Where We Begin
by LaythornMuse

Summary

Jamie and Claire, newly married and pregnant, have already had their bond and relationship tested. Read their story of how they begin, and what they have yet to face before they can welcome their first child.
“I look like a lopsided cupcake,” Claire muttered, eyeing her profile dubiously in the full-length mirror.

“Ye look lovely.”

Claire’s eyes turned sharply to her husband, who was wrestling a Windsor knot into his tie, brow creased in concentration. It matched her pale pink dress, which set off his light grey suit and his neatly tamed, short, auburn curls. His eyes met hers briefly in the mirror, and -damn him- his lip twitched.

“Maybe a wee bit lopsided, but lovely still.”

Claire tutted her annoyance as she picked up her pearl bracelet from the dresser. At 32 weeks pregnant, the novelty of her glow and growing bump was growing stale. She could no longer move as freely as she did even a few weeks ago, and nothing, not even this pale rose dress of chiffon and lace, could make her feel elegant enough for the task ahead of her.

Tonight was the Scottish Antiquities Society Gala, an annual fundraiser hosted on the Lallybroch estate for the last 10 years. Each year they tried to talk Jamie into trusting Lallybroch to the society and each year he humbly declined their patronage over a glass of Renish. Or so Jenny had explained while dressing her curls and educating her on the guests attending this evening.

Tonight was Claire’s debut to Scotland’s high society as the new, and rumored to be speedily acquired, “Mrs. Fraser of Lallybroch.” She knew better than to be frazzled, but Damn them, the women were all socialites who sat on charity boards by day and attending balls and galas by night, wistfully eyeing their unfaithful husbands who used their inheritances to buy up Scottish history.
The estate was little more than a sheep farm until Jamie’s father began Lallybroch’s equestrian breeding and training program. Thirty years and several Olympic medalling riders later, Lallybroch was Scotland and England’s first class training facility for Equestrian Dressage and Show Jumping.

She knew tonight was necessary, and she understood why Jamie had to placate them, but she hated that tonight would invite their eyes, and judgment, into her private life—their private life—hers and the bloody Scot, who now grinned madly at her while she struggled with the bracelet clasp.

“Sassanach…” He purred, as his hands took the bracelet from her hands and cinched the clasp in one fluid stroke.

“I’m a surgeon, Jamie.”

“I ken what you are.”

“Those people don’t ken what I am. All they’ll see is…this.” She motioned to her expanding waistline.

“You’re no’ ashamed of our bairn, are ye?” Jamie’s eyebrows nearly shot into his hairline and then eased back into place at the Scottish noise Claire made in indignation.

“Of course not! But you can’t deny this won’t…cause a stir.” Her eyes dropped, and her cheeks flamed as fear settled on her lips. “Does it really not trouble you, what they’ll say of you, of me?”

Jamie’s thumb rubbed circles on the inside of her wrist before lifting it to his lips and placing a gentle kiss on her pulse. “They know nothin’ of us, Sorcha. Of what I feel for ye. They’d have plenty of words to say whether you were breeding or no’.”

Claire shot him a glare. “I am not a horse.”

He chuckled softly into her hair, and she felt a shiver down her spine as his breath tickled her neck.

“Let them fash themselves into a frenzy, and let me enjoy ye on my arm.”

“So this is about your bloody ego, hm? Prancing me about and marking your territory?”

“If it gets your arse in more skirts like this…”

“It’s a gown, though just barely,” Claire said with a glance over her shoulder at her bare back. “A well placed thin strap is all that’s holding this thing up.”

“A sound exit strategy, Sassenach,” Jamie breathes against her mouth before letting his tongue tease her lower lip. She pressed her lips to his in earnest, needing more than his playful banter at the moment. His hand cupped her cheek, as he pulled her close. He knew she was intimidated and that she had dreaded events like these from the moment she agreed to marry him.

“I’ll no’ leave ye, Claire. You have my word.”

“I know.”

“Ready, then?”

She nodded and took the elbow her husband offered.
--8 months Prior--

James Alexander Malcolm Mackenzie Fraser, frustrated by yet another delay at the Edinburgh stables, this time due to a client’s poor time management, was determined to spend his free afternoon in the city drinking his coffee, finishing a crossword puzzle, and avoiding his business partner’s niece.

“I promised Jenny I’d scout that textile contact for her merino wool, John. Unfortunately, this week is just shot to hell. Please give her my regrets.”

“Jamie, Geneva won’t leave me alone. Can’t you at least tell her you’re not bloody interested yourself? The girl is in my office every morning and won’t leave until I text you.”

“I have, John. You know that. I already turned off all my social media and location notifications because she started showing up to sandwich shops.”

A dark chuckle escaped his cell phone and Jamie glared at the device.

“I told you she was trouble, didn’t I? *Just one dinner*, he said. What would be the harm in that, he
said.”

“You failed to mention she was as crazy as she was pretty.”

“No. I didn’t. Anyway, I’m cutting you off. You’ll have to make your own excuses from now on.”

“John, no...”

“Yes. I’m sure she’ll be calling you in the next hour. I’ll call you when the horse breeder reschedules, all right?”

Jamie grumbled a reply and hung up the call, sighing as texts from an unknown number made his phone vibrate. He looked down into his coffee mug and found it sadly low. Standing up to order a refill, he lifted his eyes and locked his gaze on a woman who was smirking at him. For a moment, he just took her in: green scrubs, no make up, and wild brown curls piled on top of her small frame. He couldn’t help but stare. She was effortlessly beautiful, and when her smirk spread into a gentle smile, he felt the air leave his lungs in an awkward cough.

“Rough day, it sounds like.”

“What?” He rasped, his eyes meeting hers as he suddenly came back to the present. Coffee mug. Beautiful woman. Stop starring.

“Your phone call. It made my last patient sound polite in comparison.”

“Oh, that.” Jamie let a smile cross his lips. “No, nothing too terrible. Just my friend giving me a hard time. You work across the street, I take it?”

Claire nodded, motioning to Western General Hospital. “Yes, just ended my 12-hour shift. Looking forward to exactly one day to pay bills and eat before I’m back for three more 12 hour days.”

“Brutal,” Jamie said with a chuckle. “Are you a student, or...”

“Finishing up my residency. Dr. Claire Beauchamp.” She extended her hand and Jamie took it.

“James Fraser. No distinguishing titles I’m afraid,” he teased, squeezing her hand in his. Her smile was doing terrible things to his stomach, as well as his head, but the blush spreading across her cheeks emboldened him. “Could I convince you to sit and chat if I buy your coffee?”

Her eyes swept down and then back up to his, taking in his well-defined frame, blue eyes, and his breathtaking smile. **Damn, Beauchamp.**

“I can sit for a while, at least to help you with that crossword puzzle.” She teased back and he laughed, a delightful sound that made her bite her bottom lip. Then a scream broke out.

The other patrons scrambled out of their seats with gasps and cries of alarm as the sound of twisted metal and screaming tires erupted into a maelstrom of smoke and broken glass.

Claire didn’t realize she was moving until she was halfway to the collision and processing the scene. Running, she counted two vehicles: a sedan and a pickup truck. A High-speed impact into the passenger side of the sedan. No apparent pedestrian victims. The driver of pick up: conscious and walking. No one emerging from sedan...
Claire pried the driver side door open on her third attempt. The metal was warped, and she noted the smoke coming from the engine. She caught the eye of a woman on the sidewalk.

“Call Emergency services.”

The woman nodded and pulled out her phone.

Claire’s eyes landed on the driver’s bloody face and began checking vitals. Patting her cheek, the woman softly groaned as Claire lifted an eyelid.

“I’m Claire. Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” The woman groaned. Claire unbuckled the woman’s seatbelt and reached across her to check the pulse of the passenger. Steady. Her eyes fell on a reverse child seat in the back. Her blood ran cold at the silence.

“What’s your name, love?” Claire said softly as her hands swiftly moved over the woman’s neck and torso. No lesions. Some abrasions and bruising. Sound bones.

“Sarah.”

“Can you move your legs, Sarah?”

“I think…yes.”

“Okay. I’m going to swing your legs out with your help all right? Then we’re going to lay you down on the sidewalk…”

“I’ll help her out.”

Jamie appeared at her side, his face surprisingly calm as he gently moved Claire toward the back seat, and started a conversation with Sarah while gently extracting her from the vehicle. Claire climbed into the backseat, her heart racing until her eyes fell on the six-month-old baby girl, completely preoccupied with her toes and oblivious to the world. Claire turned up the baby’s chin, checking for cuts and the baby smiled.

“Oh, sweetie. You have a very good mum. She strapped you in perfectly, didn’t she?”

“Her Da…actually.” The passenger croaked, and Claire laughed. Moving swiftly to unclasp the baby seat from the harness and handing the child to Jamie, Claire started helping Alice, passenger, and mother, slowly extract herself from the crushed metal.

“My arm hurts…”

“Hold it against your chest and just wiggle your legs until they’re free…gently…”

“Claire!”

Joe Abernathy appeared at the driver side door with a stretcher and a smile.

“We have another stretcher coming. Let’s get you out of here, young lady. You hold onto that arm and I'll hold onto you.”
Jamie nearly lost sight of her as she ran from the cafe into the open street. He moved quickly to keep up with her until he reached the collision site.

He moved to the driver of the pick up who had a cloth held to his head and guided him out of the street to the curb. Jamie picked up bits and pieces of the conversation, his eyes constantly scanning for Claire.

“Breaks gave out…”

“…right by the hospital…”

“…baby’s all right…”

After Sarah was settled and more doctors approached from the hospital ER, Jamie took a step back to stay out of their way. Claire was obviously in her element, helping her fellow doctors strap Sarah and Alice to stretchers while reassuring the young mom that they’d call the baby’s father right away. He watched Claire run to the trunk of the sedan, trying to jar it open to grab the baby bag from the trunk.

Then his stomach hit the ground as a horn blared and a third vehicle, turning onto the street from a blind spot crashed into the sedan’s side and pushed it against the length of the pickup.

Jamie felt himself shove people away from the curb as he ran into the street, his eyes scanning the crunched metal where Claire stood a moment ago, and he heard nothing but the blood pounding in his ears. He saw firetrucks and police cars begin to block off the accident site, but if she was hurt...

“Claire?!” He bellowed as he dropped to his stomach beside the truck’s back wheel.

He heard a cough.

“Hullo,” She said softly. Jamie released a sob and crawled closer to her, his eyes barely able to make out her face.

“Are ye bleeding? Can ye move, lass?”

“I... don't think so. I got pushed under the truck...James?"

"I'm coming to you, Claire. Don't move."

Claire tried not to panic. She could tell she was physically fine besides a few cuts and bruises, but being stuck laying on her stomach, every movement tangling her further into the crushed metal of the vehicle undercarriage...it made her breath run short.

She heard scrapping nearby but didn't have enough room to turn her head without her hair pulling painfully. A hand reached her and she let out a rasping breath. "James?"

"Aye, it's me. You got yourself stuck in here well enough..."

"I've noticed," She said dryly, trying not to cry.

"I think I can get ye free...your shirt is caught...there. Can you crawl towards me, Claire?"

She slowly began inching her limbs across the pavement, Jamie's coaxing words encouraging her as his hands kept her hair from snagging in the hanging tubes and metal. She finally had enough room to raise her chin and one tear-stained, dirt smeared face met another.

"You still up for that coffee after this?" Claire whispered, as his fingers brushed her cheek.
"I think we'll upgrade it to a whiskey if its all the same to you."

Jamie crawled backward until he was free from under the truck and could drag her the rest of the way out.

"I dinna ken how you're breathing, lass," Jamie breathed out as he was finally able to get his arms around her. "When I saw that car..."

"You're Scottish."

Jamie paused to look down at her.

"Aye."

"Were you Scottish before? In the cafe?" She said lamely.

"I was...did ye hit your head lass..."

It was then he noticed her paling face and the blood seeping from her calf. He swore as he pulled off his button down shirt and tied it tightly around her leg.

"We need to get you looked at, Claire. If being Scottish doesno' offend ye, I'd like to carry you in."

Her eyes blinked rapidly as she tried to argue, but Jamie had made up his mind already. Cradling her against his chest, he stood and made his way over to the ER doors, where he saw the man she called Joe running towards him.

"We'll get ye patched up, ye brave wee thing," he said softly.

"Bloody Scot..." she mumbled before she passed out cold.
Claire was a notoriously lousy patient. Joe knew the raging storm that awaited him the moment she woke. Even with James Fraser looking on, she didn’t disappoint.

“So, this is silly. I did NOT need a CT scan.”

“Precautionary. You lost consciousness.”

“I did not…”

“Ye did.”

Clare glared at James who, to Joe’s amusement, scowled right back at her. The man was stubborn, Joe observed, refusing to leave her side while she was unconscious, and holding his own against her now that she was awake. Joe immediately liked him, but knew now wasn’t the time to tell Claire as much, given the heat he felt from her gaze.

Her face faltered when she saw him prepare the suture kit.

“Stitches? Really? It can’t possibly…”

“You need about 15, so yes. Stitches.” Joe stated, stone-faced. She huffed at him, a sour expression
pouting her lips as James sat on the edge of her triage bed, a smirk crossing his face.

“Let Dr. Abernathy sew ye up, lass, and I’ll let you recount all the reasons ye hate Scots. I may even agree with some, aye?”

Joe barked out a laugh, which he quickly tried to muffle as Clare’s heated gaze turned back on him.

“I don’t hate Scots.” She growled, looking back at James.

“Mmmphm.”

“I don’t. It’s more a dislike for the history…well, it's a long story. Ack!” She winced as Joe’s needle pierced her tender skin.

Joe tried to hide a smile as he watched James nod stoically.

“Well, we are a proud folk steeped in our tradition. Can hardly get us to stop talking about it.”

“It’s not…”

“But we’re impressive storytellers. I grew up on tales of loch monsters and fairy hills. My father told them to me to keep me out of trouble, but I’m afraid it had the opposite effect.”

Claire’s lip twitched. “You went looking for trouble I take it?”

“I’ve always had a natural gift for finding trouble, ye ken. Though today, I believe trouble walked into my coffee shop.”

“Yours, you say? I work across from it and spend a good percentage of my pay sponsoring that coffee shop. Can you say the same?”

“Why of course. It’s the only place in town that cold brews with Nitrogen gas. And their muffins? Baked fresh daily. I practically lived there when I was in University.”

“Cold brew? What you can’t handle a hot cup of coffee?”

“Not in this heat! Lord almighty, I’d melt.” James looked appalled until her chuckle broke out.

“It barely broke 70 degrees this week. You think this is warm, do you?”

“That’s sweltering for Scotland, lass.”

James grinned as he tapped Claire under her chin, his eyes moving to the wound on her leg.

“You made quick work of that, doctor.”

“It’s easier when she’s distracted.”

Claire’s eyes swiveled to the wound where Joe had finished the last stitch. Her expression shifted when she looked back at James as if she was seeing him for the first time. Joe chose that moment to excuse himself before she spotted his grin.

Claire looked up and the scowl melted off her face as James’ gaze pierced through her annoyed disposition. Her brain processed the white cotton t-shirt he wore, the bloody dress shirt discarded over the hospital stool, and she instantly felt gratitude as well as a small dab of shame. As Joe pulled the curtain closed around her triage bed, Claire sat up a little straighter, and let her hand fall on his.
“Thank you, James, for staying, even after I ruined your shirt,” She said softly, her fingers grazing his.

“Don’t fash yourself. I have plenty of shirts. But please, call me Jamie.”

Clare nodded as the corner of her mouth twitched. “Jamie.”

“And you don’t need to thank me. My motives for staying aren’t exactly innocent.”

He squeezed her fingers, and a smile crept up her lips. “Oh, they aren’t?”

“Nah.” He bit his bottom lip and weighed his words carefully. “Since we didn’t get to have that drink, I didna have a chance to get your number, and well…” He looked sheepishly down at her hands. “I figured standing at the hospital doors waiting for you to arrive wouldna make the impression I desired.”

“I daresay you would have made an impression, with security at least.”

They both chuckled, and Claire felt a warmth enter her cheeks and her chest. She eyed the large, red-haired man fluffing a pillow beneath her foot and sensed her defenses drop a little further. He was handsome, and the t-shirt he wore did little to conceal the chiseled physique beneath it.

“I’ll give you my number if you let me replace that shirt,” She offered, raising a brow at him.

“I’ll let you replace the shirt if you have dinner with me.”

“I thought we were only getting drinks.”

“You upped the ante,” Jamie smirked, pulling his phone from his pocket. “Dinner?”

Claire wished she could school her face to not look as giddy as she felt. She took the phone from his hands and plugged her name and number into the device.

“You drive a hard bargain, but I accept your terms.” Claire handed the phone back just as Joe returned to her triage bed.

“You’re tests are good, LJ. You’re ready for discharge. Dr. Fitz already took you off rotation until Monday so rest up and get out of here.” Joe turned to Jamie and Claire watched the grin split her friend’s face. *You’ll never hear the end of this one, Beauchamp.*

“It was great meeting you, James. Hopefully, I’ll see you again soon,” Joe said with a smirk.

Claire tutted at her friend, but Jamie laughed.

“If she lets me come around, Dr. Abernathy. Wonderful meeting you.”

As Joe left, Claire swung her legs to the floor and tried her weight on her injured side. Not too painful.

“Can you get home all right?” Jamie asked, holding her steady as she placed her full weight on her two feet.

“Yes. I’m not far, and I need to get my car home.”

“Well, I’d like to walk you to your car, if that’s all right.”
They walked in comfortable conversation, Jamie’s hand staying close to her elbow after she stumbled twice. He asked her about Joe and more about her work, and Claire found herself enchanted by this tall specimen of a man. He was curious about all things her, and to Claire’s shock, she wanted to tell him everything. Even about…

“Well, this is me. Thank you, Mr. Fraser, for seeing me safe.” She bit her lower lip to contain her smile as he bent over her hand and placed a swift kiss on her palm.

“It was my pleasure, Ms. Beauchamp. Good evening to ye.”

Claire got into her car, her smile never ceasing as she pulled away from the curb. Her eyes continued to flicker to her rear-view mirror until Jamie’s figure vanished into the dark.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I'm on Tumblr!

Go there for pictures that inspire my writing, as well as some awesome Outlander community. There are some fabulous peeps there.

Screen name: LaythornMuse.

Go follow me please! I'm pretty lonely over there >.>.

*Present day*

The guests arrived in waves as the sun began to set over the sloping heather. Three white canopies gently glowed as the wait staff lit the candles on the dinner tables and Claire couldn’t help smiling as the smell of Lavender and rosemary carried on the breeze from Lallybroch’s garden.

Claire stood beside Jamie as they greeted the guests, and was relieved when the first break in arrivals came.

“You’re a natural, love,” Jamie murmured, handing her a glass of water.
“Well, they aren’t nearly as prickly as I expected.” She said with a smirk. “At least not with you standing so close.”

“I intend to stay close. Perhaps steal a dance or two?” He leaned into her side and placed a kiss on her temple. He paused a moment, pursing his lips. “Do you ever regret…not doing this.”

Claire looked up. “What?”

“That we didn’t have a grand reception for our wedding.”

Claire’s eyes grew large as two press vans emptied passengers at the turn around before the main house. “I rather liked not having reporters.”

“Not like this,” he added quickly, a chuckle rumbling through his chest. “but a celebration for all of our friends…and maybe some non-friends…” he ended with a glint of mischief.

“I loved our small ceremony,” Claire said softly, her fingers entangling with his.

It had been small, only 20 guests in all, but it was what they both wanted. They welcomed family and close friends, exchanged their vows in Lallybroch’s chapel at twilight, and followed the service with dinner in the main house’s dining room.

“I did too, but I do love to flaunt ye, Sassenach,” Jamie whispered. “And I wonder if I discredited you by not publicizing it.”

“Well, too late for that, Fraser. You’re stuck with me, harlot or no.” She whispered softly, as she pressed into his side.

“I ken it well, Fraser,” he muttered into her curls, pressing a soft kiss above her ear. His arm twined around her waist as a group of reporters approached with a fresh wave of guests.

*Eight Months Prior*

Claire woke with a start as her phone vibrated off the coffee table and hit the tile floor. Sun streamed through her living room window, announcing it mid to late afternoon.

The events from yesterday, a full day of work followed by a close call with death and flirtation with a handsome man, had apparently taken its toll. She woke that morning at 10 AM, but after carefully bathing around her stitches and picking up her mail, she had crashed on her couch and lost several hours napping.

Her phone vibrated again, and this time Claire reached for it, pulling the screen to her face while her blurry vision receded.

2 missed calls, 1 missed message

Unknown: Did you survive the night?
Claire: Who wants to know?

Unknown: Oh. Well, just your red-haired admirer. Hopefully, you don’t have too many of those.

Claire: Let me check my photos

Claire smugly typed in Jamie’s name to his contact and grinned when she saw he was typing a response.

Jamie: ~waits patiently~

Claire’s face hurt from the strength of her smile.

Claire: Ah. The Scot.

Claire: Yes. I’m alive and well, thank you for asking.

Jamie: Excellent news. You’d be terrible company this evening if you were dead.

Claire:…this evening?

Jamie: Yes. I’m bringing you pizza, whiskey and your choice of classic film. You, in exchange, have to tolerate my company.

Claire: Define “Classic film.”

Jamie: No. I’m testing you. If you respond with Jurassic Park, we’re through.

Claire let out a chuckle.

Claire: Casablanca?

Jamie: Closet romantic, are you? Interesting.

Claire: Says the man bringing me a pizza for our dinner date.

Jamie: Not a date. Injury nullifies all flirtatious behavior to gentle-mansliness.

Claire: Is that in a rule-book somewhere?

Jamie: Aye. My father’s. Six work?

Claire looked around her apartment and for once, felt zero guilt at having a cleaning service.
Jamie knocked on her door precisely 2 minutes before 6 PM. He stood in her doorway with a pizza box, freshly shaven, and looking quite sheepish.

“If you’re not feeling well,” He began. “I can just…”

Claire’s smile stopped him mid-sentence.

“I’m glad you came,” Claire said softly, stepping aside to let him in. Jamie let out a breath and smiled shyly back, handing her the pizza and stepping into Claire’s home. It was a cozy flat with bulky throw rugs, soft lighting, and scattered photographs. He hung his coat by the door, and eyeballed some cardboard boxes, neatly stacked but clearly out of place in her home. The name “Frank” was neatly written on the side, and a few mailing addresses were stacked on top, mentioning Boston, Massachusetts.

He turned to find Claire standing a few feet away, worrying her lip between her teeth and wringing her hands.

“Well, that expression doesn’t bode well,” Jamie said softly, a gentle smile pulling at his lip. Claire nodded and looked away.

“I forgot I hadn’t mailed them yet. I’m so used to seeing the boxes there.” Claire sighed and looked up into the eyes encouraging her to say more. “I really didn’t want to talk about this yet. I figured we had at least two more dates before we had to talk about our pasts.”

Jamie chuckled and stepped closer. “I don’t mind either way, but seeing your face drop like that…” Jamie’s hand closed around hers. “Maybe it will help to talk about it?”
“Kind of a mood killer,” She joked, casting her eyes down.

“I already said this wasna a date. Come on, lass. Whiskey and Bogart can wait.”

“Actually the whiskey will help,” Claire nodded, as she led him into the kitchen.

She doled out plates and glasses while readying herself. No one besides Joe knew the whole story.

“Frank and I broke up about 6 months ago.” She started, sitting on the barstool at her breakfast island. “We were engaged.”

Jamie nodded, placing a slice of pie on her plate while he tucked into his own. “What happened?”

Claire stared at a pepperoni and threw back the shot of whiskey in her glass.

“Well, he taught at the University of Edinburgh. History Professor.”

“Ahh. Scottish history, mayhaps?”

“Mmmhmm,” Claire said confidently. Jamie snorted but motioned for her to continue. Her mood grew more somber as she stared at the bottom of her glass.

“I caught him…engaged with a student…when I came by for lunch one day.” She looked down at her hands, forcing a smile to play against her lips. “Very cliche, that. Looking back on it, I shouldn’t have been as surprised as I felt.”

She felt Jamie bristle, but to his credit, he only grunted a “mmhmm” and let her continue.

“I was 19 when we started dating, and two years later we were engaged. When I applied to medical school, we said we’d wait, but then 8 years went by and we never set a date. He started traveling a lot, and I stopped missing him. It was…” Jamie’s hand reached for hers and squeezed it, “almost a relief to have a reason to end it. He moved to Boston to follow a promotion. I’ve been meaning to send him his things.”

“But it feels final,” Jamie concluded.

“It’s stupid. It was over well before we ended things. At first, I didn’t want to let go of the stuff, but now I feel silly for hanging onto it for so long.”

“Why do you think you held onto it? Eat, woman.” He threw her a scornful gaze and she erupted into laughter, taking another bite.

