An interruption in the first law of thermodynamics

by WhiskyNotTea

Summary

Jamie and Claire meet in High School and the adventure of togetherness begins.
“James Fraser! Ian Murray!” Mrs. FitzGibbons stopped abruptly her lecture -for the tenth time during the last hour- “Since the meaning of two simple words such as “be quiet” seems too hard for you to understand and you obviously can’t just do it, you’re separated!”

I saw Mrs Fitz glaring at them and I turned slightly my head, giving Jamie and Ian a glance over my shoulder. Trying to conceal their laughter behind lowered heads and eyes staring their desk wasn’t successful at all. Their shoulders shook from restricted mirth and their faces had become a very bright red from lack of oxygen.

“Jamie take your book and notes -not that you kept any- and move…” Mrs Fitz paused to think and I returned to my notes on the first law of thermodynamics.

“Here, next to Claire, so I can see you” I heard her finish her sentence.

Oh no. Did she say next to Claire? Great, bloody great. The seat next to me was empty since - today of all days - Joe was sick at home.

I took a breath thinking what I should say to him. 
Nothing- I shouldn’t say anything in the middle of the class, or Mrs. Fitz would definitely flip out. 
Anyway, the last thing I needed now was to worry about the most popular ginger of the school and his swollen muscles sitting next to me.

A book landed on my desk and the chair next to me was moved without a sound. Jamie sat himself down and buried his face in his hands, rubbing his brow. His auburn curls bounced a bit and I caught myself staring.

What the hell, Beauchamp?

I swallowed every thought and returned to my notes.

\[ \Delta U = Q - W. \]

\( \Delta U \) stands for internal energy…

A light bump on my knee cost my concentration and a heartbeat –or two. I didn’t look at him though. 
He surely didn’t mean it, it was just an accident. 
Why did I get excited? Why am I doing this to myself? I don’t even like the guy!

I took a deep but silent breath and decided to ignore the cocky Scot. However, he seemed to have different plans because at that moment exactly I felt a second bump on my left knee. Annoyed, I turned my eyes at him to find him smiling at me, with that beautiful smile reaching his blue eyes, like all details were fixed using photoshop.

“What, Sassenach” he whispered with slightly raised eyebrows.

Yes, you’re handsome – we know.

“Hi Jamie” I returned, attempting a face that said “I’m sorry you had to change your place with this
one but I don’t really care”

He pointed towards Mrs Fitz with his head and said “Can ye help me a bit, lass? I dinna listen a lot since the class started”

“Mmm” I nodded “I noticed”.

He smiled again at that. “Can you show me your notes, Claire?”

I attempted for a casual gesture, nodding and shrugging simultaneously (that must seem ridiculous enough) and passed my notes to him.

Raising my head to focus on what Mrs Fitz was now saying, I felt Jamie’s arm on mine.

It’s an accident, Claire. He is huge and probably the desk is too small for him.

So I withdrew, going as far as I could at the other side of the desk, not that there was much space to begin with.

Another bump on my knee. Won’t the fool leave me alone?

“Can I borrow your pen for a minute?”

“Sure”

He reached in front of me to grab the pen, his arm grazing mine the whole time. My heartbeat was far from normal now and I just hoped the class would finish as soon as possible. Or not; maybe it could just last forever.

Oh, come on Beauchamp! He’s probably like this with all the girls! How many times have you heard them talking about him and discussing how great he is? Disgusting.

I rested my head on my left palm, elbow on the desk, to avoid looking at him and I kept staring at the blackboard with my mind far from the conservation of energy.

I felt him looking at me and I froze.

Next thing he was returning the pen at its initial position, snaking deftly his hand between my arm and my chest and whispering -ever innocently- “Thank you, Sassenach”.

My heart stopped and my mind could form but the one question.

“What the hell, James Fraser?”
The alpha male

CB: Really Joe, you had to be in bed with fever TODAY OF ALL DAYS?

I texted Joe the moment I left the classroom while I headed to the cafeteria.

My stomach was growling during class – before Jamie came next to me, that is.

I guess the adrenaline that followed the massive Scot’s arrival washed out everything else I could possibly feel. Even hunger.

Seems my sympathetic nervous system has an opinion of its own, concerning Jamie Fraser. My options limited to heart racing, dry mouth and stress.

Well, let my epinephrine rise as it wants, I have my central nervous system to take decisions, thank you very much.

My stomach growled again as I approached the cafeteria.

Tuesday, let me think my options. Egg noodles with pork or pasta all’ arrabiata?

Arrabiata means angry in Italian.

I checked my phone. No reply from Joe, yet.

I hope he’s not sleeping because I have to talk to someone or I’ll burst.

Yeah, I’ll definitely have the arrabiata today.

I queued up, took my pasta and water and walked towards an empty table.

Setting my food on the far end of the table I slumped on the bend wood chair. I grabbed the fork with my right hand, my phone secured in the left.

Nothing from Joe yet.

Leaving my fork I held the phone with both hands to text him again.
CB: *WTF are you doing Joe Abernathy and you haven’t seen my texts yet? Check your bloody phone!!*

I left my phone on the table and focused on eating my spicy pasta. The melted Parmigiano-Reggiano on top, combined with just the right amount of garlic and the freshness from the basil made me close my eyes to savour it.

A characteristic ringtone made me open them again and I saw my screen lighting up with a new message. I hastily reached for it, turning over my opened water bottle with the back of my hand.

Fuck!

It rolled on the table losing almost half its content and I immediately grabbed my phone to avoid seeing it bathe in the water stream. With the phone safe in my hand I now reached for the bottle that would in a few seconds fall on the floor.

Another hand stopped its course before mine could.

A big hand, with gracious but strong long fingers, that was now a few centimetres away from mine.

Trailing my eyes up from the hand, I slowly raised my head to see the point where the muscled arm met the shoulder and the broad chest until I finally reached his face looking at me. Smiling; always smiling.

I realised that my hand was still suspended in the air and pulled it back abruptly.

The water bottle was now set upright but water was still dripping on the floor, making me think if my day’s anguish was worse than the Chinese water torture.

Nevertheless, I returned a smile mumbling “thanks” and I made to clean the water with a napkin, while wondering if he was holding his tray one handed before my accident or if his reflexes were so quick as to manage his tray and my bottle in mere seconds.

Jamie didn’t speak, and I turned my eyes on him again, the napkin now fully soaked. He held my glance with his slanted eyes and still balancing his tray with one hand, he kind of bowed to me. It was slight, just with his head and shoulders, but still counted as a bow.
What is this? The fucking 18th century?

Despite myself, I grinned. His smile transformed to a full grin to match mine and it seemed impossible for me to comprehend how he could become even more impressive and beautiful.

Rupert MacKenzie slapped him on the back pointing with his head towards the table where Ian and Angus sat.

Jamie nodded at him and looked back at me once more, before turning his back to join his friends.

Great. Fucking bloody great. Now you’re even smiling at him, Beauchamp.

I scowled, shaking my head and returned to my food. After the second bite I remembered the reason of all this mishap. Joe had finally replied.

**JA**: Seems you can’t stand a day away from me, LG!! What’s up?

**CB**: Fiiiiiiinally!! God, I need to talk to someone, like NOW!

**JA**: I’m all ears! Or rather eyes…

With my mouth full with more pasta than I could normally process and while making huge movements with my jaw to finally swallow the thing, I briefed him of the day’s events.

**JA**: So, what’s the matter LG? I don’t get it.

**CB**: WHAT EXACTLY don’t you get Joe?

**JA**: He was a bit more brave than he should be during the class and then he rescued your bottle of water? So what?

**CB**: So what?? A BIT MORE BRAVE? Seriously Joe? He was way over the line there and I don’t
need a fucking savior!

JA: OK, I’m gonna pretend that the CAPS here are totally accidental and move on. Why do you care? You shit on him and all the Swimming and Diving Team all the time! “They are so presumptuous Joe, blah blah”

CB: Not all of them! I like Ian!

JA: Yeah, you didn’t like him before getting to know Jenny a bit better! Let me remind you, she is the reason you reconsidered.

CB: No she’s not! Ian is kind and quiet! In contrast to the lot of them…

JA: Sure. But you didn’t answer my question. Why are you so upset? If you don’t like a guy who hits on you, you usually tell him to go screw and never mention him again.

Why was I really upset?

I looked towards Jamie with the phone still in my hands. The collar of his white shirt was standing out from the black V-neck sweater and all I could see was his broad back and auburn-ginger hair. Even in the uniform, he stood out like he had a spotlight pointing at him. The alpha male.

Blond hair was now mixed with his, disrupting the black of his uniform with their bright colour. She was casually leaning on him, grabbing something from his plate and eating it.

I hope he got the roast chicken drumsticks with sticky Tabasco.

No. She was giggling. It was just the bacon pizza. Shit.

That’s it Beauchamp. Nothing that you didn’t already know.

The alpha male. Confident, strong, competitive, with a presence, walking like the shit and always getting the girl. All the girls.
The alpha male lion claims sexual rights to all females.

I looked down at my phone and texted Joe.

**CB:** *Jamie Fraser can go fuck himself, Joe, for all I care.*
I walked into the dance studio and sat in a corner, my head lowered to the ground, my hands fidgeting with my t-shirt. I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to dance.

Thank God the message was pretty clear and only two or three girls came to say hi. I was angry and felt my stamina nearly touching the ceiling. Worst of all, I knew why I felt this way. I’d put my guard down, even for a short while, leaving my heart free to hope.

Only he could be the reason of my feelings; the reason I smiled like a fool and felt my heart pounding in my temples. But now I could see how stupid this infatuation was. Stupid and one-sided, to boot.

I tried to calm down during the warm-up exercises but it seemed impossible. My body started to respond with each stretch and I felt my muscles ready to carry me and my anger away. I ached to be lost in the music, to feel it flow through my body, to be free.

Not to think anymore. Not to think of Jamie again.

“OK girls, please take your positions, we're going to practice our routine” Lilly, our instructor, said in a sweet voice.

We’ll do it all, everything, on our own

Hands slowly grazing the floor, opening middle-way and then closing again, coming stretched in front of me.

Synchronized, we all raised slowly, sitting on our knees, heads lifted towards the ceiling.

We don't need anything or anyone

Balancing on the left hand, I raised my right leg and hand – the music already filling my body. Ready for the kick that would lift me up to my feet.

If I lay here, if I just lay here
I got lost in the lyrics, in my feelings, in each movement. Pirouetting, swinging, jumping and falling on the floor; high and low. That’s why I loved contemporary dance. Ballet was too rigid for me but this, this was real. This was life.

My emotions overwhelmed me again but I could handle them now. I’d found room to let them breath, to give them the clarity that allowed me to finally look at them; to confront them.

Leaving the turmoil inside me to evaporate with each movement, what I was, what I hoped and felt was now exposed and accepted, received with benediction. Losing my anger, I felt utterly exposed - but strong.

Whatever this feeling was, it was intense. I had every right to feel that way, and that was OK, as long as I could shield myself from the others; but not from me.

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Finishing the lesson I headed towards the door and I saw Jenny Fraser coming towards me. She smiled to me, her flashed cheeks the only thing that betrayed her dancing. In contrast to my almost ruined bun and stray curls falling around my face, Jenny’s hair slicked back in a perfect ponytail. Always in order, Jenny Fraser.

“Hi Jenny!” I smiled to her securing two stray curls behind my ear.

“Hi Claire! It went really well today, no? I think we’ll be ready for the performance next month” she said calm and relaxed. It was nice seeing her like this, in contrast to her usual a-bit-too stern self.

“Yes! It was wonderful. Exactly what I needed”

“Me too. I didna expect it, ye ken, dancing to help me that much!”

I nodded in agreement and started walking towards the door. Jenny followed and after a few moments spoke again. “Lilly proposed all the team to go for a retreat, for bonding, se said”

“Really?” that sounded interesting.

“Aye! She said it would be good for the team and we could practise our routine as well.”

“Sure! That’d be great! When would that be? Have we found our destination?” I asked intrigued.

“At a weekend, that’s for sure. But we dinna ken yet as for where.”

“Mmh” I said biting my lip in search for a nice place.

Entering the locker room I grabbed my bag, beanie and coat and while Jenny was rummaging her bag in search for something I turned to say goodbye.

“I’ll take a shower at home, Jenny. Nice talking to you! See you tomorrow.”

“Oh! I’ll leave too, Claire! Just wait a minute?”

“OK” I wore my coat and leaned on the locker.
“Ready!” Jenny announced a few minutes later and we turned towards the door. “I have to go find Ian. He trains in the swimming pool but he won’t be done for one more hour. Care to join, Claire?”

“Oh” I stopped in my tracks. I didn’t see that coming. “I’m a mess, Jenny, I think I better head home.”

“Oh, come on, I’m not much better myself!” Jenny replied even though I still couldn’t find a thing on her that looked sloppy. “The swimming pool is a twenty-minute bike ride and I’ll be bored waiting there all alone” she said looking at me pleadingly – as pleadingly Jenny could ever look at someone.

“Ahhh, OK!” I said, thinking that I’d have to practice more how to say no. “Let’s go.”

The air on my face was cold and refreshing and I was glad that -for once- it wasn’t raining. We took our bikes and rode through the beautiful Royal Botanic Garden, arriving at the swimming pool where the Swimming and Diving Team was training in less than twenty minutes.

We entered the building and sat at the first raw of the bleachers, relatively close to the pool. I removed my beanie and hastily put my hair in a bun in an attempt to be more presentable – not that this changed any of my mess.

Putting my coat next to me I saw Jenny waving to someone – most probably Ian. I turned my head and saw him, waving back with a huge smile on his face. Love, I thought.

Just behind him, emerging at that moment from the water was Jamie.

His hair was hidden under a blue swimming cap but this was the only thing on him that I could describe as hidden. Supported on his arms, he first raised himself to sit on the tiles and then rose, standing by Ian.

He was so flawless I couldn’t stop staring. Muscles covered every inch of his body - his wet body that kept dripping on the floor- with his huge arms on the sides of his bulged chest. Glancing lower I saw a set of perfectly shaped abs and then… I abruptly searched for an invisible stain on my tights and then pretended to search for something in my bag.

Had he seen me? Oh, God, I hope he didn’t see me! Arghhhh

I couldn’t stop wondering. How could someone be so perfect? The lad could work as a living statue incarnating the perfect male if he couldn’t do anything else with his life, if you ask me.

No doubt Jamie Fraser was so self-assured. With that body he probably thought he could own the world.

Thinking it would be safe now, I raised my head again with my whole body on fire – from lust or shame I couldn’t tell.

Jamie was looking at me, tall and handsome with a strange look on his face. Biting his lips and with his eyes locked on mine he nodded at me.
I thought that he would be smug, but he wasn’t. He seemed happy. Shining, in fact.

Jamie Fraser, almost naked and definitely godlike, was raising his hand to wave to me.

My heart was ready to explode and I swallowed with great difficulty. Totally isolated from my surroundings, I felt an invisible cord connecting us and making us the only people in the centre.

Raising my slightly trembling hand, I waved back and smiled at him.

This is definitely *not* shielding yourself, Beauchamp.
Walk me home

Chapter Notes

This chapter is here a bit sooner than planned, because of all your pressing, I mean... encouraging comments!

Seriously, I would like to thank each one of you for your support - for your comments and kudos!! I can’t even express how happy you make me!! 💖

I hope you’ll enjoy Chapter 4!

The swimming pool looked extremely serene when the team disappeared behind the doors leading to the locker room. I got lost in the blue-water colour, so intense, so peaceful, so beautiful, so like… like his eyes. Oh God, there was no salvation, was there?

Laughing with myself – silently, because Jenny was still beside me, I accepted my situation. How did this happen? When? I was totally swept off my feet.

Jenny was looking at her phone when I turned to her. I knew I had to find an excuse and leave before Jamie and Ian would come back, but my mind was blank. It would be impolite to leave now, I thought. And my glass face would probably show my lying, anyway. So I stayed.

“What will you do now, Claire?” Jenny turned to look at me. “It’s Friday and we thought of going to the cinema! Do you want to come?”

Yes.
But no. I couldn’t. I’ve promised Lamb that we would go out for dinner tonight.

“I’m sorry Jenny, I have plans for the night.”

“OK. Maybe we could arrange something for tomorrow? Joe could come too!” she suggested, leaving me looking at her agape. I hadn’t realized that Jenny wanted to hang out that much.

“Sure!” I said, seeing Jamie and Ian coming towards us.

“Hello!” said Ian, followed be a whispered “Hi babe” to Jenny, giving her a kiss on the lips.

Don’t look at Jamie. Don’t look at him now, I thought, while raising my eyes to look at him. What was bloody wrong with me?

My eyes found his looking at me and I saw his cheeks gradually becoming red. I felt mine turning scarlet. Great.

He gave me a lopsided smile – God this smile – and said “How come you’re here, Sassenach?”

Before I had the chance to respond, Jenny’s somber voice filled the tense air “I invited Claire, brother. And ye may stop calling her Sassenach, aye? Tisnae very polite”

“Oh” Jamie said as if he hadn’t noticed his sister before she spoke. He then turned abruptly to look at
me with a terrified look upon his face. “I dinna mean to insult ye, Claire. Tis just that ye came this year in Edinburgh and Sassenach means English and an outlander and – “

“It’s OK, Jamie. I know you didn’t say it like that” I smiled at him, realizing that from day one I somehow knew that he said my nickname with sympathy. Was it something even more than sympathy? I wondered.

“And I dinna mean that I don’t want ye here, either” he said, the last word through gnashed teeth and giving Jenny a look.

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Fortunately, Rupert and Angus joined our little company at that moment and saved me the trouble.

“Ah, lassies even come to see us training now” Angus said. “When I’ll win the 200 Free next month, the lassies will fight to take the best seat just to see me” he bragged, raising his eyebrows suggestively to me.

“Well, if they fight, it will be for the seat further away from your lane” I replied and the silence that followed made me think that I took this too far. Angus was definitely not the best-looking guy and he was shorter than me but he was a great swimmer with an almost perfect technique, if I wanted to be honest.

Suddenly Rupert burst out laughing and everybody else joined in. Relieved, I laughed as well.

“You’re a witty one” said Jamie and nudged me with his elbow, lingering a bit longer when we touched.

Every time I felt him, I was blazing. My skin was sensitized, tuned to overreact to his.

My breathing became rapid and I couldn’t control the way I looked at him when I turned to face him.

“Are we ready to go then?” I heard Ian, bringing me back to myself. “Claire, will you join us? We’ll go to the cinema”

“No, unfortunately I can’t but thank you, Ian” I said, gathering my bag and coat from the bleachers. “So… see you guys!” I run my eyes to each one of them while they nodded and said their goodbyes. I left Jamie last, noticing that he’d said nothing. He didn’t smile anymore.

He seemed disappointed.

Well done, Beauchamp, now you interpret his face thinking whatever suits you. Just go!

I smiled to him nonetheless and headed towards the door.

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I was outside, unlocking my bike when I heard him calling my name.

“Claire!”

I turned towards the direction of his voice, realizing that he was much closer to me than I thought. Was he running?

“Oh, you have a bike” he said, his face clouded.

“I do” I said, pointing to my bike as if I was a telemarketer. At least I made him laugh.
I made Jamie Fraser laugh. Jamie Fraser, with his hair still wet from his shower, wearing torn jeans and a casual sweater and being the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And he had run after me. Was that a parallel universe or something?

“I thought…” he trailed off. He took a deep breath and spoke again “Do ye mind, if I walk you home?”

It was my turn to just reply with an “Oh…”

Was that really happening?

Trying to seem aloof, I said “Sure, why not? Let’s walk. My place is not far from here”

The swimming pool was very close to the University of Edinburgh and Lamp had opted for a house close to work. My bike ride to school wasn’t long either. Suddenly I realized that Jamie had left his friends to come with me.

“Jamie”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you want to go watch the film as well?” I asked concerned. “My house is close, you don’t really need to come with me”

“No” he said, his right hand ruffling his hair “I want to come with you. Why didn’t you come with us though? Was it Angus’ bullshit?”

I laughed shaking my head “No, I just have plans with my uncle tonight”. I didn’t need to inform his about my plans, and yet I did.

“Ah…” Jamie smiled and seemed happier.

As if through an unuttered agreement, we kept a relatively slow pace. I felt my feet moving, my solid steps on the paved street, the cold air feeling my lungs and prickling my face as if it was the first time I walked back home. I wished time would expand, never to arrive; just to walk with him at the other side of my bike. I didn’t mind being cold – I didn’t care about anything, as a matter of fact, apart from him strolling down the street with me.

“So, Sassenach, how do you find Scotland?”

“Rainy. Cold. And beautiful.” I turned to look at him and saw him raising his hand, placing it on top of mine on my bike’s handlebars.

My heart must have stopped. How long could you live when you heart stops?

I didn’t find out, because my powerful muscle started racing immediately afterwards, as if to make up for the lost beats.

I was staring at our hands, Jamie’s big one totally enveloping mine. I’d forgotten to wear my gloves and I realized that just now, when I felt how much warmer his hand was compared to mine. Scotland is cold, I’d said. Well, it wasn’t anymore.

When I looked at his face his slanted eyes were shining.

“Edinburgh is very beautiful, Sassenach, for a city. But it’s the countryside that holds Scotland’s real beauty, ye ken. Have ye visited it yet? The moors and the mountains, the forests and the lochs... The
rolling hills, the coastlines, the castles?” he had a dreamy tone in his voice and I was sure he didn’t see the grey buildings in front of us but all the scenic images in his mind. I left my mind wander with his, my only knowledge of what he was describing the pictures I’d seen in Google Maps.

After my negative answer, confirming that I had no idea what he was talking about, he said “Ye should come with us Sassenach. On the winter break. We’ll go back home”

“Back home?” I asked taken aback.

“Aye, we’re not from Edinburgh, none of us. Jenny, Ian and I – we’re from a village close to Inverness, Beauly. Ye ken, in the Highlands. Rupert and Angus are from Lairg, even northern.”

“And do you live here alone?”

“No, that we’d wish! Jenny, Ian and I are living with my godfather, Murtagh. Our parents are back at home”

I was surprised, to say the least.

“You leave with your uncle?” Jamie asked.

“Mmmhmm”

“Are your parents away, too, then?”

“Pretty far away” I tried to lighten up the conversation but I felt a lump forming in my throat “They died when I was five. Car accident”

He squeezed my hand, making me realize that he kept in there, sheathing mine all this way. It felt like my hand belonged there, buried in his.

“I didna ken, Claire – I shouldn’t ask… I’m sorry”

“It’s OK” I assured him “It was a long time ago”

“It’s never OK, Claire” he said with a knowing look. I frowned at him and he continued “We’ve lost our mother, Jenny and I. And our younger brother.”

“Oh, Jamie. I’m so sorry.” I moved my hand squeezing his and saw him smiling.

“How come your hands are so bloody warm?” I said feigning irritation, in an attempt to change the subject. It worked.

“We Scots arenae like you, blue nosed Sassenachs. We can handle the weather!”

“Can you now?” I replied, raising an eyebrow and wishing I could be absorbed in his warmth.

Arriving at our destination I stopped in front of the entrance of the building. “Well, here we are”

Jamie stopped, facing first the building and then the ground. His hand was still on mine and he was obviously thinking something so I stayed silent, waiting. When he looked up at me, his other hand was making a mess of his hair reminding me that I was actually a mess myself. I hadn’t even looked myself in the mirror before leaving the locker rooms!

However, Jamie didn’t seem to notice that when he looked at me again.
“Claire…”
He blushed and I couldn’t help smiling. Maybe my hair wasn’t that bad anyway. It felt less humid today, compared to other days, so maybe my curls were well-behaved.

Waiting for him to continue my right hand was gripping the handlebar so hard that my knuckles had become white. I waited, never removing my eyes from his. I should have said something, but I didn’t think that I could trust my voice at the moment.

“Could you… If you want… If that’s OK, I mean…”
He will never finish the sentence, I thought.

“Yes?” I encouraged him.

“Could ye maybe give me yer phone?”

“Don’t you have one of you own?” I mocked him.

“Yer number, yer number, Claire” he said a little exasperated after seeing me silently laughing and then added with a smug grin “Ye owe me an afternoon at the cinema, after all.”

“You said you wanted to come with me!”

“Aye, but you owe me nonetheless”

I gave him my number, thanking God that I didn’t completely black out forgetting the odd sequence of numbers.

He slowly ran his fingers on my hand and left, saying “See ye around, Sassenach!” and grinning.

I stayed there, unable to move for a few moments, seeing him leaving.
Then, thinking that he shouldn’t see me looking at him in case he turned his head back, I entered the building.

Locking my bike, I raced the stairs up to the apartment, unable to contain my excitement. Entering my room, I was jumping like crazy for what felt like an eternity.
Jamie Fraser asked for my number.
Jamie Fraser asked for my number.
Jamie Fraser asked for my number!

I kept repeating the same thing in my head, unable to think of anything else for a while.

I felt a bit dizzy, mildly intoxicated from what had just happened. An electric current run through my body, activating every neuron – OK not every one but definitely the dopaminergic neurons associated with reward.
And they worked just fine because I felt euphoric!

The sky was the most beautiful blue it had ever been, with puffy white clouds here and there, reminding me of the drawings I made as a child. The ones where the house, trees and people all had the same size (a gigantic that is) and the grass met the sky in an almost straight line turning bright green to cobalt blue. In a corner there was always a sun spreading its rays – a long one, then a shorter, and a long one again.

But today the sun was in my room, in my heart that was trying to fly away from the rest of my body. Everything was beautiful today. Even the homey feeling of my room was different. The posters I never noticed anymore, the souvenirs from my travels, my beautiful bookcase with all books orderly arranged – Lamb’s gift/bribery when he announced that we had to move again – everything was glowing.

I closed my eyes and gave my widest smile towards the sky.

Mom, Dad, I’m happy.

Taking a deep breath, unable to remove the broad smile from my face but a bit calmer now, I sat on my bed re-winding the day in my mind and going back to the swimming pool. I gathered my legs close to my chest and hugged myself, letting Jamie conquer all my thoughts.

My face would probably hurt after all this smiling, but I couldn’t help it.

I saw him in front of me, majestic as always. I tried to remember every move, every glance, every smile. I cupped my left hand with my right one, desperate to keep his warmth on me for a little more.

You couldn’t say that we were holding hands, but that was pretty close. It wasn’t enough, but it was a start. The best start.

In such a small amount of time I felt connected to him in so many ways. He seemed to understand me. What had Virginia Woolf said? “The high luxury of not having to explain…” That was it.

We barely said hello before. I’d noticed him, of course, and … OK I was attracted to him, but I thought that would be all. I had to protect myself from a heart-break. It was only one year ago, when I promised to myself that I would stay away from the popular guys at school.

And here I was, breaking that promise. But Jamie wasn’t just a popular guy. He had this certain air, yes, and he was carrying himself magnificently but he was not the superficial good-looking guy I was sure he was.
Actually, I couldn’t be more wrong about him. But how could I know that? And what were the chances Jamie Fraser would show interest for me?

But he did.

He didn’t have to walk me home. He didn’t have to hold my hand. He didn’t have to tell me about his mother and brother, about his home.

And yet he did.

And he certainly didn’t have to ask for my number.

But he fucking did! And he wasn’t smug at all. God, he was even blushing!

I heard myself squeeing, wondering if I had ever made such a sound before.

Sprawled across my bed, I breathed deeply.

I was so falling for him.

“Claire! I’m home!” Lamb’s voice followed the sound of the closing door.

Oh no! I was awfully late! Instead of coming straight back home, shower and get ready for dinner with Lamb I’ve busying myself watching the Swimming Team’s training and then talking to Jamie. And then thinking about him. Not that I regretted any of these.

Without even trying to find out what time it was, I shouted towards the door “I’m not ready! Just need fifteen minutes!”

I heard my uncle’s chuckle. “Alright. I’ll be at my office. Come when you get ready”

**

We drove to our favourite restaurant, ordered – once again – our favourite dishes and conversed about our week. It was our established routine, to find time for each other once a week and spend a couple of hours together.

Lamb had tried hard to raise me properly, being himself a bachelor with crazy time-schedules and a suitcase always at hand. I missed my parents awfully but I always felt love and gratitude towards my unique uncle. I was never alone, even though our constant travels hindered any long-life friendships and I didn’t have tights to any place, as other “normal” people of my age.

“We are citizens of the world, Claire” Lamb used to say, winking his eye at me. And I felt proud of our little special family.

Lamb always cared for me and made sure that I knew that. Since I remembered myself, there were
times when he and I stayed together, having our “quality time”, as he called it. When I was little he
used to read to me and asked me for goodnight tales, which I made up out of cloth and most of the
times he found them so hilarious that he couldn’t sleep afterwards but kept laughing. We played
games, planned little adventures and trips and growing up we added to all these visits to museums,
plays and films (at least when we visited cities that offered these activities). I didn’t have what others
took for granted but I had my uncle. And never took him for granted.

When our orders arrived at the table, we talked about school and my dance lessons. I was interested
in the progress of his work and when I asked him about it he started with the same-old passion to
describe the manuscripts he resurrected and their immense significance in his research.

I found myself abstracted for what it would be the tenth time – to say at least. My uncle’s words
became a background noise with great ease today and my thoughts were constantly floating towards
Jamie and the “See ye around, Sassenach!” he said before he left.

I must have checked my phone a million times. At some point Lamb said with a sly smile “Is there
any other news you want to share, Claire?”

His eyes were twinkling dangerously.

“Ummm, no. No, no nothing new”

How many no’s where there?

He gave me a look showing that he didn’t believe a word but didn’t push me further.

All the way home I couldn’t stop thinking if Jamie would text. He didn’t say that we would talk later,
but I thought he would send something. Anything.

Why haven’t he said “Talk to you later, Sassenach”?

Did I do something wrong? Had he regretted it?

Going back in my room, I felt desperate.

He didn’t text. He didn’t care.

I didn’t know why he got my number but obviously he could do just fine without it.

I changed back in my green striped pyjamas and felt like a proper prisoner, just in a wrongly
coloured uniform.

Crawling to my bed, I placed my phone on the nightstand and tried to hide myself from the world by
pulling my duvet up above my head.

It was still early and I was not sleepy at all and that a bad thing considering that I kept overanalyzing
everything and kept thinking about the things I’d said to Jamie and what I should have said instead. I
made up approximately ten conversations that could take place in parallel universes.
When I was on the verge of sleep, I heard it.

The text notification.
That I shot out of bed as if my life depended on it would be an understatement.
I grabbed my phone, wishing for humanity’s sake that it wouldn’t be an advertisement.

Unknown number.
That was good.

“Hello Sassenach. How was your night with your uncle?”

Yeeeeeerreeeeees!

Constant smile? Back.
Sleep tonight? Questionable.
Here we go with a bit of texting between Jamie and Claire! This chapter had originally a few emojis as well (because who texts without emojis?) but I found it impossible to add them here in A03. :( Hope you enjoy this and thank you again for your kind words! I really appreciate it!

I’d read somewhere that it takes between 90 seconds and 4 minutes to decide if you fancy someone. And then elsewhere that it takes 8 seconds for men to fall in love at first sight.

I didn’t know the exact time point when my feelings were established but I had a whole night to fall in love with Jamie, if I wasn’t already totally enchanted by him.

My heart pounded in my ears and a grin spread through my face while I stayed immobile, holding my phone as the world’s biggest treasure.

And then I heard that foolish squee escaping my mouth again.

What are you doing to me James Fraser?

Sitting on my bed, I read his text again and again squeezing my brain to think of my reply.

Well, not just a reply. A good reply. A perfect one.

Blank.

I couldn’t think, my heartbeat messing with all my other functions.

What should I say? What? The question was running panicked through my mind.

Calm down, first things first, Beauchamp. Let’s save his number.

That I would type his name on my phone! Jamie Fraser. Yes, like I wouldn’t remember who he was without his last name written.
OK, now read his text for a last time and just reply Beauchamp!

**JF**: *Hello Sassenach. How was your night with your uncle?*

OK, it was a simple text asking about my night.

Of course, he could text houuuurs earlier saying something else; instead of waiting all this time to be sure I would be back home – but no.

Jamie Fraser waits for me to be totally depressed and then he goes and texts!

Anyway.

**CB**: *Hi Jamie! It was fun! Nothing can go wrong while eating your favourite dish and catching up!*

His reply came in seconds.

**JF**: *And that dish would be …?*

**CB**: *Mushroom risotto! How was your night?*

**JF**: *Oh, in contrast with yers, Sassenach, my night sucked. Ye see, I missed the film and went straight back home. Murtagh was so glad to see me back early – to help him with some chores, that is.*

Oh come on! What an arse, I thought, teasing me for walking me home – and this his decision too. But I was still smiling.

**CB**: *Oh, my poor lad…*

**JF**: *Willing to make it up to me?*

With eyebrows raised, I texted back.

**CB**: *And how would that be…?*

**JF**: *Ye already owe me a night in the cinema. Ye didn’t forget that, did ye?*
Of course I hadn’t forgotten that! How this would ever be possible! But he didn’t need to know.

**CB:** Although this was a unilateral decision…

**JF:** What? Oh, no lass. This was just the right thing, what has to be done.

**CB:** hahaha OK, I guess I can pay you back with a night at the cinema.

**JF:** Of course ye will! I wouldn’t give in, no matter how much ye would try to avoid it. After all I lost the film.

Well, I never wanted you to give in, to begin with.

**CB:** Great

**JF:** But you know tis not just this

What did he have in his mind? I thought going out together would be enough.

**CB:** No?

**JF:** D’ye not read that I was doing chores as well, Sassenach?

**CB:** And I am to blame for this?

**JF:** Definitely

I was laughing, shaking my head but opted for a more sober reply.

**CB:** I have to disagree on that, you know.

**JF:** Ye have to make amends, I say.
Well, if you say so…

**CB:** That would include?

**JF:** *Spending your Saturday night with us, Sassenach*

With us, not with me, but it was an invitation nonetheless.

**CS:** And who would you be?

**JF:** Jenny, Ian, Rupert, Angus… and I.

**CS:** Well, I like Jenny a lot.

At this point I was giggling.

**JF:** Do ye then?

**CS:** Yeap

**JF:** Good. Then ye’re coming?

**CB:** Where?

**JF:** To escape with me

My heart stopped and a shiver ran through my body.

I read the text again, but the letters remained the same, dancing in front of my eyes.

Be smart. Say something funny.
CB: Are you trying to run away to avoid your chores?

JF: I would ran away with you – chores or no

Oh my God.

That cheeky forward bastard!

I read his last text about ten times and then ten more, including his previous one as well.

He was joking but I felt like we both could say all the things we wanted, veiled and secured as jokes. Keeping a cool façade.

When I saw he was typing again I realized that I hadn’t replied.

JF: Dinna worry Sassenach, we’re staying here at the moment

CB: Good, cause my uncle would hear me packing right now, in the dead of the night

JF: We’ll plan it for another time then

CB: Where to?

JF: Everywhere

CB: Everywhere? How are we going to do this?

JF: Dinna ken yet. Maybe rent a camper van and start touring across Europe?

CB: Good, I haven’t visited Europe that much

JF: How about starting from France?
CB: Love it!

JF: Cool. Paris it is, then.

Paris. With Jamie Fraser.

I knew I was daydreaming, that these were words were floating in the air just for a minute before a light puff! and they would vanish for ever. I knew that this trip would never come to happen but still, I couldn't help myself from closing my eyes and seeing us walking by the Seine.

For the moment it was enough that we both fantasized the same thing.

That our dreams collided and merged, becoming one.

The audition song from LA LA Land came in my mind and I murmured the lyrics thinking of him.

“Here’s to the ones who dream
Foolish as they may seem
Here’s to the hearts that ache
Here’s to the mess we make”

Was I ready for another mess?

Ready or not, Beauchamp, it seems that you can’t avoid it now.

The text notification brought me back from my reverie.

JF: So, Sassenach, now that we’ll still here, let’s meet tomorrow at eight?

CB: You still didn’t tell me where we’re going Jamie!

JF: Didn’t I? Well, ye’ll find out tomorrow then

CB: Arghhh OK. Where are we meeting?
**JF:** I'll come by your place. Is that alright?

**CB:** Yeap

**JF:** See ye tomorrow Sassenach

Before I could reply, another text was delivered.

**JF:** Good night Claire

**CB:** Good night Jamie

Cocooned in my duvet, I closed my eyes and thought of him doing exactly the same in another house in the city – annihilating all the distance between us.

How brilliant it would be to have him next to me.

Maybe. One day.
Scottish Bluebells

Black jeans and a black blouse?
Torn jeans, a t-shirt and a cardigan?
A skirt, maybe?

I exhaled loudly and sunk on my bed, looking at my wardrobe that serenely started back at me through its open doors.

Decide, it said, you're running out of time.

Yes, I would decide and it would be much easier to do so if Jamie Fraser had informed me on our destination.

I needed something that would emphasize on my strong figures, without looking like I cared a lot.

OK. Jeans, definitely, but not the black ones. Blue made my butt looking better.
And my black game of thrones T-shirt, “Le petite Bran”, featuring little Bran Stark instead of the little prince on the latter's planet, and Winterfel instead of the rose. Casual, smart and funny. Joe's gift in my birthday. Let's hope it will bring me luck.

And on top of that, my black cardigan.

Well it's not that we're going to any fancy place anyway.

Or were we? Should I wear a skirt?

Or maybe switch the t-shirt with a long sleeved top?

Panicked, I was hurriedly putting on my long sleeved slim fit black top to highlight my waist and bust - throwing a ball of my t-shirt and cardigan on the bed - when I heard the notification from my phone.

*JF: Just arrived :)*

Shit!

Grabbing my bag and peacoat I ran to the door and wore my sneakers in a new record-time.

“Lamb! I’m leaving!” I shouted towards my uncle’s closed door.

“Have fun! Don’t be late.” I heard him reply before I closed the door behind me.

I raced down the stairs, stopping for a moment in front of the mirror in the lobby to check my hair. My curls where all over the place but – at least – they where shiny, forming nice ringlets. That was all I hoped for, anyway.

I exited the building to find James Fraser leaning on the wall, staring absentmindedly at the street.

Oh God, he was perfect.

I took a second to watch him – maybe a bit longer. He wore jeans, a grey stitch crewneck sweater
and a black jacket, his red curls grazing the collar leaving bold red hues on the black.

Thank God I changed into the long-sleeved top.

The sound from the door closing behind me was enough to catch his attention. He turned and gifted me with a perfect smile while his eyes locked with mine.

“Hello” I said as I walked to him.

“Hello, Sassenach” he said and he produced a small posy from behind his back, composed from Scottish bluebells.

“Oh!” I said and felt my cheeks reddening.

“Tis not much. Just thought ye might…” he trailed off and looked at me sheepishly.

“Oh I like them a lot!” I replied taking the beautiful violet-blue posy from his hands. “They are beautiful, Jamie!”

“They were in the garden in front of our apartment building”

“Campanula rotundifolia” I whispered.

“What?”

“It’s just the Latin name for this flower. I happen to like these things”

“And what else do ye ken about the Scottish bluebells, Sassenach?”

We started walking and I stared the plants for a while before answering.
“Well, they are also called witch’s bells, if you want to know. And Shakespeare wrote about them.” Changing my voice, I recited “The azured hare-bell, like thy veins; no, nor” and then changing back to my normal voice I continued, “But don’t ask me more because that’s all I remember!”

Jamie laughed. “I only knew they are wildflowers and bell-shaped” he pointed at them showing the obvious, “so that’s much more than I expected. Impressive, I should say.”

Bright red, I should say – because this would be the colour of my face right now. I shook my head but didn’t reply.

“Witch’s bells…” I heard him saying contemplatively before looking at me.

“A witch, am I?” I enquired with raised eyebrows.

He laughed. “A witch, a fairy… I dinna ken” he said while studying me.

“You know they would burn me some hundred years ago if they heard you saying so?”

“I woulndna let them burn you, Sassenach”

“Why thank you, my knight” I said faking a bow. “Be careful though, I could bewitch you, you know”

Well done, Beauchamp. That was a bloody bold thing to say. But he started it, so why not?

I heard him whisper something, so low that was almost inaudible.

After a few moments of thinking about it I thought it sounded something like “Too late” but couldn’t be sure.

“I was thinking maybe ye changed your mind, while I waited, and these poor bells would have no one to own them” he said bumping his arm on mine and then laughed at my surprise.
“You didn’t wait that much! But should I?” I said, “Change my mind, I mean. I still don’t know where we’re going!”

“Of course you shouldn’t! But even if ye did change your mind, I would just remind you that coming tonight was kind of an obligation. My chores, ye ken.” he finished with a smug look.

“Aye, I ken” I said and walked in front of him, hearing his loud laughter at my awful accent as he followed me.

It wasn’t difficult to come next to me again, with these huge legs of his.

We walked extremely close to each other, my arm brushing his with every step I took.

I felt intoxicated, holding his flowers – these lovely wildflowers – and walking with him, his steps tuned with mine. I was sure that his heart would be in sync with my heartbeat, if I could feel it – two drums creating their own concert.

Every time he laid his eyes on me I thought I would hyperventilate.

Try to be cool, Beauchamp, will you?

Fortunately when he spoke again he chose a neutral subject.

“So, I saw you in the Physics and Maths course. What else have ye chosen for yer last year in high-school, Sassenach?”

“Well… My A levels are in sciences, actually. Biology, chemistry, maths and… physics”

“Four A levels? You’re in for a lot of studying, Sassenach”

“I want to go to medical school” I replied, half proud-half shy. “If I’ll make it”

“Ye will. I know ye will” He seemed to believe it.
I looked at him laughing, but puzzled “How do you know?”

“I’ve seen ye in the class, aye?”

“Right. Not much into physics though, are you?” I said with a snobbish look. “Both you and Ian, if I may say so. What were you talking about during the last lesson, making Mrs. Fitz furious?”

“Ahh, Sassenach. Maybe I’ll tell you one day” he said, his eyes lost from mine, staring now the grey cobles of the street.

“OK, mystery man. So, what will be your A levels?”

“Well, my A levels are maths, physics and English. I’m bound to take the reins of the family business”

I found myself wanting to know everything about him. Who he really was, what were his thoughts, his goals and dreams.

“And what this business would be?” I asked.

“Whisky and local Scottish products. Production and sales”

“That sounds interesting!”

“Yes, it is. It is nice, working at my home and producing stuff that will get into people’s lives and bring a bit of Scotland in them.”

“And English?” I asked intrigued. I could easily picture him in the Highlands producing whisky and having his own farm. But why would he choose English as well?

“I like reading literature. Opens new worlds, ye ken.” he said, beaming with happiness. “I’d like to travel the world, meet people, other cultures different from ours and find amazing tales to say. Maybe write them in my own book one day. But that’s a dream” he added shyly, giving me a wistful look.
I had no words and I just squeezed his arm lightly – a proof that I was there, understanding the battle in him. Staying and leaving. Obligation and dream.

Jamie nodded and took a deep breath; I supposed to get rid of the problem at the moment.

To lighten up things a bit, I changed the subject. “So where are we going James Fraser?”

He smiled to me and with a cunning look said “I told ye, Sassenach. To escape”
Looking at the sign outside the building, I burst out laughing.

“To escape with you!” I repeated his words, shaking my head “You are unbelievable, James Fraser!”

Jamie laughed but said nothing while we moved towards the door.

An escape room! Why haven’t I thought of that? Surely I would find it, if I’d spared some thoughts on where he were heading - but I guess I was too busy thinking of him instead.

We heard them before opening the door to enter the building.

Angus and Jenny, with voices that reminded me of dogs growling to each other, obviously couldn’t agree on something, both of them eyeing the other in a determined unyielding way.

As we entered the lobby, they turned to look at us.

“Finally, ye honor us with your presence!” Angus said exasperated, with his cheeks red from anger but with a smile curving the edges of his lips upwards as he saw us.

Jenny and I rolled our eyes simultaneously and laughed. “Hi Claire! Did my brother walk you through all Edinburgh before coming here? It took you a while.”

She took me by surprise and I gave her a quizzical look. Frowning I turned to ask Jamie, only to see a red hue coloring his neck and cheeks. It then downed on me. We had taken the longest route possible from my house to the escape room.

I tried to hide my satisfaction, but my bliss was probably drawn on my face because when I faced Jenny again all she did was to wink at me.
“So, what are ye two arguing about?” Jamie said changing the subject.

“Well, there are three rooms to choose from” Ian explained showing a prospectus to us “Jenny wants the nuclear disaster, Angus wants the purgatory and –”

“The purgatory is the creepy one, eye? It’s a horror room!” Angus interrupted Ian.

“And I would rather try the Serial Killer room, not that anyone asked me…” Ian complained making Jenny come next to him and kiss him on the cheek.

“It’s just that the Nuclear Disaster room is a faulty fallout shelter, with limited air supply and we must find our way out before we run out of oxygen!”

“Oh, I like that!” I said immediately, gaining a huge grin from Jenny.

“In the purgatory there is a ghost lurking in corners while we’ll search for clues, popping out to scare us!” Angus tried to convince us, wiggling his eyebrows to emphasize on the superiority of his room.

“Be careful Angus, the ghost may trip over you in the dark, aye? Ye won’t help him much to go to heaven if he’s cursing his luck because of ye” Rupert joked.

“Verra funny, ye fat oaf. Maybe yer belly will protect me from the ghost anyway, such an obstacle to bypass” Angus replied laughing, making the rest of us laugh as well.

“OK. Let’s ballot to see which room wins, aye?” Jamie said, ever the peacemaker. “Claire, will ye come to help me?” he said nodding at me to follow him to the corner of the lobby.

“So what are we doing?” I whispered to him.

“Do ye have pen and paper?”

“I think so” I said while I started looking in my bag and tried to conceal the fact that I probably had half my possessions in there.

“Do ye happen to have a dinosaur in there as well?” Jamie asked.

“Ha. Ha. Ha” I said, finally finding the bloody pen at the bottom of my bag and giving it to him with a proud and cocky look (hoping that nothing else would fall on the floor while I removed the pen from the bag).

Jamie took it together with my notebook, cut three small paper pieces and wrote on them “nuclear” “purgatory” “killer”.

“Take this one Sassenach” he said after folding them, and he placed one of the little paper pieces in my open palm. He didn’t remove his hand immediately, but enfolded mine instead, gently closing my hand around the paper. My eyes trailed from our hands to his eyes and I saw him looking fixedly back at me. “And I’ll keep the other two” he finished as he moved to meet the others.

My heart couldn’t really afford these encounters. It was going to burst.
Back with the others, we stretched our fists in front of us, his left arm grazing my right one and we smiled while Jenny took a step to come in front of us, hovering over our hands.

It was strange to have our arms touching while there was so much empty space and I felt my skin blazing. Even though we were not alone, Jamie left his arm next to mine, as if this was its rightful place. He was claiming me, claiming a place by my side. And to be honest, I loved it.

“I am choosing” Jenny announced and before anyone could express his disagreement she picked Jamie’s left hand. “This, brother”

Jamie opened his fist and Jenny took the paper. She unfolded it ans announced with a defeated look “Purgatory”

“Yeeees!” Angus shouted running and jumping on Rupert.

“Get of me ye wee monkey!” Rupert said and they started towards the room.

“We can come again Jen, try the other rooms as well” Ian said, kissing his girlfriend’s crown and taking her towards the room’s door.

“Are you ready, Sassenach?” Jamie asked me as we followed them.

“Is anybody ever ready for the purgatory?”

“Dinna ken. It depends on why ye have to go to purgatory, I suppose”

I didn’t have time to reply because we were standing in front of the kind lady that would explain the rules to us.

“So ye picked The Purgatory” she said.
“So ye picked The Purgatory.” she said.

“Aye!” Angus’s unnecessary reply came out loud, interrupting the woman’s rehearsed speech about our room, and causing six simultaneous eye rolls.

“OK then, ye are certainly excited about this!” the lady continued with a smile. “I am Mrs. Graham and I am here to inform ye on our purgatory room. Have ye tried an escape room before?”

I heard Jamie, Ian, and Jenny murmuring, “Aye,” while Rupert, Angus, and I shook our heads saying, “No.” Mrs. Graham saw us and continued. “This is a difficult room and since not all of you are experienced, would you rather try another one? We have two more available at the moment.”

We looked at each other, the question obvious in our eyes. After a few shrugs and the terrified look of Angus, who was too close to losing his room of choice, Jamie replied. “Nay, thank ye. We’ll try this one.”

“Alright then,” Mrs Graham intertwined her fingers in front of her chest. Her voice was low when she spoke again. “Ye are six friends on a trip in the Highlands.”
I heard a noise from Jamie, one that most likely showed that he liked the beginning of our story. I smiled, happy with the knowledge of this little detail about him.

“Ye were wandering about the beautiful Scottish nature, exploring our moors and hills . . .”

I instantly remembered the passion in Jamie’s voice when he told me about his home. How his face lit up while speaking of the places that filled his heart…

*Can you concentrate a bit Beauchamp?*

I refocused on Mrs Graham, “. . . and ye stumbled upon an abandoned cabin. Ye are adventurous, aren’t ye?” she said with a smile. “So ye decided to go in and explore a little. Only once ye got in, ye found yourselves trapped inside - and not alone. This cabin was the property of a man long dead. His soul is in purgatory and he has trapped you in his cabin to bring back his memories. Ye have to help him find his story, to remember his sins and be cleansed. If ye don’t find why he died and then you will stay in the cabin forever, lost as his soul is.”

*Jesus.* Mrs Graham seemed sweet and kind but her eyes took a wild glimmer while she narrated the story.

“This is all the information I can give ye. Find who this man was and his venial sins to help him leave the purgatory and find peace in heaven.” She stopped and then added, “Ye ken this room has a performance included?”

“The ghost ye mean?” Angus asked with a huge grin.

“Aye, lad. The man’s soul.” She replied in a spooky voice.

“Aye, aye, we know. Let’s go then!” Rupert motioned to the room’s door.

The lady moved to open the door. “The difficulty for this room is 95% and ye have 80 minutes to solve the mystery.”
95%? I thought incredulously. Does this mean that only 5% escape the room?

Mrs. Graham continued with her instructions. “There is a screen above the door, showing how much time ye have left. Also, when you hear a characteristic beep, a hint will appear on the screen to help you move forward with the solution of the mystery. Some clues will be easy to find, others ye’ll need to search more. Ye may find some clues before ye can use them, so mind not to forget them. There is a paper and a pencil in the room to keep notes on your findings. In case you need to leave the room, there is a red panic button next to the door. Press it and the door will open. If you find this man’s identity and solve the mystery, the last clue will give you a code. Type the code on the mechanism above the panic button and the door will open for you, setting you and the man’s soul free. Have fun!”

“Thank you!” We said, moving towards the door.

The Purgatory. When Angus first told us about the room I thought it would include fire and souls that were to be purified. Maybe some torments to punish the souls for their sins. But this was not the case, not at all. My imagination had gone wild again.

We were not in purgatory, this man was.

We were just going to explore his house and I felt much more comfortable with that.

Until I entered the room, that is.

It was dark. When we all got inside the door closed behind us with great force producing a deafening Bam!

I jumped and saw Jenny start, placing her hand upon her heart.

Here we go, I thought – not comfortable at all.

The room was nothing close to what I imagined, and homey would be the last word that would come to mind if you asked me to describe it.
A low fire was burning in the hearth, allowing the shadows to roam freely on the stone walls and the furniture. A plain desk was sitting at a corner, with some papers on top of it and a single bed next to it. One wall was half-covered with a closet. It was a simple oblong case without any carved details on it, not even painted. In the middle of the room stood a rough wooden table with a single chair on its side, while a lone armchair was the only luxurious piece in the room, occupying a lonely corner. Two paintings were hanging on the walls, their colours dull and worn out. Dust covered everything, a layer of forlornness piercing the atmosphere.

Everything seemed old. Very old. What did Mrs. Graham say? *Long dead.* Everything around me seemed to be dated more than 200 years back. But there was something more than that. A feeling that everything in the room was neglected and unwanted, never cared for. Like no one really ever found peace and warmth in this place.

From the moment we entered the room we heard the wind howling above our heads, threatening to invade the cabin. Drops of rain (I guessed) were falling in the room, as if from a leak on the ceiling. The background music aided the adrenaline high that we had, reinforcing the chilling feeling that the room gave us. Everything was gloomy.

Someone touched me lightly on the shoulder and I flinched, a current running through me, before I heard Jamie’s voice behind me.

“Creepy.”

“Are you afraid, James Fraser?” I teased him, even though I had quite an eerie feeling myself. I was not afraid, but all this was too atmospheric and believable to feel calm, if you asked me.

“Never, Sassenach,” he whispered, so close to my ear that I felt his breath on my skin, making a second current run through my body, for a totally different reason this time.

I swallowed, avoided looking at Jamie and made to search for clues around the room. Maybe I could find more wood for the fire. We could hardly see, burning so low as it was.

At that moment I heard Jenny say, “There are candles here, let’s light them so we can see, aye?”

She was pointing at a bunch of candles on a bedside table. I hadn’t notice that there was a bedside table at all.
Ian and Jenny were lightening the candles, giving one to each of us.

“Right. Now let’s look for clues,” she said once all the candles were distributed and I realized we had just found our team leader.

Taking my candle I walked to the table in the middle of the room. Angus started pretending that he was a ghost, trying to scare Rupert but ended up only with a slap on his head.

“Will ye stop ye wee heathen? We have to find the clues to get out of here!” Rupert scolded giving Angus a candle.

The table was full of dust and as I approached the letters showed themselves – distinct and clear dark lines surrounded by the pale dust covering the table like a tablecloth.

HELP ME

Swallowing, I left my candle on the table and focused on the items that it held.

A dark grey goblet stood proud and full with a stale drink. Lowering my face to smell it I could identify the intense yet familiar sweet odor of whisky. Of course, what else it could be! We were in the Highlands after all.

Next to the drink there was a piece of paper. It was worn and black inked letters were disrupting the peaceful yellow-cream background. A letter.

My beloved Flora,

Nothing is worth living anymore, since I lost you.

I left the military. I couldn’t see him – him that had taken you away from me forever.

I have no home. The people around me are no friends.

I am alone.

And yet I prefer that from seeing you and have no chance to make you mine.
I was so moved by these words, by this man’s despair – this letter was heartbreaking.

“Heeeeeeelp meeeee,” an eerie voice called from behind me while something cold and feathery touched my neck.

Jumping, I screamed and moved to the side, entangling my feet with the chair. I shrieked as I saw myself approaching the floor in slow-motion, with my hands in the air frantically trying to grasp something – anything that would keep me standing.

Two strong hands were on my waist, lifting me to an upright position. They remained there as I tried to find my breath. I heard a reassuring murmuring in Gaelic in Jamie’s voice and I leaned slightly backwards, letting the weight of myself go and leaving it to him to support me. I could feel his warm chest and I dropped my head toward him as well, his big hands firm on me.

Finding my breath, I felt him inhaling with me, steadying me. His head was inclined towards mine, his nose in my curls.

“Holy fuck,” I whispered and felt him chuckle. “Thank you”

Jenny and Ian looked worriedly at me and I moved my hand in what I thought was a reassuring gesture.

“Was that the ghost?” said Angus excited, but I paid no attention to him.

“Are ye alright, Sassenach?” Jamie asked, still not moving his hands from my waist.

“I guess I just encountered the man’s soul. I kind of forgot about that.”

“Well, I would come to ye myself if I had to choose someone from this room,” he said as he turned
me around to look at me. “Sure you’re OK?”

“Yes, sure.” I smiled even though my heart was still beating like crazy. I didn’t know if it was the creepy soul or Jamie’s arms that had the biggest effect on me. “I think he chose me because of this.” I said, showing Jamie the letter.

He took the letter and nodded after reading it. With a hand on the small of my back he led me to the portraits on the wall.

“I was just seeing these,” Jamie said nodding at the portraits.

A young man with a smile on his thin lips and two blue eyes stared back at me. He looked to be less than 30 years old in this portrait. “This must be him,” Jamie said and then pointed with the letter to the other portrait, showing a young fair woman, “And this must be his Fiona.”

I nodded. “He was in love with her, but she belonged to another. He left his job, he was a soldier or something, but I can’t understand anything else on the letter. He says that he has people around him but he really is alone.”

“Poor man.” Jamie commented. He rubbed my back and removed his hand turning to face the room. I had the impulse to take his hand and place it back, exactly where it had been, but I resisted.

“What else have you found?”

“Ah, nothing Sassenach. Let’s go to Jenny and Ian – see what they got.”
Jamie and I walked towards the desk where Jenny and Ian were talking intently.

“There’s a paper here. It’s a list of names, men’s names. Some are underlined.” Jenny informed us.

“And this is a map.” Ian’s finger was on a map that looked hand-drawn “Some locations are circled but I can’t make out anything from it.”

The map was relatively plain and it reminded me of deserted island treasure maps. However, this one contained more information than a trail and an “X” on a hill where a pirate had buried his precious gems.

“There are drawers here as well but they are all locked. We dinna find a key.”

Excited that I might have found a clue, I looked at the names on the list. “How many names in this list start with a T?” I asked and seeing the question in Jenny’s eyes I explained, “I found a letter on the table and it is signed with a T.”

Jamie left the letter on the desk as we all scanned the list of names. There were five first names starting with a T and four last names. Three of them were underlined.

“This doesn’t help a lot.” I said.

“Aye, but maybe we can use it later.” Jenny proposed. “Have ye found the paper and pencil? To write things down?”

“Tis here!” Rupert said from the other side of the room where he had checked the bedside table. “The drawer had a pencil and paper inside, and a riddle.” he continued as he and Angus came to
stand with us.

Putting the riddle on the table so we all could see, he read it aloud.

“The key to my heart,

Where my sorrows drown.

You and I apart,

Like no sun ever shone.”

“The whisky!” I exclaimed, walking back to the table. “There’s whisky in the goblet – where the sorrows drown … in drink!” Putting my fingers in the goblet I searched its bottom. Sure enough, my fingers brushed a flat piece of metal.

“A key!” I blurted the moment I picked it up. Ian took it and went to the desk to check if he could open the only lock that needed a key.

“Good job, Sassenach.” Jamie complimented me with a smile and bumped me on the shoulder.

“It’s open! Come!” Jenny shouted and we walked to the desk again.

There were more papers spread on the desk now, including a list of various estates. Next to each estate’s name, the name of its Laird and a record of what each one specialized in - grain production, animals owned, etc.

“Who was this man?” Rupert murmured.

“He was in the military and since he had such information in his possession, he could have been an English soldier.” I thought and said so.

“Aye, but if he was an English soldier he wouldn’t live here, in a cabin out in the middle of nowhere.” Angus replied.

“Look here.” Ian showed the last line on the list.

“Twelve estates, four months, six men.”

“1. 2. 4. 6. I’ll try the numbers on the padlock with a 4-digit combination.” Rupert said and rolled the numbers on the brass padlock that secured the contents of another drawer. A moment later he shook his head, empty handed.

“Nothing. There must be another 4-digit combination padlock.”

“That, or this clue is for something else.” Jenny added.
“Or tis no clue at all.” Angus shrugged.

“OK, let’s search the room to be sure that we have all the padlocks covered and we know where each one is.” Jamie proposed and I took the pencil and paper in hand to keep notes.

After a thorough search, we found six padlocks.

We had opened one of them with the key from the whisky goblet. Five to go.

One opened with a key.

The one at the wardrobe had a 5-digit combination.

Of the rest, one had 3-digit and two had a 4-digit combination.

I turned to check how much time had passed and almost felt my eyes pop out from their sockets. Forty-five minutes left.

Jamie must have seen me, because he commented, “Aye, Sassenach, time flies.” His lips were pressed as he looked around for another clue.

Ian and Rupert were standing over the desk again when we heard the beep! from the screen above the door.

**Maps are used to give directions,** it said.

“The map!” I heard Jenny say as I uttered the exact same words.

We all ran to where Ian and Rupert were standing over the desk.

Leaning over the map that was now in the middle of the desk, we frowned – trying to discern the secrets it held.

“Will this howling noise ever stop?” Jenny said irritated and I noticed again that the screaming wind and the drops of rain reaching the floor from an imaginary leak hadn’t ceased. I had just blocked them out.

All the circled estates were on the list we’d found. We squared the rest of the estates that were on our list, ending up with what most likely was a route starting from the southern Highlands and finishing in the north-east.

The first estate on the route that wasn’t already circled was called “Broch Tuarach”.

Jamie brought the list next to the map, our eyes running through the letters, eager to find the name we needed.
“Fraser?” I asked looking at Jamie with raised eyebrows.

“Aye, tis a common surname in Inverness-shire, really. The Frasers of Lovat—"

“Wait!” Jenny interrupted placing her hands forcefully on the map.

12. 4. 6.

“Broch Tuarach is the seventh estate on the list and the map and it has 12 letters in its name.”

“Wow, yer right Jen. And it produces six kinds of goods.” Ian remarked.

“Aye,” mumbled Jamie. “If we replace 12 with seven… Rupert man, will ye try this one? 7. 4. 6”

“Or 7. 2. 6!” Ian said. “Half the time for half the estates.”

Rupert walked quickly to the 3-digit combination padlock but returned with a disappointed face.

“The number four might need to be replaced as well, maybe with something linked to Fraser? We covered the estate name and the production of goods but not the family name.” I proposed, thinking what the name could mean.

Beep!

The screen, having our attention again, lit up with another message.

Check the letter.

Jamie unburied the letter from underneath all the papers we had found in the meantime. Frowning, I looked at it again, wondering what we’d missed.

“Some letters are faded! I didna notice that before!” he said and I could only nod in agreement.

My beloved Flora,

Nothing is worth living anymore, since I lost you.

I left the military. I couldn’t see him – him that had taken you away from me forever.

I have no home. The people around me are no friends.
I am alone.

And yet I prefer that from seeing you and have no chance to make you mine.

T.

Taking the pencil Jenny circled all the faded letters.

Fraser five.

While Jamie repeated the combination with all clues now combined, Rupert went to try the second drawer on the bedside table.

7. 5. 6.

“Open sesame!” Rupert said and he came back to the desk with a huge grin on his face and a box in his hands.

The box had another riddle inside and a piece of tartan.

“We have no colour

We watch around

Stopping the crime

With our gun’s sound”

Jamie repeated the riddle twice, murmuring.

“Ye said ye found a list of men’s names?” he suddenly asked Jenny.

“Aye.”

“What clan?”

“No particular clan. Why?”

“No colour…” he repeated.

“Let’s put everything in order.” I said. “No colour – what could that mean?”
“Well, each clan’s tartan has its own colours.” Jamie replied his finger on the tartan “And since the list has names belonging to more than one clan, no colour can mean that - mixed clans.”

“aye, it could. But who are they? The clans were rarely united.” Ian replied troubled.

Jamie read aloud the riddle once more.

“Christ, 28 minutes remaining.” Rupert mentioned gloomily.

“Already? Where is the ghost?” Angus said with a disappointed look but was cut short by Ian who looked at him exasperated.

“Let’s calm down.” I said both to myself and to the others who started moving around nervously. I took the paper and the pencil and wrote down all our clues while saying them aloud. “We have found six padlocks – two are opened. We know he was a soldier, loved a girl named Fiona, quit the military, and did something else to protect people from crime while visiting estates in the Highlands. His name starts with a T and so he could be …” I took the list with names and checked the six underlined ones. “Either Timothy MacBrian, Taran MacQuarrie, or Roan Tallach.”

“I know!” Jamie interrupted my thoughts. “Visiting the estates in the Highlands and protecting from crime … The Black Watch! They patrolled areas to prevent smuggling and cattle rustling! Ye remember Jenny? Da told us stories about them!” he asked and continued without waiting for a response. “They were established after the Jacobite Rising of 1715.”

“Oh!” Angus exclaimed rummaging in his pocket.

We all turned to him with the same question. “What?”

“I found a wee note under the pillow, saying 16 years since I last saw ye, since the three years I was close to ye, one life to remember.”

“Ye clotheid!” Jenny shouted, and I thought she was going to tear her hair out, ruining her sleek ponytail. “Ye say that now?!”

“Aye! I forgot! I was looking for the ghost, aye?”

“1. 6. 3. 1. Where are the 4-digit combination padlocks?” Jamie asked and crouched to try a padlock on the desk drawer that Ian pointed to.

“Opened …” he said, shaking his head with disbelief for the clue we had all this time in hand. He then placed another riddle on the desk.

“All I am, I am close to you
Where my heart hides
my salvation resides”

Close to you, I thought. “The portrait!” Jamie and I said simultaneously and went to check the lady’s portrait on the wall. Forgetting to get a candle in our rush, I went back and grabbed one.
“Is there anything hidden in the picture?” I wondered.

“No, but maybe behind…” he said as he took the portrait down and I lowered my candle to look at the brown carton.

“Three years spent with you
One for my thoughts, one for my heart, one for my soul”

“He was definitely depressed.” I said and Jamie raised an eyebrow to me.

“She seemed to be the love of his life, Sassenach. Wouldn’t you be depressed?”

I pressed my lips, thinking of the question but quickly put that aside and informed the others that we possibly had another combination: 3. 1. 1. 1. could do for the 4-digit padlock left.

This padlock was securing the chest Jamie had found under the bed, which opened with a click and relief instantly filled the room. Another tartan was there and another riddle that complicated things more.

“Losing all grace
I lived like a thief
Selling protection
To those in need”

“I’m tired of all these wee poems!” Angus whined with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“They are riddles ye wee –“ Rupert was interrupted again by his friend.

“To be, or not to –“ Angus stopped abruptly.

At that moment a breeze came into the room, extinguishing all our candles’ flames. I gasped, the low fire casting only our shadows on the wall, but I felt a now familiar hand on the small of my back. In the dark, I leaned into Jamie’s side. I could feel his chest moving with shallow breaths and I instinctively moved to lay my head on his chest.

You’re here for me and I’m here for you.

His hand encircled my waist and I felt him moving. A moment later, his lips were on my forehead, tender and reassuring. I was sure that he wouldn’t take advantage of me in the dark.

I raised my head to look at him and the moment our eyes locked I just couldn’t stop. I desperately needed to feel his lips on mine. The alarm from the sudden darkness together with his solid body
touching mine and his sweet, musky, smoky smell were more than enough. Add the piercing blue eyes in to the mix, and this combination could open every padlock stopping me. Rising on my tiptoes I trailed a hand down the expanse of his back and faced him, determined. He must have seen the look in my eyes because he instantly lowered his face, closing our distance. The last thing I saw before my eyelids fell blocking out the world around us were his blue hooded eyes. I felt his warm breath on my lips and then a shriek filled the room making me fall abruptly on my feet again.

“What?” I heard Jamie’s husked voice. His arm still engulfed me and I could feel him tense.

“What are ye doing, man?” Angus – who obviously was the one who shrieked – was angrily accusing Rupert.

“I did nothing ye idiot!” Rupert defended himself.

At that moment the howling of the wind rose and a tremor passed through my body. Everyone moved agitated and then the low eerie voice I’d heard before spoke again.

“*I missed the signs*

*Death was brought to me*

*To draw the lines*

*Where my steps should be*”

Rain and wind took over, their screams filling the room. When the noise settled down, Jamie took the candles and rekindled them from the fireplace. I could see noone in the room apart from the six of us.

When we held our candles and could see each other again, our pale faces giving away our horror, we erupted in a hysterical laughter. Frightened, unnerved, hysterical laughter.

“Thank ye for the clue, man.” Jamie said as he was coming back next to me after giving a candle to each one of us. I hastily wrote down the new information the spirit had given to us.

“Did we miss the signs?” asked Ian who was looking at the small uneven cut tartans.

“These tartans fit, one next to the other – like a puzzle!” Jenny said, connecting the two pieces of cloth. “But there is a piece missing.”

We started looking around frantically for the other cloth.

“The armchair! We haven’t checked the armchair yet!” Ian broke the silence as he walked to the chair.

A moment later he came back with another key. “In between the pillows.” he announced with pride in his voice.
Another lock was opened and we found the third piece of tartan together with a worn piece of paper. Most of the letters scribbled on it were illegible, apart from what maybe a name on the top.

A loud banging coming from the closet made me and Jenny shriek. Someone was knocking on the closet door from the inside and we all stood still, watching at the closed closet with terror.

Did we really have to open it?

“Oh my God” Jenny said when the banging stopped.

“I certainly didn’t see that coming” I added, terrified.

“Let’s continue!” Ian proposed. “I’ll cross-check it with the list of men’s names we have, to see if I can figure out who he is.” he said, his eyes narrowed with concentration.

We now had only the 5-digit combination for the closet’s padlock. And 13 minutes left. The rest of us focused on the tartans - apart from Angus, who was looking around trying to find the ghost. Fitting the pieces of the tartan-puzzle together we made out the faint letters on the cloth. Wooden leg.

It took us four long minutes searching all the wooden furniture to find the next clue, until I felt something secured on the junction between one leg and the armchair’s seat. Taking it out, I found myself holding a small piece of paper and unfolded it.

“Four hosts, one laird
one man is dead and no-one heard
five men we fell into our own trap
And took two others on demand”
4. 1. 1. 5. 2.

“Try that on the closet!” Rupert said the moment Ian joined us, announcing that the man’s name was “Taran MacQuarrie.”

Jamie walked towards the closet, when the loud banging started and the wind rose. After a small pause, he opened the closet door with a mingled look of triumph and alarm in his face. When he saw what was inside the smile froze on his lips.

“What?” I asked and he moved from the opening so we could see. A rope was hanging from the rod and the inside of the closet was painted with a crimson red colour. A dirty coat was crumbled in a corner. Jenny gasped, putting a hand in front of her mouth and Angus asked from a distance, “The ghost?”

“He was hanged.” I whispered.

“Aye.” Jamie agreed while searching the coat. After reading the thin, worn, almost transparent paper he found underneath the coat he nodded with his head. “He was a member of The Watch and he was caught in a raid against the Redcoats. Execution by hanging. This is the execution warrant.” Jamie
said

“That’s why the closet is red.” Ian filled in.

