damage there. When a few cycles passed and you didn’t conceive, you started on the IVF. And that eventually resulted in Faith.”

“I remember.” Claire confirmed.

“The pathway between the left ovary and fallopian tube is working perfectly now.” The wand stilled on a slightly lighter spot. “However, I’m afraid that the right side has suffered yet another complication. If not for your scheduled appointment to retrieve your eggs today, we likely wouldn’t have caught this for several weeks but, circumstances being what they are, we just happened catch this. It looks like the right fallopian tube is blocked. I am almost positive that…right there,” Dr. McEwan pointed again at the screen, “is a zygote. I’m having Anna put a rush on your blood work and we will confirm it before you leave our office but I think the test is just a formality.” Jamie remembered just enough high school biology to know a zygote was a term describing the very earliest stages of egg meeting sperm.

“An ectopic pregnancy?” Claire asked.

Jamie noted her look of resignation, and for her sake he kept his face perfectly blank, listening and saying nothing in return. But his heart was hammering inside his chest and his stomach was
flipping over on itself despite his outer composure.

“Pretty much, yes. But I would say we are within ten days to two weeks of fertilization.”

“I can’t hear anything.” Claire said regarding the lack of a heart beat from the ultrasound. The doctor shook her head.

“Nor would you. This is far too early, none of the typical structures will form for weeks yet. We aren’t even at an embryonic stage and, given the location, your body couldn’t have sustained this for very much longer. I am sorry.” Both Claire and Jamie had understood there was nothing that she could do. “There is some good news, though, if one can ever say such a thing in these circumstances. We caught this early enough that it can be treated non-surgically and there won’t be any permanent damage to the tube. And, it looks like these new hormone injections do increase your egg production and viability. Here is a copy of all the hormone testing so you can see for yourself.” Claire took the report and scanned it, nodding and humming to herself. The last go around with Frank, her numbers were much lower.

“As for you, Jamie, this confirms that you have at least a few good swimmers in there, which appears to be rather fortuitous given the fact that Anna tells me you never transferred your sperm from Preservation to a new clinic?”

They discussed the next steps at some length after that but Jamie heard maybe one word in three. Dr. McEwan wasn’t sure how much technical support they would require when they were ready to try again. He would need to undergo extensive testing in the next few weeks and they would take it from there.

As they pulled into the driveway, finally home after their trying afternoon, the back door sprung open and Faith’s curly head popped into view. Jamie reached for Claire’s hand, stopping her from jumping out of the car. He starts to ask if she is ok, but quickly realizes how ridiculous the words will sound.

“I’ll always be right here, beside you, come what may.” He vows. Her hand is ice cold in his. She draws in a sobbing breath of air and he knows she isn’t ready to talk about it yet. “I was thinking stew for dinner.” He hopes to ease them onto safer ground. A tight smile and a nod and she’s out of the car and in the house before he’s even moved.

It’s deep in the night when a sound rattles him awake. Claire’s speaking in French, telling her mother she’s afraid and doesn’t want to walk any further. Jamie answers her in the same language, soothing her as best he can. She gasps as she wakes, sweat making the back of her shirt hot and
“Just a dream, Sassenach.” He tells her.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you.” She groans and tucks her knees up near her belly.

“Cramps?” He asks, even though he knows.

“I’m going to get some painkiller. I’ll be fine, go back to sleep.” Claire kisses his cheek as she rises. “I am alright.” She repeats with some emphasis. It is then that he realizes they have switched to English.

Jamie waits ten minutes, and then another ten. He doesn’t want to crowd her, knows good and well she hates his mother hen routine. But the instinct to go to her, to offer his wife comfort is too strong to ignore and he goes in search of her. He finds her in Faith’s room, tucking the blankets once more around their daughter’s shoulders. He reaches out to share in this task, fingers brushing against hers. They both kiss Faith’s forehead and then he guides Claire back to the living room. He pours them both a shot of whisky and takes her into his lap, waiting her out. Jamie won’t force her to reveal emotions she is fighting to hold inside and so he hangs onto his silence. Once she has finished her drink, she is finally ready.

“It’s not that I expected my life to be problem free.”

Jamie responds with a mmphm.

“But sometimes I feel like every problem in the universe is waiting to leap out at me from every corner of the globe.”

“Feel like throwing yerself a pity party and wallowing, do ye?” Jamie gave her an amused look.

“Too bloody right I do!”

“Aye, well, I hate to break it to ye, Sassenach but yer far more likely to fight back than to go down for the count.”
“You don’t think I am capable of giving up and giving in?” She said indignantly.

Jamie snorted and she huffed out a laugh. Her head came to rest against his shoulder and his arms envelop her. He can feel the brush of her lashes against his neck, the moist breath tickling his ear.

“Go on, then, Sassenach, rant and wail. Hit me, if it’ll make you feel better, or curse a blue streak.”

“Maybe I’ll just get hysterical and ugly cry.” She warned.

“Maybe ye will but ‘salright, you’re safe wi’ me.” He reminds her. “Ye dinna need to be brave all the time, Claire. Let me be your strength tonight. I promise no matter what you do, I’ll love you twice as much come morning.” He felt her whole body sigh at that and pulled her closer.

“I’m so glad it’s you.” She tells him. “That I married.” This earns her a tender kiss on her forehead, his thumb traces her cheek bone.

“Ye did warn me that the process wouldna be simple.”

“I did. Though, I didn't think it’d be quite this complicated.”

He moves his head to look at her face, noticing for the first time how pale she is.

“Tell me how yer really doing, Claire.” He holds her gaze and nods to encourage her.

“Will you think me a horrible person if I say I’m doing fine?” Jamie shook his head and let out a breath. “It’s a shock, to be sure; but, since I never imagined we would conceive naturally, the loss...doesn’t quite feel real to me. Mostly, I’m worried about you. When I think about you….that’s when I want to cry.” As if giving voice to her fear gave it life, suddenly the tears started rolling down her cheeks.

Jamie kissed them away. “Because?”
“I think you’re going to be so disappointed.”

“Disappointed?” Jamie couldn’t hide his surprise.

“In me. I feel like I’ve let you down.” Claire whispered and Jamie’s heart broke a little. Watching her cry made his own eyes start to spill over. Tissue in hand, Claire started to touch his face but his hand stopped her and he lifted her chin to hold her still.

“Never, Claire.” He looked intently at her. “You give me joy, hope, love. As long as yer by my side, mo ghraidh, I can handle anything the future has in store.”

“Are you sure?” Claire’s voice trembled, scared to ask but needing to know. Jamie nodded emphatically.

“I dinna ken if we are the two luckiest people in the world or the unluckiest.” Jamie was smiling now, a gleam in his eye. “The thought that we could get pregnant like…. just like any ordinary couple… ‘twas nothing I dared hope for when I awoke this morning. But tonight, I’ll fall asleep with you in my arms knowing it’s possible, aye?”

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