“I think I had to figure out who I was without him.” She poured another finger of whiskey.

“Not a history enthusiast?” Jamie asked, refilling his drink.

“I don’t dislike Scottish history,” she laughed. “I actually know quite a bit about the Stuart uprisings and the 45. I just…” she looked up at him. “I wanted to be more important than his books. And I wasn’t.”

Jamie stayed silent sipping his whiskey as he watched the emotion play across her face. Her face, so
translucent to every thought and feeling, made his heartache. He wanted to pull her close and hold her until all the pain passed out of her. Then he watched her face close up, at least as much as she could close it up, and watched her stand and begin collecting their dishes, an airy look of amusement on her face.

Brave, indeed.

“So what are ye, Claire, without him I mean?”

Her brow lifted at him as she pursed her lips in thought. He gripped the edge of his seat, wanting badly at that moment to know how those lips tasted…

“Doctor, friend, art lover, gardener…”

“Garden do ye? You have some wee flowers on your terrace?” Jamie smirked as he reached over the island to brush off a smear of tomato sauce on her lip.

“Medicinal herbs,” she said proudly. “The flowers usually commit suicide but the herbs like me fine.”

“I can appreciate what they see in ye,” he said, taking her hand as she stepped back around to his side. He pulled her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her fingers. “We all have ghosts, Claire. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a wee bit angry over him treating you so, but…” his thumb ran over her knuckles, “if he wasn’t a fool, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

“You still want to be here, then? I didn’t scare you away yet?” Claire grinned and gave him a hopeful look.

“You’re awfully pretty, lass,” he said with a grin. “It’d take a good bit more to derail my interest in ye.”

She snorted, and he laughed openly, pressing another kiss to her knuckle before she pulled her hand away and shoved him playfully.

“Weren’t you telling me that flirting doesn’t gain you anything because I’m injured?” She said with a soft cackle, standing up and taking her glass with her.

“Oh. Well, I don’t mind making a fool of myself if it keeps you smiling.”

Claire turned her television on, her back to him, but felt a soft glow start in her chest at his words.

“Good,” she said softly, biting her lip as she settled into her side of the loveseat. “Mr. Bogart would approve.”

Over the course of the movie, Claire found herself magnetically drawn into Jamie’s side. To her amusement, his hand was equally drawn to her ass. The first time he caught it drifting down the back of her hip he jerked his hand back and firmly planted it on her waist, masking the action with a coughing fit. The second time it happened, Claire bit her lip and whispered, “Problem, Fraser?”

“Pawing my arse and calling me names, Fraser?”

“English woman. No’ an insult.” He said, tapping her nose. His voice lowered an octave. “A wild outlander…verra exotic to a Scot.”

Their chuckles were interrupted as the room darkened and the credits to their movie began to roll across the screen.

“We missed the ending, you silly Scot,” Claire muttered against his chest. To her dismay, Jamie started to stand and gently extract himself from her limbs.

“Just as well. It’s time I let you rest, Claire,” he extended a hand to her and pulled her to her feet.

Claire felt an emptiness well inside of her, wishing he would stay longer but unable to say the words. She knew he should go, but more than anything, she wanted to return to the cocoon of his arms and sleep there for a week.

As if reading her thoughts, his finger found purchase under her chin and lifted it until her eyes met his.

“I’ll be out of town this weekend, and I know you go back to work on Monday…” he ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “But, I want to see you again, Claire.”

She nodded. “I’d like that. Thank you, for tonight.”

He smiled and brushed her cheek with his thumb. “My pleasure, Sassenach.”

Jamie turned towards the door, but as he pulled away, Claire’s hand eased behind his neck and pulled him down. She had to know if…

Fevered. Salty. Pulsing desire.

That’s how his lips felt and tasted, and Claire needed more. She heard herself whimper as his hands pulled her against him. She felt herself pant as his groin pressed into her thigh…

Then, he stepped away from her and tried to catch his breath. Her eyes widened.

“You can’t…”

“I have to leave.” He said firmly.

“Did you not…I mean, damn it, wasn’t that…”

“Hot as fuck, aye.” Jamie grabbed his coat.

“But…”

“I’m already kicking my chivalrous ass for leaving, Claire,” he grunted, and only the cheerful giggle that sounded made him turn around as he opened the door to leave.
“That’s why you’re leaving? Chivalry?”

“It’s certainly not sense driving me out your door.”

There it was, again. A giggle. Christ this woman killed him.

“G’night. James.” She blew him a kiss and slowly closed the door on him.
Despite his words when he left, Claire didn’t get a single text from Jamie over the weekend, nor Monday before she started her shift. What made it worse, she realized, was how much it bothered her.

*He said he’d be out of town, but three days and no word? After THAT kiss?*

Claire shook her head as she badged in, pushing her frustration and disappointment to the back of her mind.

*You’re ridiculous, Beauchamp. Time to be a doctor.*

Claire turned down the hall to the staff board where she would pick up her cases for the evening, shooting Joe a smile as he fell into step beside her.

“I gather you had a nice weekend,” he said quietly.

“Uneventful, just did some laundry and paid some…”

Claire froze. At the nurse’s station sat an enormous bouquet of wildflowers and a white box. The lettering spelled “Claire” in a broad bold print, and a small crowd had gathered in front of the display.

“You were saying?” Joe replied, a smug grin on his face.

Claire stepped towards the flowers and the few nurses twittering about quickly dispersed. Her mouth opened and closed for a moment before she turned to Joe. Seeing his expression, her cheeks immediately flushed as the smile she was fighting off sprung to life. Joe chuckled.

“Oh good. You like him.” Joe said dryly, plucking the card from the bouquet. “I was starting to feel bad for the man.”

“No-no! You don’t get to read…at least not before me,” Claire said, ripping the card out of his hands. In true friend form, Joe peered over her shoulder and read the card aloud:
“Of all the coffee shops,
In all the towns,
In all the world,
You had to walk into mine.”
- J

“You’re on first initial basis now. Very serious, LJ,” Joe muttered. “Casablanca?”

She pushed an elbow into his side. “Yes. He came over, and we ate pizza. It was completely innocent.”

Joe shot her a skeptical look.

“Fine, mostly innocent.”

She pulled the top of the box open and found an array of prepackaged nuts, dried fruit, and trail mix varieties. She smiled. “And apparently, he doesn’t think I eat.”

“You don’t,” Joe chuckled, picking up a chart. “I’ll take evens if you take odds?” Claire dug out a bag of nuts and tossed them to Joe.

“Deal.”

Claire clocked out and headed to the staff locker room around 2 am. Pulling off her coat, she opened her locker and fished her phone out of her purse.

3 missed messages

Jamie:

I hope you’re not the jealous type, but there’s another female in my life…Meet Losgann.

Jamie: (picture attached)

Jamie: (Video attached)

Claire’s brows drew together as she opened the attachment. Her face lit up as a beautiful chestnut mare filled her screen. A white star adorned her nose, and a splattering of red enhanced the brown hues of her coat. The video showed Jamie on her back, dressed in tan breeches and black riding boots, navigating the mare to the starting gate. Lord, did he ever not look handsome?

The footage panned left to right, following him as he brought her into a full gallop, slowing only slightly as she jumped a shrub obstacle with ease. Claire had to stop herself from applauding the performance and watched it twice more before the door of the locker room slammed shut.

“Claire, I didn’t realize you were still here.” Before her stood Dr. Harvey Roth, the attending
physician for the next shift. Claire smiled, nodded and closed her locker. She felt a chill run down her back as Harvey’s eyes traveled over her tank top.

“Just ended my shift, actually.”

“Flowers, huh? Found a man already, Beauchamp?” Harvey leaned close to Claire, and she instinctively took a step back.

“Ah, yes.” She clipped.

“Well, if you change your mind about him, I wouldn’t mind showing you a good time, sweetheart.” He shrugged and winked, turning his back to her as he pulled his shirt over his head.

Claire tried to not gag as she gathered up the flowers and hurried to the door before he got any more naked in her presence. “Goodnight, Dr. Roth.” She called behind her. She heard a muffled reply but made sure she was out of the locker room by the time he emerged from his collar.

As she settled into her car, she pulled her phone out and sent Jamie a message.

Claire: She’s beautiful. She must be huge to make you look so small.

Her phone rang a moment later and Jamie’s name scrolled across the screen.

“You’re up late,” She said, smiling to herself as she turned on the car.

“Your text woke me, actually,” Jamie replied, his voice heavy with sleep.

Claire winced. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think about the time.”

“Don’t fash yourself. I’m glad for it.” He paused, and she heard a rustling in his background. “I missed talkin’ to ye.”

“Me too,” Claire said softly. “Thank you for the flowers and a month’s worth of snacks.”

Jamie laughed. “A month? That would barely last me a week.”

Claire smirked to herself. “Yes, with your appetite. How long have you been riding?”

“I think I was on a horse before I could walk,” he said slowly. “Riding is the family business. Which, reminds me of a request I’d like to ask of ye. Are ye free on Friday night?”

“Yes, I am,” Claire said with a smile.

“There’s a benefit my sister is twisting my arm to attend. Would you like to be my date?”

“I’d love to,” she said softly, biting her bottom lip. “Losgann’s busy I take it?”

He chuckled. “She a verra good lass, but I’ve met someone prettier if you can imagine that.”

“Mmhm. And I’ll get to meet your sister as well?”

“And her husband. The brood is staying at home with my Godfather.” Jamie groaned inwardly. “I tried to get that job but…”
Claire laughed as her mind buzzed back to something he said earlier. “What do you do, for work I mean? You’ve barely mentioned it at all.”

A silence fell over the line, and Claire felt her heart flip as he sighed.

“Weel, its…” she heard more rustling as he twisted in bed. “Have you heard of F.B.M Equestrian?”

“Of course. Who hasn’t?” She started, but then her phone pinged at her. “Damn it, my battery’s about to die. Text me the benefit information okay? I’ll call…”

Beep. Dead. Claire sighed and sat back in her driver seat. The clock on her dash read 2:30 am, and now she was beginning to feel the tiredness creeping in. Putting the car in drive, she headed home, a smile still pulling at her lip as she mentally went through her closet for Friday night.
Claire spent Thursday evening digging through her closet, trying to find the clutch purse that matched her nude pumps. She selected her navy blue cocktail dress that was flattering, sophisticated, and just a touch flirty. It wasn’t the most daring dress she owned, and certainly didn’t give off the “seductive” vibe she wanted, but after a heated debate with two girlfriends and a disgruntled Joe, she decided that the classier vibe was more appropriate with his family present.

She hadn’t spoken to Jamie since Monday evening except for a handful of texts and hurried phone calls. The last of her shifts ended an hour ago, and she was looking forward to the next two days off.

She picked up the dress from the cleaners this afternoon, had her nails cleaned and polished, and even removed the unsightly stitches from her newly-healed wound. Now if she could just find this bag…

Her doorbell rung. Claire, still in her towel from her shower, found herself frozen in her room, trying to both dress and find her phone at the same time.

*Was the hospital trying to reach me? Who could be at the door?*

She finally dropped the towel and pulled her arms through her cotton knee length robe. She still
couldn’t find her phone but as she walked to her front door the banging grew louder.

“Claire?”

Jamie’s voice echoed through her door, and she felt her heart jump into her throat.

*Great. Drowned rat is an attractive look…*

She pulled the door open and found him pacing on the other side of the door, looking just as harried as she.

“Christ woman! Did ye lose your phone?”

“Actually, yes. It’s been eaten by my closet. What are you…”

“Can I come in?”

Claire’s brows scrunched in concern but she pulled the door open and allowed him in.

He ran his hands through his hair several times while muttering to himself, and for the first time since meeting him, a chill of concern ran down her back.

She’d seen this anxiety before with men, usually before they delivered bad news. Claire pulled her robe tighter around her body and hugged herself. She sat down on her loveseat and watched Jamie’s internal cogs slow until he stood in front of her, his fingers tapping against his thigh.

“There’s no easy way for me to explain this, lass.” He muttered.

Claire could feel her chest caving in, with the pressure of his confession.

*God…broken up with before one proper date. This must be a pathetic record.*

Claire steeled herself and found her voice. “I appreciate you coming over to cancel tomorrow night.” She cleared her throat and nodded. “Most people would just send a text message, so I…”

“What?” Jamie balked.

Claire fell silent and looked back down at her hands, taking another deep breath. “You came over to cancel for tomorrow night, right? That’s why your…”

“No, lass.”

“Oh.” Claire's brows rose as Jamie knelt in front of her, his hand finding hers.

“No. I…well It's no’ that I was lying to ye as much as I was being secretive, ye ken? I didna think it…well, my sister Jenny, it stirred her into a stramash and-”

Claire interrupted. “I don’t understand what you just said.”

He let out a heavy sigh and pressed his forehead to her knee. “My job, Claire. You asked me about my work.”

“Right, and then my phone died. Well, I figured it had something to do with F. B. M. Equestrian…”

“It does…”
You probably teach or…”

“Well, yes but that’s no…I mean, you should know…”

“Wait, do you think…did you think I’d disapprove?” Claire’s temper suddenly spiked as outrage began to set in.

“What? Claire…”

“Did you think I’d judge you by your career?”

“No, just…”

“I don’t give a rat’s arse about…”

His hand covered her mouth before she could continue.

“I own it. I own F.B.M Equestrian. Rather my family does, for now. Frasers of Broch Morda Equestrian.”

Jamie slowly drew his hand from her mouth, watching as her eyes grew large. She sat very still, Her eyes locked on his, and then on her hands as she processed the flood of information now passing through her brain.

F.B.M Equestrian, local sponsors of the 2012 Olympic Games in London…

Friends of F.B.M.E Blood Research sponsorship in 2015…

That was just what she knew off the top of her head. Claire knew F.B.M. Equestrian penetrated many layers of Edinburgh’s community, donating to schools and starting grant programs for local artists as well as their involvement in the children’s hospital in Inverness.

And that’s not evening taking into account the Scottish Antiquities society…

“Claire, please say something.”

Claire clamped her mouth shut. It had been agape. “I need to sit down.”

Jamie met her gaze and nodded. “You’re sittin’, lass.”

“Oh. Well good.” Claire swallowed and finally looked at Jamie. “Um, well you can ignore what I was saying about…being an underpaid but passionate horse handler…or whatever.”

A smirk crossed his lips. “I assure you our trainers are all well compensated.” Jamie squeezed her hands then. “Jenny made me realize you had no idea…well, that I hadn’t warned you for what tomorrow night…”

“Oh God,” Claire exclaimed, standing suddenly. “You’re not attending the benefit. You’re hosting it.”

“Err…well, yes.”

“Jamie, I can’t attend as your date!”

Jamie’s expression deflated minutely before his stubbornness rallied.
“Yes, ye can, Sassenach. I’ll be with ye the whole time…”

“But…it will be publicized…as what? I’m a friend tagging along?”

Jamie stood and came to her side. “There will be press, and…I was hoping to introduce ye as Dr. Claire Beauchamp. They don’t need to know more.”

Claire’s face showed relief and then, to Jamie’s utter delight, a pout formed on her lips. He laughed then and tipped her chin up.

“What is it, Claire?”

“How did this not come up?” Claire said, anger starting to mix into her shock.

“Weel, I’m not used to meeting people who haven’t heard of me or my family. I didna ken…”

“That I had no idea who you bloody were?” Claire fumed.

Jamie swallowed and tightened his grip on her hands. “Aye. No until the other night. I tried to tell ye as soon as I realized but…”

“Yes, I know.” She said quietly. She and Jamie had played phone tag for the last two days. He knew she was working double shifts but when he called she was still on, and when she called back he was sleeping.

“Claire,” Jamie spoke softly, pulled her close and let his hands trail up her arms until he cupped her face. “Please. I want ye with me tomorrow night.”

Claire’s throat tightened as his gaze penetrated her anger, replacing it with desire and heat. His finger stroked her cheek when she finally nodded.

A small smile crawled onto his face. “Good. Now…can I ask what you're wearing?”

“You mean tomorrow…”

“Now, lass. More interested in now.” He muttered, his tone gruff and deep. One hand rested on her hip where it squeezed her softly against him.

“A robe…”

“A thin robe,” Jamie replied darkly. “I can feel the heat of your skin.”

Claire’s lip quirked. “I can get dressed…”

A growl interrupted her as Jamie’s arm wrapped tightly around her waist.

“Or not…”

Jamie cupped her cheek gently and ran his thumb over her lips. “I can think of little else but this. I’ve known you for a week and haven’t stopped thinking about this wee curve…” his thumb traced the bow of her lip. A shiver ran through her as her body leaned into him, craving more contact with his skin.

“Let me kiss you, Claire.” He wet his lips as he dropped his forehead to hers. “I canna explain how different this feels, you and I, but I want to feel it again.”
Claire tipped her chin up in invitation and brushed his lips with hers. He answered her brush with a tender nip, before teasing her with soft presses against her jaw and bottom lip.

Her whimper broke his resolve and patience and his mouth covered hers, his tongue lavishing in her sweetness and heat. He felt himself grow hard as her hands moved to his waist, slowly pushing him backward, her mouth moving with his in sync, letting out little sighs of contentment that gave him gooseflesh.

Claire felt her core drum and spasm with impatience. She lurched into him, quite involuntarily, as her apex sought friction of any kind, anything to soothe this throbbing between her legs where she could feel her heartbeat.

Reaching her loveseat, she pushed him down, straddled his lap and ground her heat into the hardened peak in his pants. A moan escaped her as she finally found some relief, her skin tingling in gratitude as his lips traveled down her neck and his hand ran up her thigh to her laced bottom.

“You’re killing me, Sassenach,” he whispered against her skin, nibbling where her shoulder met her neck. His hand pulled her bottom closer, adjusting the way her hips rubbed against him, and she mewled out her gratitude.

She reached to slip her robe off her shoulders when his free hand stopped her. The look she shot him screamed of impatience and betrayal, but he merely pressed another long kiss to her lips, stilling her against him.

“You don’t…want to?” She panted.

“Aye, I do.” He brushed his lips against her forehead. “But when I bed ye, I plan to worship you for hours. I won’t take you in haste and risk not enjoying you fully.”

“Bloody Scot. We can just do it again after,” she muttered, but she too leaned close, smelling his sweat and cologne mixing with her own.

“It doesn’t feel too soon?”

Claire lowered her eyes in thought. “It does, but you’re right. I don’t know what this is, this energy between us, but I trust you. I’ve never felt this…” she looked up and met his eyes.

“Safe.” He whispered. She nodded and pulled him close, embracing him tightly as his arms wound around her.

“Tomorrow night then? Will you stay the night with me?” He leaned back to watch her face as a smile glowed to life.

“I’d like that very much,” she whispered, a blush consuming her until he tenderly pressed his lips to hers in promise.
Chapter 8

The car arrived precisely at 6 p.m. as Claire was walking down the steps of her complex. Jamie stepped out of the car to help her in, but as she approached he felt an awe fall over him.

Her curls were pinned delicately in place, swept back and off her neck in delicate ringlets. Her skin glowed with just a hint of cosmetics, her eyes smoky and alluring. Her dress, though modest, hit mid thigh and made her opal, soft legs appear endless.

“Jamie. You’re staring.” She smirked as she stopped in front of him.

Jamie blinked several times before a sheepish expression crossed his face. He took the small overnight tote from her hand and pulled her close for a kiss. The smell of jasmine on her neck made him groan aloud.

“I was wondering how long Jenny would let me live if we skipped the benefit and I took you home now,” he murmured, sending a bolt of heat right between her legs.

She grinned. “I did not spend hours on these curls to have no one see them, Fraser.”

He smiled, closed his eyes a moment and shook his head. “Aye. You’re right.” He backed up a step and offered her his hand. “After you.”

Jamie shut the door behind her, placed her tote in the trunk and circled round to the opposite door, all while trying to wipe the grin off his face. A woman he was crazy about was about to meet his family before spending the night. He mumbled a soft prayer that he didn’t screw it up.

***

Claire felt her breath still in her chest as they pulled up to the venue. They had laughed together during the car ride, but now that she saw the crowd gathered around the door and the cameras, her palms felt damp and her heart raced. A strong arm wound around her to still her hands, as a warm breath hummed by her ear.

“Let them snap their photos. Smile and breathe and dinna let go of my hand.”

“Like I intended to.” She muttered dryly.

“I’ll walk around to your door and help ye out. Ready?”

“No,” Claire whispered.

Jamie pressed a kiss to her neck and let his hand drop from her hand to her thigh. He squeezed the skin above her knee and slowly let his fingers crawl upward, inching under the hem of her dress.

“Weel, I suppose we could find something else to do…”

“This is not motivating me out of the car.” She whispered, leaning her head back to grant more access to her neck.

A knock on the window startled them apart, and Jamie grimaced as His sister leaned on the tinted windows.
“Jenny.” He sighed and motioned her away. “She’s always had terrible timing,” he muttered. He gripped her hands. “Now?”

Claire nodded and smiled. “Just don’t let go.”

***

Jamie led her through the dense crowd in under 5 minutes, stopping in 10-second intervals to either keep an eye on Jenny, shake hands with a guest being interviewed (smart move, I thought) or to pose for a brief picture where he pulled her close And motioned discretely where to look.Claire was shocked when they cleared the glass doors of the gala’s foyer, and tugged Jamie to a halt.

“There’s no need to stop moving. They can smell weakness, ye ken.”

Claire hid a grin behind her hand as Jamie lead her into the main ballroom, stopping only to hug his sister when she and her husband caught up.

Jenny did not intimidate Claire, but it was clear that Jenny was a great force of opinion, stubbornness, and guile. She glowed in a cream and gold one-shoulder cocktail dress, beautifully tailored to her petite frame. She commanded the ballroom, catching the eye of attendants to refill beverages while eying the hors d’oeuvres to ensure their presence. She did this while briefing Jamie on the last minute cancellations and giving him a murderous glare if his attention wavered.

After Jamie left the previous night, Claire’s phone erupted with messages from Jenny. With barely an introduction, Jenny jumped right into the business of preparation. The gala was benefiting the City’s Recreation Centers, starting new after-school programs in discovery and science, ranging age 12-16. Jenny texted her a 20-page document on the at-risk statistics of children 12-16, the major donor names of the evening, and talking points in case she was surrounded and cornered

Always a good student, Claire studied the materials provided and was not at all surprised when Jenny turned her attention to her.

“Very good, Claire,” Jenny nodded approvingly after the fifth correct answer.

“Jenny, please, will ye no’ relax?” Jamie pleaded.

“Well, I kno’ ye didn’t review the packet I sent ye, Brother, Given where your head’s been.” Jenny gave me a pointed look. “But, at least this one laughs and has a head filled with more than smoke.”

“Janet!” Jamie growled.

Claire smirked and patted Jamie’s arm. “I’m flattered, Jenny. Your good opinion seems hard earned, but I’ll do my best.”

“See? We understand each other already,” Jenny teased, as Ian came around her left and handed her a drink.

“Causing mayhem already, mo ghraidh?” Ian said with a wink. “Cheers, Claire, to your first battle with my lovely Fraser. May you survive more.”

“Hush, you,” Jenny scowled, before leaning in to kiss his cheek. “And I’m sure it’s not her first.”
“Guilty.” Jamie clinked his glass to Claire’s, grinning at her before scanning the room. “Just about time Jenny?”

“Aye, it is. Come away, brother.” Jenny said, tipping back the last drops of her drink.

“A wee speech,” Jamie said softly to Claire. “Ian, behave now. None of those college shinty stories.”

“I wouldn’t dream of telling her those,” Ian laughed, offering Claire his arm. Claire beamed at him as she wound her arm through his.

“And why not?”

“Because he plays a part in most of them,” Jamie muttered and squeezed her hand before he followed Jenny.

***

Claire was delighted with Ian’s company, more so when she discovered he was a fellow art lover.

“Did you study art?” She asked.

“No, but Jenny did,” He grinned. “We met in an art class and…well,” Ian chuckled, “I took a few more art classes than necessary to get close to her, ye ken.”

“How terribly romantic,” Claire quipped as he led her to the next installation. They had only just reached the piece when one of the event coordinators approached them.

“Excuse me, sir. Mrs. Murray has requested you.” Ian hesitated a moment before Claire pressed.

“I can manage just fine, Ian. Please, go ahead.”

“All right, but I won’t be long.”

Claire playfully shooed him away, as she turned back to the display. This one was a sepia photograph of raked fields, following a harvest. The ground was ripped apart, roots and branches scattered over the once neatly lined wheat field, but in the foreground, a male hand extended out to landscape, and within the cupped hand, the land’s soil. As she leaned closer she felt a set of eyes lock on her back. She dropped her eyes to her clenched hands and forced herself to relax them as she felt a presence walk up alongside her.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said the young woman. Claire glanced at her a moment, taking in her dark curls and the ruby-lipped smile.