“Taran MacQuarrie, executed by the Redcoats.” Jenny summed up our findings.

“There are some nails here, in the closet. D’ye think that means anything?” Jamie asked as we all went closer to check at the nails.

The rope was used in hanging. Hang it. I read the tip on the screen after listening to the beep!.

“Hang the rope…” Jamie murmured. “How?”

It took us a while, but we hanged the rope in between the nails. Taking a step back, we saw it.

1743

We were all excited.

“Let’s try 1. 7. 4. 3. at the door, to exit!”

Jenny typed in the numbers but the door remained locked.

“Yes, but what are his sins? Fighting the Redcoats?” Ian murmured, his light eyebrows almost touching as he frowned.

“The riddle.” Rupert replied “Selling protection to those in need. The Watch was supposed to protect the estates from smuggling and from the Redcoats, but without a fee. He most likely didn’t do so but took something for himself as well.”

“Aye.” Jamie agreed. “But we still have to find the code to exit.”

“Aye, we have four minutes. And that’s a good thing because I’m a wee bit hungry.” Angus said while lying on the bed. He seemed vastly disappointed and I was sure he must have thought that this would be a simple horror room.

The eerie voice was heard again, making Angus jump up.

“Black sin has fallen

On whom I was

Pray for that boy
That boy. I ran immediately to his portrait, while checking our time.

Four minutes.

Taking his portrait down, I saw a series of letters. Some seemed broken with missing parts, few were whole and others were totally missing. The only legible word was something akin to “Taran MacQuarrie”. But we had this information already.

Jamie came up next to me with the warrant in hand. The beep! came from the screen again, writing “There is more in a warrant than seems to be” making Jamie raise his candle to check the warrant more carefully.

“Aye there is…” he said and he placed the paper on the back of the portrait, aligning the name written in both papers.

The two papers together revealed another date.

1968

“Try this one to exit!”

“No, it doesn’t work.” Ian said after typing the number and then wandered around the room looking for something we may had missed.

1968-1743. The code!

Running to the door while shouting, “Both! We need both dates!” I started typing the numbers. Everyone was around me in seconds, our stomachs in our throats.

With a buzzing sound the door opened and I started jumping and shrieking, my curls falling on my face. Jamie’s arms were instantly around me, lifting me up and swinging me around.

Our laughter filled the room.

I couldn’t have felt happier.
There are some moments in life that stay trapped in our memories forever. The wonder of persisting synapses, stable enough to carry on in a world of plasticity and remodeling.

I have no idea how some of these memories came to be, but I remembered.

My mom securing a blanket tight under my limbs, making me feel safe before her warm lips were on my cheek and I heard her whispering, “Goodnight love bug”. The day Lamb dressed me in the only black dress I owned, took me by the hand, and brought me to say “goodbye.” I didn’t want to say goodbye, I only wanted to beg them come back. The first time I dug out an artifact, dusting it with my own personal brush, a gift for my eighth birthday, and giving it to Lamb with a pride that made me stand as if I was the tallest person within a mile.

And I was sure I would remember the day I was spinning around in Jamie’s arms, laughing and feeling his chest vibrating beneath my body with his own laughter.

Still up in the air, I closed my eyes and relished the moment, adding it to my collection, a memory in my little box, keeping it safe.
“Hey guys! Well done!” A girl around twenty-five was now standing next to the door. “Ye’re a great team! Two minutes and twelve seconds left! Did ye like the room?”

“Aye, we did!” Jenny replied with a huge smile, while Jamie set me on my feet again.

When I looked at him again his ears took on a beautiful shade of red, making me wonder if he just realized what he’d done. The moment he saw me standing steady, he turned to talk with Ian and Rupert. I smiled to myself, noticing that even now he didn’t move from my side. His arm was touching mine and I could hardly stop myself from taking his hand in mine. Or the opposite, since there was no way for me to engulf his huge hand in my smaller one.

Fiona was lovely, and she talked with us for a while, laughing at our reactions and congratulating us on some of the riddles we solved faster than was usual.

“So ye were watching us all along?” Jamie asked raised an eyebrow.

“This surely is an interesting job.” Rupert contemplated after seeing Fiona’s nod.

“Aye, tis fun. We get to build our own rooms and watch all of you while ye’re solving the mysteries. We’re a team of video-game players, actually, who really liked the idea of the escape rooms.”

“And the lady that explained the room to us?” I heard myself asking before I could register what I said.

“That’s my grandma. She was an actor and she’s great in talking with this spooky voice, ye see, so she helps a bit with some of the rooms. We try to get you in the mood even before getting in the room.”

After paying Fiona and checking the other rooms for a future visit, we exited the house to find ourselves in the cold Scottish wind. I hastily tied my scarf around my neck, one loop and then a second one until I had properly shielded myself.

Jamie quirked an eyebrow at me and smirked. “We’ll have ta do an excavation to find ye now, Sassenach.”

I could hardly disagree, but the warmth was much preferable than the luxury to move freely at that moment. However, I couldn’t stop thinking why Jamie Fraser wanted to find me under my layers of clothing. Or rather, when he would find me.

We stood in front of the building, trying to decide what to do next. I had two more hours before I had to be back home.

“Is anybody else hungry?” Rupert asked, immediately getting nods from the rest of us.

“Aye, I could use some food. Where to?” Jamie said and then abruptly turned to face me with a question in his face. Seeing that I agreed, he let a breath out.
I still couldn’t comprehend how he could be so handsome and yet so sweet.

We went to a fast food restaurant with a specialty in Scottish hog roasts. Listening to Rupert’s and Angus’ praises, I was sure they’d sell their own parents to be granted free access at the place.

We sat inside, making fun of Angus and how much he resembled the pig art on the wall – until he started making loud, repetitive “oinks” at us and we all stopped immediately. In a few minutes we had our hands full with delicious buns overflowing with slow roast pork, the best I’d ever eaten. Jamie chose the largest size (with 250g of meat, for God’s sake!) and I raised my eyebrows in challenge. A challenge accepted and completed, to my surprise.

Eating with them was entertaining. They were funny and open, ridiculous at times as they kept mocking and laughing at each other. Surprisingly, I felt myself at ease. Until that moment the only person I’d felt comfortable with was Joe. But now it seemed I had found some new friends, all on the swimming team – which would inevitably lead to Joe’s endless mockery after all my previous remarks about them. But they were nice. They asked about me, but not in an interrogating way. It was like a welcome party I never had coming to Edinburgh.

We left around eleven o’clock and walked to the crossroad where we would split.

“So, guys, see you on Monday. It was fun tonight” I said smiling to them.

“Now that we get to know ye, Claire, we should do this again!” Ian said, sweet and kind as always.

“Aye, we should repeat it without the wee monkey this time.” Rupert teased Angus but the rest of us agreed, thinking that this was a pretty good idea.

Jenny kissed me on the cheek and gave me a genuine smile. “See ye on Monday Claire.”

Jamie didn’t say a word. I turned to face him, only to find a smile playing on his lips as he looked at me. “Let’s go, Sassenach.”

“Oh, you don’t need to come with me.”

“I ken that. I … want to.” He said and then added, nonchalantly, “A little walk will help after eating so much.”

I swallowed the remark, “I told you so,” and said instead, “You sure?” only to feel his hand on my back urging me to walk.

“Aye, I’m sure.” he murmured, as if I’d asked the stupidest of questions. “See ye later.” He waved a hand to the others and we took the small dark street on our left.

Jamie took his hand off my back after the first three steps, but we kept walking ridiculously close. His hand was brushing mine and we both pretended it was just an accident, even though no one tried to prevent it from happening again. And again.

I reached the point where I wished that he would finally take my hand into his. We’d come so close
in the escape room, being in each other’s arms and almost kissing, but now I didn’t know how to react to his closeness.

*Would it be too awkward to hold hands?*

So I resisted my urge to take his hand and focused on the moment. Breathing deeply, I just let myself be happy. Happy that I was with him, happy for the person he was, happy because he seemed to really want to be here with me.

My phone beeped inside my bag, but I thought it could wait. I didn’t want anything to disrupt us now that we were alone.

We silently agreed to take the long, the very long way home – one could say that this way didn’t even lead to my house – so we could extend our time together.

When he finally – FINALLY – took my hand in his, I thought I was going to burst with happiness. His hand was huge and warm and perfect. We kept talking, squeezing each other’s hand after a teasing remark and laughing together. When we didn’t talk we just shared the night’s silence and the city’s noise.

Edinburgh was wonderful, the cold wind hitting our faces as we walked was wonderful, the sky with its millions of stars was wonderful. The world was wonderful.

My vocabulary, reduced only to one word, was wonderful.

At last we arrived at my front door. I was a bit late, but I hoped Lamb wouldn’t mind.

“So, we’re here. Again.” I said with my hand still in his as I smiled to him.

“Aye,” he said nodding absentmindedly. “We’re here.”

*Say something, Jamie, please say something.*

“I had a great time today, Claire.” He grinned at me.

“Yes, the escape room was cool.”

*Yes, way to go. The escape room was cool. Great answer. Well done.*
While I silently chastised myself, Jamie smirked. “Aye. The ghost was great.”

“Oh, you liked it that much, did you?” I said pretending incredulousness.

*Of course it was great. It was the reason you were always next to me. It was the reason we almost kissed, for Christ’s sake!*

“And don’t I deserve a goodnight kiss for that?” Jamie said, his eyes glinting with mischief and something else that I couldn’t place. He turned his face so I could kiss his cheek.

*This is it.*

Instead of kissing his cheek, now completely red from the wind, I opted for his lips. Raised on tiptoes, I turned my face to plant a smooth kiss on the lips I hungered for the whole way home.

Jamie, surprised, opened his eyes and took me in. He then shook his head and grabbing me tight, he brought my body to his.

He kissed me in a way that surpassed my greatest expectations.

It was warm, and soft, and fiery, and passionate. It was everything.

And it was wonderful.
We kissed! We kissed! We kissed – we kissed – we kissed!

I was singing - not too loudly because Lamb was still awake in his office - these two words over and over again in every possible tune I could imagine.

We were holding hands and then we kissed!

I was so happy I could hardly stop smiling and I felt dizzy. Soon though, second thoughts and doubt started sneaking their way into my mind and made me sober up a bit.

Should I have waited for him to kiss me first? Had I been too bold?

No, my wiser self argued. Judge from the outcome. And judging from what followed my bold action last night, I had done right.

Oh God, how perfect his kiss was!
He didn’t just reciprocate my kiss. That kiss, the first one, was so light and chaste. I knew he never expected me to go for his lips, but the moment I kissed him everything changed. He could have stopped it all there if he wanted to, but he didn’t. What he did was start another kind of kiss, a passionate and intense one. Because he wanted to kiss me! I was sure of it. I did right. And he… He did great.

After a mini jumping dance around my -too small for this activity- room, I slipped in to my pajamas, climbed into my bed, and burrowed under my duvet. I planned on replaying our time together in my mind’s projector over and over, to remember every word that he’d said and every move he’d made before saying, “Goodnight to ye too, Sassenach.” But sleep soon claimed my thoughts.

It didn’t matter at all though, because Jamie was in my dreams all night, smiling to me with mischief in his eyes and making me feel like I was the only person that mattered in the world. Pretty much all the same things real Jamie did.

**

The next day I was smiling even before I was able to open my eyes. I could almost feel his breath on my lips, his tongue touching mine, an arm pulling me tight to him while his hand got entangled in my hair. I was on my tiptoes, leaning all my weight into him and he was there to support me. All the tension from our previous attempts to touch was finally released.

I wanted that moment to last forever, but time was cruel and my mind got itself out of its stupor faster than I wished it to. With a deep sigh I opened my eyes and licked my lips searching for his taste, trying to keep the memory of our first kiss in my mind forever.

I couldn’t wait to see him again tomorrow at school. Would what had been between us change in any way?

Entering the kitchen, desperate for a glass of water, I found uncle Lamb sitting at the kitchen table reading his newspaper.

“Did you have a good time last night?” he asked me.

“Mnhmm.” I said, before gulping down a large glass of water and then refilling it. He must have seen a hint of something in my face because he turned his attention away from the newspaper in his hand.
“Hungry?”

I shook my head no. Food was the last thing I could think of. Things like food were suddenly so…

trivial.

“Are you planning to bless us with any proper English words today?”

At that he received only a sardonic look from me.

“I see.” He said and while I was searching for the orange juice in our fridge he started humming a

familiar tune, and then sang the accompanying words, “That’s amore…”

Yeah, I knew this song. “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amore…”

Who writes lyrics like that? I wondered, the smile on my face notwithstanding.

Glancing at the table I realized that my uncle had only pretended to sip nonchalantly from his cup of

Earl Grey and read his newspaper, while in truth all he had done was to glance periodically at me,
ready to tease me.

Great. How does he know now?

Slowly, I turned my head to look at him over my shoulder.

“We’re out of orange juice.” I said, trying to distract him.

“What a catastrophe, I’m sure.” He said with an air of blatant sarcasm as he looked at me with half a

smile on his lips.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

He said nothing, just smiled widely at me and resumed his singing.

“You’re incorrigible.” I shook my head, kissed him on the cheek, and headed to my room, his

singing growing louder with my departure from the kitchen.

“When you walk in a dream, but you know you’re not dreaming, signore…”

I was sure his song would be stuck in my mind for the whole day.

After a few minutes’ search I found my bag and checked my phone. I froze for an instant looking at
the screen. Five texts and three unanswered calls - very uncommon for a Sunday morning.

Two calls from Lilly, our dance instructor and another from Jenny. One text from Jenny, two from

Joe, and two texts from Jamie.

Two texts!
With a smile and without thinking, I opened Jamie’s texts first.

*Jamie: Good morning, Sassenach. :-) What are your plans for today?*

And then the second one.

*Jamie: Jenny just told me. You two are going to have a tough week…*

*What?*

I hurriedly checked Jenny’s text.

*Jenny: Hi Claire! Lilly couldn’t reach you. We’ve had a change of plans and we’re performing on Saturday! Call me or Lilly ASAP!*

What? No, that couldn’t be. Our performance was supposed to be next month. A week was way too soon, we weren’t ready yet!

I was already calling Lilly back, pacing my room while I did so.

Five minutes later I’d changed into my tights and tank top, threw everything I’d need in to my rucksack, and after a short stop at the kitchen to inform Lamb that I was going to the dance studio and I’d be gone for most of the day, I raced out the door.

**

For thirty minutes all I could see was the panic in everyone’s eyes, and I was pretty sure that mine weren’t much different. Indistinct chatter was heard from all around the room, all of us gathered into smaller groups of two or three girls discussing the same thing - the injustice of this change in the program.

Jenny waved at me the moment I had entered the dance studio.

“Oh God,” I said the moment she was within hearing distance. “Why did they change the date?”

“I have no idea. We haven’t practiced the choreography enough, I still forget some of the moves, to be honest, and they want us to perform so soon?” She said incredulously and the frown between her eyebrows deepened.

“I know. It sucks. We’ll be terrible.” My optimism was apparently hidden in the middle of earth or somewhere else far away from our dance studio.

“Girls! Calm down and come close. I need to talk to you.” Lilly, always calm and composed, motioned us to gather as she walked to the center of the room.

**
Four hours later we lay exhausted on the sleek wooden floor. I could feel the hard wood against every inch of my spine and my back, complaining about the hard use as much as my body did. However, I couldn’t get up even for the softest, fluffiest mattress in the world. I had my doubts about performing on Saturday, not because we wouldn’t be good enough but because we might be dead by then. I was sure my legs would wobble and I’d end up straight on the floor if I tried to rise any time soon. Turning my head to the right, I saw Jenny in a similar condition. I smiled at her and she rolled her eyes and feigned sleep. Yeap, I could use some sleep myself now. This was going to be a tough week.

This was going to be a tough week! Oh my God, I hadn’t replied to Jamie’s text!

Without a second thought and with vigor I couldn’t fathom how I still had in me, I rose and strode briskly across the studio to the locker room.

I should have replied hours ago! Would he now think that I didn’t care?

Up until the moment I got the phone in my hands, I had changed my mind two hundred times.

Text him right now? No, send something brief now, shower and continue the conversation, if there was to be one, later. No, better shower first, as not to delay another text in case he’d reply immediately.

Before I made a decision on how and when I’d respond to Jamie, I read the texts from Joe and briefly informed him about the reason he had received radio silence from me for more than a day.

JA: “You’re omitting valuable information Lady Jane! How did the date go?”

CB: “It wasn’t a date and it went great.”

JA: “Look at you now, hanging out with the jocks and not even texting us, poor nerds.”

CB: “Very funny, Joe. Ha Ha. And FYI, they’re cool. It was fun.”

JA: “Fun fun or… fun fun *wiggling eyebrows here*”

CB: “You’re an ass.”

JA: “That’s why you love me. Did you two kiss?”

CB: “…

JA: “Come on! Did the Viking warrior kiss you?”

CB: “Bye Joe!”

JA: Did you kiss?

JA: Did he kiss you?

JA: Did you kiss him?
JA: *Did you two kiss?*

CB: “*Shut up!*”

JA: “*Did you kiss?*”

CB: “*Yeeees <3*”

JA: “*Good. CU tomorrow LJ*”

CB: “*xoxo*”

While I was texting Joe, the rest of the team came into the locker room, dragging feet and all. I felt quite refreshed. Better text Jamie now.

CB: “*Hi Jamie! Sorry for the delay. I had to come to the studio, we had an extra practice session today.*”

Jamie: “*Yeah, I know. Jenny told me.*”

CB: “*Right. Got to go shower. TTYL?*”

Jamie: “*;-)*”

If I wasn’t so tired and I didn’t want to resume texting with Jamie as soon as possible, I would have stayed under the hot water forever. The soapy bubbles and the water’s pressure on my body gradually removed the fatigue like a layer of sweat being washed out, forever lost in the shower drain. It wasn’t that I could run a half marathon right then, but I felt quite well.

*The endorphins are doing their job, I suppose.*

I was even confident that the performance would be just fine. If we continued training like crazy, that is.

Jenny was getting into her coat when I left the shower. She’d told me that Ian was waiting for her at home and she wanted to get back quick since she’d left him alone for the whole day.

I checked my phone to see if Jamie had sent anything else, and somewhat disappointed that he hadn’t, I got dressed.

With my beanie and a huge scarf around my neck covering half of my face as well, I walked to my bicycle.

“So ye’re here incognito, Sassenach?” His voice came from my left and his hand was on my waist a moment later. “I almost didna recognize ye.”

My heart was banging in my chest so loudly I was sure he could hear it. I turned to face him, giving
him the opportunity to pull me close to him, which was exactly what he did.

“Let’s see what we can do about it.” He said in a low voice pursing his lips as he lowered the scarf from my face. “Much better.” And seeing me smile he bent and kissed me. I didn’t think he was going for a long kiss, but I wouldn’t pull my lips from his now that they were on mine. They were so warm and soft and hungry that I felt intoxicated. We got lost in the moment and in each other, and we opened our eyes again only when we had to part for valuable oxygen.

Without an inch between us for the cold wind to invade, I inhaled his scent before looking into his eyes. “What are you doing here?” I said with a questioning smile.

“Ye said we’d talk later. I thought I’d come so we could talk.”

“Mnhmm. This is how Jamie Fraser talks to girls, then?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Only if they’re named Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp.” He said soberly, his eyes intent on mine.

“Okay then.”

He shook his head, disapproving of my way of thinking, and with a smile he claimed my lips again.

“I couldn’t wait till tomorrow to see ye.” He said and pulled me closer.

“I know.” I said, feeling my legs wobble again, but not from fatigue.

This time they wobbled from happiness.
I never was a morning person.

Wake up with sunrise? No.
Never hit snooze? No.
Get ready for a jog in the morning? No.
Function properly from the moment my eyes were open? Definitely NOT.

That night was the first time I slept eager to wake up in the morning.

I’d never felt more excited about going to school. Not that I had any huge experience with school in general, since I was home-schooled during most of my formative years. Still, I had an enormous amount of excitement for something I would keep on doing every day for almost a year – my last school year.
But nothing would be the same now. Jamie would be there, and arriving early meant I’d get to see him before class.

With three alarms set half an hour earlier than usual, I fell asleep thinking of him.

**

The next morning, I opened my eyes lazily, sure that anticipation had caused me to wake up even earlier than planned. Grabbing my phone my eyes scanned the screen for reassurance. Yes, it was still 7:30.

Wait! What? How could that be? I’d set all my alarms for 6:45!

I sprang out of bed so quickly that I ended up feeling light headed. Of course, once again, my dear Murphy and his law were at my side.

After my first misfortune of missing all three alarms, I put my blouse on inside out twice - How on earth did I manage to do that? - bumped in to every surface with a sharp edge, and had to search for my chemistry textbook for what felt like an eternity. When I finally got myself to school, I definitely was not early enough to find Jamie before class, and I almost barrelled over Mr. MacMahon, our maths teacher, as I swept through the classroom door.

Trying to compose myself and with my eyes on the floor, I moved hurriedly to sit myself in an empty chair. The moment I set my bag down at my side though, I whirled around in search of him. Maths was one of our shared courses, so he should be there.

And there he was, with his red curls dropping down over his forehead, making him look scruffy and beautiful at the same time. It’d be an exercise in self-restraint to be in the same classroom with Jamie for the rest of the year. I felt the need to go over and kiss him, with my fingers wrapped between his curls, until I couldn’t feel my lips anymore. The moment I looked at his eyes, I realized that they were set on mine and his face split into a broad grin, making him look even more irresistible.

I couldn’t stop my own smile from spreading across my face. Jamie mouthed a, “Good morning, Sassenach,” and I whispered back, “Good morning,” before I turned to face Mr. MacMahon and the blackboard. I tried hard to make the smile disappear from my face. Mr. MacMahon wouldn’t appreciate me being that happy during his class, I was sure. But I couldn’t help it.
Last night came back to my mind. After spending three hours together, walking aimlessly around the city, we continued texting until two o’clock in the morning. It was so easy talking to Jamie, it felt almost like talking to myself. I didn’t need to obsess about what I’d say, I didn’t feel insecure over my choice of words, and there was always something to talk about without draining my head in search for an interesting topic to continue the conversation. It was natural talking to him. I felt like he knew me and really understood me. On top of that, he was funny, smart, and kind.

I’d pinched my arm more than enough – a valuable means to convince myself that I wasn’t living in a dream.

I could feel his stare on my back, while I was opening my textbook. With a last glance over my shoulder - I knew he had been looking at me! - I decided it was time to focus on Mr. MacMahon’s voice. I would talk to Jamie during the break.

Five minutes later I felt a light tap on my back. I turned around to see Mary, going red in the face, with a little paper in her hand. “For you,” she whispered and hastily gave it to me.

It was a paper carelessly torn from a notebook, with handwriting I’d never seen before, but it didn’t take a lot of imagination to guess who it belonged to.

_You were late this morning, Sassenach!_

_Meet me after class?_

I considered replying in the same way, but the thought of Mary’s face if I’d made her do the same transaction backwards and I changed my mind. With a broad grin and a raised eyebrow I turned to face him and, of course, nodded my agreement.

_How much time till the break?_

**

_My dearest Mr. Murphy, give me a break._

Mr. MacMahon’s opinion of breaks was that they were the equivalent of time lost, so he decided to continue his lesson through our usual short break. I had to run to be at my chemistry class on time.
Joe was there, sitting at our desk, and he smiled when his eyes caught me entering the classroom.

The chemistry class proved very useful, giving me the opportunity to tell – or actually write – my news to Joe. It felt weird that it had been only a weekend and I had so much to talk about. I found it hard to grasp everything that had happened in the last three days. It definitely felt longer.

After teasing me for my previous comments concerning Jamie and the swim team, Joe said, “It seems you’ve found yourself a keeper, LJ.” He winked at me, earning a broad smile and blush in return.

**

I didn’t manage to talk to Jamie until lunch and I was looking forward to seeing him in the cafeteria.

When Joe and I arrived, Jamie and the rest of his friends were nowhere to be found. Disappointed, I sat at our favorite table and I tried hard to focus on what Joe was talking about.

_A girl? Called Gail, or something similar?_

_**Be a good friend, Beauchamp! He let you ramble on for hours!**_

I was midway through finishing my halloumi and roasted vegetable wrap, when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Would the two of you like to join us?” His soft voice ran through me. He was pointing at their table as if he was the head waiter in a classy restaurant and I cracked a smile. He then extended his hand to Joe saying, “I’m Jamie, by the way.”

I could see trouble coming judging from Joe’s playful eyes, and I wished he’d see my hard stare and stop before saying anything foolish. Fortunately he did, and he simply said, “Joe,” giving Jamie a firm handshake.

“So, are ye coming?” Jamie repeated, and I looked to Joe, raising an eyebrow to let him make the decision.
“Sure!” Joe shrugged and with his tray ready he started moving towards Jamie’s table where the rest of the swim team was already sitting.

Jamie stood behind, waiting for me. When we started walking side by side, he asked in a low voice, “Where have you been all day, Sassenach?”

“Around,” I said nonchalantly even though this was my exact question for him.

“Lies. I searched for ye everywhere,” he said disapprovingly.

“Did you, now?” A grin started on my lips, making my satisfaction plain.

“Ye’re happy for my misery?” he asked with a cocked eyebrow and a glint in his eyes. “Ye’ll pay for that,” he continued, with a grin of his own to match mine.

Reaching their table Jamie tried to move people somehow, so he could sit next to me. After realizing that no one was willing to give up his seat, we sat in the last empty spots at the table, across from each other. Joe hadn’t sat next to me, but it was plain enough that he wouldn’t need my help to feel at ease. He was already engrossed in a hot discussion comparing American football to rugby and I was sure he’d be just fine.

Jamie and I hardly ate, as we couldn’t stop smiling at each other.

_Everybody knows that you can’t smile and chew at the same time._

When I became distracted listening to the guys’ conversation, I felt a light kick under the table reclaiming my attention. After that, the silent kicking war had begun. At some point we tried to make a serious conversation on the morning’s maths class, but soon realized that neither of us had paid much attention and we burst in laughter.

The girl next to him, the same girl I’d seen eating his pizza three days ago, was leaning in towards him the whole bloody time. She even tried to interrupt us two or three times, with her breasts accidentally grazing Jamie’s arm.
I felt awkward and I focused on Jamie’s reactions to the girl, trying to understand. From what I could see, he paid her no attention. He was actually trying to stay as far from her as possible. It was funny to see Jamie Fraser with his huge shoulders, trying to avoid her body touching his. He’d almost fell on Rupert, who eyed him once or twice with a questioning glance.

The girl, with her blond braids and blue eyes, talked to Jamie in a sweet, mellow voice while looking at me with suspicion. However, I couldn’t have cared less. All I had eyes for was Jamie.

We were ready to go back to class when Jamie – with a hand on my waist – asked me to wait for him before leaving school so he could walk me home. The team had a quick meeting with their coach and then he’d come to find me. The fact that our houses were in totally different directions didn’t seem to matter to him at all.

**

For the next few hours all I could think about was our impending walk home together, when we’d be alone again. Joe started teasing me, especially when he realized that I hadn’t heard a word he’d said about the biology essay we had to write, and he saw the suspicious look Mrs. Darrow shot at me.

“Earth calling LJ. How’s the weather in your fluffy pink cloud?” Joe asked with a smirk after we’d finished for the day.

“It’s not pink,” I replied with a smile and I pulled the books I was holding tighter to my chest, breathing deeply. “I just can’t stop thinking of him,” I whispered excitedly, making sure I was loud enough for Joe to hear me.

“Have fun, then! Text me later, aye?” he said, trying a Scottish accent that sounded absolutely horrible and with a wink, he left.

**

I was waiting just outside the courtyard, pacing back and forth in a vain attempt to make time pass quicker. Finally, I calmed myself down and leaned against the low wall, waiting.
Ten minutes later, most students had left already, but I hadn’t seen anyone from the swimming team yet. To distract myself, I reached for the phone in my school bag.

I hadn’t heard the notification, but I had a text from Jamie. With a smile, I read it.

*Jamie: Our coach is VERY TALKATIVE today, Sassenach. I’m sorry. Can you wait a bit longer?*

*CB: Sure! :-)*

The moment I sent the text, a shadow covered the phone’s screen, making me raise my head. The girl that had been sitting next to Jamie during lunch was now standing in front of me. *Leeree?*

“Hello,” I said awkwardly.

“Hi, Claire,” she said my name with a sour-face and loathing in her voice. Nothing sweet or mellow here, I noticed. “Are ye alone?”

*What the hell does she want, now?*

I nodded and gestured around me, demonstrating the obvious answer to her question. I could tell my sarcastic vibe wasn’t appreciated because her stare became even colder than before.

“I saw ye talking to Jamie Fraser at lunch, aye?” she asked with eyebrows slightly raised, as if challenging me to say no. Of course she saw me, but where was this conversation going?

“Yes?” I replied, waiting for her to explain why she was all of a sudden interested in whom I’d talked to during my day.

“I just wanted to say, ye should try not to seem so excited about it. I saw ye – how ye smiled the whole time.” Her bleached-blue eyes didn’t leave mine, her face still, as if she trying to warn me about something.
“And why should I do that?” I was beginning to become bored with this meaningless conversation.

At that she laughed and shook her head, trying to show a fake compassion but keep her air of superiority.

“Who do ye think ye are?” she said looking down on me, even though I was at least 5-inches taller than her. “Ye’re nothing to him, ye hear me? Have ye no idea how silly you look? With your hair …” she gestured at my head with disgust, “And … and … looking like this!” she lamely continued, gesturing again all over me.

It was then that I noticed her perfect braids - not a single hair in the wrong place – and the perfectly applied eyeliner. I didn’t care about her opinion on my looks, in fact it was exactly the opposite. I had no respect for girls like her. I knew who I was and no Leeree or others like her would make me underestimate myself.

“I know exactly how I look and I can’t see how it is any of your concern.” I replied coldly, trying not to slap her in the face. Trying really hard.

“Ye dinna understand, do ye?” she laughed. “Ye’re not but a bet fer the lads, a challenge fer Jamie to date the nerdiest girl of the school.”

*What? What was she saying? A bet?*

Frowning, I tried to find something to say, but it was in vain. I opened and closed my mouth, gaping like a fish and cursing myself for it.

She laughed again, a ferocious, mad laughter. “Jamie Fraser is mine and mine alone. Ye mean nothing to him, how could ye? He fakes it when he’s with ye, because Jamie is not a loser. He would never lose a bet – especially one so easy as ye. Ye’re nothing but a bet to him, I’m telling ye.” She turned to leave, with a move I was quite sure I’d seen in a movie. “Just so you know,” she said over her shoulder and left.
I didn’t realize how many minutes had passed with me standing there, with my eyes on the empty road where she disappeared, while the world was falling down around me. Small pieces of happiness were laying now on the cold tarmac, ready to be crushed by unknown shoes.

As if in a dream, I started walking home, forgetting my bicycle locked in the courtyard, close to my shattered heart.
The Bet

My phone was ringing. I could hear it, the familiar sound bubbling through my ears, as if it was coming from the bottom of a dark well.

Then the text notifications, one after the other. Little air bubbles reaching the water surface with force, longing to be free in the sky. Then more ringing.

I was drowning. Every bubble released in the air was a valuable breath leaving my lungs forever.

All I was hearing in my mind, were two words.

A bet.

*When had I landed in Hollywood? When did my life become a teen movie?*

I’d never expected such things to happen in real life. The first moments after grasping what she’d told me, I felt my whole world going straight to hell.

However, when I thought more about it, everything made sense.
It was Jamie Fraser, after all – not the boy next door. He could have any girl he wanted. I started connecting all the pieces of the puzzle together. Maybe that’s why he was laughing with Ian, before Mrs. Fitz made him sit next to me last Friday. They planned a little fun game to spend their days.

I was an easy bet she’d said and I guess she was right. All it took was three days and minimal effort, and I was already in love.

*Well done, Jamie Fraser.*

My phone didn’t stop ringing all the way home.

*I really don’t want to talk to you right now.*

*I really don’t want to talk to you, period.*

**

Fortunately, Lamb was not at home. I went straight to my room, locking the door behind me. Without a second thought I turned my phone off and climbed into my bed. I had two hours to regroup and get myself together before dance rehearsal. Jenny Fraser would be there and I didn’t want her to see me like this.

*Oh God, do I need a Fraser in every place I go?*

I couldn’t make myself believe that Jenny knew about the bet. She wouldn’t have allowed it, I was sure. Jenny was a true friend to me.

*Jamie seemed to be sincere as well, but what do I know?*

What a fool I’d been … Jamie Fraser and I.

Pulling my legs tight against my chest with my arms, I let the heartbreak and embarrassment wash over me until I was sobbing violently. I felt worthless and I hated him for making me feel so. I couldn’t fathom how he could have faked everything I’d seen in him, all this pretense just for a laugh. How he could be so cruel.

I continued crying until I felt empty. Empty of hope, of happiness, of pain. Just a vessel of myself. I got into the shower, desperate to feel the scalding water against my body. It hit my skin with its full
pressure, leaving red blotches behind. I needed something to warm me up, to make me feel human again. Scorched on the edges, but still human.

I didn’t want to leave the house ever again. My room was the only safe place I could hide. I didn’t want to go back to school, or even to dance rehearsal. And I wouldn’t have gone , except we had that bloody performance on Saturday. Baulking at the last minute would be irresponsible and I never was that. I gritted my teeth and moved on.

*It’s okay. I’m okay.*

*It’s going to be okay.*

*Stupid high school. One day I’ll be old enough and I’ll laugh at all this.*

Finally, I got dressed for rehearsal with ghost-like moves. I’d forgotten my bicycle at school and now I had to walk. More time in the fresh air would do me good, anyway.

I turned my phone on again. Not that I was ready to confront the world, but it showed weakness to try to disappear. And I wasn’t weak.

I had nine missed calls and twelve texts. All from him. He truly didn’t want to lose this bet. Did I want to read them? No. Not yet. I was too close to starting to cry again and I wouldn’t go into the studio with red, puffy eyes.

The cold wind hit my face the moment I opened our heavy wooden front door. It caressed my skin, drying the tears that welled in my eyes. It entered my body with a promise; life goes on.

*Getting away with it all messed up, that’s the living.*

Instead of going straight to the studio, I headed back to school to get my bicycle.

I’d never felt like this before. Everything was blank, white and blurred – insignificant. I was floating over my body, seeing myself placing one foot in front of the other. Step by step, I continued on with my life. Dragging my feet, I was trying to move on.

*It’s only a year. I will be okay.*

The school was empty and silent. Different. No buzzing voices, screams, or laughter.

I was close to my bicycle when I saw it pinned on the handlebars. A small white note on an irregularly cut piece of notebook paper, similar to the one I had gotten that morning from Mary’s shaking hand. My heart had burst with happiness then. Now I could hardly look at it. I smashed it, ready to throw it into the garbage, but at the last moment I stopped myself. I couldn’t. I opened it just to see his handwriting.
Please call me. I’m worried sick.

I swallowed all my thoughts and climbed on to my bike. I started pedaling as fast as I could, willing the air to freeze my face before my eyes would go red and teary again. The paper was still trapped between my hand and the handlebars, burning my palm.

**

I arrived a bit late to the dancing studio, that way I wouldn’t have to talk to Jenny. She shot me a questioning eye once or twice while we were dancing, but I pretended I didn’t see her.

In the next hours I lost myself in the flow of our choreography, exhausting my body with the hope that I’d shower and sleep like the dead the moment I got home.

When Lilly finally dismissed us, I almost ran to the door, hurriedly wrapping myself in extra layers of clothing, afraid that someone would come to talk to me.

The instant I pushed the key in my bicycle’s padlock, I saw everything for what it was. A lie.

I had one last, tiny hope that he’d come for me.

I knew he had training as well, he’d told me so the night before, acting sad because we wouldn’t be able to meet tonight. Mondays were the busiest days in his schedule. Still, the fool in me wished he’d be here.

He wasn’t.

I went back home and hid under my duvet like a little girl afraid of a monster. I needed my mom. I needed a hug and a promise of happiness.

After some time, I took my phone in hand. This nonsense would end today.

He’d called while I was at the studio and he’d sent more texts.

I started with his last text.

*Jamie: Jenny just told me she saw you at your rehearsal.*

Then I went back, reading them from the beginning.
Jamie: Sassenach? Did you leave?

Jamie: I know I was late. Sorry I made you wait.

Jamie: Where are you? Everything OK?

Jamie: Claire I just saw your bicycle. Please answer my calls.

Jamie: Sassenach? Pick up your phone!

Jamie: I'm coming to your place.

Jamie: Claire, I'm in front of your apartment building. Are you at home? Please say something.

Jamie: OMG can you please pick up your damn phone?

Jamie: I HONESTLY HOPE YOU ARE MAD AT ME AND YOU'RE JUST IGNORING ME, HIDING IN YOUR ROOM.

Jamie: I don't know what happened, but can you please send a text that you're OK?

Jamie: I have to leave, Claire. I have training. Please call me.

Jamie: CALL ME ANYTIME

And then, the most recent ones.
Jamie: Just finished training. Where are you?

Jamie: If you don’t reply I’m coming to your place to talk to your uncle.

Jamie: God, Sassenach. You took your bicycle. You scared me half to death.

And then the last one.

Jamie: Jenny just told me she saw you at your rehearsal.

No more pleading. The last text was just a statement, no further attempt to communicate.

Good.

I felt guilty for scaring him by leaving my bicycle at school. Yes, he was awful and he’d played with me, but it’s a different thing not to be interested in someone and another to believe the other person is hurt.

I had to thank him for his concern. And then remind him that my well-being shouldn’t concern him.

I hardly slept that night.

**

The next morning, I found myself at school with my eyes closing every few seconds and the teacher’s voice a nice lullaby in my ears. Joe kept nudging me to keep me awake during our first hour.

I hadn’t told him what was wrong, I couldn’t. First, I was very much afraid I’d start crying again. Second, I was so embarrassed I just wanted to dig a hole and hide in it for the rest of the year. Joe respected that and stopped asking – after the hundredth time.
My real problems started two hours later, just before physics class. *The irony!* The same class I looked forward to before because we’d be together, was now my worst nightmare.

I entered the classroom, hidden behind Joe, with my eyes glued on the floor. Sitting in my chair, I slid my weight along the hard, wooden surface willing myself to disappear from his view. Of course this was impossible, since he towered over almost everyone in the school.

I focused the remnants of my brain capability on Mrs. Fitz’s voice, keeping notes to prevent me from sleeping, although once in a while I could see my letters become blurred, indistinct scribbles ending in a trembled line. Another poke from Joe and I forced my eyes open to see a note laying on my textbook, the familiar hastily cut paper folded again and again until it was tiny. I didn’t want to unfold it. I left on the side of my notebook, until I realized that doing so would be interpreted as interest.

So I unfolded it.

*Wait for me on the break. I need to talk to you.*

No Sassenach, or teasing – of course.

I didn’t reply, but I would wait. It was time to put an end to this fiasco.

**

When the bell rang for the break, I thought that my heart would damage my ribs from beating so hard and fast in my chest. I told Joe I’d meet him afterwards and he left, with a squeeze on my arm.

“You know where to find me, LJ.”

I gave him the best smile I could manage, realizing that this thing on my face wouldn’t seem like a smile at all.

I felt Jamie hovering above me before I could smell his musky scent and I closed my eyes, trying to collect myself and my strength.

I stood up and slowly brought my eyes higher to find his. I didn’t expect him to look as he did and it surprised me. He looked tired, sad, and angry. Or so I thought.

He looked … like me.

Jamie let out a breath and waited until I’d gathered all my stuff. We walked together across the long corridor, bypassing other students, two strangers who happened to have the same destination. We
walked until we were in the courtyard, once there he continued and led me towards the far side, and finally stopped at a nook hidden from view, where most students went to hide while sneaking a quick smoke.

He stopped, crossed his arms in front of his chest and waited.

When he realized I wasn’t going to start this conversation, he said in a low and civilized voice, “I’m waiting for an apology, Claire. Anything close to an apology.”


“Ye scared the shit out of me yesterday and I still don’t know why.”

“You don’t know why,” I repeated disgusted. The gall of him! “Well, you don’t need to worry about me Jamie. I’m fine. I was fine before I met you and I will be fine afterwards.”

His eyebrows shot up near his headline. “That’s all that you have to say? You… You…” He bit his lip, forcing himself to stop.

“What?” I was shouting, provoking him to go on. I wouldn’t stand there waiting for him to offend me. “Listen to me James bloody Fraser. I don’t know why you’re doing this now, but there is no point – believe me. You had your fun –“

“I had my fun? Do you think that searching for you, calling hospitals and asking for a Claire Beauchamp was fun? FUN?” He was shaking.

That took me aback. He’d called the hospitals? “I… I… I’m sorry I didn’t reply. As you can see I’m fine.”

His eyes were two narrow slits, his chest heaving. “Aye, I can see. Ye still didn’t explain yerself though.”

“I have nothing to explain. And to end this charade, thank you for your interest and I hope your bet was just for a kiss with me. It’d be such a pity to lose, you were good. Really –“

“What?” He seemed genuinely perplexed, wrinkling his face with his eyebrows almost touching
“Oh yeah, sorry for that. Your wicked game is ruined, it seems.”

“What are ye talking about?”

“THE BET. I KNOW!”

“What BET?”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. “Jamie, stop pretending, please. I know I was just a bet for you and the lads. I know you did this to have fun. I know that you are a total arsehole and that’s why I didn’t reply yesterday. Because I don’t want to speak with you again. NEVER.” Saying that, I turned to leave.

“Who told ye this horse shit?”

“I don’t see why that matters at all.”

“I do.”

“Is this so important to you then? It’s true you don’t know how to lose. You never lose – she didn’t lie. You played your role very well, tell them I said so. You were very … convincing.” With that, I turned to leave again.

I’d taken two steps before he was in front of me.

“You believed her?” he asked. I raised my eyes only to find his, filed with disappointment. He wasn’t angry anymore.

“It’s hard to ignore what your girlfriend told me.” I replied coldly.
“Who? I don’t have a girlfriend!” He was shaking his head, his short curls flying to all directions. So beautiful.

“Yeah. OK.” I tried to leave yet again, but he wouldn’t let me.

“I DON’T!”

“What do you want from me?” I was frustrated and angry. All I wanted was to plant my nails on his face and wreck his absurd amount of beauty.

Jamie grabbed me by the waist with one arm and crashing me against the wall with all his weight, he kissed me hard and painful. I didn’t know how to react to this at first, but after a moment I trapped his lips between my teeth and bit down on them hard. I didn’t want to escape from him but to hurt him, to feel him, to taste his blood and know that even though he was in pain, he wouldn’t go away. I wanted him to surrender to me.

“You,” he said when we parted, “I want you.” His eyes were burning in mine while his fingers were tenderly caressing my cheek, my chin, travelling along my jawline before they got lost in my hair, trembling with restrain. “When I saw your bicycle and you were nowhere to be found,” he shook his head as if to push the memory away, “I was terrified Claire.”

Deep in my heart I could feel the truth reverberating between us. No matter how hard I tried though, I couldn’t stop thinking about the burning question over and over again. “What was the bet about?”

“There is no bet!” He said, close to being outraged once more. “Never say that again. Never think of that!” His eyes were locked on mine and in an instant his face was covered with sadness. “How could you ever believe that of me? I’d never do such a thing.”

“I was not a bet? There never was a bet?” I said, aching with the need to hear him say it again, so I could search for the lie, for the pretense. All I found in his eyes was reassurance.

“Never.” His arms tightened around me. “If ye were a bet Claire, you’d be MY personal bet. A bet with myself to make ye smile and to hear ye laugh. But no one knows that, Sassenach, apart from me – and now, you.”

He could see my doubts plainly written on my face. “Let me prove myself to ye, aye?” he asked, his
eyes pleading for a yes. “That’s all I ask. Give us time.”

Something was broken in me, I knew, its edges still painful against my heart – but I couldn’t leave. If Leeree had lied, leaving would mean that I’d let her destroy something beautiful. No, I wouldn’t let her win.

I nodded repeatedly and Jamie trapped me in a bear hug. “Ah, and something else, Sassenach. Answer yer phone. Never do that to me again.”

And with that he kissed me, slowly and tenderly as if I was the most valuable and fragile vase in the world and he needed to fill me with his love and truth.

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And here is our Jamie and Claire, by the amazing Cantrix_grisea!
I lost half of my lunch break and half of my mind buried in Jamie’s hug, kissing him in the courtyard. I was finding him again, trying to rebuild in my heart the image of him that was shattered by her two words. *A bet.*

*I'm not a bet. He’s here. He sent me one hundred texts yesterday. He cares for me and he wants me for the person that I am. What he says is the truth.*

I kept repeating this as a mantra, with his lips making each word louder in my mind, adding the weight of his strength and desire until they settled in my heart. His truth was falling into me like a heavy rock that wouldn’t be moved, changing the landscape of who I was and sinking further with every kiss.

Finally, my belly rumbled and Jamie broke our kiss, smiling with mischief.

“We better go feed you, aye?”

I laughed. I couldn’t remember the last time I either ate or laughed. Most probably yesterday at lunch. Before my whole world went to hell.
I made to move towards the building, only to be stopped by Jamie’s arms that pulled me to him again. He didn’t kiss me, he just stared into my eyes and I felt like those blue eyes could actually see into my soul.

“Claire,” he said, in a serious voice, “I need to know that you believe me. I would never be a part of such a bet. We don’t know each other that well yet, and I understand why you reacted that way. But I want you to know me, Sassenach, as I want to know you. And I will promise you honesty. Everything I say to ye will be the truth. Can ye promise me the same?”

“Yes.” I answered the moment he finished his question. I was sick of all the lies and pretense. I could use some honesty for a change. It was the only way to feel secure once more, so I wouldn’t ruin with doubt what Jamie and I had.

“I need ye to tell me who told ye this bullshit, Sassenach.” His voice was bold, and I could feel the resolve in him. He would put things right, and that would take more action than telling the truth to me.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s finished now.” I didn’t want to acknowledge her or the mess she created. It was partly my fault that I believed her, never giving Jamie a chance to explain. Instead of replying, I stood on my toes and kissed him. His arms tightened around my waist and he kissed me back, until we totally forgot for a moment about what he had asked me and we were lost in our own trance.

It took him a few seconds to remember what he wanted to say when we parted, “It does matter.” He whispered. “And don’t try to mislead me!” He added, smiling. He then got serious again. “This is important to me, Claire. Look what they almost did to us.” Seeing that I wasn’t giving in, he pleaded, “Tell me?”

*What she almost did to us,* I corrected him in my mind. I hated myself for believing her, for giving her such power over something that was between Jamie and me. But I still didn’t want him to mess with her. I very much wanted to punch her in the face myself and make her eat her blonde braids, but that was something I would do. She lied to me, not to him. I was the target of the attack. “I can handle this.” I said to Jamie, becoming more serious now myself.

“Aye, I’m sure ye can. But since the information was about me, don’t I need to know, too?” He tenderly tucked a curl behind my ear and added, “I’m almost sure who said it anyway. I just need a confirmation. It’s Laoghaire, right?”
My hands reflexively tightened in to fists after hearing her name and I voiced a cold, “Yes,” before looking into his caring blue eyes and closing our distance for a kiss. Just the reference of her, and I wanted to claim him, to prove that he was mine.

And mine he was. I could feel his confirmation in that passionate kiss, stating that I was the one he wanted, the one he cared for. I broke our kiss and hugged him tighter, my head tucked under his head, feeling the soft wool of his sweater under my cheek and listening to the pounding of his heart. With one arm trailing soothing patterns on my back, Jamie kissed my head and whispered, “Thank ye, Sassenach.”

When I felt strong again I raised my head to look at him, announcing that I was ready. “Let’s go.”

“Aye,” he agreed “Only one more thing and we go.” Before I had time to think to ask him what else he wanted, his lips were on mine, hot and soft, his tongue licking my bottom lip, asking for access to more. Access was granted, of course, and we forgot ourselves once again, our hearts banging in our chests.

“It will be a while before I’ll get to do this again, so…” He trailed of, giving me a shy but utterly irresistible lopsided smile – which only made me want to kiss him again. And that was exactly what I did. I was never well-known for my self restraint, anyway.

Finally, he took my hand in his and we walked inside, with our cheeks flushed and our lips red and swollen from kissing. Our fingers intertwined instantly, bones made specially for that purpose. To fit with each other. Being together felt like they were just slipping back in place.

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When we entered the cafeteria I looked around for Joe, only to see him sitting in a corner with the girl he kept talking about, Gail. I needed to be introduced to her at some point. If Joe’s comments held any truth, she would be amazing. What had he said about her? Ah yes, “She is the sweetest, smartest, kindest girl I’ve ever known!” Yeah, someone was definitely smitten.

Joe raised both eyebrows when we made eye contact and I gave him a smile as a reply. *All is well,* it said. I felt so grateful having him in my life. He was always at my side, supporting and understanding. He wanted me to be happy even though I shared nothing of the last day’s madness with him.
Jamie walked straight towards the table the swimming team usually occupied. I felt him tensing, his fingers pressing into the back of my hand. He was looking at their table, with his jaw set and his chest slightly heaving. A moment later, I saw her. She was sitting there, surrounded by her besties, with her eyes on us. She kept glancing from Jamie to me and back to Jamie again. I squeezed Jamie’s hand in an attempt to make him look at me, to calm him down.

He didn’t see me though. His eyes glared at her, and I thought it was a good thing he wasn’t a superhero or anything because the only thing missing from that stare were the burning rays. The X-men Cyclops, in disguise.

Lamb taught me to stand up for myself in all circumstances. Seeing someone defending me so fiercely was new to me. On the one hand, I wanted to deal with her myself. On the other, I had a beautiful feeling of being cared for and protected, with the huge bulk of Jamie fighting for us.

When we reached the table, Jamie made no move to sit. His hand left mine, only to put his arm around my waist and pull me to him.

“Laoghaire,” he started, with a cold voice. This was exactly the opposite from the husky one he used when he called me Sassenach. Good. “I think ye need to leave.”

“What? I’m not going anywhere! This is my table, too.” She replied, her eyes two slits.

“This was your table, but not anymore. Ye’re not welcome here.”

“Oh, now I’m not welcome here? Changing shift, right? Ye think I will leave because ye brought your Sassenach nerd here? I don’t think so, Jamie!” She crossed her arms in front of her chest, making it obvious she wouldn’t move an inch.

“It’s James for you and watch yer mouth.” His restrain was visible and I could feel his body preparing for a fight. “Leave.” He hissed.

Laoghaire turned around to find support, but no one spoke in her defense.

“Ye better leave, Laoghaire.” Jenny said when Laoghaire looked at her, searching for an ally. “If my
brother says so, he’ll has his reasons. And now that I heard ye talk like that, I have mine, too.”

With a last long stare at Jamie, Laoghaire stood up and walked away, leaving her half-finished tray behind. After a few steps she stopped again, looked at me with disgust and then motioned to her terrified friend-slaves to follow her. When they were out of sight I turned to see Jamie’s face red from anger.

Well, here is someone with well-practiced self restraint.

“Sit Sassenach, I'll go get us food.” He said and with a light squeeze of my hand he left. Apparently, Jamie Fraser was in hero-rescuing-the princess mode. And I couldn’t deny that I liked it.

No one mentioned anything about her while we ate. Even Jenny, who shot us a questioning glance when Laoghaire left, continued eating her chicken drumsticks and started talking about our rehearsals and how exhausting our schedule had become. I managed to eat only half of my pizza before the break was over.

Jamie ate faster than I ever thought a person could eat and didn’t say a word. All the while he made sure his thigh was next to mine, touching, and his left hand rested a little above my knee. He made sure I knew he was there, that I wasn’t alone.

Before leaving, he announced he’d wait for me in the courtyard after school, to walk with me to the dance studio. With a chaste kiss on the cheek, I left him to go to my biology class.

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I saw her waiting for me just outside the classroom when I raised my eyes from Jamie’s text (Jamie: I should have chosen biology, too. Sounds interesting.). I was just a few steps away. Her lips were pressed in a thin line and she gave me the impression of a wild animal ready to attack.

“You!” She exclaimed once I got closer. “How dare you try stealing Jamie from me? Jamie Fraser is mine!” She was pointing to her chest, as if mere words weren’t sufficient to enlighten me about whom she was talking.

“Jamie is not an object to be stolen from anyone. He has his own opinions about people, you know.” I replied, as removed as possible.
“He was mine before you came here. Go hang out with your Sassenach friend, that is where you belong.” Her cheeks were burning red.

“I will hang out with whomever I want, thank you very much.” I tried to be cool and dismiss her stupid opinions. She didn’t deserve a proper reply, anyway.

“You don’t deserve him. Jamie and I were meant to be together! But I’m not to worry.” She paused and raised herself to her full height – many inches lower than mine. “He’ll come back to me. I’m sure you’re just a fuck for him. A Sassenach slut.”

I didn’t know what possessed me during the next few moments. First her lies about a bet and now this. It was too much. Without thinking, I raised my hand and slapped her hard across the face. I could almost see my fingers marking her fair skin when I removed my hand and I took extra pleasure to see the tears in her eyes.

_Stupid, mean bitch._

After a moment, I came back to myself.

Laoghaire, recovering from the surprise, held a hand to her cheek and looked at me with horror. It took her some breaths to transform this feeling to the one of revenge. “I will make him mine, again.” She warned me and left, leaving me alone in the corridor and late to my class.

_I will make him mine again._

I had to ask Jamie for more details about what he and Laoghaire had been. A simple “trust me” didn’t seem to quench neither my curiosity, nor a few of my insecurities. But I knew she was lying and he would give me the truth.

The girl was nuts.

Thinking about that, I slowly pushed open the classroom door.
I was walking towards him, the same thought repeating itself in my mind.

I am walking towards Jamie Fraser. Jamie Fraser is waiting for me in the school’s courtyard.

A few sun rays escaped the clouds of the Scottish sky and landed on Jamie’s head, ten different hues of red escaping his hair. My heart kicked against my ribs when his eyes settled on me and he gave me a lopsided smile. His smile was so provocative, I should be allowed to sue him for the effects it had on me. He looked happy and self-assured, and oh so beautiful, that I felt my insides melting on the floor. I took a mental note to punish him for this later.

Yes, I’m coming to you, you cocky bastard!

My cheek muscles ached, a wide smile straining them inexorably. How much time was I looking at him, grinning like a fool? I couldn’t remember how to fix it though, how I was supposed to turn my lips back to their natural position, touching each other. Like normal people did.

“What?” I asked, looking at his intense gaze, when I was close enough for him to hear me.
“Nothing,” he shrugged.

“Am I late?” Mary had some questions after class and I couldn’t turn her down, now that she finally started talking. The girl’s picture should be in the dictionary next to the word “shy” as the perfect example of the condition.

“Nah.”

“And what is this smug face?” I asked, my finger drawing circles in the air in front of his face.

“Smug face?” His question was genuine.

“Yeah. The ‘I’m James Fraser, the king of men’ face.”

“I didna ken there was such a face!” He said, cocking both eyebrows before he smirked again. “Well, ye were coming to me, Sassenach, so I guess that makes me the king of men, no?”

I could sense the heat raising on my cheeks and I felt them blazing.

“Yeah, sure. You didn’t notice me until just last Friday.” I tried to minimize the implication of his statement.

“Well, Sassenach, I can tell ye, ye couldn’t be more wrong than that. I did notice ye, lass, since day one.” He looked deep into my eyes and I was surprised by the honesty I could see there. He didn’t wait for a reply, but added “Ye, however, hated me.”

I laughed, “Well, hate is too strong a feeling. I didn’t know you enough to hate you.”

“But ye certainly weren’t fond of me,” Jamie insisted.

“I am now.” I raised myself onto my tiptoes to reach his lips, kissing his worry away.
“Ahem.” I heard a man clearing his throat right behind me and I parted my lips from Jamie’s mortified. I didn’t turn to face the man, sure that whoever he was I would die of embarrassment on the spot if I met his eye, and stumble over some stupid excuse for what he saw me doing in the courtyard.

Jamie nodded to him with a sober face and a curt, “Mr. MacMahon”. The moment the teacher had his back to us, Jamie gave me a broad grin that was in perfect contrast with his previous face. “Better go, Sassenach?”

“Yes.” I grimaced in shame, thinking of the encounter with our teacher.

_Oh God. How was I supposed to ever look him in the eye again?_

Once we were out, Jamie’s hand immediately moved in search of mine, gripping it tightly.

I took a deep, contented breath, focusing on the sense of his strong fingers between mine. Anchoring me to him.

_I’m not leaving now, Jamie Fraser._

We walked in silence for a while, happy to be together, breathing the same air, and synchronizing our steps in a shared trot. I was sure our hearts had a secret dance of their own, too.

“So,” I finally broke the silence, “I have some questions.” I didn’t want to spoil our time together, talking about her again, but I felt I had to get some answers. We needed to leave this whole mess behind and I could be sure that the whole situation with Laoghaire was over only when I knew everything that had led to it. That way I could deal with her, not wondering every time if what she said was the truth or a horrible lie again.

Jamie looked at me, smiling. “Ye surely have a curious mind, I could tell that from class. Ye raise
your hand so many times, Sassenach, it surely has to feel sore after school. Although most times it’s to answer questions, now that I’m thinking of it.”

“Ha ha ha. Verrrrra funny.” My Scottish accent must have been very funny indeed, because Jamie’s feet stopped abruptly while he laughed out loud. He pulled me to him, arms securing me close, and kissed me with a smile still on his lips. I made it disappear when I kissed him back, my teeth grazing his bottom lip.

“I’ll have to keep ye close to me, only to hear that accent of yours more often.” He whispered and rubbed his nose on mine.

“Only for that?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Well, I can think of a few other things, as well… Like some private lessons in math. I have a few questions of my own, ye see.”

“I never say no to a fellow student in need of help. In fact, I see a question ready to pop out of this mouth, right here…” I placed my lips on the corner of his mouth, making it turn up in a smile again, before Jamie turned his face slightly, to claim my mouth.

My body was snuggled into his arms, and when we broke the kiss I didn’t want to leave an inch of air between us. The closer the better, concerning what I wanted to talk about.

“Jamie…” I raised my eyes from his Adam’s apple to his blue, still unconcerned eyes. “I want to talk about Laoghaire.” Better go straight to the point.

“What?” He asked, alert. “What about her? Did she say something to you again?” I could see his anger slowly building up, darkening his eyes. He wasn’t expecting me to talk about her again.

“First, I want you to tell me what she is to you.” I demanded, and his fingers dug deeper into my back.

“Nothing! I told ye that already Sassenach! She’s not important to me.” He said the last sentence slowly, adding emphasis to each word.
“But she once was?” My heart squeezed in my chest, all the thoughts of the two of them together stabbing me forcefully. All the feelings he might once had, all the possible dreams he made of a future with her.

Confusion furrowed his eyebrows, but his reply came immediately. “Nay. She was never special to me.”

I breathed in again, the air having the scent of him and dancing through my nose to fill my lungs, soothing the pain and fighting the fear harbored in my heart.

*Oh God, thank you.*

“So why did she say all of that to me? She surely had a reason, a past to rely on. No?” I continued my inquiring.

Jamie took a deep breath that brought his chest pressing into mine, only to exhale and leave a void in the absence of his solid touch behind. I instinctively moved a bit closer, yearning for his warmth. “I made the grave mistake of kissing the lass last year. She… She kissed me, that is, and I kissed her back. I didna think about it, back then, just did it.” Jamie took a hand from my back to rub his nape, avoiding my eyes.

“And did you become a couple after that?” They might have tried, ending up seeing that it didn’t work out for them. I would be okay with that.

“NO! No.” He forced himself to calm down. “That was all, just a kiss. But she acted crazy after that, like she was possessed or something. She told all her friends that we were together. She was always finding ways to be around me, never leaving me alone. It was a nightmare.” Jamie’s hand was on my cheek and his eyes sought mine when he continued, his voice low. “We never went on a date, we never texted each other, we never shared anything. That’s the truth, Sassenach.” He looked me straight in the eye to make sure I believed him. When I nodded, he continued. “But she got that idea in her head, that I belonged with her. I tried to make her see that there was nothing between us but she’s from my hometown, Claire, and I couldn’t be cruel and make a fool out of her.”

“She manages to do that just fine on her own, Jamie.” At least this made him laugh.

“Aye, she does that.” Jamie’s look was sorrowful, and the thought that he pitied her came to my mind. It felt good, somehow.
“Jamie… How come you two kissed? You don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to, just – ”

His fingers travelled to my cheekbones, and I fixed my gaze on his shirt’s collar. “I want to tell you, Sassenach. I want to tell you everything – everything you want to know and more than that, maybe. Do you really want to know more details about it, Claire?”

“Yes. I feel like I need to.”

His hands moved under my chin, bringing my eyes to his. “She came to find me after a swimming competition. She wanted to congratulate me, because I took first place in my race and… she ended up kissing me. I kissed her back.” He shook his head, his eyelids falling momentarily, hiding his soul from me. Then, as if he realized that his emotions were not on display anymore, he popped them open again. “Back then I thought it would be fun. That was all, Claire. It was just a kiss, like all the other kisses. I felt nothing, and I would have forgotten it the moment she left if it wasn’t for her stalker like behavior afterwards.”

“A kiss like all the other kisses, ehm? And how many kisses are there in this collection, James Fraser?” In my mind it sounded like a joke, by my words were harsher than I wanted them to be.

“Not a lot, but not a few either.” He replied, his look smug but honest. However, I could see a tiny bit of fear in the back of his eyes, before he asked “And yours?”

“About the same, more or less.” I said nonchalantly, brushing a few stray curls away from my eyes.

He stopped my hand, intertwining his fingers with mine and he kissed the tender skin on the inside of my wrist. Without breaking eye contact, he moved his lips to find mine. They were warm and tender, and goosebumps formed all over my body when I felt his tongue. Our kiss became hungry; to taste more, to prove more, to claim more.

“No one. No one ever made me feel as ye do, Claire.” I could feel his heart beating against mine. “It’s the first time I’ve felt this way.”

I smiled, running my tongue over my lips to savor the last hints of his kiss. His eyes were burning into mine before they instinctively moved, as if enchanted, on my lips.
“What are ye doing to me, Sassenach?” Jamie asked in a husky voice, seconds before his tongue was on my lips. “I knew I would be in trouble with ye, from the first moment ye walked into class.”

“Did you now?”

He shook his head, smirking, and pulled me closer to his heart. My eyes were closed as I breathed him in, wishing the moment to last forever.

“Jamie…” I murmured, my voice almost muffled by his jacket. “I have to tell you something.”

“What did ye do now, ye wee trouble-maker?” His chest rumbled under my cheek.

I breathed in deeply and while the air left my chest I said hastily, “I slapped Laoghaire.”

I heard his sharp exhale, accompanied by a “A Dhia!” before his lips landed somewhere between my errant curls. “Dinna fash, Sassenach. We’ll deal with this together.”
My feet bounced up and down on the floor, a million times per minute – okay, maybe a few less – making some of my short-cut curls hop to and fro around my face. My teeth were biting hard on my bottom lip, chewing and releasing before they’d bite again harder. My nails were leaving their marks on the tender skin of my palms, which became clammy with every passing moment.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Things took a bad turn. A turn towards the cliff, if I wanted to be more precise.

And there I was, waiting just outside Mr. Gowan’s office with Lamb sitting next to me and my eyes glued on the headteacher’s shiny nameplate. My first time being called to the headteacher’s office.

“Claire, this note says that my presence is required at your school, to attend to a meeting with the headteacher.” Lamb narrowed his eyes towards me. “What does this mean, lamb? What did you do?”

I rolled my eyes so hard it was painful when I heard him calling me lamb again, his favorite joke. Lamb and his lamb. Every time I did something stupid, I just became *the lamb.*
“Nothing!” I exclaimed indignantly, only to end up with Lamb giving me ‘the eye’.

I had to work on lying more convincingly.

Without the luxury of another option, I lowered my head and answered his question, in the lowest voice possible, “I slapped a girl.”

“You did what? Oh God.” Lamb sank in to the chair next to him and watched me with a strict face until I’d explained everything. I told him all the details I didn’t want to mention. Even that one detail that I was dating a Scottish Highlander named Jamie Fraser. Yeap, all the information a girl wants her uncle to NOT know.

–

“Claire. Calm down.” Lamb’s voice was steady, controlled. For a moment I wondered if he was angry with me, but in the next his hand was petting my head, as if I was five years old again. Surprisingly, this simple gesture brought me so much comfort that I wanted to snuggle in to his embrace, as I had once done after breaking one of my his artifacts, out of the sheer excitement of holding it, the first time he had trusted me with one.

My phone buzzed from inside my pocket and I dithered for a while before taking a quick look at it. I didn’t want the first thing Mr. Gowan would see when he opened the door to be me playing with my phone. I concentrated on the noises coming from the office to be sure that no steps were coming towards the door.

Nothing.

I snuck a peak at my phone to find a text from Jamie.

Jamie: It’s going to be alright, Sassenach. I’m thinking of you. xx

At least he’s thinking of me. If he’d never kissed her, though… That would have been far better to begin with. And when I say far better, I mean far far far better, Mr. Jamie “Kisser of Whoever is in Front of Me” Fraser.

Anyway.

Then another buzz.
Jamie: Oh! And don’t slap Gowan, Sassenach!

That arsehole.

–

Jamie’s first reaction when I told him about Laoghaire was to hug me tighter and reassure me that everything was going to be okay. Eventually. I realized belatedly what he meant by that, I was still much more naive concerning Laoghaire and what she could do. The girl was evil.

After a while, though, I felt Jamie’s chest moving with suppressed laughter.

“Ye really slapped her, Sassenach?” He asked and moved so he could see my face. His eyes were even more slanted from laughter, their colour reminding me of the most beautiful sky’s blue.

I shrugged.

He laughed a little louder. “I can’t wait to tell Jenny about it. She’ll be enthralled!”

I laughed too, thinking of Jenny Fraser’s reaction after being informed that she missed the opportunity of slapping someone to me. Especially someone who bothered her little brother.

“Why did ye do it?” Jamie’s laughter faded, giving place to a sober voice.

“She … she got really offensive, Jamie.” With my laughter gone, I could hear the crack in my voice at the memory of Laoghaire standing in front of me in the school’s corridor. Her brutal declaration was so loud in my head, I couldn’t stop the pain from reaching my voice.

“What did she say?” Of course, Jamie Fraser would never be content with such vague information.

“I … I don’t want to repeat it. Please?” My breath was shallow, my mind back in the school’s
“Okay. Promise you’ll tell me when ye’re ready?” I could sense his need to know battling with the need to respect my wish. Jamie put his instinctive reaction second, giving me what I needed most and that made me want to give him something in return.

“Promise.” I whispered and tucked my face under his chin, taking in a deep breath of him.

I was fairly sure that the “Laoghaire story” would end then and there. She lied, I believed her, Jamie showed her that she had to stop, she didn’t take the message, she lied and insulted me once again, and I slapped her. It was pretty clear to me that she’d done far worse things than I did. The only reason I told Jamie about the slap was for him to know the truth, in case she’d go to inform him, changing the story to her merit.

Of course, I was a fool once again. Laoghaire had promptly run to the headteacher after the incident, informing him of my improper behavior without mentioning any of her insults and lies – surprise, surprise!

–

“Mr. Beauchamp,” Ned Gowan, our headteacher, fixed his round glasses on his nose and stood up extending a hand to my uncle. “Welcome. Please, take a seat.”

They both sat and Mr. Gowan’s eyes settled on me and the anxious fidgeting of my hands. “You may sit, too, Claire.”

Good. Because my legs were not that reliable at the moment.

Mr. Gowan directed his words to my uncle first, giving him a brief introduction on the subject matter of our meeting. And it wasn’t my good grades.

“So, do you agree with what I just said, Claire? Did you slap Laoghaire MacKenzie?”

“I …”
I am the worst liar on the face of the Earth.

Even if I wanted to contradict what Laoghaire had already said, because no one was there to witness what had really happened apart the two of us, my face would end up an impressive beetroot-red the moment I would start lying. So, I told the truth, swallowing hard. “Yes, I did.”

“Would ye care to share with us the reason why, Claire? Ye are a person of sense. Laoghaire said she had no idea.”

The mean trollop! She had no idea, my arse!

I took a deep breath and replied in a serious voice, “She insulted me, Mr. Gowan. I would like to not get into the details of it, if that’s possible. I tried not to pay any attention to her insults, but she wouldn’t stop. I … I acted instinctively. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t know about the insults, but …” Mr. Gowan trailed of, taking a note on a faded yellow post-it. The letters were illegible, making it impossible for me to decipher what he wrote. “It’s good that ye’re sorry and ye recognize that violence is never the solution to a problem. Ye do realize that, right?”

“I do.” My eyes found him for a second before I fixed them on a pile of papers on his desk.

“Good. Good.” He turned to Lamb. “We don’t accept violent acts in our school, Mr. Beauchamp, as ye very well know. And adherence to the school’s rules is a very important matter.”

“I know that, Mr. Gowan, and I support that notion wholeheartedly. I raised Claire to voice her disagreements and talk things out, not to slap her indignation on others. She has never showed such behavior before, I can assure you of that.”

Thank you Lambie, my beloved, best, awesomest uncle!

“Aye. I can assure you that she has been an exemplar student thus far, and it’s a privilege to have Claire in our school.”
Okay, you too, Ned Gowan, you’re the sweetest!

“But as ye can understand, I canna leave such behavior unpunished.”

Oh shit.

“I will not give Claire a suspension, because she admits to and recognizes her mistake, and she promises never to repeat such an action.”

I nodded like crazy.

Yes, yes, yes. No suspension, no more slaps. I will avoid the stupid blonde like the plague. Although that slap felt good … It felt heavenly.

“And I’m sure Claire has a good reasoning behind this, although whatever it is, it doesn’t justify that particular behavior,” Mr. Gowan continued, “Claire will get detention for a week. She will work in the school’s library, to help with categorizing the books that are in our warehouse.”

Great! That was a far better punny than most.

“And she won’t take part in any school activities during that week, since all her free time will be spent in the library.”

Oh no. I’m not hearing that.

“But,” I spoke in a tiny voice, unsure if what I was doing was wise. “We have our dance performance this Saturday.”

Mr. Gowan pressed his lips together, released them, and said, “I’m sorry Claire.”

“It’s quite alright, I’m sure.” Lamb’s strong voice rang through my ears, settling in the pit of my stomach. “Thank you, Mr. Gowan.”
No, it isn’t quite alright. Not quite alright at all.

I stood up mechanically when I sensed Lamb rising from his chair. I smiled to Mr. Gowan, said, “Thank you,” and walked out of his office.

I would miss the dance performance. All the rehearsals, all the time and stress, and I wouldn’t even be there to see how it all came together. Lilly would kill me.

“I hope this serves as a lesson for you, Claire, though your motives were right.” Lamb said. But after seeing the disappointment in my eyes, he immediately added, “I’m sorry, darling. I know how important this performance was to you. But it could be far worse. Try to see the light! See you at home.” He kissed me on the forehead and left, leaving me alone in the school’s corridor.

–

I stood in the corridor, with my back against the wall and my eyes closed, trying to stop the tears from running.

“Sassenach?” His sweet voice filled the air around me, bringing a piece of happiness with it, while a hand settled on my waist. “Tell me?”

“I slapped Mr. Gowan.” I said, my eyes still closed to hide the lie.

“What?” Jamie whisper-yelled incredulously.

I opened my eyes and laughed, seeing his eyebrows shoot up in to the middle of his forehead. “It isn’t funny now, is it?”

“I’ll kill ye!” Jamie was shaking his head while a mischievous grin made his eyes sparkle.

“Detention, one week.” I replied to his question, now serious. I heard him let a breath out and I
added, “No dance performance.”

His arms came around me, enveloping me in a bear hug. “I’m sorry, mo nighean donn.” He whispered in my hair, and I felt so safe and small with his arms around me that I couldn’t stop the tears any longer.

“Any details on the detention?”

“Work in the library’s warehouse. At least that one was good.” I said, snorting.

“Yeah, at least they found the only person who would think that’s good.” He said, and I felt him smiling. “Ye’re one of a kind, Sassenach.”

I didn’t reply to that, only rubbed my face on his sweater, and placed a kiss on his neck.

–

Lilly was mad at me for getting detention.

I was mad at myself for letting my impulsivity get the better of me.

I was also mad at the dust in the library’s warehouse, for getting in my lungs, mouth, and hair and making me cough every two minutes.

But the books … Oh, the books were beautiful. I even found some leather-bound editions of the classics and the temptation to stop the work and start reading was so strong. Knowing this meant more trouble, I resisted.

_I’m Claire and I’m strong._

Two days had passed and apart from discovering another rare edition, nothing was interesting anymore. I hated Laoghaire. When I wasn’t thinking of what the evil bitch had done, I watched the big clock on the wall, thinking of what I would be doing if I wasn’t trapped in the warehouse. In
fact, I involuntarily started replaying our choreography in my head, and it only made me feel more miserable.

In my head, I was jumping up and falling down on the floor, rolling and stretching, extending arms to catch an invisible light. In reality, I was cleaning up the books I’d found in piles of boxes in a dark corner of the warehouse, before writing down their titles and authors in to the huge notebook Mrs. Cameron gave me.

My phone beeped and I turned my eyes to the table where I left it. I had a new text from Jamie and I smiled, as I did every time I imagined those red locks falling in front of his eyes as he typed out a message. **TO ME. Suck it Laoghaire.**

*Jamie: Sassenach, text me when ye’re done.*

*CB: Okay. I still have a lot to do. I’ll be late. :-(*

*Jamie: Text me fifteen minutes before you leave. I’m coming to take ye home.*

*CB: You don’t need to, I’m fine. :-)*

*Jamie: I’m coming. Promise ye’ll be finer.*

That ridiculous human being!

I smiled and continued dusting, trying to finish as quickly as possible so I could see his smile a bit sooner. That always did make me feel finer.

–

I was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the library for Jamie, my hands buried deep in my pockets to avoid the cold wind. God, Scotland was freezing cold.

*Why couldn’t Lamb find a position at the University of The Bahamas? There had to be some history*
As this thought formed in my mind, my hair was gently swept from the nape of my neck, exposing plenty of space for the wind to bite at my warm skin. I hissed, just a moment before Jamie’s lips landed, sharing his warmth.

Who would ever choose The Bahamas over this?

“Mmmm. Hello to you too,” I smiled and turned around to find his lips with mine.

Finally. It was the best part of my day.

“Tired?” Jamie asked when our lips parted.

“Not that much now that you’re here.” I smiled at him and nibbled on his neck, breathing him in again. “I’m already finer,” I teased him.

A low laugh was trapped in his throat and his hand trailed down my back to settle on my butt. He pulled lightly, bringing me closer to him. “Verra funny, Sassenach.”

“I know! I’m funny!” I said, burying a hand in the back pocket of his jeans, doing the same to him. “Shall we?” I asked, nodding towards the way home.

“I’ve just a question for ye before we go.” Jamie replied without releasing me.

“And what’s that?” I cocked an eyebrow, waiting.

“If ye won’t be too weary, will ye go out on a date with me on Saturday?”

A date. Our first date. On Saturday.
I raised my hand slowly, cupping his cheek and running a thumb over his prominent cheekbones. I couldn’t believe the treasure I had found in him, with every passing day. He made me happy, not because of something impressive he did to show off, but with all the minor gestures that showed how much he cared. I bit my lip to prevent my emotions from running free and I smiled. He was trying to fix things and cheer me up, filling my time with beautiful moments so I wouldn’t think of missing the performance. That was the sweetest thing he could do for me, but even if he had proposed another day, there was no way I could resist those alluring blue eyes and the hint of a smile that hid behind his lips. I took a breath to accept his invitation, when I realized what he’d first said.

“Weary? I will most probably be at home, if Mrs. Cameron doesn’t require my presence here.” I said in Mrs. Cameron’s voice and then I stopped, seeing Jamie shaking his head in negation. “What?” I asked, perplexed.

“Ye’re dancing, babe.” Jamie replied, a broad grin splitting his beautiful face in two.

“I’m WHAT?” I was sure he could hear my heart beating.

*OH MY GOD.*

*What did he do?*
Life is neither fair nor perfect. I learned that from a young age, a knowledge bestowed on me whether I wanted it or not. Together with this, however, came the gift of learning how to go on. Even when the whole picture goes black there are still little cracks that let the light in. Like the millions of stars scattering the vast darkness of the sky as they hovered above our tents in the middle of nowhere. Every time I felt sad, I focused on the life’s little details to cheer me up. Like the shadows underneath a tree as the sunrays played with its leaves, changing as the sun traveled across the sky. Or a ladybug walking on my hand, a silent companion bringing polka dots, color and a smile in my life. When I had bigger problems, I tended to focus on the minor details to bring hope again to my heart. It was Lamb’s strategy, that. His coping mechanism. When life knocks you down, he said, take your time and see the stars.

Jamie, huge as he was, was exactly the opposite of a minor detail but worked quite well as a coping mechanism, if I did say so. He came into my life and occupied almost every empty nook - even the ones I was not aware of - strangely without squeezing me in or stealing my air. All it took was less than a week and his loud laughter, kind heart and big biceps had infiltrated most of my thoughts throughout the day. I couldn’t remember how life was before him.

Boring. My life used to be good, but boring.
Maybe he was my lucky laddie-bug, always there to cheer me up!

_I should call him that once, only to see how his face will scrunch up at the thought._


That glorious night when Jamie announced that I was going to dance for the school’s performance, I jumped at him squealing with joy and kissed him until I had run out of breath.

_OMG OMG OMG OMG_

How did he manage to convince Mr. Gowan to change his mind?!

It couldn’t be real, it had to be a dream. Or he was indeed my lucky laddie-bug.

One minute later, between kisses and smiles – and a wee bit of dancing in front of the library that made him laugh – I was informed that Jamie hadn’t done it all alone. He said that he wouldn’t divulge any more information beyond that. If I wanted to find out more, I had to go to his place so that he and Jenny could enlighten me together about their achievement on my behalf.

That was the night I realized that if the stubborn Fraser siblings wanted something, they were unstoppable.


“I couldn’t let this pout stay on yer face, Sassenach.” Jamie said as he brought my tea and sat down next to me on the couch.

Ian smiled and Jenny fluttered excitedly her eyelashes to tease her brother.

“Janet!” Jamie’s voice lost all its sweetness and I saw a red hew working its way up from his neck.

“James.” Jenny said with a raised eyebrow, daring him to continue.
My eyes crossed with Ian’s, whose shrug informed me that this confrontation was usual between the siblings. After a minute in which Jenny and Jamie only glared at each other, they decided to let it pass and described to me their triumphant visit to our headteacher.

After talking to Jamie and crying in his arms in the corridor, I accepted my ill fate and the fact that life sometimes sucks and we can do nothing about it. The Frasers, however, had another opinion and that same night they came up with a plan.

The following day Jamie and Jenny went to see Mr. Gowan, taking the matter into their own hands. They informed him – without omitting a single detail – of Laoghaire’s behavior in the cafeteria, making sure to highlight the fact that she had a problem with me because I was new and a “foreigner” who didn’t fit in well with them. They surely knew where to focus their efforts; Mr. Gowan had a zero tolerance attitude concerning racism of all kinds.

Emphasizing that I was so hurt by Laoghaire’s actions that I didn’t even confess to them what she had said to me during our private encounter was the final hit for Mr. Gowan. He suspected the worse – which actually was pretty close to the truth.

Seeing his change in demeanor, the Frasers strategically continued, referencing my reaction and how much I regretted slapping the blonde bimbo, even though I had every right to be react so harshly – if they were allowed to judge, that is.

“Jamie started saying that ye were more than willing to pay for yer inappropriate behavior, but ye were heartbroken about the dance performance. Ye should have seen Gowan’s face as this clotheid talked about ye, Claire! The man could hardly hide his smile!” Jenny said, laughing.

*Well, at the moment I’d like to see my face, just to make sure my cheeks were not neon red by now.*

Jamie’s arm found its way around my waist as I leaned forward to take my mug from the coffee table and he continued the story in an attempt to stop Jenny’s teasing. “Then my verra kind sister here pleaded with him to allow ye to participate in the dance performance even though ye’d missed all the rehearsals. She complained that he had been the one who changed yer date to begin with, and that the whole team worked so hard to perfect the performance that it would be a disaster to ruin the entire choreography because one person would be missing.”

“Well it’s not that it would have been ruined,” I murmured, looking at Jenny.
“I didna lie! We had to do adjustments without ye and during the last week to boot! I have never seen Lilly so stressed!”

“Anyway,” Jamie smiled to me, “After listening to all of Jenny’s grumbling – which was A LOT, we asked him to adjust yer punny so ye could dance and he said yes!” Jamie finished and tried to wink at me, blinking owlishly instead and making me laugh.

“As ye understand, Claire, we left his office immediately, thanking him on our way to the door so he’d have no time to change his mind!”

“And here Claire, ye just witnessed the Frasers’ craftiness in all its majesty!” Ian concluded with a smile, winning an elbow on his stomach from Jenny while Jamie murmured something about their “MacKenzie side.”

A week ago if someone would have told me that Jamie and Jenny Fraser would come to my rescue, I would have called them nuts.

—

When I left their apartment to go home, I was so happy that I didn’t even think of the frantic days that would follow and how I would manage to fit everything in when each day stubbornly insisted on having only 24 hours.

Life was exhausting, but good. Really good. Particularly good because all we saw of Laoghaire during the rest of the week was her sour face in the corridors before arriving to class and in the cafeteria during lunch. She didn’t talk to any of us and was generally withdrawn, with her besties, glancing occasionally at us from the table at the far end of the cafeteria. We soon found out that Mr. Gowan had called her to his office to talk to her and she was given detention as well. She was to work for one more hour before leaving the school, every day for a week.

Not bad.

Jamie made it a habit to wait by the door of my classroom every time we had a different class. How he’d manage to always be on time, I didn’t know. Maybe I was just too slow collecting my things and checking my notes before leaving the classroom. Maybe he was sprinting down the hallways to fetch me on time.
I couldn’t deny that I liked the thought of Jamie Fraser rushing through the corridors to come to me.

When we shared a class, Jamie would sit at the desk just behind mine, playing with my curls and writing notes to me. He dislodged Mary from her desk in zero time and with great ease – he just asked her to pass his secret notes to me if she wanted to keep her desk. Mary had gone dead white envisioning herself in the middle of such a perilous situation and gave up her claim to the seat in less than five seconds.

With Jamie’s fingers in my hair or drawing lines on my shoulders and back it was more than difficult to concentrate during class. To make things worse, his long legs invaded the space underneath my chair and I felt him pressing his feet against mine, careless and hungry for every interaction we might have.

Apart from that, we had our notes. Each secret note, written on a tiny piece of paper, had a counter-note going in the opposite direction. My heart was in my throat every time I felt his light tap on my shoulder, and I could hardly hide my excitement as I extended a hand towards him. Twice I touched his knee and doing so in the class made me want him even more. It was forbidden and we were supposed not to be seen, but the repressed groan I heard both times coming from him at the unexpected contact made weird things to me. His fingertips slightly caressed the lines of my open palm making me shiver before I’d feel the edges of the folded paper against my skin.

_The tease._

I didn’t know why, but I kept each one of Jamie’s notes. From the simple “Good morning, Sassenach” to the more intimate “Four more minutes until i get to kiss you.”

In other words, my life had a lot of ladybugs and stars to look at.

Every afternoon found me in the library’s warehouse, dusting and categorizing the books with a renewed zeal, until Jamie would finish his training in the evening. He would then arrive with his wet hair hidden in a beanie and a broad smile, and we’d walk back to his place, so I could practice my choreography with Jenny.

_Jenny, who had the deadliest look and the kindest heart._

When she told me that she talked to Lilly and we were to practice together at home every evening, half of Edinburgh probably heard me screaming with delight. She managed to convince Lilly to
allow me to be apart of the dress rehearsal to double check if I was good enough, and if I was she’d allow me to take part in the performance.

Of course I’d make it. I had to be perfect and I was determined.

–

When I first announced to Lamb that I would be going to Jenny’s to practice after my work was done at the library, he looked at me closely and with a cocked eyebrow he said, “Jenny also known as Jamie’s sister? That Jenny?”

“Yes, that Jenny!” I said indignantly. “I need to practice because I’ve missed all the rehearsals with this stupid detention!”

Come on Lamb, you have to let me go. You have to let me go.

Mental note to myself: Google how to manipulate someone’s brain and make him do what you want. Or something like that.

Luckily Lamb was not that hard to convince and he just said “Sure, lamb.” With my attention focused on the “sure” and not the “lamb” I smiled at him.

Incidentally, I forgot to mention that after practicing Jenny and I would be hanging out in the boys’ room to watch an episode of “Dark” – a mystery horror TV series that necessitated being held closely by someone bigger and stronger than yourself.

Let’s just call that a random choice of a TV series.

–

These evenings were the greatest detention evenings anyone had ever had.

First, we moved all the living room furniture to the walls, so Jenny and I would have enough space
to dance. Then, after using the boys’ muscles to help us with the heavy pieces, we shooed them to their bedroom, so we wouldn’t have an audience. The final dance was to be a surprise for everyone attending the performance. Murtagh, Jamie and Jenny’s taciturn uncle, usually went to his own room with a glass of whisky at hand and a grumpy, “Dinna break the place down, lassies, aye?” followed by a smirk he thought we didn’t see. He forgot about the living room’s mirror, though.

Finishing our practice, we snuck into the boys’ bedroom for the day’s episode. I was exceedingly self-conscious the first day I walked into their room, with Jamie smiling and opening his arms for me. I was sticky and sweaty and felt gross. I sat next to him with a timid smile and he placed his arm around my waist and pulled me to him, kissing my neck.

“Ye smell wonderful, dinna fash,” the bloody Scot said.

“No I don’t,” I murmured.

“Yes ye do,” he insisted, taking a ridiculous deep breath.

Snuggled between Jamie’s thighs with his arms around me, we watched the story of the mysterious city of Winden, where people had disappeared.

The show was amazing and had us on edge the whole time. The direction made it all too believable.

After all, people disappear all the time.

For a whole hour I was feeling Jamie’s heart beating as forcefully as mine against my back. Watching a science fiction thriller series with him would definitely lead me to an early grave.

*I mean, how many times does the heart beat throughout our lives?*

I was using double the amount of beats necessary every time Jamie was around.

After discussing every episode until we recovered our normal heartbeats, Jamie walked me home. We were together almost all day long, but our walks were the only time we were truly alone, just with each other. His arm found its way around my shoulders to keep me close, while my hand settled
on the waistband of his jeans. I couldn’t get enough of him.

–

On the Friday before our performance Jamie left me on my doorstep, squeezing my hand.

“I canna wait to see ye dancing tomorrow.”

“For all you know, I could be a terrible dancer! Don’t set your expectations too high, Jamie Fraser, because you might end up disappointed!” I laughed brushing off his compliment the only way I knew how, as I felt my cheeks blushing.

“Too late for that. If I get disappointed though, you’ll need to comfort me.” He smirked, taking my lips into his.

“Mhmm… And how would I do that?” A tender bite on his bottom lip.

“I dinna ken, but I’ll think of something.” A hand on the small of my back drawing me closer.

“Beware not to burn your brain thinking, Fraser.”

“Oh, dinna fash. I can easily think so many ways…”

I kissed him once more, my hands wrapped across his nape, feeling his body’s warmth burning me.

“Off you go.” I said without giving myself time to think about it or regret it. He had to go before we’d end up frozen on my doorstep.

“I canna.” He said, voice rumbling deep in his chest before he leaned in to kiss me again. His tongue suddenly left my mouth, taking me by surprise, before I felt a hot trail along my neck. “Ye’re driving me crazy, Claire.” His teeth were softly biting my tender skin and I felt my body responding to his, leaving my hands free to roam and touch him.
When he stopped and looked at me through dark eyes, hooded with desire I mustered all my self-restraint not to pull him back to me. But it was late and he had a long walk back home. We kissed goodnight with our breaths still shallow and I saw him turn for a last glance before he disappeared at the end of the street.

We texted until he got home, our last goodnight just a moment before I fell asleep. I felt so tired that all it took was less than a minute to switch from thinking of Jamie to dreaming of him.

—

Saturday morning came bringing along the wrong song ringing loudly from the phone next to my pillow.

Wrong, because that was not my phone alarm. Someone was calling.

Perplexed, I checked the screen to see Jamie’s face looking back at me, with red locks making the blue of his eyes seem brighter and a potato chip extended from his pursed lips.

“Yes?” I answered the call, my voice hoarse from sleep.

“Sassenach? Good morning.” Jamie hesitated and then added, “Did ye just wake up?”

“Yes?”

*Why was that strange? It must still be early; my alarm hadn’t gone off yet.*

“Don’t ye have to get to the dress rehearsal, babe? Jenny left the house a quarter ago.”

*He called me babe! But…*

“What?”
“What time it is?” I forced myself out from under the warm duvet and stood up so quickly that I felt dizzy.

“Eleven fifteen.”

Shiiiiiiiiiiiit!

“I got to go, Jamie!”

“Aye, I ken.” I heard him snort before I ended the call.

It was a miracle that I arrived at the studio safe and sound without breaking my bike in the meantime.

Safe, sound and on time. Like a proper English lady. My arse.

But it was so great to be in the studio again!

Lilly complimented me for keeping up even though I missed the rehearsals and I gave Jenny a huge hug, thanking her again and again for all her help.

I was there because of her. Well, because of her and Jamie.

Jamie, who would be there today. He’d come to watch me dance, well both Jenny and I, but I somehow felt that he’d come mostly for me. But that might be just in my head.

In fact the whole school would be there, but I only cared about one person. The person that made this possible for me to begin with.

The day passed so fast that it was four o’clock before we even knew it. A quarter hour before the
performance began we gathered around Lilly, a circle of blue and white dresses, waiting for her last advice. Instead of commenting on our moves and synchronization, Lilly smiled to us and told us how proud she was of what we had accomplished. Of our team work and the way each one of us grew during our practices, of our determination to make this performance beautiful. We were all tearful when she gave a little white pouch with a blue ribbon to each one of us. We opened them to find a necklace with the figure of a dancer and a note writing “Dance with your heart.” Lilly kissed all of us and after a group hug, we were ready to go.

–

When he entered the stage to take our positions I felt my heart banging so hard in my chest that I thought it’d break a rib or two.

I set my jaw and walked across the stage with my chin up and my face somber and concentrated. When I reached the front right part of the stage, just four steps in front of Jenny, I stopped and bent to my knees. I folded myself with my chest on my thighs and the last thing I saw as I lowered my body was Jamie, sitting in the second row and looking at me with a proud smile on his beautiful face.

The short blue dress puddled around my body and my chest was rising and falling against my thighs. I closed my eyes to calm my breathing.

When I heard the first notes of the song, I forgot where I was and that the whole school plus parents were watching.

“We’ll do it all
Everything
On our own”

I rose my upper body slowly, a wave running through me and ruling my moves. With my head rising last, I opened my eyes and met his; serious, absorbed, admiring. My arms opened to my sides and I felt that I opened myself to him, exposed and unguarded, a book for him to read. He smiled at me and I could see the rise and fall of his chest underneath his grey sweater, its rhythm the same as mine.

From that moment, I didn’t dance only for myself. I was dancing for us.

My hands fell to the floor before the next verse.
“We don’t need
Anything
Or anyone”

Raising my right hand to the sky, I focused my gaze on my fingers before I slid against the floor. Rolling around myself, I stood up, feeling my feet strong to support the jumps that would follow when the chorus would start.

“If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?”

I didn’t have to think, the routine programmed in to my body from all the rehearsals, ready to flow, to be released. I moved with the music, synchronized with the other girls, feeling my body as part of a whole. I didn’t look at Jamie again, but I didn’t need to. I had his eyes in front of me, every time I closed mine.

I was dancing with my heart.

“All that I am
All that I ever was
Is here in your perfect eyes, they’re all I can see

I don’t know where
Confused about how as well
Just know that these things will never change for us at all

If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?”

With a final push, we bounced on our heels before letting our knees give up, the weight of our bodies subdued to gravity, and we all fell to the floor on our backs, with palms facing the sky and chests heaving.

We stayed there, our eyes closed, listening to the applause.

“If I lay here
If I just lay here
Would he lie with me and just forget the world?”
There are some feelings in life that you can never truly describe, no matter how hard you try. Like dancing in the rain, each drop running down your skin and leaving a trail behind as it reaches to your soul. Or lying under the sun, the heat radiating into your core to warm your heart.

Listening to an audience applauding loudly as you rise from the floor is one of these feelings. One more clap and you think your heart will burst with pride and joy.

That was exactly what I felt as I stood up, the song’s last chord still echoing in my ears.

Elation.

A broad smile was glued on my face and I had no intentions of trying to change that. Glancing around, the other girls had the same glint in their eyes, the same grin splitting their faces in two.

We all held hands, beaming, and bowed to the audience, again and again. Lilly was standing in front of us, her back to the crowd, with pride in her teary eyes. Jenny’s hand was almost crushing my fingers, but I couldn’t mind less. The feeling of accomplishment was too strong to let anything else get into my heart at that moment.
Until I saw him.

Jamie was standing up, applauding, the huge smile on his face matching mine.

And just with that, he replaced all feelings with one.

*Love.*

I couldn’t take my eyes off him. He was so beautiful, wearing black jeans and a cream Henley shirt. His red locks were combed back and his broad smile made his eyes so slanted that the eyelashes hid their sapphire color, protecting a rare gem. I didn’t need to see his eyes to know that they would be the brightest blue, the blue of the sky on a sunny day. That was their color every time Jamie was happy.

The fact that I knew when Jamie Fraser was happy and the exact color of his eyes in those moments was something beyond me.

*How did this happen?*

As we lined up to leave the stage I glanced back at him once. His smile was dashing, and I couldn’t help thinking that his teeth looked so white that he could have been a model for a toothpaste advertisement. Setting my jaw to stop my laughter, I walked towards the backstage.

He was perfect. And he was looking at me. From the first moment he saw me, he didn’t take his eyes off me.

“All that I am

All that I ever was

Is here in your perfect eyes, they’re all I can see”

–

Lilly came back with us to the dressing room, her kind brown eyes scattering soft glances at all of us.
She didn’t say much, only that she was proud and blessed to have us on her team. And that really was all we needed to hear.

After group hugs, normal hugs, and attack hugs we finally changed out of our costumes, our blue and white dresses carefully packed in our rucksacks as we opted for more casual clothes.

At least the rest of the girls.

What I picked for the evening was far from my most casual attire, but I was going out with Jamie and I wanted something more than jeans and a sweater. He saw me in casual clothes more than enough and I wanted that night to be different. After all, it was our first official date.

My black dress wasn’t fancy, but it caressed the lines of my body perfectly and I felt beautiful in it. It was a button up A-line dress with a jewel neck. The soft fabric ended just above my knees, flowing with my every move. But what I liked the most about that dress were the short see-through sleeves, laced with little black flowers. They made it unique, somehow, and I wanted something special for that evening.

“Wow! Someone wants to look good tonight!” Jenny elbowed me and I saw she was wearing a beautiful halter neck olive green dress.

“Well, I could say the same to you!”

“Aye,” she smirked. “Ian and I are going out tonight. And Jamie said ye two have a date, too?”

“Yes.” I felt my lips forming a smile without me telling them to do so. Oh well. “He says I owe him an evening at the cinema. He missed the movie you guys went to when he walked me home last week.”

“Aye, sure.” The raised eyebrow and cheeky smile from Jenny Fraser made my heart flutter in expectation.

Our first date.
I left the dressing room heading for the auditorium, my steps purposefully slow as my eyes scanned through the people, trying to find Lamb. He had to attend a dinner with his collaborators after my performance, but he said he wouldn’t miss me dancing for the world.

*My sweet Lambiebear.*

My eyes stopped abruptly when they met a familiar red mop of hair standing higher than most of the people around. Two blue eyes were staring back at me, and I felt like time had stopped. Jamie was standing as still – and beautiful – as a statue and I wasn’t sure if he was even breathing.

I kept walking, unable to break our connection. The moment I smiled to him he shook his head slightly, as if coming out of a trance, and started walking towards me with big, fast strides. Judging from the grin on his face and way he looked at me as he came closer, I was sure he would sweep me off the floor and swirl me around the moment his hands reached my waist. However, with a glance over his shoulder at Murtagh, Ian, and the other man standing next to them he just hugged me tight and kissed my forehead.

Not what I expected, but the wisest choice, seeing as the auditorium was still full of parents.

“Claire,” he said, his eyes boring deep into mine. The only time he had called me by my name was when we had fought about Laoghaire and I swallowed hard, not knowing what was coming. “Ye’re captivating, Sassenach.”

I could see his chest rising and falling intensely and I placed a hand over his heart. *My black dress never fails me.*

Jamie’s hand trailed the length of my arm until it reached my face, cupping it. “I’m so proud of ye. Ye were breathtaking, babe.”

“I think you’re a bit biased, Jamie, but thank you.” I laughed, blushing nonetheless. “It was good, wasn’t it?”

“It was amazing, Sassenach.” He gave me a chaste kiss on the lips and took my hand in his. “Come wi’ me? I want ye to meet someone.”
I saw that “someone” as we walked back to where Jamie had been waiting for me before. He was a man around forty-five, one or two inches shorter than Jamie, with Jenny’s dark straight hair. He wore blue pants and a blue-red-white plaid shirt. He was impressive and the moment he turned to look at me, I knew I didn’t need an introduction. He had the Fraser eyes.

“Da,” I heard Jamie confirming my assumption and I swallowed hard preparing myself. “This is Claire Beauchamp.” Four Fraser eyes, father’s and son’s, were looking at me as Jamie continued. “Claire, this is my Da.”

‘This is Claire Beauchamp.’ I repeated in my head.

Not ‘This is Claire Beauchamp, my girlfriend’. Just plain Claire Beauchamp.

I felt my heart sinking to the pit of my stomach and I tried to shake the feeling away, focusing on the man in front of me.

Make a good impression. Make a good impression.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Fraser.” I smiled, extending my hand.

Why was I trying to make a good impression if I wasn’t the girlfriend?

It’s not a bloody title that makes you who you are, Beauchamp.

Great I was now having a whole conversation with myself in my head.

“You too, Claire.” Brian Fraser took my hand in his, making it obvious who was to blame for Jamie’s genes. His hand was huge, exactly like his son’s, and totally engulfed mine. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” He said, his almond-shaped eyes slanting just a bit more.

Just what exactly had he heard?

“Only good things, I hope.”
He didn’t have time to reply, as a light tap on my shoulder made me turn and look up at my uncle.

*Shit! I had forgotten about uncle Lamb! Way to go, Beauchamp.*

Lamb, however, didn’t seem to mind.

“Claire! Congratulations, darling!” His arms came around me and he added, “You were marvelous.”

I hugged him back, almost too tight, a child amidst strangers clinging on a familiar person seeking security. Kissing him on the cheek, I turned towards the rest of the group to see that Jenny had appeared, receiving her family’s hugs and kisses as well.

“This is my uncle, Lambert Beauchamp.” I introduced Lamb when they looked at us. “Uncle, these are my friends, Jenny, Ian, and Jamie.”

I deliberately said Jamie’s name last to see if he had noticed the omission just as I had. Lamb already knew of my feelings for Jamie, but since I was plain Claire Beauchamp I saw fit for Jamie to be just one of my friends too. Jamie’s chest inflated for a moment when he heard his name, only to immediately deflate when nothing followed.

*Well, well, well. That’s interesting. Disappointed, are we, James Fraser?*

With my eyes on Jamie’s father I continued the introductions. “Jenny and Jamie’s father, Mr. Brian Fraser and their uncle, Mr. Murtagh…”

*What was Murtagh’s last name?!*

“FitzGibbons Fraser,” Murtagh finished for me, giving me half a smile that I supposed meant ‘no worries’.

“Nice to meet you all,” Lamb said while shaking hands with the two men.

“So, Mr. Beauchamp how did you end up in Scotland?” Brian asked Lamb and I knew that we
would be standing in that exact spot for an eternity if Lamb started talking about Scottish history.

“Oh please, call me Lamb. Well, to make a long story short…”

Lamb’s voice telling our story – instead of the Scottish history, thank God - came into the background as my thoughts became louder in my head.

*What are we doing now?*

We were to go on a date and we had just introduced each other to our families as friends.

I knew Jamie cared for me. There were so many little details to show me how much he wanted to make me smile. All the nights watching the “Dark” in his arms. All our walks, our notes. Every time he saw me and his face lightened up. Every time his hand found mine, completing a puzzle made by fingers aching to touch.

Not to forget that he spoke to Gowan for me, so I wouldn’t miss the dancing performance. And we spent all the previous week either together or texting. Plus, the whole school knew about us.

I felt a nudge on my arm and turned my head to the left where I met two dark blue eyes, holding rain and clouds.

“What is it, Sassenach?” His whisper reached me as a frown settled on his brow.

“Nothing,” I answered, watching the frown deepen.

At that moment I realized that I hadn’t looked into his eyes since he introduced me to his father. He was worried, and I couldn’t see him like this.

*Forget it, Claire. Don’t spoil something good because it’s moving slower than you thought it would.*

I swallowed hard and looked at him again, resigned.

I had time to give him.

I had time and love enough.
There is a theory by the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, called the “looking glass self.” I accidentally stumbled upon it a couple of years ago and it stuck in my mind. Cooley said, “I am who you think I am.” His theory referred to the idea that our identity depends upon who the others think we are.

It never resonated with me, this idea of other people determining who I was.

I was the person I wanted to be, no matter the opinion of the others – that, most of the times, was far from the reality.

I never was the “poor orphan” that needed pity from others.

I never was the “lost cause with no future” just because I was raised running about archaeological digs with a dusty face and a bandana on my head.

I never was the “lonely no lifer” just because I didn’t talk much at school.

The few people that mattered to me knew me for person I really was.

The others just tried to define me based on the titles that society gave me.

Everyone is someone’s daughter, sister, friend, girlfriend. But this is not who this person is.

As far back as I could remember, I was no one’s daughter. I was the niece of a person who loved me truly, deeply, and enough, but I wasn’t his daughter.

I was no one’s sister either. I occasionally was someone’s friend, but that was miles away from sharing your blood with a person that remembers you since you were a small child.

I was just Claire. Myself.
Until Jamie, that is.

The moment Jamie introduced me to his father, the “looking glass self” theory finally meant something to me. What Jamie saw in me was important.

I needed him to know me, the real me, and want me in his life. And I suddenly realized that I wished for him to define himself depending on me.

I longed for a title. I ached to hear the word ‘girlfriend’ leave his lips. To be a part of him as he’d become a part of me. I craved for the sense of belonging to another.

These were absolutely peculiar thoughts, because until this moment I had just wanted to belong to myself.

What we will always have is ourselves, anyway, and I very well knew that.

But Jamie changed that, too. He didn’t make me feel that I would lose myself in him. When we were together I became something more. I was my stronger, better self.

And I wanted to be his girlfriend, to give this back to him. To know that he’d trust himself to me to keep him safe.

Anyway.

It had only been a week since we started this, our togetherness. Relationships don’t need to be on the run, they need time and space. Sun and oxygen, like little flowers, to grow and bloom.

*That must be something I read online on a page about psychology, because it makes no sense that I’m thinking that on my own.*

What was important was that Jamie cared for me and he wanted to spend time with me. I had a present to live, and everything that was included in it.

Currently my present included Lamb, Murtagh, and Brian Fraser talking about Scottish history for more than fifteen minutes. I heard the word ‘rising’ more times than I cared to count. Jenny talked with Ian, murmuring sweet things and looking at each other with their hearts on their eyes.

I felt Jamie’s intense stare on me while I remained silent, and I could almost hear him thinking – trying to figure out what was troubling me.

I bit my teeth hard into my bottom lip. I could never tell him what was wrong. I would never beg to be something more than what he wanted me to be.

The forced smile on my lips became a real one when I found myself lost in his soft blue eyes. I talked to him then, until the frown disappeared from his face.
All is well. Nothing had changed between us, this is all in my mind.

We had something beautiful, no matter what we called it. I just had to be a bit more careful myself, that was all.

Finally, Lamb checked his watch, realizing that he had to leave.

“Claire, darling, are you coming home?”

I wasn’t, was I? I turned to look at Jamie who shook his head furiously.

No change of plans then.

Seeing that I didn’t answer my uncle’s question, Jamie swallowed hard. “We planned on going to the cinema Mr. Beauchamp, if that’s alright with you.” His cheeks were crimson red, and I could hardly keep my grin in check.

Look at him now and all this formality! How am I supposed to resist a nervous Jamie Fraser?

At least our date was as important to him as it was to me.

“Oh, yes, that’s perfectly fine! I just asked because I forgot something at home and I could give Claire a lift back if she needed it.”

“No need! See you later, uncle.” I kissed Lamb’s cheek as I heard Brian Fraser inviting him to Lallybroch.

Now both Beauchamps had an invitation to visit the Highlands.

Brian Fraser and Murtagh left soon after Lamb. The moment they were out of hearing distance Ian turned to us with wide, relieved brown eyes. “Finally! I thought we would have to stay here forever.”

“Aye! Seems that Da found someone who cares about Scottish history just as much as he does!” Jenny smiled and I didn’t know if she approved of that or not.

“Are you afraid to say ‘even more’?” I asked rolling my eyes, and we all laughed.

“Okay, we’re off, too!” Jenny announced and hugged me. “Have fun!” she whispered, before she took Ian’s hand to lead him to the exit.

We were finally alone.

In fact, Jamie and I were the last people still in the auditorium. When I pulled my eyes away from the exit and turned to look at him, he materialized a red rose from under his black leather jacket.

“Congratulations, Sassenach.” His smile made the colors of the rose seem pale.

I don’t know what you’re thinking Jamie Fraser, but this is something a boyfriend would do – whether you like it or not.
“Stop thinking about it, Beauchamp?”

But I couldn’t stop. And a thought crossed my mind at that moment, something I had never considered before.

Was it possible that Jamie was afraid that I’d hurt him and was trying to protect himself?

He didn’t look like a vulnerable person, but one can never know …

Okay, Claire. Stop thinking and just enjoy your date.

“All’s beautiful, Jamie. Thank you!” I rose on my tiptoes and aimed for a kiss on his cheek. He didn’t let me have it though, turning his face so that my lips crashed into his. He didn’t stop there either. He took my lips in his, his tongue asking for entrance as soon as possible. When I gave it to him, he deepened the kiss, with a hunger that I hadn’t seen in him all day.

All the restrained passion was finally free, flowing into me in fiery red waves and proving his desire. I felt my knees wobble and I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, both for support and to pull him closer.

“I’ve wanted to do that for so long, Sassenach.” He whispered. “I couldn’t wait for everyone to leave so I could have ye all to myself.”

“Is that so?” I cocked an eyebrow, more than happy with his statement. He didn’t lie. I could actually feel him through his black jeans and that was the biggest confirmation I could have.

He certainly likes me.

“Can’t ye tell?” He pushed his body against mine as he held me from the waist.

“Ummm.” I grinned, teasingly rubbing myself against him before I increased our distance again. “Shall we go? Don’t we have a film to catch?”

With a deep sigh Jamie let his forehead rest on mine. “Aye, ye tyrant. Ye have no pity, do ye?”

“No, none at all.” I said, reaching for his lips as I cupped his face. Deep blue eyes looked back at me as I moved away and that moment I knew more than enough.

I was Jamie’s girlfriend, whether he gave me the title or no.

And I stopped caring about it once more. He saw me as I was.
We arrived late to the cinema and we entered the dark theater while the trailers of movies coming
soon were playing. Using our phones as light to discern the numbers of the rows, we found our seats,
which were on the far end of a row in the middle of the room. We received a few frustrated sighs and
scorns from the people already settled as we tried to pass in front of them with popcorn and nachos in
hands, and we plopped ourselves onto the soft velvet seats.

Our hands touched almost too much in the big popcorn box, *totally by accident.*

“You’re getting all the popcorn with these huge hands of yours!” I quietly feigned irritation.

“Ye’re eating too fast, Sassenach, it’s a miracle my hands find anything to take from this box ye’re
holding!”

Towards the middle of the movie, with all our food eaten, I leaned my head onto his arm and Jamie
entangled his hand with mine.

*Can this movie last forever?*

I could feel his breath, chest rising and falling, slightly moving both of us. I could feel my heart
taking the oxygen from his lungs. In the darkness of the room, our bodies talked in a language of
their own.

“Claire?” I heard him whispering. He was holding his breath and my heart skipped a beat.

What was it now?

‘Mmm?’ I didn’t trust myself with words.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend?” His voice pierced the dark, reverberating in my head for a good
while.

His breath was fast and shallow, making my heart beat erratically.

*Did he just ask me to be his girlfriend? Thank God we’re out of food or I would choke to death on a
popcorn!*

My eyes met his, just a glint of a color that was soon lost as the screen darkened again. A few
seconds later, the now bright screen revealed two hopeful dark blue eyes, looking into mine, waiting
for the answer.

“Jamie,” I said, as the screen went dark again. I was smiling but he couldn’t see it. “I think I already
am your girlfriend.” Dark screen or no, after saying that out loud I couldn’t stop my chuckle.

“Ye are?” Bright screen. Incredulous, happy sapphire eyes.

“Hush!” Someone complained from behind us.

Well, we have a kind of serious conversation here so ‘Hush’ yourself!’

“Well, at least that was what I thought.” I answered, paying no attention to the second ‘Hush!’ we
heard from somewhere behind us. “If you want me to be.”

“Aye! Of course I want ye too, Sassenach!” He whispered a bit too loudly and leaned in to kiss me,
as someone asked louder now, “Will ye two stop talking?”.
That kiss hushed us just fine.

I didn’t know how long it lasted, but when we parted I was out of breath and wanting more.

Jamie kissed me and opened himself to me. All his feelings and dreams on the tip of his tongue for me to taste.

“Jamie?” I whispered. “Is that is why you didn’t introduce me as you girlfriend to your father? You wanted to ask me first?” The words were tumbling out of me, like pebbles carelessly kicked from the top of a hill.

*I shouldn’t be asking this, I just shouldn’t. Why do I never shut up?*

“Aye,” he said, not bothered by my question. “I wanted us to be alone the first time I’d call ye my girlfriend.” He sounded shy but any evidence of a red face was well hidden in the darkness.

I smiled, my happiness too much to hide under the surface. “You’re a fool, Jamie Fraser.” I moved so that my lips were almost on his. “And you’re mine.”

“Aye, I am both, Sassenach. And ye’re mine, too.”

With a hand on the back of my head he brought me on his lips, kissing me slowly, tenderly and so sensationally that I could feel my body shuddering.

His.

As long as I remembered myself I was always mine. When I started to understand the world and form my own ideas, I firmly denied any ownership.

But listening to Jamie calling me ‘his’ woke currents running through my body. This was different.

I was his, not because he owned me, but because he chose me. I was the one to share a part of himself that no one else knew.

And I chose him.

Settling again on my seat, I turned to kiss Jamie’s shoulder. He sighed contently and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me to him.

I faced the screen and closed my eyes, focusing on the rising and falling of his chest, each of his breaths providing oxygen to my heart.
Life can change in just a minute.

One moment you’re watching *Alice in Wonderland* at your uncle’s place, where your parents left you for the weekend. The next, the phone rings and you fall into a dark hole with no way out; an ominous cloud pouring disaster down upon you.

The good thing about changes is that they’re unbiased. They don’t care about you, they just happen.

So another moment comes, when you least expect it, bringing a new cloud above you. And that one is puffy and white, waiting for you to climb up into a world where majestic rainbows fly across the sky and colorful confetti is sprinkled upon your head.

The moment Mrs. Fitz told Jamie to sit next to me, interrupting my thoughts about the first law of thermodynamics, I felt myself rise from the floor and land comfortably on cloud nine.

It was the day Jamie asked me to be his girlfriend that I found the courage to talk to him about our first meeting. It had been only a week, but it seemed like a lifetime ago.

“So, I guess we should thank Mrs. Fitz.” I said, nudging him as we walked back home from the cinema.

“Mrs. Fitz? And why would we do that, Sassenach?” His lopsided smile told me that he knew very well what I was talking about.

“You know, if it wasn’t for Mrs. Fitz you would never have talked to me!” With raised eyebrows I waited for his answer, feeling my heart pounding in my chest.
Would we be here now if not for that incident?

“You actually believe that?” Jamie stopped in his tracks and looked at me with incredulity in his eyes.

“I really don’t know.” Shrugging my shoulders I took his hand and pulled him forward.

“Well, that’s funny,” Jamie murmured as he walked towards me. “That’s exactly what I was discussing with Ian when Mrs. Fitz separated us.” Seeing my inquisitive glance, he continued, “Ian laughed at me for chickening out and not talking to you.” Jamie paused to give me a side glance, “I wanted to talk to ye for a while, ye ken.”

“You did? You’d noticed me? Before?”

“I noticed ye the first time ye walked in, Sassenach, with yer rebellious hair and yer golden eyes,” Jamie said, shaking his head in disbelief, as if he had been sure I already knew that. “I was trying to find an opportunity to talk to ye, but I didna want to say anything stupid to make ye think I was a dolt.”

“You wanted to talk to me but you were afraid of what I’d think of you?”

“Didna I just say that, Sassenach?”

“Yes, but… It sounds so weird. You seemed to have your way with the lasses.”

“Ye were never just a lass to me, Claire. Ye’re different. From the first moment, ye were that… Different.” His voice was deep and honest, and his sapphire blue eyes were boring into mine, the passion in them underlining every word that left his lips.

“So how come you finally made the move? Just because you had to sit next to me?” I tried to lighten the mood, smiling with mischief as I asked for more details.

“Ian was mocking me just before Mrs. Fitz made me come sit next to you. He said that when I’d finally summon the courage to talk to ye, we’d be seventy years old with grey hair, no teeth and all, and ye’d still think me a fool. That’s why we laughed and upset Mrs. Fitz. When I heard her talking to me, telling me to go and sit next to ye, I thought that it couldna be possible. Ian shot me the most ridiculous glance and yet I couldn’a think of anything else but ye. When I sat next to ye, Sassenach, feeling ye so close, I thought that it’d might be the only opportunity I’d ever have.” Jamie stopped and smiled at me, running his hand through his red locks self-consciously. “I said to myself, ‘Jamie lad, it’s now or never. Ye’re not going to get this close again.’” With his hand safe once more in his jacket pocket, he shrugged, “Not that I managed to do a whole lot, I was nervous as hell!”

“You were nervous? So nonchalantly asking for my notes, my pen…? Not to mention how you gave the pen back to me!” I pinched him lightly on the side without taking my eyes off his face, curious of what he’d say.

Jamie turned crimson red at that and I reveled in his shyness. “Ye didna notice how badly my hand was trembling? I thought ye could actually hear my heart pounding when I did that!”

“Well, maybe I would have … If mine wasn’t beating so loud in my own chest!”

Jamie’s eyes sparkled, and his lips turned up into a broad grin, obviously happy that his feelings were returned from day one. “So, I told ye everything, Sassenach, and ye remain closed just as tight as an oyster. What did ye think back then?”
I laughed as I remembered the thoughts that ran through my head that day. “Well, I thought … ‘What the hell, James Fraser?’ I also thought that you were just a cocky handsome guy, back then.”

“And now?”

“Now you’re my guy. And I know I was mistaken in my first impression.” I wrapped my arms around his neck, a hand lost in the locks his fingers had touched moments ago and I kissed him, feeling my heart beating against his, even more loudly than that first day. But they were beating together now, with nothing separating them except warm flesh aching to be touched.

When we broke our kiss a few minutes later, we both looked upwards saying, “Thank you, Mrs. Fitz!” And erupted in laughter in each other’s arms.

“I would have talked to you eventually, ye ken.” Jamie insisted, pulling me closer to him as we started walking again.

“Mhmm.” I leaned my head on the side of his chest taking a deep breath of the city’s cold, moist atmosphere speckled with Jamie’s scent.

My favorite.

–

The Friday after the dance performance was the 20th of October. My seventeenth birthday.

One more year before I became an adult. One more year before my life would change once more, clouds coming and going as I walked towards the future I had always dreamed of.

Becoming a doctor. Saving lives. Helping others. Being there so fewer girls would trip into that dark, deep hole, finding themselves in an upside-down world.

I was always looking forward to fulfilling what I was meant to be, but for the first time, I wasn’t in a hurry. I was living in a wonderful present and I wanted to sip every little drop of that, until I was utterly drunk with happiness.

My plans for my birthday were quite simple. Lamb had a meeting in London on Saturday and he would be out of town starting Friday afternoon. My “party” would consist of Joe and Gail – they were inseparable as of late - Jenny and Ian, Rupert, Angus, and of course Jamie. They’d be coming to my place, we’d order pizza, and play board games or something like that. Nothing fancy, but nights at home with friends were always on the top of my list.

Jamie Fraser apparently had plans of his own.

Just before finishing our lunch, he left the cafeteria and came back five minutes later with an incredible cake; one layer of approximately ten centimeters, topped with the figures of two surgeons in an operating room.

Surgeons. In an operating room. On my birthday cake.
I thought I might die from joy.

My grin was so broad, that I could see just a fragment of Jamie through the two teary slits that my eyes had become.

But he was there, cake in hands, beaming in front of me.

“Happy birthday, Sassenach,” he said in a low voice as he placed the cake on the table and he came to stand beside me.

“What is this?” I foolishly asked.

“I thought I’d give ye a snippet from yer future.” I couldn’t decide if I loved my cake or his smile the most.

“But I never told you about …”

*Have I told him about my dream of being a surgeon?*

“Well, I just put two and two together, Sassenach. It wasna that difficult, ye talk a lot ye ken.” Jamie stopped my elbow before it found his stomach. Coming closer to me, he whispered in my ear “I’m sure ye’ll be in scrubs one day, babe, and I’ll be there, proud of ye.”

“Oh my God, Jamie.” It was vain to try to keep the tears from running free. I felt them moistening my lips, savoring their salty taste as I thought of the woman in Egypt who told me about happy tears when she tried to explain why she cried every time her children returned home.

This was the first time I had cried from happiness. Jamie wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed me on the forehead and all I could see in his eyes was his need to feel my lips on his, to taste my tears and kiss them away. I wanted to take his lips in mine too, to share this special feeling that was too much to be kept inside, but we agreed not to commit any act of public affection while at school and we both obeyed that rule. Feeling Jamie’s hand strong on my waist, I turned to smile at everyone who had gathered around.

They all started singing, loud enough that the whole cafeteria would know what was going on, and I could hear unfamiliar voices wishing me a happy birthday as I felt the flush on my cheeks turning to a scarlet red.

“Make a wish, Sassenach.” Jamie’s whisper caressed my neck, finding its way through the pores of my skin and into my veins, unsettling the serene flow of my blood.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

*I wish I will always be as happy and complete as I am now.*

I turned to look at Jamie, took his hand in mine and blew out the candle.

More well wishes followed from Joe, Jenny, Ian and the rest of the company, together with hugs and kisses. Angus asked for a birthday kiss on the lips, but after seeing how Jamie narrowed his eyes at him, and his clear disadvantage in size, he settled with one on the cheek. Not that there was a chance for anything else.

“Sassenach,” Jamie spoke in a low voice when we sat to eat the chocolate cake – my favorite.
“I ken ye plans for today, but I was thinking that tomorrow we could all go together to M & D’s?” There was a glint in his eyes and a small smile tugged his lips upwards but I had no idea what he was talking about.

“M & D’s?” I asked, stuffing my mouth with a huge spoonful of cake.

*Note to self: Try to eat more gracefully.*

“Scotland’s theme park,” Jamie explained as I tried to process the food I had in my mouth.

“Ye alright?” He asked with a tiny frown when he saw me struggle with chewing but after my reassuring nod he continued, “It closes for the winter and this is the last weekend we can visit.”

Raising a hand I motioned him to wait and he bent to eat from his plate. Once I swallowed, I exclaimed, “Theme park? Hell yes!”

Jamie laughed loudly at that. “Ye’ll ask yer uncle then? Murtagh will give as a ride. Jenny and Ian are coming too. D’ye want to invite Rupert and Angus? Joe and Gail?” I smiled at his thoughtfulness. He hardly knew Joe and we were merely introduced to Gail.

“I think Joe and Gail have plans for tomorrow, but I can ask them! I don’t know how they will come though… Where is the place?”

“Close to Glasgow. They can come with Rupert’s mom.”

“Okay, I’ll tell Joe. But you can still come to my place tonight, right?” I asked, concerned that I might have to cancel my plans.

“Only me?” Jamie wiggled his eyebrows and I pinched him on the stomach. I really liked doing that, feeling his abs hard against my fingers.

“Ouch! Okay then, not just me. Of course we’re coming, Sassenach.” Jamie placed his hand on my knee underneath the table and focused on his piece of cake.

For several seconds, maybe half a minute — *okay maximum one minute* — I thought about the possibility of Jamie and I, alone at my place. That wasn’t a bad thought, not at all.

Joe brought me back to reality, his deep voice booming from across the table. “So, Lady Jane. Tonight at nine?”

“Yes,” I replied, strong biceps and well-formed abs somewhere in the back of my mind. “Tonight at nine.”

Jamie’s hand squeezed my knee and I turned to see him wearing his most beautiful smile. I smiled back and stayed transfixed there, staring at him as he stared back at me, trying to capture as much of him as I could before heading to my next class.
Birthdays are strange.

The day comes just like any other day and it’s the same to everyone, apart from that one person who happened to cry for the first time on that particular date, years ago.

All I had from my early birthdays was pictures.

Colorful cakes printed on glossy paper. Smiles and shiny eyes.

My daddy’s strong arms hugging me and raising me up so high, that I could almost hear the toddler that I was giggle through the paper.

Curls just like mine falling across my mother’s cheeks, her warm lips smiling as she kissed my nose.

Lamb was travelling, and my birthdays were always a celebration for three. Judging from the pictures, we didn’t need anyone else.

I didn’t remember those days, but I made a story for each one of them, based on the pictures I had in my little box. And I remembered my stories.

Every 20th of October, I would lay on my bed with these pictures scattered around me, spending time with them, replaying the stories in my head.
It wasn’t a tradition that saddened me.

I just wished someone could tell me how many times the little me had to blow before the flames on the three pink candles were extinguished. Or what gifts I asked for. I wish I knew more, some accurate information to add to the stories I had created.

But what I knew deep inside me, was that these days, like any other day I spent with them, were imprinted in me forever. Forged with laughter and love, they made me who I was.

For that reason, I loved my birthday. I felt I was celebrating my parents’ gift, keeping them alive inside me.

With Lamb every birthday was different.

My gift could range from excavating the personal belongings found inside a tomb to a trip on a camel’s back in the desert.

Candles standing proud on a Basbousa or almost falling from an Om Ali.

Hugs and words that conveyed love and support.

Every time I woke up on the 20th of October, I felt that the world was shinier and cheerful songs would play in the back of my mind. The positivity that people hide on other days is finally released when it’s your birthday. It’s like an unwritten rule – you can’t be mean to the birthday person. Not today.

I couldn’t believe that Jamie ordered a special birthday cake for me. I couldn’t remember the last time I actually had a real birthday cake.

“You found yourself a really nice lad this time, lamb.” Uncle Lamb said, kissing me on the forehead when I finished narrating the day’s events. “This is for you.” He handed me a small box, with a wink. It was a beautiful watch, with a rose gold cadran and navy blue bracelet.

“Oh, thank you uncle! It’s beautiful!”

“I’m sorry I have to leave on your birthday.” He said with a rueful smile that then changed to something I couldn’t discern. “There are beers in the fridge, too.” He smiled seeing my raised eyebrows. “Gift from your uncle. Happy birthday, Claire.”

I snuggled into his embrace as I did years ago, smelling the ocean breeze of our conditioner on his suit, the mint leaves and cedarwood of his cologne.

“Have fun today and behave, okay?” I closed my eyes as he placed a kiss on my forehead.

“Okay! I love you, Lamb.”

“Love you too, lamb.” He said and was out of the door.
House cleaned.

Beers and soft drinks cold in the fridge.

Crisps in their bowls. Vinegar, oregano, barbeque.

Tortilla rolls made and laid out.

Cherry tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots all in place next to the mayonnaise and yogurt dip.

Dried fruits and nuts.

Am I forgetting anything?

The cheese and spinach pie!

The doorbell rang the exact moment I finished applying my lipstick.

My long lasting lipstick, that is – because with Jamie in the room it would be impossible to keep anything else on my lips.

I didn’t wear too much makeup, just my lipstick and mascara, and I thought it was perfect with my high waist blue jeans and a polka dot blouse.

Opening the door, I saw Joe and Gail’s smiley faces. Five minutes later, the swimming gang arrived.

Jamie was standing at the front of the door with a huge smile on his face. His lips were on mine the moment he got close enough and I surreptitiously checked his mouth for any sign of my lipstick.

Nothing. Cool. Maybe a hint of pink, but... I like it on him.

We joined Joe and Gail in the living room, my hands full of gifts.

“Do you want to open the gifts first, Claire?” Jenny suggested, and I sat on the couch next to Jamie, all the bags at my feet. I couldn’t remember the last time I received so many gifts.

I raised a medium sized orange bag first. “This is– ” Jenny started, but Rupert interrupted her.

“Let the lass guess who brought what!” He winked at me, leaning into the armchair’s back.

Jenny looked at me with a frown, trying to understand how that made me feel. Seeing me shrug, she smiled.

“Okay then, let’s do this.”
Gift number one was an infinite scarf, brown, red and yellow, and I loved it. Looking around, I smiled to Jenny and Ian. “Thank you, guys.”

“Did she find it?” Angus asked, reaching for the crisps.

“Aye, she did.” Ian’s smile was one of the sweetest I’ve ever seen.

“Grab the next, then!” Angus said with a mouth full of crisps, catapulting some bits towards Rupert who glared at him.

“Okay, I know this is from Joe and Gail…” I picked the white bag Joe handed me when they arrived. Books. The first two books of the series A Song of Ice and Fire by George R. R. Martin; A Game of Thrones and A Clash of Kings.

I raised my eyebrows. “No, you didn’t.”

Joe laughed, holding Gail’s hand. “We did. You love the show and you said you wanted to read the books!” As if Joe could read my mind about reading fiction instead of biology and chemistry for my classes, he continued, “It’ll be good to take a break from school stuff once in a while!”

“I don’t know how I’m going to stop reading these, once I start.” I muttered. “I hope I won’t get as obsessed I was when I was reading Harry Potter.”

“Ye read Harry Potter?” I heard Jamie’s excited voice from my left.

“Of course I did! I love Harry Potter! Don’t you?”

“Of course!” He said indignantly.

I sighed, relieved. “I mean… Who hasn’t read it?” I asked rhetorically, looking at my guests.

“Well, I haven’t.” Gail’s reply made Joe turn and look at her through bulged eyes.

“What?” He asked, not waiting for an answer. “We have to fix that, G.” He announced in a serious tone, making her shake her head.

“Ye should see the movies!” Rupert proposed, with Angus nodding in agreement. “Tis faster and more fun than reading.”

Jamie, Jenny, and I almost shot out from our seats. “WHAT?”

“What?” Rupert asked perplexed as we erupted in laughter at our identical responses.

“The movies are shite compared to the books.” Jamie stated and Jenny, Joe and I nodded again in agreement.

“Read the books, people! What’s wrong with you?” I asked, exaggerating my exasperation.

“Have ye seen the books, Claire?” Angus said, grimacing. “They weigh more than me. And are thicker than Rupert’s head.”

As we laughed, Jamie leaned closer to me, whispering, “Ye were Hermione, right?”

I looked at him smugly. “Why would you say so? And who would you be?”

“Well, I always imagined myself as Harry.”

“I dinna want to be Harry anymore.” That made me turn to look at him. “Can I be your Ron? I’m a ginger already!”

My heart stopped before beating so hard that it was almost painful.

*How does he do that?*

I didn’t have time to answer his question, because Jenny’s voice directed my eyes back to her.

“Let’s move on with the gifts, aye?”

I opened the long and narrow bag to reveal a bottle of whisky. Angus’ smile reached his ears and Rupert’s eyes were glinting at my revelation. The disbelief in my eyes must have been evident, as I asked, “How did you manage to get this?”

“We have our ways, lass.” Angus wiggled his eyebrows with a huge grin.

“Okay then, let’s save this for later. Aye?” I mimicked his accent, and the Scots filled the room with laughter. I knew they would, because Jamie found my horrible impersonation hilarious every single time.

“So, this is the last one.” I turned to see Jamie, who for some unknown reason had started to blush.

*Let the gift not be underwear or I’ll have to listen to crude jokes from Angus forever!*

Seeing my furrowed eyebrows, Jamie stroked my back and smiled.

*No underwear, then. Or he would have said something.*

I opened the small bag to find a little box inside. Biting my lip, I swallowed hard and removed the top. There was a beautiful stainless-steel bracelet inside, with little leaves and bluebells with azure enamel on them. I couldn’t stop my smile, remembering the first day Jamie came to pick me up with a bunch of bluebells in hand.

“I love it.” I said, leaning into him for a kiss. “Help me?”

I extended my hand to him and Jamie locked the bracelet in place, interlacing his fingers with mine when he finished. I couldn’t take my eyes off my bracelet and our hands together and I felt my heart beating harder.

*How did he find a bluebell bracelet?*

I looked at him, grateful and happy, and I didn’t need to say anything, because he knew. He just knew. He held my hand tighter for a moment and then relaxed his grip again when my head found his shoulder.

With the gifts now opened we talked and gossiped about our teachers, eating the finger food I had prepared, and drinking both six-packs Lamb left in the bridge. When Rupert rose, stating that we should open the whisky, I got up too.

It was time.
I returned from my room with the box in hand. Everyone’s eyes were on me, their question obvious.

“The Game of Things!” I announced, excited.

“What?” Angus’ eyebrows almost touched, and I saw Joe shaking his head.

“Whisky and The Game of Things is a bad combination, L.J.” Joe stated, his raised eyebrows in complete contrast with Angus’.

“So, what is the game about?” Ian’s smile indicated that he didn’t mind whisky and games together.

“Okay, the rules.” I said, as everyone’s eyes focused on me.

Jamie’s stare was different than the others, and I soon realized he wasn’t thinking about the game at all. I knew that stare, I’d seen it more than once, and I felt my cheeks flush. Clearing my throat, I continued, “We all have to answer to the same question. We write our answers down on folded papers, and then we collect them all and open them. Each one of us tries to guess who wrote what. If your answer is correct, you go on guessing. If it’s not, the next one continues.”

With everyone on board Rupert started filling glasses with whisky. Lamb said that whisky is an acquired taste. If I was to stay in Scotland, I figured I had to learn how to blend in – with a blend.

I sat next to Jamie, opening the box and distributing the papers and pencils to everyone, painfully aware of his hand sinking deeper than my waist to settle comfortably on my arse.

I drank my first sip of whisky as Jenny revealed the first question.

Acquired taste. It’s going to taste better after a while.

THINGS… you wouldn’t do naked.

I bent over my paper, hiding it from Jamie’s prying eyes, as I tried to think what I wouldn’t do naked. Jamie’s free hand however, plainly disclosed what he would do if I was naked.

Cook. Plant greens in the garden. Open the door to a stranger.

I folded my paper placing it in the middle of the table. Joe guessed first, and he immediately identified my answer.

“Cook,” he said with a smirk. “Ever the logical mind, L.J. And greens?”

“Shut up!” I grinned back at him as he tried to figure out which was Gail’s answer.

On the next round Jamie immediately found Angus’ answer to THINGS… you would do if you were invisible.

Enter the shower to check on a lass.

But then he missed Rupert’s, who wouldn’t go around eating people’s chips. That would be Ian, the little bully!
The fifth question was the hardest one.

**THINGS… you would do if you were a superhero.**

The answers were collected again, and it was my turn to guess first. I squeezed my eyes, thinking.

“Will you stop distracting me?” I hissed at Jamie. “Are you doing that on purpose so I won’t win?”

“Busted!” He said, raising his hands up before replacing them on the exact spots they were previously.

I tried to ignore him – and the squeeze low in my belly – as I read the answers again.

_Listen to people’s thoughts._

_Be invisible._

_X-ray vision_

_Time travel._

_Fly._

_Heal._

_Run fast._

_Transform to whoever I want._

Time travel was me.

X-ray vision should be Angus. Certainly. To see through girls’ clothes.

Heal, I had to go with Joe. _Damn! Why I didn’t write that?_

Now for the rest, things were getting hard.

_What would Jenny do?_

_Definitely not being invisible. Neither fly nor run fast._

“Today, Claire.” Rupert grinned smugly from the other side of the table and I narrowed my eyes on him in response.

“Okay. Let’s go.”
I started my guesses, but they stopped me when I said that Ian would want to listen to people’s thoughts. Apparently, Jenny’s voiced thoughts were more than enough for Ian and he didn’t want access to more. Jamie’s turn was next, and he lost when he guessed that Gail would want to be invisible.

He didn’t seem defeated though, he just sank further into the couch taking me with him. I snuggled close to him, his chest in sync with mine as we laughed together at our friends’ inaccurate, tipsy guesses.

My eyes wandered to the table and I noticed that most of the bowls and plates were empty.

“I’ll go get more crisps!” I said, taking two empty bowls as I headed to the kitchen.

I was on tiptoes, trying to reach the packages in the back of the cabinet when his low voice came next to my ear, startling me.

“Open the door to a stranger?” Jamie’s breath was hot on my neck and I felt a current running through me.

“Mmm,” I smiled, content that he remembered my answer four questions back.

“But to someone you know? Would you?”

“Would I what? Open the door naked?”

His teeth on my neck answered my question better than words.

“Are you implying something, Fraser?”

“Aye, Beauchamp, I am.” His voice was burning me. I heard him inhaling deeply before he spoke again, more somber now. “You are so beautiful, Claire.”

He trailed kisses across my neck and I shivered, feeling his tongue against my skin.

I turned around, trapped between the counter and Jamie, feeling every inch of his body against mine. My hands found the nape of his neck just a moment before our lips crashed in a desperate kiss. To have him next to me all this time and not kiss him properly had made me crazy. Obviously, the effect had been the same for him, too.

“I want ye…” He whispered, his breath shallow. “I want ye so much, I can scarcely breath.”

My body trembled and my heart was racing as the whisky in his breath mingled with mine through our almost touching lips. “I want you, too.” I ran one hand down his body, until I found the waistband of his jeans.

Someone called my name from the living room and I heard the word crisps before everybody started laughing.

“We need to go back.” I whispered, my eyes locked with Jamie’s. Hooded and wild.

“Mmphm,” he exhaled loudly, his broad chest deflating. “I canna believe this.”
I smirked at him, running my tongue on his bottom lip one last time. “Can you reach the crisps?” I asked, nodding towards the cabinet.

Jamie gave me a lopsided grin and with an exaggerated move to show how easy it was for him, he handed me the bag.

We waited a few minutes for Jamie to be in condition to join our friends and we entered the living room, flushed, smiling, with our hands intertwined.

Ready to hear all the teasing.
My alarm clock and a thirst that wouldn’t be quenched even after drinking all the water of the Niagara Falls, woke me up on Saturday morning.

Two words swam through my thoughts, blurry and unfocused.

**Whisky. Headache.**

I inhaled deeply, trying to clear my mind.

And I smelled him.

My eyes popped open without conscious thought and well before I was ready. Stray sun beams found their way between the curtains, leaving a trail of dust behind, before they landed on my face. Even though I reveled in their moderate warmth, their effect on my eyes was not equally welcomed. Turning my face into my pillow, the same scent came to me.

*Was Jamie here?*

Slowly, tentatively, I opened my eyes again. I searched my room as the surroundings were gradually
brought into focus, sure that I would stumble upon fiery red and sapphire blue.

Nothing.

Nothing but that musky, sweet smell. Soap and sandalwood.

Moments from the previous night drifted back to me as the tiny rusty gears turned in my head, allowing the pieces to click into place.

He had forgotten his scarf. I had been holding it in my hands just before closing my eyes last night, after reading his text.

**Jamie:** “Just laid down in my bed, Sassenach. I miss you already.”

I smiled and closed my eyes. I would text back in just one minute. I needed for a second – maybe two – to hold his scarf and imagine he was in *my* bed instead of his.

Apparently, I never replied to that text and Jamie’s scarf was now spread across my pillow.

I buried my nose deep in the wool tartan, and last night’s smile found my lips again.

*Jamie. My Jamie.*

Grabbing my phone to finally stop the alarm, I found two more texts from him.

**Jamie:** Good morning, *mo nighean donn.*

**Jamie:** Sassenach, are you up? We’re coming in 30.

*Up. I’m up!*

I typed a quick text and sat bolt upright in bed.

Water. I needed water.

First, cold in a glass. Then warm for a shower. I had thirty minutes to get ready before Jamie and the gang would arrive to pick me up to start our day.
Jamie was waiting for me in front of Murtagh’s parked car and he started walking towards me the moment he heard the building’s door close. The huge smile on his face made my residual headache miraculously disappear, as each of my steps brought me closer to him.

“You forgot this,” I said, lightly bumping his chest with my fist, full with the smooth wool.

“Aye, I ken. I searched all the house twice this morning, trying to find it. Figured I left that here.” He didn’t seem to care about the scarf as he leaned slowly towards me, finishing his sentence with his lips almost touching mine. He grinned as his deep blue eyes locked with mine, and he planted a chaste kiss on my lips while his hand settled on my waist pulling me towards him with the promise of much more. More, that was never delivered as he withdrew.

“Good morning, Sassenach,” he whispered, and I ran my tongue on his bottom lip, trying to claim the rest of my kiss. Jamie’s eyes almost bulged out of his scalp. “Claire!” he said, terrified. “Murtagh is in the car! He’s watching!”

Chuckling at my alarmed face, Jamie took my hand and led me to the car. “Jenny and Ian…” he started in an apologetic tone, “They…”

Turning my gaze towards the car, I quickly realized what Jamie was trying to convey. Jenny was pressed tight against Ian’s side in the back seat, which meant that Jamie would be sitting in the front and I right behind him. I shrugged and squeezed his hand before reluctantly letting of it to climb in next to Jenny.

I slumped back against the seat as we drove, absentmindedly staring out at the Scottish hills just beyond the window. I was on the verge of sleep when something in my peripheral vision caught my attention. Jamie had somehow managed to wedge his hand between his seat and the car’s body and his palm hung in midair, fingers wiggling as they searched for mine. With a silent smile I took his hand in mine, moving a bit to sit comfortably while holding him and I drew a heart on his palm. He seemed to pay attention to how my finger was moving on his soft skin, because he immediately squeezed it in response. We spent the rest of the trip with me drawing obscure lines and shapes on his palm, massaging it, and trailing my fingers across his. I didn’t know how much he felt after a while, because with his arm stuck in the same position for almost an hour he surely had lost feeling to it. But I loved the connection he offered and I was going to repay him for his troubles later.

Murtagh dropped us off at the amusement park, reminding us at least three times that he would be waiting in the exact same spot in five hours, and that we better be there because he was not in a mood to go searching the park for us. The moment we saw the car pull out, Jamie’s arms snuck around me, bringing me flush against him. I could feel his chest heaving against my back as he bent his head, placing a soft kiss on my neck.

“This thing,” he whispered, “On my hand. Christ, Sassenach, ye were driving me insane in there!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Aye, ye did. Even if ye didna know ye were doing it - which I verra much doubt.”