“Yes. I never thought a harvest could appear so violent.” Claire admitted. “Do you know the artist?”

The woman tilted her head. “Don’t you? You were just standing with her husband, after all.” Claire’s eyes flew to the artist plaque and felt a blush start to creep up her neck. “Oh! I didn’t realize…Are you a friend of the family?”

“My uncle has worked for the Frasers for years. This was taken at the Lallybroch estate two summers ago. Janet usually donates a few stills to these types of events. She hasn’t sold privately in years, despite everyone urging her to.” The woman turned fully to Claire and extended her hand.

“Geneva Dunsany.”

Claire felt her throat go dry. “Dunsany, as in Lord Provost of Edinburgh?”
“My Father.” Geneva tilted her head and waived over a server. “And you are?”

“Dr. Claire Beauchamp.”


Claire pressed her lips together and took a glass of champagne from the server. “Medicine actually. I’ll be a certified surgeon before the end of the year.”

“Oh. Well, that’s wonderful.” Geneva’s eyes sank to her drink, taking a sip before beaming at her again. “Goodness, that must have taken a lot of time. I’ll finish my BS in Philosophy this spring.”

“Do you know what you wish to do after college then?” Claire asked, grateful to be back in familiar territory.

“Oh, no. No plans yet. I’m sure I’ll work for one of my mother’s philanthropies before long, but the main goal after college will be getting established.”

“Established?” Claire quirked an eyebrow.

“Married, of course. I’m turning 22 soon. I can’t very well wait much longer.” She chuckled.

“I see.” Claire felt as if she’d stepped back into the 18th century. Not knowing whether to pity the young girl or declare her delusional, Claire decided to play along with her madness. “Who’s the lucky fellow?”

“No decided winners yet. Though I have one in mind.” Geneva’s eyes turned slowly back on Claire. “Men can never be rushed into these things. My mother says they’re like temperate horses. Sometimes, if you want them to behave and follow you, you need to let go of their bridle and let them run free a bit.”

“Very sound advice,” Claire muttered.

“Yes. Though, I do wish he’d hurry up sowing his seed amongst the wild mares.” Claire watched Geneva’s eyes turn cold, as a tremor ran down her spine. “You’ll return James in good working order, I trust?”

Claire was grateful for the shadows in this part of the room, hiding the redness creeping up her neck and her hands clawing into her elbows.

“Excuse me?” Clare spat.

“Oh listen to me. I meant to reassure you there were no hard feelings.” Geneva tipped her head and bit her bottom lip. “Be sure to enjoy him while you have him, Claire. He’s an awfully good ride.”

(Insert week long pause here for previous break between part 1 and 2 ;)

So quiet,” Geneva taunted. “Guess you haven’t taken him for a ride then?”

In that moment, Claire felt grateful. Circumstance had delivered her Geneva’s last name, and knowing it was the only thing saving her from a trip down the nearest flight of stairs, Hippocratic oath be damned.

“You disgust me,” Claire said tersely. “And it’s clear you don’t know Jamie half as well as you’d like.”
Geneva’s smile wavered. “And you think you do? Like you knew Frank?”

Claire felt her ears begin to ring as blood flooded her face and fury built up inside her. “How…”

“Easy enough to dig up dirt if you have connections,” Geneva pursed her lips. “Slept around, did he? That’s what I heard. Now I wonder why he’d do that…”

“You insufferable wench!”

Claire felt herself stepping forward, her hand destined for Geneva’s throat or hair or whatever she could get her fingers around. She was struck dumb with when she ran into Ian’s side instead.

Ian eyed Claire’s state, and Geneva’s unflattering gaping mouth and quickly pieced together the scene. “Geneva. Leave.” Ian growled.

“But…”

“I will have your uncle drag you out if you don’t go on your own.” Ian held her gaze with one of steel. “Do not trifle with me.”

Geneva backed away and slowly disappeared down the stairwell. Claire stood by Ian, shaken and silent, hands clasped together. Ian led her to a pair of french doors that opened out onto the balcony. He handed her a glass of water and squeezed her elbow.

“Claire, I’ll be back in a moment. Please stay here.”

Claire watched Ian retreat from the balcony and quickly rewound the last ten minutes.

Frank was a history professor, for crying out loud. Not some bored debutant or hustler.

Yet, she knew about him. Knew of their rocky ending.

What else did she know? Where she worked? Her friends? Where she lived?

Her mind was painting a frightening picture of what one love-crazed girl could do.

Get a grip, Beauchamp. No need to have a panic attack at a party.

“Claire!”

She turned as Jamie walked onto the balcony and closed the doors firmly behind him. He was breathing heavy and Claire wondered briefly if he ran up here.

His hands reached for hers tentatively, and she let him take them. He pressed a kiss to her fingertips before pressing her hands to his chest.

“It’s my fault. Geneva I mean.” He spoke softly. “I should have dealt with her a week ago when she started leaving 20 messages each day.”

Claire’s stomach dipped and she paled. “You didn’t actually date her did you?”

“No…well,” he amended, and Claire pulled her hands away, ignoring the hurt look on his face. “We had dinner, one time. Two months ago.”

“Well, it obviously didn’t end with dinner,” Claire hissed between her teeth. “She had many lovely things to say about your…assets.”
Jamie paled. “What did she say, exactly?”

“Bugger off about what she said! Why don’t you tell me the truth!” She barked, and immediately regretted her tone when she saw Jamie flinch. She closed her eyes, trying to calm her temper, and willed her tears to not fall.

“Claire…”

“You don’t need to tell me. It doesn’t matter.” She turned towards the door. “I’m going home.”

“Claire, wait…” Jamie bit out.

Her hand was on the door handle when Jamie’s hand slammed onto the door frame, holding the door in place.

“I kissed her. After dinner, all right? I gave her a ride home, we made out in the car and then she turned into a loon and crawled into my lap, hell-bent to get naked over my dashboard.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair and Claire thought he swore, but wasn’t sure in which language, exactly.

“I made her leave. I didna want her. I don’t even know why I kissed her for Christ sake! I’ve found sheep more interesting than her, but I was deep into work and training on weekends and Jenny was driving me insane with ‘it’s been two years, Jamie’ and how worried about me she was and about ‘getting back in the saddle’ and I just wanted to shut her up about…” Jamie paused as he realized Claire was vibrating. “Are you…laughing at me?”

Claire blinked rapidly and then brought her hand to her mouth. “Yes.” She glanced sideways at him, “Jenny didn’t really tell you to get ‘back in the saddle,’ did she? “

“Aye. She did.”

“Does everyone in your family use horse puns?”

He shrugged as if the answer was obvious. “Aye. We also spit off motivational quotes when you least want to hear them. Care to hear a few?”

Her smirk turned into a grin and Jamie felt the tension in his chest ease.

“Later perhaps.” She turned to face him, letting her eyes slowly rise to his. “I meant it you know. You didn’t need to tell me.”

“No, I did. If I’d handled her better a week ago she would have let you alone. And to have you leave for it…”

“I was upset about something else.” She admitted. “Though you didn’t help it, I suppose.”

What is it, Sassenach?”

His free arm looped around her waist, and despite her fear that Geneva was right, hearing Jamie’s moniker for her made her realize she knew him enough. He was a live wire, a safe haven, and all hers if she allowed it. She breathed in his comfort and felt her heart settle. She then erupted into tears.

“What…shhhh, lass,” Jamie crooned. As startled as he was by her sudden outburst, He managed to walk her over to the nearby bench.

Handing her a handkerchief, he rubbed her arms, and lowered his lips to her hair, whispering comforting nonsense in Gaelic to her.
“I don’t know what you’re saying, but…don’t stop,” she hiccups. He smiled into her hair and held her until her trembling subsided.

“Claire…talk to me?” He asked.

Claire swallowed. “She researched me. She knew about Frank, how and why it ended and I don’t even know how.”

Jamie nodded, pressing his lips together. “He worked at the University of Edinburgh?”

Claire looked up. “Yes.”

“I saw the boxes at your place. The mail on top. Well, that’s where she goes. Maybe a friend of hers knew him, or a professor…or…”

“Right.” Claire bit out, before dropping her head into her hands. Jamie’s hand moved to her back, rubbing small circles into her shoulders.

“Well, she knew just where to strike me. She used what she knew to make me doubt…us,” She looked up then and saw a flicker of sadness, barely held at bay.

“Well of course she did. That’s what she wanted, ye ken,” he murmured. He met her gaze. “But you shouldn’t doubt us.”

A small smile spread, despite her trembling lip. “Oh, is that so?”

His fingers brushed her cheek and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. His lips burned as they pressed into hers, his mouth coaxing her open as his tongue tasted her and stole her breath.

She mewed as her own mouth kissed the stubble above his lip, the corner of his mouth and the edge of his jaw. Her tongue licked a path to his earlobe, worrying it between her teeth as he groaned and pulled her close.

“Sassenach,” he murmured, pressing his lips back to her throat, sucking gently as she squirmed and squeaked in his arms. “I want ye so…” he huffed as his lips met hers again, and he felt electricity and heat surge through him. His hand traveled up the outside of her thigh until it tangled in the lace of her panties, drawing an appreciative moan from his lips.

Claire smiled into his mouth and scooted off the bench and onto her feet in front of him, never leaving his lips. She led his other hand to her hip and helped his fingers roll the lacy fabric down until it fell slack around her ankles.

Jamie’s hands reached for her but she was gone, having stepped away and out of her undergarments.

“I’m glad you want me,” she grinned and picked up the lace from the ground. “But, I’m afraid you can’t have me until we leave.”

She dropped the lacey bits in his lap and heard a harsh breath escape him. She bit her lip and backed away towards the door.

He quirked an eyebrow at her and grinned as he stood, tucking her panties into his pocket.

“No one would accuse you of subtlety, Sassenach.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

To Jeannie: Thank you so much for your comment on either this chapter or Chapter 8 Part 2. Because I'm mentally challenged with AO3, and was combining chapter 8 part 1 and 2, I believe I deleted your comment by accident. Please know the words were so sweet and heart felt, and I appreciate them greatly. Hope you enjoy this Chapter <3

Happy Printshop Everyone :)

“Are you all right?” Claire whispered to him. “You’re pale.”

“Aye, I’m fine,” he answered, a bit startled at how far his mind had wandered. “Just a little lightheaded.”

“I’m running to the ladies room, but I’ll bring you back some water,” Claire said, her eyes glinting with amusement.

He watched her as she walked away, his eyes only leaving her arse to look at his watch.

“Go home, brother,” Jenny said, a wicked smile on her face. “There’s only a half hour left. Ian and I will manage fine.”

Jamie shot her a wary look. “What will this kind act cost me later? You never let me leave early.”

“You’ve never dated a girl I liked,” Jenny clucked back.

“Like, is it? Well, that is mighty praise from you, dear sister,” he grinned.

“I like her too, or does that not matter?” Ian quipped. His eyes grew more serious as he pulled his wife close. “Are you going to talk to John later?”

“Aye,” Jamie muttered. “I’ll speak with him on Monday. I’m just grateful he took Geneva home.”

“I’ll speak with her mother as well,” Jenny said and reached over to squeeze his hand. “Dinna fash. Off with ye both, brother.” She pressed a kiss to her brother’s forehead, and Jamie squeezed her shoulder before he stood and embraced Ian.

“And Jamie?” Jenny called. “Be sure to invite her to Lallybroch Saturday next.”

Jamie was standing outside the ladies room when Claire emerged. His eyes darkened when they met hers, and Claire felt her lower belly tighten in response.

“We’re leaving,” Jamie murmured in her ear as he took her arm.
“Already? Well, let me tell…”

“No need.” Jamie clipped. He was firmly moving them towards the exit when Claire paused.

“But, I didn’t say goodbye…”

“I told them for you.”

“That’s not the same, and you know it.”

“They won’t mind.”

“Jamie!” Claire huffed, exasperated as he led her out the side entrance. Their car was waiting for them already. “But I wanted to…”

His lips were on hers before she could finish the words, kissing her hard as his hand cupped the back of her neck. He continued to back her towards the car door. “She invited you to Lallybroch next weekend.”

Claire beamed. “Really! Oh, I’d love to...”

“Claire.”

“What?”

“Get. In. The car.”

Claire raised a brow.

“Please.” He added.

She took his hand as he helped her in, but she didn’t let her grin show until he closed her door.

The drive to his home was short, only ten minutes or so.

Damn if he didn’t tease her the entire time.

Despite his brutish tone on the sidewalk, once inside the car his arms enveloped her, his fingers trailing down her arms and across her shoulders, down the slope of her neck and over the curve of her jaw.

He pressed his lips to her ear, and she shivered as he whispered to her of the gooseflesh along her neck and the heat of her skin. A soft moan escaped her as his hand slid between her thighs, his fingers bunching up her hem until he could smell the faint trace of her desire.

He kissed her then, his lips teasing hers apart, softly touching his tongue to hers.

By the time they arrived at his home, Claire felt as if her blood was set aflame.

Five frustratingly long minutes later, Claire was wrestling his suit jacket off in his doorway.
She gasped as his tongue licked a path down her neck, and lifted her into his arms. Her legs locked around his waist as his mouth found hers, his feet carrying them down the hallway to his bedroom.

Jamie lowered her to the bed’s edge and took a knee to hold her ankle. He removed one heel, placing it gently beside the bed, before hooking his fingers around the strap of the other. His hands rubbed circles into her calves as his eyes lifted to hers. She watched him intently, and he found it difficult to break away from her gaze.

His hand traveled back to her waist to pull her close as he pressed a chaste kiss to her lips.

“Is this all right?” He asked, feeling a shyness creep over him as a light blush touched her cheeks.

“Yes, but I want to take this off,” Claire said, and they both chuckled as she reached behind her for the dress’s clasp. Jamie’s hands were there a moment later, guiding the zipper down her back until the fabric fell off her shoulders to pool around her waist. She rose to her knees on the bed’s edge, pulling the dress over her head as his hands steadied her waist.

Her breasts were barely covered by the sheer black material stretched over her pink nipples, and Jamie felt his throat go dry.

“You’re so very lovely, Sassenach,” he rasped. Her face rouged as her fingers unbuttoned his shirt, untucked the tails from his trousers, and slid the shirt off his shoulders. Claire studied his bare chest, letting her fingers trace his collarbone before she dipped down to the raised, puckered skin around his nipples. Jamie let out a shuddered breath as her nails raked down his abs to his navel, her fingers reaching for the clasp of his trousers. He stopped her and took her hands in his, placing a kiss on the inside of each wrist.

“You’re so very lovely, Sassenach,” he rasped. Her face rouged as her fingers unbuttoned his shirt, untucked the tails from his trousers, and slid the shirt off his shoulders. Claire studied his bare chest, letting her fingers trace his collarbone before she dipped down to the raised, puckered skin around his nipples. Jamie let out a shuddered breath as her nails raked down his abs to his navel, her fingers reaching for the clasp of his trousers. He stopped her and took her hands in his, placing a kiss on the inside of each wrist.

“Lay back, Claire,” he murmured, holding her wrists as he lowered her back. He stood to admire her and place one more kiss to her lips before leaving them to explore. He traveled down between her breasts, placing a gentle kiss on each peak that drew mewls from her lips. His tongue lapped at her nipples through the sheer fabric, and his fingers tugged at them until they stiffened. Jamie cupped the back of her knees and pulled her towards him, placing one leg on his shoulder. She sighed as he pressed kisses on her inner thigh, her breaths growing louder as his lips drew closer to her apex.

“Please,” she pleaded. Jamie smiled as he hovered over her. He gently placed his fingers on her lower lips and opened her, feeling a shiver run through her thigh. When his tongue stroked her, her belly clenched to her spine, and a delicious squeal passed her lips.

Looking up, Jamie watched her face contort in pleasure as she began moving her hips against his mouth, her body flushed and damp with arousal. He watched as she bit her lip and thrashed against his touch, wanting more of him.
She moaned as she arched against his hand as he curled his fingers inside her slick heat, and felt her walls throb and pulse until, in a high pitch cry of abandon, she came hard, chest heaving and legs trembling. He presses kisses to her knees, and inner thighs as his fingers rubbed the swollen walnut within her, milking her orgasm until he felt the spasms still and her breath quiet. She tugged on his hair gently, and he chuckled, kissing her belly.

“Jamie,” she whispered, and he felt a surge of lust flow through him. She sounded husky and wanton and very pleased.

“Hmm?”

“Come here.”

He stood between her knees and took her hands to help her sit up. Her hands finished their earlier work, unclasping his trousers and pushing them to his ankles with his undergarments in seconds.

“It's no’ going anywhere, lass,” he said and smiled as her hands reached for his bottom for leverage.

“That’s fine,” she gasped. “But I need you inside me.”

“Och, I couldn’t agree more.”

He kissed her, letting his tongue awaken her again as he slid over her. He reached over her to the nightstand, grabbing for a rubber when she pulled his face back.

“No, don’t,” she whispered.

“Really?” He murmured. “You don’t mind?”

Before he left the night before Claire had the obligatory “you’ve been tested recently” conversation with him, that ended with rolled eyes and blushes, but affirmative answers. She also knew birth control wouldn’t be an issue but forced that thought out of her head. She wouldn’t ruin this.

“I want to feel you.”

He felt his throat thicken with emotion, so he nodded his understanding and smiled. Claire shifted toward the middle of the bed, and he followed, crawling between her legs and pressing kisses along her navel, ribs, and breasts.

His lips found purchase in the hollow of her neck as his hand guided his hardness along her folds, coating himself in her fluids. Her hips lifted off the bed, and she huffed again as he pushed them back down, letting his thumb rub her as his mouth sucked at her pulse. Her hands found squeezed his biceps as she whimpered and mewled, pain mixing with pleasure as his teeth nipped her.

She cried out and dug her nails into his shoulders, as he hummed against her jaw.

“Jamie,” she pleaded.

“Hush. I’m here,” he nuzzled her nose as he placed himself at her opening, biting his lip at the feel of her. She was so wet he could have thrust right away, but he inched in, moving with her breaths until he was half sheathed.

She didn’t complain. He was thicker than she was used to and appreciated his care until he pulled out again.

“You’re so tight, Claire,” he breathed, pushing just his tip into her, again and again.
“More,” she moaned as her fingers gripped his back. He grunted and grabbed her knee, hitching it high on his hip.

He eased into her, and they both cried out as he filled her.

They were still for several heartbeats, foreheads pressed together as they clutched one another. Her breath was audible, and he hummed softly, brushing her cheek with his nose.

“All right?” He whispered.

“Yes,” she purred, tightening her hold on him.

He moved inside her and felt his blood ignite. He watched her as his hips bucked against hers and smiled when her eyes opened and locked on his. Their eyes bore into one another as her body hummed and moved with him. His fingers found the clasp between her breasts and released her hardened, stiff peaks. He dipped his head to them, sucking and nipping at her pebbled nipples until they swelled a dark red. Then he lifted his eyes back to her and rubbed his chest against hers, groaning at the friction between them.

She contracting around him and he yelped, feeling his self-control slip further by the moment. His hand traveled between her legs to their joining, and he flicked her nub with his thumb, bringing a flood of wetness and a squeak.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, kissing her lips.

“Don’t stop,” she panted. “Yes! Don’t stop!”

He lost himself as she came again, clutching him in her heat, and encouraging him with her cry of release. He panted as he spilled himself inside of her, a moan of relief escaping him as he rode out his lingering pleasure, before lowering himself to her side.

When her breathing slowed, she turned to look at him. His Eyes were closed, and his soft smile made him looked boyish, beautiful really. The expression changed to a frown when he felt her shift, and a chuckle escaped her as his arm locked her in place.

“Bored with me already?” he quipped, a smirk crawling onto his face.

Her thumb rubbed along his lower lip, and he kissed it softly.

“Never,” she whispered, turning on her side. His left hand cupped her arse and pulled her against him until they were nose to nose. She wanted to say so many things to him but felt words failed to describe the elation springing from her heart. Fortunately, her stomach had its own direct language. A loud grumble erupted from her gut, and Jamie’s smirk quickly turned into a wide grin.

“Well there’s a sentiment I can agree with,” he declared, rubbing her back as she chuckled into a collarbone. Patting her behind, he slowly sat up. “Come Sassenach. Let me feed ye before there’s nothing left of ye.”

Sitting on Jamie’s kitchen counter in his undershirt, Claire watched as he cut up a small block of cheese, summer sausage, and a few apple slices. His sweatpants hung low on his hips, exposing the delicious curve of muscle and ligaments leading to his…

“See somethin’ you like, lass?” He said with his low-toned resonant burr.

She shivered and smiled. “Maybe.” He made a Scottish noise and fed her a piece of cheese.
“You know, your accent isn’t always distinguishable. Why is that?”

“Och. Just my schooling showing. My parents would be proud.” He rolled his eyes as he leaned against her dangling legs. He held out an apple slice for her, and she grinned as she leaned forward for a bite.

“They didn’t like it?”

“Och, no they didn’t mind but,” he paused. “People still carry a bit of prejudice against Scots. They wanted me to know how to turn it off if I found myself in bad company.”

“Well, I rather like the burr. It suits a man of…” her eyes widened. “I don’t know how old you are. Bloody hell, I’ve slept with you, and I don’t know your age, your middle name…”

“My blood type, my gross income…”

She pinched his side.

Jamie squealed.

Claire’s eyes grew wide with mischievous wonder. Before her fingers could continue their assault, he had her by the wrists.

“You’re ticklish,” she gasped, grinned widely.

“Be reasonable, woman,” he warned, somewhat in jest. “You want information, and I’d like to keep a small amount of dignity. Fair trade?”

“Perhaps. Start talking, Fraser.”

They moved to his couch, bringing the food and conversation somewhere warmer for them both. Jamie’s bare toes wiggled as he answered her questions and asked some of his own about her childhood, her family and friends. Her heart warmed as they laughed softly in the darkened room, despite stories of their parents and their departures.

“Your father sounds like a wonderful man,” she squeezed his hand. “When did he pass?”

“Two years ago now. He got to meet Jenny’s bairns. We were all grateful for that, even…”

“Even if you were only 26. Still too young to lose a parent.” She spoke softly into his shoulder, curling her toes beneath her.

“How old are you, lass?” She smiled.

“Thirty-one. Are you surprised?”

His brows furrowed. “A bit. You certainly don’t act older than me,” he caught her elbow before it connected with his stomach and pulled her into his lap, kissing the scowl on her lips. His hands moved under his t-shirt cupping the back of her thighs.

She rose up on her knees as his fingers squeezed her arse, dipping her head to the left, so her cheek touched her shoulder. His shirt smelled of his soap and cologne, and she smiled to herself as his hand slipped around her waist.
“Christ,” he muttered. “You look so bonny, hair tussled, legs bare, wearing my shirt.”

“I’m glad you approve,” she grinned, arching her hips as his thumbs dug into her skin. He huffed and stood, lifting her into his arms. He held her securely, and brought his mouth to hers, sucking on her bottom lip, as she felt him walk across the room.

“Where are we…”

His hands cupped her bottom and placed her on the kitchen counter edge.

“Going.” She finished, looking up at him. His eyes had darkened, and she shuddered as his hands spread her knees apart. She arched her back and leaned back on her hands, her hardened nipples straining against his cotton shirt.

“God, Claire,” he rasped. “I want ye so badly.”

She met his gaze. “Then show me.”

There was no gentleness between them this time. She wanted to know his need, and he vowed to show her. He thrust hard into her, and she cried out her approval. His fingers dug into her arse as he plunged into her, again and again, moans and grunts escaping him. Her hands gripped his shoulders as he drove into her, his pace speeding up as her moans grew louder.

“Fuck,” he groaned, as his thrusts became more erratic. He reached his fingers to her clit and pinched it gently. She echoed his explicative as she rubbed against his chest.

“Faster,” she commanded, and his eyes turned molten as he pulled her hips off the counter. He held her hips still against the dishwasher as he kept her at a relentless pace. She keened and vibrated against him until she erupted, soaking his cock and sending him spiraling into orgasm. His body convulsed as he spilled into her, his moans punctuating each jerk of his cock as it finally settled. Their eyes met and then their lips, hungry for one another, bumping teeth and clashing tongues as they fought to claim each other. Finally, they calmed, lust momentarily dismissed, leaving them bewildered and dazed.

“I…well,” he started.

“Exactly.” She smirked.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and settled herself in his comforting heat.

“Can we go back to bed?” She whispered.

He smiled and readjusted her in his arms. “Aye, that we can.”
Chapter 10

Jamie stood in the Edinburgh Stables battling his temper and annoyance. This was the second time this breeder stood him up to see this damn horse, and Jamie felt a distinct level of skepticism over his seller’s desire to sell.

“You know they’re like this. I don’t know why it always surprises you,” John said good-naturedly, laying a hand on his friend’s back.

“I don’t know why you always make excuses for them,” Jamie countered, eying John as they walked toward the ring. “He’s trying to drive up the price.”