“Why didn’t you tell me to stop, then?”

“I didna want ye to stop.” His whisper caressed my neck just before his teeth found my tender skin bringing about currents that ran across my body. I felt his warm tongue just a moment before a car
stopped in front of us, a plump rosy-cheeked woman behind the wheel.

“Hello kiddos!” She said with a smile and Jamie’s head shot up, while Rupert and Angus closed the car doors. “I have to rush now, I’ll be back at five. Have fun!” Her wink was the same as her son’s, smart and playful, accompanied by a warm smile.

“Morning,” Rupert said as he and Angus came to stand next to us. “Ready?”

After a few ‘Ayes,’ everyone started walking towards the ticket office, leaving me and Jamie behind. He made no move to follow the rest, keeping me trapped in his strong arms, and I was about to ask him if we were going to stand there all day long when Jenny turned to look at us.

“Come on, lovebirds!” She yelled with a mischievous smile. “We’re not leaving you behind, no matter how much you’d like that!”

“Don’t worry,” I yelled back. “We’re not going to miss the rides!”

“We could…” I heard Jamie murmur behind me.

“Oh no,” I turned around to look at him. “We’re not missing any ride, James Fraser.” I announced, kissing his lips that now willingly opened to me, giving me access to more as a grunt left his throat.

“Christ, guys! Are ye coming?” Ian’s voice brought us back to reality and we parted, smiling sheepishly as we moved towards the others with our hands tangled together.


Three hours later our adrenaline levels were sky high.

We started our day with the easy rides, wanting to keep the best ones until the end. The Strathclyde Loch was sparkling under the sun and it covered almost all the landscape we could see from the top of the Big Wheel. It seemed like a magical place and it was not hard to imagine the kelpies Rupert described living in there, just as his grandda used to tell him.

As the time passed, we started picking the thrill rides.

“That was so cool!” Jenny exclaimed excitedly after our ride on the Wave Swinger, where we spun around sitting on tilted chairs.

“Aye, ’tis a classic, this one. The Drop Tower was the best so far.” Ian’s statement evoked a strange sound coming from Jamie, who clearly wasn’t enthralled at all by our freefall experience.

“Wait, man! We still have the Tornado!” Angus’ face lit up at the prospect of a fast one km whirlwind ride, while an invisible whirlpool seemed to suck all the colors from Jamie’s face.

My Scot kept silent after our last ride, standing a bit further away from the rest of us. I noticed that he talked less and less between the rides and I hadn’t heard him laugh at all in the last thirty minutes. I started walking towards him, worried about the lack of color on his cheeks, only to see him turn his back to me and walk away.

I stopped abruptly in my tracks, not knowing what to do.
Did Jamie just reject me?

“Just let him be alone for a few minutes, Claire.” Jenny came to stand next to me and waved her arm in mine. “Jamie gets nauseated so easily. It’s a miracle he was able to go on so many rides. Dinna ken why the clotheid doesn’t stop.” She explained, trying to make me understand her brother’s irrational behavior.

“Okay,” I said, still wishing that Jamie would have wanted me to go with him. Wishing I could do something to make him feel better.

Five minutes later Jamie came back, with a hue of green grass on his face and pressed lips.

“Jamie?” I leaned into him, worried. “Are you okay?”

“Aye, Sassenach,” he replied, with a deep frown that conveyed exactly the opposite. “I’m fine.” He side-eyed the ride next to us, swallowing hard.

The fact that he was feeling ill and he chose not to share it with me was painful, but I didn’t want to mention anything in case he’d get mad at Jenny for telling me. “We can take a break, eat something if you’d like.” I suggested, searching for his hand.

“Eat? Are ye mad, lass? If I eat something now I’ll most probably bring it back to see the light from someone’s back during the next ride.”

His voice was low and crude and I was taken aback by it. I reflexively moved away, my heart sore as I increased our distance, crossing my hands in front of my chest so they wouldn’t feel so empty.

They still did.

“Okay,” I retorted simply and I turned my back to him, looking towards the others that were trying to decide which would be our next ride. We had agreed from the beginning that we’d leave the Tornado last, and now Angus and Rupert kept cheering ‘Giant Condor - Giant Condor’ until Jenny and Ian gave up, agreeing to try this one instead of the flying – at 15 ft – carpet.

The Giant Condor was – as it’s name revealed – gigantic and scary, especially if someone was afraid of heights, because we were actually suspended thirty meters above the ground. Each one of us was sitting in an individual gondola and I was glad I could take some distance from Jamie to process what just happened.

He never talked to me like that before. He was rude and distant, and apparently he didn’t feel like sharing everything with me as I thought he would. In contrast, I found myself sharing more and more with him. I didn’t regret being open - he said he could see through my glass face anyway - but until that moment I thought that he did just the same.

The ride was fun and the landscape beneath us was beautiful, but I couldn’t stop thinking of Jamie. I didn’t hear why Rupert and Angus were laughing, or what song Jenny was singing. The wind pierced my ears, granting me some solidarity and I felt grateful for this. Closed in my shell, I tried to remember all the details of the incident after the Wave Swinger. I replayed the scene in my mind again and again, in an attempt to find if I could handle the situation better. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find anything wrong in my behavior.
Jamie was an arse.

The ride finished and I walked away from him once we were on the ground again, not caring how he felt after all the turning around. Desperate for a distraction, I found my phone in my bag and I texted Joe. All I wished for was to go back home.

We were walking towards the Tornado when I felt Jamie’s warmth close to me. Two strides later he was next to me, walking by my side. I set my jaw, my stare unmoved from Angus’ orange hood.

That jacket was hideous.

“Will we walk alone, now?” His voice was gentle, as if coming from a different person and not the one who spoke to me before.

I shrugged, pressing my lips tight together. Jamie’s long fingers brushed my arm lightly before ending at my hand, intertwining with mine. I made no move to acknowledge his gesture. My hand hung limp in his, the pressure of his fingers against mine the only thing keeping us linked together.

His grasp became tighter and I could feel the weight of his stare on me, but I didn’t want to talk to him. What he did, what he didn’t do - it was too much.

“Claire?” My name was rarely on his lips and it made my heart bang against its confines. “Babe,” his hand tugged me back, forcing me to stop and look at him. “I’m sorry. I didna want to talk to you like this.” His eyes were sad and a pout I never saw before was on his face. He looked like a little boy.

“Why?” I asked with a frown, not willing to give in that easily.

“I… It’s just…” He started but stopped, his eyes wandering around for a moment, trying to find a way out. He bit his lips so hard that they almost bled and his fingers pressed painfully against the back of my hand.

“Jamie? Tell me?” I couldn’t understand why it was so difficult for him to talk, but I decided to wait patiently until he’d be ready.

Jamie shook his head, as if he would shake all the unwanted thoughts away with a simple movement. He took a deep breath, letting the air out loudly, and looked at me. “I get seasick. I… I didna want to tell ye, I just wanted to come and enjoy all the rides with ye. I’m a grown man, I canna feel nauseous like a baby after a family ride. But I… I do.”

I shook my head, smiling at the big baby I had in front of me.

“Forgive me?” He breathed, and I could hear the tremble in his voice.

“Forgiven,” I whispered, cupping his face with my palm. “You know it’s not your fault, right? You can’t control it, love, and it’s not a baby thing. Millions of adults feel nauseous rather easily.”

Jamie nodded slowly and brought his hand on top of mine, securing my fingers on his cheek as he leaned into my palm, closing his eyes.

I stood on tiptoes and placed a soft kiss on his red lips, that tugged up in a smile after feeling mine. “Let’s go,” I said, and his eyes opened to reveal the sky’s most shiny blue, his pupils two little dark spots under the sun’s bright light. They weren’t troubled anymore and I felt the weight lift from my chest, trapped in a helium balloon and set free in the wind’s waves.
We had joined the others in the queue and I felt Jamie tensing again, even though he was trying to hide it behind jokes and laughter.

“Jamie, we can just sit here and wait for the others.”

“No, Sassenach. This is the last one. I didna do all of them to stop here.”

*Stubborn Scot.*

We were the first in the queue and ready to take our seats when the man who checked our wristbands stopped in front of Jamie. “I’m sorry young man, but you have to wait for your friends here.”

I thought that I saw a little smile on Jamie’s lips, before he rearranged his face to ask for the reason why. Apparently, the ride had some limitations and being over 1.9m was one of them.

“I will wait with you,” I said, but Jamie shook his head.

“Nay, Sassenach. Go. I’ll see you from right there.” He pointed to a bench and with a kiss on my temple he left me with Angus and Rupert.

“We’ll take care of yer girl, Jamie! Dinna fash! I’ll take the seat right next to hers.” Angus smiled and placed a hand on my back, leading me to the wagon.

“Ye better keep yer hands at yer sides,” Jamie retorted, “If ye wanna keep them at all, that is.”

The Tornado was the biggest rollercoaster in the amusement park and it was AWESOME. I thought that I wouldn’t have any more voice after screaming continuously for five minutes – when they said the journey was at a rapid speed they weren’t joking – and the idea that I might die on the spot came to me more than once, especially when we were turned upside down. Listening to Jenny’s screams didn’t help either.

“Oh my God,” I said, falling onto Jamie’s lap. “This was so good!” I buried my face in his neck, taking deep breaths of him to fight the nausea.

“Yer heart is beating like a drum, Sassenach.” I felt his smile as his hand came to stroke my back in an attempt to calm my heart and lungs.

“It’s a pity you couldn’t join us,” I teased him. “This one was my favorite.”

“Mmm,” I felt the movement of his chest more than I heard him. “I’m sure it is.”

“Can I stay here for a little longer?” I whispered, snuggling closer to him with my eyes still closed. We was warm and big, and I never wanted to move again.

“This is my favorite ride so far, babe.” Jamie declared, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

*This ridiculous human being.*

“I love it so much when ye laugh, Sassenach.” Opening my eyes, I looked into my favorite blue before I crushed my lips into his smile. I was still feeling dizzy and I melted in his arms, as they pulled me closer against his muscles. Jamie’s kiss was intoxicating, our tongues dancing and fighting.
in a game of teasing and domination. My hand trailed his neck before cupping his head, fingers interweaving in the red locks as I surrendered to his kiss, both soft and passionate, making my whole body tingle.

“Get a room, there are little children around here, ye ken.” The teasing in Rupert’s voice was obvious, but I suddenly felt very self-aware.

We were surrounded by children with their parents and the last thing they wanted was to see two brainless high-schoolers making out in front of the roller coaster.

Jamie must had the same thoughts as me, because I could see the faint pink on the top of his ears creeping down his neck when he looked at me.

“Everybody is getting their favorite ride apart from me,” he said, sulky.

“Well, all rides come to an end, baby,” I said as I stood up. “Good thing we can repeat this one, though.” I winked at him and took his hand to pull him up from the bench.

The sun was setting in the horizon, and a crisp air blew over our faces as we walked in search for something to eat. Jamie’s color found the way back to his cheeks and he grinned broadly as his hand settled on my waist, before slipping a little lower to find his favorite spot. I turned to look at him to repeat Rupert’s comment about the children around us, but I blanked out when I saw his face. I would do everything I could to keep that triumphant, infectious grin there.

That day I realized that life is like a roller coaster, and some days come turning us upside down, bringing to the surface all our insecurities and stupid notions. Some of us freeze in response, some others scream, scared that we don’t have it in us to endure the ride - scared that we’ll fall off the wagon and it will smash us as it mercilessly goes on.

It’s on these days that we need someone that cares enough, to hold our hand and be our safety belt, securing us in place until the ride slows down and we take the control back again.

And I cared enough for my bloody nauseous stubborn Scot.
I tried to keep a diary more than once in my life. I did everything necessary to motivate myself to stick with it: gave it a variety of names, kept it on my bedside table, promised myself that I would write every day…

None of those things worked though.

Or it did, but only for a day or two, when I’d take my favorite pen and run it carefully over the paper, thoughts and experiences defying time as they were laid stark against the white background. But life was busy and I had better things to do than share everything with an inanimate notebook. Occupied as I was with living, I always abandoned my little diary with only a few pages written at the beginning.

If I were keeping a diary now though, I would write just one thing, in black letters big enough to cover two full pages:

**LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL!**

*No, let me correct that.*
It is so beautiful that sometimes I find it hard to convince myself that what I’m living is in fact reality.

Jamie and I had been a couple for more than two months.

Two months in which most of the girls at school would look at us twice as we walked along the corridors hand in hand, because who was I to win Fraser’s heart? The glorious ginger who had never entered into a relationship before?

Two months of constantly laughing along with his jokes, smiling at his sweet confessions, trembling every time his lips touched mine, and feeling the warmth of his hands on my skin.

I was the happiest person on earth.

Before coming to Scotland, it never crossed my mind that I wasn’t happy enough or that my life wasn’t complete. I had everything I needed - or so I thought.

Apparently, I was wrong.

I was wrong about love, too. I underestimated the feeling, degrading the idea of love to what I felt back then.

I thought that being happy to see the other person, feeling easy around him, and having some level of attraction that makes me want to kiss him was all I could get. I had found all of these things in Hasani, the most popular guy that I met back in Egypt. We had fun together. We talked about his country, shared words that I used only with him, and he taught me the alphabet of his language, long lines and curves that seemed like hiding mysteries. His skin was dark and his eyes almost black, and I liked the contrast in the colors as our hands intertwined. He had something exotic that drew me to him. That is until the moment he told me that women are to stay at home and raise their children. That I was just a woman, after all, and how could I become a surgeon. I felt betrayed, as if by kissing him I gave him a part of myself, to make with it whatever he wanted to – in dreams I didn’t want to be a part of. He believed that I should feel grateful that he had chosen me as the woman he had dreamt of. I kept looking at him with my mouth agape, and I didn’t know which of us felt more fooled by the other.

Apart from that tiny (huge) problem, I never had butterflies in my stomach, increased palpitations of the heart, and shallow gasps instead of breaths when I felt Hasani standing close to me. I thought these were exaggerated declarations, saved to be felt only by fictional characters.

Silly me.

When Lamb and I first arrived in Scotland, I had decided that I didn’t want a man in my life – apart from uncle Lamb, that is. I felt relieved that I was able to leave Hasani and his primitive thoughts on women, but I missed the sun and the warm weather of Egypt. I even missed the sand getting in to my clothes and the heat that made me want to take a shower every ten minutes.

But everything had changed during the last couple of months.
Now I loved Scotland.

*Walking around the city, feeling the cold wind hitting my face? Perfect.*

Because Jamie was pulling me closer to him to warm me up.

*Having to deal with a sky full of grey clouds and rain almost every day? Perfect.*

Because we were sharing the same umbrella, together with the same earplugs as we walked home, listening to music with one ear and the rain from the other.

*Snow? Don’t get me started about snow!* 

Have you ever seen an incredulous Jamie looking at you through wide eyes full of surprise because you hit him with a snowball in the back of his head and the snow is now melting down the nape of his neck and inside his coat?

*Well, let me tell you that this is one of my favorite Jamie Fraser faces.*

The determination and the light frown as he was trying to catch me to take his revenge was even better.

I loved my life and it would be rather safe to say that I was very much in love. In love with Jamie; in love with the feeling of being in love.

My days were full of him.

We were together at school, he walked me home every day, and most days we met in the evening as well. We would walk around Edinburgh with our hands entwined and our heartbeats synchronized. Heartbeats that became fast and loud when we found ourselves in a dark spot on the street, where the lamp posts created enough shadows to hide us from prying eyes.

We let all the lust rule us then; licking and biting lips, battling with our tongues to feel more, to taste everything while our hands were roaming over each other’s body, unable to stay in one place long. Desperate to touch, to feel, to conquer every bit of the other…

We would walk through the Meadows and the Bruntsfield Links every night, our steps crossing those of a few dog-walkers before they led us to a remote bench; our bench. Jamie always sat first, taking me on to his lap, and my arms would settle on the nape of his neck as he secured me on top of his strong thighs, holding me close with an arm around my waist. We talked about classes and teachers, about our friends and our dreams; dreams that were freed in the cold air with each puff of misty breath, dissolving around us to cover us with hope.

It was often that our conversations stopped in the middle and remained unfinished as one of us found a reason to tease, to touch, to kiss. Our tongues got busy then, finding each other instead of forming words. As the time passed and our conversation was long forgotten, our hands moved bold on each other’s body, fingertips yearning for the skin hidden underneath the thick layers of clothes. It was times like these that they sneaked under hems, defying the cold, thirsty for warm skin. Thirsty for more.

The first time our fingers got what they ached for, was on a moonless night, when rain favored us, sleeping in the clouds that hung dark and heavy from the sky. When I felt Jamie’s hand cupping my breast, I lost my breath. It was warm, much warmer than I thought it would be, and I was sure he
could feel the current that ran through my body and my heart drumming underneath his hand.

The first time that Jamie’s fingers pulled the ends of my sweatpants’ drawstring bow, together with my breath, I lost every coherent thought.

His hand slipped under the loosened waistband and over my panties making me gasp, and I broke our kiss to look into his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I didn’t recognize the voice that left my lips, squeaky and shaking.

“I need to feel ye, Claire. I need to feel ye, wet on my fingers.”

Oh my God. Shut up, James Fraser.

His breathy declaration was an attack that broke almost every wall of reason I had built up to resist him. The effect of his words between my legs was obvious and I was sure he could feel it, even over my panties. Judging from his deep groan, he did.

“Jamie, people might see us.” I tried again. My voice was merely a whisper, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances.

“It’s dark and no one is coming this way. I’ll no let anyone see ye, Sassenach. Ye’re only mine to see, mine to feel. But please, may I?” His voice trembled but his hand was fixed in place, and he looked at me through hooded and pleading blue eyes.

Oh God, to see him wanting me so much.

“It’s so cold.”

What an argument! Way to go, Beauchamp.

“I’ll warm ye, babe. Let me warm ye, as ye’ll warm me.”

With my pulse so loud that I could actually feel it straining my arteries and veins, I realized that I couldn’t object anymore. Nor did I want to.

I could hear my ragged breathing and I knew Jamie heard it too, as the soft melody of the guitar came from our shared earplugs.

Then I’ll follow you into the dark …

Without replying, I took his lips in mine, biting them hard.

We are totally crazy.

Jamie continued to kiss me passionately, his hand inside my sweatpants, fingers moving gently. After a few strokes he cautiously pushed my panties out of the way.

It was a only a moment when I felt the insecurity hit me.

What if he doesn’t like what he’ll feel?

I pulled my lips from his to take in his face, to read how he felt, what he was thinking. The way he licked his bottom lip before biting it and the adoration in his eyes made me bold again. He wanted
And in all honesty, I wanted him too. I was blazing and my body was throbbing, begging for his touch. His hand was cold against my skin as his middle finger came into contact with my clit, and his mouth swallowed the moan that escaped mine. He started moving his finger slowly, tracing soft circles that left me dripping and wanting. I instinctively moved against his finger, my hands intertwined in his hair to bring his mouth closer.

Jamie’s free hand came to cup my head, and with his fist full of my curls he softly pulled so he could access my neck. I closed my eyes and felt his tongue hot on my skin, leaving a wet trail that made me shiver when the wind danced on it. The moment he slipped a finger inside me, I couldn’t stop the whimper from escaping my mouth. I thought I would burst if I tried to keep all these feelings inside.

“Sassenach,” he said, lips leaving my neck for a moment. “As much as I like yer wee sounds, someone might hear us, mo ghraidh.”

“I… I can’t.” I panted. Even listening to him calling me Sassenach made things worse. Jamie’s finger was still inside me and he moved it slightly, making me moan again.

“Ye’ll be the death of me, Sassenach. I swear it.” He whispered, and eliciting another moan as he stroked me, a deep guttural sound left his lips. It was then that I realized how hard he was, his cock straining against boxer briefs and sweatpants. Pulling a hand from his auburn curls, I traced a finger lightly over the length of him before reaching for his waistband.

“What are ye doing, Claire?” He was breathless, his voice low, his eyes hooded with desire.

“What do you think I’m doing?” I asked with a cheeky grin, my voice stable once more in the realization of the power I had. My hand sneaked under his underwear and I took him in my hand.

His free hand came down on top of mine, showing me the way, until I didn’t need his guidance anymore. When he entered his finger inside me again, I thought that the sensation was too much. And not enough. He then pulled it out, wet with my own arousal, and I moaned, wanting more as I felt the length of him harden even more in my palm. I kept stroking him, listening to his fast breaths, reveling in the state I brought him to. I was occasionally losing my tempo, and he was losing his, as we tried to balance our own pleasure with the need to make the other tremble under our touch.

Every time Jamie’s fingers entered me, his thumb caressing my throbbing clit, I forgot where we were, if we were concealed by the darkness, or if the last sound that left my mouth was louder than it should have been.

Jamie’s lips never left mine, but it was more than once that we couldn’t even kiss, unable to focus on anything apart from the consuming sensation in our bodies. We kept breathing in each other’s mouth, sharing heat and peppermint, with our hearts level, banging against our rib cages.

Jamie’s wet finger moved on my clit again and I stroked him faster, until I felt something tighten low in my belly and I started trembling against him. Jamie cradled me closer, his whisper soft on my lips. “Aye, aye, come for me, mo chridhe, come for me.”

His words, together with his long finger rubbing me, made me explode in a way I never had on my own. I let myself go, touched with love and passion in the darkness, weak and powerful in his arms, trusting him to carry me. Trusting him to see me as I was.

When I came back to myself, with currents still running across my body, I started stroking him again,
slowly at first and then faster, until he came, his head buried in my neck, his soft lips whispering my name.

“Did anyone see us?” I asked him, once I met his eyes again. “Or hear us?” I was blushing even more, if that was even possible, but it turned out it wasn’t.

“I dinna ken.” He whispered, never taking his eyes from mine. “I dinna care.” He was still breathing heavily. “Ye… Ye drive me crazy, Claire.” Seeing that I didn’t reply, he added. “I’ve never done this before.”

I smiled at that, running my tongue on his bottom lip. “Me neither.”

We burst into laughter as the heat died down and we realized where we were. We were flustered, but not regretful. It felt right. Maybe not the place, although it was far too late for anyone to see us. But what we did, this was right. It was giving and taking, loving and caring, sharing and opening ourselves to the other. It was beautiful.

Jamie held me in his arms, close to his heart, stroking my hair and whispering in Gaelic, until the first drops of rain fell on us. We rose reluctantly from our bench and walked back home, holding each other tight, not wanting to part just yet. We kissed lips, cheeks, temples and noses again and again at my doorstep before I gathered the courage to unlock the door. Safe in our beds, we texted all night, sleeping in the early morning hours with the promise that we would see each other soon enough at school.

Closing my eyes with my phone in hand, Jamie smiling at me from a picture I had taken a few days ago, one thought swirled around in my mind.

_That is what it feels like, to give yourself to somebody, and have it returned, more than it ever was._
“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

Yeah, tell me about it.

It would be the most wonderful time of the year actually, if things were different. If I was now packing for the Highlands, instead of being condemned to two lonely weeks in Edinburgh.

Locked in my room, Lamb’s response to my pleadings reverberated in my head, mingling with my sobs. It was a loud and clear ‘No,’ and it felt like a knife going right through my heart.

All of my Christmas plans with Jamie were going to waste.

How was I supposed to tell him?

With my gaze fixed on the white ceiling of my room, tears running free to get lost in my curls, I replayed the conversation with Lamb in my head, trying to find a way out.

I had one more day before the Christmas Holidays. One more day to convince him to visit Lallybroch and spend the holidays there. We were both invited, and I was sure that Lamb would be delighted to have more conversations with Brian Fraser about his favorite topic, Scottish history.

But Lamb said he couldn’t make it.

He had two dissertations to read and a meeting with the CEO of an important foundation, about a grant he was trying to get to start new excavations in South America. I was tired of his excavations. He said going to Lallybroch was impossible.

I hadn’t given up easily. I tried to talk to him calmly at first, knowing that yelling wouldn’t bring me any closer to my goal. I rambled about the beauty of the Highlands, spending time together, the peace he would find and how he could read the dissertations there.
Nothing worked.

*Change of plans, then.*

I then tried to convince him that he should let me go to Lallybroch alone. He wouldn’t have time to spend with me in Edinburgh anyway, if he had so much work to do. When Lamb said that he was the adult in this home and announced his final decision, I was unable to keep my temper under tight reins. I cried out that it wasn’t fair, that it was the first time I’d ever asked him to do something my way. Unshed tears blurred my vision and I could feel my pulse throbbing in my temples. My eyes wild, landed on his cool face and the heat rose inside me, burning my cheeks a fierce red. One more minute and I would end up screaming at him. With pressed lips and my hands in fists, I turned around and ran to my room, locking myself in.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

It was approximately thirty minutes later when I heard him knocking on the door. The sound was restrained, quiet. I knew I had upset him. I had never reacted like a spoiled child before, but this injustice was drowning me.

*Was it so much to do what I wanted for once?*

I couldn’t let him in, not yet. Instead, I gripped my pillow tighter, letting silent tears make its colors darker until I heard Lamb’s steps taking him away again.

My phone pinged and I ran a hand over my eyes to make the text come into focus.

*Jamie:* Make sure you bring your warm boots, Sassenach!

*Jamie:* Do ye ken that when I write ‘Sa’ the first suggestion my phone makes is the word ‘Sassenach’? ❤

I read Jamie’s texts and I broke into an ugly cry all over again.

*It would have been the most wonderful time of the year. Now everything sucks.*

About an hour later I heard the soft sound of our front door closing. Lamb had left. I bit my lip looking at my tear stained pillow, and took a deep breath. If I stayed locked in my room going over the same thoughts again, I would never stop crying.

*How many damn tears can these glands produce?*

I had to do something, anything that could make my mind fly away. The green message light was blinking on my phone, a constant reminder of the new texts coming from Jamie and my incapability to reply to any of them.

Rising from my bed, I walked to the wardrobe and picked a black tank top and my favorite grey leggings with geometrical prints. My fight with Lamb had made me feel deflated and hyperactive at the same time. I needed to get all this energy out and then just fall tired on the floor, a puddle of disappointment and hopelessness.

No matter how hard I’d tried, I hadn’t thought of anything that I could say to make him change his mind.
I rode my bike to the dance studio, the cold wind drying the tears from my puffy eyes and calming my breathing. Walking in to find that I was alone was the best gift I could ask for. I threw my backpack and coat into a corner, taking only my new bluetooth earbuds from the front pocket. Lamb’s gift.

Oh my God, uncle. Why the hell couldn’t we just go and have fun, for once?

The feeling of the wooden barre underneath my fingertips felt like a balm to my heart. I started warming up with slow exercises, balancing on the steady barre to support my body.

Red, swollen eyes looked back at me from the mirror and I almost started crying again. Blinking, I turned my head and looked away.

I needed Jamie, but I couldn’t find the strength to call him. Not yet.

When I felt my muscles ready, I increased the volume of the music in my earplugs and started dancing.

Run across the room and fall on the hard floor. I would stay in Edinburgh, alone.

Rise with a jump, and then step backwards, back arched. Joe would visit his grandparents in Boston.

Extend arms and hands on each side, waiting for help that would never come. Gail would go on a trip with her parents to London.

Swirl and stop, arms wide open, ready for a hit. The whole swimming gang would be in the Highlands.

Crash on the floor. I wouldn’t see Jamie for two weeks.

I didn’t know how much time had passed, but I finally lost every thought in the swirling force that moved my body. With closed eyes and open heart, I danced the pain away.

As another song died out, I slowly opened my eyes only to jump again – this time from pure surprise.

“Jesus Christ, Jamie! You scared the hell out of me!” I said in between gasps, with a hand over my thundering heart.

Jamie was standing next to the door, breathing heavily, his eyes dark and hooded.

“What are you doing here?” I asked and walked to him, a magnet always drawing me closer. “How long have you been standing here?” My fingers traced his chest and abs over his hoodie, before my arms sneaked inside his open jacket to bring him closer for a kiss. I needed his touch. I needed to get as much of him as possible now that we were close.

“Long enough,” he answered in a deep, low voice, that made my skin tingle. He softly bit my bottom lip, while his hands traveled down my back to cup my butt. “God, yer arse. When I first saw ye in leggings, the day you came wi’ Jenny to find us in the swimming pool, I couldn’t think of anything else apart from having this round arse in my hands. Mine.”

“What?” I intended to tease him for his confession, but his dark voice combined with his need of possession made me shiver instead.

“Ye didn’t see me staring like a dolt, Sassenach?” He asked, honestly.
“No, I didn’t!” I replied, now laughing at the memory of that day.

Maybe because I was busy staring, too. Jamie in a square cut swim trunk, water dripping from his body, was quite the sight.

Still smiling, I ran my tongue on his bottom lip and a deep groan filled the quiet room. Jamie pressed his hands under my butt, lifting me up to trap my body between his and the wall. The reflection of our bodies in the mirror made my breath shallow, and I captured his lips in mine, desperate to share the overwhelming feeling burning me.

“It’s a miracle I held myself back before and I didn’t interrupt yer dance,” he said in between long kisses, full of lust and need. “This was the most beautiful, strong, and storming thing I’ve seen.”

“It was a stupid choreography I just made up.” I said, and I didn’t know if the heat on my skin was caused by his compliments or his kisses.

Jamie trailed a path with his tongue on my neck. “It wasn’t stupid. It was passionate and genuine.” He insisted, nibbling softly.

“Or you just find everything that I do beautiful.” I moaned at the sense of his fingers under my tank top.

“Ye ken how this is called, my Sassenach?” Jamie stopped abruptly and brought his eyes level with mine.

“Stupidity?” I asked with a cheeky smile.

Jamie snorted, slightly shaking his head in disagreement. “That is falling in love, mo chridhe.”

My heart stopped and then erupted in my chest, so full that it couldn’t keep the feelings inside. “I find everything you do beautiful too, Jamie Fraser.”

“I thought so.” He gave me a lopsided smile that made my hand pinch his side to punish him for his confidence.

“You cocky bastard!”

Slanted eyes locked with mine and we were still laughing when his teeth trapped my curled lip, sucking it softly. My tongue sought his, and I felt our chests inflating in sync to bring the hearts closer, creating their own music with every beat. Jamie shifted his body slightly and I felt him hard against me, the thin fabric of my leggings letting me feel every inch of him, restrained in his jeans.

“I need ye,” he breathed, and I was unconsciously rubbing myself against him when the studio’s door closed with a bang.

“Is anyone here?” Lilly’s voice came from the hallway and I thought I would die there and then.

“Shit,” I whispered as Jamie lowered me to the floor. “Go out that door, to the changing room.”

I saw him flushed, swallowing hard and with a few wide strides he was out of the room.

That was too close.

It took me ten minutes to get Lilly in her small office and another twenty-five to leave the building,
hoping that Jamie had gotten out at some point.

He had. My Scot was waiting for me next to my bike, with a shy smile and a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“’Tis late, you shouldn’t have waited.” I said as I drew closer, although I wasn’t sure I really meant it.

“I needed to talk to ye, Sassenach.” He pulled me closer with a hand on my waist and placed a soft kiss on my lips.

“Talk? So that was what we were doing before?”

“I got distracted in there,” the shy smile crept its way to his lips again, together with a red hue on the tips of his ears. “But there was a reason I came to find ye. Why didn’t ye reply to my texts?”

Averting my eyes from his, I focused my gaze on the zipper of his coat, feeling it between my fingers. Setting my jaw, I breathed deeply, knowing that I couldn’t keep the news from him much longer.

“I won’t be coming to Lallybroch.” My whisper was so low that it was almost inaudible.

“Ye won’t? Why?” His voice was tinged with worry, and I heard another crack added to my heart.

“Lamb. He said he can’t leave the city and we’re to stay here.”

Jamie held me closer to him, his arms steadying us both, his breath soft on my neck. “We’ll find a way. I’ll talk to my Da, see if he can call yer uncle to change his mind. If not…”

“If not, we will spend two weeks apart.”

“We’ll talk all the time, mo nighean donn.” Jamie said, his fingers sneaking under my rubber band to let the mess of my hair free. His fingers got lost in my curls and he brought me closer, sealing his hot lips with mine. “I dinna say that I like it, but if we canna change it we just have to be patient.”

“I want to come.” I almost whimpered. “We’ve planned so much already for the holidays.”

“Dinna fash, Sassenach. Lallybroch will be there waiting for ye. And yer uncle may change his mind, aye?”

“I don’t think so.” I pulled him closer, needing to be locked in his hug and stay there forever.

“Ye never know. Come on now, babe, let’s get ye home before ye freeze out here.”

–

The house was dark when I entered, a narrow beam of light escaping underneath Lamb’s office door. He was back. Jamie had managed to calm me, as he always - mysteriously - did and I was ready for a second, hopefully uneventful, conversation regarding the Highland trip. Taking a deep breath to prepare myself, I walked towards the office and knocked on the door.

“Come in, lamb.”

Lamb. That’s a good sign. At least he isn’t mad at me.

“Uncle,” I said as I stepped in, clasping my hands in front of my stomach and keeping my eyes fixed on my fingers. “I’m sorry for earlier. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”
“Claire,” he said in a voice that made me raise my eyes to look at him. He seemed tired and the strain in his features was obvious. A strain caused by me. “Sit down, please.”

I moved tentatively in the room and sat right across from him.

“I thought a lot about our previous conversation, Claire.” Lamb resumed, moving some papers to the side of his desk, and I nodded, waiting. A little smile adorned his face when his eyes traveled to me. For a moment I thought he didn’t see me, but looked right through me. “You want to belong somewhere, Claire. And you finally found that somewhere. I know this feeling because I’d felt it too, a long time ago.” I made to speak, but realized he had more to say. “You have your mother’s strength and independence but this… You get this quality from the Beauchamps. From your father. Henry needed to belong to her and to you, you know, to be part of a whole. And I can see now that you have the same need.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks before I realized I was crying. I was like them. There were parts of both of them in me. I opened my mouth to talk, but I couldn’t find any words. I sat there, looking at Lamb through my tears, feeling my heart beating hard against my ribcage.

“I’ll finish everything during the next week and we’ll visit the Frasers, for Hogmanay, lamb. Is it okay with you?” He asked with a smile, rising from his chair to come next to me.

I fell into his embrace, my arms tight around his neck.

“It is,” I said, feeling the soft cashmere of his jumper underneath my cheek. “Thank you, uncle.”

“I love you, baby girl.”

As Lamb held me in his arms, the only person I belonged with for so many years, I thought about my parents, about independence and belonging. I thought of the way Jamie made me feel, embracing all I was.

And I dreamed of the best New Year’s Eve of my life.
For a seventeen-year-old I had traveled a lot. Each journey was a new adventure, a new discovery. Busy cities filling my eyes with bright colors while their busy bees buzzed in my ears with engines and horns. Quiet rocky mountains begging to be walked. Endless deserts holding millions of stars in the sky atop them. I’ve ridden bumpy roads leading to little villages forgotten by time and men, while dust and flowers filled my senses. I had imprinted in my memory the yellow of the sand - hues changing from daffodil to fire - and the green of the pines - unchanging, always fierce and persistent.

I thought that visiting the Scottish Highlands would be just another destination to cross off my bucket list. The place wouldn’t matter a lot. The most important thing in my mind was that it would – finally
– bring me closer to Jamie. Being away from him for a whole week was worse than I thought, even with all the texts and video calls.

But the trip to Lallybroch turned out to be something more than that.

It wasn’t the big skies or the stunning landscapes, the snow covered meadows and munros, enhancing their formidable beauty. It was the peaceful feeling the place gave me as we headed north, making my every breath come easier, fuller. This wasn’t an adventure. It felt like I had already been there and every inch of land was waiting for me to return.

Strangely, it felt like home.

It felt like Jamie.

The magic of the Highlands only increased my anticipation of seeing him. I couldn’t wait to breathe the same crisp air with him, to share the same views with our hands intertwined - tree branches made to resist the winter together, waiting for spring to come so they’d burst into life again. Our spring had come in the middle of the Christmas break and the promise of life shared between our lips made me smile during the entire trip to Beauly. Lamb commented on that - of course he would - teasing me and singing to me old romantic songs over the music on the radio. I tolerated him, because I had to, hoping that while at Lallybroch, Jamie’s da would keep him busy enough not to notice our heart eyes.

Once we arrived in Beauly, I saw Lamb concentrate, face scrunched up in thought. I wanted so much to tease him, looking like a little child as he did so, but I didn’t want us to get lost so I kept silent. Brian Fraser had given explicit instructions to Lamb to find Lallybroch, which, apparently, was well out of town. After a few missed turns and two phone calls to Jamie’s da to ask for help, we finally saw the imposing manor in front of us.

“Dear Lord,” Lamb whispered. “This house must be three hundred years old.”

“More or less,” I nodded. The three-story manor was more impressive than I thought it’d be based on Jamie’s descriptions, but it had something homey about it, something that made me feel welcome. It also had Jamie, so I wouldn’t care less if it was a tiny croft.

Jamie appeared at the front door the moment my boot crushed the fluffy snow. He came to greet us with a smile that I guessed was mirroring mine, and he ceremoniously shook Lamb’s hand.

“Welcome to Lallybroch, Mr Beauchamp.”

At least he didn’t lay out a bloody red carpet.

“Thank you for having us, lad.” Lamb smiled back at him and winked at me before taking his suitcase and heading towards the house.

What was that wink?

Jamie was by my side in an instant, and after a quick glance to be sure that Lamb had gotten into the house, his lips found mine. Soft, hot and perfect.

“I missed ye, Sassenach.” He sighed when our eyes locked and I shivered at the feel of his breath on my still wet lips.
“I missed you, too.” I purred. *Did I really purr? God! “It felt like a bloody eternity.”*

“Aye, I ken. Let’s go inside, or else they’ll start talking.” He made an apologetic face, as if it was his own fault that the rest would comment on our delay and lifted my suitcase. Our hands clasped together tightly as he walked into the house, aching for each other’s touch, trying to recover the days of emptiness.

Lamb was still in the hallway when Jamie and I entered the front door. I could see from the glint in his eyes and his faint smile that he was enchanted by the old manor. Well, it had the one characteristic he loved most than anything else in the world. It was old. Everything old had a special power over Lamb and I smiled at the sight of him looking around amazed, like a small child in a candy shop.

I mimicked him, my gaze falling on the portraits, similar slanted eyes staring soberly out at us, the newcomers. Fraser eyes. Turning my head, I searched for my Fraser’s eyes, to find them looking at me, blue and beautiful and full of life. I’d choose them over the ones in the portraits a million times over.

When we’d moved further into the house, I was convinced that Lallybroch was as impressive on the inside, as it was from the outside.

*Like it’s inhabitants, more or less.*

It had vintage decorations I’d seen in magazines, but it was natural, unpretentious. The heavy furniture, the thick carpets, the old paintings covering the walls, they didn’t suffocate me. They warmed my heart.

There was a huge Christmas tree full of ornaments and lights next to be fireplace, branches of holly with red fruits making the dark wood coffee table more festive, and little snowmen and Santa Clauses in every corner I could see. I’ve never lived in a home so changed in terms of decoration for Christmas. Lamb and I hardly put the lights on our tiny tree.

Yes, the house was grand and beautiful, but I was more interested in its inhabitants. And one most particularly.

Brian Fraser and Jenny met us in the living room, and as my uncle followed Jamie’s da into his office, Jenny offered to show me to my room.

“All I could do was shrug apologetically to Jenny – who was smiling with mischief – before Jamie took my hand and almost dragged me up the stairs.

In less than a minute I was pinned against the door of my room, Jamie’s strong hands traveling over my body. Our lips found each other in a lustful dance, taking toll for all the days of absence, threatening to burn us with their heat. It was a feeling bigger than us. A thirst that needed to be quenched, lungs that needed to breathe nothing else but each other, an instinct of survival.

Our hearts were bored of their conventional beating. They needed to bang hard in our chests, pushing the blood flow harder, making us feel alive again.

We couldn’t stop. And we wouldn’t have, if Brian Fraser hadn’t called Jamie to bring some wood in for the fireplace downstairs.
He shouted Jamie’s name twice. And then once more.

As if bringing the bloody wood was a matter of life and death.

–

We sat across from each other at dinner, my eyes locked with his, our lips absently curling up. I was thinking of how beautifully his auburn curls adorned his face, their contrast with the deep blue of his eyes, the bronze skin that smelled like soap and sandalwood when Jenny leaned towards me, interrupting my thoughts.

“Ye better eat something Claire, or else ye’re gonna starve aye? Staring my brother isna verra filling, ye ken.”

I don’t know about filling, but he is bloody delicious.

Get a grip, Claire!

I blushed with Jenny’s remark, but even more with my own thoughts. Tearing my eyes away from Jamie, I fixed them on the untouched piece of shepherd’s pie on my plate. When I gathered up the courage to look at him again, all I could see was a gigantic frown on his face. Shaking my head slightly to dismiss his worry, I grabbed my fork and started eating the pie – one of the best I’d ever had – as if I was on a secret mission and this was the main reason I attended dinner. I spotted each little crumble, trying to lift it with my fork, pressing it against the plate’s porcelain and pushing it around. Anything to keep my attention away from Jamie.

Until he kicked me under the table.

My fork fell on the floor with clatter and I snorted, bending to take it. For my bad luck, it landed on Jamie’s foot and I crouched underneath the table, trying to reach it. When I finally got it, Jamie’s hand trapped mine.

“What?” I whispered, freaking out.

“You okay?” He asked.

I’m okay baby, I’m okay. Stop looking at me with those damn eyes and I’ll be fine!

“Yes.”

“What are you two doing down there, exactly?” Jenny’s face appeared under the tablecloth.

“Nothing.” I replied, hastily returning to my chair.

Seated again, I quickly realized that Jamie’s long legs could easily reach mine. The problem was that he had realized it too. I trapped a wandering foot between both my legs and gave him a cheeky smile. This seemed enough to bring back his relaxed expression, and the tiny smile that gave life to the butterflies residing in my stomach made its appearance. The rest of the dinner passed uneventfully, with Lamb and Brian talking about the first Jacobite rising, asking us how much we knew and filling our poor brains with even more needless details. And Jamie’s foot a prisoner between my ankles.

After finishing dinner we moved to the living room, both adults with tumblers of whisky in hand. Claiming that we were entitled to a drink, both men laughed and served Jamie, Jenny, and me a good amount of whisky - we weren’t children anymore. We stayed up late that night, telling stories around
the fireplace, talking about history and tradition, about the previous Fraser generations that made that house a home. A realization hit me then and warmed me to the bone, even more than the sparkling heat from the roaring fire and the alcohol. We weren’t fiction, created by Dickens for a Christmas story. We’d made our own gathering of family and friends, sharing moments around the fireplace and creating memories. The ‘nephew’s house’ in the Christmas Carol was real and it was all of us, battered and broken on the edges, finding happiness in front of the fireplace in the old parlour of Lallybroch.

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It was two o'clock in the morning when I changed into my grey and baby pink pyjamas, tired and slightly intoxicated. Spreading myself out on my bed, I rubbed my face on the stark white pillow with the embroidered light blue flowers. The soft fabric filled my nostrils with the fresh scent of a conditioner most likely named ‘summer breeze’, and I smiled contentedly.

I had just closed my eyes, my body secured under the heavy blankets, when I heard a soft knock on my door. With a grunt I went got of bed and padded to the door, opening it just a bit to see two blue eyes glinting under the hallway light.

“Ye forgot something, Sassenach.” Jamie whispered opening the door a bit more.

“What?”

“My goodnight kiss.”

I smiled and stood on tiptoes to crush my lips to his adorable pout.

“Better?” I asked, biting my lip to stop from kissing him again.

“Aye, much better.” Jamie said, his tongue running across his bottom lip, collecting traces of me. “I’ll leave now, because I swear, Sassenach, ye’re temptation itself hidden in a curly wigged angel’s face.”

“Am I?” I asked and with a hand on the nape of his neck I lowered his face to mine so I could catch the aforementioned bottom lip between my teeth.

Someone cleared his throat from the top of the stairs and I broke the kiss, goggling at Brian Fraser, who was chuckling to himself.

*Oh God.*

My startled face conveyed more information to Jamie than I could ever transfer with words and his wide eyes were the last thing I saw before closing the door in his face.

Five minutes later, when my heart found its normal rhythm again, I texted him.

*Sassenach (the ridiculous human being had changed my name in the messenger app):* Sorry for shutting the door in your face but NKJFNWEJFWJKFN

*Jamie:* Dinna fash, Sassenach. I think we entertained my Da just fine.

*Sassenach:* You know what’s the worst part, right?
Jamie:  ???

Sassenach: He and Lamb together. I don’t even want to think about it!

Jamie:  hahahaha

Mmmm… Options…Name… Change nickname… Scot.

Scot: WHAT? I’m the Scot, now?

Sassenach: Aye!

Scot: I’d rather you’d change that to something sappy, like ‘my one and only love’.

Sassenach: Goodnight, my one and only Scot!

Scot: Sweet dreams, my Sassenach.

Sassenach: Sweet dreams are made of these.

Scot: Who am I to disagree?

Sassenach: I traveled the world and the seven seas.

Scot: Everybody’s looking for something.

Scot: I found what I was looking for.

Sassenach: Saaaaaaaappy

Sassenach: I found it, too.

With a smile, I fixed a cocoon of blankets around me and slept in that room, in that house deep in the Highlands that felt like home.
It takes a few moments to realize where you are when you wake up in a strange room. The memory of your own room is sometimes overpowering, dominating what your eyes are looking at for those first few moments of consciousness.

Those fuzzy moments were all it took me to pop out of bed, eager to start my day. I was at Lallybroch, the big window of my room revealing the rolling Highland hills, the day breaking on a bright and cold New Years Eve. I dressed quickly, changing from my pyjamas into my boyfriend style denim and a hoodie, impatient to see Jamie Fraser and finally kiss him ‘good morning’. A real kiss, not one through a video call or an emoji with a yellow round face blowing a heart.

I was so close to him now. I could almost feel his big hands on the small of my back. I could almost taste his lips on mine.

After a quick visit to the bathroom - better to smell of peppermint for the first kiss of the day - I trotted down the stairs and checked for him in the living room. Seeing that it was empty, I headed straight to the the kitchen.

Jenny was sitting at the kitchen table, spreading butter on a slice of whole-wheat bread with deliberate swipes of a knife.

“Good morning!” I said with a smile, sitting across from her at the big wooden table while wondering if Jamie was still asleep. He was supposed to be the the early bird in this relationship.

“Good morning, Claire!” Jenny said, passing me the bread. “D'ye sleep well?”

“Yes. I was exhausted, I slept like a log.”

“Good!” She said, spreading raspberry jam on top of the butter layer on her bread. “Because it’s going to be a full day.”

I took a slice of the handmade bread and reached for the butter. Before taking the knife, I looked at Jenny, asking as nonchalantly as I could, “Jenny? Where is Jamie?”
Jenny smiled and motioned me to wait so she could swallow. “Da wanted to show yer uncle around today. The distillery, the animals. He wanted Jamie to go with them.” She shrugged, as if Jamie’s absence didn’t matter at all.

Shit. There goes my morning kiss.

“Oh, it’s nine already!” Jenny exclaimed as she looked at the big kitchen clock. “Eat up, Claire! There’s a lot to do,” she added, almost inhaling her slice of bread and taking her plate to the sink.

What do people have to do on New Year's Eve?

My plans usually involved a lazy morning in bed and a light lunch before Lamb and I would dress up to go to one of the parties he had to attend. Zero effort, top-level boredom.

At Lallybroch, however, things were different. And apparently, here a lot was to be done before the night’s celebration.

I ate my slice of bread with strawberry jam, reaching for an additional spoonful in the end. As I washed my plate, Jenny enlightened me about our day’s programming.

“House is cleaned, Jamie and I did everything yesterday.” She stopped, looking around and pursing her lips. “Maybe we can vacuum once more in the afternoon, but other than that we are ready. We just have to prepare the food.”

“What?” I asked and felt my eyebrows touching my hairline. “We have to cook?”

“Well, not on our own. Mrs Crook will come to help. She always does, since mom died.”

“Oh…” I swallowed with difficulty, the jam suddenly too sticky in my throat, but Jenny didn’t seem to notice. Or pretended she didn’t. “Cool, because I have never cooked before.” I added. “How many people are you going to have here tonight?”

“Not that many. Mom’s relatives don’t join us anymore, after she passed away.” Jenny made a face that I couldn’t quite interpret, but I decided it was better to remain silent. “It’ll be us here, Murtagh, the Murrays, Mrs. Crook and her two boys, and the MacNabs.” Looking at my questioning gaze, she continued, “The Murrays and the MacNabs are family friends. Annie, that’s Ian’s mom, Bridget Macnab, and my ma were best friends. They planned to marry their children to each other so we’d all become one big family.” Jenny laughed shaking her head. “Ian’s ma keeps telling that story every year. Tis funny, because Ian and I ended up together.”

“And the MacNab?” I asked, unable to hide the frown forming on my face.

“Oh, aye. Jamie was supposed to end up with Mary. But obviously that didn’t work out.” Jenny shrugged and placed two huge bowls on the table.

“They… They were together?” The muscles in my throat clenched painfully, leaving no room for air to come through.

“Nah. Between you and me, Claire, I’m sure that Mary always had a thing for Jamie. Maybe she still does. But he never really saw her.” Jenny paused and looked at me, serious. “Mary doesna challenge him. And yer Jamie, as ye ken, loves challenges.”

My Jamie.

Nodding, I reached for the knives and turned my face away from Jenny.
“Claire,” she said, coming closer and squeezing my upper arm, “I’ve never seen Jamie look at a lass as he looks at ye.” I nodded, fidgeting with the bowl that was in front of me, wanting to talk about anything else. Jenny however, like the Fraser she was, read the uncertainty in my moves. “Claire. The lad was trying to find an excuse to talk to ye from the first moment ye showed up at school. Dinna fash. He’s madly in love wi’ ye.” She winked and elbowed me in the ribs before moving away.

I smiled, thinking of the story Jamie had told me, about Ian making fun of him that first day he came to my desk. He wanted me then, and wanted me even more now. No matter what this Bridget MacNab wished for.

“So,” I said looking at Jenny opening the cabinets and bringing all sorts of ingredients down on to the counter, “What are we supposed to be cooking today?”

“Well, it’s not going to be a big feast, but we’ll do our best. Ma used to cook continuously for three days before Hogmanay.” Ellen was so present in Jenny’s mind that I could almost see her sitting on the chair by the door, smiling at us with that glorious smile I’d only seen in pictures of her. “Now everybody prepares something for tonight and brings it. Good thing is that Ian’s ma prepares the haggis - no hearts and livers for us. We make the bannocks, the tipsy laird trifle, and the shortbread cookies.” With a glance at my terrified face, Jenny chuckled. “Dinna worry, Claire. Mrs. Crook is the one who bakes the shortbreads for the Fraser Goods, makes the chutneys and jams. We canna fail.”

The Fraser Shortbread Cookies. While in Edinburgh I called them Scotbreads and had become totally addicted to them. Jamie teased me, proud nonetheless, about my crazy behavior regarding the crumbly cookies his family business produced, saying that I couldn’t resist anything with the Fraser name on it. I usually paid him no mind, focused solely on those ethereal cookies. They were buttery, yet light, their taste full, yet not enough. And they literally vanished when I was close enough.

“Claire? Are you listening to me?” Jenny was looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Mmm?”

“Don’t tell me ye’re thinking of my brother again. Christ girl, ye’ll see him at noon!”

I didn’t know if telling her that, for once, I was daydreaming about the Fraser Shortbreads and not Jamie would somehow save me.

–

Jamie didn’t come back for lunch. Neither did his dad or Lamb. At three in the afternoon I was spread out on the sofa in the living room, wondering how I was supposed to stay awake and celebrate all night when I could hardly walk to the kitchen to grab a glass of water, to keep myself from dying of thirst.

Closing my eyes with a groan, I decided that baking was an amazing hobby, but it certainly wasn’t for me. I could feel all my muscles aching, only from lying on the couch.

“Are ye dead, Sassenach?” His whisper caressed my ear, and I opened my eyes to find Jamie leaning over me from the back of the couch. How he had entered the room without me noticing, remained a mystery.

“Almost.”

“Shall I save yer life wi’ a kiss?”
“I doubt a kiss could revive me much right now, but go ahead. Doesn’t hurt to try.” I tilted my head back, making my lips more accessible to him.

First, I felt his breath. Hot and wet on my lips, tempting me to eat him whole. Then I made the mistake of inhaling deeply.

_Horses and sheep._

“God, you stink!” I said scrunching up my face.

“Ye dinna want me? Is that what ye’re telling me?” He was trying to look serious, but I could see the laughter threatening to leave his throat.

He didn’t seem discouraged at all by my rejection. Instead, he came closer, taking my lips between his teeth and biting lightly. Without conscious thought I responded to his kiss, my tongue searching for his.

“So ye do want me.” He said in a low, hoarse voice and I felt my heart flutter.

“Mmm, I do. But I’ll want you more after you take a shower.” I said, licking his bottom lip in invitation.

There was no Jamie Fraser that I wouldn’t want, it seemed. Stinking or not.

“Come with me.” Jamie said and walked around the couch to take my hand, pulling me up.

“Where-” I started to ask, but a wide, sly smile was the only reply I got.

The house was quiet. I knew Jenny had gone to take a shower and Mrs. Crook went back to her place, but I had no idea where Brian Fraser and my uncle were.

Jamie didn’t let go of my hand as we ascended the stairs and I felt my heart racing in my chest.

We entered my room and he closed the door behind us.

“I know I smell of the animals, Sassenach.” He said, suddenly shy, his thumb running over the knuckles of my hand. Raising his head, his eyes locked with mine and became darker, his breathing becoming faster. I placed a hand on his chest, feeling it inflate and deflate, air traveling under the taut muscle, providing oxygen to his heart that had started beating erratically. “But I need ye. I havna felt you in too many days.” He lifted me up onto the desk next to the door and kissed me, making my muscles relax at his touch, only to contract again from pleasure.

I was wet already. Jamie’s hand unzipped my jeans, his fingers traveling over my soaked panties.

“Ah Dhia,” he groaned and kissed me harder, only to stop a few moments later. I wasn’t ready to let him go. I traced my finger over his crotch, the bulge underneath the sweatpants twitching against my touch.

With another groan, he moved away from me.

“Ah, Sassenach. Dinna look at me like that.” He said, seeing my pout. “The others will arrive soon. I just rushed to come find you. I didna even have my phone wi’ me today to talk to you.” He came closer again, placing his hand on my cheek. “I missed ye,” he whispered, a moment before his lopsided smile returned to his face. “But I have to take a shower, aye? A certain someone said I stink.”
“You shouldn’t start things if you’re not disposed to finish them, James Fraser.” I narrowed my eyes at him, arms crossed in front of my chest.

“I’m sorry, Claire Beauchamp. Seems I canna control myself when I’m around ye.”

I snorted but didn’t move, studying him. Strong, and hot, and stinking.

“Take a nap, Sassenach. Rest a bit. We have a big night ahead.”

“Will you? Sleep?” I asked, the thought of us sleeping together comforting me.

“Aye. For a couple of hours I will. And I’m pretty sure I know what I’ll dream of.”

“What?”

“You,” he said, and disappeared out my door as the front door opened and closed, and Lamb’s voice traveled up the stairs.

–

Light fingers traveled down my arm and I opened my eyes, anticipating his bright blue to be looking back at me through red curls.

I wanted to continue with my dream. I wasn’t ready to wake up just yet.

The eyes that locked with mine were dark and Jenny’s black sleek hair was framing her rosy cheeks.

“Claire, time to wake up, aye?”

“What time is it?” I felt like I had been sleeping for ten minutes.

“It’s six o’clock. We must get ready, our guests will start arriving in an hour or so.”

“Okay,” I said, even though I wanted to bury myself deeper under the covers.

An hour later, I was ready. Curls pinned up in a simple bun, light makeup with mascara and a red lipstick, my black dress, black heels, and red panties.

They say you have to wear something red on New Year’s Eve.

I opened the door of my room, but closed it again, leaving only a little crack open. Hidden behind it for a few minutes, I listened to the voices coming from the living room. I had never thought of meeting so many people when I said that I wanted to spend the Christmas break at Lallybroch. I was only thinking of more time with Jamie, without school and obligations. Jenny’s words came back to me.

Her mother’s best friends.

Would they feel that they had to approve me, now that Ellen was away?

Was I good enough for him? Would Bridget MacNab understand that plans aren’t always meant to be followed?

It isn’t a competition, I repeated to myself. I didn’t know Mary, but Jamie had chosen me. Brian
Fraser and Murtagh knew me, and they liked me.

Finally, I walked back into my room and rummaged in my little bag for my mother’s pearl earrings. I put them on and looked in the mirror, her whisky eyes looking back at me.

I peeled my eyes away with a smile, thinking that maybe she had already met Ellen Fraser up there, and they were happy that their children had found each other.

Walking towards the door, I opened it and headed to the stairs, ready for the first New Year's Eve that I’d be surrounded by family, sure that Ellen Fraser was smiling at me from the picture in the corridor.
I was never the girl that dreamed of being a princess.

A pirate, maybe. An astronaut. An explorer. A healer. But not a princess. There were too many walls around those girls, too high, too rigid. I often wondered how they managed not to suffocate.

Walking down the stairs at Lallybroch was the first and only time I felt like one. Not the suffocating part – even though my breathing had become shallow and fast – but all the rest that accompanied the term. And it was all Jamie’s fault.

He was standing by the fireplace, listening to Lamb and Brian talk about politics (the word Brexit was the first that reached me when I left my room) and a broad grin was painted on his face the moment he saw me, making the blue of his eyes brighter and the red of his hair fiercer.

Oh God, he’s so beautiful.

And mine.

A matching grin was splitting my face in two when our eyes locked and I could feel every bit of my heart, yelling at me to move my stupid legs faster and get to him.

Jamie walked to the foot of the stairs and waited for me, his high cheekbones proud, his shoulders and arms stretching the fabric of the dark green shirt. It took me a moment to realize that he was wearing a kilt.

A bloody kilt. My Scot.

And he looked dashing. I’d never thought that a man in a kilt could be so attractive.

And I mean SO attractive.
When I finally descended the stairs (were they so many yesterday?) and stepped in front of him, Jamie surprised me by taking my hand in his and kissing my knuckles. The gesture was so chivalrous yet intimate that it took my breath away and for a moment I was transferred back, to that first day in the cafeteria when Jamie had bowed to me.

*My knight in his plaided armor.*

Time had stopped. The world forgot to keep rotating around itself, around the sun.

Jamie brought me close to him with a hand on the small of my back and whispering, his lips almost touching my earlobe, “Ye’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen, Claire.”

My cheeks were blazing when I met his eyes again. Without replying, I raised up onto my tiptoes and placed a soft kiss on his cheek, leaving a mark of red lips behind. “I marked you.” I said, chuckling, and rubbed his bronze skin to remove the lipstick.

“Ye could leave it, ye ken. This way I’d have yer lips on me for the whole night.” He wiggled his eyebrows, teasing me, but his eyes were speaking a truth deeper than this.

“And what is this?” I asked, pointing at his kilt.

“Ye call me a Scot! Thought I should keep up wi’ my reputation!”

“You’re beautiful.” I said softly, reaching for his hand.

“They’re the Fraser colors. My mom…” Jamie swallowed, his eyes a bit more glassy than a moment before. “It was a gift from my mom.”

“I wear my mom’s earrings.” I admitted with a sorrowful smile and squeezed his hand. Jamie squeezed mine back, a silent conversation shared only with gazes and touches.

“Claire! You’re ready!” Lamb exclaimed, eventually noticing me from across the room. “I thought Jenny would never manage to wake you up!”

“There is nothing Jenny can’t force people to do, if she sets her mind on it.” Brian Fraser said and laughed, accompanied by Jamie who was nodding his head in agreement.

“I can hear ye da!” Jenny’s voice came from the kitchen, only to intensify their laughter.

“I think I’m going to Jenny, see if she needs any help.” I announced and started walking towards the kitchen. Jamie came behind me, mumbling that he was coming to his sister’s aid, too.

It took one of his wide strides to come next to me, and we walked into the corridor, with our arms brushing against each other. The moment we were out of the living room I found myself pinned against the wall, his breath hot on my skin.

“Not on the mouth! I’m wearing lipstick!” I whispered-shouted and saw puppy eyes looking back at me, a pout formed on his wide lips. “I’m serious!” I insisted, determined not to become a big smudge because of Jamie Fraser’s uncontrollable behavior. Jamie sighed, bending just a bit lower and taking the smooth skin of my neck in his teeth, sucking softly.

The effect was instant. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of his tongue on me, aware of the goosebumps that formed all along my body. It was a light bite that brought my mind back to its normal function and I pushed Jamie away, trying to catch my breath. He looked at me through incredulous, wide eyes and I realized that my reaction wasn’t self-explained. “You’ll give me a
hickey!” I said, pointing at my neck, white and exposed.

“Ye’re giving me the hardest night of the year, Sassenach.” Jamie said, and took my hand, placing it where his belt buckle met his kilt, cocking an eyebrow.

*Message delivered.*

I knew this dress was good. The A line, the tight waist, and most of all the square neckline, boosting my boobs just so. “I promise I’ll make it up to you,” I whispered in his ear. “At some point.”

Jamie groaned, half frustrated, half hopeful and I took his hand, moving us both towards the kitchen and Jenny, who had been too silent herself.

–

The guests arrived on time.

The door opened to reveal the first arrival, the sweetest looking woman I’ve ever seen. Ian’s mom, Anne, entered the door with a motherly, warm smile and her hands full with a huge platter of haggis. She greeted everyone cheerily and walked straight to the kitchen, calling to Ian to not dally about but bring the ‘neeps and tatties’ along. A minute later she came out again, to kiss and hug each one of us.

She stopped in front of me, her light brown eyes crinkled in a smile.

“This is Claire Beauchamp,” I heard Jamie introducing me. “My girlfriend,” he added, and stood a bit straighter, his full height making us all look like dwarfs.

Anne Murray glanced at him, and I thought she wanted to ruffle his head as if he was five years old or so. With the smile never leaving her face she looked at me again, enveloping me in a huge hug. “Welcome, honey,” she said, and her voice ran right through my skin, finding my heart and nestling there, for she really meant it.

Ian’s father was less affectionate, but his genuine smile was proof that he shared his wife’s feelings.

*So far so good.*

The doorbell rang again five minutes later, and Murtagh entered the house followed by Mrs. Crook and her two thirteen-year-old twins, who seemed rather unhappy about being at this particular gathering. They had the face I had, when Lamb took me along to meetings at the university. Murtagh on the other hand, had one of the least grumpy faces I’d ever seen on him. Not that he was cheerful, but his eyes were a bit more slanted and his lips were tugged up just a tiny bit. I guessed that this was as jolly as Murtagh could go.

We were seated in the parlor when the MacNabs arrived. Bridget MacNab was thin and pompous. Her hair was coiffed in perfection, her makeup professional. She was so stiff that I wondered rather unhappy about being at this particular gathering. They had the face I had, when Lamb took me along to meetings at the university. Murtagh on the other hand, had one of the least grumpy faces I’d ever seen on him. Not that he was cheerful, but his eyes were a bit more slanted and his lips were tugged up just a tiny bit. I guessed that this was as jolly as Murtagh could go.

We were seated in the parlor when the MacNabs arrived. Bridget MacNab was thin and pompous. Her hair was coiffed in perfection, her makeup professional. She was so stiff that I wondered how she could be friends with Anne Murray. She came through the door carrying only her tiny bag, and I saw her husband behind her, his hands full of bags. Bridget kissed Jamie while praising him for his looks and gently pushed her daughter in front of her, so she could greet him too.

Mary MacNab was the exact opposite of her mother. Shy and quiet, she moved reluctantly towards Jamie who hugged her, leaving her even more blushed than she already was. I didn’t take my eyes away from the two of them, observing how he moved around her, trying to find something to lash out at him for. Anything that would reveal the slightest hint of attraction.

I found nothing.
Victorious, I stayed fixed in my place next to Lamb, waiting for the next round of introductions. The MacNab family of four, was split in two halves, I noticed. Mary and her father, Michael, always moved timidly behind Bridget and her son, who had breathed almost all the air out of the room in a few minutes.

Lamb got up from his chair and ceremoniously introduced himself and me. “I’m Lambert Beauchamp and this is my niece, Claire,” he said. “The Frasers were gracious enough to have us here at Lallybroch for Hogmanay this year.”

“It’s our pleasure, Lamb.” Jamie’s dad raised a glass of whisky to uncle Lamb, who followed suit.

I saw Jamie struggling to fit in the conversation, and I was sure he wanted to somehow add that we were there because I was his girlfriend.

“It’s lovely to meet you, dear.” Bridget MacNab said to me with half a smile and moved to talk to Anne.

“Hi, Claire, is it?” He was tall and dark and he was standing close in front of me. Too close, if you’d ask me.

“Yes, Claire. And you are…”

“Benjamin. But you can call me Ben.” He said that as if it was a huge honor for me. His eyes didn’t leave mine and his stare was too intense for my liking.

“Nice to meet you, Ben.” I said and turned towards his sister who was standing next to him, studying me. “And you’re Mary?” I said with a smile. A real one, now that I had assessed the threat.

“Aye,” she smiled. “Nice to meet ye, Claire.”

“So, Claire,” Ben spoke again somehow disturbed that the spotlight wasn’t on him. “How come you and your uncle are spending Hogmanay here?”

“Claire is my girlfriend.”

I didn’t know when he’d come, but Jamie was now standing next to me, looking down at Ben from the few inches he had in advantage. His voice was cold somber, and I felt his fingers reaching for mine.

Claiming your territory, Fraser?

I smiled at his reaction and interlaced my fingers with his long ones, seeing Benjamin - Ben - looking nervously at us. Mary just bit her lip, lowering her stare for a moment, only to bring it up to us once more and smile.

She was a kind person and I felt sorry for her crushed feelings, but instinctively I scooted closer to Jamie.

Claiming your territory, Beauchamp?

The night wore on with laughter and stories, delicious food, and a lot of Fraser whisky for the adults. We, the kiddos as they once called us, had access only to the beer. Not that we complained.

I was eating my sixth shortbread cookie when Brain Fraser checked his watch and stood up.
announcing that the New Year would be here in less than a minute. All conversations stopped, and I swallowed the cookie a bit too fast, feeling its crumbs graze my throat. Just before I started coughing, Jamie materialized a glass of water out of thin air and passed it to me, smiling at my surprised face. With a shrug he handed me the glass and I had just swallowed a big gulp of water when the pendulum clock on the parlor’s wall stroke twelve and everybody started singing.

“Shid ald akwentans bee firgot,

an nivir brocht ti mynd?

Shid ald akwentans bee firgot,

an ald lang syn?”

I looked at Lamb who looked back at me with a delightful smile, and we joined the Scots with our outlandish English accents.

“For auld lang syne, my dear,

for auld lang syne,

we’ll take a cup of kindness yet,

for auld lang syne.”

Jamie took my hand in his and turned his head to face me. We looked at each other, transfixed, as we mouthed the same words in different accents, distinct but together, mingling to create a new mold that held us both, united.

“And surely you’ll buy your pint cup!

and surely I’ll buy mine!

And we’ll take a cup o’ kindness yet,

for auld lang syne.”

The song went on and I felt my heart swell and my eyes tear up. That was it. That was what holidays were supposed to be. Celebrating with the people you belong with.

“And thers a han, my trustee feer!” Jamie pressed my finger between his.

“And give me a hand o’ thine!” I grinned, risking the letting of a tear or two run down my cheeks, and pressed him back.

“And we’ll take a right good-will draught,

for auld lang syne.”

The song ended and all I wanted was to kiss him. To start the year with his lips on mine, having him as close as possible.

And that was exactly what I did.

It wasn’t the passionate kiss I ached for, but it was the best we could have under the circumstances. Soft, tender and full of love.
“Happy New Year, Sassenach.” Jamie whispered with a smile.

“Happy New Year, Jamie.” I said, lost in the blue of his eyes and I felt him pulling me closer to him.

I left Jamie’s hug reluctantly, to exchange good wishes with uncle Lamb and everyone else.

A loud knock on the door hushed us all and Brian walked cheerily towards the door, with everyone else behind.

Jamie, seeing my questioning glance, started to explain as we walked towards the corridor. “Tis the first footing, Sassenach. A tall, dark-haired man comes to the house bringing gifts and good wishes for the new year.”

“Tall and dark-haired?” I asked looking at the men around me.

“Ian’s da.” Jamie winked at me. “It’s consider bad luck if the man is red-headed, ken.”

“Not for me.” I said with a cheeky smile and marveled in seeing the color on his cheeks intensify.

John Murray was tall – but shorter than Brian and Jamie – with black hair and dark brown eyes. He gave various little gifts for the house’s prosperity to Jamie’s dad, who gave him back a tumbler of whisky. We all raised our glasses then, and a succession of loud and joyful ‘Sláinte!’ filled the hallway.

I’d turned on my heels to go back to the parlor when Jamie stopped me, keeping me where we were standing.

“What?” I asked with a frown, and he put his index finger between my eyebrows, easing the crinkle that formed there.

“Another tradition,” he said, shrugging with an innocent face. “This one is like a game. Ye’ll see.” He winked at me and walked out of the house.

In less than a minute all men had gathered outside the manor, while all women remained inside. Jenny came to my side, quickly explaining what we were supposed to do. “Each single woman spins about in the house, then closes her eyes and walks through the door. She then spins again and opens her eyes. The man she sees first is the one she’ll marry.”

I couldn’t fathom how the down-to-earth realist Jenny Fraser believed in that stuff, and I looked at her with raised eyebrows before commenting on the game. Jenny laughed, adding, “It’s to see what the New Year might bring! Come on! Tis fun!”

She went first, standing in front of the door and she span about, her dark blue dress billowing around her knees. Closing her eyes, she walked out with a broad smile – and Anne’s help - spun once more and opened them again, only to see Peter Crook looking at her scared.

“Sorry mate!” Ian apologized, walking with fast strides towards Jenny. “The lass is taken.” He kissed her on the cheek, bringing a content smile to her face, and making the rest of us laugh.

I couldn’t tell if Peter Crooked was relieved or offended.

“Come on, Claire!” Jenny shouted from Ian’s hug and I took a deep breath, excited and terrified all at once.

Two warm hands landed on my shoulders and I heard Anne’s low voice prompting me to go

It’s just a game.

As I walked close to the door, I peeked outside and saw that Jamie was on the left side, looking at me with a smile, his fingers moving restless on his thigh. Next to him was Ben MacNab and my last thought before I started spinning was that I needed to avoid him like the plague.

Left. Stop when you’ll be facing at the left.

I spun inside the house, crossed the door and spun once again.

Shit. There goes my orientation.

I took a moment before opening my eyes.

Left. Face towards the left side.

I knew that it didn’t mean anything if I didn’t see him, but for a weird reason I needed to open my eyes and find him looking at me, with that soft smile that made me weak in the knees.

Please, let it be Jamie, let it be Jamie.

I opened my eyes slowly, afraid of whom I’d see, but there he was. Tall, with his broad shoulders and the Fraser colors, looking back at me. He didn’t have the soft smile I expected, though. He had his mischievous lopsided one, that quickly disappeared when our eyes locked and he looked at me seriously, as if the moment was too important to make fun of it.

And then I saw it. Ben was no more on Jamie’s right side, but on the left. The little scam had switched places with him so that I’d see him first!

And that was the best omen the New Year could bring. We’d do everything to be together, no matter what.

In that year which would bring so many changes to our lives, we’d always find a way to each other.
A New Year brings hope. It brings the possibility of change, tightly linked to new goals that no one remembers come the beginning of February.

The first night of the year you take a step into the future, where everything becomes possible. And you celebrate that. The endless soapy bubbles of happiness that float around, waiting for you to decide which one you will break with your extended index finger. Which one will burst, its contents sprinkled around you, illuminating your path.

What makes that night even more magical is that you don’t have to choose a bubble, not at that moment. That night you can just stare with a smile at every single opportunity, alluring in front of your tipsy brain, feeling that you have the future in your hands, in the little touch of your finger that will change everything.

I understood that idea of infinite possibilities, the moment Jamie’s face came level with mine, a hand on the small of my back, his hot breath on my neck rising a riot in my body.

“When everyone falls asleep, come to my room.” At my terrified glance, he just smiled and kissed my cheek, whispering, “I’ll wait for ye.”
With that he left, walking to stand next to the fireplace where Ian and Ben were laughing.

*Come to my room.*

I hardly remembered participating in any conversation from that point on, until the guests left and we dragged our feet up to our rooms, tired and happy.

It wasn’t until I was alone in front of my room’s mirror that I forgot my weariness, the panic rising inside me like a whirlwind, taking feeling and thoughts and swirling them around so fast that I could do nothing but stare them with shallow breaths.

*Now what?*

Jamie and I hadn’t managed to be alone in a room since the previous day, when I arrived at Lallybroch. It felt like ages since that short encounter behind my room’s closed door. But now, the whole night would be ours. Ditching my high heels, I paced back and forth in my room, the questions and suppositions prickling the soles of my feet, spurring me to keep going.

Jamie had never seen me naked. Touched me, felt me, yes. Over and under clothes. More than once. But we never had a place where we could undress, and he had never seen my body. Doubt crept beneath my wall of trust, liquid and sly, leaving stains of uncertainty all over my confidence.

*Will he like my body? Will my skin be too pale for his taste? Will he mind the stretch marks on my inner thighs?*

I felt the panic rising with every passing minute and I wished I could splash my face with water to cleanse my thoughts. Damned makeup. I wanted to wander outside, to breathe in some cool air together with fresh thoughts. But that would raise suspicions.

I wished I could be perfect, but I wasn’t.

Looking myself over in the mirror, a few stray curls escaping their pins, I imagined his hand as he’d stroke them behind my ear. He always did that, before running a thumb over my freckled cheekbones.

No, I wasn’t perfect. And yet, he wanted me. I felt it every day, every time he reached for me. In the way his eyes lingered on mine, uttering silent words. In the way our fingers found a way to graze, to touch, to grasp.

He wanted me. And I wanted him. But it was something more than that. I trusted him with my desire, I trusted him to see me safe.

With a deep breath, I walked to the door, trying to listen if the house had quieted down.

Silence.

*How much time had passed since we’d said goodnight?*

I reached for the door handle with a trembling hand. Slowly, silently, I opened the door to my room and walked on tiptoes across the hallway, feeling the thick carpet swallow my toes, marking my path to Jamie’s room. I stopped in front of his closed door, wondering if I was supposed to knock. With a final deep inhale I opened his door and almost - almost - froze in the doorway.

Candles were spread all around the room, little flames flickering, dispersing their soft light on the walls and furniture. My eyes scanned the dark wood surfaces and stopped at the open space in front
of Jamie’s bed, on a heart made of white candles with our initials on each side, red rose petals scattered around.

“Jamie…” I whispered as I entered the room, carefully closing the door behind me.

“Sassenach,” he acknowledged me in a low voice, his eyes hidden in the shadows where he stood, next to the wide window.

I walked towards him, mindful of the candles, and wrapped an arm around his waist, my hand slowly trailing up to the nape of his neck. Without words, I brought his mouth down to me, taking his bottom lip between mine, kissing him softly. I gently sucked and my tongue darted forward, tracing his tender lip until his mouth opened to me, allowing the kiss to deepen. I needed that, I needed to somehow convey my feelings of utter happiness to him.

“I love you,” I whispered into his mouth, and the word bounced around the room, dancing over the candles, infiltrating the shadows. It was the first time that I had said it aloud and my heart beat harder after each word.

“I love you too, mo ghraidh.” Jamie pressed his forehead against mine, his eyes dark, staring deep into my own. “More than you could ever imagine.”

The passion held in our hearts snuck into our kisses, our need and desire expanding in a logarithmic scale. Jamie’s fingers moved to my hair and I placed a hand on his toned chest, nails grazing the sculpted body above his shirt, eliciting grunts from him.

When my fingers bypassed the belt that held his kilt, Jamie made a small protest, one that was quickly silenced when he felt my hand tracing up his thigh. My fingers stopped their wandering abruptly when I realized I hadn’t encountered his boxers like I usually did.

A true Scotsman?

His only answer to my raised eyebrow was a lopsided smile and a slight shrug, before he dipped into my neck, nipping me softly. Both of Jamie’s hands were on my butt, pressing and massaging me, and I resumed the movements of my fingers, tracing with featherlight touches his pubic area, but avoiding his cock. I continued my teasing, touching him lightly, until Jamie exhaled loudly against my collarbone, pulling me towards him with such force that I lost my balance. His strong arms kept me upright and he continued his elaborate work on my neck now that our bodies were even closer, licking and sucking so hard that I momentarily wondered if I had brought enough turtlenecks with me for the rest of my stay. He wiggled his body against me, searching for any kind of friction, with my hand or my body, but I avoided him with a laugh.

“Ye said you’d make it up to me,” he murmured. “Ye dinna think I was tortured enough all night long? Wanting to have my hands on your bare skin, wanting to listen to your breath when I touch you?”

His words ran through my skin, making my blood boil in my veins, and I moved my hand to his erection, feeling the urge to touch him as much as he did, a moan leaving my mouth together with his when my fingers wrapped around his large, hard cock.

I stroked him, slowly and laboriously, reveling in the feel of evoking so many feelings in him. Jamie groaned loudly before he stopped my hand, bringing his head up from my neck. His hair was ruffled, locks falling over his forehead and eyes and he took me by the hand, leading me to the double bed in a backwards dance, until his knees found the mattress and he sat, pulling me between his open legs.
I heard the sound of my dress’ zipper and swallowed hard, trying to quiet down my crazy heart. We would be completely naked. We would look at each other’s bodies for the first time.

Don’t make a fuss over it.

Jamie continued his ministrations, pressing kisses on my collarbones and the skin that was exposed by the square neckline of my dress. When all the coil teeth of my zipper had popped open, he took my hands in his, extended our arms over my head, then bringing his back down he lifted my dress off slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. I could see our chests moving together, every synchronized breath leaving the room with less oxygen.

The sound of my dress hitting the floor was covered by Jamie’s gasp when he saw me only in my black bra and red panties.

“Ah Dhia,” he breathed and stood transfixed for a moment, watching me, before he pulled me towards him again. “Have I ever told you that ye’ll be the death of me?”

“Mmm, I think so.”

Jamie shook his head but his eyes were full of wonder when he let his fingers run over my black lace bra, feeling my erect nipples underneath the thin fabric. Licking his lips, he unclasped my bra, wrapped two fingers around the straps, and threw it on the bed behind him. His gaze moved from my face to my breasts and in a matter of seconds he had my nipple in his mouth, licking it softly. I arched my body against him instinctively, and he started biting and sucking in response, moving his fingers to tease my other, neglected nipple.

My moan was answered by a groan that vibrated through my skin, leaving me only wanting more. I wove my fingers into his locks and closed my eyes, focusing on the feeling that put my body on fire. It was marvelous. But it wasn’t enough.

With my hand still in his hair I straddled him and jerked his head up to press my mouth on the lips that sucked my nipple a moment ago. Jamie’s hands moved to my thighs, tracing the pale skin, tracing the stretch marks, tracing everything I was and cherishing it. The feeling of fingers running on a finished painting, the colors dry, recognizing each stroke used to draw its story. Unable to control myself, I unbuttoned his shirt, aching to feel his chest’s heat beneath my fingertips, to run a nail over his nipple and listen to his growl.

I whimpered when I felt his tongue leaving mine, and I was ready to claim his mouth again when he smiled against the small hollow between my collarbones. Ready to take revenge, I leaned towards his neck and sucked him hard, taking my time, making sure to mark him as mine while I started grinding myself against him over his kilt.

His breathing became heavy and he groaned, lying on his back with closed eyes, leaving me kneeling above him.

Jamie gripped my waist and opened his eyes slowly, looking at me in silence.

“That’s the most beautiful view I’ve ever seen,” he said with his dark blue eyes running over my body, following the paths and shadows carved by the soft candlelight all over my skin. “Come here”, he pleaded, and I lowered my body on top of him, his lips opening instantly to the feel of my tongue. Our kiss became hungry and I got drunk on his scent, his taste, the low growls that left his mouth directed to mine. Maneuvering my body to unbuckle his belt and free us from his kilt that was in the way, I moved my hips against him, feeling my wetness spreading over him, making him twitch, sleek
against me.

Jamie wrapped an arm around my waist and with a fast move he flipped us over and started kissing my body, his tongue flicking and his teeth nipping the softness of my breasts and my stomach while his fingers were teasingly trailing a path from my knees, to the inside of my thighs, up to my core. When his tongue and fingers met just above my wetness, he put a hand on each thigh, opening my legs. Instinctively, I tried to close my legs again, and jerk his head up with a harsh pull of his hair.

I was exposed in a way that I couldn’t control, and I wasn’t disposed to risk that much by letting him go down there. I felt self-conscious and vulnerable, the idea of not seeing his eyes and expressions, not knowing how he felt, waking a new fear inside my heart.

Jamie didn’t let me close my legs. He raised his eyes to meet mine and I saw the dark blue becoming warm again, drawing my attention from my thoughts back to him.

“Ye dinna trust me, mo chridhe?” he asked in a low voice, sprinkled with a sadness I didn’t expect to hear.

“I do,” I answered simply, because that was the truth. “It’s just-“

Jamie moved quickly to come above me and kissed me soundly.

“It’s just the two of us, babe. I want to taste ye. I want to. If ye dinna like it, I’ll stop, aye?”

“Aye,” I sighed, and felt him going down on me again. One hand found mine and our fingers intertwined instantly, while his other hand pushed my panties down my legs, freeing me of the extra fabric.

When Jamie’s tongue touched my clit, a current ran through my body, making me open my legs even more to him. A moan that I couldn’t control left my lips and I raised my head to watch him, to make sure that he liked it, that he liked me.

Seeing Jamie’s tousled hair between my thighs made me feel even more aroused. When his eyes met mine, his stare vibrant and intense, the dark blue unable to hide his lust behind it, I felt my body relaxing.

“Ye’re sweet, Sassenach,” he said and I shuddered, feeling his breath against my wet clit. “I want to eat ye whole.”

I couldn’t reply, just run a hand through his red locks and felt his hand on my mouth.

“Christ, Claire,” he whispered. “Dinna be so loud, they’ll hear us.”

*So loud? I didn’t even realize that I made a noise.*

Turning my face towards the fluffy pillow that was next to my head, I muffled my moans in its lavender scent, while Jamie worked me both with his fingers and his tongue, raising my body to his touch until I could feel nothing else but my need for him, the need to fill me, the need to take me with him while my body was shaking and trembling, my vagina contracting against his long fingers.

It took me a while to come back to myself and realize where I was. Jamie was lying on top of me, with his head between my breasts.

“Was I loud?” I asked him, terrified.
“Nah,” he said with a smile. “Pillow did a great job.”

“And how are you?” I asked, his erection evident against my body.

“Happy,” he sighed just above my heart.

*What did I do to deserve him?*

Jamie looked at me and moved to kiss me, hovering over my body. A gasp escaped both our mouths when his tip grazed over my clit, posing a question that remained unanswered in the air, our bodies’ responses pressing for us to decide.

Before he had time to say anything out loud, I smiled at him, trying to look as alluring as I could when I said, “My turn.”

I rolled over him and ran my nails down his chest, stopping at his nipple and bending my head to lick it lightly, before continuing towards his cock, licking and biting his golden skin, feeling how the muscles underneath contracted at my touch. As I got close to his erection I grazed the inside of his thighs, reveling in the goosebumps I left behind and in the hardness of his cock, waiting for me.

“Please,” he said with a heavy breath and I moved my tongue along his shaft, from the bottom to the top, before taking the sleek tip in my mouth.

A loud groan, deep and guttural, left Jamie’s mouth and I stopped, looking at him with a smile.

“Pillow,” I said, and bent again, feeling him shifting to bury his face in the pillow that had captured my breaths some minutes ago.

I curled my fingers around his cock and started stroking him, flicking my tongue over his tip. Jamie’s weaved his fingers in my curls, pushing me lightly towards him and I breathed in deeply before taking him in my mouth, as deep as I could.

The pillow did nothing to cover that moan.

I kept stroking and sucking him, feeling his fingers against the back of my head, hearing his heavy breaths. Removing my hand, I took him in my mouth again and moved my head slowly, trying to breathe in from my nose without disrupting my rhythm. It was more difficult than I thought it would be, but the power I had on him was like a drug, and I was beaming with the triumph of pleasing him.

He tried to pull me off his cock at some point, but I didn’t let go, and it was not long after that when the muscles of his thighs got hard and he spilled himself in my mouth.

I didn’t know what to do for a moment, but seeing as I had no other choice, I swallowed.

“I’m sweet, you’re salty.” I said with a smile and moved to lie by his side.

“Why didn’t you…” He started but stopped, trying to find the right words even though I knew what he wanted to say. “We could…”

“We could.” I replied, not saying the three-lettered-word myself. We could have had sex. “But I wanted this. Did you like it?”

“Are ye kidding me, Sassenach? I thought my heart was gonna burst.”

I laughed at that, thinking how similar that was to what I’d felt. We stayed silent for a while, and I wasn’t sure if he was still awake when I spoke again.
“Jamie?”

“Mmm?”

“I want it, it’s not that I don’t. It’s just that … Can we wait a bit more?”

“We can wait as long as we want, mo ghraidh. I want ye more than anything else – ye ken that. I canna keep my hands off ye. But I dinna mind waiting. I just want to be wi’ ye.”

I kissed him softly on the shoulder, a sigh leaving my lips.

“And promise me, when this does happen, we’ll need no pillows.”

Jamie laughed and moved to his side to kiss me. He wrapped us both in the duvet and I cuddled against him, feeling his warm chest on my back and his big hand on my breast.

“I promise ye, Sassenach. When we make love for the first time, I’ll let ye make all the wee sounds that drive me crazy.”

When we’d make love for the first time, we would be alone. And we wouldn’t have to hide.
New addition to my “Top 10 Best Things In The World” list: Falling asleep in Jamie’s arms.

Reason: Because sleeping with the arms of the person you love wrapped around you feels like nothing else. It’s a hug that lasts for hours; it keeps you warm, safe, and secure.

I couldn’t get enough of it.

And waking up to Jamie’s voice was the best alarm clock I could ever imagine.

Hearing his whisper – though I had no idea what he’d said – mingling with the colors of my dream, trailing shapes like a soft breeze, put a huge smile on my face.

This is perfect.

I was expecting to open my eyes and find him looking at me, whispering beautiful things, the sunlight softly kissing his auburn locks, and little hearts emanating from his head. Or something similar. Heart eyes at the very least.

You know, like it is in movies.
Instead, Jamie’s arms and the feel of his chest under my cheek were the only things going according to the plan. No sweet whispers. No kisses. Not even a hoarse ‘good morning’ or the sun entering the room. Everything was dark and I just wanted to go back to sleep.

“Sassenach! Wake up!”

“Wake up?” I repeated, still half asleep, my eyes feeling heavy.

“Aye. Grab a brush and put a little makeup.” Jamie chuckled, amused by himself. I didn’t even have the energy to roll my eyes, so I ignored both him and his joke and just snuggled closer into his chest, trying to remember the dream interrupted by his whisper. Jamie, however, was determined to keep me up and with a large hand on my back, he started lightly shaking me.

“What?”

“Ye have to leave, mo chridhe!”

“Why?”

“Christ! Will ye please wake up and start thinking? Ye’re in my room!”

_I am in Jamie’s room._

“Yes, of course I’m in your room. I came here last night,” I murmured and wrapped an arm over his stomach. “Now let me sleep. Five more minutes.”

_Five more minutes, that will lead to five more, and five more. I know how to do this._

“Claire…” This time his whisper came with a kiss on the forehead.

Jamie using my name was never a good omen.

I finally opened my eyes and kissed him on his collar bone before putting my chin right next to it.

“Are you okay?”

Jamie took a deep breath with closed eyes, and let the air leave his body, coming out in three words.

“More than okay.” He smiled, then continued, “I woke up wi’ ye in my arms, mo chridhe. Tis perfect. Even better than I thought it would be.”

“I know,” I murmured against his skin, holding him tighter.

“And I don’t want you to go, babe, I really don’t, but you have to.” He brushed a few stray curls from my face, giving me a sad smile. “They canna find us here.”

I knew he was right, and with a kiss on his chest I put a hand on the mattress to prop myself up. I was naked, but I didn’t feel the urge to hide my body as I’d seen the women do in the movies. I wasn’t embarrassed. We wanted to share our bodies, our lust, our love, to let the other know us whole. In our strongest and our weakest moments. And we had done just that. We trusted ourselves to the other, to see us safe. And pleased – more than pleased. Plus, walking around like a Greek goddess wrapped up in the sheets didn’t seem practical at all.

I was starting to scan the room in search for my clothes, when Jamie trapped my hand in his, pulling me back to him.
“Eeee!”

“One last kiss,” came his answer, breathy, with the hint of a smile. The smile grew and crashed against mine, our tongues finding each other in a matter of seconds. I almost straddled him, but realized that the longer I stayed, the more probable it was that we’d wake the whole house. With a last bite on his bottom lip, I left the bed, trying to remember where my panties were. Jamie laid there still, naked, first with a pout on his face and then with a glint in his eyes that I knew all too well.

“Will you come and help me?” I asked with a raised eyebrow, “I can’t find my bra, because apparently, you couldn’t just leave it on the bed.”

“I dinna think I had a mind for things like that at that moment.” He mumbled, getting up in search of the black lace undergarment.

“Can we turn the lights on?”

“Hell no! Are ye crazy, Sassenach?” He looked at me in the dark with, I guessed, incredulous eyes. “I’ll use my phone.”

It took us an insanely long time to find my dress and underwear. In the meantime, Jamie found his boxers tangled in the sheets on the bed and threw them back on. My panties were somewhere under the bed, so I opted for going commando back to my room. I was next to the door when Jamie stopped me again, asking for ‘one last kiss’.

“I thought the previous one was the last!” I said with a cocky smile.

“Aye, this one is the last-last.” He smiled in response and kissed me again, the pull between us too strong to ignore.

“I’ll see you in a few hours, you know,” I whispered, cupping his face when our lips parted.

Jamie nodded, and ran a hand through his locks.

“Dream of me?” He asked, somehow shy, all of the sudden.

“Will do.” I kissed him once more – the last-last-last time, I supposed – and left his room.

Walking a ridiculously small distance in a hallway at 5:30 in the morning seems like a an easy thing to do and not be caught.

Unless you’re at Lallybroch.

The light coming from Brian Fraser’s closed door was enough to knock the breath out of me. With my panties well hidden in my fist, I swallowed hard and started walking to my room with my head down.

*Please stay in your room for a few more seconds. Please, please please.*

The moment I reached my door, I heard a door open from behind. I entered my room without looking back, praying that whoever it was, he hadn’t seen me.

*Sassenach: Did you just open your door?*

*Scot: No. Shit.*

*Sassenach: AAAAAAAAAAAAAA My thoughts exactly.*
Scot: lol Don’t worry, aye?

Sassenach: The lights in your dad’s room were on.

Scot: It’s done now. Most likely he dinna see ye. Sleep, Sassenach. We’ll find out in the morning. Or better yet, we wouldn’t.

It took almost an hour to get rid of the adrenaline high and drift back to sleep.

–

The next morning, I walked down the stairs wishing that my uncle and Brian Fraser would be in the office again. To my relief, the only people in the living room were Jamie and Ian, watching videos on YouTube. With a quick kiss to Jamie I headed to the kitchen, wanting to drink a whole tank of water. Jenny was there, with a half-full glass in hand.

“Haggis,” she said, raising her glass as if in a toast.

“I know! I’m so thirsty!” I opened the cabinet above the sink, searching for the biggest glass.

“This is my millionth glass of water, actually,” Jenny chuckled. “I came down twice during the night because I woke up thirsty.”

I almost choked. Unable to speak, I just nodded.

“Twas quite active, in the house last night.” She continued, and I pondered whether I should look at her or keep drinking water forever. “After we went to bed, I mean.”

There was a smile in her voice that I couldn’t ignore.

“It was you?” Jenny’s raised eyebrows gave me the answer I needed, and her laugh soon confirmed it.

Just Jenny. Thank god.

“So?” Jenny looked at me, waiting for more details.

“So?” I asked, faking ignorance.

“Did ye do it?”

Typical Jenny Fraser. Right to the point.

“No,” I replied quickly, feeling my cheeks burn crimson.

Water. More water.

“Aye, twas not verra noisy, last night. Although I think I heard some strange noises…”

“Jenny!” I looked at her with wide eyes, and she laughed at my expression.

“I didna hear anything, I’m teasing ye. This house has solid walls,” she added with a wink.

“Have you and Ian?” I asked, feeling more relaxed now that I knew she was okay talking about it.

“No. Not yet, anyway.” She made a gesture with her hand, as if this was a decision she didn’t fully
agree with. “I think it’ll be great,” she added with a sigh.

“I guess so…”

“I mean, the first time, wi’ the lad ye love. It’s the right thing, aye?”

“Yes,” I agreed with a smile. “It’s right. Aren’t you at all afraid?”

“Sometimes when I overthink everything, yes, I am. But then, we know what to do - more or less. We’ve done our homework,” she smiled with mischief, winking at me.

“Maybe you’ll do it first, and then tell me about it.” I raised an eyebrow and she blushed a little.

“Ah, we’ll see. Ian really wants to wait. For what, I dinna ken.” Jenny shrugged, filling her glass with water again. “Anyway, we’ve done other… stuff.”

“Yes, we’ve done other stuff too.”

Jenny rolled her eyes but smiled. “Don’t ye tell! The wee dolt I have as a brother canna take his hands off ye.”

Laughing, and with our glasses full, we walked back to the living room, where I noticed Jamie wasn’t the only ‘wee dolt’. Ian was looking at Jenny as if she held the world in her hands.

We all huddled together on the big couch, laptop on the table, and watched funny videos until Lamb and Brian came to find us extremely happy and hungry.

–

Time had a different pace at Lallybroch. It didn’t fly by, it didn’t rush. I was in search of a distraction in the afternoon when Brian Fraser proposed I go to his office and pick a book from the library. It was that or rereading, for the hundredth time, one of the Harry Potter books I’d seen in Jamie’s room. Since it was the beginning of a new year, I thought it would be better to try something new.

I’m sorry, Harry.

Brian Fraser had an impressive library, with shelves full of history books – a few of them stacked on a table, most probably by Lamb – and many about economics, management, and finance that I passed by without giving them a second glance.

This is what Jamie will read in uni.

And then, there they were. Fiction. Millions of worlds waiting to be discovered. Brian Fraser had a large collection of the classics and I found myself standing indecisive in front of the book shelves.

“A lot of these were my mom’s.” Jamie was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed in front of his chest, watching me.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to hear you huff and not spare a second glance at the books about economics.”

“That’s for you to read.” My raised eyebrow didn’t have the effect I was expecting on him. His eyes clouded, and his gaze left my eyes to run along the burgundy carpet.

“What?” I walked to him, placing a hand on his chest and bending my head so he could see me. He
laughed at my childish move and pulled me closer to him, inhaling deeply. “Tell me?”

“Nothing.”

“Hey…”

“Tis nothing, really. I just don’t see myself enjoying reading these books more than you would, Sassenach.” Jamie sighed, and placed a kiss on my forehead.

“But the distillery…”

“Aye, I ken. I have to, if I want to continue the business.”

“And do you want to?”

Jamie shrugged, and I knew that he wasn’t ready to talk about this. Having no other means to help, I pulled him closer to me, hoping that the mere presence of my body next to his would hold some power to make him feel better.

“So what did you choose to read?” he asked after a while, obviously changing subject. His gaze was on the book I’d left on Brian’s desk.

“Charles Dickens, the Christmas stories,” I said with a shrug, feeling totally predictable.

“Oh, I like *The Cricket on the Hearth*,” Jamie moved to pick up the book and smiled at me over his shoulder, reaching for my hand. “Even more than *A Christmas Carol*, actually.”

“I have to read it, then.” Standing next to him, I took the book from his hand and was about to open it to find the story, when something on Brian’s desk caught my attention. “Jamie, what’s that?” He followed my gaze, and when he saw the object in question, he snorted. It was a body lotion, in a beautiful vase that resembled the Fraser whisky bottle.

“This is ‘Ellen’s body lotion,’” he said while I squinted, trying to read the label. “See, my ma had her own series of body lotions.”

“She did?” I asked surprised and Jamie reached for the vase to give it to me.

“Aye, she had five different ones. Like the Fraser whiskies. Like the Frasers.” I took the vase from his hand, placing a kiss on his bicep.

“Almond,” I said, inhaling deeply. “It’s so good!”

“Twas hers. Ma was almond. She always smelled like it and Da made a whisky wi’ almond notes for her. And then came the body lotion.”

“And he keeps it here to remember her?”

“I dinna think tis to remember her. He had one of these vases here from the first night after ma died. I think he keeps it here to feel her around.”

I left the lotion on the desk, feeling like an intruder, not entitled to knowing Ellen’s scent.

“I couldna understand him in the beginning. Twas pointless, she was gone and she would never come back. A stupid body lotion wouldna bring her back.” I placed a hand on his cheek bringing his eyes to me, trying to take a bit of his heartbreak away. “I understand him now, ye ken,” Jamie continued with his voice broken, the almond scent that enveloped us not enough to mend his
wounds. “He missed her. And I know now, because I have ye.”

“I know, baby, I know.” With fingers intertwined in his locks, I brought his mouth to mine, tasting his tears and his pain.

“I dinna want to lose ye, ever.” He said, more tears running down his cheeks. “I’ve lost enough people already, I dinna want to lose more. I dinna want to try to remember.”

“Shhh…” I soothed, cupping his face with both hands, trying not to think of scars that salves and creams could never erase. “I’m here. You’re here. We are all alive and well, aye?”

My Scottish made him laugh, and he turned his head to kiss the soft skin on the inside of my wrist. “I just miss her.”

“I know.”

“And I wish she could’ve been here to know ye.”

“I wish that too, love.”

I buried myself in his arms, feeling them tighten around me, and I silently promised to Ellen Fraser that I would take care of him. Her red-headed lad.

My red-headed lad.
Our Christmas vacation at Lallybroch was the perfect refresher before the home stretch of our final year, that included Jamie’s championship swim meet and our A levels.

The finish line for the two of us was Oxford. Together. One of the most prestigious universities in the world. And we had to make the grades to get there.

I needed at least an A in Chemistry and Biology or Physics, and Jamie needed at least an A in Mathematics. Plus the BioMedical Admissions Test I would take, to make myself much more appealing amongst the excellent candidate pool. Or I hoped it would.

The ominous possibility of failure was hanging over our heads, only a few thin threads keeping it from crashing down on top of us. With each mistake, a thread would be cut. We couldn’t afford a change of plans. We had to go to Oxford on scholarships – both of us. It would be the beginning of our new life.

My goals were merged with Jamie’s, and I found myself wishing for a future that I never imagined a few months before. We would move to another city, together. Not as students anymore, but as undergrads and without adults checking on us every so often – even though we had been really lucky with Lamb and Murtagh.

Jamie would go to Pembroke College. I would go to Lady Margaret Hall. Twenty four minutes on foot, a bit more than a mile away. We would be free to do what we wanted, to spend whole days together exploring the city, and others staying lazy in bed doing nothing. Both colleges provided accommodation, but we were already discussing finding jobs and moving into a place together. It was a dream. And it had to come true.

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My phone vibrated against my desk, and I rubbed my eyes before looking away from my notes, black dots dancing in front of my eyes.

Scot: I miss you.
Sassenach: I know, I miss you too.

Scot: I’m going to the pool.

Sassenach: Again?

Scot: Yes. Personal training. Coach said I need all the training I can get. Want to come by after?

Sassenach: Haven’t finished this chapter yet and I have another one after that. Plus the maths tests. Sorry.

Scot: I’m on the street across from your window. Can I at least see you for a sec?

With my heart pounding inside my chest and phone still in hand, I walked to the window. Jamie was leaning against a tree, tall and beautiful as ever. His face lit up with a smile when he saw me and I crossed my hands in front of my chest, smiling back. My phone vibrated again, and I reluctantly took my eyes off him, only to see our picture taking up all of my screen.

“I needed to hear yer voice, too,” he said once I answered, and I realized how much I had missed his voice. We saw each other only during lunch earlier and my day had been so different without him. I missed our walks, I missed being alone with him. Touching him. Tasting him. “And your smile. God, I missed your smile. And your lips…” His voice was getting lower and hoarser with each uttered word.

“Stop doing that, Jamie Fraser, or I’ll come down there, take you by those auburn curls of yours and…” I trailed of, unsure of what to say next.

“And?” I couldn’t see the details of his face from this distance, but I was sure there was a cocked eyebrow beneath the locks falling on his forehead.

“And… And kiss the hell out of you.” I finished, feeling my cheeks burning. We hadn’t even kissed properly today as we said goodbye after school in front of the whole gang.

“Come.” It wasn’t more than a whisper, but it went right through my body, a current that made my nerves stand on end.

“Baby…”

“Come. Just a kiss, I promise, and I’ll let you go back to studying.”

“How probable is that? And you’ll be late for your training.”

A long sigh came through the phone and I saw his shoulders slump. “That’s painful,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “I canna bear listening to ye, seeing ye and not touching ye.”

“Hey… You said you wanted to see me!”

“Yes, but now it’s all worse.”

“Jamie…”

“Promise me we’ll meet tomorrow, Sassenach.”

“I promise,” I said with a smile. “Now go break your personal record.”
“I love you, mo ghraidh.”

“Love you too,” I said and watched him leave with his hands in his pockets and his head bent. With half a heart, I went back to my chemistry notes, and it took me almost half an hour to focus my concentration again. I couldn’t stop thinking of him, regretting that I didn’t go out to steal just one kiss from him.

Over the next two hours – after I found my place again – I ended up being very productive, even though Jamie was constantly in the back of my mind. I checked my phone, seeing no new messages, and with a quick look at the wall clock I got dressed and announced to Lamb that I was going out “to clear my mind”. He gave me a knowing look, making it obvious that he was just pretending he believed me, and smiled.

_I’m not lying! I will clear my mind!_

Winter in Scotland didn’t play games. The wind hit my face and I pulled my beanie down, covering as much of my face as possible. My eternity scarf was up to my nose and I looked longingly towards the parked car, thinking how handy a car would come in at times like this. It would be great if I could drive, arriving at the swimming pool warm and dry, with my hair looking normal and not like my usual Albert Einstein hairstyle, curls messed after my bike ride. With these thoughts swirling around in my head, I rode my bike to the swimming pool, feeling like my hands would freeze and fall off the handlebars well before I arrived at my destination.

The swimming pool was full of older women getting ready for their water aerobics class.

_Was I too late?_

I was certain that Jamie would have texted me once he was finished with training, but had I been wrong?

Trying not to be noticed by the instructor who was now talking with three ladies on the other side of the pool, I snuck into the changing rooms, praying that they would be empty. Two of the women were walking out of the female locker room, and I smiled at them politely, feeling my heart pulsing in my chest. I could just text him and ask him where he was, but that would take away the surprise element of my visit.

_Oh, come on! He had an individual training session. He must be alone in there._

If he was in there, at all.

In that moment, waiting in the corridor and trying to hear for any voices coming from the men’s changing room, I decided to be bold. A surprise it would be. I would enter the room and if I found someone else inside, I could just say that I mistook the doors.

But if there was no one else inside…

With this thought and a last glance towards the hallway I pushed opened the door and stepped in. It was quiet, but the lights were still on. All the benches in front of me were empty and I padded quietly to the other side, keeping my steps as light as possible.

He was there, with his back turned to me, wearing only his black sweatpants. His hair was still wet and water droplets fell on his shoulders, rolling down his toned back. He searched his gym bag retrieving his phone, and a smile curled my lips up when I saw him texting and felt my phone vibrate
in my pocket. I walked silently up behind him, and without giving him a chance to see me, I swept a
droplet off his shoulder blade with the back of my index finger.

Jamie jolted up straight, turning immediately, a menacing hand suspended in the air.

“Christ, Sassenach!” He gasped once he took me in, and his hand moved to lay over his heart. “Ye
scared the shit out of me!”

“I wanted to surprise you,” I said, trying for my best imitation of a pout.

“Ah, that ye did.” Jamie shook his head and smiled, pulling me to him with two hands on my hips.
“What are ye doing here? I thought ye said ye had to study.”

“I did. I still do, but I reconsidered your request. I did enough studying for the day.”

“Mmm,” he said with a lopsided smile, leaning in to kiss me. My hands ran over the expanse of his
back and he jerked again, looking at me through wide eyes. “Yer hands are like icicles, Sassenach. If
ye don’t mind?” He captured my hands in his, making sure they’d stay away from his bare skin.

“So this is the ‘thank you’ I get after almost dying out in the cold to come find you.”

“Little exaggerated, don’t ye think?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No, I don’t! I better leave then.” I drew my hands from his and turned around, pretending to be
deeply offended.

“Come ‘ere,” Jamie murmured, grabbing my hand and pulling me back to him. “I can warm ye, can’t
I?”

“The least you could do,” I said, my tone still strict.

Jamie took my hands in his large ones, rubbing them softly and warming up with his breath. He
brought them to his lips then, placing a soft kiss on each hand. “Ye’re crazy,” he said with a satisfied
smile once he took me in, curls flying in every possible direction with the beanie off, cheeks flushed,
and a runny red nose from the cold. He kissed my forehead and my frozen nose before taking my
lips in his, a sigh leaving us both. “How I missed you,” he breathed on my lips and kissed me again,
his tongue tracing my bottom lip before finding mine.

My – warm now – hands were on his neck, twining into his hair and I felt his hands traveling down
to cup my butt, as he walked as both towards the lockers, pinning me against the metal surface.

“Ye’re wearing too many clothes,” he mumbled, trying to find the hem of my sweater.

“But your not,” I said with a naughty smile and turned us around, bringing his back level with the
locker. I removed my coat and scarf, trying not to take my eyes off him and then kissed him again,
starting from his mouth and travelling down his neck. His sharp inhale told me everything I needed
to know, and I sucked the tender skin, first softly and then eagerly, sure that I would leave a mark but
unable to stop.

“Sassenach,” he whispered, and I put a finger on his lips, silencing him.

Making sure that I had paid enough attention to his neck, my lips trailed down his collarbones and
then on to his nipple, nipping softly as I felt and heard his breaths becoming shallow and fast. I
grazed his chest with my nails, moving down to his stomach until I found the waistband of his
sweatpants. I pulled it down with both hands, and cupped him softly, reveling in the state I’d brought
him to. With a quick move I removed his black boxers and took him in my hand, stroking twice before I kneeled in front of him and licked.

“Ah Dhia,” Jamie whispered before one hand came to settle between my curls, the other sprawled against the locker behind him.

There was love and need in his eyes, mixed in a haze of lust, that made me want to give him even more. I took him in my mouth then, and heard him inhale sharply, and then groan, a sound that ran right through me to my core.

“Fraser?”

It came so unexpectedly that I didn’t believe my ears at first. I moved away from Jamie, who pulled his boxers and sweatpants up in a flash and walked towards the door in a desperate attempt to stop the man from entering the locker room any further.

Shit.

“Coach?” I heard him say, his voice still husky.

Please don’t come in. Please don’t come in.

I looked around, trying to find a place to hide.

How do people lock students in lockers in the movies?

There was barely enough space for Jamie’s stuff in that particular locker.

“What are ye doing lad?” The man asked while I was more concerned with finding a way out. “I was waiting for ye. We need to talk.”

“Ummm… Aye, coach. I’m coming. Let me get dressed and I’ll be with ye presently.”

“I’ll be in my office,” he said and left the changing room.

“So bloody close,” I whispered, and I ran my hands through my curls, feeling my heart beating erratically.

“I think I had a heart attack. First you stopping, and then having to find a way to make him go…” Jamie said, reaching for the hoodie in his bag.

“Me, stopping?” I asked, incredulous. “That’s the first thing that worried you?”

“Tis not good for a man when his pleasured is so rudely interrupted, Sassenach,” he said with half a smile and a glint in his eyes.

“Bloody men.”

Jamie came closer to me, fully dressed now, and cupped my face with both hands. “I’m sorry for that, mo chridhe,” he said, kissing the tip of my nose. He shook his head then and laughed.

“What can possibly be funny?” I asked with furrowed eyebrows and a questioning eye. “We got got caught!”

Jamie looked at me, a soft smile lingering on his lips, and brought his forehead against mine. “Ye really are everything to me, my Sassenach. Everything.”
Before I started dating Jamie, I thought I knew as much as I needed to about swimming. And by that, I mean the basics. Move your limbs all about and breathe occasionally. Freestyle, backstroke, tight swimsuits.

After getting to know Jamie, however, I learned a lot more. Lots and lots about tight swimsuits. And even more about his swimming style.

The backstroke.

What I also learned was that Jamie had finished first in last year’s Edinburgh Schools Championship Meet and a swimmer’s shoulder, also known as biceps tendinitis, was the reason he didn’t participate in the Scottish Schools Championship Meet. Jamie never bragged about his achievements and I was quite sure I wouldn’t have known about any of this if Jenny hadn’t told me how good he really was, too proud of her brother to hide her excitement for him.

“See, we’re giving you the best lad we have,” she winked after telling me how the local coach in Inverness sought her parents out, trying to persuade them that Jamie should become a swimmer back when he was still a young boy.

“Oh,” I cocked an eyebrow, “Isn’t Ian the best lad you have?”

Jenny narrowed her eyes at me, pursing her mouth. “Ian isna a Fraser for me to give. So if someone has him, tis me.” She laughed then, elbowing my side as the two of them came towards us.

If I hadn’t realized how talented Jamie was by listening to Jenny’s stories - and trusting my own judgement every time I was there during his training sessions - his coach’s announcement the evening he gave us a heart attack in the locker rooms would have done the trick. Jamie was transferred to another practice squad that evening, the ‘National Boys’, where his training would be focused on winning the Scotland National Age Group Championship and qualifying for the British Summer Championships. Meaning that he would be training more than ever. He had to add another
weekly session to his schedule, four more hours of swimming and 2 hours of training on land. In total, less hours for me to see him.

And yet, I couldn’t have been happier, my own heart swelling with pride to match his puffed chest when he told me why the coach had called for him.

At least he had a good reason for interrupting us.

Jamie’s wide smile when we met outside warmed me to the bone and I had no other desire than to squeeze him and congratulate him on his success.

Jamie was competing in the 50, 100, and 200 meter backstroke, and even though his time was great at the last two races, he needed to drop a second or two in the 50 meter. To improve his time underwater, as he’d told me, because this was the phase he could go faster due to decreased resistance compared to the surface. His coach pushed him a lot, and I could see how exhausted he was after each training session. But as he had explained to me, getting his personal best better was the only way to qualify for the Junior European Swimming Championship. To be a part of Britain’s national team. And that was what he wanted.

His eyes were shining every time he talked about it, like a dream that suddenly became tangible, a puffy white cloud coming lower, just on the top of the mountain, daring him to touch it.

And this is how, in just a few months, swimming became a part of my life, too. Together with the control of gene expression for my Biology A levels, I came to know the whole event calendar for Jamie’s meets. The east district races, the Edinburgh Schools, the Scottish Schools, the Lothian Leagues… And then, the Scottish National Age Group Championships. He had to meet his time goals by then to be considered for the European Championship. He had to be his best self. And he was doing… swimmingly.

Jamie won one race after another, his grin a bit broader each time, his kiss a bit more fervent afterwards. Each victory invigorated him, paying him back for his hard training, bringing that dreamy cloud closer, to be trapped between his long, strong fingers. But fluffy white clouds never come that close alone. They are usually accompanied by others, grey and ominous ones, ready to break the serenity with lightning bolts. And Jamie’s dark cloud was coming from the north, making his smile fade and his hands tighten in fists. It broke my heart to see his disappointment every time he talked with his da on the phone.

Brian Fraser didn’t value swimming as much as his son did. It was all good and nice, he said, as far as Jamie consider it just a hobby. But this hobby now was taking up most of Jamie’s time and Brian wanted him to focus on school, to study and have as his sole goal to do well at his A levels. Go to study at the university. Become a man worthy and ready to take over the business from him. And in all honesty, I wanted the same – Jamie to rock his A levels, that was. But in contrast to Brian Fraser, I saw Jamie every day and I knew how much swimming meant to him, how much he tried to keep a balance between training and school. But with four evening and four early morning workouts it became more and more difficult for him to stay focused on trigonometry, exponentials, and logarithms.

Next was the Scottish Schools Championship. After that, Jamie assured me that he would have more time to study, until the Scottish National Champs. He needed an A in mathematics, and we needed our plan for college to be successful.

I knew he’d make it. He would never leave me by myself. And I wanted to be there with him, for him, sharing his effort and his joy.
Every time Jamie had a race, I was in the bleachers, ready to cheer him on to his next victory. It was surprising to me how calm he always was before a race, going to bed early and eating according to his coach’s meal plan. How easy his steps were as he walked towards me for a good luck kiss before going to the locker rooms. Before the locker room, that was a lesson we both came to learn at his first race, when I made the mistake of going to kiss him while he was getting ready.

He was the last in the locker room, as Ian had kindly informed me on his way out, and I entered walking straight to him, knowing that we wouldn’t have much time. One kiss good luck, then a second, and a third… It didn’t take long for Jamie’s cock to bulge in his swimsuit and he looked at me terrified when we broke the kiss, realizing what had happened.

“Fuck!” Jamie was looking at the offending part of his anatomy as if it would mysteriously disappear before turning his eyes on me, mischief and embarrassment fighting to settle in the deep blue irises, a faint smile curling up his lips. “Ye better leave, Sassenach,” he said and smiled when I started giggling. “This is all yer fault and it isna the most hydrodynamic shape, ye ken.”

With my smile still lingering on my face I gave him a quick peck on the lips and left to find Jenny and Joe among the spectators. When Jamie walked up to take his position, I couldn’t take my eyes off his blue swimsuit, trying to see if his erection was still obvious. When he got in the water, grabbing the start block with his face to the wall, I couldn’t stop myself from looking at his toned back, broader than everyone else’s with its wheaten color making it seem delicious, and I hoped that he’d be much more concentrated than I was. When he pushed away from the block and jumped, arching in the air with his sculpted body on full display - the wide chest and well-defined abs I ran my fingers over, the huge biceps that enveloped me in his warmth and carried me more than once with my legs wrapped around his waist - I bit my lip to keep from moaning. I hardly noticed the other students, his time, or Jenny and Joe cheering on each side of me. The only thought occupying my mind was having Jamie alone and mine, with that tight swimsuit and the pool water running all over his body.

Only that I never came to get that. Damn the common locker rooms.

Knowing that there was a disappointing dead end at the end of such ventures, we never repeated the mistake of that first race. But Jamie always came to me in the bleachers to get his ‘good luck kiss’. And he always locked his eyes with mine when he got out of the pool, in a way that screamed “that was for you,” and made my heart jump in my chest.

Every time I saw him in a pool, it became clearer to me how much he loved swimming. It was like his second nature, being in the water, moving so gracefully as if it was a mere coincidence that he had two legs to stand on earth. His mother called him her kelpie, he’d told me. A mythical creature that lived in the lochs, strong and powerful. And he was exactly that. Always serene before getting in the pool, capable and tranquil, always thinking of the next race as another opportunity to do what he did best. Always, apart from the night before the Scottish Schools finals. His texts were one too many, and I could tell that something was wrong, even if he hadn’t admitted anything.

**Sassenach:** What’s wrong?

**Scot:** Nothing babe.

**Sassenach:** I know it’s something you stubborn Scot!

**Scot:** Ah, of course you do.

**Sassenach:** So?
Scot: Can we go for a walk?

Sassenach: Now? It’s too late.

Scot: Can I at least come and see ye?

Sassenach: Ring me when you’re here.

Twenty minutes later Jamie was at the front door of my apartment building. He walked in the moment I opened the door, hugging me as if his life depended on it. His arms were curled around my body and we stayed in that tight embrace, my black massive curls mingling with his auburn locks in the mirror of the foyer, until the lights went off. Then, in the darkness, Jamie cupped my face, and planted a reverent kiss on my forehead while breathing in deeply.

“A Dhia, how I needed that,” he murmured against my skin and then moved to take my lips in his. “Ye always ground me, Sassenach. Ye drive the dangerous currents away.”

“Jamie,” I took my hand from his neck and placed it on his chest, just above his heart. I was seriously worried by that point. “What’s the matter?”

Jamie shrugged, as if his jacket had become too tight all of a sudden and turned his eyes from mine. With a heavy sigh, he said a barely audible, “tomorrow.”

“The finals?” I asked, feeling a frown setting on my face. “But why?”

“It’s a long story, Sassenach.”

“I love long stories,” I smiled at him, even though I wasn’t sure he could see me.

“Last year, there was a conflict between me and another swimmer. His name is Tom Christie and he’s from a school in Glasgow.” I felt his chest heaving underneath my palm, indicating his distress, and I wanted to turn on the lights and see his face. Jamie didn’t turn to look at me though, and I knew that he preferred hiding in the darkness for a bit, even if that meant that he was hiding from me too.

“We didn’t actually start it, the two of us,” he continued, “It was other people that started comparing us, making polls and voting who of the two would win. I used to laugh at that in the beginning but then, when I missed the Scottish Schools finals, Christie sent me a message on Facebook asking me if I chickened out. He had won, so I told him to celebrate as much as he could, because this would be the last time he’d ever hold the gold medal.”

“And?” I encouraged him to go on, still unsure of what was the real problem.

“And yesterday my time at the 100 meter wasn’t that good, and he has the best technique in this. I dinna want to make a fool of myself.”

“Jamie,” I brought his face back to mine, running a thumb over his high cheekbone, my voice low in the silence of the foyer. His eyes had no color in the darkness, but I saw the glint in them, a moisture hiding his fear of a failure, his stress over not being good enough. “I’m sure you’ll do great tomorrow,” I said decisively, my voice now echoing in the empty staircase. Jamie didn’t talk, just leaned into my touch. “But even if you don’t win, that doesn’t mean you’re not a great swimmer, okay? We all have good and bad days and if this Christie makes a huge deal about the results, he’s just an arse and you should ignore him.”

Jamie looked away from me, and I wasn’t sure if he was looking down or had closed them all
“Jamie Fraser,” I said, resolute, wanting to make him listen to me. “I know your value. Your coach knows your value. You, most of all people, know your value. You have been training like crazy for this and you’ll try your best tomorrow – no matter the outcome.” Jamie nodded and I thought that I saw a small smile in the corner of his wide mouth. “And if you win, you, you…” I paused, trying to think of the proper adjective.

“Scot,” he murmured and I breathed in his smile.

“Yes. Scot. If you win, I’ll make you do something totally ridiculous just to show you how ridiculous you’re being right now.”

This won me a laugh. “Like what, my Sassenach?” Jamie’s hand on my waist pulled me closer to him and his voice sounded much lighter, like a weight had been taken off his shoulders. He kissed me then, a kiss that didn’t coat the concern I tasted the first time my lips found his.

A car passed just outside the door and loud music filled the whole neighborhood. “You’ll dance for me,” I whispered before taking his bottom lip between my teeth. “This song.”

“Uptown Funk? Bruno Mars? Ye’re too cruel, Sassenach.” He shook his head, laughing, and went straight for my neck, biting the tender skin there.

“Mmm,” I agreed, unable to find my words, wanting to lose myself in the feel of his arms around me and his teeth above my arteries.

Jamie’s phone buzzed in his pocket against my thigh, with a text from Jenny informing him that Murtagh wasn’t “verra happy of his nighttime ventures.”

We both laughed thinking the grumpy man discovering that Jamie wasn’t in his room, and with a last kiss he moved towards the door. He opened it and turned to look at me, his voice soft when he wished me good night, just before he was enveloped by the cold Scottish wind. I had started walking up the stairs when I heard him calling my name in a loud whisper and I turned to see his head reappearing in the crack of the almost closed door, a broad grin flashing towards me. “I love ye.”

“I love you too, you fool.” I smiled back, blew him a kiss and hopped up the stairs, going straight for my bed before his scent would leave my pyjamas.
Jamie won the Scottish Schools Championship.

The palms of my hands stung from clapping so hard, my ribs were close to cracking under the forceful pounding of my heart, and my throat felt hoarse from the cheering I had done over the course of Jamie’s race.

I saw his fingertips touch the wall just milliseconds before Christie’s. He had won and I knew it.

He was still in the pool, pulling off his cap and goggles, his eyes turning up with the rest of the crowd’s. All eyes were fixed at the official time board, waiting for the final results to populate. Except for mine. Mine were on Jamie.

I was waiting for that moment when he’d know he had won. Waiting to see every little detail of his face change, the furrowed brow to disappear, the smile I loved so much to transform his eyes in to two happy slits.

The results popped up with Jamie’s name at the very top. In an instant, a smile spread across his face, making the stress of the weeks leading up to the race disappear. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. Bringing his fist down into the water in a triumphant splash, he turned himself to look up into the thrall of spectators. He knew exactly where I was and met my eyes, to share his hard-won victory with a grin that was directed only to me.

Jamie stood higher than everyone on the pedestal, and that meant two things. First, that he got to shake Christie’s hand like the bigger man that he was, congratulating him on the silver medal finish –
while basking in his victorious glow, his grin impossibly wide. Second, that he had to fulfill his promise and dance for me.

On our way home, between tight hugs and excited kisses, Jamie told me that he was a man of his word and he hadn’t forgotten his promise. Not that I would let him do so, even if he tried.

The problem was that I had demanded a proper dance, not quick moves that could be easily done in the middle of the street. For Jamie to fulfill my request, we needed an empty house, time alone, and a little *funk*. Given that Murtagh, Ian, and Jenny were at his place and uncle Lamb at mine, I began to think that our mission would prove impossible.

I had almost forgotten all about it, when, a week later, Lamb told me that he’d be going to Oxford for two days, the following Thursday and Friday, because he was invited to give two lectures. Trying not to choke on my own tongue, I continued spreading butter on my toast, nodding to him, pretending that his plans were of no concern to me at all. On the inside though, I was doing my happy dance while screaming like a loon.

*Thursday. Think, Claire think. What’s on Jamie’s schedule?*

*Damn, he has an afternoon session.*

*Friday, then. Friday…*

It took me a few moments to squeeze my brain and remember Jamie’s schedule in my excitement. He had a morning session on Friday! With a barely suppressed grin I filled my mouth with half a scone, chewing with difficulty while watching Lamb from the corner of my eye. He was reading the morning paper, paying no attention to me, but he was humming a cheery tune.

*At least he’s not singing one of those songs from the fifties this time.*

Humming or not, I couldn’t worry about Lamb at that moment. There was only one thought racing through my mind, creating a strange current that ran through my body and made my fingers restlessly rub against the fabric of my shirt, my leg bouncing wildly.

*Jamie and I, finally alone… inside! I loved our walks – we both did – but it would be really nice for once to be with each other without layers of clothing, runny noses and freezing limbs.*

—

“So, what’s the plan for tomorrow, Sassenach?” Jamie asked, his hand resting on the small of my back as we walked home, the Edinburgh sun already running towards America, leaving stray rays behind to be lost somewhere above the dark Scottish clouds.

*It would rain – again. How rare.*

*I couldn’t care less.*

I shot him a wide smile before answering. “Well, I was thinking we could skip lunch and go home together right after our last class, cook something fast and then have the whole day to ourselves… Lamb isn’t due home until after 10 PM, so we’ll have plenty of time to spend together… doing stuff…” I finished lamely, moving towards the crosswalk button. “What do you think?” I asked, focusing my gaze on the lights.

It sounded like the perfect plan, but would he think so as well?
“Sounds great, Sassenach.” Jamie smirked and took a deep breath before pulling me to him for a slow, promising kiss.

“You still owe me that dance, you know,” I said in an attempt to distract myself from the crazy beating of my heart.

“Do I?” he asked with raised eyebrows. I narrowed my eyes at him and he continued, squeezing me between his arms and chest, “I’ll tell Murtagh today.”

Thursday evening turned out to be a long one. I couldn’t concentrate enough to study, couldn’t find any interesting movies to watch, and the apartment felt way too empty. I couldn’t stop thinking that Jamie would walk into my house in less than twenty-four hours. Cook in my kitchen, sit on my couch, curl up on my bed.

I laid down on that same bed and closed my eyes, imagining his smile as he pulled me to his arms. Tomorrow, I thought, taking a deep breath, willing sleep to come.

On Friday, school was over before I knew it. I’d been absent-mindedly listening to the teachers, their words no more than white noise as I thought of the rest of my day with Jamie. We hadn’t planned anything, leaving the schedule open to do as we’d see fit.

Just the two of us together would be enough.

When the last bell rang, I found Jamie waiting for me next to the school gates. Our matching grins were the only thing visible between our scarves and beanies as we walked home, our gloved hands easily intertwining, knowing that they would soon touch the skin they craved for.

We finally had a place all for ourselves.

We crossed the threshold with giddy smiles. When I closed the apartment door behind me, locking it twice, I felt Jamie’s hands snaking under the hem of my coat, fingers splaying across my ribs to find purchase on my waist, pulling my back level to his chest. He breathed in deeply, tucking his face into my curls, lowering his head until his lips found the part of my neck that was left uncovered by my scarf, sucking it lightly. A groan came from his throat, accompanied by a loud growl from his stomach and I laughed, turning around to capture his lips in mine.

“We better feed the beast,” I said, pinching him.

Jamie laughed too, a sound that made a current run through me every single time. “Aye, let’s do that first, Sassenach.”

“First?” I asked, removing my scarf and coat.

“First.” He confirmed, mirroring my moves with a lopsided smile.

We cooked pasta with a pesto sauce and set the kitchen table with only what was absolutely necessary. We talked about how our life would be in Oxford, how incredible it would be to be able to do simple things like prepare and eat a meal together whenever we wanted. Jamie insisted he’d be the one to cook, shamelessly declaring that I would be an awful chef, just because I forgot to add salt while boiling the water for the pasta – which was my only duty. I claimed that I did it on purpose, knowing how bad salt was for our health, and shrugged off his comment about me eating his salted chips all the time. When our plates got emptied we cleaned up together, a real team, and then cuddled on the sofa with my laptop in front of us, pretending we were searching for a new show to start watching on Netflix.
What a joke.

We ended up kissing in less than five minutes. In less than ten, I had removed his sweater and was straddling him, unable to stop the pull between us.

And then I remembered.

“Hey…” I said, breaking our kiss. “You owe me! Don’t try and distract me with those seductive lips of yours.”

“I didn’t intend to, Sassenach.” He chuckled, but brought my mouth back on his, biting lightly before running his tongue over my bottom lip. “It’s just this pesto sauce… It’s delicious.”

“There is no pesto sauce there!” I exclaimed, moving away and brushing my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Aye, there is,” he smiled. “Ye also have a bit more here,” he kissed my chin, “and here,” he moved onto my neck, running his tongue all along, “and here…”


With a final hard kiss, I left his lap and turned to my laptop to find the song.

_Uptown funk._

“I hope ye’re ready for this, Sassenach,” Jamie said, standing up.

“Oh yeah.” I smiled to him. “Believe me, James Fraser, when I say that I am.”

Jamie was up and standing in the middle of the living room when I found the video on YouTube. “I meant to find you a pink jacket and a hat,” I pursed my lips, thinking. “But I guess it’s too late now.”

“Oh aye. Too bad we didn’t think of it earlier.” He shook his head with a grimace, running a hand through his hair.

He was wearing blue jeans and a black shirt, his sweater still on the floor from our previous activities.

“Ready?”

“Wait,” he said and moved towards the liquor cabinet. With a look back at me he grabbed the Dalwhinnie and a glass. He took a large gulp. And a second. “Aye,” he said, turning to look at me. “Start the damned thing.”

I pushed play.

The beat filled the air and his leg immediately started bouncing. The rest of his body followed a few moments later, and he licked his lips, looking at me intently.

He was doing it, the stubborn Scot!

A small smile formed on his lips, bringing with it a mischief, a glint in his eyes that I knew all too well.
The moment Bruno Mars started singing Jamie walked to me and stopped two feet away, his body in perfect sync with the tone. He moved his weight from foot to foot, running his hands on his chest, playfully pulling the hem of his tee upwards.

The tease.

He walked backwards, never breaking eye contact, his shoulders and hands coloring the air around him with every move, making me wonder how could such a tall muscled man dance that well.

I was in awe, looking at him dancing that ridiculous song with lyrics saying,

*Stylin’, wilin’, livin’ it up in the city*

*Got Chucks on with Saint Laurent*

And being sexy as hell.

My focus was on his flexed biceps when he pulled me out of my trance, kissing himself on the shoulder and batting his eyelashes when we heard,

*Gotta kiss myself, I’m so pretty*

I started laughing then, sitting cross legged on the sofa, waiting for more of what had to be the funniest sexy spectacle ever.

God, this was one of my best ever ideas.

He was relaxed and confident – smug even. The way he cocked his eyebrow, the light bite of his lips, the hands roaming on his body… He knew he was good and he knew that I wanted him.

*I’m too hot (hot damn)*

*Called a police and a fireman*

The tee shirt was gone. His eyes were darker, his smile sly. A carnivore ready to attack.

*I’m too hot*

“Hot damn,” I whispered.

*Make a dragon wanna retire man*

He did a hip roll. Shirtless, dry and all mine. Bloody Fraser, with his swimmer’s body. And I was a sucker for those hip bones.

*I’m too hot (hot damn)*

*Say my name you know who I am*

*I’m too hot (hot damn)*

*Am I bad ‘bout that money, break it down*

“Jamie Fraser.” I said, straining to get my voice louder than the music. My throat felt so dry that I thought I could hardly speak. “Come here. Now.” My tone made clear that I wouldn’t take no for an answer, but I also beckoned him with my index finger, swallowing with effort.
“The song isna finished, Sassenach.” He didn’t dance now, his eyes fixed on mine, his voice barely audible over the song.

“I know,” I said untangling my legs to stand up, but he was on me in mere seconds, pinning me down and taking my lips in his with the same thirst I felt.

“God,” he whispered, his hands finding the hem of my shirt. “I dinna think I could do this much longer, seeing ye look at me wi’ those eyes, biting yer lip still wet from my kisses.”

“You seemed pretty comfortable up there,” I whispered, biting his neck softly.

“I’m never more comfortable than when I have ye in my arms.” He said it quickly, with a single breath, his hand running up along my rib cage. His fingers trailed on my clavicle before moving to my back, searching for the clasp of my bra. It was a perfect, purple lace bra that he didn’t give a second glance, removing it in a heartbeat.

“That was fast,” I said with a raised eyebrow.

“Training helps, Sassenach,” he replied, making the owlish grimace he did instead of winking.

Once the bra was off, he cupped a breast with one hand and lowered his head to the other, taking my nipple in his mouth.

His tongue on me, the feel of his teeth, the way he was sucking. I lost time and place, arching towards him, opening my legs to get him between them, aching for more.

“Jamie,” I gasped at last. “Let’s go to bed.”

He raised his head and looked at me, a million questions reflected in his eyes. I nodded silently, giving him a timid smile. Making him know that I meant it.

“Are ye sure, mo ghraidh?”

“Yes. I’m sure. I’m surer than I’ll ever be.”

I rose and took his hand in mine, leading him to my room. His fingers pressed lightly against mine and I stopped before I opened the door, turning to see him. His eyes were a clear blue, bright and sure, his hair ruffled from my hands, his bare chest heaving.

I could hear my heart beating. I could count each pulse that echoed in my ears and yet, I felt calm. Certainty provides a serenity, the conviction that all is right and well.

Jamie held me close when we entered my room and kissed me slowly and languidly, with our hands still tightly entwined, my breast flush to his chest. When the oxygen in my lungs reached terribly low levels, I moved away, just barely, afraid that if I increased our distance I would breath too much fresh air. I didn’t want fresh air – I wanted to share his breath. It was intoxicating. We kept looking at each other for a good while before he started walking me backwards, guiding me with slow steps until my knees buckled against the mattress. He held me tight and without losing eye contact, he tenderly lowered me on the bed.

His eyes were soft; loving. I knew those eyes - the way they melted into mine, sharing a part of his soul. This would be the last barrier.

I didn’t need walls with Jamie to feel protected. He was my wall. He kept me safe. I had nothing to hide, nothing to prove, nothing to change. I wanted to give him everything I was and take him in
return, sharing all the threads I had – my heart, my soul, my body – to knot them with his, creating that special bond that would make us one.


I wanted – I needed – to feel him, all of him and to give the gift back.

Jamie smiled as he knelt in front of me, his mouth moving in a silent whisper that I couldn’t quite grasp. “Ye’re so beautiful, Claire.” He said louder, his eyes glistening.

Jamie rarely used my name. I had almost forgotten how he rolled the r, the sound flowing around me, rumbling like the water approaching the waterfall.

Claire. My identity. Not who I was to him, not his love or his Sassenach, but who I was to myself – to the world. A declaration that he wanted me, exactly for the person I was.

Not that I didn’t know that already.

His eyes sparkled with excitement and softened with love as he leaned towards me to take my lips in his. I wanted to just feel, to be present in our moment, and closed my eyes, pushing every thought away. I focused on the way his tongue found mine, the hunger with which his wide mouth trapped my lips, the tender skin my teeth found when I bit him. My heart started beating at double speed, both from anticipation and from anxiety.

_Calm down, Claire. Calm down. It’s going to be okay._

Jamie, ever the mind reader, broke our kiss placing both palms on my face, cupping my cheeks.

“Mo chridhe…” He said, placing a kiss on the tip of my nose. “Dinna be afraid. There’s the two of us now.”

_The two of us._

I nodded. He was Jamie. My sweet, loving, caring, strong and beautiful Jamie. There was no one else I’d ever want to do this more than him.

His lips found mine again, a kiss that lasted only for a few seconds, before his tongue made its way down along my neck. Jamie placed a soft kiss on the hollow between my collar bones, before moving down to my chest. His touch rose goosebumps on its wake, his tongue leaving wet, silvery trails on my soft skin. I could see each rise and fall of his chest as he licked me, each movement mirroring mine. One hand cupped my breast while the other was holding me from the waist and I felt his tongue flicking on my nipple. His breath was cool, each of his exhales meeting my the erect skin, making me want more.

“Aye…” I heard him saying. “Moan for me, my Sassenach.”

I had no idea that I had moaned. In fact, I was sure I didn’t.

Bringing his attention to my other nipple, his weight brought me slowly lying on the bed. His fingers ghosted my rib cage, moving towards the hem of my jeans. My breath was fast and shallow and all I wanted was to be naked, under him. He deftly unbuttoned my jeans and leaving my breast momentarily, he took them off with both hands.

I saw him swallow hard before opening his mouth to speak. “Sassenach,” it was a mere whisper leaving his lips. “I need to taste you.”
I haven’t ever been so wet ever again in my life.

Jamie lowered himself between my legs as he spread them open with certain hands, kissing the inside of my thigh, just above the knee. With small nibbles and licks, he made his way upwards, driving me mad all the while, my legs opening wide in their own accord, my core throbbing.

“Oh Claire.” He said in reverence, before I felt his tongue tracing the lace of my purple panties. He removed them deftly and his warm tongue found me, aching with need. My sigh met his and I got lost in the sensation, his tongue on my clit, brushing lightly against it, tasting the evidence of the effect he had on me. He kept one arm under my thigh, his palm open, and I knew he was only waiting to feel my fingers link with his. My other hand was lost in his curls, messy and disheveled from his moves, pulling and pushing him towards me. When he slipped a finger inside me, I couldn’t stop a loud whimper leaving my mouth.

He groaned and stopped then, momentarily. “I love yer wee sounds, Sassenach. Make more for me.” And he was instantly on me again, until I could hear myself loud in the room and couldn’t deny that I made noises anymore.

“Come here.” I said in a hoarse voice, when I found that I could speak again, and pulled him up by his hair, needing his lips to find mine. My fingers lingered on his chest, the well-formed abs, the V line drawn by his hip bones – that I couldn’t take my eyes off before. They finally reached the waistband of his button fly jeans, and I fumbled, finding it too difficult to pop them all open.

“Let me help ye there.” Jamie said, removing his jeans and boxers in a swift move.

He came back to me, his face hovering over mine, waiting for a signal from me to move.

“Come to me.” I said, my hand cupping his cheek, my eyes lost in his.

I felt so loved at that moment, so desired, my heart overflowing, that I didn’t think I could take any more feelings.

“Are ye sure, Claire? We can still stop.” Jamie hesitated uncertainty swirling in his eyes.

“Do you want us to stop?” I asked, even though I could feel the answer to that question, bold against my thigh.

“God no.” Jamie whispered, confirming the obvious.

“Me neither.”

Jamie kissed me again, starting soft and becoming more passionate as my hand ran down on his body, finding his cock and stroking him slowly.

He broke our kiss and reached for his jeans, grabbing a condom from his pocket.

“Show me how.” I said and sat up when his hands placed the condom on the tip of his cock. He stopped and took my hand in his, to guide me.

I rolled it on his cock, two fingers keeping the front part pinched and heard him groan, a deep sound coming from his chest.

With a hand behind his nape I lay back and guided him on top of me. He took his cock in his hand and lowered his head to kiss me. He slowly entered me. I stiffened, and he stilled at once.
“D’ye want me to stop, babe?” His voice was worried, his eyes shadowed.

“No.” I shook my head, smiling at him.

It would be just the once, and this had to be done. It wouldn’t hurt after that.

The frown didn’t leave his face as he went on, stretching me inch by inch. I pulled him down on me and buried my face on his neck, to prevent him from seeing the tell-tale look in my eyes. He resisted, trying to re-establish eye contact, but my hand in his hair made my intention obvious. I nibbled his neck in encouragement and he continued.

I felt him sigh when he was fully inside me, feeling me tight around his cock, and he stayed still for a few moments, our breaths the only sound in the room.

He moved then, slowly pulling out and pushing again inside me, carefully, tenderly.

“Are you alright, babe?” He whispered in my ear and I could only answer with a vague “Mmm.. Don’t stop.” I was sure he heard the pain in it, but I really didn’t want him to stop.

I could feel his arms tense, ready to push against the mattress and increase our distance. “Don’t stop.” I repeated, and kissed him softly on the neck, sucking the smooth skin.

He didn’t. I felt the hard length of him stretching me again as he pushed inside, and then once more before he stiffened, his cock pulsing inside me. “Oh god, oh god, oh god,” he mumbled, his muscles shaking under my fingers. “I canna, Claire, I’m sorry, I canna, I’m sorry.”

And he fell on top of me, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

It took a minute for his breathing to calm. He was still inside me when he rose his head to look at me, the elation in his eyes was battling with something else, something that made his eyebrows furrow and his lips form a thin line.

“I’m sorry, mo’ chridhe. I didna want to… I mean I wanted to but no too… I couldna… I’m so sorry, Claire. I – ”

When I thought that I had enough of his incessant rumbling, I pushed a finger on his mouth, trapping the rest of his words inside. I moved slowly then, running my tongue on the thin lips, searching for the kiss I knew he was hiding for me.

“You’re a fool, Jamie Fraser,” I said with a smile. “You don’t need to be sorry for anything.”

“Aye, I do. That was embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing? To whom? To me?” I asked incredulous, raising both eyebrows. “Aren’t we one?”

“We are,” he whispered.

“There is nothing you can do with me that will be embarrassing.”

“I should last – ”

“Stop the bullshit and kiss me.” I ran my hand through the fierce red hair, bringing his lips on mine again.