“You want the horse. It’s my job to keep you civil until the deal is done.”

“How can I want a horse I haven’t seen…” Jamie’s phone beeped with Claire’s personalized sound. His face lit up as he checked his phone, a smile spreading across his face as he quickly typed a response. John quirked a brow, fascinated by this change of pace.

“That’s her?” John asked.

Jamie glanced at him. “Aye. Is it that obvious?”

“Painfully so. You’re making my heart ache.”

Jamie chuckled as they walked on, but John eyed him suspiciously.

“Why didn’t you introduce me?”

“I thought that would be obvious,” Jamie muttered.

“Because I’m better looking? Because you can’t hold a candle to my witty banter and…”

“John.” Jamie threw him a dirty look.

“Come on, you can’t possibly think…”

“Ye have! Damn near every time!” He growled.

For the past 15 years of their friendship, John could point out the fatal flaw in a woman Jamie dated within five minutes of meeting her. He could predict how long the relationship would last down to the week. John had spent many hours with Brian Fraser in the Lallybroch kitchen, chuckling at his friend’s expense. Jenny suspected John hexed Jamie, and was quite happy he could make the tartlets disappear, while Brian Fraser stated John simply had more sense.

“Oh, For the love of God…” John groaned. “This superstition thing again…”

“I dinna need a lecture or a priest,” Jamie huffed and walked faster.

John tilted his head before realization set in. “You really like her.”

“Aye, I do,” Jamie stated, still not meeting John’s eyes.
“Jamie, if you feel that strongly, that already sets her apart from most of the women you’ve dated.”

“What are ye talking about?”

John’s lip quirked. “You didn’t like any of them, man.”

“You’re daft.”

“You’re daft! Even Annalise...”

“You’ll never let me live that down, will you?”

“You cringed when she spoke! And then you were baffled when she broke up with you!”

Jamie stopped walking and sighed, admitting defeat and revealing the slightest of grins. “God, her voice was awful.”

John’s smirk fell as loud calls and yells echoed towards them.

The city stables were often busy at this time a day with private appointments or rented slots for showings and meetings. Such a display was occurring in the ring, where a monstrous black devil was rearing and neighing angrily at its handler. His coat was in disarray, and the creature kicked out at the hands trying to grab his reins.

“On the ground!” John pointed.

Jamie took off running, John a few cursing strides behind him, until he reached the idiot being dragged around the ring.

“Do ye no’ have sense, man?! Let go!” Jamie called to him as he stood bodily in front of the fallen rider. The young girl took the distraction and scrambled out of the ring.

Jamie threw his arms out and widened his stance, holding his ground as the horse circled. The horse approached him once or twice to challenge the barrier, but Jamie hollered at the beast until it finally began to settle.

“John,” Jamie called out, “is everyone out?”

“Everyone except you,” he replied. “Naturally.”

Jamie smiled at the irked tone in his friend’s voice and lowered his arms. The horse immediately whinnied but didn’t stamp or kick, which Jamie found agreeable. Walking towards the giant beast, Jamie saw the appeal in the boy. Young, gigantic, beautiful stature and lines.

The horse’s ears flicked with annoyance as he neighed his displeasure.

_I’m sure these idiots were trying to turn you into a show pony,_” Jamie muttered, unaware he had switched to Gaelic.

“Come here, sweet son, and let me look at you.”

John kept one eye on Jamie and then turned to the details: The peeved owners, the too young rider who wanted a horse beyond her abilities, the horse handlers offering their apologies. John would read each of them, and then when Jamie gave him a signal, John would make an offer. John knew his friend well, and he knew when Jamie found what he wanted.
The fact that the beast was Satan incarnate would only encourage him.

Jamie got his hand on the horse’s lead rope and led the irritated animal to the center of the ring where Jamie ran him through some basic groundwork. It was clear the horse lacked discipline, but Jamie was surprised at how quickly the horse’s mood shifted once led with a steady hand. He caught John’s eye and pinched his denim pocket. Then he turned his back and let the horse come to a halt. “Let’s get you settled with some hay, a bhalaich,” Jamie spoke softly.

Claire dropped her grocery bags on the counter and stripped quickly, heading towards her shower. She ran the water, throwing herself under the jets and finally releasing a long ragged breath.

Jamie was coming over as soon as he finished up at the stables and Claire found herself on edge.

She’d last seen him 5 days ago when she left his apartment Saturday afternoon. She nearly shook with need remembering their lazy morning: tangled limbs, tender kisses, and Jamie’s fingers coaxing her legs to open for him again and again…

She bit her bottom lip and grabbed her loofa to distract herself. Five days seemed far too long. They talked every day since she left his home. His lips had lingered on hers and delayed her departure for several hours, but eventually, she had gone, and life had resumed. Too much so.

Work had quickly consumed them both, making it impossible to align their schedules. Even tonight was a compromise, as Jamie had to leave in the early morning to head to Lallybroch for the weekend. She wished she could head up with him, but she still had a shift to work tomorrow afternoon.

He had insisted on tonight, and she couldn’t argue. She tried several times this week to remember how it had felt with Frank at the beginning. Of course, he had pursued her and romanced her, made her feel giddy and light, but this felt entirely different. Jamie tasted like oxygen after surfacing from a deep dive.

She heard her front door slam and smiled. She’d left the door open for him.

“Sassenach…” she heard him call.

“In the shower!” She called rinsing out the suds in her hair. “I’ll be right out!”

She was startled when she heard the bathroom door open a moment later.

“Jamie?”

She squeaked as he pulled the shower curtain back.

“What…”

His lips met hers in a hard kiss, as he stepped into the shower and pinned her to the wall. As his hands came up to cup her cheek and hold her hip, she realized his nakedness and smiled against his mouth.

“Hi,” he whispered huskily.

“Hallo,” Claire whispered back, running her tongue along his upper lip. He pulled her knee up around his hip and pressed his hips against hers. He was more than ready.
“Do you just walk around like that all day?” She quipped.

“Only when your near, lass,” he chuckled. “I got hard climbing your stairs.”

“Oh,” Claire whispered. Jamie entered her with a grunt and Claire’s cry muffled against his shoulder.

“Christ did I hurt…”

“No! Please, I need more,” she sighed against his shoulder.

He pulled out and thrust back into her as she nodded against his fevered skin.

“How are you this wet, Claire?” He whispered against her mouth, his thrusts growing faster. “Were you thinking of me, too?”

“Oh huh.”

Words failed her as he sped up to ram her, his hips slapping against hers in a smooth rhythm of lust and arousal.

“Come for me, Claire,” he moaned in her ear. “I want to watch you fall apart, feel you fall…apart,” he grunted, biting his lip as he concentrated.

He could feel her hip quivering, and with a few swipes of his thumb over her clit she screamed out his name, hips bucking against his as she contracted hard on his cock.

“God, Claire,” he moaned as he released jets of seed into her. His chest heaved and trembled under her fingertips.

He lowered her leg slowly as her mouth sealed against his. She tasted the salt of his mouth, his hot breath, and knew that this felt much different than mere pleasure or desire. His hand came to her cheek, and she felt a tear bead down her face, overwhelmed by his tenderness.

“I missed you,” she murmured against his lips.

“And I, you,” he answered, a glowing smile breaking on his face. He looked around, puzzled.

“Lose something?” She quipped.

“I just realized I smell like horses and I don’t have soap here.” He grimaced.

“Alas, laddie. I do have soap.” She chuckled.

“Mnhmm. Will I smell of botanical breezes after?” He smirked.

“You arse,” she said, snapping a wet washcloth at him as he chuckled. “Its citrus, and you didn’t mind it when I was in your shower.”

“I don’t mind much when you're naked,” he said huskily. He pressed a kiss to her lips and reached beyond her to the soap, eying it skeptically. “I’ll make do.”

Pulling on a t-shirt and panties, Claire eyed Jamie’s bare chest from across the room. His body was
beautiful, cut and muscular, with soft auburn curls cutting across his chest. He chuckled when he saw her staring and motioned her over with a crook of his finger. Grinning, she obliged him and made a content sound when he placed a kiss on her collarbone.

“Come then,” he said softly. “I want to hear all about your week.”

“Well, you know the highlights already,” she said, leading him into the kitchen. “Long shifts, Dr. Roth being more of a hardass than usual…”

“Harvey Roth?” Jamie asked. Claire looked over at him, raising a brow. “Yes. You know him?”

Jamie frowned. “He’s your supervisor?”

“Part of the Scottish Antiquities Society and is known to be a ruthless businessman. He earned some unpopularity when he sold some rare Scottish coins to an Italian merchant a few years ago.” Jamie’s face darkened. “To sell outside of the society is bad enough, but to a foreign trader? For an extra 10% profit? He was nearly ejected.”

Claire considered this as she closed her pantry, groceries fully packed away. “Frank always talked about the scattered nature of Scottish history, especially after the 45 rising.”

“The antiquities society funded most of the recovery efforts since 1920. They were the ones who probably entrusted the coins to Harvey’s family ages ago. To…” Jamie blushed suddenly, a sheepish look overtaking his expression. “Sorry, Sassenach.”

“For what?” Claire asked, taking a plate from him and handing him a fork.

“Bah, going on about nothing. My point was, Harvey's a bastard.” Jamie grumbled, sliding into the chair next to hers.

“So what else…”

Her hand grabbed his wrist and turned his arm over, revealing a terrible gash on his forearm.

“How the hell did you do this?” She asked, barely containing her alarm. Jamie barely looked up from his plate.

“A horse bit me.”

“…it BIT you?” She exclaimed.

“Aye, well. I got between him and his hay, ye ken. My fault for being ill-mannered with an ill-mannered horse.”

“I see,” she furrowed her brows. “Did you tell the owner about the foul thing?”

“Nah. I already bought him when he bit me.”

“You BOUGHT the creature that did this to you? He broke the skin!”

“Och, it’s no’ that bad.”
“Och, it is, damn it,” Claire growled, standing up. She dragged him from his seat and lead him to the bathroom where she pulled out her hydrogen peroxide and bacitracin.

Jamie stood silently as she grumbled her disagreement, cleaning his wound over her sink. When she had applied the ointment and wrapped it to her satisfaction, he let a small smile cross his lips.

“Well, that’s quite proper."

“Do you know how many silly cuts and abrasions turn into full-blown blood and staph infections because people don’t clean them properly?”

“Is that right?” He said, pulling her close.

“I’m serious, you bloody…” he kissed her, but she wouldn’t be silenced that easily. She pulled away, glowering at his grin.

“Scot."

A few hours later, they were curled into her sheets, clothes abandoned on the floor from their lovemaking. Claire laid nestled in Jamie’s arms, her back to his chest, with one of his hands gently cupping her breast.

He’d been telling her about Lallybroch, about his love for it and what they’d do and see this weekend when he fell quiet. Only the gentle drumming of his index finger let her know he was still awake.

“You make me so happy, Claire.”

She smiled, feeling a glow fill her chest near to the point of bursting. She kissed one of the knuckles on his hand.

“When I’m not lecturing you, you mean?”

“Nah. I’m happy then. I’d be happy if you were moody,” he nuzzled close to her ear. “Or cross. When your wee cheeks get red with anger…” he bit back a laugh as she frowned, “or even if you shrieked like a banshee.”

“I. Do not. Shriek.”

“I’ve heard you come, Sassenach. I like your shrieks just fine.”

She kicked at his shins until he turned her in his arms, planting a kiss on her nose.

“You make me happy too, at least when you aren’t being bitten by horses,” Claire murmured, curling into his chest.

“G’night, mo ghraidh.”

My darling, he had told her, when she asked what it meant.

“G’night, Jamie.”
Chapter 11

Claire arrived at Lallybroch late Friday evening. Jamie met her on the long dark driveway, leading her vehicle past the main house to a small cottage set back from the main road.

Exiting the car, she barely took two steps before his arms enveloped her into his coat, and his mouth dropped to possess hers.

“How was the drive?” He spoke against her lips. “Are you never coming up here again?”

“It was only two hours, Jamie,” she muttered back, a smile forming as she leaned in for another kiss. “I’ve driven far worse roads with less attractive men at the end of them.”

“Och, a prize, am I?” He teased, taking her bag from her as he pulled her along the path to the house.

“Motivation, I’d say. That and a warm bed,” she squeezed his hand as she looked up at the house with its rich smelling, log fire hearth. He grinned as he opened the door for her, his eyes moving over her lithe form before his hands found their way back to her hips.

“I know I was just with you this morning,” he spoke softly to her, his hands holding her in the dark foyer of the cottage, “but I feel like I’ve longed for you to be here, with me, for an age.”

“I love it already. Being here with you…” she smiled into the dark, and found his lips again.

She peeled away her coat and his until they stood in their clothes, limbs twined around one another, their mouths gently claiming one another in a sweet and tender dance. They would have continued on, had a yawn not rattled her body and given her away.

“Tired, aye?”

“Well, it’s certainly not your kisses putting me to sleep.”

Jamie chuckled and kissed her once more before leading her up the stairs to their bedroom, where a fire was well tended in the hearth and the sheets were already turned down. The room was decorated in a primitive style, harkening back to the estate’s 18th-century roots. Across the chair by the window was a beautiful red tartan, the Fraser colors from what she knew, that completed the room’s charm.

“Would you like to shower…”

“No, I showered before I drove up, just in case ‘rustic’ meant camping bathrooms.” She said with a chuckle as he kissed her forehead.

“Well, good. I’m about ready to fall over and I don’t plan on sleeping without ye,” Jamie said, patting her gently on her rump. “I’ll show ye the grounds and gardens in the morning, and then you can meet Donas and Losgann.”

“Is Donas the biter?”

Jamie smiled as he pulled his sweater off.

“Aye. That’s him.”

“Mhmhm.” Claire muttered, peeling off her layers just as quickly to slip under the sheets. They were
cool against her naked skin and the sensation made her shiver.

“Cold?” Jamie murmured, as he slid under the sheets as well. They both wordlessly moved towards the center of the bed, where they pressed against one another, transferring heat, touches, and kisses.

“Not anymore,” Claire murmured against his chest. Curled into one another, and tucked in the fire-warmed feather down, their soft words quieted as they drifted off in each other’s arms.

The slamming door felt like it shook the entire cottage, yet it was the pounding steps on the stairs that launched Jamie out of bed and into his clothes.

“JAMES. FRASER.”

Claire’s head popped up, eying Jamie’s half-naked form as he scrambled into his jeans. His pants buttoned, he opened the door and met Jenny Murray before she had a chance to storm into their room.

“Yes, Jenny?” Claire heard his muffled greeting as he closed the door behind him.

A silence followed, and Claire’s eyebrow crept up her face as Jenny’s voice punctuated the morning air. She decided promptness was the best solution and dressed in a pair of leggings and a long sweater.

“Breakfast is getting cold, and I don’t plan on eating without you both,” Jenny stated softly as Claire appeared on the landing.

“That sounds lovely. Thank you for having me, Jenny.”

“Yes, Jenny?” Claire heard his muffled greeting as he closed the door behind him.

A silence followed, and Claire’s eyebrow crept up her face as Jenny’s voice punctuated the morning air. She decided promptness was the best solution and dressed in a pair of leggings and a long sweater.

“Breakfast is getting cold, and I don’t plan on eating without you both,” Jenny stated softly as Claire appeared on the landing.

“That sounds lovely. Thank you for having me, Jenny.”

“Of course, Claire,” Jenny said and then turned back to her brother, frowning.

“Well, put on a shirt you clot-heid.” Jenny tsked and started down the stairs.

Claire bit her bottom lip to keep a grin from splitting her face in half.

“Mmhmm.” Jamie muttered but returned in under a minute fully dressed. He wrapped his arm around her waist as they took the stairs.

“Did you sleep well?” He murmured in her ear.

“I always sleep well next to you,” she answered, kissing his cheek.

He smiled and hummed pulling her closer to his side and they walked out of their cottage towards the main house. The crisp fall air carried the smell of bacon, yeasty rolls, and eggs. Claire’s mouth watered immediately, but even the heavenly scent of breakfast couldn’t distract her from the rolling hills and the nearby fields of lilac and heather.

“Oh Jamie, it’s so lovely here,” she whispered to him, squeezing his hand.

“It gets better if you can imagine,” he spoke to her curls. Ten feet from the house two small children stumbled down the front steps, both climbing over the other as they scrambled to their feet.

“Uncle Jamie!” The small boy called as he ran straight into Jamie’s arms. Jamie tucked him under his arm while he leaned down to his three-year-old niece and circled his free arm around her, lifting her
to his hip.

“I told ye to be more gentle with your sister, ye gomeral,” Jamie jostled the boy gently before putting him back on his feet.

“This troublemaker is young Jamie, my nephew. Jamie, this is Claire, a special friend of mine.”

The young boy blushed and smiled widely, his uncle’s smile, Claire noted.

“Hi. I can show you the horses later. I know all their names.”

“Aye, that’d be verra helpful lad,” Jamie added with a smile.

“Nunkie,” Maggie said softly, her small hands gently folding into Jamie’s hair.

Jamie kissed Maggie’s cheek. “And this is Maggie.”

“Hello Maggie,” Claire cooed, and Maggie’s hands instantly gravitated to Claire’s hair.

“Pretty.” She said in awe, and Jamie chuckled.

“Aye, Maggie. I couldn’t agree more.” Claire blushed but before she could reply, Jenny appeared at the door, taking in her brother and children. She rolled her eyes and huffed. “You’ll all be the death of me. In the house for some food, now, all of ye.”

John sat at the long dining table, his fork shoving eggs into his mouth as Ian read him a story from the newspaper. Upon seeing Claire, John stood, and hastily stepped around the table, avoiding the dog and young Jamie running into his shins.

“You must be Claire,” John declared, a grin dancing across his face as he took in her windswept look and her easy smile.

“Yes! And who are you then?” She said, taking his hand as he guided her to a seat.

“I, good woman, am the adopted brother, that you’ve no doubt heard nothing about because…”

“John then,” Claire replied, grinning. “I trust you’re friendlier than your niece?”

John’s face morphed through several expressions before he chuckled, and to Claire’s delight, blushed. “I’m humbled if you find me so, Claire.”

“She already disarmed you, John?” Jamie asked through the bannock in his mouth. He took a seat on Claire’s other side and reached for the plate of sausage.

“Honestly, I expected more from you.”

“I’m only on my first cup of…”

“Oh, coffee!” Claire exalted as Jamie poured her a cup. “I can’t fault you there. I’m not allowed near my scalpels until cup two.”

“Jamie mentioned you were in your residency. A surgeon then?”
“If all goes well,” Claire smiled, sipping from her cup. “I should finish my certifications by January.”

“A hell of an accomplishment that’s for sure,” John replied, raising his brows at Jamie. “Much more prestigious than an MBA.”

“Be nice, now,” Jamie muttered to his forkful of sausage. “We can’t all have law degrees, John.” Claire smiled. “And Jenny the artist. She must have hated listening to you all.”

“Actually, I didn’t mind it much.” Jenny chimed in, as she slid into her chair. “I can block out most of their prattle when it suits me.” She cast a grin at Ian who leaned in for a kiss.

“What do you make of our humble home then, Claire?” Jenny asked, eying her over her mug.

“I’d hardly call it humble,” Claire chuckled. “It’s quite grand in fact, even in the dark. I can’t wait to see more of it.”

“You’ll be tired of the hills and horses by noon,” John muttered and Ian laughed.

“Because you’re tired of it, aye?” Jamie replied quirking a brow at him. “And that’s why you’re here today as well?”

“I’m here to watch you make an ass of yourself on that horse. I wouldn’t miss that for the world.”

“Donas did wonderful yesterday,” Jamie said evenly.

“By wonderful, you mean he only threw you once,” Ian piped in, looking at Jamie over his paper. “Or did you forget about that?”

John winked at Claire. “Has he told you about the demonic beast yet?”

Claire’s eyes flicked to Jamie who stared intently into his mug. She looked back to John and took a long sip.

“I saw the bite mark. Is there more to that story?”

“Just Jamie shouting at a crazed horse and praying to God the thing didn’t run him over like…”

“That’s quite enough coffee for you,” Jamie muttered, pulling the carafe away from John. “And he wasna crazed. Just scared.”

“Same different when it’s a 500-kilo animal,” John growled, his eye flickering to Jenny who just rolled hers heavenward.

“I gave up this argument years ago, John. Maybe Claire can talk some sense into him,” Jenny snickered, passing rolls to Claire.

“She’s no’ God, Janet,” Jamie grumbled, his hand slipping to Claire’s thigh under the table.

Claire furrowed her brows at him. “It’d take God to keep you away from a dangerous horse?”

“Nah,” Jamie grinned, giving her thigh a squeeze. “But it’d take God’s intervention for me to give up on one.”
Chapter 12

With breakfast finished and the dishes cleared, Jenny helped Claire into a more suitable jacket and boots for her morning excursions. Jamie grinned upon seeing her in a quilted mid waist jacket, and knee-high boots with her hair pulled back in a bun. John coughed loudly next to him, and he startled, and shot his friend a glare.

“You’ll thank me when your face doesn’t freeze in that lovesick stare,” John muttered and hid a smile behind his sleeve.

“Ass,” Jamie replied and smacked his friend’s shoulder as they walked outside.

Claire caught Jamie’s hand as the three headed toward the barn.

“So how much of a demon is he really, John?” Claire asked.

Before John could reply, Donas raced out of his stall, leaving a cloud of dust and two handlers behind him, who ran at full speed to grab his reigns before he ran out of the paddocks. The beast huffed, stamped his feet, and shook his head with agitation.

Claire shook with laughter as the two men stared at each other as if daring the other to speak first.

John admitted defeat first and leaned forward to smile at Claire. “Oh, nothing Jamie can’t handle.”

“Which I should…handle that is…” Jamie squeezed her hand and jogged off towards Donas’s paddock.

“In the meantime, let me introduce you to Losgann. She’s much sweeter.”

“Jamie’s sweetheart from what I hear,” Claire chuckled and took the arm John offered.

John laughed and shook his head. “She’s a wonderful horse. We’ve retired her from competition now, but Jamie medaled with her in cross country for several years.”

“Cross country riding?” Claire asked as they approached Losgann’s paddock. The horse immediately walked over to where they stood and nuzzled John’s shoulder affectionately.

“Yes. Jamie excelled at cross country. It takes a smart, brave horse and a sharp rider.” John rubbed Losgann’s nose affectionately. “She has an easier life now, but she’s still Jamie’s favorite.”

“I see,” Claire said with a smile as her hand extended to Losgann’s forehead. The horse gently bumped her hand, and Claire felt her heart swell.

She was a huge animal, but gentle and positively smitten with Claire, John noted with a chuckle, and he watched as Losgann’s nose root against Claire pocket for a treat. John pressed a biscuit into Claire’s hand and motioned for her to hold her hand flat. Losgann’s lips quivered in excitement over her palm as her teeth gently grabbed the treat and licked her palm.

“Oh, you are a sweet girl,” Claire said softly. In the distant paddock, Claire saw Jamie swinging a rope in circles in front of him with one hand as the other held the lead rope.

“What’s he doing with Donas, exactly?”
“It’s groundwork. We “work” horses, because they do well with purpose and guidance. The best way to discipline a horse is with work. It helps them focus. The reward is rest.”

Claire walked closer to where Jamie guided Donas around the paddock, leading the horse into a cross step, a back step, and trots. When Jamie brought Donas to a halt, he reached his hand to his nose, and pat it gently.

“He seems to tolerate you today,” John said evenly, knowing his voice would carry to Jamie.

“Well enough, at least,” Jamie replied and led Donas to where Claire stood with John.

Jamie pulled the lead rope tighter as he approached and touched Donas’s nose before guiding Claire’s hand to it.

Donas tolerated Claire gentle pats and even gave her hand a soft lick.

“Bloody hell.” John cursed, and shook his head. “He likes women.”

“And me.” Jamie scoffed, furrowing his brow. “Though he does seem to like Claire. Losgann whinnied then, and Claire turned to see the horse as near to them as she could get from her paddock.

“Or female horses. Could Donas smell her on me?”

Jamie’s brows rose. “It’s possible. Regardless, ye wee demon,” Jamie turned to Donas, eyes narrowed, “you’ll let the horse handlers brush you down aye? I’d like to attend to my lady friend, if your done flirting, that is.”

“Mine or Donas’s?” John asked, bring a scowl to Jamie’s face and a delightful giggle from Claire’s.

“I have to go over some figures with Ian, but I’ll be sticking around for supper. Until later, Claire.” John bowed gallantly, and Jamie rolled his eyes at his friend. Claire waved and turned back to Jamie, who had handed Donas successfully over to his handlers.

Jamie pressed a kiss to her forehead and led her back to Losgann.

“Sweet Lass,” Jamie spoke softly. “Nah, I didn’t forget ye.”