“What was it? Two thrusts?” He said, shaking his head but cracking a smile. “And even after… you know.”
I knew. I had found him in the school showers just before we left. “This plan didn’t work out as well as you thought it would, right? But I believe it was three? Thrusts, I mean. Doesn’t the first one count as well?”

That was it. Our laughter filled the room and vibrated through the walls, pushing away all inhibitions and insecurities, leaving us again as we always were.

The two of us.

“Did you… like it?” I asked once we quietened down again, looking at him under my eyelashes.

“Are ye kidding me, Claire?” he asked, incredulous, but didn’t reply to my question until his index finger got under my chin, making me face him. “Wasn’t that obvious?”

I shrugged, somehow insecure, wanting to hear his voice saying the words out loud.

“Aye, I liked it verra much, mo ghraidh. To feel ye around me like this, to share my body wi’ ye and take yers in response… Twas better than I ever dreamed.” He kissed me then, an unhurried touch that punctuated every word that had just left his mouth. “Give me a moment, aye? I’ll be right back.”

With another kiss, light and quick, Jamie rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom. I kept looking at his glorious ass until he disappeared and then closed my eyes and sighed with a silly smile on my face.

The mattress of my bed subsided at his weight just a moment before his musky scent filled my nostrils. I opened my eyes to see him crawling to me, a mischievous grin on his face. The moment my hands found the locks of his hair, Jamie let out a growl that made me laugh, and bit my lips.

“Where were we?” He asked, slowly moving his lips to my jawline and then back on my mouth. I kissed him back, pushing my teeth on his bottom lip, feeling his thumb playfully flickering over my nipple.

I heard my moan and felt his rumble coming in response.

Jamie moved his hand from my breast to my stomach and then between my legs, exhaling a single word, “Dhia…”

I knew I was wet. I could hear it as his fingers moved inside me and the only thing I could think was that I needed to feel him again. His cock was half-ready when I took it in my hand to stroke him.

He put the condom on alone this time. We both sensed the same need to be fast, as if a few more seconds of waiting would be too much for us to bear.

Jamie entered me carefully, the restraint obvious in his body and his eyes. Not to hurt me, wanting it to be enjoyable for me this time.

“It’s okay,” I reassured him, cupping his cheek. Jamie didn’t move inside me, just turned his head to kiss my open palm.

“I just don’t want to hurt you, no more than I already did.”

“You didn’t hurt me.” To make my point clear, I moved my hips towards him.

“Och, like this, is it?” Jamie’s lopsided smile made my heart flutter. I looked at him smugly and opened my legs a little more.
He pulled out and moved inside me again, another groan leaving his lips. This time it wasn’t painful, but it wasn’t pleasurable either. At least at the beginning. Closing my eyes, I focused on Jamie’s breath, on our bodies moving together, on the filling sensation between my legs.

I relaxed.

I crossed my legs around his waist, freeing my body to meet his on every thrust, and we moved in sync echoing our hearts that beat with the same drumming rhythm.

Opening my eyes again, I found his face level with mine, his slanted eyes searching, questioning. I licked my upper lip and kissed him, both of us moaning at how good it felt, and he knew this was my answer to his silent question. I swallowed his smile and his moan as his thrusts became faster, reassured that I was there with him, wanting him as much as he wanted me. His arms were strong around me and I ran my fingers on his back, grazing the soft skin with my fingernails.

“Oh Claire,” he whispered, his breaths heavy and shallow. “What ye’re doing to me.”

Jamie lowered himself to kiss me again, but I couldn’t concentrate on his lips anymore. My head fell back and I focused on the million shivers that ran through my body as he was filling me, his hand now teasing my aroused nipple as his lips reached once more to frantically claim mine.

My hands gripped his arse, making him groan in my mouth, and I tasted his upper lip, salty with sweat and alluring, making me crave more. I could hear the sounds of our joint arousal and that made me ferocious.

“Oh God.” He whispered, moving his hand where we were linked, his thumb rubbing my clit. “Oh, Claire.”

I felt the tension leaving him as he was thrusting once, then twice again and he fell on me, the feel of his finger together with his release making my core clamp on him, squeezing him, feeling him more.

When I opened my eyes I saw Jamie looking at me, a soft smile tugging up the corners of his lips. Bending his head, he kissed my forehead, my nose, my cheekbones, my chin. Finally, he took my lips in his, whispering in my mouth. “I love ye, Claire.”

“I love you too, Jamie.” I said, thinking that I couldn’t ask for anything more in my life.

With another kiss he moved to his side, draping an arm across my waist to pull me towards him. His fingers traced light circles on my back, as he asked, “Are you alright, mo ghraidh?”

“Perfect. You?”

Jamie lay on his back and I moved with him to lay my head on his chest. His words vibrated through his body and into my ears when he spoke again. “Perfect is a word too small to describe how I feel, Sassenach. I think my heart is gonna burst.”

This was the moment that mine almost did. From love, happiness, or desire – I couldn’t tell, but I
wondered if our hearts were designed to keep a certain amount of feelings and mine was just too full.

Only that it didn’t burst. It kept growing to enfold more of him, more of us. More of this life, beautiful and sweet and kind as it was.

With our inflated hearts, we were invincible.

With love, we became immortal.
Lingering smiles are sly creatures. Reluctant to leave your face, they tug up the corners of your lips until you’ve forgotten they’re there.

Clueless, you keep going on, proud that no one can understand what’s hiding under your skin; until that lingering smile betrays you, disclosing information you believed camouflaged.

Jamie had been gone by the time Lamb came back home, but a soft smile was still changing the shape of my mouth, lighting up my face. Lamb’s glance traveled from me to the chemistry book in my hands, and a raised eyebrow accompanied the glint in his eye. I didn’t know what he’d thought or had guessed, for he didn’t talk – thank God. He leaned over me and planted a kiss on my forehead, saying, “Hello, lamb.”

His hands ruffled my hair, something that he hadn’t done in years. “Welcome home!” I said, and swallowed my self-consciousness as I sat up on the couch, carefully placing the book on the coffee table. Lamb moved to the kitchen, opened the fridge absentmindedly, and stared at its contents.

“How’s it going?” he asked in a casual tone and nodded to the coffee table. The air tightly held in my lungs left my chest in a sigh of relief, and I started talking about my studying plans, thankful for escaping an awkward conversation.

Two days later, I found out that I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t stop smiling on Friday.

“So?” Jenny appeared next to me the moment I entered the courtyard, pursing her lips as if she was trying to keep tons of questions inside.

“Good morning to you too, Jenny,” I said with a yawn. I’d overslept after staying up until late to
study, and all I wanted was to get back into my bed. My pillow… my soft duvet… I had already closed my eyes, stretching my neck, when Jenny’s voice dragged me out of my dreams again.

“Good morning, Claire. So?”

“So what?” I opened my eyes to see Jenny Fraser looking back at me, expectant, her blue eyes slanted from the slight smile on her lips.

“So, my wee dolt of a brother came back home on Friday night, wi’ the broadest smile I’ve ever seen on him.”

“Did he now?” I asked, feigning ignorance, while a similar smile was curving up my lips.

“Mmmph,” Jenny rolled her eyes, but decided that the Scottish noise wasn’t enough – she needed to say more. “Claire Beauchamp, d’ye think I’m a bloody fool? I know ye two did it! I was almost sure when I saw my brother, but I actually know it because Jamie told Ian!”

“He did? Oh, cool. Glad we are all up to date then.” I looked around, searching for Jamie, not sure what I’d do to him once I found him. Ian was his best friend – of course he’d tell him. “Oh, wait.” I felt my eyes go wide and turned my attention to Jenny again. “Does Murtagh know, too?”

“Ah, I dinna ken. I guess so. When Jamie arrived, Murtagh let out one of his unexplained grunts, shaking his head, but I think I saw him smiling under that thick castaway beard of his.”

Oh my God, Jamie. You could have at least tried to be a little less obvious.

“He couldn’t help it, Claire,” Jenny said as if she’d read my thoughts. “The lad was positively shining.”

“So, what else do you know?” I asked, wondering whether I really wanted to know the answer.

“Not much. No details, at least… Just some rubbish about ‘making love’ – as he called it – being magical and him being the happiest man in the world.” Jenny batted her eyelashes, mocking her brother, but she suddenly stopped. “You did use a condom, right?”

“We did,” I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks soon burned crimson with the memory of how we came to use that first condom.

“Oh my god, you’re blushing, too! Ian told me Jamie’s face looked like a ripe tomato when he told him ye’d had sex! You’re both insufferable.” Jenny linked her arm with mine through mine and we started walking towards the building.

“So how was it?” she asked, he voice now caring and serious.

“Good,” I said, nodding to emphasize the single word that didn’t even begin to encompass the experience; something surpassing words and meanings.

“Just good?” Jenny asked, worried. “Did he do anything stupid or – ”

“No, no. Jamie was perfect,” I interrupted her, smiling at the thought of him. I hadn’t lied, he was everything I could ever ask for. “The first time was okay, I guess… The – ”

“The first time?” It was Jenny’s turn to interrupt me, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “How many times did ye bang? Couldn’t stop after trying it, huh?”

I chuckled and shrugged. “Well, the second time was more than fun… I can’t even imagine how
good it’s going to be from now on.”

“Good… Fun… Are you going to tell me the truth, Claire, or am I just losing my time here instead of… doing nothing but wait in the classroom?”

We both laughed, and I felt an easiness softly spreading around us like a comfortable, warm sheet in the crisp winter morning. It kept the emotions safe, close to our bodies, protecting them from roaming freely around the courtyard.

“It was amazing, Jenny.” I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. “The way we felt, the way we connected, it was so different from anything else. We were really one.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Jenny said and sighed, squeezing my arm. “Lucky you!” she continued with a pout. “And I’m with Ian for so long and still nothing.”

“Oh come on… You never know when it’s going to happen. It came out of the blue for us – and we had the whole place to ourselves. It’ll happen, don’t worry.”

“Yeah, sure. Ian thinks too much, in my opinion. He keeps saying that we can’t just do it and keep living under the same roof with Murtagh and Jamie!”

“It’ll be weird, you think?”

“Hmm, I dinna ken. But Ian definitely thinks so. I’m sure he’s afraid of Murtagh. Deflowering his niece and all.”

“Deflowering!” I burst out laughing.

“Ridiculous, aye?” Jenny joined me. “Anyway! I’m so happy for you two!”

“Thanks Jenny. Really.” We were just outside my classroom and I turned to face her, wondering how this amazing woman could be my friend. “I love your brother, you know that.”

“I do.” She smiled broadly and winked at me.

“Where is he, by the way?” I asked, while searching around for a glimpse of him.

“Monday.”

“Oh… Right.”

Monday. Morning session in the pool.

A few hours later, I saw Jamie Fraser entering the cafeteria and stopping short by the door, gazing around.

Searching for me.

I was sitting at our usual table, and his eyes didn’t leave mine as he was walking towards me, the curls on his forehead bouncing slightly with each step, his lopsided grin making me go weak in the knees. It was a good thing I was sitting down already. I smiled at him with my mouth closed, full of chicken, and my heart full of love.

He was like oxygen. Breathing him in was necessary to keep me alive. Having more of him made
me light-headed; lost in a haze, never wanting to find my way out. It was always different between us, but this time I felt like nothing could break the bond we’d created. Something made by the two of us, for the two of us.

“I’ve missed ye so much,” he murmured when he sat next to me, pulling me to him and placing a kiss between my curls.

“Mmm, I missed you too.” I inhaled him deeply, his body’s musky scent mixing with the pear, nutmeg and driftwood of his shower gel - not that I could recognize the odors, but I’d read the description on the bottle when we bought it together.

“I’m sorry I couldn’a see ye during the weekend, Sassenach,” he said, lowering his head as his forehead came to meet mine.

“Power cleaning – I know.” I kissed the tip of his long, straight nose and he raised his head to look at me. “Is the house perfect to accept the Queen, now?”

Jamie chuckled, a hand moving from my hip to reach for my food. “Aye, ‘tis. Though I dinna think it’s the Queen. I’m pretty sure Murtagh regrets having his house full of people, sometimes.”

“He has someone?” I asked, raising both eyebrows and feeling happy for this grump, wonderful man.

“Mmm, I think so,” Jamie said, wiggling his eyebrows. “What are we eating?”

“I am eating chicken wings, Jamie Fraser, and you take your hands off my food!”

“Ye’re not going to share a wee bite wi’ the love of yer life?”

“The love of my life?” I asked, feigning shock. “That sure, are you?”

Jamie looked at me, seemingly deeply betrayed with a pout on his face and his eyebrows dropping low above his clear blue eyes. Before I had enough time to consider if he had taken my words to heart, a cocky smile changed his demeanor completely. “Aye,” he said, and his hand on my waist gripped me tighter. “And I intend to prove that to ye every day, until ye’re finally convinced as well.”

“Well now, that’s rather interesting.” Placing my elbow on the table, I cupped my cheek, ardently looking at him.

“I canna do it if ye dinna feed me, Sassenach.”

I sighed dramatically and pushed my plate towards him. “Here you are, my poor, starving lad.”

He gave me a cheeky grin and dipped a chicken wing in the tabasco sauce, almost emptying the container. “Hey!”

“You wanted that?” he asked, chewing. “Come, take some back.” He pursed his lips, full of tabasco sauce, and leaned in to kiss me.

“You fool,” I laughed and pushed him away. “Take it. It’s all yours.”

He licked his lips and came closer to me, bending his head so I could almost taste the tabasco on his breath. “I can’t stop thinking of you – of us.”

His husky words became images, dancing in my mind, and my body tightened in response. I
breathed in deeply and gulped, trying to find something coherent to say in reply, but not a single thought in my mind made sense. Instead, I covered the small distance between us and kissed him, trying to share the fire he’d lit inside me before it would eat me whole.

“I didna ken that hot sauce is an aphrodisiac, Angus. D’ye think ‘twas written in Cosmo?” Rupert’s voice carried from a few feet behind us and we broke apart with silly, shy smiles on our throbbing lips.

“Ye’re the one who reads Cosmo, Rup,” Angus replied as he sat down across from us, but neither Jamie nor I had turned to look at him, still suspended between our precious bubble and reality. Angus lowered his voice and coughed, trying to sound more sophisticated. “Actually, tabasco peppers are grown in Mexico, not Africa.”

“What?” Rupert’s confusion was obvious in his voice. Jamie and I turned our heads in slow motion to face them, our initial frowns gradually transforming into wide smiles with understanding dawning on us.

“Aphro-disiac?” I asked, trying to suppress my laughter, already feeling Jamie’s body shaking against mine.

The next moment all three of us burst into laughing, with Angus looking at us confused. His furrowed eyebrows and the questioning grimace on his face made it even more difficult for us to stop. I had tears rolling down my cheeks when Ian and Jenny arrived at the table.

“What?” Ian asked, only to trigger another episode of uncontrollable, boisterous laughter.

–

I was in my room, with my chemistry notes spread over every inch of my desk, when my mind traveled back to the cafeteria and Angus’ dumbfoundedness. Chuckling quietly to myself, I did a quick search on google and reached for my phone.

**Sassenach:** So it seems that tabasco sauce actually is an aphrodisiac! And I found a Tabasco Chocolate Fudge Pudding recipe that we can keep in mind...

I turned my attention back to my notes, trying to focus, but the letters blurred, and the lines danced in front of my eyes. My gaze trailed back on my phone. No response from Jamie.

**Sassenach:** Hmm… Are you thinking about the pudding or would you rather have the chicken wings?

I put my phone to the side and grabbed my pen, deciding to concentrate on my homework on redox. A moment later, I reached for my phone again, realizing that he hadn’t been online for the last 30 minutes. Once in Oxford, I thought longingly, we wouldn’t have to deal with nights apart. We’d sleep together every night, whispering goodnights into each other’s skin with our eyes already closed.

But before that, we had our Easter holidays to look forward to. After Jamie’s win in the Scottish Schools championship, his coach had asked him to stay in Edinburgh during the break, not to miss his training sessions - which meant that he would stay with me, instead of going to Lallybroch for two weeks. And with Murtagh, Ian and Jenny gone, we’d have his place all to ourselves.

I looked again at my phone’s black screen. I missed him.

**Sassenach:** Do you think I can come to your place to study chemistry during the break? We could
study together?

**Sassenach:** Where are you?!?!

It had been too long. It never took Jamie more than fifteen minutes to text me back. Moving from my desk, I lay in my bed and turned up the volume on my phone to distract myself.

“So if you’re lonely
You know I’m here waiting for you
I’m just a cross hair
I’m just a shot away from you
And if you leave here
You leave me broken, shattered, I lie
I’m just a cross hair
I’m just a shot, then we can die”

**Sassenach:** Baby?

He must have fallen asleep. There was no other explanation.

I was already half asleep myself, when fifteen minutes later, my phone buzzed against my pillow. In my rush to grab it, I hit it with my hand, making it fly halfway across my room, where it hit a chair and fell down on the carpet.

I rushed to retrieve it, praying not to see the screen broken. Making sure that it wasn’t, I let out the breath caught in my chest and unlocked the phone, fully awake again.

**Scot:** I’m here.

**Sassenach:** You okay?

**Scot:** No.

With my heart in my mouth once again, I dialled his number and waited, only to have him reject my call.
**Scot:** Can’t speak right now.

Sitting on my bed, I texted him back.

**Sassenach:** What happened?

The next messages came one after the other, in a success that made my teeth borrow deep into my lip.

**Scot:** Spoke with my da.

**Scot:** I’m not allowed to stay in Edinburgh during the break.

**Scot:** He said, I’ll have to stop swimming if my grades don’t get better.

**Scot:** MacMahon called him today.

**Sassenach:** MacMahon? Why?

I couldn’t understand why our maths teacher had called Jamie’s da, instead of sending a formal letter to him – no matter the reason behind sending the letter.

**Scot:** They know each other.

**Sassenach:** And?

**Scot:** He told him that I failed the last test.

**Sassenach:** Shit. I’m sorry, Jamie.

**Sassenach:** But come on! Failing one test doesn’t mean you have to stop swimming!

**Scot:** Tell that to my da.

**Sassenach:** It’s just one test! You’ll do better next time. I’ll help you!

Without waiting for a response, I texted again, typing words I’d already sent earlier, but truly meaning them this time.
Sassenach: We’ll study together.

Scot: I’m going to bed, babe.

Sassenach: Jamie…

Scot: Sorry to fuck up our holiday plans.

Sassenach: Stop this!

Sassenach: You didn’t fuck anything up.

Scot: I’m going to Lallybroch for the break.

Sassenach: It’s just two weeks – and you can study there! Then you’ll be back, and you’ll rock both tests and the races.

Scot: I don’t know if I can. It’s getting too much.

Sassenach: Can I call you?

Scot: Ian is in the room. We’ll talk tomorrow, Sassenach.

Sassenach: Okay. We’ll fix this, Jamie. Promise. Sending a huuuuuuuuuuuuuge hug.

Scot: I wish you were here.

Sassenach: Me too.

Lingering smiles are sly creatures. When you think them gone, they’re still there; when you need
them most, they disappear.
Expectations. What a person believes will happen, under certain conditions. The product of probability and value.

The problem with this equation is that values change depending on the person.

Brian Fraser valued the continuation of his business, a stable life for his son to carry on his family name, an admirable career that would give Jamie the foundation for a happy life.

I valued Jamie’s happiness and proximity. I didn’t care what he chose to do, as long as it made him happy and we left Edinburgh together, going to uni and living the best years of our lives.

Jamie, however, valued the feeling of water enfolding his body in the pool, the thrill of a victory, the progress he made every day towards being the best.

Happiness is a common trait, linked to the variables of everyone’s expectations. But there is a different version of happiness in each person, anchored to its own universe.

Our expectations. Our family’s, our friends’ expectations… What we have, what we’d like to have, what we should have in the future. Who we should be.

Life is demanding. And love makes people demanding.

A battle of beliefs – adding weight to our decisions, to our plans, to our lives. Changing the equation’s balance.

Jamie was angry, scared, stressed. I couldn’t imagine a worse combination. He closed himself off and I was sure that he hardly heard my little motivational speech as I was talking to him during the lunch break.

“Listen to me, you bloody Scot. Your father said that you’ll stop swimming if you don’t get better
grades. *IF*.” At this point, I had grasped his hand, my fingers applying pressure against his, pushing my conviction into his skin.

“He doesna understand, Sassenach.” Jamie’s words were strained, leaving barely opened lips. “He thinks I’m fooling around wi’ the swimming when I’m not. Ye ken that.” His eyes bore into mine, daring me to contradict him. “Tis what makes me happy.” His face softened for a moment, before adding, “And you.”

“I know Jamie, but you can’t blame hi—”

“The hell I can’t!” I’d lost him again. He went from vulnerable and open to distant and cold in mere seconds.

“He wants the best for you, that’s why he pushes you,” I tried again, willing the relation between the two strong headed men to be mended. “He’s your father, Jamie, he loves you more than anyone.”

“My Ma would never have done this, make me choose.” His voice broke mid-sentence and he fixed his eyes on an invisible mark on the floor.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I wouldn’t let him get caught in that loop of pain and anger. It was easy to blame his dad and idealize his mother. It was safe - no one could prove him wrong. Before I opened my mouth to speak again, Jamie’s ironic chuckle stopped me.

“He never really got it – my Da. It was my Ma who was driving me to the pool every day, who cheered me on, she embraced who I was and my love for swimming. My Da… his mind was always on the business.” Loss and hurt gave way to fury again, and his words came out harsh and hurried. “And now he sees swimming as a distraction, when the only distraction is school.”

At this, I stopped short. I blinked once, trying to comprehend what he’d said.

“What?” It was a single syllable, but it must have carried a load of emotion because Jamie’s face turned abruptly towards me. I tried to be calm, to stop my heaving chest, to keep my pounding heart safe in my chest before it broke in pieces. “Jamie, you can’t really mean that.” My words sounded almost normal – almost. “You need to study, you need the grades, the A levels…” My composure failed me then, the continuation of my sentence silent, grinding against my throat.

*Us.*

He didn’t want to go to Oxford anymore? If he didn’t care about school, about uni…

“Claire,” he said, voice husky again. “Please, not you too. *Not you.*”

I shook my head, willing the tears to stay hidden behind closed eyelids, my face straining in pain. I felt his strong arms around my shoulders pulling me tight to him and I swallowed hard, scared of what was to come. A secret buried deep inside him, coming to the surface. “I dinna mean it, mo chridh. Not that way.” I didn’t move or speak, and I felt him take a deep breath, his chest pushing against my own. “I’m sorry, Claire. I dinna want to fuck up with you too.”

I ran my hands over my face, took a step back and looked at him. “So what did you mean?”

He shrugged, running a hand through his messed locks. “I dinna want to stop swimming, is all I meant. I need to focus on training. If I win the Scottish National Champs I might even get to the national team - I checked the times they need, I’m really close. But this doesna mean I dinna want to fix my grades.”
I pushed myself to the side for a moment, tossed my expectations in the trash can and decided to focus on his - all the while feeling a knife going through my heart. But this wasn’t about me. It was about him. His life, his future. His happiness.

I took him by the hand and walked into an empty classroom. It was quiet, the dust suspended in the air, the numbers on the blackboard noting dates to be remembered, important, historical ones. Not like the dates I remembered: when he asked me for my number, when we kissed for the first time, when we went to the cinema on our first date, when I spent the night in his room at Lallybroch, when we made love. I didn’t want to add another date to my list - when Jamie realized that he didn’t want to come to Oxford. And yet, I would - if I had to.

Jamie sat on a desk and I settled between his thighs. His eyes were lost, desperate. “Do you remember when we went to the escape room?” I asked and he looked at me surprised, but nodded his head.

“Before we met the others, we talked about our A levels.” He nodded again. “You said you would take over your father’s business, but your dream was to travel, to write a book. Do you still want to do that?”

Jamie smiled, shaking his head. “Ye do remember everything, aye?” I shrugged in response and let him continue. “I still like studying English more than maths, that’s to be sure. But, nay, I dinna see myself doing that.”

“What do you see yourself doing then?”

“I want to keep swimming.”

“You and Dory from Nemo,” I said, losing my solemn expression for a moment, and kissed his nose.

A silent laugh left his throat and he took a deep breath, but didn’t speak.

“Do you want to go to uni?” I asked, my voice steady. My heart clenched, ready to take the blow.

“Of course I do, Claire!”

A loud beat, the blood resuming its flow through my body.

“To do what?” I asked, making him justify his response out loud. If he didn’t want to face his future, to prioritize his goals, someone had to do it for him.

“Business management.” He said it as if it was obvious, and yet the worst thing in the world.

“Jamie, do you want to take over the family business? I mean… Do you really want to do it?”

Jamie looked away for a long moment and swallowed hard before his eyes returned to mine. “I dinna ken. It’s not actually a choice, Sassenach.”

“Have you talked to your dad about it? Have you ever explained to him how you feel?”

Jamie let out a long breath before a sad smile settled on his lips. “I canna do that.”

“And why is that?” I pushed him.

“He has been planning it for years. It would break him, Sassenach. My Ma and he, they created everything, starting from nothing. It’s his dream to continue the Fraser business, so my parents’ labour wouldn’t be in vain. He wants to leave something behind - for us. A legacy that we’ll take
even further. I canna deny him his dream.”

“His dream.” I emphasized.

“Still,” he said it simply and it was all I needed to understand what he meant. He couldn’t let down
his father. Wouldn’t, not now. Not before having something more certain as an alternative.

“But you can see yourself running the business?”

“Aye, I can. Tis not that bad, Sassenach. In a way, we try to make people happy, give them pleasure
wi’ our products. Maybe give them a smile some time during their day.”

I smiled, thinking of my smile every time I ate one of their shortbread cookies. ”But it’s not
swimming.” I voiced the part of his thoughts he had kept silent.

“No, tis not.”

“But would you like to be a professional swimmer?” I asked him, already knowing the answer.

“Ye ken that I want to. But tis not easy.”

“So, since you still don’t know what the future holds for you, you’ll close no doors - just yet.”

“No, I won’t. That’s why I’m training as much as I can. That’s why I’ll go to uni. Wi’ you,” he said
and pulled me closer for a kiss.

“You do realise,” I said with a frown when we broke our kiss, “That for this to happen, you have to
study and pass our exams. Right?”

Jamie raised his eyebrows, as if the answer to my question was obvious. “Help me wi’ the maths?”

I looked at him and thought that I could easily finish this conversation with a positive answer and a
kiss. But I couldn’t. The doubt crept up in me, slowly eating pieces of my happiness. My
expectations. “Jamie, is Oxford still your dream as it is mine?” My voice was as light as I could make
it sound, trying not to push him towards an answer, to have him make his own decision. “It’s fine if
it’s not.”

That knife again, threatening my heart. But I wanted him to be sure of his choice. I didn’t want to
force my dreams on him.

Jamie pulled me towards him again, holding me so tight that I could barely breathe. “I didna mean it
Claire, about school. I said that out of anger, for my da. For swimming.” His eyebrows furrowed in
the absence of my response and he ran his hand along my cheekbone, as if to wipe invisible tears.
“Ye do believe me, right?”

“I do,” I whispered, leaning into his touch. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Ye’ll help me then?” His lips found my forehead, lingering there, pressing against my skin.

“I will,” I said and exhaled loudly. “We’re going to have you ready for those A levels.”

“Thank ye, Sassenach. Thank ye for bearing with me.”

“Well, I have ulterior motives, don’t I?” I smiled, trying to lighten the mood. “I do want you at
Oxford with me.”
Jamie chuckled and kissed me, his lips soft against mine. “I dinna ken what I’ve done to deserve ye, mo ghraidh, but I thank my luck every day for that gift.”

“Umhmm,” I smiled against his mouth, trapping his bottom lip between my teeth.

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Jamie and I got organized. We put together a study plan, never breaking our schedule. Twice per week, I was taking my books and notes and rode to his place in a full teaching mode, determined to fill the gaps he’d created by totally disregarding any maths homework in months.

Ahead of the prospect of losing his swimming training and, consequently, all the meets his coach had planned for him, Jamie set on studying square roots and coefficients of quadratic equations, series and trigonometry. He wasn’t extremely happy for the task, and murmured things under his breath once too often, but he did it.

It wasn’t easy, but we had everything under control.

Not that we were always completely focused.

Not that Jamie hadn’t suggested that for every solved equation we would remove a piece of clothing.

Not that Ian had entered the room at that exact moment, turned red and suggested we’d inform him beforehand if we were actually studying or not. “That’s anatomy, by the way,” he’d said, chortling, as he closed the door, “Not maths.”

Not that Jamie wiggled his eyebrows at me, whispering, “When will we study A level Anatomy, my Sassenach?”

But, all in all, it was going well.

I usually stayed for dinner afterwards, the smell of Murtagh’s famous scrambled eggs or Ian’s spaghetti napolitana wafting into Jamie’s room, and making our stomachs growl. Lamb used to feign irritation with me for leaving him alone, but I could see the small smile on his face, no matter how much he was trying to hide it behind the paper he held.

The day Mr. McMahon asked to see Jamie after class, telling him that he could finally see in him the student he knew all the past years, we celebrated with fish and chips at Calton Hill.

Jamie relaxed and focused on his - now balanced - schedule. He got his confidence back, and was positive that he could win the Scottish National Open Championship and rock his A levels. More importantly, he stopped fighting with his dad over the phone, even though it was clear that Brian still wasn’t happy with Jamie’s training schedule. But at least he was now reassured that Jamie wouldn’t fail his A levels. He’d become the lad he was supposed to be, getting ready for the continuation of his education.

We had more than one reason to believe that Brian would let Jamie stay in Edinburgh over the Easter holidays. During our breaks from studying – when we weren’t extremely busy kissing or making out – we cuddled on his bed and whispered to each other, making plans for the two weeks we’d be all alone. We spoke our dreams softly in the quiet room, our voices floating around before taking shape; cherry blossoms over our heads as we’d walk through the city parks, the buzz of the people in the old town as we’d walk up the Royal Mile, the table we’d set to eat all alone, the nights we’d spend awake, making love. The days too – as Jamie pointed out. Jenny and Ian would go back home and Murtagh would be going to Paris with his mysterious woman. Not that Suzette was that mysterious, but we kept our mouths shut until he finally introduced her to us. She was living in the same
apartment building, and it wasn’t that common for Murtagh to go grocery shopping - buying chia seeds for a neighbor.

With so many dreams ready to come true, Jamie asked his dad if he’d changed his mind a few days before the break. Everything was going according to the plan now, and he could stay back to continue studying and training.

Brian, however, answered with a definite “No.” He wanted Jamie to return to Lallybroch and work on the distillery. They would begin the fermentation of their new single malt and he wanted his son to be there. “To get to know things from the inside,” as he’d said.

Our dreams popped in the room, iridescent bubbles that held nothing but thin air.

Jamie looked at me with brooding eyes, unable to talk for a few minutes. “I canna believe he’s doing this to me. I dinna bloody care about his whisky!”

“Jamie,” I said, cupping his cheeks with my hands, bringing his forehead against mine. “It’s alright.”

It wasn’t alright, but I couldn’t make things worse by saying it aloud.

“Tis not alright. I’ve done everything he asked for!” His slumped shoulders sank a bit deeper and he brought his arms around me, pulling me into his embrace.

“You’ve done what you needed to do. For you, not for him. And he was negative from the beginning about you staying back, we should have expected that.”

But we hadn’t, because we fooled ourselves with cherry blossoms and endless kisses.

“It’s two weeks, Sassenach. What are we going to do for two whole weeks?”

I kissed the tip of his nose, his cheekbones, his lips. “We’ll text. We’ll video call.”

“We’ll count the days,” he said and I kissed his pout.

“Yes, that too.” I agreed, my hands leaving his cheeks to run through his silken hair.

His lopsided smile was the last thing I saw before he took my lips in his in a slow, long, burning kiss.

Two days later, I watched the train leaving from the central station and taking him away, his words reverberating in my head louder than any other sound around me.

“I miss you already, babe. So much.”
Spring break.

My last spring break as a teenager. The one in which my suspicion that adults can be just as ridiculous as teenagers was confirmed. And that they’re especially ridiculous when they think themselves funny.

Another silly bit of knowledge I also learned overt spring break was that adults - particularly my uncle - find young love adorable. And because of that, they think it’s quite funny to tease young lovers about it.

“Claire,” Lamb said from his spot in front of the bookshelf. He had been standing there for more than ten minutes, inspecting the books with a frown on his face, his index finger drumming against his chin. “Can you please get me the volumes on the Jacobite rebellion from my desk? Those ones, with the red leather cover,” he pointed towards his desk and my gaze followed his finger across the room, landing on the large hardcover tomes on his desk, their covers a deep burgundy, carved with black letters.

“That’s burgundy, not red,” I playfully snipped, then I rose from the couch, sighing. I walked to his desk, slipping my phone into my pocket just a second before I picked the books up in my hands.

“Well, look at that now,” Lamb said with a cocked eyebrow and a crooked smile. “I would swear that phone was glued to your hand!”

I shot him a glare before rolling my eyes. “Ha, ha, ha. What a funny uncle I have.”

Lamb chuckled at his own joke and extended a hand to take a volume from me. “Yer a lucky lass,” he said, his Scottish accent even worse than mine.
Remarks like that had become a staple in our interactions during spring break because, apparently, I was always texting, half my mind focused on Jamie. The fact that I took a new selfie every two minutes didn’t help with Lamb’s teasing much, but there was nothing I could do about it. Lamb just went on with his *hilarious* remarks and I thought my eyes would get stuck looking skywards from being rolled all the time.

My phone buzzed with hundreds of messages every day – and every night: the night texts being the reason I never let it out of my sight. Lamb’s teasing of me was bearable, but I couldn’t risk him accidentally reading Jamie’s texts about what he planned to do to me once he was back from Lallybroch. I, however, found myself scrolling up every night before sleeping, reading and rereading his texts, feeling an ache in my chest and a tightening low in my belly. It was like getting drunk on him. I usually fell asleep with a silly smile on my face and one of Jamie’s pictures on my phone’s screen.

Jamie’s pictures. In just a few days my phone was full of them, to an extent that proved detrimental to my phone’s free storage space.

*Jamie in bed, with tousled hair and a sleepy smile.*

**Scot:** *Mooooorning, Sassenach.*

And then, after a long silence on my part because I was obviously still sleeping,

**Scot:** *Wake up, babe! Don’t leave me alone!*

*The porridge Jamie had for breakfast – extremely similar to the one he had had the day before, but still worth sharing.*

**Scot:** *Breakfast! Have to eat fast, da waiting to leave for the distillery.*

*Jamie at the distillery, making a goofy face in front of the copper stills.*

**Scot:** *Hard working man, here. You like?*

His distillery picture - every time at a different place of the distillery - came through at approximately the time I woke up.

**Sassenach:** *Mmmm. Morning!*

*Another picture showing half the ceiling and half Jamie’s face, taken from a weird angle.*

**Sassenach:** *What’s this?*

**Scot:** *Da watching. Was the best I could do.*
Jamie’s time at the distillery was the only part of the day when we didn’t text. Brian was serious about his son’s training concerning the family whisky, and Jamie soon realized that since he was going to be there, he better make it count. It would be a few hours later when another picture would arrive.

Jamie back home, grinning broadly to the camera next to Bran, his deerhound, patiently awaiting his favorite human to stop with the nonsense and play with him.

Scot: Back home!

Sassenach: Play-time?

Scot: Going to run up the hill, Sassenach. Train to keep up with the lack of swimming. :-(

Jamie with Bran again, the human feigning sleep, while the dog slept on his lap.

Scot: DEAD

Sassenach: Oh what a pity! You’re not coming back, then?

Scot: YOU WISH

Sassenach: In fact I’m not.

Scot: Can’t wait to kiss you again. To lick you, to touch you.

Sassenach: OMG CAN YOU STOP IT?

Scot: I’ve big plans for you when I get back.

Sassenach: Have you now?

Scot: Wait and you’ll see. What are you doing?

Sassenach: Studying! Won’t YOU study??

Scot: Ffs

Jamie in his room, my notes and the book in front of him.

Scot: Not the same without you.

Sassenach: I know…

We’d study together then, usually until our eyes hurt and our yawns took the better of us. The last picture he always sent me was of him looking just as sleepy as the first picture of the day.
Jamie’s face covering the whole screen, sending me a goodnight kiss.

Jamie, Jamie, Jamie. He was everywhere, and yet I missed him insufferably much.

Apart from texting with Jamie - that took more time than one could imagine - my spring break was quiet, and I finally found time to catch up with Joe. It was unbelievable how the two of us were perfectly synchronized in finding love. And we both fell face first into that buzzing feeling that took hold of all our senses.

Two days before going back to school, Joe and I finally arranged to meet. We had so much to tell and texts seemed insufficient. I sent my morning selfie to Jamie, teasing him about staying at home to study while I went out. A series of angry emojis arrived seconds after my message was seen. After a bunch of hearts of all colours from me, he suggested we go to his favorite bakehouse, and I texted Joe with the address.

**Sassenach:** Are you sure you don’t want to be the one who’ll take me there for the first time?

**Scot:** Nah, Sassenach. It’s okay. If you like it we can go as many times as we want.

**Scot:** Try the cherry and almond tart!

I was getting dressed and didn’t reply. When I checked my phone again, I had two new messages.

**Scot:** Try the tart. Seriously.

**Scot:** It’s the beeeest. My fav.

Smiling, I texted back.

**Sassenach:** Okay! I’ll order your tart!

One hour later, I was sitting at a small cute table in the corner of the shop, a big piece of the cherry and almond tart in front of me, next to my cup of chai. I had three major subjects to discuss with Joe, and we jumped from one to the other several times every minute.


I knew he was madly in love with Gail – actually the whole school knew, one glance at the two of them and everyone could see it – and my heart swelled when I heard him talking about her, his voice low and mellow, her name bringing a soft curve to his lips and a sparkle in his eyes. He got dreamy when he told me how they were spending their days, how they loved the same things, how her left cheek had this infinitesimally small dimple when she laughed. We talked about her family and her ideas, the way she saw the world – which had clearly affected Joe. Long gone was his cynical side, his absolute beliefs. He was softer somehow, his edges smoother.

“I certainly need to get to know her better! She sounds so awesome, Joe!”

“She is,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“We’re lucky, aren’t we?” I asked, beaming. “Who would imagine that Scotland would be this good. I got to meet the most amazing people - you included,” I smirked, and Joe smiled back.

“I know, LJ. Pretty awesome, ain’t it?” He then took on one of his teasing looks, and I knew I was in
trouble. “Amazing people… Who would have guessed,” he said and I raised an eyebrow. “If I remember correctly, I have a text here… somewhere…” he unlocked his phone, pretending to search for the text. “Saying ‘Jamie Fraser can go fuck himself’ or something along these lines?”

I scoffed and narrowed my eyes at him.

“And here we are now,” he continued, “With you unable to stop babbling about your dashing Highlander.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “He turned out to be a bit better than I thought.”

“A bit,” Joe smirked. “So did he fuck himself? Or did you help him with it?”

I burst out in laughter, feeling my cheeks burn crimson.

“Oh I see,” Joe said, winking at me.

The bastard.

After the enormous amount of time it took me to catch my breath, I decided the best I could do was to change the subject. “So,” I said. “Universities. Where will you apply? Do you still plan on going back to the US?”

“Hell yes! Scotland is great, lass,” he said winking at me – again –, “But we’re definitely going to the US, bae!”

“What?” I asked smiling at the thought of studying in the US.

“New York City.” Joe said with a smug grin. “At least we hope so,” he added, sobering up a bit.

“That’s so cool! School of Medicine and…?” I trailed off, not knowing Gail’s goals.

“Silver School of Social Work, for Gail. She’ll be great, she’s made for it.” Joe took a big bite of his chocolate brownie. “And you?”

“Oxford University, both of us.” I said, proud of our choice. “I’ll miss you so much,” I added with a pout. “But it’s going to be so good, Joe!” Joe’s smile became broader, just a second before I heard an all too familiar voice, low and deep, coming from behind my ear.

“Oh yes. It’s going to be amazing, Joe.” I could hear the grin in his voice, but I couldn’t turn, my eyes wide looking at Joe. “Hello, babe,” Jamie said, and I felt his lips warm on the tender skin of my neck. He lingered a bit, breathing me in, and then moved away, making me long for more.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice high pitched with excitement.

“I told you I missed you,” Jamie answered, plopping himself down on the chair next to me.

I shook my head, taking his face in my hands. “You’re incredible.”

Jamie smiled and kissed me, and I lost myself in the sweet taste of his lips – or was that the dessert on my lips – and the heat that rose in my body - an effect Jamie always had on me when so close.

“Ahem.” Joe pretended to clear his throat before he laughed. We broke the kiss, smiling sheepishly.

“My cherry tart!” Jamie said, licking his lips as he reached for my fork. The last bite was still on my plate.
“So, what do you think you’re doing?” I asked, trying to hide the smile I felt springing up on my face.

“Eating my order?” He smiled smugly and I realized the reason he insisted on me ordering his favorite dessert. “At least ye left me a bite!”

“You fool,” I said, pinching his ribs.

Jamie swallowed and kissed me once more. His hand trailed up my thigh until it found mine on my lap and our fingers intertwined, finally in the right place. He told us that had taken the morning train from Inverness and came back – alone. His coach had called, asking him if he could at least be there for Sunday training and after the exemplary behavior he’d shown during the break, his dad allowed him to go. Ian and Jenny would return the next day. My mind ran so fast, thinking of the possibilities over and over.

Was Murtagh at home?

We left the bakehouse almost half an hour later, parting ways with Joe who was headed to meet Gail at the library.

“Finally,” Jamie breathed in my ear.

I shot him a knowing glance but he spoke before I could say anything.

“Dinna get me wrong, Sassenach, Joe is a verra fine lad and all, but I haven’t seen ye in twelve days and tis making me crazy.”

“Crazy?” I asked. “Crazy, how?”

I found myself pushed into a close, my back flush on the rough stone, my lip taken hostage by Jamie’s teeth.

“Crazy,” he said and our tongues collided, thirsty for each other. “Like,” He bit me lightly and his hand snuck under my coat, then under my sweater, until it was resting on my bare skin. Goosebumps rose in his fingers’ wake, and I didn’t know if they were from his cold hand or the heat of being touched. “That,” he concluded, one hand cupping my breast and the other my butt. Searching for connection, as much connection as possible. It was a need, a reaction necessary for survival and we couldn’t but surrender to it.

“Oh God, Jamie.” His mouth left mine and he licked a trail down my neck, making me shiver.

“I want you,” he sighed. “I need you. I need to get my hands on you, on all of you, and feel your skin burn under my fingers and feel your breath come faster in my mouth. Ye wear,” he said, squeezing my butt, “too many bloody clothes, Sassenach.”

I moaned and laughed, and I opened my eyes, realizing where we were. People were passing by the close. Just a slight turn of their heads and they would see us. Burning.

“Jamie,” I stopped him, regretting it the moment I did it. “People are passing by right next to us.”

He opened his eyes and looked around, as if taking the place in for the first time. He took his hands off me with great difficulty, leaning his forehead against mine. “Ye’ll be the death of me,” he whispered, a small lopsided smile on his face. He breathed twice; full, deep breaths. “Claire,” he said then, his thumb running on my cheek, and he moved a strong arm to envelope me in his warmth. My body responded immediately, my hand coming to rest over his heart, feeling it pounding. “My
training is tomorrow and Murtagh is in Glasgow. He will be there for at least four more hours. Come home with me.”

I felt my body melting into his, flesh igniting, our hearts beating to a rhythm that was ours alone. I nodded and kissed his soft smile; a kiss that tasted like almond, cherries, and happiness. Jamie took my hand and led me back to the main street, and I wondered if I could walk all the way to his house, my breath already coming short and shallow. Burning with love.
Edinburgh always felt different when I walked the city with Jamie. There was a special energy that ran through my muscles, an urge to dance, to celebrate life. His presence electrified my senses, made me feel like I was a part of the city, part of its people, part of something bigger than myself. Not alone, but as one, with him. Together with the boy I loved.

Together with this huge person who shortened his strides for my sake.

Our cheeks were bright red when we left the close, our hair slightly disheveled. I pulled Jamie to a stop to fix the stray locks on his head, only to see him looking back at me with the silliest, most adorable smile. He tucked a curl behind my ear – something I was sure didn’t make any difference for the disaster that was my hair – and I goofily kissed his nose before we started walking again. We tried to keep our eyes on the street, to make sure we would arrive at his place without any further distractions, but it was impossible. We kept stealing glances at one another, our happy eyes quickly followed by curled up lips.

Conveniently, Murtagh’s apartment was close to Jamie’s favorite bakehouse. It took us ten minutes, hands clasped tight, to reach the four-story brownstone. The building stood proud amongst the others surrounding it, facing the little park across the street. It was a beautiful neighbourhood, but I never really took the time to appreciate it. For me, all that mattered was that it was Jamie’s neighbourhood, and every time I was there, I’d get to see him soon.

Now he was next to me, smiling crookedly while he unlocked the front door.
When we walked into the apartment, I realized it was the first time I had seen it empty. It looked bigger somehow without its residents moving about, and much cleaner. The daylight shone across the dark furniture, the leather couch, the immaculately clean kitchen counter, and I stopped for a moment, truly taking in the room for the first time. Jamie, however, not impressed by the house at all, headed straight for his room. Impatient. Smiling, I tugged him back and gave him a long, soft kiss, one that I knew would elicit a low growl deep in his throat. His stare was intense when I met his eyes again and he turned around, determined, making our destination clear.

“Can I have a glass of water? Please?” I asked, stopping him in his tracks once more.

*Oh, you’re going to regret all the naughty texts you sent me during the break, Jamie Fraser.*

He looked at me, his confused frown quickly replaced by a sheepish smile. “Ye can have all the water ye want, Sassenach.” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m sorry I didna offer ye anything, I didna exactly had the savoir vivre on my mind right now.”

*Oh, really.*

“Busy thinking other things?” I asked, removing my jacket while he poured me a glass of water. Jamie only replied with a guttural sound, but it was more than enough for me. I drank slowly, all the while feeling his eyes on me.

*Just don’t choke, Claire.*

“Can we please go to my room now, before I lose it altogether?” he asked, stepping closer and slipping his hand from my waist to my butt.

“Lose what?” I inquired, trying for my most innocent face.

“Ye’re the worst person in the world, Sassenach.” Jamie shook his head, smiling nonetheless. “But I want ye anyway. Ye must have bewitched me, I guess.”

“I put a spell on you,” I sang. “Because you’re miiiiiine.”

“Aye, that. Come here.”

He pressed his palm into my bottom, fingers gripping tight, pulling me closer to his body. His lips were soft against my mouth, his cock hard against my thigh. Jamie took the glass from my hand, set it on the counter with a slow, deliberate move, and started walking us towards his bedroom door, with his eyes closed, still kissing me. He seemed to know what he was doing, but I could hardly concentrate on the kiss, my mind wondering whether I’d trip on the furniture and fall to the floor, bruising the arse Jamie loved so much.

But then again, I’d know exactly who to blame.

We arrived safe and sound inside his room, Jamie closing and locking the door behind us.

“We’re alone, aren’t we?” I asked with a frown, but he gave me a reassuring smile.

“Aye. I just feel safer if we’re locked in. D’ye mind?”

“No, I don’t mind,” I said, pinning him against the door. “I don’t mind a bit.”

I took his bottom lip between my teeth and bit softly, reaching for the hem of his sweater when I realized that he had removed his jacket without me noticing. I pulled his sweater off, reveling in the
feeling of his bare skin beneath my fingers, and the way the sweater had ruffled his hair, allowing stray curls over his forehead.

“Fair is fair,” Jamie said in a husky voice, freeing me of my own sweater and tossing it on to the floor.

His breath came faster, and a moment later his hot lips were on my neck. Jamie cupped my breast over my bra, a groan leaving the mouth that was sucking on my neck, vibrating into my skin. I reached for his jeans and gripped his length through the fabric, running my hand over it. It wasn’t enough. I quickly unbuttoned his jeans using both hands and pushed them down over his thighs. Jamie unclasped my bra and flicked a finger over my nipple, making it hard in anticipation of his mouth. I reached for his cock and stroked him through the thin fabric of his boxers making him stand fixed for a moment, unable to do anything apart from enjoying the sensation of my hand on him. When Jamie looked at me again, his dilated pupils turned his blue eyes almost black. He worked quickly to rid me of my jeans and once they were puddled on the floor, he ran his hand over my panties, a moan escaping his mouth.

“Ah Dhia,” he gasped. “Ye’re so wet.” I smiled against his lips, and he continued. “I was thinking of ye, everyday, when I couldna touch ye. I tried to remember, but not once,” he said, biting my bottom lip hard. “Not once could I remember ye as perfect as ye really are.”

“Perfect, am I?” I asked cheekily. He pushed my panties to the side and slipped a finger inside me.

“Aye,” he said in response to my whimper. “Perfect.”

Jamie rested his forehead on my shoulder and I sucked at his neck as he stroked me – at least when I was aware enough to do so. I felt my knees weakening, my skin dissolving beneath his touch, and I let go the control of my body, leaving it to him to hold me, to please me, to keep me whole.

“I need to feel ye around my cock,” Jamie said in a voice so low that I hardly heard him. Goosebumps rose all over my body. He stopped his ministrations, cupped my butt with both hands, and swooped me up, walking us both over to bed. He sat down, me on his lap, and I started grinding against him; an impulse I couldn’t control, a hunger I had to sate. My breath came shallow until he kissed me, swallowing my gasps.

“I was waiting for this for so long,” he sighed.

“We’ve gone without for much longer before.” I replied, continuing to move against him.

“Twas not the same – before. Not at all,” he said, a hand cupping my breast while the other settled on my butt, aiding in my movement. “God, I need ye, Sassenach.”

His body was more than enough to rouse me, but every time I heard him saying that he needed me, I felt a current run through my body. I stood up and stepped away from him to take off my panties. Jamie reached for a condom in his bedside table and unceremoniously discarded his own underwear.

“Come here,” he said once he was ready, and without waiting for me to move, he placed a hand on my waist to pull me closer.

I straddled him without a conscious thought, leaving my body to make all decisions. After a quick kiss, I took him in my hand and slowly guided him to my entrance. The moment his cock slipped inside me, twin sighs of pleasure and relief left our mouths, hot air rushing over open lips. A wave ran over our bodies, freeing the moans that had been trapped in our chests for weeks, that longing that burned our lungs, making our breaths come strained.
I moved languidly against him, feeling him hard inside me, feeling his heart pounding against my chest. His strong hands kept me in place while I rolled my hips, dizzy with the sensation of his body responding to mine.

Our kisses were interrupted by my movement, but our lips kept finding one another; again and again, magnets drawn together by an inexplicable force.

“So many nights,” Jamie said, his voice coming with difficulty. “I dreamed of ye.” His mouth moved to my neck and I tipped my head to the side to give him more access. He nibbled softly and then kissed my skin.

“I dreamed of you, too,” I whispered.

“And what did you dream, my Sassenach?” he asked cupping my breast and bringing my nipple to his mouth.

“This,” I said with a gasp, arching my back. “I dreamed of this.” A moan interrupted my thoughts when Jamie sucked harder on my nipple. “You. Inside me.”

His deep guttural growl went right through my skin, making my muscles clench against him. It was different, being on top of him. He was so close that I could see his eyes, the small changes on his face when he liked the way my body moved against his. I loved making him crazy with desire, feeling the power I had over him, controlling our movement and pace. On top of that, I could hardly keep myself in check, feeling filled, while my clit rubbed against him. I was seriously considering keeping that as our go-to position, when I found myself rolled over, with Jamie on top of me.

“Hey…” I objected, but his beautiful smile stopped me from protesting more. Jamie thrust into me, deep and hard, until our whimpers and moans filled the room.

He fell on top of me, so that his chest was flush to mine, and I opened my legs more, nuzzling into his neck, my tongue brushing over his salty skin, breathing in the spices and chocolate of his musky scent. I ran my nails down his back and he growled, his face lost in my curls. A few moments later, I felt him thrust twice and then freeze, his cock twitching, coming inside me.

We didn’t move, but let our chests collide with every breath, our lips curling up in soft smiles. I ran my hand through Jamie’s hair and he kissed my neck, then my chin, my lips.

“I love ye so, my Sassenach,” he whispered, and my smile widened against his lips.

“I love you too, Jamie.” I kissed him softly, brushing the hair off his forehead.

When Jamie went to the bathroom, I thought of how great it would have been if he hadn’t flipped over on top of me. I had been close, so close. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then another. Maybe next time, I said to myself. It was beautiful anyway, this connection, the way our bodies moved in sync, so intimate, acting as one.

When Jamie came back into his room – broad grin across his face, perfectly muscled body aching for me – I couldn’t help but feel my heart swell.

I was the reason of his happiness.

“I did a bit better this time, aye?” he asked, drying his hair with a towel. “Lasted a bit longer.”

“Mmm, you did,” I said, pinching him on the ribs as I walked towards the bathroom. It wasn’t a lie – he had lasted longer.
Once I was back in his room we lay on the bed, fingers running unhurried over the other’s skin, speaking of the little details we’d missed in each other’s lives. We were almost ready to start a second session, when the apartment’s door closed with a loud bang.

I looked at Jamie, my eyes wide, a continuous chorus of “shit, shit, shit” whispered from my mouth.

“He’s early, he’s early. Damn why is he here?”

“Not like it’s his home or anything,” I said, earning a cocked eyebrow from Jamie. We rushed to get dressed, when I realized that my bra was nowhere to be found. Panicked, we both searched the room to no avail.

“You do that every time!” I accused Jamie. “You throw away my clothes and then we can’t find them.”

Jamie gave me a stern look, only murmuring a “Sassenach”, that was supposed to stop me from going on mental on him.

At last, with no sign of my bra, Jamie decided to go out and greet Murtagh, letting him know that we were at home. Once I found the bloody bra, I would join them.

It took me fifteen minutes to locate the bra and sneak my arm between the bed and the wall to retrieve it. Fully dressed, I ran my fingers through my hair to tame the unruly curls and joined Jamie and Murtagh in the kitchen.

Murtagh was chopping vegetables on the counter with his back to Jamie, who sat at the table talking about Brian’s whisky.

“Hello!” I said cheerily – maybe a bit more than normal – and sat in the chair next to Jamie. 

*Play it cool.*

Murtagh set the knife aside and turned to look at me with a smile on his face. “Will ye stay for lunch, lass?”

“Umm, yes. Thank you.” I turned to look at Jamie to confirm that this was the right answer. Murtagh smiling wasn’t a common thing at all. Judging by my redhead’s smile though, I supposed I did well.

“So, how was your trip?” I asked Murtagh, trying to find a safe subject of conversation.

“Twas good, lass. Thank ye.” He turned to the counter again, taking up the knife to chop the onions, and I swear I heard him mutter, “As good as yer day, I spose.”

I turned to look at Jamie, a panicked grimace on my face, but his smile didn’t waver. He leaned over, close to me, placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Ye’ve a glass face, Sassenach,” he whispered in my ear. “Haven’t I told ye?”

I closed my eyes, utterly mortified, cursing myself for letting all my thoughts show on my damned face.

But then again, that was me. Glass face, broad smile, full heart. Oh, and lost bras.
I always imagined my 18th birthday as a super special day. It would be the beginning of my adult life, and needed to be celebrated accordingly. Not by throwing a huge party, not necessarily, but by doing something that I would remember forever. Something like what Jamie did for my 17th birthday. Now that would be a difficult day to surpass.

Jamie, however, was not of the same opinion when it came to his own 18th birthday. It was the coming Saturday, just five days away, and he told me it was just another birthday to him. The only thing he’d asked for was to spend it with me, and maybe hang out with Jenny and Ian too.

“So, you don’t want a party?” I asked him for what felt like the millionth time. “Are you sure?”

“Aye, Sassenach,” he answered, rolling his eyes skywards, and pulled me closer for a kiss. “I dinna need a bunch of people. I only have the one person in my mind that I want to spend it with, and she’s more than enough.” He gave me a cheeky smile and leaned in for another kiss.

“Okay, then,” I said, perfectly happy with the kiss but somewhat disappointed about the party. I wanted to do something special for him, like he had done for me. And mine hadn’t even been my 18th birthday.

Later that day during the lunch break, I ran to the cafeteria, hoping to find Jenny alone and discuss my plans for Jamie’s special day. However, my redhead arrived just after I did, taking the empty seat next to me.

*Great. Can’t a girl organize a surprise party at this school?*
I whispered a “Later,” at Jenny’s puzzled look and focused on my food. I ate faster than ever, earning a surprised look from Jamie, and picked up my tray in hands, ready to leave.

“I have to meet Mrs. Fitz, see you later!” I said with a quick kiss to Jamie, then turned towards Jenny, whispering, “Meet me in the library.”

Five minutes later Jenny entered the quiet library. Everyone was in the cafeteria apart from two guys at the far end wearing earplugs, so I rushed into the subject hoping we wouldn’t be interrupted.

“I wanted to talk to you about Jamie’s birthday. I talked to him and he said he doesn’t want a party. What’s the plan? What are we doing?”

Jenny’s face changed abruptly, and she gave me a wistful smile. “Aye, of course he doesna want a party. I hoped this year would be different, since he has you, but apparently it isna.”

“What?” I asked, confused. This was not what I expected to hear. “What do you mean?”

“Jamie hasn’t had a birthday party since he was a wee lad. It’s…” Jenny took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then continued, “Our mom and little brother were killed in a car accident, on their way to pick up Jamie’s birthday cake.” My eyes almost popped out of their sockets, but I didn’t speak, sensing she had more to say. Jenny crossed her arms in front of her chest, fingers digging into the soft flesh over her biceps. Her gaze was far away when she spoke again, eyes glinting with unshed tears. “She usually made the cake herself, she was a fine baker. But on his 8th birthday Jamie had repetitively asked for a 3D WALL.E cake. Mom couldna do it by herself, so she ordered it from a shop in Inverness. We lost them both, mom and wee Rob, that afternoon, and Jamie never wanted to celebrate his birthday again.”

I stood there shocked, looking at Jenny, feeling my heart breaking in my chest. “He never told me… I mean, I knew that your mom… But not how…”

“Aye, he blamed himself, he still does. Twasn’t his fault, and sometimes I just wish we could open his thick head and pluck out that stupid thought.”

“But we can’t,” I said, still lost, but trying to think how I could help him. He hadn’t even told me… “Jenny,” she looked back at me, once again composed. “He asked me if we could spend the day together, and maybe hang out with you guys.”

“Did he now?” she raised both eyebrows. “That’s an improvement. He usually spends the day all by himself and hardly accepts any well wishes.”

I nodded, more hopeful now, thinking I could take it a step further. “So we can gather up at your place, right?” I saw Jenny nodding and I continued. “I’m thinking of making him a birthday cake.”

Jenny pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head in disagreement. “Claire, I dinna think that’s a good idea.”

“Homemade. With love. It’s not like we’re throwing a huge surprise party full of casual acquaintances, it’ll only be only the four of us. And Murtagh,” I added Jamie’s uncle as an afterthought. “He has to accept that we love him and we care. What kind of punishment lasts 10 years?”

“I dinna ken…” Jenny said, the frown on her face carving deep lines into her forehead. “If we lose him again?” she asked, and before I could ask what that meant she continued. “He didna talk to anybody for about six months after the accident. Not a single word. Not even to the therapist.”
“But he was eight years old, he’s eighteen now. He has to confront his guilt at some point. What’s a better opportunity than his birthday, having all the people who love him around? You know, to face his fears.” I emphasized each argument, feeling that they were as much for Jenny as for me. “I don’t know…” I began to doubt myself.

“Aye, me neither.” Jenny bit her lip hard, exhaling loudly.

We left the library with shadowed faces, both of us deep in thought. I didn’t know if Jenny was thinking back to that day, to the party that turned into a funeral. I was thinking of it, of the boy who expected his mother back at any moment, the sister who kept teasing him about her last birthday cake being better because it had strawberries in it, the father who picked up the phone and heard the cold voice of a stranger announcing that his wife and son wouldn’t be coming home. Loss, knocking on their door when they least expected it.

But do we ever expect loss?

I knew I hadn’t expected my parents to never come back home from their weekend anniversary trip. And yet, they hadn’t. I’d been sure that I would listen to the doorbell at any moment and my parents would wait for me behind the heavy wooden door, with the doll they’d promised me and the hugs I’d missed - but the doorbell never rung. What had rung was Lamb’s phone, interrupting my narration about the elephant and the mouse, and moments later, Lamb was trying to steady himself with a hand on the kitchen table. Phone calls, changing our lives forever.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that I needed to help Jamie forgive himself. He had to accept the fact that life is cruel sometimes and it’s no one’s fault. Certainly not his. He had been just a little boy who wanted a special cake for his birthday.

I was lucky enough to leave school alone, or else Jamie would have seen on my face that something was wrong. Still, he texted me once he finished training, asking if I was alright.

Damn his sixth sense.

I texted him back, a message full of emojis and exclamation points, trying to convince him everything was perfectly alright.

That night I lay in my bed, thinking about Jamie’s birthday over and over again, while texting him about the irrelevant details of my day.

Sassenach: We had chicken for dinner, too!

I sent the message, my mind far away from my dinner with Lamb.

Will he be mad at me, when he’ll realize I pushed him so much, knowing what this meant for him?

Another text from Jamie, quoting me saying that I didn’t like chicken.

Sassenach: I know, but Lamb is really good at it! An Indian recipe I think.

And back to my thoughts again.

Should I do a WALL.E themed cake, to give him what he never got as a boy? Will that bring back only bad memories?

Another text. Jamie seemed pretty invested in my uncle’s tikka masala recipe.
Sassenach: Pretty sure it had turmeric in it. It helps the memory, did you know that?

I sent the message and winced.

What if he wants to delete those memories? Should I just listen to Jenny and be content with the fact that Jamie won’t lock himself in his room this year?

I was still waiting for Jamie’s reply, when his sister’s name popped up in my notifications.

Jenny: Someone has to shake him out of this stupid guilt loop. Let’s do it Claire.

And then another one.

Jenny: Do you know how to make a cake?

Well, the truth was that I didn’t. I had never baked anything in my life, but there is a first time for everything.

I would make his birthday cake. I was on a mission.

The next day I started my search for recipes, thanking Brin and Page for inventing Google. I needed something easy, preferably with almonds and cherries. Not more than two layers, because a cake falling-apart would make no one feel better. Not a super fancy frosting either. Definitely not sugarpaste - I hated sugarpaste. At last, I ended up with a couple of recipes that seemed relatively easy and tasty, and chose the one with the prettiest picture - hoping mine would look the same, even though I knew it wouldn’t.

That Friday night I asked Lamb if we could cancel our usual dinner out, and stationed myself in the kitchen.

It took me an hour and a half of mixing and waiting expectantly in front of the oven, only to end up with a flat, uneven cake that looked like a total disaster. After more google searching, I learned I wasn’t supposed to overmix the batter after I’d added the flour.

Had I overmixed it? Was that when I went to my room for a quick call with Jamie?

Cursing and hissing, I started over, paying more attention to the recipe now. However, I did give myself a little pat on the back for buying double amounts of all the ingredients.

Another hour and a half later, I had a perfect almond cake cooling on the rack. I took a deep breath and proceeded with the filling. I’d opted for a simple, classic buttercream with cherries. The swiss meringue buttercream sounded delicious, but I didn’t trust myself with those egg whites. Having already ruined the cake once, I felt like the increased risk wouldn’t pay off in the end.

It took me another hour to finish with the filling and assemble the cake. God, baking was exhausting. Finally, I sat at the kitchen table, admiring the product of my labor. It didn’t look like the picture I had seen, but it was beautiful. One final touch, and it would be complete.

I took the piping bag, filled it with dark blue buttercream and tried to keep my hand steady.

*Just keep swimming.*

*We love you.*

It was from Finding Nemo, not WALL.E, and it was perfect. Both figurative and literal. No one
would ever call it calligraphy, but it was legible. The final ‘you’ was a little smaller because I accidentally made the ‘love’ bigger. I thought of fixing the second line and rewriting it, but I wasn’t sure if the first layer would show through or not. Plus, I was exhausted.

I set the cake in the fridge and walked straight to my room. It was a quarter to twelve, and I knew that Jamie would be asleep already, but I wanted to stay up until midnight to be the first to wish him a happy birthday. The second after I sent the message, I fell into bed and slept, dreaming of runny frostings and crooked letters.

Jamie’s text woke me the next morning, much earlier than I would have liked. I called him back, singing the sleepiest rendition of ‘Happy Birthday’ and taking in his laughter like it was an espresso shot.

Jamie had no idea about the cake. All he knew was that we’d meet after his training, we’d buy to-go coffee and we’d walk to our favorite place – Calton Hill. And this was exactly what we did.

Jamie was happy, and I felt my heart fill every time his laughter echoed in my ears. We sat at our spot and I gave him his gift, the one he’d been asking for from the first moment he saw me caring the bag. He took the wrapped box in his hands and looked at me with a broad, childish grin that made me think of the little boy waiting for his mother to return home with his cake. I swallowed hard and blinked back tears, grateful that Jamie was too distracted with the colorful packaging to notice me.

“What is it, Sassenach?” he asked, eyes fixed on the box.

“You might as well open it and find out,” I smiled at him, hoping he’d like it. I had been looking for his gift for almost a month.

Jamie tore open the wrapping paper and stared at the box. “Ultra Fast-Dry Travel and Sports Towel,” he murmured.

“Lightweight and compact, an essential gear for swimmers!” I chimed in as if I were in a television advertisement.

Jamie flashed me a huge smile and leaned in to kiss me, the box blocking us from getting too close.

“Do you like it?” I whispered the moment my lips were free again.

“I love it, Sassenach,” he answered, setting the box to the side to pull me into his arms.

We kissed for a long while, before Jamie opened the box to inspect just how soft his towel was. “Now I’ll have something from ye when I’m at the pool as well,” he said, making my stomach flutter with his cheesiness.

Jamie walked me home just before lunch, and we set our date for six o’clock in the evening. Before I walked in I turned to see him leaving, hoping that the evening’s celebration would go just as well as the morning’s.

—

At six o’clock, I balanced the cake in one hand and used the other to ring the doorbell at Murtagh’s apartment. I’d met Suzette in front of the building and she’d let me in with a smile that said ‘Happy birthday to your boyfriend!’ I’d climbed up the stairs, had taken the cake out of its box and was now waiting at front door with a celebratory smile, hearing the commotion from inside the apartment, and then Jamie’s voice coming closer to the door. “Okay, okay, I’ll get it!”
The first thing I saw when he opened the door was his sweet smile freeze on his face.

That cost me two heartbeats. Skipped, lost forever.

I looked past him to find Jenny, Ian, and Murtagh in a semicircle of hope. They all looked back at me with encouraging nods and smiles. Taking that as a good omen, I turned my eyes back on Jamie. His smile had now disappeared, and a cold mask was over his face, hiding all his feelings.

“Happy birthday!” I said, trying to beat that blank stare, but it didn’t come out as happy as I hoped.

Jamie swallowed hard, his fingers drumming on his thigh almost as fast as my heart in my chest. He opened his mouth to speak and I held my breath, but no words came out.

“I made it myself,” I whispered with half a smile, trying not to cry on his doorstep with the cake still in my hands.

This was such a bad idea. Bad, bad, bad idea.

“Won’t ye invite the lass inside, Jamie?” Murtagh’s voice was stern and I wondered if he did it on purpose, to hide the worry in it.

Jamie didn’t say anything, just stepped aside to let me in.

I said a broken “Hello,” to the three gloomy figures in the living room and headed straight to the kitchen to avoid another uncomfortable silence.

I left the cake on the countertop, folded my arms in front of my chest, and focused on my breathing in a last attempt to keep the tears at bay. I heard a mumble of voices was from the living room, but I couldn’t discern any words. I didn’t know how much time had passed when I finally felt the tears roll down on my cheeks, disobeying every order given by my brain.

I went way too far. The gift and a quiet evening would have been enough. Now I’ve ruined it all.

“Claire,” Jamie’s voice was low as he walked across the kitchen to come behind me. Without saying anything, he wrapped his arms around my waist, and buried his head in the crook of my neck. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s me that should be sorry,” I said, the tears flowing now out of control. It was as if his touch had broken the last part of the dam that stood upright until that moment. “I shouldn’t have done it. Jenny told me, I knew…”

“Aye, I ken. Dinna cry, mo chridhe.” I felt his own tears on my neck, but I wasn’t able to utter a single word. “I’m sorry I reacted that way.”

“Aye, I ken. Dinna cry, mo chridhe.” I felt his own tears on my neck, but I wasn’t able to utter a single word. “I’m sorry I reacted that way.”

“I just…” I said, sobs interrupting my sentence. “I just wanted… Wanted to help.”

“I ken, Claire. Tis just not that easy.”

“I know, but it will never be easy.” Every time he called me by my name, I felt like he was twisting a small knife into my heart - but he had to realize that I knew, that I understood him. I took a breath and continued. “I wanted you to know that it’s okay to mourn your mother, but it isn’t okay to blame yourself for something that wasn’t your fault. It’s not fair.” I truly believed what I said, but I still felt that I trespassed on territory I shouldn’t set my foot on. “But I shouldn’t do that,” I continued, putting a hand on his arm. “I should maybe wait for you to be ready…”
“Sassenach,” he whispered, and sighed loudly. “I’ll never be ready. My Da and Jenny gave up a long while ago. Murtagh and Ian too, because I didna listen to them. But ye tried to overwrite the bad memories with good ones, aye? Ye’ve the devil’s own courage, Sassenach.”

“I tried and I failed. I just created more bad memories.”

“No, you didna. And it’s not ye who failed.” Jamie turned me around and cupped my face, brushing the tears away from my cheekbones. “I failed ye. Ye believed in me, but I didn’t… This is so bloody hard, Claire.”