Claire smiled as apple slices appeared from his coat pocket. He pulled Claire close to his side and handed her a slice.

“John showed ye, aye?”

“Mmhmm.”

Jamie smiled as Claire earned more nuzzles from Losgann.

“Aye, she seems to like ye fine. Have ye never been around horses, Sassenach?”

“Not really. Not this close at least.”

“Well, a few rules then. Always be confident. They’re very aware of us and look to us to lead. If you back or shy away, it makes them nervous.” Jamie’s hand slipped around her waist as his other hand guided hers down Losgann’s neck.

“Next, don’t kneel within 10 yards of a horse. Even if you have to bend to get at their feet, ye never drop a knee. Ye always want your feet under ye in case they startle.”
“Last bit, horses can see straight behind them on either side but are blind at their rear. Never cross behind a horse you don’t know, and never without letting them know you’re there unless you enjoy getting kicked in the head.” He leaned down to kiss her then, and she rolled her eyes before consenting.

“I think I can keep those straight. What now, Fraser?” She tilted up her chin and met his eyes.

“Now we ride.”

To Claire’s surprise, the absolute terror of being up so high and traveling on a bouncing animal lasted for only a minute.

Jamie started her out slowly so she could get used to the Losgann’s natural sway as she walked.

He put Losgann on a lead rope and let Claire circle the paddock as he watched Claire’s posture and grinned like a fool when she wasn’t looking at him.

“Press through your heels…good. We’ll try a trot next, aye? It will be bumpy since yer no’ posting, but you’ll ken the feel of…”

“Jamie…I don’t know what you just said.”

Jamie sighed and shook his head. “Faster. Ready?”

Claire settled her seat and straightened her back, taking a solid grip of the reins, and nodded.

Claire felt her teeth rattle as she bounced against the saddle, feeling very much like a game of paddle ball.

“Breathe Claire. She can feel that you’re scared. Just let your body move naturally with hers.”

“Nothing about this…feels…natural…”

He chuckled and slowed Losgann down to walk.

“It doesn’t because a trot isn’t natural. A rider should post…”

“Post?”

“Stand in the saddle, partially, through certain steps of the trot. But ye look bonny on her. Now,” he lengthened the led rope so he could stand in the center of the paddock, “You’re going to use the commands we discussed to start and stop her. Ready?”

Claire nodded and gave Losgann a light squeeze with her knees. Jamie smiled as Losgann resumed her walk. After a turn around the paddock, Claire released the pressure of her knees, pressed into her heels to shift her weigh and applied a comfortable tension to the reins. Losgann came to a clean stop.

“Good Lass,” Jamie murmured to Losgann, giving her a small biscuit from his hand. He patted Claire’s thigh, and to her surprise, mounted Losgann to sit behind her.

“Oh! What are we…”

“Well that’s enough basics for today,” he said with a rueful grin. “We’re going for a ride now to see
the land if you’re up for it.”

“I’d love that,” she said and felt her heart skip as his hand settled low on her belly.

He led them out of the paddock and onto the dirt road before bringing Losgann into a smooth canter. As the stables fell away and the trees opened up to spanning green fields, Claire felt, at once, small and wonderous as she viewed the vast green pastures and hilltops speckled with sheep. As they topped a hill, a cloud of birds lifted from the heather in the distance and swirled in flight. She watched as they descended back to their nests or flew off to the streams just visible to the north.

He pulled her hips back against his so she could feel the subtle motions that changed their direction or pace. Now and then his hand skated down to her knee and squeezed it.

When they neared the side of the lake, Jamie brought Losgann back to a slow walk.

“How was that?” He asked softly in her ear.

“Well,” she said, as a grin crawled onto her face, “it would have been more informative if I wasn’t distracted by a certain hardness pressed into me.”

He chuckled in her ear. “You’re no’ wearing pants, and your arse is round and warm. I didn’t think you’d appreciate me taking you in the saddle.”

Claire frowned. “Is that even…oh, well I suppose you could, long as the horse behaved.” He chuckled as her frown deepened, trying to figure out the necessary physics for such a deed.

Jamie dismounted and helped Claire down a moment later, his arms tangled around her to keep her close. He pulled a square of folded cloth from under the saddle before he gave Losgann a light tap on the rear toward the tall grass on the opposite side of the lake. As soon as the horse was a reasonable distance away, he pulled Claire down onto the soft heather.

“So? What do you think of my home?” His voice rumbled against her collarbone where his fingers had tugged her sweater off her shoulder.

“I love it, Jamie,” she whispered. “Do you only come up here once a month?”

He shrugged. “The business needs a presence in Edinburgh, and while I love Jenny, we grate on one another if we’re in each other’s hair too long.” He leaned back and smiled at her. “Not that there isn’t enough land to make space between us…”

“And isn’t John your Edinburgh presence?” Claire asked, side-eyeing him. He nodded and sighed.

“Perhaps I just see my father everywhere. It still pains me, the loss of him.”

“You’d be stone if it didn’t.” Claire fingers tangled in Jamie’s hair and brought him close. “He wouldn’t want you avoiding your home.”

“No, I suppose not. I do like the city, but…” his eyes met hers, and she felt a blush light her cheeks as he pressed a kiss to her hand. “I could be persuaded to spend more time here if my special friend thought it best.”

She chuckled at the term he used with his nephew. “Special friend? Is that what I am?”

“Mistress?” He murmured in her ear. She tutted at him, and he shook with laughter.

“No. Too ambiguous. That won’t do.” She sighed and motioned for him to try again.
“Girlfriend, then,” and he smiled as she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, in grade school perhaps.”

He adjusted himself in the grass so his hip bumped hers and he could look into her face. He knew she was coy by the way she bit her bottom lip, but he wanted to leave no doubt in her mind.

“My Sweetheart…” he murmured against her lips as his tongue tasted the corner of her mouth. Her hands wove around his neck as she met his lips and kissed him thoroughly.

His arms cradled her as he entered her mouth and swallowed her gasps. Their mouths moved languidly together as their hands sought more contact, more heat, more friction.

Jamie’s hands found the top of her leggings and pulled them down her sides and off with her boots. He peeled the jacket off her shoulders and tossed it into the growing pile beside them and looked back at her.

With her lips swollen, her legs bare and her sweater drooping off her shoulder, she looked ravishing.

“God, I want you, Claire,” he whispered before his lips crashed back into hers.

“I want you, too,” she gasped as his lips descended to her neck, and nipped their way back up her jaw. Her mouth opened but no sound left as she felt a shockwave travel through her, triggered by his kisses. Her thighs were slick with desire, and as his knee parted them, she laid back in the heather to watch as he worked at his belt buckle.

“Shirt too,” she crooned as her fingers pulled at his buttons. “I want to see you.”

“Glad I bought this then,” he murmured as he unfolded a red wool tartan. He pulled off his shirt as Claire’s fingers fumbled with the button of his jeans. He pushed his jeans off and quickly pulled the sweater over her head until she was just in her bra.

Claire admired her Scot in nothing but the tartan around his shoulders. Her fingers traced the taut muscles in his belly as she leaned forward to kiss his navel. Her fingers danced down to the golden hairs of his thighs admiring their tone and strength as she straddled her own. Her eyes then settled on his cock, thoroughly aroused, and moved her hand to encircle it.

His eyes rolled back as a soft sigh escaped his lips. Claire watched his head lolling from side to side as her fingers moved over his pink velvet skin and smiled when a soft groan escaped him.

“Stand up,” Claire ordered, shifting back onto her knees.

“Aye,” he murmured, and a moment later gathered what she planned. She leaned against a tree trunk and pulled Jamie’s hips closer until he stood close enough to hold onto the tree. Then she slipped his shaft into her mouth.

“God, Claire…” he murmured, as her warm mouth moved over him. Her fingers dug into his hips, pulling him forward until the back of her head touched the tree. Then, looking up at him, she tugged on his shaft into her mouth.

“Are ye…sure…Lord Almighty…” Jamie leaned his forehead against the tree, taking a deep breath as Claire’s tongue glided along the underside of him. He pulled his hips back, feeling her soft lips clamped tight on him, before pushing himself back in, until he felt the back of her throat swallowing him.
“Christ…” he murmured to the tree, as his hips picked up their pace. Claire’s fingers dug into his buttocks, though not painfully, which encouraged him to give over to her.

Her fingers pulled his seat apart. Letting a finger migrate to where his cheeks split, and languidly stroked the spot that made him buck against her jaw.

Her finger there unraveled him, and he came hard in her mouth, crying out as he thrust into three, four, five times before his orgasm dissipated.

He immediately dropped to his knees and gathered her into his arms, tucking his head between her neck and shoulder.

“I didn’t hurt you?” He whispered.

“No,” she whispered as her lips found his. He pulled her away from the tree and took up the place she had just abandoned, opening his legs and nestling her back between them. She let out a content sigh as a hand crawled down her belly while the other tucked the tartan carefully over her naked body.

“Oh, I thought you’d forgotten about this…”

“Never.” His lips teased her mouth as soft, breathy moans escaped her. He held her tightly against his chest, his fingers gently tracing the curve of her jaw and the flush of her cheeks as his other hand pleasured her. Listening to her call his name, feeling her body tremble for his touch, smelling the heady scent of her arousal was enough to make him ready for her again.

But he wouldn’t be greedy. Today.

“Look at me.”

His tone brought her eyes to his immediately, and what she found there swept away all the years of pain and loneliness as if they were a dusting of flour on the counter. Her pleasure swelled and broke over her, as she trembled and quaked in Jamie’s arms. His lips caught hers softly as his hand swept the curls off her face.

“I love you, Claire, mo chridhe, so very much.”

Tears sprang to her eyes at his declaration, and she quickly kissed him to stop the floodgates that threatened to open. Too late. She broke the kiss off a moment later, full sobs escaping her now as she tried to speak. He seemed to understand her squeaks and hiccups despite her emotions exploding on her face and pulled her closer, kissing her tears as they escaped down her cheeks. He took a corner of the tartan and dried her face gently, as he tenderly kissed her eyes and lips.

“Care to try again, lass?” She nodded.

“I love you, too,” She croaked.

He snorted, his shoulders shaking with laughter, and her eyes narrowed. He bit his lip, but couldn’t stop the vibrations rumbling through him.

“You sound like a wee toad, Sassan…”

She rammed a fist into his ribs, startling his laughter into a full wheeze. She rained more fists on his chest, which made him laugh harder until he stilled her hands, red-faced and barely breathing. He took a clean corner of the tartan and wiped his face before he kissed her frown and brought peace
back to their blanketed haven.

“We should probably head back soon, aye? I know the James will want to be showing you the stables, and that belly of yours will be hungry before long.”

“Mmm, long as we can continue this later?”

Jamie hummed his agreement against her lips. As he dressed and left to collect Losgann, a sudden realization hit her square in the chest. She’d let it go too long without talking about it, and now he loved her.

And I love him.

Wasn’t she supposed to have more time? She shook her head. She had to tell him tonight. He needed to know what a future with her looked like, even if it meant she lost him.
Chapter 13

The rest of the day seemed to go by in a whirlwind. Little James met them by the stables, and Claire felt daggers strike her heart every time he giggled and grabbed his uncle’s hand. Dinner was a similar affair, and Claire found herself becoming more and more withdrawn from the conversation as Jamie wrestled Maggie into her seat and fed her a dinner roll. To her dismay, her silence didn’t go unnoticed.

“Claire, you look a bit grey. Are you feeling all right?”

Claire caught Jenny’s eye and realized the gift Jenny was offering. She nodded at her and forced a smile.

“Actually I’m not. I’m sorry everyone. I think a small lay down would help.”

Jamie stood with her, and followed her out of the room, catching her waist. “Did you have enough water? Let me walk…”

“I just need a moment, Jamie. Please?” Claire said with a bit too much bite at the end of her words.

“All right. I’ll go finish up and meet you back at the cottage then.”

Claire nodded and turned to leave before Jamie pulled her back and kissed her tenderly. She was stiff in his arms but slackened momentarily while he kissed her.

Alarms went off in his head as he watched her walk into the encroaching dark evening.

Jamie walked into the bedroom an hour later and could practically feel Claire tense. He steeled himself, not sure what could possibly have her this upset. He mentally rewound their conversation on the way home, in the stable, at the table…

Was it not this afternoon that she told him she loved him?

She didn’t look up as he slowly crossed the room, not until he stood before her. Even then, she raised her eyes only to his waist. He could see tear stains on her cheeks.

“Watching you at breakfast and dinner today, I realized how important family is to you.” A smile ghosted over her expression. “Your face lights up when you hold Maggie. Do you know that?” She said softly and wiped her nose.

He nodded, and bravely decided to take her hand. She tried to pull it back but he hung on, determined.

“What’s the matter, my Sassenach?” He threaded his fingers through hers and sat down beside her. His words and warmth broke through the shabby wall she’d constructed in the last hour. “Damn you,” she whispered. “I was hoping to say this without falling apart.”

“I ken,” he said softly. She shook as she choked off sobs and tears. His fingers worked into her lower back, as he attempted to soothe the hurricane in her mind. “I ken all of this…is fast, and frightening Claire. If what I said earlier left you uneasy…”

“No.” She looked up into his face for the first time since he entered the room. He fought the urge to silence her and tuck her safely into his arms. She fought the urge to bypass this conversation altogether.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and took a large breath before choking out the words. “I can’t have children.”

Her eyes opened to face the fallout, but only saw Jamie’s furrowed brow. To his credit, he took a few moments to process a response. He didn’t respond as most people did, with denial, or idiotic questions like, was she sure? That she thought, was a good start. A breath escaped him with a whoosh and he pulled her closer with the arm that crept behind her hip.

“When did you find out?” He asked.

She took a breath. Good start, indeed. “About five years ago. We tried, Frank and I. When nothing
happened I went to the doctor and had a series of tests ran.” Jamie nodded, and to her surprise, kept talking.

“What is the trouble exactly?”

“A few, unfortunately. My body creates…well, an unfavorable environment for fertilization, to put it simply,” she said grimacing. “My cycles were never that regular as a young girl, which was a warning sign but I never thought…” She wiped at her eyes and cleared her throat. “So, they started me on hormone injections right away.”

Jamie squeezed her hand and pressed a kiss to it. “How did that go?”

“As terrible as you’d imagine. Mood swings, terrible bouts of sickness, and swelling. I was a raving loon,” she grinned, despite the topic. “Even with IVF, my chances to conceive were about 10 percent. After the fourth round with no results, Frank was done.”

“What?”

She shrugged. “The doctors prepared me for miscarriages, but they didn’t prepare me for 100% rejection. Two years, and nothing.” She looked down at their entwined hands and sighed. “I felt broken. I still do sometimes.”

“Claire,” he uttered, pressing a kiss to her fingers.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring it up sooner,” her chest heaved but she pressed on. “It’s the most horrible thing to explain to someone, and I hate doing it, but…I feel like I mislead you, by waiting.”

“You didn’t…”

“We’ve only known each other for two, maybe three weeks, and we have to talk about children because I’m…” she pressed her palms into her eyes.

“Claire…”

“Because if this is a deal breaker for you, then its only fair that we end things…”

“Claire…”

“And it’d be easier now rather than wait-” Jamie clamped a hand over her mouth.

“My turn, lass.” He said and lifted his hand from her mouth. “It’s not.”

“What?”

“Knowing this doesn’t change anything for me.” He said softly.

She stared at him, her eyes wide and glassy. “How can it not?”

He shrugged and smiled sadly. “I’d love to see some curly wigged bairns chasing after ye, but, if God doesn’t will it, then…”

Claire shook her head. “I can’t ask you to give up…”

“You’re not asking,” He interrupted her. “But I can make that decision for myself, and Claire…” he held her cheek in his hand. “You are the first person to make me want a family. I wouldn’t want it with anyone else. Adopting has its own struggles but we could…”

“Adopt?” Claire’s eyes shot up, bewildered.

Jamie nodded. “Aye.”

“You’d be willing to adopt? Really?”

Jamie’s brows furrowed. “Why does that surprise you?”

Her mouth gaped like a fish for a few moments before she finally closed it and processed her thoughts. Why did it surprise her?

“I guess…because Frank and I fought about it. He wouldn’t even consider it.”

Jamie snorted and his face contorted into an expression of contempt. “Well, Frank’s an arse.”

Claire’s eyes watered again and for the first time in years, she felt a glimmer of hope. She sniffed as her eyes lifted to his.

“But you know that can take years…what if…”

“Claire,” he whispered against her forehead. “Nothing you say will convince me to let you go, so save your breath, aye?”

Hiccups took over as tears spilled over her cheeks. “Promise?”

She leaned her head into Jamie’s shoulder, and he embraced her and nodded.

“You’re no’ broken, Claire. I love ye, for all that you are. Hush, now.” Claire let her sobs rattle her frame, set free from her guilt and failure in the unwavering strength she found in Jamie’s arms. His
thumb swept the tears that ran down her cheek as his lips soothed her with soft pecks along her forehead and ear. When he felt her tremors subside, he lifted her in his arms and took her to the master bath, undressing them both wordlessly before leading her into the shower.
The water cascaded down their bodies as they moved slowly. It soaped up the dirt from the farm, scrubbed the salt from her cheeks and his chest, and rinsed away the heaviness of the evening, leaving only the kisses they shared. Toweling each other off, their bodies weaved into each other: fingers caressed hands, lips touched skin, tongues wrung out moans. In the darkened night, they made love until the doubts and fears were burned to ash, and dispelled with the morning sun.
Chapter 14

Claire gathered her notes and headed towards the surgical floor where her rounds with Dr. Harvey’s group were about to begin. She sighed with content as she logged off her computer station, satisfied with her first day back at work after her weekend at Lallybroch.

Her smile could not waiver today. The moments between chart updates, medical procedures and patients were filled with thoughts of Jamie and his family. A swell of joy brightened her smile in those moments, thinking of his soft Sunday morning murmurs, and Jenny’s life-stealing hug at breakfast.

Claire took her place next to Joe but quickly noticed wore a face-splitting grin. She glanced up at him and blushed immediately.

“Am I that obvious?”

“You just floated down the hall,” Joe quipped, as he lowered his voice. “Great weekend, huh?”

Claire snorted as Joe wiggled his brows at her.

Something amusing you, Beauchamp?” Dr. Harvey growled.

“Not at present, Dr. Harvey,” Claire said, leveling her eyes to his.

“Wonderful. Let’s start then.”

Joe waited until the group started walking before he leaned into her side. “I’m happy for you.”

She smiled her appreciation as Dr. Harvey readied the X-rays for the first patient.

Rounds with Dr. Harvey were never pleasant, but today he was determined to destroy her.

He dismissed three of her treatment plans, rejected her diagnosis and insisted her explanation was inaccurate and vague.

Claire stepped into the doctor’s lounge in search of caffeine when the door slammed behind her. Dr. Harvey stood before her, his brows raised into his hairline.

“What happened out there, Claire?”

His tone was soft and full of concern, a drastic change from his disparaging words twenty minutes ago.

“I could ask the same. You shouted at me in front of the staff.”

“You were distracted and unprepared.”

“I was not!” Claire growled before she took a step back and steadied herself. “McDonald had the same diagnosis, and you praised him for it.”

“You didn’t mention the lab results.”

“I said he showed advanced signs of…”
“Claire.” Dr. Harvey spat her name and held up his hand to silence her. “I’ve always thought you were the most talented of the group, but I can’t let sloppiness impact a patient’s care.”

“Dr. Harvey I was not…”

“Don’t come to my rounds distracted again.”

He marched out of the lounge without a backward glance, and Claire stood dumbfounded, staring at his retreat. She always had glowing reviews on her rounds and positive feedback from her other mentors, so to be dressed down so matter of factly by the chief surgeon…

Claire clutched her fists to her side and breathed out a shattered breath. She would just have to do better.

The next day, Claire found herself back in the doctor’s lounge, but this time she was alone. She stared at the back wall as her mind ran through the evening events, and she tried to keep her anger in check.

“Sterile, Claire. Do you know what the word means? That patient has to be moved to another clean room because of your carelessness.”

“The room wasn’t marked! And all clean rooms have a scrub cart beside the door! There wasn’t any indication…”

But when she had stepped back outside the room, the scrub cart was there, and the chart holder that was previously empty now held a red patient chart. She stared dumbly at the chart as Dr. Harvey tore into her, trying to retrace the steps that led her to the patient’s room without proper precautions.

She sat silently in the lounge, her mind still not accepting that she walked into a sterilized room without checking the chart.

*It wasn’t there. I know it wasn’t.*

*You’re really tired, Beauchamp.*

*Tired doesn’t make me blind. It wasn’t there.*

“I think I’m going mad.”

Jamie raised a brow as he turned from the stovetop to glance at her. He filled a bowl with chicken stir fry and slid it in front of her, his hand giving her a quick squeeze.

“I know you’ve had a rough few days…”

“Weeks,” Claire corrected as she forked a piece of broccoli.

Three weeks had passed since her first disastrous rounds with Dr. Harvey, and not a single shift passed without some catastrophic mistake. She was making mistakes in her patient charts, forgetting medicine orders, and missing follow-ups. Jamie was leaving tomorrow morning for a week-long trip with John, but when the hospital review board scheduled an appointment to discuss “corrective actions,” Claire’s first tearful call was to Jamie.

He had promptly left the office, and used his new key to sneak into her apartment and make her dinner.

“Aye, right,” he nodded. “What’s troubling ye, then?”
Claire let out a breath and met his gaze. “Nothing. I’m sleeping well, I’m studying my charts, double checking my orders, and yet I’m missing things. Items I swore I ordered, vanish.”

Jamie nodded, settling into silence as he thought of her words. Claire was rattled, that much he could see by her face’s pallor, and he knew words wouldn’t combat the defeat in her eyes.

“You write orders in the charts, aye?” He asked between bites.

She shook her head and swallowed a bite of food. “No, we have software and user-specific logins to track orders per patient.”

“And it doesn’t match what you believe you did.”

“Right…so I’m going mad.” She let her fork drop into her bowl as she rested her head in her hands. Jamie eyed her nearly full bowl and ran a finger along her temple. “Stomach still bothering ye?”

“Yes, but thank you for cooking. I’ll miss coming home to cooked meals,” Claire said, attempting a smile.

“I’ll only be in London a week, lass,” Jamie said, as he brushed her cheek. “John swears this is the last bit of traveling I need to do for a while, so enjoy your bed while ye can.”

Since their visit to Lallybroch, they spent as many evenings together as their schedules allowed. She’d grown accustomed to sleeping alone with Frank, but now her limbs searched for Jamie each night. She learned to weave her feet between his calves to warm her toes, and smiled at the soft grunt he’d make in protest. Her fingers sought his hands, his belly, his thigh and let his breath and pulse lull her to sleep. She slept deeper with him near and was restless when he slept at his apartment.

His mischievous grin told her he damn well knew it, too.

“Very funny,” she quipped, as she pulled him closer by his collar. His chuckle dissolved as her tongue softly probed his bottom lip, and any witty reply left his head as the heat of her mouth made his balls clench.

“Maybe I can shorten this trip…” He breathed over her lips.

Claire grinned and pressed a kiss to his chin. “I still expect a long goodbye for this short trip. Starting now, perhaps?” His eyes smoldered, and Claire bit her lip, taking a few steps backward as he stood and followed her. He lunged at her, and she shrieked as she ran out of his reach, her laugh echoing his as he chased her to the bedroom.

Jamie’s trip couldn’t be shortened, and Claire felt her stomach drop as he told her needed to extend it another week.

“I can’t believe I’m stuck dealing with disgruntle handlers while you’re alone with the flu,” Jamie growled over the phone.

“For the last time, I don’t have the flu,” Claire muttered, covering her eyes with a washcloth. “I’m just run down and achy. I’m sure I’ll be better by the time you get home.”

She felt guilty keeping information from Jamie but “rundown” was an understatement. Her nights were plagued by a persistent stomach bug that left her nauseous for hours, making her night shifts hell.
“Want me to run your labs? You could have an infection, LJ,” Joe said upon her return from the ladies room.

“No. It eventually passes. Besides, now isn’t the time for me to be taking extended leaves from the hospital,” Claire said with a sigh.

“The review board was good to you. Your track record is stellar and they…”

“They didn’t write me up, and they could have. That’s exactly why I won’t be taking some paid leave,” Claire bite out as she grabbed a chart.

“At least let me grab one of your shifts. You look like you’re about to fall over.”

“I’m fine. Besides, part of my “action plan” is extra hours in the research lab.”

“I take it back. Hours with cadavers is not appealing at all.” Claire cracked a smile before her face fell again. Three more orange sheets were in her mailbox. Deficiency slips from Dr. Alma this time.

“Joe, you aren’t losing any of your orders are you?”

“That’s still happening to you huh?” Joe’s face twisted in concern as he eyed the slip. “Have you gone down to systems security yet? Have them enter a ticket to monitor your profile. It will give you some peace of mind.”

Claire’s face light up, and Joe let out a small sigh of relief. “That’s a great idea. I’ll go talk to Rupert before I leave.”

Rupert, despite encompassing every stereotype one thinks of when describing an “IT genius” was always roaring with laughter when Claire passed the hospital security hub. He had worked for the hospital for 15 years, half of those years spent as a security guard on night shifts. He knew everyone and their life story, though he would claim it was just part of his work.

“How’s yer Scot treating ye these days, Claire?” Rupert called when he saw her walking towards him. “He hasn’t brought ye any wee bags this week. Does he need a-talkin’ to?” Rupert cackled at his own joke, his eyes lighting up with merriment at Claire’s soft blush.

“He’s traveling Rup, but he’ll be stung by your lack of faith in him,” Claire teased, settling her arms on his countertop.

“Bah, he’s a good lad. Tell him I say hello, eh? Now, what brings ye to my doors, Claire?”

Claire explained the issues she’d been encountering with her medical orders, and Rupert’s face twisted in disbelief.

“Wееel, don’t go callin’ me a tin hatter again, Claire, but we’re going to put a trace on your account. That way every login in recorded and time stamped. I ken yer not dense so I won’t shame ye by saying you’re no’ clicking the save wheel on the screen.”

“I appreciate your faith in me, Rup,” Claire said with a chuckle. A mop of dark hair darted behind Rupert, but not before Rupert let out a cry and bellowed after the figure. “Pardon me, Claire. I need to go track down my new assistant. I’d introduce ye, but she’s a shy type.” Claire nodded her understanding and watched Rupert march into the back office. Her phone pinged in her pocket,
alerting her to a text from Jamie:

“Just landed. See ye soon, beautiful.”

A wave of relief washed over Claire. She had planned to stay another hour to write some additional notes, but that thought left her as she nearly ran to the locker room to badge out.

Claire nearly collided with Jamie as she entered her apartment.

“I was just heading to the hospital to get ye,” Jamie announced, pulling her into his arms as he stripped her of her jacket and purse. Claire tugged his face down to hers, kissing him solidly as her fingers trailed over his stubbled chin.

“Take this off,” she ordered, pulling his jacket off his arms before her fingers started untucking his shirt tails from his pants.

A deep chuckle rumbled against her lips as warm fingers slid from her navel to her ribs before flicking at her cold, erect nipples. “Eager, aren’t ye, Sorcha?”

“You have…no idea,” she muttered against his lips, shucking her pants to the floor before removing his belt.

“I promise ye, I do.” Claire’s top was flung across the living room as his hands groped at her ass, tugging off the panties that were obstructing his grip. He pulled her towards the bedroom when she shook her head.

“No. Here. Come here,” she breathed as she pulled him down to her living room floor. The wood floor was cold against her back, but she hardly noticed as Jamie pressed against her. His teeth nipped a path over her breasts, clamping down on her nipple as fingers crawled between her thighs. He rolled her clit between his thumb and index finger as his teeth squeezed her breast until she thrashed beneath him and wailed her approval. Releasing her nipple with a pop, Jamie chuckled as Claire pushed his head down towards her apex.

“Not yet, ye impatient thing,” he scolded as she propped herself up on her elbows. She loved watching him when he was like this, lavishing her body in slow, heated attention, but tonight she could scream. She wanted him, now, and nearly told him so when his fingers finally parted her folds, making a throaty moan escape her.

“Hold onto me, lass.” He rasped, as one arm reached forward to hoist her up against his chest, spreading her legs as her arms circled his neck.

“Aye, like that. I don’t want to miss a single breath…” Claire gasped as one finger, then two entered her, thrusting into her slick heat as his tongue licked her bottom lip. A third finger slipped into her, spreading her taut as his fingers dug into the spot that unraveled her. Her thighs quivered as her hips rolled against his hands, and she could no longer control the sounds he extracted from her.

“Please,” she cried, as his hands pulled away from her.

“Had enough, love?” He murmured, his lips teasing hers. Claire felt her frustration erupt as her building orgasm slowly dissipated with Jamie’s slowing hands.

“More than enough,” she growled.

Jamie loved slow, teasing lovemaking, and she usually loved being at his mercy for however long he could hold out. Tonight, however, she was not in the mood to be teased.

She pushed Jamie onto his back and straddled his hips.
“Claire…”

His brows furrowed until she grabbed his cock and fed it inside of herself, grinding her pelvis into his as his face contorted into surprise, overwhelming sensation, and then relief as her hips began to move.

“You’re a horrible tease,” she breathed out as she lifted her hips and slammed them back against his. “And I plan to punish you for it.”

Jamie’s hands found her thighs and steadied her as she rode him hard and tilted her hips to change how he felt inside her. She leaned back, letting the tip of him rub against the walnut inside her, making her arch her back more.

“Claire,” he moaned in desperation, and she looked down to find sweat gleaming against his forehead and chest. “Faster, Claire.”

“No,” she replied, sighing as she slowly moved her hips. “I’m going to fuck you, James Fraser, just as I want to. And if you come, I’ll keep riding you until you’re hard again and ready for me.”

A groan escaped him, but he nodded, as his hips twitched. She took her time, satisfying herself until she came, but to his wonder and chagrin, she didn’t stop after that. She rubbed her nipples against his chest before spinning around, so she faced his feet. Then, slowly, she began to ride him again, and this time she pushed him deep into her. She squeezed down on him and listened to his grunts and outcries as she sped up to a torturous pace.

“Claire…I can’t…please…”

“You can,” she panted, and pulled off of him, making him cry out in dismay.

“What…come here…”

“No. Watch me…watch me until I’m about to come…” she whispered, letting her fingers dance down between her legs as she bent forward, giving Jamie a fantastic view of her behind and entrance. A growl escaped him as he watched her fingers enter where he was moments before, tracing gently around her opening until he could take it no longer. He sat up and launched himself over her, so his hardness brushed against her soaked slit.

“You’re mine,” he growled as he pushed into her and her belly quaked beneath his hand. “And if turning me into a beast was your goal, you succeeded.”

He impaled her from behind, his hand on her breast holding her to his chest while the other hand gripped her hips. He rammed into her so hard, she began to wobble until both of his hands came to rest on her hips, pushing and pulling her against the hardness throbbing within her, filling her, stretching her…

When he slipped a finger between his cock and her, he felt the waves of his pleasure start to break over him in tune with her raspy moans.

“Christ,” he rasped, his hooded eyes watching him thrust into her folds as he listened to her shatter.

She collapsed forward on her elbows as she came, a high pitch moan rolling from her as she clenched him through his release, riding her lubed center until he felt empty.

He collapsed on the floor beside her and rolled onto his back, his breath ragged and broken. Claire recovered quicker, nestling into his side and blowing cold air onto his neck as his eyes tried to focus
on her face.

“What…in God’s name…brought that on?” Jamie asked between pants.

Claire blushed as she pushed his hair off his face. “I needed a good swivin’ is all. Is that all right?”

Jamie barked out a laugh, pressing his lips to her forehead.

“Oh, I think I’ll survive if we need to do that again,” he muttered as his eyes twinkled with mirth.

Jamie rolled onto his side and gingerly rose to his feet. When he extended a hand to her, however, his face fell as he looked at her more closely.

“What?” Claire asked, shrinking away from his gaze.

“Christ, are you still not eating?” Jamie asked, voice full of concern now as he pulled her close, his hands ghosting over the thinness of her hips and shoulders. “You’ve dropped at least a stone since I saw ye last.”

“I’m eating,” she bit back, a tad harsher than she intended. “I told you I was sick.”

“I ken, but…”

“And you didn’t mind when you fucking me just now,” She snapped.

“Claire I just…”

“And you didn’t mind when you fucking me just now,” She snapped.

“Claire I just…”

“I’m taking a shower,” she grumbled and turned away from him.

Jamie stood in her living room, naked and stunned, as she slammed the bedroom door behind her.

Perturbed barely described his mood once the shock of the door slam wore off. He listened for the shower, telling himself he’d give her some time to calm down, but when 20 minutes went by without the hum of her water pipes, he eased the bedroom door open.

He heard her before his eyes found her huddled on the bathroom floor in front of the toilet. Pulled by her sobs, he crossed the room in four strides and sat beside her on the tile floor.

“Hush,” he whispered as he brought her into his arms. “What’s this all about, hm?”

“I didn’t mean…to yell at you. I’m just so tired of being sick,” she sniffled. “It’s been one thing after another, and I can’t afford to be sick with my work suffering the way it is. I’m tired all the time, everything tastes like ash, and I keep getting…”

Claire turned green before his eyes before she launched forward and expelled the contents of her stomach. She hung her head as Jamie rubbed her lower back and flushed away her deposit.

“Better?” He asked softly. With a nod of her head, her arms snaked around his middle, and Jamie dismissed the thought poking at the back of his brain. She was a doctor after all. Surely, she’d know.

Over the course of the next week, she tried his patience more than a few times, snapping at him over muddy boots, eaten granola bars, and missing bananas.

“You hate bananas,” he said, through his mouthful of oatmeal. “Every single one I don’t eat dies a
“miserable Black Death to your garbage shoot.”

“Bananas are one of the few things I can keep down, and you ate the last one. Just…tell me next time…”

He chewed slowly, watching her wrench open his refrigerator door, and pour herself a glass of orange juice.

“I’ll go get bananas from the corner store,” he said, standing up.

“It’s not about the bloody bananas!” She yelled, tossing the empty orange juice container at him.

He fumed as he dodged the flying cardboard and shot her a nasty glare. “Could ye tell me then? Or do I need to say it?”

“What are you talking about?”

Jamie sighed. Out with it then. “I think you’re pregnant.”

A silence descended on his kitchen, as Claire stared daggers at him and he fought to not shrink away from her gaze.

She huffed. “You bastard. How could you say that to me?”

She tried to push by him, but he laid a steady hand on the counter, blocking her path.

“Claire, it would explain…”

“I’ll be damned if you’re going to say something that…cruel to me every time you think I’m being…hormonal!” She shoved him, and he finally took a step back, letting her pass.

“Will ye take a test at least?” He said to her back, and she froze.

“I explained this to you, in detail. That is not in the cards for me, and you said you understood.” A dark chuckle escaped her. “What, did you think you’d be the exception? That somehow with you, it’d be a better match, and I’d magically get knocked up? And you want me to pee on a stick on the sick hope that maybe everything I told you wasn’t true?”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” He roared, his fist slamming on the counter. “There’s something wrong with ye, and you’re just ignoring it! Do you think your hiding how many times you get sick each night? How about the dark circles under your eyes from no’ sleeping?”

“You don’t own me because we’re fucking!”

Jamie’s heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach, where he felt it shatter and dissolve.

“We’re just fucking now, are we?” He said quietly. “Good to know.”

She grabbed her jacket and purse and headed for the door. Thank God, Jamie thought, because he couldn’t stop the tears running down his face.

He watched her fumble through her purse for her keys and phone. He wanted to beg her to stay, but the anger and pain coursing through him held his mouth shut. Her shoulders heaved, and she turned, not meeting his eyes.

“I’m going home. I need to think.”
“Aye.” He choked out. “You’ve already gutted me, woman. You may as well finish it.”

Her eyes darkened, and for a moment, a look of despair crossed her face, regret and sadness mingled into her longing.

It gave Jamie hope. Then it vanished with her out his door.
Chapter 15

Claire opened her locker at work, letting out a breath of relief now that her shift was half over. She’d spend the rest of the night in the research lab, but had wanted to check…

She felt herself deflate as her phone’s screen held no new messages or texts.

She left Jamie’s apartment two nights ago, and spent the first night raging at his existence and the next, sobbing.

I really am a storm of raging hormones, she thought. For a moment last night, she’d let herself wonder, “What if…”

But really, how? She had known Jamie for less than 3 months, and had tried with Frank for 6 years.

This morning, she abandoned the thought when she woke up feeling better than she had in weeks. But now, staring at her phone and willing the man she loved to message her she couldn’t help feeling nauseous. She typed out a quick message and pressed send before she could doubt herself.

_I didn’t mean what I said the other night._

Claire let out a breath as she stared at her phone, willing him to reply. After five minutes, she rolled her eyes to the ceiling.

You are pathetic, Beauchamp, and he’s obviously still mad.

Not that she could blame him.

***

Jamie saw the message come in, and fought the urge to respond right away.

God, he missed her terribly, but he was still so angry he couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t rip her apart.

He eyed the half empty bottle of whiskey on his coffee table and sighed. She’d told him she loved him, and then minimized what was between them to rutting on floors.

“She sounds pregnant to me,” Ian had told him that afternoon. Jamie had turned to his brother-in-law, and oldest friend, when his phone had stayed quiet for two days.

“She thinks I’m an insensitive bastard for sayin’ so,” Jamie huffed.

“I was an insensitive bastard for breathing…both times,” Ian said, shooting Jamie a sad smile. “And she’s been sick, and tired?”
“Aye…I don’t know what to say to her. If she’s not, she’s sick with something else, or…”

“Jamie,” Ian said, “I don’t think its something else. Not with moodiness, nausea, fatigue and sex. Find a way to talk to her.”

He had to talk to her, but he didn’t want to push her further away, and with thoughts of throttling her so close to the surface, he just didn’t know how to do it yet.

He let his screen go dark, and made his way to bed.

***

Claire always found the research lab to be theraputic. Even after 4 hours of surgery under Dr. Alma’s supervision, Claire found the quiet quarters and her silent companions enrapturing.

Most of the bodies were donated by the families for scientific research, usually individuals who died after long rounds of treatment. Sometimes they were organ transplant failures, and Sometimes aggressive cancer sufferers. They each had stories, and to Claire, names. She would collect samples, run tests, and add data to their charts so the diagnostic teams had a battery of information to go through. As a surgeon, she could reverse engineer their deaths, and catalog the system failures as they happened with the hope that next time, another Person’s story may end another way.

“How are you doing in here, Claire?” Dr. Harvey called from behind her. She jumped, turning briefly towards the door as he strode towards her.

“Oh, just fine, thank you,” She said shortly, and returned to her microscope.

His hand touched down on her left shoulder and cupped her arm in a way that made her hair raise on end. When his thumb began rubbing circles into her shoulder blade, she stiffened and Took a deep breath to steady herself. “Dr. Harvey…”

Then his hand was gone. He rounded her quickly and sat on the stool in front of her. “Dr. Alma said the ligament repair went well. Tell me how you approached it.”

Claire stared at him, utterly bewildered by the sudden change.

“She told me you entered from his upper tricep and…”

“Yes…I, it went very well.” She stuttered, before she retraced her steps and described the procedure from start to finish.

She was on auto pilot, but when she looked up Dr. Harvey nodded in approval and then was gone. Did I imagine it? No, she thought. Her shoulder still tingled.

She had worked under him for two years, and while he certainly was inappropriate at times, and had made several mentions to wanting to date her, she’d always taken it As awkward banter. He’d never touched her before. He would never cross that line.

But he had, hadn’t he?

Claire let the shiver run down her back and closed her eyes for ten seconds, before turning back to her microscope.
Bollocks, that. She was making this more than it was.

***

Three days later, Claire had two more brush ins with Dr. Harvey, each more confusing than the last. He’d taken a pencil and tapped it against her lips, while he reviewed her Notes, and Claire had done nothing but stare, shocked. Dr. Harvey hadn’t seen Joe coming down the hall and had made a breezy exit with a pat on Joe’s arm. Joe then turned to Claire.

“What the hell was that?” Joe muttered.

“What was what?” Claire cringed as the words left her mouth. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.” Claire shook her head. “It’s so embarrassing.”

Joe scoffed. “Embarassing? Its so inappropriate, LJ. Has he done this before?”

“No…well not that,” Claire bit her lip, and told Joe about the research lab earlier in the week.

“You have to say something, LJ.”

“It’s the worst possible time for me to say something. He’s the most critical of me in these performance reviews.”

“Did you think that maybe that’s the point?”

Claire stared at Joe, but then startled when her phone started vibrating. She sighed in relief at seeing Jamie’s face flash across her screen. They’d been playing phone tag for a day.

“It’s Jamie. I need to take this.”

“Good. Tell him what’s going on, will you?” Joe raised a brow.

“I will,” Claire mouthed as she answered the phone.

“Jamie?”

“Hi Claire. Can you talk a moment?”

Claire cringed at his formality. “Yes of course. Did you get my messages?”

“I did. I’m sorry we kept missing each other. I’m slammed at work tonight but I wanted to see how you’re feeling.”

“About the same,” she replied simply. “Just missing you more.”

His line was silent until she heard a sigh and the sound of his chair as he settled into it. “I miss ye, too.”

“Can you come over tonight?” She pleaded. “Please?”

“I can’t, but I’d like to talk to ye tomorrow night, if that’s all right.”

“Of course it is,” Claire muttered, feeling a tightening in her chest. “Jamie, I didn’t…”

“I know, Claire,” Jamie soothed. “I’ll meet ye at your place after work.”
Claire hung up the phone and dropped her head in her hands, feeling more unsettled than before his call.

Later that night, she climbed into bed, her mind still racing from the day. Dr. Harvey’s hand skirted her waist as she clocked out, shooting her a friendly smile and moving on like the contact was the most natural thing in the world. She felt a tingling mass of nerves churn in the center of her chest, and despite slipping on her trainers for a run, she found she could only do a third of her usual distance before she turned around. She was weak and too wound to sleep, hungry with no taste for food, and frustrated but completely unable to articulate why. To make matters worse, she’d never been so turned on and lonely in her life.

She looked over at her phone and frowned before picking it up and typing out a message.

_You wouldn’t come over to break up with me, would you?_

She waited, saw the message bubbles appear, and then grimaced as her phone vibrated with Jamie’s call.

“Well?” She asked, in as serious a tone as she could manage.

“Is this a serious question?” he asked, his voice muffled.

“Were you sleeping?” She asked.

“Aye, I was,” he grumbled lightly, though she heard him sitting up. “What’s this now?”

“I just…” though as the words popped into her mind, she felt suddenly childish. “Well, I wanted to prepare myself if you were planning to break things off, that’s all. In case my outburst the other night…made you reconsider…us…i guess…”

“Does it sound silly to you, now that you’re saying it out loud?” He muttered.

“Maybe,” Claire cringed, thought she felt strengthened by his chuckle.

“Claire, I don’t want to make light of the hurt I felt when you left last week, but,” he sighed. “But, I meant what I said. I love you. We’re gonna argue from time to time…and while I’d prefer you not resort to callin’ me a bastard…”

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out.

“We’re both stubborn, aye? It will take some lessons on both our parts to not lash out in our anger.”

“That’s what you wanted to talk about?” She asked.

“Aye…before I got ye naked…and I knew if I came over tonight, tired and poorly fed from a long night I’d want nothing but to bury myself deep in ye, and make you pant and squirm until you gave yourself to me,” he rasped, his voice soft and deep.

Claire felt a wave of arousal sweep over her at his words. But still there was an annoying twinge of doubt she wanted put to rest.
“You still want me?”

“Aye, because you already have all of me, and it’s only fair if I’m fucking you senseless on your hardwoods.”

She snorted at that and laid back against her pillows. “I have to tell you something about work, but…”

“It’ll keep aye? Go to bed, lass. Sweet dreams.” He whispered to her.

“You too.”
Chapter 16

Claire’s eyes kept flickering to the clock on the wall. 6 p.m. Jamie would be at her apartment by now, and in an hour she’d be with him.

*About bloody time,* she thought with a smile.

Claire realized when she started her shift that today was the last day of her performance probation. The last week had been exceptionally good, and Dr. Alma confided in her today that she was sure the incidents from a few weeks ago would be viewed as a fluke.

Claire felt such a burden lifted from her shoulders that tears of relief swam in her vision. It would be all right. Despite the harrowing nature of the last few weeks, everything would be all right: her career, her relationship…

Her health. Within 20 minutes of her conversation with Dr. Alma, she pulled Joe aside and had him draw up a blood panel for her. She even let him order the pregnancy test, despite the chest tightening anxiety it caused.

She could bear it, another negative result, if it eased Jamie’s mind. He was worth it, and if the relief it gave him compared at all to this, she would be patient, as he was with her. Regardless of the results, she knew she wouldn’t be alone through whatever trial lay ahead, whether influenza or terminal disease. God help her if the test was inconclusive. He’d probably insist she admit herself this weekend and Joe…

She wondered if Joe would even give her the choice.

She mulled this over as she took several samples from the liver on her surgical table. Dutifully preparing slides and grimacing at the thought of the two men in her life, she didn’t hear the door open behind her, or the soft footfall of carefully laid steps.

="Claire!"

*Harvey Roth barked her name so loudly he wasn’t at all surprised when the scalpel flew from Claire’s grip. She turned so swiftly, her pupils dilated, that he could still see the tremor of her lips as the gasp escaped her. Fear. It coursed through her body as her breath escaped her lungs, followed quickly by anger. She shouted something at him, but he didn’t pay attention. She was his sole focus now: her heaving chest, her paling skin, her pink lips…*

She wasn’t supposed to have a choice. She was supposed to lose it all, her career, her lover, her reputation. That had been their arrangement after all, and Geneva had been quite generous with her part of the bargain.

*She had approached him with a carrot. He could choose any student at the university and Geneva would somehow deliver them, ready and mostly willing, to his doorstep within 24 hours. The first three were free. A good faith payment, she said. Then she played her card: She wanted Claire, ruined, humiliated, scandalized. That was the price for his future trysts, and one he’d been happy to pay.*

*It wouldn’t take much. A small injection of opiates in her system would be enough to damn her. He’d alter her blood panel to show extensive use.*

*She’d have her license revoked. She’d be shamed by the community. Geneva was convinced the*
But, ruining her wasn’t simple now. His hands had felt the heat of her skin, the smallness of her waist, the softness of her wrist. No, nothing was simple now, but regardless of what she chose, he wouldn’t be denied.

Claire heard a dull ringing in her ears as her eyes focused on the syringe Harvey pulled from his pocket. She gripped the table behind her, forcing her terror into tips of her fingers, as she squared her shoulders and clenched her jaw.

“What the hell is that?” She hissed. Harvey’s eyes focused on the syringe before slowly turning his gaze back to her. “Harvey?”

A smile crossed his face as he tilted his head. “Even now, you’re ferocious. Remarkable.” He took a step closer to her, gently running a finger over the syringe cap. “This time tomorrow, the board will know you as an opioid addict whose been dosing herself with the disappearing product in the hospital pharmacy. It’s been slowly walking off the shelves for weeks with no explanation…until now at least.”

Claire felt the ground shift beneath her feet as Harvey’s words sunk in. Questions shot through her mind but she couldn’t vocalize any of them, as his words echoed in her head.

“My orders then? They weren’t disappearing?”

“No, of course not,” he scoffed. “But, you had to appear sloppy. Changed. Otherwise, they wouldn’t believe it.”

Her eyes darted to her surroundings, but besides the scalpel she threw, all she had on her side of the desk were slides and tissue samples.

“But if you leave him, I could convince her to spare you,” Harvey said softly.

“She, who?” Claire growled again, sidestepping around the sink. Christ, was there any furniture in here that wasn’t bolted down?

He ignored her question. “You could practice again once your blood scans are clean…”

“They’re clean now, Harvey,” Claire spat as she circled the table. Why the hell is the fire alarm on the other side of the lab? Beakers, microscope? She didn’t trust herself to get close enough to smash something over his head.

He chuckled. “Well, not for long.” He looked her up and down in a way that made Claire’s stomach turn. “I wouldn’t ask for much in return. A few nights with you maybe…”

“Go to hell,” she snapped, placing the surgical table between them.

“I wouldn’t make a hasty decision, Claire,” Harvey spat impatiently. “It won’t end well for you.”

Claire’s fingers closed around an industrial sized bottle. She glanced down to read the name and back at Harvey who was quickly closing the distance between them. Without further hesitation, she uncapped the bottle of Methylene Blue dye and threw the contents at Harvey’s face.

He screamed as the blue dye seeped into his eyes and blinded him, and Claire dashed for the laboratory door, pulling the fire alarm as she passed. She bolted down the corridor for Rupert’s...
security desk, avoiding the persons already filtering into the hallway in panic. As she turned the corner, she saw a frantic Joe and Jamie talking with Rupert and a young girl behind the security desk in handcuffs. He brain tried to piece together the scene when she wobbled on her feet. She reached for the wall to steady herself but missed and fell to her knees.

“Jamie,” she called out, exhaustion seeping up through her limbs. She saw his face pale as he met her gaze, and then all she saw was darkness.
Chapter 17

This Chapter is dedicated to Rupert, a character after my own heart.

Jamie was just leaving work when his cell phone came to life with the Hospital’s Security desk line. He had purposely set this number to an urgent ring tone, knowing Rupert would never call from this line unless it was an emergency.