It was my turn to kiss his tears away. “I know. I’m not saying that a cake will change it all, but I thought we could try. It was never your fault, Jamie. It wasn’t a cake or your birthday that took your mom away. It was an accident, life’s wicked game.”

Jamie nodded repeatedly. “It’s just that… If I hadna insisted on the fancy cake, she’d never have gone to Inverness, she’d never…”

I stopped him with a finger on his lips. “Jamie, you didn’t know. You couldn’t have known. There are millions of ‘what if’s’ in everything we do. You just don’t know what might have happened, and it’s time to stop punishing yourself. Your mom wouldn’t want you to carry this on your back.”

Jamie looked at me seriously, and I saw something change in his gaze. “No, she wouldn’a.” He closed his eyes for a moment, taking deep, full breaths. “I dinna promise ye anything, Sassenach, but I’ll try.” He kissed my forehead, murmuring against my skin, “Thank ye for being by my side.”

“I don’t want to be anywhere else,” I said, kissing his jaw, before I brought his face down to mine, tasting his lips. Our kiss was salty from our tears, but sweet with hope. “It’s with almond and cherries!” I said, nodding towards the cake.

Jamie looked at the cake and turned his blue glittering eyes back to me, smiling. “I’ll keep swimming,” he breathed. “Because you love me.”

I kissed him again, feeling his warmth permeating my skin, making me feel safe again, calming the screams in my mind that cried that I’d lost him.

“Are ye sure that ye willna poison us, Sassenach?” he asked with a teasing smile, and I pinched his side in response.

“You ungrateful -” His mouth swallowed the single word he knew that would follow.

“Scot,” he continued for me.

We took the cake and walked back to the living room, the stains from the tears on our cheeks ending up to curled up lips. Jenny placed eighteen colorful candles on the cake, and we all sang for Jamie. For a Happy Birthday, after ten sad ones.

When he blew the candles out, Murtagh took him in a tight embrace, saying in a broken voice that his mother would be proud of him. I smiled, glancing up to the ceiling, and I silently told Ellen that I was taking good care of her lad. A moment later I felt her daughter’s hand squeezing mine.
Biology.

Cell structure and genetics, homeostasis and synaptic neurotransmission. My first exam, just a week after Jamie’s birthday. A week after that perfect evening; the last time I removed school completely from my thoughts, free of the impending challenge of the exams that would shape my life.

Murtagh had disappeared after we cut the cake – supposedly to leave us alone, although we knew exactly where he was going – and the four of us had decided to make popcorn and watch old Disney movies, to keep the child in Jamie alive.

As if he wasn’t a child already, blowing out his candles with such wonder and fervor, as if a whole new world had opened in front of him.

Ian had declared that one of the movies we had to watch was Finding Nemo, since it had become our party’s unofficial theme. Jenny and I picked Hercules, already giggling over the lines of Hades and the Muses’ songs. Perched on the two couches of the living room – Jamie had stated we were to have the largest one because it was his birthday – we’d sang, laughed, and recited almost all the dialogue of each movie. When Murtagh had come back – whistling a happy tune that made the smiles on our faces broader – I’d given Jamie the longest goodnight kiss in the history of the world and went to sleep in Jenny’s room. After approximately two hours of talking and giggling, Jenny and I had eventually fallen asleep, smiling, celebrating our victory over Jamie’s grief, with his full, belly laughs still echoing in our ears.

When I left their apartment the next morning, I tried to memorize the feel of Jamie’s arms around my body, the softness of his lips, warm and inviting on mine.
We saw each other much less over the following month, and even though we had both agreed that this was the best strategy to follow, it still seemed like the stupidest idea we’d ever had. But we had a goal and we had to achieve it.

Not that many miles south of Edinburgh, lay our future.

Oxford.

Every time I was ready to give in and call Jamie to meet me for a walk, I refocused my mind on that single word, imagining us both strolling around in that fairytale city, hands linked, feet feeling the uneven cobblestones under our shoes. My life was already divided into the pre- and post-Oxford era, and that was enough motivation to make my eyes and my thoughts return to the notes laid out on my desk.

I just had to excel in my exams.

I had been planning, studying, and preparing for more than a year, and it felt surreal that the time of the exams had finally come. I was trying to remain calm, to remind myself that I was ready, that I had done the best I could. It was the truth, after all. Since the beginning of the year I had gone over the content of my subjects more times than I could count. I had even organized my time during the exams; what questions I’d approach first, what I’d leave for the end.

But I knew that my textbooks wouldn’t be enough this time. There was always something more to learn, some new information I could fit in with the knowledge I already acquired. Something that would make a difference, that would demonstrate how hard I had worked, how serious I was about my choice.

When I’d read everything I thought would be relevant, I started watching YouTube videos and reading scientific papers. It was then that Lamb started teasing me, saying if I’d continue like I was I could just skip going to medical school altogether.

Lamb, who kept saying it wouldn’t be the end of the world if I failed my exams, that life always offers new possibilities, some of which I probably never fathomed beforehand.

I couldn’t even listen to him talking about failure, about a future different from what I’d dreamed of. I wouldn’t let that happen.

But… What if I had missed something important? What if I hadn’t paid attention to a significant detail?

“Will ye stop before ye go completely crazy, Sassenach?” Jamie asked me when I voiced my thoughts. “Ye ken everything! Ye’ll do great tomorrow!”

I sighed dramatically and he pressed me tight against his body with a strong arm around my shoulders. I pulled his face down towards me for a kiss, to drink in some of his optimism, to feel the auburn locks cold between my fingers and his lips warm on mine. He had come straight from the swimming pool and had almost dragged me out of my house to prevent me from going through the previous years’ exams one last time.

“Just for a wee walk, Sassenach,” he’d said. “To decompress before the big day.”

It was impossible to say no to Jamie, so I’d tried to silence the little voices in my head, crying that I should stay at home and study, instead of walking around Edinburgh the night before the exams.

“Ye wee nerd,” Jamie said, when I told him I felt bad for going out. I huffed and I nudged him on
the ribs, pulling away from him.

“I’m not a nerd!” I protested, in a voice that was more high-pitched than I’d have liked.

He kept silent but raised an eyebrow, while I could plainly see the corner of his mouth curling up in a suggestive smile.

“I’m not!” I repeated, and then crossed my hands across the front of my chest, pouting. Seeing that he still hadn’t said a word, I relented. “Okay, maybe just a bit.”

That made him chuckle. “Come here, my nerd,” he said, curling his index finger repeatedly in a come hither way, broadly grinning.

“Your nerd…” I murmured, thinking, but didn’t move towards him. “So that makes you my jock?”

“I’m not a jock!” he said in a nasal voice, and I could hardly contain my giggle. Following his lead though, I just shrugged and looked at him. “We’re not playing in a rom-com,” he continued, defiant. “First of all, you weren’t secretly in love with me from the beginning.”

I wanted to cackle, but I did my best for a serious voice instead. “No, I wasn’t.” It was a lost battle, trying to keep a straight face, and I knew it, but continued nonetheless. “I could never fall in love with you, the swoon-worthy swimmer… All muscle and no brain… No, not a chance.”

Jamie narrowed his eyes at me and pursed his lips, as if deciding what was the best way to take revenge. “Like that, is it, Sassenach?”

“Mmm, you were sae repulsive, ye ken.” I tried my best to mimic his accent and burst out laughing.

“Ye’re dead, Sassenach,” he said and came towards me with long strides. I ran. He ran, too, and I hadn’t even reached the next block when he caught up with me, capturing me in his arms.

I was dead. I was sure my heart would stop beating at any moment, overwhelmed by a euphoric feeling that made happiness seem trivial.

“You do know I wanted you from the very beginning,” I whispered to him, my breath brushing against his lips. “Jock.”

“And I, you,” he said, his voice utterly sweet, and swallowed my sigh with his kiss. “Nerd.”

The next day I sprang out of bed listening to my alarm clock, with blurry images of cell membranes still fogging my thoughts. I had dreamed of the exams, again.

I took a deep breath and checked my phone, finding a text from Jamie.

Scot: Show them how it’s done, Sassenach.

Scot: ILY <3 <3

He had set his alarm clock just to text me.

Sassenach: ILY TOO! :*

I couldn’t imagine a better way to start my day.
An hour and a half later, I was at school, sitting at my desk, waiting for the paper. The moments before we were handed the exams were the worst. I had quickly found that looking around while waiting was the worst thing to do, so I focused on my desk instead, feeling the smooth surface beneath my fingertips. I fidgeted with one of my two pens, swirling it around and running my nail over the carved letters, to hear the reassuring scratching sound of their resistance. Not having much more to do, I took deep breaths, waiting.

The room was quiet, but there was a tension hanging low over our heads, filled with dreams and opportunities, stress and hope. It felt so heavy and real, that I was afraid I would accidentally breathe it in and it would close my throat, linger in my trachea, to end up in my lungs and keep the oxygen out. The atmosphere was thick with apprehension, and we could almost capture it between our fingers. The same fingers that minutes later, gripped the pens and started writing.

The moment the paper was in front of me everything around me disappeared. It was me versus myself – my favorite competition. My brain was on the verge of being burned with overthinking, my hand hurt from holding the pen too tight, but I continued to write the answers. I knew them all.

I almost danced in the middle of the street when I met Jamie later, success making me deliriously happy. Jamie had one more week before his English exam, which was his favorite subject, and the only one he wouldn’t need in his application for a business management bachelor’s degree. He wasn’t anxious at all, the bloody Scot, and I couldn’t understand how he did it.

Not anxious about the exams, that is. Because every day I watched him become more and more worried about the Scottish National Championship. It seemed absurd to me that he would care that much about swimming, right in the middle of the exams. Especially after all our work, to make his grades in math descent again. “You do realize that you have to finish the exams first, right? That we have more than two months until you’ll swim at the Nationals?”

“Aye, Sassenach. I do.” His voice was rigid, and it made me feel like a mother scolding her child. “Ye dinna trust me now?” he asked, and I kept silent, guilty, because the thought that he overestimated his preparation for the exams had crossed my mind more than once. Jamie exhaled loudly and took my face in his hands. “Claire,” he said, “I do study and I will get the grades I need. I’m no’ a fool.”

His eyes were so serious and sincere that I couldn’t but nod in agreement. Jamie kissed my forehead and pulled me in for a tight hug. “Tis just…” he started, but trailed off.

“What?” I mumbled, and nuzzled against his neck, breathing him.

“I think it’s more difficult to win the National Championship than it is to write an A+ in math and business management. My personal best needs so much improvement.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with the statement, but I decided to trust him. “I know you’ll make it,” I said, and kissed the hollow between his clavicles, that little part of him I had declared mine, months ago.

It’s sometimes difficult to realize, incomprehensible almost, how things you’ve been waiting for so long come to pass, like fast breaths taken after a long run. And the air I breathed in, leaving the testing hall for the last time, had the taste of accomplishment.

Math was our last exam. When I saw Jamie waiting for me with his red curls falling over his forehead totally disheveled from all the times he ran his hands through them, my heart stopped. But then I saw the huge smile on his face, and it told me everything I needed to know.
We had more than a month before the results would be announced, but we had done well. We had made it.

Oxford was waiting for us.

I walked towards him, grinning, and I felt like flowing above the shiny floor, my feet inches away from the surface. The moment I came to stand in front of him, Jamie hugged me tight, lifted me up in the air, and asked me if I would be his date at the prom.

“We’re going to the prom?” I asked, uncertain. This was the last thing I expected to hear at that moment.

“Aye! Of course we are! So, will ye be my date, Sassenach?”

“Oh, I don’t know…” I replied, teasing him. “This is really on short notice, and I might have plans for that night.”

Jamie shook his head, lowered me to the ground and bent his head to kiss me. “Cancel yer plans, m’ghraidh. Ye’ll be all mine that night.”
I was about ten years old the first time the concept of prom was introduced to me. Lamb and I had left the Egyptian desert to visit his colleagues in the Department of Egyptology at Cairo University, when we bumped into a group of girls on our way back to the hotel. They were wearing silken dresses, and the ones without matching head scarves had their hair done up in impressive styles. Lamb had smiled when we passed them, but I, used to seeing everyone coated in several layers of sand, had been amazed. For the rest of our evening Lamb had, with the knowledge of a single man in his sixties but very patiently, entertained all my questions about prom night as best he could.

“I still like my pants more,” I had concluded in the end, causing him to roll his eyes at my tomboy remark.

“Me too, lamb, me too,” he had replied, before sticking his nose all the way into his wine glass, closing his eyes and sniffing the sweet, fruity aroma.

Eight years later, I still preferred my pants. Or, perhaps, my casual dresses. Thinking about the articles of clothing in my closet, I realized I had absolutely nothing to wear to the prom.

“No one has a formal dress sitting around before the prom, Claire,” Jenny looked at me as if stating the obvious was extremely tiring for her.
"You do!"

"Aye, I do," she said softly. "But that’s an exception."

Jenny had a dress. In fact, she had her mother’s dress; a beautiful green gown that was off at the seamstress’ shop for adjustments. I couldn’t follow Jenny’s example, because Lamb hadn’t kept any of my mother’s clothes, and I had no idea where to buy a prom dress, let alone what it should look like.

"Dinna fash, Claire!" Jenny nudged me in the ribs, grinning. "We’ll find yer dress together."

After spending a ridiculous amount of time in changing rooms of all the local dress shops, I found a floor length, curve hugging, purple dress with a high neck.

"Yer neck is so long, Claire," Jenny murmured while adjusting the fabric around the open back. "It shows even more with that dress. I love it."

"You know what?" I asked with a smile, looking myself over in the mirror. "I love it, too."

We went back to Murtagh’s apartment, made tea and waited for Jamie and Ian to come back from their own shopping expedition. Jamie and I had agreed to keep our outfits a surprise for each other, thinking it would be more exciting that way. He arrived home with two big paper bags in hand, gave me a quick kiss and rushed into his room to hide the bags before I could see anything. Ian made a beeline for Jenny, sank into the couch next to her and after whispering something in her ear, rose again and headed to the kitchen to prepare tea for him and Jamie. A minute later, Jamie came back from his room and sat on the armrest of my chair.

"Sassenach," he whispered a moment later. "Tisna verra comfortable up here."

I lifted an eyebrow at the red giant hovering over me and glanced at the empty couch across my seat. "You could just as well sit there, you know."

"I know," he said, and a pout started to form on his mouth. "But I’m so tired and I wanted the armchair."

I rolled my eyes, let out an exasperated sigh, and stood up to go sit in the couch. Jamie slipped into the chair, and with an arm hooked around my waist pulled me back to him.

"Ah, much better now," he whispered with a smile, and I couldn’t help but shake my head. I turned to look at him and our smiles crashed together in a kiss.

Later on, with our teacups warming our hands, we talked about the schedule for prom night. I would meet them at Murtagh’s and then we’d all go to dinner, food being absolutely necessary before a night full of dancing. We decided we couldn’t really depend on the catering set up by our fellow classmates.

"No, not at Oink!" Jenny disagreed when Jamie came up with that idea. "Claire and I will be wearing makeup, and sandwiches arena very easy to eat."

The boys weren’t thrilled with that argument, but accepted it nonetheless. After a lot of thought, and various restaurants that were rejected, Murtagh came into the living room and announced that he would make a reservation for us. “You only finish high school once,” he said with a wink, flipped the towel he was holding onto his shoulder, and walked back into the kitchen.
The evening of the prom I put my hair up into a simple yet elegant high bun and a natural makeup palette to accentuate my features. Once my look was complete I presented myself to Lamb while he sat working in his office.

“Ready,” I said, twirling in a circle to show off the dress.

Looking up from his desk he beamed at me. “You look dashing, my dear,” he said, and if I didn’t know him as well as I did I would never have been able to pick up on the slight quiver in his voice. “You look just like your mother.”

“I do?” I asked, proud that I kept her alive in a way, just by looking like her.

Lamb stood up and walked towards me, took hold of my arms to look at me more carefully, and then pulled me into a tight embrace. “I’m so proud of you, lamb,” he said a moment later. “You’ve done so well.”

“I love you too, Lamb,” I said, grateful for the man who raised me, who helped me become the woman I was.

“Enough of that,” he chuckled after a long moment, brushing tears from his eyes. “Ready to impress your lad?”

I smiled slyly and tucked my arm into his. It was a quiet ride to Murtagh’s apartment, and I left Lamb with a quick kiss on his cheek, ready to meet my date for the night.

Sassenach: I’m downstairs.

Less than a minute later the door swung open. I intended to curtsy in an old-fashioned way to him, but I found I couldn’t move once my eyes caught sight of him. The image of Jamie in full highland regalia had frozen me in place. I had prepared myself for a suit, but not this. This, left me speechless. He wore a kilt with the Fraser colors, and his knees were bare, his high socks stopping just below them, allowing the muscle of his thigh to peak out under the kilt just a bit. His black shirt, vest and jacket showed off the broad plains of his shoulders and his flat chest. I blinked, taking in the full effect of him.

“Jamie,” I whispered when my eyes found his. He hadn’t spoken either, and I saw him gaping at me before his lips slowly curled up into a smile.

“Ye’re so beautiful,” he said in a low voice. “Breathtaking. Truly.”


Jamie blushed, proving that hot as hell and cute were not mutually exclusive.

Murtagh had made a reservation at Timberyard and drove us there, after taking a hundred pictures of us outside the apartment. The hotel where the prom was being held was close to the restaurant that we’d walk there after our meal.

Timberyard had a hipster vibe to it that made us all wonder how Murtagh had come to know the place. With wiggling eyebrows and sly smiles, we all agreed it had to be Suzette that had chosen the place for us - not that we were complaining. The main dining room was framed by whitewashed brick walls, exposed wooden beams, and giant windows, and the red tartan blankets that hung over the backs of the chairs made the whole atmosphere of the place friendly and cozy. I noticed the staff mainly consisted of younger adults, mostly around thirty, extremely polite, and always with a smile on their faces.
“Heading to the prom?” our waiter asked, filling our glasses with water.

“Aye,” Jamie replied with a smile.

“I still remember mine,” the waiter said with a wink. “Have fun.”

“D’ye think Ian would look nice wi’ a beard, Claire?” Jenny asked me in a whisper, once the bearded waiter left our table. Before I had time to reply, she spoke again. “Did ye see his tattoo?”

“What tattoo?” I asked, searching for the waiter who was now over by the bar.

“His arm was full of tattoos!” she said in a low voice, her words barely audible, and I squinted in the waiter’s direction, trying to see the arm in question.

While doing so, I had that strange feeling of someone watching me. My eyes went back to Jamie, and I saw him breathing deliberately slow, lips pressed in a tight line. When I smiled at him, he didn’t smile back. I frowned, pouted, silently asked him what was wrong, but he kept a mask on his face, speaking sharply when the waiter came back to take our order.

Not wanting to make a scene in front of Jenny and Ian, I ate my trout in silence, chatting with them while Jamie ignored me.

Perfect. Such a great way to begin our evening…

When we paid - using Murtagh’s credit card - and left the restaurant. I gripped Jamie’s hand to keep him back with me, while Ian and Jenny walked on in front of us, murmuring things in each other’s ear in a way that made me incredibly jealous and mad at my Scot for pulling an attitude with me on our prom night.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked in a low, menacing voice.

“Nothing’s wrong with me.”

“Then why are you acting like this? You’ve been ignoring me for the last two hours!”

“Did I?”

“Yes you did.”

“Maybe I was just giving you space. Ye seemed occupied, anyway. I didna want to interrupt yer drooling over the waiter.”

“What?” My voice came out loud enough for Jenny to look back at us with a frown. I smiled at her, shaking my head, and she turned to look ahead again, leaning closer to Ian. “What?” I repeated, much lower now.

“Ye heard me,” Jamie said, biting his bottom lip. “Ye ken what I’m talking about, so don’t pretend he have no idea - not wi’ me.”

“Jamie,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t drool over the waiter. How can you even say that?” I was sure my grimace was showing how surprised and disgusted I was. Sometimes having a glass face came handy. But Jamie wouldn’t even look at me. “Do you not know me at all?”

“Do I?” he asked, his breathing shallow, his strides fast and wide, making it hard for me to follow.

“Wait.” I grabbed his hand again and pulled us to a stop. “Why are you doing this now?”
“Why did ye do that?”

“Looking at him?” I asked, and continued without waiting for his response. “I was just trying to see his tattoo!”


“Because Jenny asked me to! What do you think, that I’m checking out other men?”

“Yes.”

“Jamie, I have eyes. I can see other men. But I’m with you. I love you. I want you. There is no one else for me, apart from you. I never see other men like I see you.”

He looked at me and for the first time in a long while and finally really saw me. His face softened, and the frown slowly disappeared from between his brows.

“Just me?”

“Just you, you bloody Scot. How could you even think otherwise?”

“I dinna ken,” he said, lowering his eyes to the ground, realizing how absurd his behavior was. “I just saw ye looking at him, so intently. I couldn’t think of anything else, apart from punching him in the face. Then I wondered if he was looking at you as well, and – ”

That’s enough, I thought, and blocked the rest of his words inside his mouth, kissing him hard enough to push away all his stupid insecurities. “Just you,” I repeated, my words brushing against his lips. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he nodded with a pout on his face.

“And, by the way, if you had talked to me during dinner, it would have been you I discussed his tattoos with. You, because you’re mine and I share everything with you.”

With that, I took his hand in mine and started walking again. I heard him heave a loud sigh, and the next moment he was walking next to me, his arm around my shoulders, pressing me against him.

“I just don’t want to lose you,” he said without looking at me.

“You won’t,” I answered, and meant it. No one would ever be better than Jamie for me, and even if he doubted it, I was sure about it.

We arrived at the hotel to find Rupert and Angus attacking the buffet while their dates were waiting patiently a few feet away. Joe and Gail were glued to each other, and I walked straight to them, ready to tease them.

“As if you and Jamie leave each other’s side,” Gail said with a look that dared me to disagree.

When the first and most daring couples started to dance, Joe and Gail followed them, and I found myself alone. Jamie was talking to the guys from the football team. Following Rupert’s example, I headed to the buffet to check out the catering for myself.

I had stuffed my mouth with a tortilla roll up when Jamie materialized behind me.

“Will ye honor me with this dance, my lady?” he asked, his voice serious, but he started laughing
when I turned around to look at him, still chewing. “Hungry, are ye Sassenach?”

“Just sampling.” I answered with a shrug, trying not to spit food out on to his jacket.

He raised both eyebrows, indicating that he knew exactly what I was doing, but didn’t comment. “So? Will ye dance with me?” he asked again with a smirk on his face, leaving his hand hanging in mid-air, waiting for mine.

“Gladly,” I said as soon as I’d swallowed, and took his hand. “Just watch your steps. I don’t want these huge feet of yours stepping on mine.”

“Oh, dinna fash, Sassenach. I ken how to dance just fine.”

He did. Dancing with Jamie was easy, our moves flowing together, our steps in sync. I let him lead me, settling my hand on his shoulder, feeling his at home on my waist. It was then that it hit me, I hadn’t danced with him before.

“We should do this more often,” I said, and saw him smile.

“Aye, we should.”

We lasted for one song in the proper slow dance position. When the next song started, both Jamie’s hands were on my waist, pulling me closer against him. Mine trailed up onto the nape of his neck and then through his curls, to short for a bun. I leaned into his chest and breathed him in.

I felt complete.

We looked at each other for a few long moments, our eyes crinkled with happiness, before Jamie spoke again.

“I’m so happy I found ye, Sassenach.”

I pulled him down to me for a kiss that was just a quick flutter of tongues, before we attracted glances from the couples around us.

“Actually, it’s me that found you,” I finally replied, and seeing the confusion on his face, I added, “I came to your school!”

“Oh aye, ye did. But I came to your desk, remember?”

“And saved my water from falling over in the cafeteria,” I teased him.

“Always at yer service, Sassenach.”

“I’ll hold you on that, Jamie Fraser,” I said with a cheeky grin.

Jamie and I danced, and continued dancing when the slow songs were over, and found ourselves surrounded by Ian and Jenny, Joe and Gail. Angus, Rupert, and their dates were nowhere to be found.

“Sassenach,” Jamie screamed in my ear some time later. “Do you want to leave?”

I stopped dancing and looked at him, thinking that I had misheard. “What?” I shouted back.

“I said, let’s leave.”
“But you’re nominated for the Prom King!”

Of course he was.

“I dinna care. I’m not doing the stupid catwalk they’ve organized. I want to leave with ye.” Then he pulled me closer to him, to make his urgency more obvious. “Now.”

Not that I hadn’t sensed a certain hardness while we were dancing with my back flush to his chest. Rubbing my arse against him always worked miracles.

“Let’s go,” I agreed with a smirk and in less than five minutes we were out of the hotel, walking down the street, with absolutely no idea as to where we were going.

Jamie stopped in his tracks in the middle of the pavement and pulled me to him for a proper kiss, our first of the night. No matter how long lasting that lipstick was, it would soon be gone.

The night had fallen over Edinburgh and the light breeze was refreshing after dancing for so long in a confined room. With our brains unable to form a plan, our feet drove us down our familiar route, and we ended up on Calton Hill.

Grateful for my choice to wear flats, even though I never imagined we’d end up there, I walked up the hill, my hand tightly grasped in Jamie’s. The view was magnificent. The city lights beneath us and the stars above us made it seem like a painting, or a picture heavily edited to be perfect.

It felt surreal.

Instead of sitting down at our regular bench, Jamie kept walking, leading us to the other side of the hill, the less popular part that had no benches and a less beautiful view.

“Are we sitting down?” I asked, looking at the grass. “Here?”

“No,” he said. “We’re lying down.”

“Oh you’d like that, wouldn’t you? In these clothes?” I wasn’t one to care much for clothes, but I knew I would feel awful to see green and brown hues splotched across the perfect purple shade of my dress.

“We canna see the sky that well if we dinna lie down. I’ll set my jacket down, and ye can lie on it,” Jamie proposed, happy to find a solution, and removed his jacket.

“No, you can’t lay your jacket down!” I disagreed with his idea, and saw him doing exactly what I’d told him not to.

“Too bad I did it already. Come, Sassenach,” he said, sat down, and extended a hand towards me.

“You stubborn –”

He swallowed the rest in a kiss, and I wasn’t able to resist him.

We lay on our backs, hands clasped tight together, looking at the stars.

“I could do this forever,” he said in a low, dreamy voice.

I took a deep breath, smelling the summer scents around us. It was a warm night, and it was surprisingly quiet on the hill. “Just lie and look at the stars?” I asked, contemplating the idea.
“Wi’ ye,” he said. “I could even learn their names, to show them to ye and tell ye what you’re looking at.”

I smiled and moved closer to him, so that my arm brushed his. “I could do that too.”

He turned to look at me and I rolled onto my side to capture his lips between my teeth. Forgetting the stars above us, Jamie kissed me back, softly and then harder, as if I had woken a thirst in him that needed to be quenched.

Seeing that we were alone, I trailed a finger over his knee and down his kilt, moving along the corded muscle of his thigh until I reached my destination, only to stop abruptly and break our kiss.

“What?” he asked with a smirk. “I thought I should go as a true Scotsman, since I wore the kilt.”

“So you did,” I said, and took his cock in my hand, stroking him with slow moves.

Jamie hissed and pulled me flush to him, taking my lips in his again. His hand cupped my breast, but the high neck didn’t give him much room to play, so he opted for the hem of the dress, not having much luck there either.

“I hate this dress,” he murmured and moaned as my hand continued its ministrations.

“Why thank you.” I chuckled and he bit my lip in response.

“I want you out of it, and I can’t have that. Not here.”

“Mmm, I know. It’s okay.”

“No tis not,” he said decisively and gripped the soft fabric of my dress, pulling it up.

“What – ” I tried to ask and stop him but he was listening to none of it.

When my dress was conveniently pulled up, covering only my upper thigh, Jamie snaked his hand underneath and stopped, looking at me wide-eyed.

“What?” I smiled with mischief. “There wasn’t a pair of underwear that I tried that didn’t show through this dress! I couldn’t go to the prom with panty lines.”

“I guess you couldn’t,” he whispered, his fingers inching up to find my core. Without preliminaries, he slipped a finger inside me, groaning at my readiness.

“Ye’ll kill me one day, I swear,” he mumbled, and slowly reached with his now wet finger to my clit. It was my turn to moan.

We kept it quiet in the dark, swallowing each other’s groans and moans with kisses, stoking a fire we knew would burn us both. At last, Jamie stopped and moved on top of me, his breath hot on my ear, his words making my legs involuntarily open to him.

“I must have ye Sassenach. I must.”

“Have me then,” was the only way I could respond.

“Shit,” Jamie stopped and pulled away, so he could see me. His eyes glinted almost black in the dark. “I dinna have a condom.”

“Me neither,” I said, although he most likely knew that already.
“We canna,” he shook his head. “Tis too risky.”

I kept silent for a moment, trying to think when my last period was. Realizing that I was well past my fourteenth day, I bit my lip and spoke. “I’m not in my most fertile days.”

“Tis safe then?” he asked with a hope in his voice that made my heart break.

What are the chances? I’m waiting for my period in a few days, it has to be safe.

“Yes, it’s safe,” I said with decisiveness in my voice, to convince him and push away any ominous thoughts from my mind.

When Jamie entered me, I forgot everything else. It was just him and me, on an empty hill, concealed by the darkness, becoming one.

I pushed my hips against him, finding him midway with every thrust, feeling his breath over my ear, sucking and biting his neck knowing well that I would leave marks behind. My marks.

“Stop,” he said and stopped, our eyes locked for a moment before I kissed him. I started a languid move with my hips, and he groaned against my lips, moving a hand to stop me. “Dinna do that,” he pleaded in a small voice.

“Why?”

“I dinna want it to end,” he whispered, looking into my eyes again.

“Trust me,” I said and started moving again.

Jamie was hard, and I pushed all other thoughts aside, focusing only the feel of our bodies together.

It was so different this time. It was slow and sensual, and the idea that he was inside me, that I was grinding myself against him, listening to his gasps but seeing nothing apart from the stars hanging low on the sky, pushed me over the edge.

I curled my back and felt my muscles clamp tight on him, not sure which one of us was murmuring “Oh God,” and which one was letting out incomprehensible moans.

“Shit,” I heard him say just as I started finding myself again, and he was instantly out of me, his cock in his hand, coming on the grass next to my body.

“D’ye have a tissue?” he asked, but I only laughed and shook my head. “Okay, I’m going for a shower anyway,” he shrugged and pushed me to roll over to a new spot before he came to lie next to me, gathering me in his arms.

I nuzzled his neck, feeling the grass under my body but not moving to check where his jacket was. We sighed together, and I knew that his eyes were closed, as were mine. There was nothing else in the world at that moment, apart from the two of us.

“Sassenach,” he whispered after a while.

“Mmm?” I asked and opened my eyes to search for his.

“Did ye like it?”

“A lot,” I answered, smiling broadly.
“More than the other time?”

“Much more. Jamie,” I hesitated. “I didn’t come, the other time.”

“I ken, now. I felt you. Oh God Claire, to feel you going like that while I was inside you…” He finished his sentence with a groan that made me laugh. “What was different, this time?” he asked, moving his body so he could see me better, the look in his eyes honest, showing me that he was eager to learn.

“The kilt,” I teased him, wiggling my eyebrows.

Jamie snorted. “Seriously, Claire.”

“Well…” I said, thinking about what had been different. “First of all, we took our time … More foreplay. That definitely helped.” Jamie nodded, memorizing my advice, and I continued. “Also, you let me have control this time, and I could move the way I liked.” I felt him swallow hard and rushed to add, “Not that I need to have control every time! It would be the same if you paid attention to what I like or don’t like, when you have control. So you could, you know…continue…”

“Aye, got it.” Jamie kept silent for a long moment that made my heart beat fast in my chest.

“Anything else, Sassenach?” he asked quietly, his voice so sweet that made me want to crush him in a hug.

“Umm… The kilt.” He turned to look at me, rolling his eyes and I chuckled. “Not in that way! It was trapped between us, you know, and it rubbed against my clit and that – ”

“Helps,” he finished for me.

“Yes.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thank ye, Claire,” he said sincerely, and hugged me tighter. “I want ye to enjoy it as much as I do. I want ye to always come, as ye did today. T’was amazing.”

“I love you so bloody much, Jamie Fraser,” I whispered, placing a soft kiss on his neck.

“I love ye too, Claire,” he said, and I felt his breath come easier.

I closed my eyes again and stayed silent, with my head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat.
Stars sparkling against a black sky, a crescent moon rising on the horizon. Jamie’s breaths in sync with mine. His heartbeat steady under the palm of my hand. Everything was perfect.

Well, almost everything. The chill of a Scottish summer night was not ideal. As time passed, it started creeping into my body, making me shiver, even though I had glued my body against Jamie’s.

“Are ye cold, Sassenach?” he murmured in a hushed tone that made me think he was on the verge of sleep.

“Mmm,” I replied in similar style, trying to shimmy closer to him.

Jamie rose on an elbow, his eyes searching the ground around us. We had heard voices from the path some time before, and we had both sighed in relief for the perfect timing when we saw a group of four or maybe five bachelor students sitting on the grass at a distance from us.

*Five minutes earlier, and they would certainly have heard our moans.*

Jamie groped for his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. “Come here,” he said, and I snuggled beside him once more, much warmer now. He took a deep breath and placed a kiss on top of my curls. “I dinna want this night to end.”

“Me neither,” I whispered, breathing in his musky scent mingled with the spices of his cologne.

Time didn’t consider our requests though. As the moon moved above our heads, the wheels in my brain started turning again.

And my thoughts ran wild.

I thought about the prom, seeing him in a kilt for the first time, his silly jealousness during dinner and the way he held me tight when I told him that he was everything I needed. Our synchronized moves as we danced, and his husky voice when he told me to steal away together. How we ended up making love under the stars.
How amazing that was. And how different, to feel nothing between him and me, having sex without a condom.

Having sex without contraception.

*When was my last period?*

*What if I was late for my next one?*

*What would happen if I hadn’t ovulated when I thought I had?*

How I could be so stupid and risk everything for one night’s worth of a good time.

Eventually, unable to contain my thoughts and feelings within, I sat up with a loud sigh, hiding my face in my hands.

“Sassenach?” Jamie let out a confused mumble. I felt him sitting up, his arm instantaneously coming around my shoulders. “Mo chridhe?” he prompted again, seeing that he had gotten no response with his first attempt.

“We’re so stupid,” I murmured, my voice muffled.

“What?”

I ran my nails against my scalp, not knowing what to do with myself. I was angry. Angry for the absurdity of not having a place we could go, for my stress during the exams that might have changed my cycle, for not always having a condom in my purse. Angry at him, but most of all, I was angry at myself. Angry at my recklessness.

Damn. How did I do this?

“Claire.” His voice was authoritative now, and he turned my face towards him with two fingers on my chin, searching my eyes for the reason of my distress.

*How can he be so ignorant?*

“What?” I asked, and heard my voice shaking as I did so.

“What’s wrong?”

“Do I need to explain everything?” I huffed, exasperated, and heard him snort.

“Yes, ye do. Apparently, I’m not smart enough to figure what the hell got into ye.”

“We had sex without protection,” I finally explained, talking sharply with my arms open, if I was acting at an ancient tragedy.

“Oh,” he whispered, running a hand through his hair. His brow furrowed, and I saw him biting his bottom lip, hard. “I thought ye said twas safe.”

*Oh, well done, James Fraser. Let’s say this is all my fault. It’s easier that way, I suppose.*

I said nothing, and after a few short breaths I pulled away from him.

“Claire,” he said again. “I ken it wasn’t the wisest thing to do – ”
“Most probably the stupidest.” I set my jaw, looking into the distance, trying to calm down.

“Aye, most probably. But ye said tis not your fertile days, and I didn’t come –”

“You know what people are called who use that type of birth control? Parents!” I said, mocking him with distaste in my voice.

Jamie let out a loud sigh and turned his body away, mimicking my posture to avoid looking at me. We sat like that for a while, the boisterous thoughts in our heads swallowing the city’s noise. I could feel his body rigid, his breaths as strained as mine.

I was rubbing my face with my hands – makeup be damned – when I felt the back of his index finger timidly trailing a path on my arm.

“Babe,” he pleaded, and my heart clenched in response. “Can we talk about it? Can we deal with this together?”

I turned to look at him, grateful for the darkness because my tears threatened to get the better of me.

“I’m terrified.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could think of something better to say.

“I ken. D’ye want to come here?” He opened his arms wide, and smiled shyly, waiting for me.

I nodded and moved into his open arms. The warmth that enveloped my body had nothing to do with the chill on Calton Hill. It was coming the from inside, from the conviction that whatever was to come for us, we would be together. From Jamie’s unending belief in me. In us.

“What do you want us to do? What are our options?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“Apart from always having condoms with us,” I started, and he made one of his throaty sounds in response. “Apart from that, there is only one thing I can think of.”

“Which is?” he asked, and I felt him frowning. “Christ lass, do I need to ask for every little thing before you decide to honor me with yer thoughts?”


“How do we have to wait until tomorrow morning?” he asked, making me laugh again.

*How can he do this? I was feeling desperate just a few minutes ago.*

“No, you oaf! I think the sooner I take it, the better. Let me google it.”

I snatched my phone from my purse, ignored Jenny’s and Joe’s texts and searched for more information about the pill.

“It can be taken up to seventy-two hours after sex,” I murmured, “But yes. It’s more effective the sooner it’s taken. We have to go to a local pharmacy. And it’s free,” I finished and turned to look at Jamie.

“Do ye want to go tomorrow morning? We can go together.”

“Jamie…” I looked at him under my eyelashes. “Can’t we just go now?”

Jamie smiled and pulled me to him. “Aye, of course we can go now. There is a 24-hour pharmacy
close to the medical center,” he said, kissing my forehead with a reverence and a sense of protection that would make my knees wobble if I wasn’t sitting already.

He stood up, and offered his hand to help me up too. I wore his jacket and we walked down the hill, his arm around my shoulders, mine on his waist.

“Jamie,” I said while we were still enfolded in the hill’s quietness, before the city’s lights fell on us. “I’m sorry?”

“Was that a question?” he chuckled, and I pinched him for teasing me.

“I freaked out,” I said with a pout. “Before.”

“Aye, I ken. I would freak out too, if ye hadna gone ballistic yerself.”

“Ballistic?” I asked, incredulous, and pinched his side again in revenge.

“Yer always my crazy curly wig,” he said, and pulled me closer for a kiss. “No matter how hard ye try to conceal it under a stylish bun.”

“Why, thank you,” I laughed. “Bun-istic. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Mmhm,” he smiled, and we walked towards New Town, to find the pharmacy and the security that our future would be as we planned.

It took us about fifteen minutes to arrive at the pharmacy. The lady behind the counter gave us the pill and glanced at our clothes with a knowing smile. We ignored her slightly raised eyebrow, nodded repeatedly our assent when she told us be careful next time, and left, as fast as we could. Five minutes later, I swallowed the tiny pill and gave Jamie a broad grin.

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. He was the one that kept us sane, and I owed him that.

“I told ye I’ll always take care of ye. Especially when I’m the one to create yer problems.” He shrugged in the most charming way and I laughed. I kissed him then, softly at first, showing him that I was grateful to have him, and then harder, releasing all the tension I held inside.

“Claire,” he said, and increased the distance between us so he could look at me. “I ken for now this is out of the question, but eventually… Ye do want bairns, don’t ye?”

I smiled and set both my hands on his kilted arse, pulling him closer again. “I think I do. I’ve never seriously considered it, but I do want to have a family. Eventually.”

Jamie mirrored my grin and took my lips in his.

“Hey,” I said when we broke our kiss. “What makes you think I’ll have that family with you?” I challenged him, raising one eyebrow.

“Oh, dinna fash. I’ll take care of that myself.”

“Mmm, will you, now?”

“Now and forever,” he smiled slyly and kissed me again. A promise, for the future we could only imagine.

I almost got lost in his scent, in his kiss, in the way his body heated mine, making his jacket unnecessary.
“For now, though,” I said, and resisted his lips that tried to hush me again. I was determined to make my point. “We need to always have condoms with us,” I continued, pursing my lips in thought. “In my purse and in your wallet. Just to make sure.”


“I’m not kidding! I’m not going through all this again!”

“Aye, mo chridhe. We’ll have condoms, always,” he agreed, but I felt that he had more to say. “But, Claire…” he started, then trailed off.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, pretending it didn’t matter, but he didn’t meet my eyes.

“What?” I insisted.

“Ye didna feel it?” he asked, somehow shy. Seeing my questioning look, he continued. “Twasna different for ye, without the condom?” he asked, running his fingers through his hair.

“Oh, that.” I smiled, remembering that this was one of the first things I thought on Calton Hill. “Yes, it was. Different. Better.”

“Aye,” he beamed. “Much better. The way I felt ye… Christ,” he shook his head again, this time smiling, his bottom lip captured between his teeth to restrain himself from sharing more.

“So, when we’ll have a place of our own,” I said cheekily, “I’ll get on the pill. Or have an IUD.”

“IU what?” he asked, perplexed.

“It’s a tiny device that gets into the uterus and prevents the sperm from reaching the egg. Lasts for five to ten years,” I winked at him and chuckled, seeing his wide, surprised eyes. “Impressed, are you?”

“Oh aye, I am.” He licked his lips, thinking. “Maybe we can decide on one of these sooner? Even before Oxford?”

“Impatient, are you?” I laughed, but he cut me short with a kiss.

“I am,” he said, in his most serious voice.

“Okay, then. Which one do you prefer?” I asked, seeing him frown in thought.

“Which one is the best for ye? Will they harm ye?” he asked, his face suddenly clouded.

I kept silent, thinking. “Each one has its advantages and disadvantages, I suppose,” I said at last. “The pill has hormones; the IUD can be either copper or hormonal.”

“I have no idea what ye’re talking about, Sassenach.” I felt his fingers drumming on my back and I hardly hid my smile.

“I’m thinking the copper IUD would be better. I’d rather not take hormones. Plus, it’s fitted once, and we’re done. The pill on the other hand, has to be taken every single day.”

“It surely won’t hurt you? It’s going to be in yer body for five or ten years?” Jamie’s excitement for replacing condoms with other types of birth control was slowly turning to concern and worry.
“It’s safe, Jamie,” I whispered reassuringly and pulled his head towards me, until his forehead touched mine.

“We can ask a doctor. To be sure,” he whispered.

“I’ll call to arrange an appointment.”

“And if in the meantime we decide differently?” he asked. “Ten years is a long time.”

“I can get it removed,” I said, feeling my heart melting at the thought that Jamie already imagined having a family with me. “But we have time.”

“Aye,” he said, cupping my face and kissing my forehead, my cheekbones, my nose. “All the time in the world.”

He kissed my lips then, and I kissed him back, picturing the two of us, growing old together.
The last time we called ourselves high school students was on a sunny summer day. We found ourselves listening to a long winded speech from our headteacher, one that would make every person in the room extremely anxious about the future - if we had actually been listening to him. I could still hear his voice buzzing in my ears when Jamie found me, took me in his arms and spun me around for so long that I wasn’t sure if he was happy because we had just graduated, or because this would be the last time we had to sit through a speech from Mr. Gowan. We loved him, but he had that bad habit of never stopping once he started speaking.

After graduation, the days felt different. They were continuous, shapeless, careless. Time didn’t matter. No alarm clocks, no hurried breakfasts, no studying schedules.

No school.

Joe and Gail left for a trip to the US, a present from their parents, to celebrate their successful exam results. Rupert and Angus had gone back to the Highlands, and Jenny and Ian would soon leave for Lallybroch. Edinburgh seemed empty already.

Jamie spent more and more time training. He had a few weeks to prepare for the Scottish National Championship, and there were whole days when I would only see him briefly before or after his time at the pool. Neither of us complained; the championship was a priority for both of us. But I missed him. And I knew that I would miss him even more when he would leave for Lallybroch.
My favorite days were Mondays. More specifically, Monday afternoons. These were the days when Jamie finished his training early and we would meet Jenny and Ian at Murtagh’s apartment for coffee and board games. Two teams, always the same players. And I was proud to say that Jenny and I were on a winning streak.

We had just finished another successful round of Pictionary, when Ian walked to the center of the room and carefully unfolded an old piece of paper. His smile was shy at the beginning, but it became more and more cheeky as he read.

My eyebrows shot up to my hairline and barely I stopped myself from barking out a laugh when I realized what he was reading.

Jenny Fraser’s, or more correctly, Janet Flora Arabella Fraser’s letter to Santa.

Dear Santa,

My name is Janet Flora Arabella Fraser, but everyone calls me Jenny. You can call me that too. I live at Lallybroch, together with my mam, my da, and my wee brother. I canna write yet, so my mam is writing this for me, but I promise I will know all my letters when I go to school at Beauly, and I will write to you yourself next year.

I have been very good this year and am nice to everyone. I even play with Jamie when he brings his silly swords into my room, and I pretend to lose and die, even though I could beat him every time. The one time I won, he got angry and as red as a tomato. Anyway, I also help my mom cook. And I feed Bran every day. And I clean my room. (Jamie doesn’t, but bring him a gift anyway, okay?)

I am writing to you, because I want a puffin and da said I can’t have one. We have birds here at Lallybroch, but I haven’t seen a puffin yet. I will love it and take care of it, I promise.

Please, it’s all I truly want for Christmas!

Love,

Jenny

PS I know the Santa we saw at Beauly with my mom wasn’t real, but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want the wee bairn in his lap to cry.

PSS My mom doesn’t know what puffins eat. Can you bring me some of their food too?

Ian had to stop more than once while reading, almost choking with laughter. I brushed tears from my eyes, feeling Jamie’s silent amusement shaking my body. Jenny was hiding her face in her hands, her struggle to catch her breath audible in the room.

“How dare you,” she finally said, her own face as red as a tomato now. “How dare you, Ian Murray?” she repeated, and started laughing again.

Ian shrugged, then smiled at her. “I dinna remember seeing a puffin at Lallybroch,” he said quietly, as if he hadn’t even heard her question. “Did ye ever get your puffin, Jenny?”

Jamie spoke before his sister could. “Nah, she didna, Ian,” he said, the smile audible in his voice.
“Not that year, or the years after that. She kept asking for one, though.”

“Aye, that was what I remember too,” Ian replied, nodding, his face serious.

“What is this all about?” Jenny asked with a raised eyebrow, crossing her arms across her chest.

I was wondering exactly the same thing.

“It’s about puffins, Jen,” Ian said softly. “I think it’s about time ye see one.”

“You got me a puffin?” Jenny asked, incredulous.

“Puffins live free, Jenny,” Jamie rolled his eyes. “I think mam and da told ye that a million times.”

“So what is this…” Jenny’s words faded as Ian walked to her and kneeled on the floor in front of her.

“Tis a gift,” he said, and presented her with an envelope. “For ye. To thank ye, for all that ye are to me.”

I was sure the tears that shone in Jenny’s eyes had nothing to do with the ones brought up by her boisterous laughter only moments ago. She swallowed hard and took the envelope from Ian’s hands. “What did you do?” she asked, in an accusing way that came out even funnier in her cracked voice.

I turned in Jamie’s arms and looked at him, the question obvious on my face. His satisfied, wide smile confirmed my suspicion that he knew exactly what was going on. He lowered his head and kissed me, his lips hot against mine, before urging me to look back towards his sister. I turned to look at Jenny, feeling a shiver run through my body when Jamie’s lips found the nape of my neck. I shimmied to make him stop, and watched Jenny, her attention focused on the paper she had pulled from the envelope.

“Five days?” she asked, at last. “Five days just the two of us?”

“Aye,” Ian whispered, tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear. “To see the puffins.”

Jenny sprang from the couch straight into his lap, squeezing him so tight that I was sure if it would last a moment longer he would suffocate. Ian’s face, however, was the definition of happiness, and his smile, the sweetest I had ever seen.

I felt Jamie wrap his arms tighter around my body, pulling me closer to him.

“Any unfulfilled requests from Santa, Sassenach?” he whispered in my ear.

I took a moment, thinking, unable to remember any. “I don’t know,” I said. “A mummy, maybe? Given the fact that I was in Egypt…”

“Christ, Claire,” he chuckled. “I’m not buying ye a mummy.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Friends,” I said a moment later, and the truth in my words stuck thick in my throat like a piece of stale bread, grazing the tissue, blocking my breath. I swallowed with difficulty, pushing back memories of a lonely childhood, Jamie’s arms around me suddenly feeling overwhelming. “I was always asking for friends.”

“I’ll be yer friend, Sassenach,” Jamie whispered, his voice sweet and honest, and he nuzzled my neck. “Always.”
I swallowed back tears and let my body sink into his warmth, hoping that his heartbeat against my back was telling the truth.

Always.

I looked at Jenny, who was beaming, and gave her a broad smile. I was happy for her and for Ian, who was looking at her like she hung the moon. But it was more than that. I was happy that I was there to share that moment with them, for finally feeling that sense of belonging I had always longed for.

“We’re going to the Orkney!” she announced, excited. “I’m going to see the puffins!”

And like that, she was a little girl again, getting the gift she had always dreamed of.

“What are the puffins, exactly?” I asked, not knowing that I would sorely regret my question ten minutes later, when Jenny was still talking about the clumsy, comical birds who were expert divers and underwater fliers, laid one precious egg every year and left Scotland for the north Atlantic and North Sea outside the breeding season.

“Ye’re going to pay for that, Sassenach,” Jamie murmured in my ear, his fingers drawing patterns on my side.

“Am I not paying for it already?” I asked, making him laugh.

“Aye, but what about my suffering?”

I grimaced and mouthed a sorry. As Jenny went on talking about the puffins, Jamie leaned closer to me, whispering in my ear in his proud brother’s voice, “Jenny wants to see the birds to draw them, ken? She loves their colours.”

Of course. Jenny wanted to go to art school and nothing else would be more inspiring than the wild landscape of Orkney and the wildlife, full of birds, seals, and whales.

It would be beautiful.

–

That night Jamie was remarkably silent as he walked me home.

“What’s the matter?” I finally asked, and he turned to look at me surprised, as if he had forgotten I was even there. He didn’t reply. “Won’t you tell me?” I insisted, but the initial surprise has well-hidden now, his features calm, unfazed, his mask covering thoughts and problems.

“What?” He pretended that he hadn’t understood and gave me a small smile.

It wasn’t enough.

“Jamie.” I stopped and pulled him back to me. “You may not have my glass face, but I can see right through you.”

“It’s nothing,” he said with a frown and a shrug. When he saw me rolling my eyes, he pressed his lips tight, took a deep breath through his nose, and repeated. “Tis nothing, really.”

“You’re too silent. This isn’t nothing.” I cupped his face with my hand, his blue eyes melting as they met mine.
“I love ye, Claire,” he whispered, pressing his lips lightly against my forehead.

“I know, I love you too.” I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. He turned around, instead, and started walking again.

**Stubborn Scot.**

I sighed a few times along the way, trying to show him that our conversation wasn’t over and I was far from being convinced he was okay. He kept ignoring me and I sighed a few more times – not that it made any difference. Finally, a few blocks from home I stopped walking, this time without any attempt to pull him back to me.

“Are ye alright, Sassenach?” he asked, surprised once again.

“You tell me.”

“I tell…” The realization hit him before he finished his question. “I told ye! Tis fine!” he exclaimed, his hand messing with his hair.

I looked at him for a long moment, my jaw set, my arms crossed across my chest. Waiting. He didn’t speak. I bit my lip hard, nodding, and started walking again. When I brushed by him, I wished him a goodnight and continued towards my place.

“Where are ye going?” His voice came distraught, but I neither stopped nor answered his question. “Claire!”

“Home,” I said sharply, feeling my heart clench inside my chest.

*I thought we could tell each other everything.*

“Sassenach!” He was next to me within two wide strides, his hand gripping my arm. “What the hell! Why are ye doing this?”

“I’m not doing anything, Jamie.” I wished the words were as painful to him as they were to me, burning my chest. “I can walk home alone. Since we’re not talking anyway.”

Jamie narrowed his eyes at me and let out a short breath through his nose. “Okay,” he said, nodding repeatedly. “Okay.”

“Okay, then. Goodnight.” I started walking again, but his hand stopped me and pulled me back to him.

“Ah Dhia… Ye’re not going to make it easy, right?”

“I? I’m the one who’s making things difficult? You’re obviously not okay and you won’t even talk to me! You won’t even admit that you’re not okay! You’re lying to my face!”

“I’m not lying to yer face!”

“Oh, really?” I asked, my voice sarcastic.

We stood there, breathing fast, our eyes locked in a game of power. I saw his mask slowly melting away, leaving behind only Jamie, my Jamie, as he had always been with me. *My Scot.*

“Jamie,” I started again, now letting my worry seep in my voice. “What good can I do, when you don’t even trust me with your problems? When you won’t even talk to me?”
He kept silent, and I could hear every beat of my heart crying out to his. Pleading to let me in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking his eyes from mine and fixing them on the street. “I’m sorry, Sassenach, I didna mean for ye to think I’m lying to ye. Or that I dinna want to talk to ye. It’s just that…” he stopped, and took a breath as if he had to fortify himself.

“What?” I asked, holding my breath, suddenly afraid of what was to come.

“See… I’m not enough.”

I stood shock-still, trying to process what I had just heard. I hadn’t known what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t this.

“Hey,” I whispered, grabbing a fistful of his tee-shirt, and took the last step that kept as apart. “What are you talking about?”

“Did ye no see how happy Jenny was tonight? What Ian did for her… I’ve done nothing for you.”

“Oh god, Jamie…” I ran my fingers across his jawline, his cheekbones, through his hair, feeling my heart melting. “You’ve done so many things for me. I don’t need a trip or a gift to be happy.” Jamie didn’t talk, and I continued, hoping that my words would ring true in his heart. “I’m happy because I’m with you, because you’re in my life.”

“Aye, but I’m not in yer life that much lately,” he said, and I stupidly thought that his lowered eyebrows made him even more adorable than he already was.

“But that’s just a phase,” I said, my voice strong, sure. “It’s not going to be like that forever.”

Jamie looked at me and a small smile curled his lips. “No, it’s not,” he said, but the smile disappeared again. “But d’ye remember, Sassenach, when we started texting? I had promised you we would go everywhere, and now school has finished and we canna even go on a wee trip in Scotland.”

I smiled, thinking of our very first chat, the night he walked me home. We would travel the world, we had said. Starting from Paris.

“Jamie, we have time,” I said, and meant it. “We will travel, we don’t have to do it right now.”

“Aye, but I didna plan anything for us… Ian has been organizing this trip for so long, and I… With school and training…” He kept trailing off.

I raised onto my tiptoes, pulled him down to me and kissed him, our lips meeting in a soft whisper that soon became a long dance. Unhurried.

“We have time,” I repeated, my whisper brushing against his mouth. “We’re together, and that’s what counts. I’m perfectly happy with staying in Edinburgh. It’s the same to me.” I ran my fingers through his locks, and rested my forehead against his.

“Is it, though?” he asked, and I could almost taste the worry in his words.

“It is, you bloody Scot. It’s our first summer together, but we’re going to have a lot more after that. Right?” I asked, and felt my heart racing in my chest.

This can’t be our last summer together.

“Right,” he breathed and kissed me. “More and more and more…” Each promise coming with another kiss, sealing it.
“Good,” I said, and softly kissed the tip of his long, straight nose.

“But still,” he started again and I sighed, exasperated. “If I go straight to Lallybroch after the nationals…”

“It will still be okay.” I locked my eyes with his, and neither of us spoke for a long moment.

“But I’ll be away,” he continued, fear taking the better of him.

Bloody distance. But I had to be the brave one this time.

“Jamie!” I raised my voice and cupped his face with both my hands. “Look at me.” He did. “No matter where you are, I love you. Here, at Lallybroch, in the end of the world. I love you. And I promise you will get bored of me when we’ll live together in Oxford.”

“That willna happen,” he disagreed, and pulled me to him for a kiss.

It was sweet and hopeful, but it quickly became thirsty and urgent. Promising that he would never have enough of me.

“We’ll see,” I said when we broke our kiss, and I laced our fingers together. “Now walk me home, you bloody fool. And never think that you’re not enough.”
My boyfriend was standing heads above everyone else, and not just because he was the tallest swimmer around. He was standing in the middle of the podium, waiting to receive his medal. His gold medal.

Jamie had won the Scottish National Championship. He had even beaten his personal best, and he’d made the time necessary to compete for Britain’s National Team.

My boyfriend, one of the best swimmers in the country.

*If my heart keeps inflating at this rate, it won’t fit in my chest soon.*

I was always proud of Jamie. Mostly because of the person he was, his big heart, his genuine smile. That amazing person who happened to be mine. But in moments like this, hearing his name from the speakers and feeling the bleachers vibrate from everyone’s applause, I felt I wanted to scream my lungs out, cheering for him. I was overloaded with love, with happiness.

When Jamie locked his eyes with mine, slightly raising his medal towards me, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks and Murtagh’s hand roughly patting the curls atop my head.

His previous victory at the Scottish Schools Championship had been for his mam. Jamie had looked
skywards, whispering words that he had shared only with her. Dedicating his medal to her, the first person who had believed in him.

Now, he was sharing his award with me. A victory that was ours.

I blew him a kiss and I smiled, feeling my heart racing in my chest. The only thing I wanted was to run to him.

When Jamie turned to his right, extending his hand to congratulate his opponent, I saw Tom Christie’s jaw set, his facial expressions careful. He took Jamie’s hand and shook it with a smile that seemed almost genuine.

Tom Christie had come in second again, a few precious seconds behind Jamie. It wasn’t easy to always be second best, I had to give him that. Even though I believed winning the silver medal should be celebrated just as much as the first place swimmers’ achievement, I was sure that if Jamie were in Christie’s shoes, his face would be very close to the one Christie wore now. Their endless hours of training pointed towards one goal – the first place – and it was difficult to see all this time slipping away because someone else’s hand had touched the pool’s tile seconds before theirs did.

I tore my eyes away from Christie, fixing them again on Jamie. Another impressive distinction. Another step down the path he had chosen, bringing him closer to his dream. And this time, we had another person between us on the bleachers to share Jamie’s victory.

Brian Fraser had driven all the way from Lallybroch that same morning, to support his son. His smile when he saw Jamie stepping onto the podium, and his eyes – so like his son’s – glinting with unshed tears, warmed my heart to the core. I knew that behind his strict ways, he was just anxious for Jamie, for his success, for the place his son would take in the world. Now that he saw Jamie had made it, he could breathe again. A parent who had done the right thing for his child.

The moment Jamie came to us, Brian trapped him in a bear hug that made my huge Scot seem like a little child – a wee bairn, as he would say. Jamie’s father wasn’t usually emotional and it was surprising and sweet to see the two of them like this. A silent apology conveyed through proud puffed-up chests and sincere smiles. It was what families did – forgiving and forgetting.

Brian took us all out for lunch to celebrate Jamie’s victory. Jamie couldn’t stop smiling, a grin that wavered between shy and bright, almost indecisive, as if the praise was more than he could handle and still not enough. His hand didn’t leave mine under the table – at least until our food arrived. When the waiter set our plates down in front of us, we both realized we were starving, and the interaction provided by our touching thighs would be enough. Jenny and Ian were sitting across from me, beaming in their own little bubble, murmuring about their trip to Orkney. Murtagh had finally brought Suzette, his arm casually draped across the back of her chair, while the two of them spoke with Brian. Suzette was exactly as I imagined. Chatty and sweet, open and always with a smile – exactly the opposite from our grumpy man. The perfect balance.

I felt Jamie’s thigh bump against mine and tore my eyes away from Suzette, who was talking about hers and Murtagh’s little trip to Newcastle that weekend.

“What?” I whispered, still trying to listen to what Suzette was saying.

“D’ye hear?” he asked, slightly nodding his head towards Suzette.

“I’m trying.”

Jamie looked at me, his eyebrows slightly raised.
“What?” I mumbled, and then it hit me.

Jenny and Ian in Orkney, Murtagh and Suzette in Newcastle. If Jamie didn’t leave for Lallybroch with his da, it would be the perfect weekend to spend some alone time together.

I looked at him, feeling a pout replacing my smile. “It would be great,” I said, and turned my eyes to the piece of bread I held in my hand, pressing it between my fingers, throwing the little ball-shaped crumbs on to my plate.

“It will be, Sassenach.” Jamie’s whisper was hot against my skin as he leaned into me.

“Yeah, sure.” I pressed my lips, thinking of my weekend alone at home. A professor from the Sorbonne University had come to visit Lamb and he would be spending the whole weekend with him. Jamie nudged me with his leg again and I turned to see him smiling.

“Happy to go back to Lallybroch, are you?” I asked, my voice a little bitter even though I didn’t intend it to be.

“I’m not going back. Not for a few more days, at least,” he whispered and smiled, pleased with himself.

“What?”

“Is ‘what’ yer favorite word for the day, Sassenach? Ye’ve asked me that at least three times now.”

“You’re not going back with your Da?”

“I asked him to stay a few more days, and he agreed. I’m taking the train, next week.”

My eyes got so wide I thought they would fall out of their sockets. “Really?” I asked, stupidly, but I needed his confirmation.

“Aye,” Jamie said with a broad grin. “The apartment will be ours for the whole weekend.” His breath made the fine hair along my spine rise, a current running along my body, urging me to move closer to him.

“Holy shit.” I smiled back at him, trying to stay fixed on my seat, wishing everyone gone already.

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It was the longest Saturday morning since the beginning of Saturday mornings.

Brian had left the day before, heading to Glasgow to meet some of his customers and then back to Lallybroch, but Murtagh’s apartment was still full of people when I arrived at nine o’clock in the morning. Ian was whistling over a pan of fried eggs, Murtagh was mumbling something about a misplaced shirt, and Jamie looked at me with a cheeky smile that I tried to ignore before I could jump on him.

And to think I even set an alarm to wake up early.

I helped Jenny pack, teased her about finally having sex – she only sang a hallelujah at this, and heard her talking about puffins and seals and the perfect B&B Ian had booked for the hundredth time. All the while, I was glancing at my watch every five minutes, hoping I was subtle enough and no one would notice.

It took them almost three hours for everyone to have breakfast, get ready, and leave. I didn’t even
want to consider how long it would take them if they hadn’t been looking forward to beginning their journeys.

It was a quarter past twelve when Jamie and I leaned against the doorframe, waving goodbye to them. An identical sigh left our lips once the door was closed and we were left alone in the empty apartment.

“Ah Dhia,” Jamie whispered, pinning my body between his and the door, and I heard the lock turning, securing us inside with four distinct clicks. “Finally,” he breathed, and took my lips in his.

It seems I wasn’t the only one constantly looking at the clock.

During the last three hours, I had been wishing time to run twice as fast, but the moment Jamie’s lips crushed against mine all I wanted was time to stop.

The world would be in turmoil if I could do whatever I wanted. Conveniently crazy, but crazy nonetheless.

“Ye’re —” Jamie’s words mingled with his groan once his mouth left mine. It was hovering only an inch away, and I moved to kiss him again, only to have him gone. “Not allowed — ” he continued, his teeth sinking in the side of my neck. He sucked my skin, making my body shiver, my knees wobble. “To wear — ” One hand travelled down my chest, fingers fleeing over my breasts, down to my abdomen and back on my waist, to finally settle on my arse. “These. White. Shorts.” He squeezed as if to make his point stronger.

I moaned as I felt his other hand crawling under my T-shirt to cup my breast over my bra, but managed an answer. “And why not?”

“Because I needed to have ye there and then, Sassenach, from the first moment I saw ye,” he replied and kissed me again. A rough, hungry kiss. “And I couldn’t.”

I heard the soft sound of my zipper as he slid it open, and felt both his hands pulling my shorts down together with my panties.

My brand-new panties that he didn’t even notice.

I swear to God, James Fraser, this was the last time I spent money on underwear for you.

Jamie kneeled in front of me and started placing soft kisses on the tender skin of my inner thigh, until he hoisted my leg up on his shoulder. The world stopped when I felt his finger slipping inside me.

“Ye’re so wet, Claire,” he said, looking up at me in a way that made my blood run hot in my veins. “For me,” he added, and I gasped, feeling his tongue on my clit, tasting me.

I closed my eyes, grasped his red curls between my fingers, and felt every beat of my heart going erratic, every pulse throbbing along my body, responding to his touch.

I opened my eyes again when Jamie stopped and rose to stand in front of me. He wasn’t wearing his sweatpants or boxers anymore. “I need ye,” he said, breathing heavily. “Now.”

“Let’s go inside.”

Jamie only shook his head. “Here.”

He bent, took my leg, and slowly brought it between us, setting it against his shoulder. “Ye’re so
“flexible,” he smiled, biting his lip. “I knew ye could do it. I saw ye when ye were dancing, and then I saw it in a dream.”

“What kind of dreams do you have, James Fraser?” I teased him, but my voice was heavy with lust.

“Let me show ye.”

Jamie stroked himself twice, and slowly entered me. No condoms, nothing but my skin against his.

_Praised be the IUDs._

I was ready, so ready after all the time he had spent teasing me. Jamie’s cock slipped inside me, hard and ready, as it always was after going down on me.

It felt good. More than good. It felt perfect.

Until Jamie started moving. With one leg up secured against his chest, I soon realized that I had to stand on my tiptoes so that he wouldn’t bend his knees all the time. But still, the foot that was supposed to hold me upright was losing its traction with the floor every time Jamie thrust inside me.

I tried to ignore it. I tried to get lost in the moment. But it was impossible.

_Totally impractical, these dream-inspired sex positions._

“Jamie,” I said, at last, stopping him. “This isn’t working. You’re too tall.”

“Nay, ye’re too short, Sassenach,” he laughed, thrusting once more to keep my answer a mere sigh.

“I’m not short.” I pushed my nails further into the flesh on his back.

Jamie kissed me hard, then took my leg and lowered it to the level of his waist. With both hands under my arse, he lifted me up and secured me between the door and his body. I wrapped my legs around his waist and grounded my body against his, a silent signal to continue.

He started moving again, more tenderly this time, and I felt his length filling me, his hands holding my weight and sprawling my arse, his mouth sucking my lips.

“You’re bloody strong,” I said after a while. “Aren’t you tired? Do you want to set me down?”

“I’ll never get tired of this,” he said. “Never.” A thrust, more powerful than the previous one. “Ever.” A second thrust, hitting me in all the right places. “Ever,” he repeated, and I felt his cock twitch inside me, and the mere thought of him coming pushed me off the edge, following him, moaning his name as I felt my core throbbing against his cock.

Jamie didn’t release his grasp on me. He sat us down, still inside me, buried his head in the crook of my neck, and whispered that he loved me.

“And this… This was amazing, Sassenach.”

“Mmm,” I agreed.

“D’ye mind if we stay like this for a little?”

“Jamie.” I smiled and cupped his face with both hands. “I could stay like this forever.”

“Good. So could I.”
“No, I can’t. I lied,” I said after a moment with a grin.

“Aye, me too. Not forever. But hush now.”

I buried my head between his neck and shoulder, closed my eyes, and breathed him in.

After a few long moments, Jamie kissed me softly and took my hand, murmuring, “Come, Sassenach. Let’s clean ye up.”

I chuckled and walked to the bathroom, entering the shower after Jamie adjusted the water’s temperature just the way I liked it.

“That hot? Ye’re sure?” he had asked for the second time, his eyes wide in surprise.

“Yes!” I laughed, stepping inside. “It’s not *that* hot.”

“Ye’ll burn us alive, babe,” he snorted but entered the shower nonetheless.

We stood under the water torrent, eyes closed, foreheads against each other. I felt Jamie’s fingers tracing the lines of my body; hip, waist, ribs, breast.

He took my mouth in his and moved us aside, our tongues dancing while droplets were falling from our hair onto our shoulders, our hands wandering over the wet skin. My nipples were tender against his chest, my back getting hotter every second, still under the water.

When we pulled away to breathe, Jamie tucked the ringlets of my hair behind my ears, kissing the tip of my nose.

“How are we washing this mass of hair, Sassenach?” he asked with a frown.

“We don’t need to, I washed my hair last night.” I scanned through the bottles in the shower for a conditioner, but I found only shampoos and shower gels. “And Jenny must have taken the conditioner with her anyway. Leave them,” I said, and took the rubber band from my wrist to take my hair out of the way.

He looked at me for a long moment and then smirked mischievously. “Good. Because there are other parts I want to focus my attention on.”

“Mmm, there are some parts of you that need cleaning as well.” I raised an eyebrow and ran my fingers over the expanse of his shoulders, reaching for his biceps. “Do you realize that you might be a part of the National team, soon?” I asked, feeling the corded muscle as the pads of my fingers glided on his wet bronze skin.

“Might be,” he emphasized. “We willna ken for a while.”

“Still,” I smiled and pressed a kiss on the hollow between his clavicles. “Do you think you will… forget me?” I asked, my voice suddenly small. “When you’ll be famous, travelling the world with your team?” I attempted to change the mood with a lighter comment, but I heard my voice shaking.

“Forget ye?” he asked, incredulous. “Ye’re always in my mind, Claire,” His eyes bore into mine, his voice serious. “No matter what I’m doing, where I am, ye’re there.”

For the stretch of three breaths, I kept silent. “Good,” I said at last, and gave him a shy, satisfied smile, pulling his body closer to mine.

“Ye will…” he started but trailed off. “Ye will wait for me, aye? It will be busy with training and
“No,” I said decisively, shaking my head, while trying to hide my face.

Jamie froze. “What?”

“No, of course I will, you bloody Scot!” I laughed and kissed him soundly.

“Good,” he said, and locked his eyes with mine, giving me one of the lopsided smiles that I loved.

The hot water and the violet scent of Jenny’s shower gel – it had to be Jenny’s – made our skin slippery, and we couldn’t take our hands off each other. But the shower was small, and our movements restricted. At last, Jamie laughed and took my hand in his.