Nearly dropping the phone in his rush to answer, Jamie pulled his car off the road to take the call.

“Rupert? What’s happened, man?”

“Get here now. I figured out what’s happened to Claire’s orders. You need to pick her up and take her someplace safe while the hospital and police figure this out.”

“I’m three minutes away,” Jamie answered.

“Good, I’ll explain when you get here.”

Rupert hung up the phone and looked down at Malva as she tugged at her handcuffs. “The police will be here shortly, and then my dear, you’re gonna tell us why ye’ gave Dr. Roth access to Claire’s security codes. And then after that, a quick chat about the pharmacy’s inventory. It should be a verra entertaining talk.”

***

Joe wasn’t sure why he was watching Dr. Harvey’s rounds and then surgery for the last two hours, but Rupert’s instructions were clear.

“Be discreet man, but don’t let him out of your sight. If he approaches Claire, ye make your presence known.”

He’d confided his suspicions about Harvey to Rupert last night, but surely he didn’t think having him watched was the way to solve this?

As Harvey finished closing up his patient, Joe closed up his notebook and stood to leave the observation room. Placing his hand on the doorhandle, Joe’s face fell as he realized the door was locked.

He looked back down into the surgical suite and saw Dr. Roth heading toward the locker room and let out a soft curse. He’d have to wait for the nursing staff to finish dressing the sutures before they could leave the OR to let him out. Sighing in resignation, his hand smacked the intercom button as he shot a friendly smile to the medical staff below.

***

As Jamie entered the hospital doors, the fire alarm sounded, and his eyes darted to Rupert’s across the way. As he jogged over to the security station, he saw two security guards look up from where a mousy looking young girl sat in handcuffs.

“Is that real?” Jamie yelled over the alarm. Rupert grumbled as his fingers flew over the display, locating the tripped alarm and the cameras in the research lab.
“Shiite, nah, no fire, but something else,” Rupert muttered. “Craig! Take Tony with you and go check the research lab! Keep Dr. Roth in your custody but get him cleaned up.”

“What the hell is going on?” Joe stammered, arriving at the security desk, out of breath. A few keystrokes and Rupert had the fire alarms turned off. “You were supposed to be following Dr. Roth!” Rupert hissed.

“I got locked in the observation rooms. I couldn’t…”

“Claire!” Jamie called out, his eyes locking on her as she fell to her knees. She slowly curled forward until she slumped onto her side, though Jamie was there a moment later, tucking an arm beneath her knees as he cradled her against him. He looked up and found Joe beside him, already moving his hands over Claire’s neck and face to check her vitals.

“Bring her this way. She needs a bed,” Joe said as he helped Jamie to his feet. Joe led Jamie down a side corridor away from the mass confusion, grabbing the folder of returned lab reports off the nursing station. Stepping into a small exam room, Joe quickly brought the room’s equipment to life as Jamie deposited Claire on compact hospital bed. Within minutes, Joe had her IV drip secured, oxygen level and heart rate monitored, and a heating blanket draped over her frightfully chilled form. Jamie secured a pillow under her head, trying very hard to stay out of the way, but after three minutes of silence he finally broke.

“Can you tell me anything, Joe?” He croaked, squeezing her hand. He nearly jumped when a soft moan escaped her lips. Joe cracked a smile, as he tore through the lab results, looking for her ID number.

“Well, I can tell you that’s a good sign, if I ever heard one,” Joe said, finding her results and putting them on top of the chart as he brought out his pen lamp. “Hi Claire,” He said softly, flicking the light into her eyes. “Thanks for coming back to us. You’ll be thrilled to know you don’t have a concussion.”

“Get…that light….away…” she groaned. Jamie let out a breathy laugh, and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Joe, do you know why Rupert called me down here? He said Claire wasn’t safe…”

“I don’t know about that but…”

“I do,” Claire groaned. “Dr. Roth. He tried to attack me in the research lab.” Joe and Jamie exchanged a look and Joe immediately turned to lock the hospital room door.

“Start from the beginning,” Joe said, adjusting the hospital bed into a seated position.

***

Ten minutes later, Jamie’s face had taken on the shade of a cherry tomato, and his finger was tapping a frantic beat against his thigh.

“I may kill him…and…God, Claire…if this is Geneva? There’s no saving her,” Jamie growled.

Claire sighed, and laid back against the pillows. She closed her eyes briefly and squeezed Jamie’s hand. “Joe…the room is spinning.”

Jamie’s anger evaporated as concern took its place. Joe, who had been studying her lab reports, looked up at her, nonplussed.
“Well, you’re anemic, dehydrated, hormonally imbalanced, and malnourished. This is probably the worse case of hyperemesis gravidarum I’ve ever seen. You should be ashamed to call yourself a doctor, LJ,” Joe said with a glowing smile.

Claire’s mouth dropped open, her eyes widening in shock as Jamie looked between her and Joe. “Hyperemesis…What? What’s wrong with her?”

Joe stood. “Lock this door behind me. She’ll tell you once she stops gaping. I’ll be back with Rupert in a bit.”

Jamie locked the door, and turned to see silent tears streaming down Claire’s cheeks as she looked over the lab results. He slowly moved over to her side and squeezed her knee. She looked up at him, and finally a smile broke out over her face. “You arrogant, ridiculous Scot…I don’t know how…” She breathed out a laugh. “Oh…living with you now will be absolutely impossible…”

“You’re still sick though, aye?” He asked softly. “Is something wrong with the bairn?”

Claire sighed. “Probably not, but we’ll see. Hyperemesis gravidarum is medical term for extreme morning sickness, but it can be dangerous if not treated.” A blush burned her cheeks. “I’m…really pregnant…according to these hormone readings, almost ten weeks. To go so long without prenatal care can be risky.” Her lip trembled as he kissed her again. “I’m sorry…I’m sorry I didn’t…”

“Shhh, Sorcha…” he whispered. “It’s a wee bit of a shock, aye? We’ll manage.”

“We?” She sniffed and he produced a handkerchief from his pocket. “You mean you want to parent with the idiot doctor who didn’t know she was pregnant?” She blew her nose as he pushed her hair from her face.

“Aye. Snot covered, grumpy, pregnant, and all mine.”

***

When Joe finally returned with Rupert in tow, Rupert gave a full report on Dr. Roth as Joe had Claire wheeled towards their ultrasound wing.

Dr. Roth had initially denied any wrong doing that afternoon, until a quick 30 minute rewind replayed the scene Claire had survived. He was immediately taken into custody, and Malva was terminated with notice to have charges pressed. Geneva’s part in this however, was still vague. Malva had cracked immediately, but seemed confused when asked if Geneva conspired the plot.

Rupert finished his story looking to Claire and Jamie, who both were shaking their heads in disbelief.

“Dr. Alma will be informing the board of everything, and I’m sure more things will come about from this, but for now I believe you have your hands full,” he said with a smile as Joe readied the ultrasound machine.
“Thank you, Rupert, for calling me, and everything…” Jamie rasped, squeezing Claire’s hand.

With Rupert’s exit, Joe motioned to Claire’s stomach with the tube of jelly. “Start your engines.”

Claire lifted her shirt as Joe prepped her lower abdomen, squeezing Jamie’s hand like a vice as Joe searched for…

It was the tiniest little bean, with delicate wisps for fingers and a thudding heart, beating stubbornly against her womb. It shivered as Joe moved the wand, and he wordlessly took measurements before letting out a sigh of relief.

“Perfect,” Claire whispered to Jamie, who was pressing kisses to her cheek.

“She’s perfect.”
Chapter 18

The next few weeks were nothing short of a chaotic mess. Immediately after confirming Claire and their child were safe, Jamie herded Claire to his waiting vehicle, insisting the hospital and Joe knew exactly how to reach her when they needed her.

She hadn’t realized at the time, but a storm of reporters, privy to the fire department call, were about to fall on the hospital and the newly blossoming investigation into Edinburgh’s chief surgeon and her workplace…and her. Jamie, however, seemed well aware of the shitstorm headed there way and was taking the position of an irate sheepdog.

“Claire.” He barked, stopping her from turning back towards the hospital for the third time. The lost stare she threw him immediately hedged his temper as he moved an arm over her shoulders.

“We must go, Claire.”
“Where?” She breathed.
“Lallybroch,” he said, as he tucked her into the passenger seat. “First to your place to pack a bag.”

Claire had nodded, and for the first time, handed him the power to take care of her. Within the hour, they were on the backroads headed to Inverness, and by the time they were halfway there, he had John fully appraised and Jenny notified of their coming.

“Jamie…pull over…”

Wordlessly, he slowed the car onto the dirt side bank and watched as Claire took three steps away from the vehicle before emptying her stomach on the pavement. Crouched, Claire took deep breaths willing her mind and stomach to settle. Joe had given her explicit instructions to rest and had even packed them six intravenous treatment kits to get her stabilized.

Jamie appeared at her side with a water bottle and blanket, wrapping it over her shoulders as she swished her mouth clean. “Do ye want to pull over for a bit?”

“No, the sooner we get there the better.” She looked up at Jamie, who despite the chaos looked cool and collected and handsome, damn him, and let her head nestle under his chin. “Thank you for this. For taking over, and knowing just what to do.”

“Och, I’m making it up as we go,” He murmured, and he grinned as her chuckle vibrated against his chest. “You’re all right? Truly?”

“Yes,” she sighed, letting her arms tighten around his ribs. “We are both fine. Just get us home.”

A few hours later, Claire was tucked into bed in their usual cabin at Lallybroch. In the weeks since their first visit, they had come twice more and always gravitated toward this small dwelling, though this time it came equipped with a hovering, nervous Jenny. As Claire deftly hung her IV treatment by the bed sconce, she realized Jenny had many questions, and belatedly realized Jamie’s departure for firewood may have been forced upon him.

“So you’re pregnant, aye?”

“Yes,” Claire answered, matching Jenny’s bluntness. Then, recognizing her lack of surprise, Claire felt a flood of shame wash over her. “I guess you know I was being…well…”
“A stubborn ass? Aye, I heard a bit about that.” Jenny seemed to notice Claire’s unease and let out a soft chuckle. “I’m sure my brother deserved every word, mind ye.”

“He didn’t,” Claire replied, “But I appreciate you not thinking the worst of me.”

“Claire…” Jenny cleared her throat and settled herself on the edge of the bed before taking Claire’s hand. “I’ve spent my whole life surrounded by these stubborn, ridiculous men, and while I love them all…you should know I’ve wanted a sister all my life. With this child, you’ll always be family, but you should know you already were, for loving my brother as he deserves. There’s no greater gift you can give me than his happiness.”

Tears slid down Claire’s cheeks, bewildered and struck dumb as she was by Jenny’s unexpected and touching words. When her sleeve proved useless in mopping her face, Jenny chuckled and handed her a handkerchief from the nightstand.

“Do you…want to hear the heartbeat?” Claire said, offering her thanks for Jenny’s words in the best way she could. “These Doppler heart monitors are so affordable we always have twenty or so on hand. Joe packed me one for our stay.”

“Aye, I’d love to meet my niece,” Jenny said, her own eyes growing misty as she shuffled closer. “We won’t know for sure yet for a few more weeks…”

“Jamie told me you had an inkling, and I trust it. Mother’s are rarely surprised in these things…”

Jenny hushed as the whoosh of a tiny heart at work filled the room, and her face beamed with delight as her hand hovered over Claire’s.

“Oh listen to that! For sure a lass with that strong of a heart.” Jenny whispered. Jenny’s hand clasped Claire’s then. “I’m here for ye, Claire, if you ever have questions or worries. I had so many questions with my first and wished for another female who had any idea what I was going through. You may not, being a doctor…”

“I already have a million questions,” Claire blurted. She paused. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“Nay,” Jenny said with a smile. “Fire away. Ian knows to keep Jamie away for at least another 15 minutes.”

“You’re the best schemer I’ve ever met, do you know that?” Claire asked.

“You’ll learn soon enough.”

By the next day, the media was buzzing with the story of Edinburgh’s Chief Surgeon accused of record tampering and possible assault. She wasn’t named yet but knew that may last a week until official charges were filed. The hospital board had called, stating that the circumstances dictated she take a leave of absence while the evidence was gathered and analyzed. That didn’t surprise her as it was the typical protocol for investigations, but their next words did.

“The board unanimously decided to conclude your residency and grant you full accreditation for your surgery work. Congratulations Ms. Beauchamp.”

She could practice anywhere in the UK, once the paperwork was filed.
Claire swayed through the wave of guests now gathered under the white canopies where champagne and whiskey were dolled out in equal measure. Having eluded her husband’s fierce grip in search of beverage, Claire trilled softly when she found her prize in the chest cooler behind the bar: sparkling water. It was the only reason she could consider herself “happily pregnant” despite her indigestion.

“Dr. Fraser!”

“Oh damn it all…” Claire muttered, pouring herself a healthy serving of carbonation. “Dr. Munro,” Claire answered, shooting a brilliance smile at her colleague. “I’m so happy you could make it.”

“I couldn’t turn down an opportunity to rub elbows with some of our most generous sponsors, could I? Could Dr. Abernathy make it?”

“I haven’t seen Joe yet, but he should be here soon. I know he and Gail are still unpacking their home from the move.”

“Splendid. Well, if I haven’t thanked you enough for signing on to the Inverness Children’s hospital, let me say again how honored I am to have your talent and affluence…”

“Oh look! The McDonald Clan is set up just there! Weren’t you telling me your a descendant from the McDonalds?”

“Why yes, you remembered! Oh, I must part with you Claire, but I’ll speak with you again this evening. Off I go!”

Claire smiled and let out a breath of relief. Alistair Munro was a sweet, gifted doctor with a gentle heart and an unfortunately active tongue for chatter. He was the pulse behind Inverness’s new children’s hospital and had welcomed her with open arms when she applied for the hospital’s attending surgeon position. The surgery wing was still under construction, but it offered specialized care for children unavailable at the neighboring general hospital. Jenny had turned her ear to the position since F.B.M was making a substantial donation, and then everything settled into place after that.

“Gave him the shake, did ye?”

“Mmm, it didn’t seem to work on you, however,” Claire said, raising a brow at Jamie’s smug grin. “Really, I’m all right. My nerves are gone, and you really shouldn’t be tied to a buoy all night.”

“Don’t talk about my lover that way,” Jamie whispered in her ear, letting his fingers trace over the bare skin of her back. She tilted her head into his shoulder as his knuckle kneaded the flesh behind her left hip.

“Ohh, you wonderful man,” she moaned, as his breath tickled her neck.

“That spot is still troubling ye, aye?” He muttered softly, holding her elbow steady as he turned to face her.

“Yes, but this helps…and your daughter likes it too.”

Jamie chuckled as a steady beat of kicks drummed where his stomach met Claire’s.

“She’s a wee frog with strong legs like these,” he murmured, rubbing Claire’s belly until the kicking
stopped. “All right, promise you’ll sit soon, and I’ll let you alone for a bit, aye?” He pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

“Deal. Love you.”

“Love you.”

Claire watched as her husband walked back into the crowd, answering to calls across the way, and disappearing into the sea of tartan and suit jackets. Claire had been warmly addressed and welcomed by all the society members and their wives, though she suspected she was still a topic of gossip behind their white gloves.

“They can all hang,” Jenny had said that afternoon as she styled her hair.

“They’re jealous that you snagged my brother, and they’re dying to find something wrong with you. Crooked nose, busted chin, eyes too far spaced…”

“This isn’t reassuring Jenny…”

“But it won’t matter,” Jenny continued, as if not hearing her, “Because when they see how he looks at you-” Jenny paused and met her confused look. “Like the sun shines out of your arse, ye ken?”

“He doesn’t…”

“He does,” she said through the pins in her mouth, “and they won’t know what to do with themselves, then.

Jenny shook with mirth that afternoon, but Claire had to admit her words fortified her heart.

She caught Jenny’s eye from across the lawn and nodded her head towards the house. Jenny nodded in understanding and shot her a grin before turning back to her guests. Jenny had made sure the office was unlocked so Claire could escape there if she needed a moment to herself, and now was as good a time as ever for a quick rest.

As Claire entered through the glass doors, she left the lights off and let out a sigh of relief. Lowering herself into the chaise lounge, she promised herself 15 minutes of rest before she returned to the guests.

She heard the door open behind her and smiled, letting her head loll back against the cushions.

“Come to join me, Jenny-”

Her breath stalled in her throat as her eyes widened, taking in the figure that stood before her.

“Hi Claire,” Geneva said softly. “We need to talk.”
“Christ!” Claire exclaimed as she turned to inspect her profile. “I’m huge.”

Claire eyed her bump and pulled the fabric of her dress flush to her skin.

“Jamie?”

An inquisitive grunt sounded from the window. Jamie had his nose buried in the newest issue of Horse and Hound, no doubt rereading the controversial article that had he and John in an uproar for the last 24 hours. His frown was etched into his cheekbones, and if she wasn’t feeling so… enormous, she thought, she’d probably leave him to his grumbling.

The last 6 weeks at Lallybroch had been a mixed time of highs and lows. While the reporters were scarce in person, both their phones were habitually set to vibrate and they both agreed after the first week to avoid reading anything on the internet.

Harvey’s prosecutor had called a few times for statements, but so far the hospital felt they had enough to bury him on his conduct alone. Geneva was a different story. As interviews were conducted, the extent of Geneva’s involvement became harder to trace. Eventually, law enforcement decided Harvey was the stronger lead to chase and dropped Geneva’s investigation.

Still, restraining orders were filed, and deep lines were drawn in the sand between Jamie’s business and the provost’s daughter. John’s relationship with his brother suffered as he pressed for his niece to disclose her involvement. Jamie took to spending more evenings with John as his family became more estranged and in turn, John found himself spending more weekends at Lallybroch.

The immediacy of the trial was only trumped by Claire’s quickly progressing pregnancy. After finding an obstetrician and confirming she and the baby girl Fraser were in good health, their second ultrasound delivered more startling news: A high-risk pregnancy.

“Any spotting?” Her doctor asked as she examined the ultrasound.

“No. No cramping either…” Claire added. She met Jamie’s gaze and squeezed his hand as he shot her a reassuring grin.

“Well…” the Doctor began.


“You’re fine,” she began, patting Claire’s hand. “Baby is fine. Your placenta is obscuring your cervix a bit. Not uncommon for 16 weeks since baby has a lot of growing to do, but given your history I want to play it safe.”

Claire let out a breath. “Agreed. What do you suggest?”

“Well, you aren’t spotting or cramping. That’s excellent, but until the placenta shifts, I’d recommend a few weeks of pelvic rest.”
“Pelvic rest?” Jamie asked. “As in bed rest?”

“Not so severe. Just a break from strenuous activity until your next ultrasound. No exercise, heavy exertion or sex.”

“Oh,” Jamie nodded, his face turning a slight shade of pink. “All right. Well, we’ll…”

“What kind of sex?” Claire asked, her face contorted in concern. Jamie’s mouth gaped a bit as his head turned back to her.

“I’d avoid penetration, mostly.”

“Because of ejaculation or…”

“Hmph.” The redness, Claire noticed, was rising up his neck.

“Possibly, but also to avoid irritating your cervix.”

“So orgasms are fine?”

“Yes, just no excessive jarring.” The doctor scribbled a note in her chart. “Let me grab these pictures off the printer.”

When the doctor exited their exam room, Jamie shot Claire a look of disbelief. “Christ, lass.”

“What?” Claire exclaimed.

“I’m just surprised you left out your preferred positions, given what else you wished to discuss,” he grumbled.

“Jamie,” Claire laughed. “I’m pregnant. She knows we have sex.”

“I know, but…” he grimaced. “I don’t mind going without ye for a few weeks if it means you’re well.”

“This isn’t about you!” She exclaimed, barely holding back a cackle, when his lips formed a small pout. “I’ve been insatiable lately. I don’t know if I can handle a few weeks away from you, or have you not noticed?”

A small smile played across his lips as he leaned closer. “Aye, I’ve noticed.”

“And of course we’d abstain if we had to but…” she flushed as his brows rose at her. “Well, we don’t have to.”

“Hmmph.” He pressed his brow to hers, his eyes locked to hers until they wore matching grins “You greedy thing.”

In the following weeks, Jamie had accommodated her graciously, loving her thoroughly and as many times as it took to satisfy her. He’d hitch her knees over his shoulders, or in the dead of night, would hold her back to his chest and open her thighs with his own, letting his fingers coax her to a trembling release.

Claire mentally counted the days since that appointment and realized today made her exactly 20 weeks, a benchmark that consequently lined up with her delicate swell ballooning to a pronounced mound overnight. Horse and Hound would simply have to wait.
She crossed the room until she stood a foot from his knees, and waited as he put the magazine down.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

“I’m enormous.”

He raised a brow. “You’re still wearing normal clothes. Even your trousers.”

“That’s because…” she huffed and stopped, not wanting to start a conversation on the fit of hipster trousers and knits. “Look!”

She lifted the hem of her sundress and stepped between his knees, placing her swollen, 5-month belly into his hands. His grin widened in surprise as his fingers spread across her tight skin. She narrowed her gaze as he let out a soft chuckle.

“Oh you’re no help at all,” she said begrudgingly as Jamie leaned forward to kiss her stomach.

“There ye are, mo nighean,” Jamie said softly to her belly, and despite the nervous energy flowing through her, she felt herself worries deflate. “Don’t worry about your mam. She’s just surprised you grew so fast.”

“Jamie…”

“Claire.” He spoke her name softly, reverently as his fingers slipped down her belly to loop into the sides of her knickers. He pulled at the elastic, letting it snap gently at her skin.

She let out a sigh. “Am I so obvious? My insecurity?”

“I don’t see insecurity.” He whispered against her skin. “I see freckles, and creamy skin that smells like lavender…and a gorgeous ass that’s tight and fills my hands…”

“And a pot belly…”

He snickered. “I like seeing ye this way, in truth. You seem to shift the energy of every room you walk into, pulling all the good and laughter and light to ye before radiating it out tenfold…”

“I think that's just for you…”

“Nay,” he whispered, picking up her hand and bringing it to his lips. “John sees it too. Called me a lucky bastard just the other day.” He grinned before his lips settled into a stout, thoughtful line. “In another life perhaps, John could have envied me for meeting you first.”

“Liar,” Claire scoffed. “John views me as a sister.”

“Because he has to,” he murmured. “I’d kill him otherwise.”

Claire shuffled forward, shifting until she could settle onto his lap. “Even if your right, which I don’t think you are…” she toyed with the buttons at his neck as she dropped her eyes. “It would hardly matter. I’m positively crazy for you, James Fraser.”

A smile lit his eyes as Claire leaned forward for a kiss, though his hesitance made her pull back. “What is it?”

“Are ye feeling up for a walk to the stables?” His voice was an octave lower as his fingers interlaced with hers.
“Yes.”

“Good. Get your wellies, lass.”

Ten minutes later, she stood with Jamie by Losgann who was cheerfully munching on her hay under her tent.

“I’ve been thinking.” Jamie began, his hand running up Losgann’s nose. “You’ll be needing a horse of your own soon.”

Claire let out an abrupt laugh, a jovial silliness taking over as she chased Jamie’s hand down Losgann’s side. “Oh is that so? For when I’m off my pelvic rest?”

Jamie smiled. “Aye. And its tradition as well. Every member of the family has their own horse, and with Donas insistence on me, Losgann here will be needing your company, I think.”

Claire felt a ripple of emotion flutter through her chest. “Jamie…” she started, her eyes unexpectedly growing damp at his gesture. “But, she’s yours.”

“Aye, and so are you.” Jamie winked at her as he pulled her closer. “I asked Losgann. She likes ye just fine, Sorcha.”

Claire found herself speechless as Losgann seemed to agree by wuffling against her curls. She let out a tearful chuckle as she worked her fingers into the think hair between the horse’s ears.

“Jamie…thank you,” she whispered, meeting his lips As he stepped closer to her. “I won’t be able to ride her for several months though. Won’t she get lonely?”

“Nah, besides she’s in no condition to be ridden now. Not until she foals.”

Claire looked up and stared at him as his words clicked into place. Crossing her arms over her chest, her mouth gaped as she observed Losgann’s thicker flank.

“You knocked up my horse?” She asked sharply.

“Well, Donas, but…” Jamie said with a sheepish shrug of his shoulders.

“You let the *biting monster* knock up my horse?” She exclaimed louder, though a smirk tugged at her lips now.

“You don’t hold my bites against me, lass,” he said huskily against her ear, before dodging her swinging fist. “And the studding calmed him down some.”

“Oh, I’m sure! You bloody…Scot,” she barked out in laughter, as she clipped his side one more time before she allowed him to sweep her into a kiss.
“When is she due?”

“Och, not for another 10 months or so. We just confirmed it the other day.”

“Poor thing. That’s a long time to be uncomfortable.”

“I thought ye’d have some thoughts to share with her,” he said as he grinned.

“Oh. Last bit. Losgann has a gift for you, so you really feel part of the Fraser clan.”

“Is it chaps? Or my own smart riding boots? Perhaps a dressage…”

Claire’s mouth slammed shut as Jamie presented her with a handsome new leather bridle that had thistle leaves stamped into the leather strips that would adorn Losgann’s nose and face. On the ear strap, Claire found a CF perfectly embossed into the leather…

And on the bit strap, a delicate titanium ring, smooth with diamonds embedded flush against the metal.

“I thought to myself, what kind of ring would I get a doctor, nevermind a surgeon, who cuts and rends disease with her hands all day long?” He started quietly as he unfastened the ring. “Titanium, obviously.” He rolled his eyes and a laugh burst from her lips. “Something quietly beautiful and smooth, strong but delicate, like her.”

Jamie knelt in the mud at her feet, smile unwavering, and kissed her hands as Claire bit her bottom lip, willing herself to remain quiet until he spoke the words she hadn’t realized she’d been waiting a lifetime to hear.

“Marry me, Claire?”

She molded her lips to his, dropping down to her knees in front of him.

“Of course I’ll marry you.”

His arms circled her tightly as he let out a joyous laugh. The tears streamed down her cheeks as he slid the ring onto her finger, and pressed kisses to her eyes, cheeks, and forehead.

“I love you,” she whispered to him. “I know I don’t say it enough, but always know how privileged I feel…to love you, and be loved by you.”

“I know, lass. And I love ye, as well.”

Present Day
She spun her wedding band on her finger as she eyed Geneva, muted and shrunken. She certainly didn't appear to be a threat but given the last few months…

“You know you can’t be here…”

“I know,” her eyes locked on hers. “And I’ve never tried before but…” she let out a trembling breath. “You’re in danger. You and Jamie both are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Harvey was let off this afternoon. The judge threw out the case…”

“How?” Claire barked. “That’s not possible…he…”

“I know but you have to listen, please!”

“I don’t-”

The air shattered around Claire’s head as three shots sounded outside the office. She and Geneva ran towards the door, out towards the mass of people gathered.

It was the type of chaos that can only ensue when blood, alcohol, and violence are combined on a palette. No one would move out of her way. The screams and shouts were too loud to discern words, while others stood by frozen from shock. Pushing forward, Claire first saw John, his knee in the middle of Harvey’s back as cuffs appeared in his hand, seemingly from midair. Jenny appeared next, screaming directions into her mobile for a helicopter transport. Her hands were covered in blood, trailing down the skirt of her dress, and across the grass…to…

“Jamie,” Claire whispered.
Blood. Despite scrubbing her hands, arms, and face, she still found it caked in her cuticles and in the fold of her arms. A blanket appeared over her shoulders some hours ago, though if Claire was cold, she didn’t feel it. Beside her, Jenny dozed across two waiting room chairs, and across from her, John moved between irritated sitting and furious pacing.

Four hours in surgery, and little news.

What takes four hours to fix?

Severed liver, uncontrolled cavity bleeding, failing organs due to blood loss. No. He’d be dead already and we’d have the news. Still, complications from blood loss, damage to his stomach or kidneys…

The list seemed to go on forever, but counting the damage from three bullet wounds brought a familiar stillness as if she held the knife and clamps that were saving her husband’s life.

She imagined herself going through the procedure and what damage could be hiding behind the entry wounds and bullets, and it helped distract her from reliving…

“Out of the way, now!” Claire barked at the guests that were blocking her from her husband. She saw Dr. Munro nearby as he applied a make shift belt tourniquet above Ian’s knee. Her fingers pulled his shirt away from his chest wound and she wadded up her dress and held it to his shoulder with her knee.

“Dr. Abernathy has a urgent care kit in his trunk. He’s run to get it and I’m waiting for that blasted waiter to get me plastic wrap…”

Claire felt herself frown, but was quickly redirected by Jamie’s wheezing breath.

“I’m here, I’m here,” she whispered to him, as her fingers found the sucking chest wound and tapped on his chest. “One of your lungs collapsed. Slow breaths, love…”

She felt his chest rattle beneath her hands as another breath wheezed through his lips. Claire turned his cheek so he’d meet her gaze. “Breath with me, love,” she said softly, as she counted out inhales and exhales. His hand gripped hers tightly and Claire tried to keep her face as composed as possible when his hand began to tremble. “The helicopter is on its way. Just keep breathing…”

“I’m back!” Joe called as he slid besides her.

“I hope you have trauma packs in there…”

“And a few other tricks, LJ,” he said, as he ripped open a clotting sponge and got to work on Jamie’s shoulder.

“Hold this, Claire,” Dr. Munro said, handing her a roll of plastic wrap. She stared at Dr. Munro until he placed a credit card against the chest wound and began wrapping the plastic wrap around Jamie’s chest.

“That’s bloody brilliant,” Claire muttered as she helped feed the roll under Jamie’s back and secured it around his chest.
Dr. Munro shot her a smirk. “Combat medics makes do with what’s available.”

Claire kept hold on Jamie’s hand as Dr. Munro tied off the dressing and was rewarded with a gasping, fuller breath.

“Exhale, Jamie, as hard as you can all right?” Claire propped his head in her lap, and let out a breath when she saw his chest rise. He coughed, and took in another deep breath, letting it out with a moan this time.

“Claire,” he rasped. “Ian?”

“I applied a tourniquet to him, Mr. Fraser,” Dr. Munro said calmly, as he rolled Jamie onto his back. “His leg wound is stable.”

Three shots, Claire thought to herself. She felt the edges of her vision begin to darken as she looked about and saw the chaos around them still unfolding. Jenny was knelt in front of a pale Ian. John was bruised and shaken, speaking with the police chief. Geneva was beside them, tearful and speaking animatedly.

“I’m…cold, Claire,” Jamie whispered into her hand.

“You lost a lot of blood,” she whispered back, stroking his hair from his cheek. “But you can get through this. You’re not allowed to die,” She said, as tears began to fall down her cheek.

“Ye ken…I don’t get much choice…in the matter?”

“You have more say than you think,” Claire huffed at him, causing the corner of his mouth to rise.

“I do…Love ye, Claire,” he said softly, as his fingers laced into hers.

“Then don’t let go,” she whispered back.

Claire could feel the current from the helicopter blades overhead, and whispered a prayer for time, and for the interventous fluids that could save his life enroute to the hospital.

She felt arms shaking her, and she was alert a moment later, standing from the waiting room chair as John steadied her. The surgeon looked mussed and frantic, a good sign she knew. No one was ever in a hurry to share bad news.

“Jamie’s in recovery.”

“How extensive was the damage? How many blood transfusions did he need? What about…”

“Claire,” John said softly, but the surgeon waved John off. “The surgeon wife, aye? We’ve repaired his lacerated liver, and have a chest tube in place to help him breathe. He’s had two blood transfusions so far.” He paused then, looking her over. “Do you want to know more?”

“Everything,” Claire said and gripped Jenny’s hand between her own.

“He coded twice, once in the helicopter and once on the table. He came back quickly both times, but we won’t know if there’s any cognitive damage until he wakes.” The surgeon ended softly as Jenny
stifled a cry.

“Can we see him then?” Claire asked as she squeezed Jenny’s hand.

“Right this way.”

When Claire woke, the only light she saw was the glow emitted from Jamie’s heart monitor. John and Jenny had stayed long enough to press kisses to Jamie’s head before succumbing to exhaustion. To her surprise, she got no argument from John when she said she was staying. Instead, he moved the guest recliner parallel to Jamie’s bed and tucked blankets around Claire before telling her they’d be back in a few hours.

A quick glance at the clock told her she’d slept for a few hours, but as for what woke her…

She felt a vise close around her belly so tightly that her breath ran short.

She forced herself to push out air, breathing deeply until the pressure began to ease.

“Shit,” she whispered to herself as she felt a sweat break out over her temple. She sat up slowly and pressed the bedside buzzer for the front desk. An attending nurse entered the room a few moments later and looked quizzically at Claire before rushing over to her side.

“That obvious, is it?” Claire muttered.

“I’ve had three children myself lass. Aye, labor pains always look the same. It’s too soon though, aye?”

“Yes,” Claire said with a sharp inhale as another contraction took hold. A moment later, she cried out as a gush of fluid ran down her thighs.

“That’s always the same too.” The nurse said as she helped Claire into a wheelchair.

“Early or no, that baby’s decided to come tonight, Mrs. Fraser.”

Tagged: WhereWeBegin Laythornmuse I know its short week from hell baby is coming!
Chapter 21

Claire let out a long breath, letting her eyes close as the contraction eased. Jenny had made Claire listen to several meditation tracks designed for laboring mothers, something Jenny swore by and insisted Claire practice. Little had they known that Claire would find herself laboring early and unable to take anything for the pain due to her erratic blood pressure. After her water broke, her labor intensified to a degree that worried even the on-call gynecologist. He frowned at her now, as Claire eyed her blood pressure that continued to climb.

“This is your first pregnancy?”

“Yes,” Claire said as she gritted her teeth. “First. Only. Singular.”

“Well, I’m concerned about your blood pressure. You’re nearing pre-eclampsia levels, and with your water broken, we run too great a risk for infection for both of you. I think a c-section is our best option to keep you and your daughter safe.”

Claire nodded, and her brow fell in resignation. “Will the baby be all right? She’s so early…”

“The steroids will help her lungs speed up, and beyond that, she looks very sizable for 32 weeks, over 2 kilograms. I’m more worried about you, right now Mrs. Fraser.

Claire pressed her lips together as another contraction began. “Can you call my sister-in-law?”

“I believe your charge nurse already did. We’ll have to start prepping you now, Mrs. Fraser.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I just…didn’t think I’d be doing this alone.”

The doctor nodded and gave her hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll see what we can do.”

Janet Fraser was not about to let her only niece be born with only her mother present. If her brother couldn’t be awake for his daughter’s birth, then by God, that child’s aunt would be.

“Janet,” John croaked. “Wheels! On the pavement, for Christ sake!”

“Quit sniveling,” Jenny snapped as she turned sharply into the parking garage and slammed her fist against the ticket dispenser several times before the red barrier finally began to rise.

She sailed into the first open parking spot she saw and launched herself from the driver’s seat before John had his belt unbuckled.

“I take it you’ll be with Claire, then?” John shouted at her and shook his head as he saw her disappear through the maternity ward doors.

The hospital staff had her prepped for surgery within 7 minutes, and this, the nurse assured her, was their leisurely pace. Apparently, they were known to get serious cases ready in 3.

As they wheeled her down the hall, Claire kept her eyes on the beeping monitor beside her and was happy that neither she nor the baby required a 3-minuterang prep. Claire could see the staff was about 30 seconds from wheeling her into the surgery, and a bolt of fear ripped through her.

“Wait!!” Jenny bellowed, as she ran down the hallway towards Claire’s hospital bed.
“Ah! Another Fraser!” The doctor said through his scrub mask.

Claire burst into tears as Jenny ran into her arms, and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Oh, thank God you made it!”

Jenny squeezed her cheek and chuckled as she wiped her own tears with her free hand. “Of course I made it! Though,” Jenny mumbled through the scrubs as a nurse helped them over her head, “I may be buying John’s next set of tires.”

Claire laughed as they entered Surgery Two, and she relaxed at the familiar setting. She watched the medical staff go to work as they lowered her hospital bed, administered her epidural and after ensuring she was properly numb, began erecting the blue divider between her and her incision.

“I admit, I’ve only down this the natural way,” Jenny said softly, as she squeezed Claire’s hand. “How long until we have a baby?”

“Should only be a few minutes,” Claire said as she winced.

“Do ye feel anything?”

“No, just…pressure.” Claire let out a shaky breath as she firmly gripped Jenny’s hand.

“We’ll get through this, Claire. I promise. Just hold onto me, and we’ll get through this together.”

As was always the case, it was left to John to straighten matters when James Fraser threw himself headlong into calamity. Though this time, John worried that his friend of 25 years had damaged himself beyond repair. John sat beside Jamie’s unconscious form and squeezed his hand between his own.

“You’re going to be so angry,” John stated, a small grin lifting his lips as he pressed them together. “But I promise you, they’ll be all right, both of them. I’ll see to it.” He brushed his sleeve against his cheeks, and let out a shaky breath before he continued.

“I hope I have to say this to you again,” John began. “No, I will have to tell you this again. Damn it, Jamie, you’ve never listened to me the first time in your entire life, and you better not start now. So you better bloody make me tell you this again.”

Though he received no response, John nodded stiffly. “Right. Good. You’d ignore me if you were awake as well.” Then John began his report of all that transpired since Harvey’s arrival at the Scottish Antiquities Gala.

When Harvey made bail after his lawyer rushed a motion through a friendly judge, he first stopped at Geneva’s apartment.

“Why?” John had asked her in the police station earlier that night.

“To kidnap me,” Geneva whispered before she began her tale.

After seeing Claire on Jamie’s arm at the charity gala, Geneva reached out to Harvey, a family friend, to toy with Claire a bit.

“It’s stupid now, saying it out loud,” Geneva whispered, “But I thought if I could discredit her, Jamie would lose interest, and if not, I’d feel vindicated at least.”
And you decided to prostitute students as payment?” John asked.

Geneva paled. “No. That had nothing to do with Claire, ever. And it wasn’t prostitution. Everyone at school knew I had connections to Harvey, and he taught the summer anatomy intensive that everyone wanted to take. It was damn impossible to get a B in that class, but most couldn’t afford the C’s and D’s they scored. Some of the girls wanted to turn those C’s into A’s, and that’s when they asked me for help.”

“Can anyone back up that story?”

“Yes. My father reached out to their families and the girls are willing to give testimony. That’s why I’ve been so quiet about all this.”

“So you never arranged meetings with unwilling girls…”

“No, never! He got angry and threatened to link me to the hospital pharmacy theft. He knew I had a friend there who wrote me a script once…”

“Jesus, Geneva,” John said, letting his head fall into his hands. “So…he’s angry, and he kidnaps you? Why?”

She swallowed hard as she pressed forward. “When I opened the door, he rushed me and tackled me to the ground. He said we were both going to pay, and then he pressed something to my face and I passed out. I woke up in the trunk of his car. I worked the rope off my wrists by the time the car stopped, but he never came to check on me. I waited several minutes after the driver door slammed and then pulled the release latch on the trunk. That’s when I recognized Lallybroch, and realized what he had planned. I ran into the woods, hoping to find someone who would listen to me. When I saw Claire duck into the office, I saw my chance…”

“She got lucky,” John said, as he finished recanting the story to Jamie. “Turns out, Harvey circled back to his car to get her, and when he found her gone, that’s when he got irate. He stormed the ground tents looking for Claire but found you instead. And here we are.”

John looked at his friend whose face hadn’t shifted at all throughout the story and sighed.

“Yes, the bastard’s in jail awaiting trial. No, he won’t be making bail again. I cleaned up all this, as usual, and here you are sleeping.” John blew out a ragged breath and began weeping in earnest in the privacy of Jamie’s hospital room…or so he thought.

“Let me know if yelling at him makes any difference. Lord knows I’ll be more convincing than you,” Jenny said as she placed a hand on John’s shoulder.

John turned to her and squeezed her hand. “How’s Claire?”

His hearing came to him first. His eyelids were crusted with sleep, and his throat felt dry and cracked, but his hearing let him know he was not alone. Claire was humming.

Though it hurt, Jamie smiled. Claire hummed often when she was completely consumed by something like a medical journal, gardening, or the little burping cloths Jenny taught her to knit. Claire laughed when he brought her attention to it, but Jamie realized she hummed when she felt content and happy.

He turned his head towards her, but his eyes still refused to open. He began taking inventory of his
body, wiggling his toes and fingers, as the heaviness in his limbs began to lift. He wet his lips and tried to swallow despite the discomfort in his throat. Christ, he wanted her to come near him. He was surprised she hadn’t noticed his shifting and movements yet, but then he imagined he’d worried her terribly when he jumped in front of two bullets.

Finally, he forced his eyes open, blinking several times to clear his vision and allow his eyes to adjust to the light…

Her tiny face was pink, but so was the knit cap that covered her ears and the back of her neck. A yellow blanket hid the rest of her except for an escaped hand that tightly clenched Claire’s breast. He heard a soft suckling noise as bright red lips detached from her mother’s nipple and pressed into a tight pout that nearly stopped his heart.

“Oh,” he rasped, as his eyes filled with tears.

“Jamie?” Claire’s head shot up, and she quickly rose to her feet, closing the distance between them. “Oh, thank God,” she exclaimed as her face crumbled a moment later. She leaned down and kissed him fully on the lips, pulling away a moment later and shakily placed the baby on his chest.

“You ridiculous bastard! Don’t you ever do that again! What the hell were you thinking to tackle a man with a gun to the ground…” She scolded as she pressed kisses to his cheeks and forehead.

“The lass, Claire,” Jamie chuckled, through his tears as one hand cupped his daughter’s back and the other wiped Claire’s cheeks. “Is she…”

“She’s a stubborn Fraser, is what she is,” Claire said softly as she unwrapped the baby so she was skin to skin with her father. Jamie’s fingers traced her chin and nose as she squirmed and kicked her tiny feet against his ribs. Her tongue pulsed in and out of her mouth, stubbornly searching for a nipple despite her small stomach being warm and full.

“She’s so wee,” he whispered and pressed a kiss to her cap before meeting Claire’s gaze. “I wasna asleep for a month…”

“No. You’ve been unconscious since your surgery two days ago, but, I…” Claire wiped at her nose, as she beamed a soft smile. “I think she was worried she wouldn’t meet you.”

“Claire,” he whispered, and he squeezed her fingers before interlacing his with hers. “Is she all right?

“She’s strong. The doctors were concerned at first with her breathing, but she’s done remarkably well with some medicine and that little incubator there, and she took to nursing right away…” Claire continued to speak softly, filling Jamie in on their daughter’s vitals and benchmarks. She continued until interrupted by the tiniest sneeze that made both parents jump and then chuckle.

“And you, Claire? Are ye recovering as well?”

She sat on the side of his hospital bed, and his hand reached out to where she indicated her incision was made. She pressed his hand gently against her skin. “Jenny made sure of it, I assure you. She’s been absolutely wonderful.”

“I ken she’ll have some choice words for me as well…”

“I just want to know,” Jenny called from the room’s doorway, “what we can call my niece. Claire said she wouldn’t name her until ye woke, ye clothead, and I’ll be damned if i’m waiting another…”
“Ellie,” Jamie whispered, raising his eyes to meet Claire’s.

“That’s what I thought, too.” She whispered. She tugged at the baby’s cap to reveal the brilliant red fuzz already taking root. Jamie let out a laugh that made his chest rumble and his daughter’s forehead scrunch in annoyance.

Jamie looked up as John and Ian joined Jenny beside his bed.

“I’d like ye all to meet Ellen Elizabeth Fraser.”
Between Jamie’s minor infections a few days after waking and Ellie’s slow weight gain, it took about three weeks to get the entire Fraser family back to Lallybroch. Claire walked up the stone steps to their newly finished house, knowing nothing was unpacked or set up beside the bassinet and the changing table, but not giving a damn. She’d sleep in their home tonight with all three of them under the same roof, even if it meant sleeping on the floor.

4 Months Ago, their wedding night.

Claire never imagined being pregnant on her wedding day, and certainly not as pregnant as she currently was, but as Jamie tucked her into his side while laughing with John, she couldn’t imagine the day any differently.

She wore a simple white A-line dress with a belt of Fraser plain tied around her waist. Jamie wore his kilt and black tailored jacket with a white crisp button down beneath it. They spoke their vows at the Lallybroch chapel at dusk as the stray beams of light penetrated the windowless stone building. Jamie led her through the Gaelic vows as well, and Claire felt the power of their tradition-seeped actions as they said the words many Frasers said before them. Jamie’s arm held her close as his hand cupped her chin, and she felt her hands circle his waist as he pressed a soft kiss to her lips.

That was several hours ago, and now their remaining guests were retiring to the spare bedrooms and bidding the happy couple farewell. Eying her Fraser, Claire felt a heat flush her cheeks as desire sloshed through her veins. Damn hormones, she thought with a grin. Though she desired Jamie often, pregnancy had enhanced the suddenness and severity of her cravings. Her fingernail deftly scratched a path up the back of his thigh and his eyes darkened with understanding.

Within a few minutes, they finished their farewells, and Jamie helped her into the passenger seat of his car. When they turned in the opposite direction of their hotel, Claire shot Jamie a questioning stare, but he remained silent. When he stopped the car, he ran to Claire’s side and led her to the center of a dirt plot.

“Where are we exactly?”

“Well, you see the roped off stakes? It marks where we’ll pour the foundation…for our home.”

Claire’s mouth worked, opening and shutting on its hinge, but words failed her. “Here? I thought you wanted space from Lallybroch.”

He shrugged his shoulder. “It’s about two miles down the road. Far enough that Jenny can’t burst through the front door when's she pleases.” His grin slipped as he met her gaze. “But, I wanted your opinion before we broke ground. It’s a 15-minute commute to downtown Inverness, and its near to Lallybroch while being ours.” He tipped her chin up so her eyes met his. “What do you think?”

“I…think I love it, Jamie,” she breathed as she stepped closer to him. “Really? We can build what we want right here?”

“Mmhmm. I know we agreed to no’ take an official honeymoon with the investigation pending, but I thought this would be a good use for all your nesting energy.”

“Well, it beats reorganizing the drawers again,” she said as she pressed a kiss to his lips.
“Do you love it? Truly?”

“I do,” Claire answered, as she moved her hand under his kilt and took hold of him. Jamie let out a
gasp as he ground his hips forward into her grip, his tongue sweeping across her lower lip.

“Damn it, woman. I was trying to be romantic.”

“You were. But I’d like you to ravage me now.”

“Do husbands ravage their wives? It hardly sounds like the holy act the Bible describes.” Jamie
whispered against her ear.

“Perhaps in England they don’t.” She snickered as she backed away from him. “But this wife would
rather be treated as your whore at the moment.”

Claire dropped onto her hands and knees and pulled her dress up to her waist, revealing her garter
belt, stockings and nothing else covering her slick folds. Jamie growled as he dropped to his knees
behind her, running his hands over her bare behind and the tight garter bands running down the back
of her thighs. Thank God her doctor removed her from pelvic rest.

“If you’re going to play a whore, I want the sounds that come with it.” He pushed himself inside of
her fully and a groan escaped him as her wetness surrounded him. His fingers traced her entrance
where his cock impaled her, gathering her dripping fluids before his fingers moved to her clit. She
trembled as the pad of middle finger rubbed gentle circles into her nub, and a throaty grunt escaped
her.

“Like that, Claire,” he moaned as he began to move inside of her.

Claire dropped onto her elbows, pushing backward when Jamie thrust, resulting in the warm
thrumming of his tip against her cervix. He stretched her from this angle, and she felt full and
exposed as he pushed her knees apart. When his hands pulled her cheeks apart, she cried out and
keeled against the thumb that drifted into her cleft.

“Like that, is it?” He growled as he increased his speed. He didn’t realize he could get any harder
until she looked over her right shoulder and met his gaze. Her mouth was open, and the sweetest
squeaks and cries escaped her as he rode her.

“Harder,” she gasped. “Please. Harder.”

He sunk his thumb into her and watched in awe as she convulsed and tightened her core. She
screamed out her pleasure as she came, and her tight pulsing orgasm sent him reeling over the edge.
They both collapsed onto their sides, breathing heavily as their limbs sought contact with one
another.

“God. I needed that,” Claire rasped.

“Aye,” Jamie breathed out, his chest still heaving, as he caught her eye and smiled. “Happy to serve
ye, love.”

Claire smacked his side before snuggling into his chest. He pressed a kiss to her forehead as he held
her close, and together they stared up at the night sky whispering to each other of their future home,
their future lives, and all the happiness they’d find between those roped off stakes.
Hard to believe that was only 4 months ago. The house was planned and built within 3.5 months, a near impossible feat that wouldn’t have happened without their incredibly talented construction firm.

Claire had only officially picked up the keys that morning, but both she and Jamie were anxious for their own space after weeks at the hospital. He carefully tucked a blanket around Ellie’s sleeping form as he unclasped the car seat carrier and joined Claire on the stone steps.

“What’s amiss?” He spoke softly as his hand rested on her hip.

“Nothing. I’m just…so grateful to be here. Finally.”

He nodded as he looked up at home. “It’s not final though, Claire. This is where we begin, the three of us.”

“I know,” she whispered. She met his gaze and let a smirk cross her face. “Are you ready to assemble the crib then?”

“After our bed is made. God, I miss our bed.”

She chuckled and then let out a shriek as Jamie hoisted her up onto his hip. With his lasses in his arms, Jamie carried his small family over the threshold of their new home and began the laughter that would echo through their walls for years to come.

~FIN~

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