“Raise yer arms, Sassenach,” he said, raising my arm and reaching for his loofah with his other hand. When Jamie started rubbing my armpits, our laughter echoed in the bathroom, multiplied in the small space. I started tickling him to divert his attention and he squirmed away, making high-pitched sounds that I wished I could record to tease him about them later.

“Eeeep! Stop it!” he said, and took a step back in a vain attempt to avoid the threat of my hands. His back hit the shower wall, and he kept his hands in front of him to defend his dignity.

“How dare you!” I exclaimed, trying to free my hands again. There was no chance.

“Will you be good?” he asked with a cocked eyebrow and I nodded, waiting for him to release my hands.

When he did, I raised both hands up as a gesture of goodwill, looking at him intently. “But the question is, do you want me to be good?”

It took us a while to leave the shower.

We spent the rest of the day cooking, eating and watching Netflix. It was late in the evening when I left the couch, walking to Jenny’s room.

“Bored of me already?” Jamie asked and I laughed, seductively swaying my hips as I walked.

“Just wait here, okay?” I said, and hoped he would.

A minute later I sat on the couch, holding his present. Jamie’s swimming story. It was a big collage with pictures of him in or around swimming pools.

My favorite was the one with Jamie around six years old, standing proud next to his mother, wearing goggles and his swimming suit. He was winking to the camera – or at least trying to.

My second favorite one was a picture I had taken at the beginning of his last race. Jamie jumping back, his head inches away from the water, his body arched, every muscle taut, determined to win.

My third favorite one was of the two of us, right after that race. Jamie’s ruddy curls still wet, our smiles bright as he held me tight in his arms. I had the same happy feeling every time I looked at that
picture, miraculously returning to that moment.

My fourth one, was Ian and Jamie, in matching swimming suits, posing at the camera with thumbs up.

My fifth one…

Well, let’s say the collage had all my favorite pictures featuring Jamie in a swimsuit.

Jamie spent a few moments studying it, and then crushed me in a hug. “Tis so beautiful, Sassenach. Thank ye.”

“Do you like it? It’s not much, but – ”

“It’s perfect. How did you find – ”

“Jenny,” I confirmed his suspicions about the origin of most pictures in the collage.

Jamie nodded, and carefully set the framed collage on the floor, next to the couch. “Tis wonderful, truly.” He kissed me, his tongue demanding access to my mouth from the first moments our lips touched. “And what about the other gift?”

“What other gift?” I asked, perplexed.

“Ye, moving yer arse like that when ye walked to Jenny’s room.” He wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him.

“What about that?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Oh, I see.” He nodded and gave me a sly smile. “I need to claim my gift on my own, then.”

He leaned into me, claiming my lips as he had promised, but his tongue didn’t linger long in my mouth. It moved down to my neck, and when I had relaxed into his touch, Jamie gently spun my body around so that my back would be flush to his chest. He continued kissing the nape of my neck, removing my tank top and cupping my breasts with both hands. I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, focusing on his fingers that slowly crept down my stomach and under my pajama shorts. My moans filled the room, and I heard him groan behind me when I reached back to stroke him. Jamie lowered my shorts and panties down to my knees and took purchase of my arse with both hands, squeezing and fondling it. His breaths came fast and short, and I realized I knew what to do to take them away completely.

With a smile he couldn’t see, I bent over, balancing myself on hands and knees.

“Ah Dhia… Ye’ve the roundest arse I’ve ever seen, Sassenach.” I bit my lip at the sound of his husky voice and wiggled said arse against him.

Jamie’s hands were immediately on me, and he entered me slowly, his cock filling me, hard against my walls.

He rocked us both, softly at the beginning, but when he realized that I was moving against him, eager to feel his cock inside me, he grabbed my waist and thrust faster. I lost myself in the sensation of the two of us together.

“Touch yerself,” he demanded in a whisper, and when I made no move to do so, he said it again. “Touch yerself, Sassenach.”
I did, and the closer I drove myself to completion, the faster Jamie’s thrusts became. His groans mingled with my moans, unable to be restrained inside our bodies.

“D’ye hear us, Sassenach?” he asked, and I mumbled a ‘yes’ in response. “I can hear yer wetness every time I thrust in ye. I can feel ye, getting more and more sleek. I can feel ye on my cock,” Jamie said, the effect of his words increasing the wetness he liked so much.

“Come with me, Claire,” he pleaded. “Come, babe.”

We held our breaths together while our muscles contracted, while our hearts stopped. My moans filled the room, and I felt my body freed, yet inextricably bound with his.

Jamie leaned over me, covering my body with his, his lips soft between my shoulder blades. We pulled apart hesitantly, breathing in sync, our smiles wide and our hearts full.

–

It was dark when I woke up in the middle of the night, trying to remember what I had dreamt about. Looking around me, I realized that I was sleeping in Jamie’s bed, his body warm behind me, curved to complement mine.

*Our first night sleeping together, alone, without the fear of getting caught.*

I placed a tender kiss on his jaw and startled when I felt his arm pulling me closer.

“You’re awake?” I whispered.

“No,” he breathed and smiled.

I sighed and kissed him again, this time on his wide lips. “I don’t want this weekend to end,” I confessed, my voice so low I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me or had already fallen back asleep. “I’ll miss you so much.”

“No, ye won’t,” he replied, on the verge of sleep.

“I will,” I insisted, nuzzling his neck.

“Ye won’t, because ye’re coming wi’ me. We’ll go to Lallybroch together. Sleep now, Sassenach.”

He pulled me closer to him, and I heard his breathing getting deeper. Unsure if he was still dreaming, I decided to believe him and share the dream. I could afford to learn the truth in the morning. For now, I closed my eyes and thought of the green rolling hills and Ellen’s roses.
In the morning, I felt Jamie’s soft lips against my cheek. His whispered words mingled with my dreams, causing me to doubt that he was really in my room - Lallybroch’s guest room.

“We’re leaving, Sassenach,” he announced, lightly pecking my lips with a kiss that didn’t quite alleviate my want for him.

“What time is it?” I asked confused, opening my eyes to see the most beautiful sky blue in his. He wore an indigo t-shirt and jeans, and he was smiling.

“Seven-fifteen. Go back to sleep. We’ll be back before ye know it.” With that, the heat of his body vanished from my side. I heard the door close behind him, and my heavy eyelids shut the light out again. It was too early.

I nuzzled my pillow, pulled the covers up to my chin, and thought of him.

*Dream a little dream of me.*

I woke up almost four hours later, and stared at my phone, stunned at how late I had slept.

*That’s what holidays are for, right?*

Relieved that Brian wasn’t there to witness my waking hours - the man woke up before dawn - I stretched my body languorously and got out of bed. Having the entire house to myself had its advantages. Without bothering to get dressed, I padded to the kitchen in my pyjamas, looking forward to a warm cup of coffee.

It was a beautiful summer day. The rays of sunshine squeezed through the curtains to dance upon the
wooden kitchen table, Bran barked his disagreement with the chickens’ behavior in the yard, birds were chirping from the trees next to the back door, their song a praise to the cloudless sky.

The house was quiet and I closed my eyes. The coffee’s scent had filled the room and I inhaled deeply, listening to all the sounds that were usually swallowed by the constant buzz of the city. I was far away from Edinburgh, and yet, this place felt like home.

Lallybroch held a distinctive warmth, like a wisp of vanilla and cinnamon enfolding me when I stepped into the house. Brian, Jenny, Jamie… They had opened their arms to me. Even Ellen, with her fiery locks flying in the wind, smiled at me through the picture on Brian’s desk. Her eyes kind, her gaze conspicuous. Take care of them.

I suddenly felt alone. There was a note with Jamie’s writing on the table and I picked it up to see a smiley face next to a hastily-written ‘Good morning, babe. Breakfast in the oven.’ I chuckled and opened the oven door to find a bowl of porridge, with blueberries and toasted nuts.

My little chef. Jamie Fraser is not little. My personal chef, I amended.

With a smile, I took the bowl with one hand, my coffee with the other, and headed to the library. On my way there I realized I had left my phone in the kitchen, but I had read Jamie’s good morning text already, and it would probably be a while before he could send another message.

We had been at Lallybroch just for a day, when Jamie’s coach had called him, asking if he and his father could return to Edinburgh because he needed to talk to them – both of them. He apologized for the inconvenience but insisted it was important.

Jamie and I had spent the previous night on the couch, him lying on my outstretched legs, making guesses as to the meeting’s purpose. At last, we agreed that Jamie’s coach would want to talk to Brian about Jamie’s future, and make sure he would continue training with the team during the next year.

Which was ideal, concerning our gap year plans.

Our applications to the colleges at Oxford University would be due in October. Our interviews would follow in December, and by the beginning of the new year we would know if we were accepted.

We would - I knew it. And then we would celebrate our success with a trip to Paris, just as we had agreed. Maybe Rome, too, depending on our budget.

Our budget was currently at zero, but we had come up with a way to fix that tiny detail. We had both started looking for jobs in Edinburgh, and we wanted to talk to Brian about our plans as soon as possible, because he had to let Jamie stay with Murtagh one more year. Maybe it would be easier after the meeting, if his coach talked to Brian about the importance of Jamie’s training.

But just in case, we had a backup plan too. Once Brian set his mind to something, it was difficult to convince him to change it - just like his son. So if he would insist on Jamie staying at Lallybroch, I would go with him and find a job in Inverness. We wouldn’t spend our gap year apart when the last year we had been just a phone call and 10 minutes away.

Thinking of my phone, I remembered the message he had sent me that morning and a wide grin spread across my face. It had been a gif of a sleepy baby, and a text saying how much he would like to be in bed with me.
*Just a few more hours and he will be back.*

Perched in my armchair – the olive armchair that I had declared mine – I ate my breakfast, staring at the bookshelves and wondering what to read. My gaze fell on *Circe*, the book Jenny had suggested, and I soon found myself lost in its pages, forgetting to finish my coffee.

I was so engrossed with my book, that the next time I checked the big clock on the wall behind me I sprang to my feet and almost ran to the kitchen.

Two hours had passed, and the meeting would certainly be finished by now. I was sure that I would find tons of messages from Jamie wondering where I was – and yet, there was nothing.

*Sassenach:* Jamie? Are you still in the meeting?

Five minutes passed without a reply. Five minutes, even though he was online.

*Sassenach:* Jamie?

He didn’t read my messages.

*Calm down, he probably hasn’t checked his phone.* I heard a little, calm voice in my head.

*But he’s online.* An evil second one, added.

*Sassenach:* Is everything okay?

Nothing came in response to my texts. I paced back and forth in the kitchen, then back to the library to retrieve my bowl.

I checked my phone again. Nothing. I washed the bowl to avoid sending yet another message. Once my hands were dry again, I grabbed my phone from the table, typing furiously.

*Sassenach:* Where are you?

Finally, three dots appeared on my screen – only to disappear again. I felt my stomach clench. Jamie never hesitated when messaging with me. But he had never avoided me before either.

I typed again, but deleted my message. I stood in the middle of the kitchen – his kitchen – on that same beautiful summer day, and yet I shivered. I stared at my phone’s screen, waiting, willing myself not to text him again. Finally, his picture appeared on my screen, next to a new message.

*Scot:* Coming home, Sassenach.

That was all? No emojis, not even an exclamation point?

*Sassenach:* Are you alright?

*Scot:* Yes, fine. Ttyl.

Talk to you later, my ass.
That wasn’t fine. It was far from fine. Miles away from fine. Jamie never texted like this.

What the hell happened in Edinburgh?

I spent the next two hours watching the clock, wishing the hands to move faster. Wishing Brian to speed up, to bring Jamie back home to me.

I needed to see him, to listen to him say he was ‘fine’ and look me in the eye. He wasn’t fine.

I had tried to resume reading, but I couldn’t focus. I could do nothing but pace back and forth, then sink in the armchair in despair only to find that my limbs needed to move as much as my lungs needed to breathe.

The house suddenly seemed too big, too empty. Every little sound drew my attention, upsetting me. A subtle sound of plates settling on the drying rack in the kitchen, scaring me half to death, a door creaking, the roof clicking… And above every other sound, the one of my nerves rattling. The same question repeating itself in my head, loud and clear.

*What is wrong? What had happened?*

We had everything planned, we had thought of a solution for every possible problem. This meeting was supposed to help us.

And yet, Jamie wasn’t speaking to me. We had promised we would share everything, and now he wasn’t opening up to me.

I had my head buried in my hands when I heard Brian’s car and then the front door opening. I walked to the foyer to find Brian alone, his brow furrowed, mirroring mine.

“Jamie?” I asked, hesitantly.

“He’s outside, lass. Give him a moment, aye?” His eyes were soft, his lips pressed in a tight line. As if he was sorry.

Sorry for what?

I nodded, but my lips moved involuntarily, asking “Why?”, even though I knew there would be no answer to my question.

I waited five minutes. Five excruciating minutes, and then I walked back to the front door, put my shoes on, took a deep breath and stepped out. The sun blinded me for a second, and then I saw him, tall and impressive, red hair fiercer than the sun, standing on end in all possible directions.

With a shaking breath, I walked to him. He stood with his back towards the house, facing the hills, just as he had told me he did as a child, when he felt sad. The scenery calmed him down; wild and tamed, it was like him.

All my anger about him not replying to my messages and then being cold evaporated like fine mist under the sun’s heat. I wanted to hug him. To wrap my hands around his waist and bring him to me, whispering that it would be alright. But as I took a final step towards him, I felt afraid, unsure of how to approach him. I placed my hand between his shoulder blades tenderly, wishing not to startle him.
Jamie took a deep breath and let it out in a single word. “Sassenach.”

I had never heard that tone in his voice before. A relief, feeling my hand on him, mixed with concern and something that was terribly close to fear.

“Jamie?” My voice was small, but my steps were steady as I walked to face him. “What did your coach say?”

Jamie pursed his lips together, just as Brian had done minutes ago. “Come with me?” he asked, unsure.

“Of course.” I smiled and turned to take his hand. My eyes lingered on the scraped knuckles, the blood still fresh, painting his fingers. “What happened?” I asked, swallowing with difficulty.

“I punched a tree,” he answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You punched a tree.” I repeated. “And I guess if I go check, the tree will be worse than you, right?”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “Ye’re really funny, Claire, have I told ye so?” he mocked me, but his lips curled up.

“I think you have,” I said, and took his other hand in mine. “Let’s go inside to clean that up, you bloody Scot.”

His laughter came stronger this time, and I revelled in the sound. As long as I could make him laugh, all would be well.

Jamie sat quiet while I cleaned and bandaged his wounds. When I finished he pulled me closer, breathed in, and said, “My very own doctor.”

“Always,” I whispered, placing a kiss on the side of his neck. I pulled away then, scowling at him. “Why the hell did you do that?”

Jamie shrugged, his eyes fixed on the floor. “I didna ken what else to do.”

“Will you finally tell me what has happened? I’ve been waiting for hours, Jamie, and you kept me in the dark.”

“Claire,” he said, and his hand came to rest on my cheek. “Ye ken I love ye, aye?”

_Things are worse than I thought._

“Tell me,” I pressed, feeling my heart speeding up.

The kitchen was suddenly too small, the walls too thick to let me breathe. Jamie must had felt it too, because he took my hand and walked us outside again.

“Come, Sassenach,” he said, when I pulled us in a stop. “I want us to be alone.”

We walked up the hill behind the house and sat on the grass. The view was beautiful, the sun caressing the hills, hues of green and yellow coloring the earth, as if an invisible hand had painted them fresh that same morning. Walking had soothed my nerves, but when I caught my breath again I
felt the anxiety build in my chest, rising up in my throat, threatening to choke me.

“Tell me,” I demanded again, before tears could come to my eyes. This tension was painful, the truth he kept from me mocking me from the shadows, hidden, powerful, intimidating. I needed to know.

“There was another coach in the meeting today,” he started, and I took a breath to steady myself, but Jamie didn’t continue.

“And?” I asked, impatient.

Jamie turned away from me, hiding his face in his hands, rubbing his temples. “I was offered a scholarship,” he mumbled in his hands, so low that I wasn’t sure I had heard correctly.

“What?” I froze.

I should be hugging him now.

I wanted to move. I wanted to do something more than just stare at him, lost. Something that wouldn’t aid him in building a wall between us. “A scholarship?” I whispered, striving for more words. “That’s wonderful, Jamie!”

God my heart hurts.

The scholarship wasn’t for Oxford. Because if it was, he would have called me the moment he had left his coach’s office.

In that moment, seeing my world tumbling down, I smiled the strangest smile of my life. Happy, sad, afraid.

Happy for him. Sad for me. Afraid for us.

He turned in my arms and cupped my face with both hands. “You know I love you, right?”

“I do, Jamie,” I answered and kissed the lips that I ached for all day, tasting him. Counting.

One more kiss, now that he’s still mine.

I needed that kiss, and all the kisses that would follow, to feel his presence next to me, inside my heart. To believe that the end of the world hadn’t come yet. “I do,” I repeated. “Tell me about the scholarship.”

“The coach was from the University of Michigan,” he said in a low voice, as if the volume would change the blow.

Michigan. The United States.

Oh God.

I listened to him quietly, not daring to trust my voice, unsure if I wanted to bring my feelings to the surface. This was a great opportunity for him. Maybe the best thing that could have ever happened. Jamie explained to me that the University of Michigan had one of the best bachelor programs for business administration in the US, and one of the best swimming and diving teams. He wore his mask tight, careful to show no emotions. Maybe because he couldn’t sort them out either.
“They have an Olympic sized pool for student-athletes, coaches and sports-specific dieticians and physios. Michael Phelps trained at the University of Michigan.”

*Michael Phelps. Jamie’s first crush before he met me.*

“It’s going to be amazing, Jamie. I’m so happy for you,” I said and hugged him again. I didn’t want to let go. I needed to keep him there, with me, in that moment while we were still together. But all I could see in front of me were broken dreams, their shards painful against my skin, carving a smile on my face that was neither fake or genuine.

I didn’t know how to feel. At that moment, I understood why Jamie hadn’t replied to my messages, why he’d hit that tree. It was happiness and anguish mingled together in the most inexplicable way.

“I didn’t say I’m going,” he said pulling away, his eyes searching mine. Dropping his mask.

In that moment, I saw his dreams and aspirations tearing him apart in front of my eyes. Half a heart here, half there. Torn, no matter what.

I wouldn’t do that to him.

“You didn’t accept?” I asked, my voice matter of fact.

“No.” He shook his head repeatedly, as if to prove his innocence, his devotion.

“Jamie, you should. This is like a dream coming true.”

My smile was genuine this time. Not our dream, but his. There was not a me anymore, just him. I had to see him safe, whole. And if I had to sacrifice a part of me to do that, I would gladly cut it out myself.

“I ken,” he said, his voice light at the thought of accepting the offer. “But what about us, Sassenach? Michigan is… far,” he finished lamely.

Too far. But still.

I took a deep breath, forced the widest smile on my face and took his hand between both mine.

“Are you kidding me? You have the opportunity to go to the US on a scholarship and you’re thinking about it?”

Jamie didn’t say anything, just looked at me.

“You said you love me,” I said.

“I do!” he exclaimed, his hand squeezing mine. His eyes honest, shining with unshed tears under the sunshine.

“Well, I love you too, you bloody Scot. You will go to Michigan, and we’ll make it work. If…” I trailed off. “If you still want that. Us.”

Jamie wrapped an arm around my waist, claiming my lips with his. “Of course I want that.” His whisper was hot on my lips. “You’re the most important thing in my life, Claire!”
I smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. “We will FaceTime, we will visit, and you’ll come home during breaks, right?” Jamie nodded, and it was my turn to take his lips in mine. It was a long, unhurried kiss; trying to convince us both that we could make it work.

“He said I have to hurry, if I want to start in January. I have to take the SATs and complete my application by the 1st of October.”

“Then that is what you’ll do.” I shrugged, and smoothed the frown between his eyebrows with my index finger.

“Are you sure?” he asked again, and I silenced him with another kiss.

“I’m sure. You have to go teach Michael Phelps how things are done.”

His laughter. That boisterous sound, filling every empty nook of my soul.

“I dinna ken what I would do without ye, Sassenach,” Jamie whispered, still smiling. The sigh that followed felt as if the weight of the world had been taken away from his shoulders.

*And set upon mine.*

As we walked back to the house, hands tightly clasped together, I could feel my heart beat with difficulty, my brain hurt.


*No sleeping in Jamie’s arms every night.*

*No waking up to his whisper breathing ‘good morning’ in my ear every day.*

Dreams crushed, like the wildflowers underneath our shoes.
Jamie accepted the offer from Michigan. We had written the email together - simple, polite, formal. The email that would change the course our lives.

“Will ye help me with the SATs too?” he had asked, turning in his chair to look at me the moment we were finished composing the email. “I canna do it without ye, Sassenach.”

“Of course I will,” I assured him, wrapping my hands around his neck and pulling him closer to kiss the tip of his nose. “What would you do without me, I wonder.”

“I don’t mean to find out,” he said, and my breath caught in my throat.

I didn’t answer, only smiled and kissed him again, hoping he would never have to find out. No matter the distance between us, we would always be together.

Since that moment, I kept catching myself watching Jamie for long, lingering moments, trying to
memorize every little detail of him.

How the hands he casually dipped in his pockets while talking to Brian sought mine when I was close until our fingers interlaced, inseparable.

How his eyes creased into two narrow slits when the sun hit his face, and the smile in his voice when he called me to him.

How he said *babe, Sassenach, Claire*. How these words changed when he whispered them into my mouth, his breath filling my lungs.

*You’re going to talk to him and see him even when he’s away. You’ll FaceTime. Get your shit together.*

And yet, no matter how hard I tried to convince myself everything was normal, every time my gaze fell on him it was impossible to not think about how much I would miss him.

Every time Jamie was near, our bodies gravitated towards each other desperate for touch; magnets unable to resist the electrical currents between them.

It takes force to pull two magnets apart. Force and strength I didn’t know if I possessed.

Jenny and Ian came back from their trip with matching smiles that revealed truths they wished to keep secret forever. Jenny talked to me about the breathtaking views, the adorable puffins, the beautiful seals and dolphins, but most of all, she talked about Ian. Sweet, strong, dependable Ian. Her Ian. She was over the moon for him and it cheered me up to tease the composed Jenny Fraser who all of a sudden acted giddy, like a little girl. It was a welcome distraction during the hours Jamie spent at the distillery with his father, and Jenny’s smile transferred a bit of her happiness to me.

At night, confined in the safety of my room after finishing dinner and helping Jamie prepare for his SATs, I googled universities in Michigan. It would be easier that way, if I were to follow him. My heart would remain whole, solid.

Michigan was good. The universities were great. Jamie and I would be together. And yet, it felt so wrong. It felt like I was betraying myself.

Oxford University had always been my dream. There, in UK’s oldest university, amongst old buildings with neoclassical architecture and impressive libraries, I would become a doctor.

The idea of going to the US had never crossed my mind, before. And even if I were accepted, Joe had told me how difficult it was to get a scholarship. I would end up with a loan and huge debt I would have to pay off for years to come. On top of that, Jamie had never asked me - he knew me well enough to know Oxford was the only place for me. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t think about the possibility.

“Claire,” Jenny’s voice was quiet but rang strong in my ears. We were sitting in the library with our tea cups in hand, having just finished cleaning the house when I decided to tell her that I didn’t want to follow Jamie to Michigan. “It’s the right thing to do,” she said with certainty.

“I really don’t know what’s right anymore.” My voice faded out and a sigh followed my words.

“You need to do what’s right for you. You’re eighteen years old, Claire! You have to focus on
yourself. And if your relationship with my brother is meant to last forever, you will make it through the hardships.”

Down to earth Jenny. With a hint of optimism and a belief in fate I had never seen in her before.

“I’m thinking, sometimes…” I rubbed my eyes, wanting to keep the tears hidden. “If all this was a movie, what would I do? Wouldn’t I follow him? Do everything to be with him?”

“Depends on the movie,” Jenny said and chuckled. “If you were a Hollywood movie, yes. If you were a European one, though, you would most probably break up with him and leave Lallybroch with a smile, ready to travel the world. Or go volunteer somewhere. Or something like this.”

“Well, I’m still here,” I whispered, pulling my legs closer to my body.

“Ye are, Claire. And ye support him, that’s what’s important.” Jenny scooted closer to me, set her cup on the table and took my hands in hers. “I really hope my brother will support you, too. If there is any brain left in his head from loving you.”

“So, you say Oxford,” I half-asked for the millionth time.


“And if we can’t keep what we have? With the distance? It’s a whole other continent.” My voice trembled with the thought, and the tears I forcefully kept down rose, forming a lump in my throat, threatening to choke me.

“If ye can’t stay together… Ye just won’t.” Jenny saw my raised eyebrows and hastened to continue. “I mean, there is not only one ideal person for each one of us, Claire. Ye could be happy with someone else, too.”

Optimistic Jenny my arse.

“I can’t,” I raised my voice in despair.

Jenny laughed. “Ye see, the good thing wi’ the two of you is that ye are both so pigheaded. And ye both want to make it work. So, since ye both see the same future for this relationship, I am sure ye’ll be alright. I told that to Jamie too, ken. That there are no soulmates. D’ye want to know what he said to me?”

“What?” I asked, and my heart drummed in my chest, demanding an answer as soon as possible.

“He said that even if there are no soulmates, ye are his. And that he’ll not let ye go from his life, no matter what. He can be dramatic at times, don’t ye think?” she asked, and my laughter hurried out, clear and loud through the tears. “But ye see the point, right?” she continued with a smile and I nodded, my heart quiet again. “Ye want the same thing, Claire. Ye believe in each other and in what you are together, and I think that’s more important than soulmates.”

“We do,” I agreed and smiled back at her. “We do.”

Jenny opened her arms and hugged me tightly. Tears rolled down my cheeks on her t-shirt, as she held me, allowing me to see further than fears and insecurities.
“Thank you, Jenny.” I said at last, brushing tears off my eyes.


—

I woke up in the morning with a message on my phone.

Scot: Breakfast at our spot, Sassenach. Don’t be late.

“Our spot,” I murmured, but my lips curled up in a glorious smile.

My sweet Scot.

With a summer dress on and a quick good morning to Brian and Jenny, I headed to the hill behind the house.

Our spot.

The day was beautiful, the sun already up and on its journey towards the west. The same direction Jamie would go.

Oh please, Claire. He’s still here.

Jamie was sitting on a red and black plaid set upon the grass, a thermos of coffee waiting for me. My gaze fell on the mini apple pies that looked suspiciously similar to the ones I had found on a website with recipes a few days ago, and I shook my head, smiling.

God, he always makes me smile.

“You made the pies?” I asked, finding hard to believe in my own eyes considering how early he would have had to be up to have them ready by ten in the morning.

“I did.” Two blue eyes locked with mine and I heard the unspoken words suspended between us. I would do everything for you.

“Will we join me, Sassenach?” he asked instead, gesturing towards the empty side of the plaid.

“Since you have coffee and food… You do know how to keep me close, don’t you?” I plopped myself down next to him, excited and absolutely graceless.

Jamie wrapped a hand around my waist, pulling me closer to him. “Ye’re too far away,” he murmured while doing so, and crushed me against his ribs. “Much better now.” His voice was soft, his breath brushing against my skin.

“Good morning, Jamie.” I tilted my head just so, and his lips were on mine. I kissed him and he kissed me back, as if weeks had passed without seeing each other.

“Good morning, wee vixen,” he said when I bit his bottom lips and freed my lips from his.

“Vixen, am I?”
“Aye, my wee vixen.” He rested his forehead against mine, as the words slipped from his mouth. We breathed in sync, smelling the summer around us, the love within us. When we started kissing again, Jamie leaned into me, lowering my body to the ground until my back hit the plaid. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I whispered, brushing red curls off his forehead. All the shades of red were dancing among his locks; maroon and cinnabar, crimson and carmine. The sun and the shadows fighting for dominance. I took a deep breath, and the spices of his skin invaded my nostrils, intoxicating. He was summer, and spring, and a fresh autumn breeze.

How would I live without him for so long?

*Shut up, Claire.*

I kissed him hard, and then even harder. He kissed me back, and in less than a minute his jeans and boxers were off, a heap next to the trunk of the tree that covered our bodies with leafy shadows. Their shapes changed as we ran our hands over each other, distorting nature’s perfection only to create shadows of leaves and branches formed by two bodies. Half a leaf on him, half on me. Whole, together.

“Jamie.” I stopped him when I realized if someone walked up the hill they would see us. “Stop.”

“No,” he whispered, and it was more like a plead than a negation. “Why?”

“What if someone comes this way?”

“No one will come here, Sassenach.” His lips were hot on my neck. “Trust me?”

I did.

Jamie pulled my dress up, pushed my panties aside and entered me in a swift move, setting the gasps caged in our chests free. With each thrust, I dissolved into him. It was need, pure need that connected us. The need to feel, to grasp, to root the other to ourselves. To prove that we are strong, unbreakable. Jamie whispered in my ear words that formed no sentence, words that made no sense and yet my heart knew them all, each and every one of them.

*Only you, mo chridhe, I need ye, mine, I want ye, now, mo ghraidh, forever.*

I felt him trying to control himself, waiting for me, and we reached our peak together, throbbing against each other, two bodies bursting and becoming one with a silent vow to eternity.

He fell atop me, his breathing shallow and fast. I kissed the sweat on his lips, searching in those eyes I loved so much and finding nothing there but the truth.

“I promise,” he said, and the moment I heard him I started crying, unable to control myself. Drown in my own feelings.

“Claire,” he said, alarmed, now his eyes that were searching mine. “Hey, babe… What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head in negation and bit my bottom lip hard, wishing the tears to disappear.

*Too late.*
Jamie got dressed quickly and gathered me in his arms. “Talk to me, Claire. We can fix it all, but please, talk to me.”

A long minute passed before I could calm my breaths and gather my courage.

“I’m sorry,” I said at last, turning in his arms to look at him. “I’m sorry I won’t follow you to Michigan.”

Jamie’s eyebrows shot almost to the middle of his forehead. “What? What are ye talking about, Claire? I never asked ye to come wi’ me!”

“I know,” I nodded. “You never did and I never volunteered, but I can’t stop thinking about it since you told me the news.”

“Claire,” he said, cupping my face with a warm palm, his fingers obstacles to my tears. “I dinna want ye to come.”

It was my time to look at him with eyebrows that formed two perfect arches above my eyes. “What do you mean?” I asked, ready to lash out at him.

“No, not what ye’re thinking!” His eyes got wide and I felt him tense, indignation making the muscles of his body rigid. “I can’t imagine something better than being at Michigan with ye. Truly. That would be a dream.”

“So?” I asked, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“That would be my dream.” A smile caressed his face before it was hidden again, like the sun rays dancing behind the leaves above us. “Ye took my decision for me, and now I’m taking yours. I want ye to go to Oxford. I want ye to follow yer plan.” His lips were warm against my forehead, and I felt his kiss easing my soul. “Ye deserve this, mo chridhe. Ye worked hard for it and I won’t take it away from ye. I would never do that.”

I didn’t know what to say. Jamie took a deep breath, moving his fingers through my curls. “I love ye, Claire,” he said, his voice filling the air between us, forcing their way in my heart. “And I trust in us.”

“I trust in us, too.” My words reverberated through my body, settling like feathers on every inch of my existence.

Jamie crushed me to him and I closed my eyes, listening to the words he had said before, now creating a perfect stream of sentences. “Ye’re everything to me, mo chridhe. I need ye, I want ye, I love ye. Only you, mo ghraidh. Ye’re mine, now and forever. I promise, Claire.”

“Now and forever,” I echoed him.

We stayed locked in that embrace for a moment that would last forever, imprinted in our minds, in our beating hearts. I finally felt serene after days filled with uncertainty and inadequacy, doubting about our future.

A while later I disentangled myself from him and gave him my cheekiest smile. “Now I have to try these pies, right? To see if you’re worth all the heartbreak of a long-distance relationship.”
“Aye,” Jamie laughed, and his slanted eyes shone in the daylight. “We dinna want ye to be trapped in a bad deal.”

“Indeed we don’t,” I said, reaching for a pie, but not before capturing the soft skin of his neck between my teeth.

The vixen had to be fed.
We spread our fingers out, trying to grasp time, to drag it backwards, if only for a little while; a month more, a few days, a single hour. Laws of the heart trying to defeat the laws of physics. Impossible.

Time kept slipping away through hollows and creases, invisible like the wind, carrying along laughter and touches instead of leaves and dust. Relentless, it continued its journey, bringing us closer to the crossroad where our path would finally split in two, where our hands would be too far away to touch, where our breaths would never reach each other’s mouth but would vaporize towards the limitless sky to reach the same stars.

We returned to Edinburgh for Jamie’s SATs and my BMAT. We both left the exam halls with smiles on our faces. When Jamie had to go back to Lallybroch, I entered Lamb’s office with my best puppy dog eyes and the pleading obvious in my voice.

A week later, I was at Lallybroch again. I was with him again – with his eyes on mine, his hands on my skin, his closeness. I would keep him close for as long as I could.

It was a grim October morning when he cornered me in the hallway, eyes glinting with mischief. And something else. Something I placed only after hearing his voice.
“A year ago,” he whispered, leaning into me, “I kissed ye.”

It hit me like a bolt of lightning. I had forgotten. A year ago, that night after the escape room…

Wait a minute.

“I kissed you, you mean.” I grinned at him, teeth flashing wry and cocky. A grunt left his throat and I hardly kept my chuckle inside.

“I kissed you, too, if I remember correctly.” His voice promised more and more kisses to come as his arms snaked up my sides.

“But I was first.” I heard my own voice hoarse, nothing like the light tone I intended.

“What can I say, I am irresistible.” A corner of his mouth tugged up, in this indeed irresistible lopsided smile of his.

“Oh, shut up!” His cheeky smile soon disappeared beneath my lips.

I kissed him, long and hard, until our chests rose and fell together, and his taste mingled with mine, creating something different, new. Something that was wholly us and wholly ours.

Jamie, at last, withdrew from our kiss, dark blue eyes boring deep into mine. His hand left my curls before it dipped into his pocket, only to emerge again with something hidden in his palm.

“A year ago,” he whispered, eyes glinting with happiness. Dark, clear skies, like the ones we spent our nights looking up at, from our spot on Calton Hill or the hill behind the house. “I kissed the girl I had always been looking for.” His hands came up to my neck, fingers lightly grazing my skin before he locked in place a simple silver chain with a stem of bluebells hanging just below my clavicles. He had given me bluebells that day too, when he’d come to pick me up. And then a bluebells bracelet on my birthday.

I raised my head slowly, looking up at him - at his soft gaze, his smiling lips. “Bluebells,” I said, my voice almost a whisper.

Jamie nodded, his fingers now trailing invisible paths on my neck, my jaw, my cheekbones. “Bluebells,” he repeated.

“It’s so beautiful, Jamie.” The flowers I held when we hardly knew each other, when I walked next to him and he wasn’t mine. And now, I would always have them against my skin – a part of him, a part of our story.

Jamie kissed my brow, lips lingering on my skin for a long minute. “D’ye ken, that bluebells bloom only in Spring?” he asked, his deep voice echoing through my body.

“But how? It was October when you first gave them to me.”

“I dinna ken. A wee miracle. They bloomed for me to give them to ye, Sassenach. They were waiting for us.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I cupped his face between my palms and brought his lips to mine.

“I ken ye dinna wear the bracelet,” he started saying a moment later, his face clouding just a bit. “But…”

“I love my bracelet,” I interrupted him. “It’s just that…that…” I raised my hand between us, dangling
and shaking it. “I’m not used to… I always…” I couldn’t find the right words to explain. “I guess I’m not a bracelet-kind of girl? And I don’t want to break it?” It was a question and a plea, because I needed him to understand, to know that it didn’t mean less to me because I didn’t wear it.

“Claire.” His voice was serious, but softened immediately. “I ken. And I bought ye a necklace, so it won’t get in the way all the time. And then when ye’ll wear gloves… a bracelet isna that easy to wear. But if ye don’t want to wear the necklace either,” he paused, then shrugged. “It’s okay.”

But all I could think was a single word. Gloves. He thought that far. Months, years after. Years, when he hoped I would still wear his necklace.

“I’ll wear it,” I said and kissed him again. “I love you.”

My lips left his and traveled down his neck, biting and sucking, until I could feel him breathing hard and loud.

“Sassenach.” His voice was strained, and I closed my eyes trying not to smile against his skin, content with the effect I had on him. Glad, he felt like the way I did when his lips were on me. “Come?” He took my hand, ready to walk back to his bedroom.

Locking my feet in place, I pulled him back. “I can’t. I promised Jenny I would help with the pies.”

“Ye can help later,” he said. He wasn’t asking.

“I’m already late. I’ve got to go.” I squeezed his hand in sympathy, in a silent sorry. He didn’t let me out of his grasp.

“So I’m giving ye bluebells and ye’re giving me blue balls in return? This is the pattern of our relationship?”

Unable to resist, I barked a laugh. Blue balls indeed, because I had left him in a similar condition when he’d given me the bracelet on my birthday. With a provokingly raised eyebrow, I freed my hands from his long fingers, mouthed a ‘later’ and turned to leave.

His heavy breathing and a hiss that sounded vindictive were the last things I heard before entering the kitchen.

Later, I paid for my smugness. Jamie entered my room late that night determined to take revenge. His teeth bit all the sensitive spots of my body and his tongue trailed healing paths where the red marks would soon appear, until shivers ran through me. His mouth locked on my nipples, sucking long enough to make me whimper. His hands caressed my body, but he didn’t touch me where I wanted him the most. The pads of his fingers traveled close enough and then withdrew, nails scraping against the soft skin of my inner thighs. No matter how hard I tried to pivot to get him grant my requests, he kept teasing and taunting me until he was sure I would never deny him again. I tried to touch him too, but he kept maneuvering out of my grasp. Soon enough, we were both equally breathless. When Jamie finally entered me, the gasp that left my mouth released the last bit of air I had kept inside my lungs. And with that, all I breathed in was him. Cardamom and cinnamon and the oranges we had eaten after dinner. And I was full of him, his body completing mine, all my senses his to conquer. All his senses mine to drink from.

–
The next months passed in a blur. Jamie received the scholarship from the University of Michigan.

My interview at Lady Margaret Hall went more than well and all I had to do was to wait for the results.

Lady Margaret Hall. Twenty minutes away from Pembroke college and an eternity away from Michigan. We had made plans and life laughed at our expense. But still, we would move on. We would make it.

It was the weirdest Christmas I had ever had. Stranger than the time I was alone with Lamb – when we hardly celebrated Christmas. This Christmas, though, was different. Everyone was happy – we were supposed to be happy. And yet, currents were trapped between us, creating static, making us think every move, every kiss, every heartbeat that brought us closer to that moment when doing these things would be impossible. And even thinking about it, was solid receipt that we would be torn in two.

And yet, defying everything, we clung to each other. Made every moment count.

Jamie left right after Christmas.

We all drove him to the airport together, crammed inside Brian’s car, keeping silent apart from Murtagh who was trying to lighten the mood with inappropriate jokes.

My heart had sunk deep down my chest and I glued my body to Jamie’s, hoping that the steady rhythm of his heart would wind mine back. His lips were tender against my forehead, his arm wrapped around me, warm and solid, keeping me close. But his heart… His heart was drumming, preparing for war, destined to frighten his enemies like a bodhrán going into battle.

I felt the air travel down my larynx, rushing towards my trachea, filling my lungs with every breath, as if it was trying to prove that I would continue living without him by my side. All I did was to close my eyes and focus on his scent, his warmth, the way his body felt against mine.

*I will miss you so bloody much, Jamie Fraser.*

I didn’t even dare whisper it in his ear, afraid that tears would rise like the tide, destroying the wall I had built around my feelings like a castle in the sand. So I bit my lip hard and waited.

Waited to arrive at the airport. Waited for Jamie to hug his family. Waited, breathless, until he would leave, and I would fall apart.

Jamie stood in front of each one of us, his eyes glazed, taking us in for a minute before he was enveloped in our arms. Each, giving him a different hug.

Brian’s hug was strong, keeping Jamie inside his arms as if he was a wee lad again. Full of trust and pride, and a little fear for his son who was old enough to live that far away from home.

Murtagh patted his head first, ruffling his hair, and then gave him a crooked, proud smile. His hand didn’t stop patting Jamie’s back the entire time they were embraced.

Jenny hugged him tight and Jamie wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her up from the ground, just so. She kept whispering to him and they both had tears in their eyes when he set her on her feet again.
With Ian, Jamie did a childish handshake, bumping fists in a flawless pattern that showed they had done the same thing a million times, and then they bumped into each other, their laughter a bit louder to cover all the built-up emotion.

Then, it was my turn.

Jamie walked to me, met my eyes for a long moment and pulled me forcefully to him. His arms were strong around my body and he set his chin atop my head, securing my face against his chest where I could feel every beat of his heart.

Don’t cry.

I didn’t know how much time had passed when I pulled back and looked at him with a bittersweet smile. He bent his head and we stared into each other’s eyes for a long moment before my forehead rested against his. At this moment, with eyes closed and our breaths intermingled, I was peaceful. I wished it could last forever.

“I love you,” I whispered, even though I was well aware he knew it. I had told him a ridiculous amount of times since he had been admitted to Michigan. But I couldn’t help it, I needed him to know.

“I love ye too, my Sassenach.” Tears rolled down my cheeks before I realized it.

“Hey, now…” he chided me, but his voice was soft, his face glinting with tears of his own.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said, short, loud breaths leaving my nose in something that could be a chuckle. Or a cry.

“I’m not leaving ye,” he whispered, kissing the tears from my cheeks. “Ye’ll always be in my mind, in my heart. Every second, every day.” I nodded, and he mirrored my response. “And I’m going to be in here,” he said, lightly setting long fingers over my heart. “And here,” he continued, tapping my temple with his index finger.

This time I really chuckled. “You ridiculous human being. Go, before I change my mind and keep you here.” I pointed to the floor, meaning the airport, Scotland, UK.

“Aye,” he smiled with mischief. “I’ll go, before I change my mind and take ye wi’ me.” He kissed me then, lips tasting of love and promises. “Forever,” he breathed, and his arms tightened around my body for a long moment before they reluctantly let me free.

I didn’t want to be free.

I saw him taking his luggage and I kept watching him as he walked towards the gates. Just before scanning the barcode on his ticket he turned back, and I saw his blue eyes sinking in mine, and I swallowed my sobs, and I mouthed ‘I love you’ simultaneously with him.

I didn’t realize I was walking to him. But I saw his long strides bringing him closer and I rushed, feet moving on the brink of running. I crashed against his chest and squeezed him tight until he brought my lips to his and kissed me. It wasn’t soft. It was desperate and painful, and it made my whole body tingle. Needing him. We broke apart, panting, grinning, eyes shooting flames and hands craving for skin.

“Go,” I whispered, and he nodded but didn’t move. “Nothing is changing. Go,” I repeated.

I walked back to the others and ignored Jenny when she said, “Now that was very rom-com-like.”
She still had tears in her eyes. Jamie waved, and we waved back, and I didn’t know how so many broken hearts would fit in Brian’s car on our way back to the city.

I felt my knees wobble as we walked towards the exit, and the next moment Jenny’s arm was around my waist.

“Hey, now,” she whispered. “It’s going to be okay. You’re stronger than this.”

I couldn’t stop rubbing my bluebells necklace between my fingers, as if it would summon him back.

A moment later my phone vibrated inside my pocket.

**Scot:** I can smell you on my clothes and it’s driving me crazy.

I chuckled.

**Sassenach:** I’ve got my bluebells, do you have your blue balls?

**Scot:** Yeap, here secured in my pants.

**Sassenach:** See? Nothing has changed.

**Scot:** I love you and I miss you already.

**Sassenach:** Me too. More than you can imagine.

We kept texting until he was on board, and then again during his flight. Neither of us slept that night, too busy to hold tight the tether that brought us together.
“Pick up, pick up, pick up.” My muttering continued at the lack of Jamie’s voice at the other end of the line. That invisible line that kept us connected since he had left. “Come on…”

It was ten o’clock in the morning in rainy Edinburgh. And that meant… Five in the morning in Michigan. He was asleep, of course he was.

Still. I didn’t want anyone to know before him. Jamie would have been the first person to hear the news if he had stayed in Scotland and I was determined not to let the bloody ocean change that.

I didn’t care for the damned time zones. Or this stupid distance between us. He was just one click away, anyway.

“Come on…”

Nothing. I tried again and waited, willing him to wake up.

“Mmm?” I was sure he had opened an eye, saw my picture on the screen and accepted the call closing said eye again. I could feel him on the verge of sleep.
“Jamieeeee!” My voice was too high and loud, the last letter of his name turning into an elongated cheer. I wondered if he had ever heard me squealing like this. Well, he couldn’t see me, at least. Because I was sure that he would never stop laughing if he’d seen me moving in my happy and frantic stationary run.

I couldn’t help it. I was excited. I was bursting with happiness. Every inch of my body vibrating with energy, strong currents seeking a release.

“I got accepted – I got accepted – I got accepted!”

A moment’s silence, as if he was taking the news in, and then, “That’s amazing! Congrats, babe! I was sure Oxford wouldn’t miss this opportunity!” It was a coarse whisper, a restrained cry, and I belatedly remembered that Jamie had a roommate. One that would very likely be asleep - if my shrill voice hadn’t reached his ears.

I rolled my eyes at his comment, wished the roommate was a heavy sleeper, and continued. “Oh my God Jamie, the letter was so small I couldn’t bring myself to open it. I stood there, looking at the envelope for a good while, doubting myself, doubting how good I had been during the interview. But then I opened it and…”

“And ye got into Oxford, Sassenach. Christ, I’m so proud of ye!”

“I did!” I paused, smiling. “I got into Oxford,” I repeated, my voice back to normal now, and plumped down onto my bed. “I’m sorry for waking you up. I just… I just wanted you to be the first one to know. Now go back to sleep!”

“Claire.” His hoarse voice squeezed through my ribs, engulfing my heart. “Thank ye. Thank ye for telling me first.”

I chuckled, trying to drive away the emotional weight carried by his words. As if I would ever tell anyone else first. As if the distance between us made any difference. My voice was soft when I spoke again. “Nothing has changed, remember? Although I had never thought you’d thank me for waking you up at five in the morning. Go back to sleep.”

“I love ye,” he whispered, adding another warm, fuzzy layer of him around my heart.

“I love you too. Goodnight!”

“Kiss?”

I sent him a ridiculous “Mwah!” and hung up with the stupidest smile on my face.

It was the ninth of January. After a quick call to Lamb to tell him the news, I made myself some breakfast, sank into the sofa and ate, absentmindedly looking at our Christmas tree. There was nothing but Oxford in my mind.

By the time my granola disappeared from my bowl I had decided to search for cheap tickets to Michigan. Now that I knew what I was going to do the following year, I had to see to some more pressing matters.

Like visiting Jamie.

I had to have a date to look forward to. To count the days until I could hold him again. Until I could crush against his chest and get wrapped up in his arms. Until I could taste him again.
I needed to have a date.

Rising from the couch, the tiny lights and ornaments on the tree looked back at me. Judgemental. Waiting.

I had promised Lamb that I would take care of all our Christmas decorations once the holidays were over. He didn’t want to have the tree to begin with. “Too much trouble,” he’d said. But I had insisted, and here I was now looking at the beautiful green branches sprinkled with baubles, wishing the holidays would last a bit longer.

One week more. Or two. Maybe three?

An hour later, I had all the ornaments back into their boxes. The tree, now bare, was patiently waiting for Lamb to discard it. But the house felt empty in a way. Less…cheerful. Normal.

I looked around, let out a loud sigh as if someone was around to take pity on me, and took the boxes to the storage room. I always disliked the end of the holidays and decided to hurry back to my room to find those cheap tickets to the US after I put everything away. That would definitely cheer me up.

I had been almost done when I tried to squeeze the last bag of garland between two boxes of ornaments. The empty space on the shelf proved to be more narrow than I had thought, and a small brown box fell down from its perch at the end of the simple wooden plank, spitting out almost all its contents.

Damn!

At least nothing had broken. Crouching on my knees I realized it contained photo albums. My parents’ photo albums. We had never unpacked all of them after moving into this house. There wasn’t enough space, so I had kept my favorite ones – with pictures of the three of us – on the bookshelf of the living room.

I loved going through those albums. Their pictures were the only tangible connection with my parents. They filled the gaps of my memories. When my mind blurred their images, the pictures where there, showing me how their faces glowed, how wide their smiles were, how happy we all were together.

But the albums lying on the floor were from a time before me. The pictures from their wedding. There was a period in my life, when I was around five, when I couldn’t stop looking at my mom in her long white dress, the lace covering her arms, the flowers on her head. The rest of the albums were even older; from my parents’ time in college. I hadn’t gone through them for a while.

Gathering the albums in my arms, I walked back into the living room. I spread them on the coffee table and the couch, and began to flip through them, one by one.

The house wasn’t empty anymore.

Each picture was a story. I knew them all. I had made Lamb tell me each and every one of them, again and again, throughout the years, that I had memorized them - they were my tales.

And because I knew, I caressed the pictures with timid hands, afraid to alter the stories behind them. Afraid to leave my fingerprints in places they didn’t belong.

God, the way they laughed. How young they were. How carefree.

There was a mirth in these pictures, different from the family warmth and elation the later pictures
These pictures held limitless possibilities.

I cherished each one of them, feeling self-conscious for having my mother’s hair, my father’s eyes.

I had decided to make myself a cup of tea and continue until Lamb came home, when a picture fell into my lap, free from the plastic constraints of the album.

It was tucked between the last page and the cover, and didn’t match any of the others. It showed my mom, hair wild and eyes glinting, surrounded by children. Children with black skin, skinny limbs, eyes full of joy and the brightest smiles I had ever seen.

*My mom had been in Africa?*

She was young, very young. And my dad was nowhere around. I had never seen that picture before. I didn’t know its story.

I flipped the picture, desperate for any information.

*Zambia, 1993*

*Zambia? My mom had been in Zambia?*

I made the calculations. She had been eighteen years old in 1993, the same age as I was now.

I sat with the picture in my hands for a long time, studying every little detail on it. The dirt on the path, the prefab building behind them, something that looked like children’s drawings glued on the windows. At last, I sat the picture on the coffee table and went to the kitchen to make a chai latte. My throat was dry. When I came back, hands warm from the hot mug and thoughts running wild, I continued with the photo albums needing to root myself to the stories I knew. My gaze, however, was falling on the lone picture on the coffee table more often than I would like to admit.

I was eager to learn its secrets. To find the piece of my mother’s life that I had missed.

In the afternoon, when Lamb entered the front door with a light whistle, I almost jumped at him.

“Lamb! What’s this?” I asked, bringing the picture inches away from his face.

“What’s what?” he asked in response, and took the picture away from me. His raised eyebrows lowered considerably as he studied the picture. “That’s your mother.”

“Duh!”

He shot me a look and his eyes immediately returned on the picture. “Where the hell is she?”

I let out a disappointed sigh. He didn’t know anything more than I did. “She’s in Zambia,” I said, and seeing his questioning glance I added, “It’s written on the back.”

Lamb turned the picture around, exactly as I had done a few hours earlier, and read the only information we had. “Ninety-three,” he murmured. “She was –”

“Eighteen years old,” I continued this thought.

“Right after high school, then.” Lamb handed the picture back to me to remove his coat. “This means… It’s taken before she met your father and me. We met in college, and during the second
“So you didn’t know that she’d been in Africa?” I asked as we moved towards the living room. “She had never talked about it?”

“No. At least not to me. I’m rather sure your father would have known, they told each other everything.” Lamb sat slowly on the armchair and ran a hand through his black and grey hair. “This woman will never stop surprising me.” His voice was soft, and I knew he said it more to himself than to me. His eyes were loaded with emotion as he bent and took the picture from the table, where I’d left it.

“It looks like a school,” I said, providing any information I thought was valid.

“It does.” Lamb smiled. “She was a great teacher, your mom. Her students loved her. Your dad always said that she was almost as patient as I.” A chuckle left his lips, and I felt my heart clenching inside my chest. I was always thinking of how much I missed them, but it rarely crossed my mind that their absence was vast from Lamb’s life too. They were the only family he had - apart from me.

I rose from the couch and walked to him, placing a soft kiss on his cheek. Lamb looked at me for a good while saying nothing. Then he sighed, called me lamb and ruffled my hair, so like my mother’s in the picture.

“You think she volunteered?”

“Sounds like her,” Lamb said, his eyes trailing back to the picture. When he finally took them away, he looked at me again. “I’m sorry I have nothing to tell you about it, lamb. I wish I knew more.”

I kissed him again, keeping for myself that I wished he would, too. “It’s okay,” I said, instead. “Are you hungry?”

Our stomachs growled in sync at the mention of food. We both laughed and headed towards the kitchen to cook.

That night, as I was waiting for Jamie’s video call, I couldn’t stop thinking about my mom and what a beautiful, brave thing she had done. How she may have changed those children’s lives. How her impact might still be here, alive, even when she was gone.

When I saw Jamie’s beautiful face, his clear blue eyes looking at me with so much love, I didn’t know from where to begin. So I told him everything, with my heart drumming in my chest and the words forming in my mouth faster than I could talk them out.

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“Now I start to understand how genetics work,” he said when I finished.

I bit my lips so hard to stop from crying, that they almost bled. “I wish I was as good as my mom.” I rolled my eyes to hide the fact that I truly did.

“Ye are, Sassenach,” he said with a conviction that made me smile. “Ye are,” he repeated, as if to plant the idea in my mind.

I shrugged and changed the subject, asking him about his day. He was so enthusiastic every time he talked about the college and his new team, that I could listen to him forever, if only to see him shining with glee. A good while later, when I’d heard every little detail of his day, I finally interrupted him and asked him if a month would be enough for him to get familiar with the place.
“A month?” He frowned in thought. “Why?”

“Because I’m coming in a month!” I exclaimed, my grin so wide I looked like the Cheshire cat.

His eyes got wide and the screen shook so much I could only see the top of his head for a few seconds. “Whaaaaaaat?” His whoop earned him a “Shut up Fraser!” that made me burst into laughter.

“I’m coming! I booked the tickets today!” I assured him when he rearranged the laptop so he’d be in the frame again.

“And why haven’t ye told me that from the beginning? Ye cruel thing! I canna believe ye’ll be here!”

I laughed again, my heart so loud I could hardly listen to my thoughts. “Happy?” I asked, my eyes fixed on the smile that covered almost half his face.

“Are ye kidding me? I’m the happiest man on earth!”

“Glad to know!” The voice was heard again and I saw the side of Jamie’s long, straight nose as he turned his head to talk to his roommate.

“Shut up, Grey!” he admonished him and turned to look at me again. “If he keeps interrupting, I’ll throw him out before I call ye next time.”

“You wish! You have no right to do so, sir!” I heard the voice again, bold and pompous.

Jamie rolled his eyes at that. “Claire,” he said then, smiling. “May I introduce you to Lord John Grey?” He turned the camera and I saw a beautiful man, lean and slender, with blond hair and light blue eyes.

“Madam,” he said, faking a bow. “Glad to make your acquaintance. And here I thought your name was Sassenach.”

I laughed at that, and the camera turned back on Jamie, who was now grimacing.

“Be sure I heard a lot about you, Claire!” John’s head popped just above Jamie’s.

“Oh! Good things I hope, my lord!”

“Too many good things. I thought he had made you up! And you can call me John. You’re a civilized English subject after all, not a brut like some Scots I’ve come to know lately.”

“Okay, enough, you two!” Jamie shoved John off and gave me a grin. “See, Sassenach? I always have an English ass next to me!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” John and I said in one voice, both equally incredulous.

“See?” Jamie glanced at him and then back at me. I was still laughing when Jamie looked at me in a way that made my skin crawl. “As ye see mo chridhe, it’s impossible to talk right now.”

I checked my screen and was surprised to find that we had been talking for almost two hours. “I have to go to bed, anyway.”

“Ye are in bed,” Jamie whispered, glancing at his right to check on John. “Christ, Sassenach, the things I’m thinking, looking at ye.”
“Isn’t John listening to you?” I asked concerned, my voice low.

“He has his headphones back on. But tomorrow I’ll make sure he gets his arse out of the room before I call ye. Don’t laugh!”

“I’m not! But you do that, tomorrow!” Still laughing, I blew him a kiss and slipped under the duvet. “Goodnight, Jamie.”

“Goodnight, mo ghraidh. Dream of me, aye?”

“I will,” I promised, ended the call, and closed my eyes thinking of my wonderful Scot.
“Gimme a ticket for an airplane, I ain’t got time to take the fast train. Lonely days are gone –”

“Lamb! Stop it!”

“What?” My uncle looked at me, with a most innocent face. “What’s wrong with The Box Tops? I’m trying to get you in the mood for your flight!”

“I am in the mood, I don’t need your singing to help me!” I huffed, looking out of the car window.

*Will it be raining in Michigan, too?*

Lamb was driving ridiculously slow, casually tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as he sang, when all I could think of was reaching the airport and getting on the plane that would take me to
Jamie.

Well, I wouldn’t get exactly on *that* plane. The first plane would get me to London. Then a second one would whisk me across the Atlantic to Chicago. And finally, after a third flight from Chicago to Detroit, I would finally get to see my Scot. *Really* see him. Run my hands through his red hair. Smell the spices of his perfume. Tickle him until he would beg for mercy. Kiss him until there would be no breath left in his lungs.

In twenty-two hours I would be standing in front of him - if I could still stand. I would most likely crawl to him, unable to move after travelling for so many hours.

I didn’t care. I would be in Michigan.

Total flying time was almost twelve hours. Total time of the journey, twenty-two. Cheap flights. Not everyone can handle it - or so I was told by Lamb.

*Scot*: Have you arrived at the airport?

*Sassenach*: Almost. You know how Lamb drives.

*Scot*: Tomorrow you’ll be here, babe.

*Sassenach*: I wish I could just apparate.

*Scot*: You haven’t taken an Apparition Test.

*Sassenach*: Since when do Gryffindors care about rules?

*Scot*: It wouldn’t do to get you here splinched, wee Ravenclaw witch.

I choked back a laugh that made Lamb shoot me a questioning glance. “I haven’t seen you so happy since you got your letter from Oxford. Which was almost a month ago, if I remember correctly.”

“More than a month,” I murmured. In retrospect, it seemed even longer.

The first day or two, I had spent the majority of my time on Google maps, mentally strolling around Oxford via computer screen. Then, I caught up with a few TV shows Jenny and Joe had been raving about. I read books that had nothing to do with human anatomy and physiology and enjoyed staying at home, a cup of tea and a hardcover in my lap, the rain pelting down on the living room windows.

Joe and Gail had left for New York, their semester starting when Jamie’s had. Jenny and Ian remained in Beauly after the summer had ended. They had both accepted their offers to the University of Edinburgh and they would come back in September, which was exactly when I would be leaving for Oxford. Jenny and I talked almost every day, but I missed having everyone in close proximity. It felt as though I had been left behind.

The flight to London was less than two hours and I had resolved myself to watching a movie, when the tiny lady sitting next to me started talking. I smiled politely and nodded more times than I could count, and kept making attempts to insert my headphones while I silently prayed that she would get the message. She didn’t. Her son was graduating and then getting married and “Oh ye can imagine, dearie, how many things remain to be done!” Even if I couldn’t imagine, I didn’t need to. By the end of our journey, she had listed and analyzed them all, pausing only once or twice. Most probably to breathe, I had thought. Her enthusiasm made me smile. Her nasal voice, however, made my head
buzz by the time we arrived at Heathrow. Mrs Macallan - “Like the whisky, ye ken?” - was sweet and kind hearted, but I felt lucky to be getting away from her on my next flight.

After retrieving my oversized rucksack, and bidding her farewell, I walked around the airport, absentmindedly looking at window displays and testing several perfumes. Finally, bored and tired, I searched for a quiet place to sit.

_Sassenach_: Seven more hours in Heathrow.

_Scot_: In thirteen hours I will kiss the hell out of you.

_Sassenach_: Oh really?

_Scot_: Yes. I can’t stop thinking about it.

_Sassenach_: Me or the kissing?

_Scot_: Both.

_Sassenach_: Hmm where are you?

_Scot_: Just finished up at the pool. We’re going to a place called “Fraser’s Pub”!

_Sassenach_: So you’re already THAT famous there?

_Scot_: Aye, restaurants open in my honor. I can’t help it Sassenach.

_Sassenach_: Snob.

_Scot_: Oh, is that you Ms. ‘I’m studying at Oxford, you common peasants’?

_Sassenach_: Ass.

_Scot_: THIRTEEN HOURS!!

_Sassenach_: Twelve and forty-five minutes 😃

_Scot_: I love you, got to go, the guys have started making fun of me. Ttyl?

_Sassenach_: Okay. I’ll be right here.

A ridiculous picture followed right after that, with Jamie’s lips so close to the camera I could hardly recognize them. Then another one, with him and John smiling broadly, heads bent together. I sent him a picture of me cuddled up next to my huge grey and purple rucksack and then tried to get as comfortable as possible, determined to get some sleep.

It seemed I was one of those people who can sleep wherever and whenever they want, not allowing anything to disturb them. Not the endless amount of people passing by, not their phone ringing, not even announcements calling their name.

When I opened my eyes, my phone had fifteen unanswered calls, nineteen unread messages, and two missed alarms. The most terrifying of all, however, was the time.

I had ten minutes to be at my gate and I didn’t even know which gate I was supposed to be at.
I picked up my bag, hoisted it unceremoniously over my shoulder and started running.

I had struggled to sleep the last two nights, the excitement of visiting Jamie making dozing off an impossible task. And now that I had a plane to catch, I fell asleep in the airport, and slept for more than six hours!

Seriously, now?

I was the last person through the boarding gate and I was the only one who went through it gasping for breath. When I finally took my seat, I checked my phone. All the missed calls and messages were from Jamie, all saying pretty much the same thing.

Where are you?!

**Sassenach**: Just got on the plane. OMG THAT WAS SO CLOSE! I almost missed my flight. I can actually hear my heart beating inside my chest.

Jamie replied immediately.

**Scot**: You scared the shit out of me, do you know that? First, I was afraid that you’d miss the flight, then I was terrified that something happened to you.

**Sassenach**: I’m sorry. 😢

**Scot**: You better be.

**Sassenach**: I didn’t do it on purpose!

I quickly calculated the time in Ann Arbor.

**Sassenach**: Are you still out?

**Scot**: No.

**Sassenach**: You’re at home? Still awake?

**Scot**: Yes, guess why! Because my girlfriend is crazy, and she sleeps in airports like the dead!

I saw the three dots appear, then stop. My heart thumped inside my chest.

**Scot**: You just scared me, is all. It took all the nerve I had to stop pacing back and forth in the room, and that’s mostly because I woke John up at least three times. I couldn’t handle it if something happened to you.

**Sassenach**: I’m okay. I’m sorry I scared you so. I love you. gtg! Plane taking off. ❤❤

**Scot**: I will kill you when you arrive. Even before kissing you.

**Sassenach**: That will make a fool of you. You’ll miss my kissing you back.

I spent my time during the flight watching movies and sleeping. No one talked to me, apart from the stewardess with the impossibly perfect makeup, who came passing by every ten minutes with coffee or tea, food, more coffee or tea …

I only had an hour layover at O’Hare International Airport and I didn’t even stop to look around.
One last flight - and a short one, at that.

One hour later I landed at Detroit Metro, murmuring continuously, “I’m here, oh my God, I’m here!”

My whole body ached from sitting for so long, and walking felt like an exotic exercise. I had been right in that I would be crawling once I got here.

But then, I wasn’t. I rushed off the plane and pushed my way to the tram, jumping into a car just before the doors closed. I followed the flow of the other passengers, feeling like herded cattle, and took the escalator down to the arrivals area.

The moment the escalator brought me low enough to see out across the great open space of baggage claim I saw him standing there, tall and beautiful, waiting for me. I felt a huge smile spread across my face and mentally urged the people in front of me to move faster. Finally, a kind of magic seeped into my muscles, pushing me forward, and the only thing I could do was run to him.

I dropped my bag just before I reached him and a moment later I was jumping into his arms, wrapping my legs around his body, relying on his strength to support my weight.

A crushing hug. And then we were kissing as if we were the only people in the whole terminal. Fierce and consuming, it was a kiss that tried to make up for all the lost ones, all those we had been sending to each other during the last month, vanishing somewhere in the space between us.

But this kiss was real and hot and powerful, filling our hearts with blood again, after more than a month when distance made their beating dull, normal.


I looked at him for a long moment, my throat too tight to talk.

“Come,” he said, and bent to pick up my rucksack. “We’ve a bus to catch.”

His hand was warm when he took mine and we walked together towards the shuttle pickup area. It was silly, but even walking next to him felt different. As if I couldn’t discipline my feet and each step would be the first to start a dance.

We sat in the second to last row of the bus, desperate for some privacy. His hand perched on the inside of my thigh, drawing abstract lines that were driving me crazy. I leaned my head onto his shoulder, trying to be decent, but five minutes later I was biting and sucking his neck until I felt him shiver.

“What are the plans for today?” I asked, my voice low.

“Today we’re going back to my dorm and we’re not leaving the room at all.” He shot me a naughty glance, implying that I knew exactly what was going to happen in his room.

“What about John?” I asked, frowning.

“He won’t come back tonight.” Jamie’s owlish wink and the sly grin that followed suggested that he had taken care of everything.

“I’ve turned everything upside-down for him. Trust me to make a bad first impression.”

“Dinna fash, Sassenach. Ye’re doing John a favour,” Jamie said, his lip curling up as he looked out
of the window.

“What do you mean?”

“Ye gave John the perfect excuse to stay over at another guy’s place. He’s on the team, too. And I think John was waiting for an opportunity to stay alone with Hector since the first time he saw him. He hasn’t admitted it yet, but I’ve seen the way he looks at him.”

“John is gay?” I asked when he finally finished. “You haven’t said anything!”

“What was I supposed to say, Sassenach? ‘Claire, let me introduce ye to my gay roommate?’”

“Well, no, but… Anyway. And how about Hector? Do you think that he returns John’s feelings?”

“He’ll be a fool if he doesna. John is amazing. It’d be like you giving me your number and I never calling you. Impossible.”

I laughed at that, shaking my head. My curls escaped from my unruly bun, but I didn’t care. Jamie liked them down. “Yeah, right. That being said by someone totally unbiased.”

He looked out at the winter landscape for a moment. Then, his eyes were back on me and he let out a long sigh. “I’m so happy ye’re here, mo chridhe.” He squeezed my hand and bent his head to kiss me.

I couldn’t get enough of his lips.

We got off of the bus and walked quickly towards his dorm, partly because we ached to be finally alone and partly because it was freezing cold outside.

“Why did you have to come here?” I asked, feeling my nose go Rudolf-red. “Hawaii is one of the States, too.”

“Oh, excuse me Sassenach for not getting a scholarship somewhere sunny!” Jamie smiled and pulled his beanie lower, to cover as much skin as possible.

“It would be a nice change to Edinburgh,” I murmured. He just squeezed me closer to his body.

As we walked, I was fascinated by how much of the campus was woven seamlessly into the city itself. Just off the main streets that were filled with restaurants and shops, were smaller homes all in a line, and then suddenly a university building would pop up with a distinctive blue and yellow sign out front.

We didn’t stop walking fast once we pushed through the entrance doors of Jamie’s dorm. He rushed me across the lobby to the elevators, only this time I was almost sure he was moving quickly as not to be stalled by any fellow Wolverines looking for greetings and introductions.

We reached his room unnoticed. Jamie tossed my rucksack into a corner and closed the door softly behind me. I stood still, looking at the room.

His place.

It wasn’t big, and the beds and two desks made it seem even smaller. But it was cozy and clean, and had something of him that made me feel comfortable. I turned to look at Jamie, and for the first time in a month, I felt like I was home.

“I missed you, you bloody Scot.” My whisper was more than a confession. It was the profession of
the gift I had been bestowed. The gift of having him in my life. Of having a home.

“I missed ye too.” He smiled in his crooked way, the way I had fallen in love with. “More than ye’d ever imagine.”

And then his lips were on mine, tender and honest. The connection we had longed for, when all we could do was rely on a screen to see each other. Now, we could feel. Our love was tangible, filling the room as our breaths mingled, as our hands intertwined, as our hearts beat together, their own song.

It didn’t take long for our kiss to turn wild.

Jamie shed the outer layers of my clothing, murmuring that I was a wee onion or something. I smiled and helped him, taking off some of his own clothes as well. It was when his hand found its way underneath my sweater that I yelped.

“Cold! Freezing hands!” He looked at me with a pout that wasn’t nearly cute enough to make me relent. “Don’t even think about it!” I said, pushing against his chest with a pointed index finger.

Jamie laughed and swiftly took me off my feet, eliciting yet another yelp from me. He lay me carefully on his bed and took off my sweater.

“No hands,” he promised, raising them in the air as he bent to kiss my neck. His lips moved to my chest, teeth softly biting my nipples, and I slightly regretted keeping his hands off the game. I needed him to touch me.

I squirmed beneath him, making my intentions obvious.

“Oh, no,” Jamie said, sucking my breast in a way I was sure would leave a hickie. “I spent so much time this past month telling ye what I was planning to do to ye when I’d have ye close again. So much time, seeing ye touching yerself and wishing it would be my hand instead of yers. I mean to take my time, mo nighean donn.”

A soft bite and a wicked grin. His eyes burned in mine.

“I mean to lick ye, kiss ye, taunt ye, feel yer smooth skin against mine and leave my marks on ye. I mean to hear yer moans and whimpers fill the room. And then, Sassenach,” he paused for effect, and I ground myself against him. We were both ready. And all the talking during our video calls didn’t go to waste, after all. “Then, I mean to fuck ye and feel ye fucking me until we canna move our limbs anymore.”

Everything went according to the plan.
Midnight

Chapter Notes

This chapter is co-written with @theministerskat, who has also made the banner, knows every little corner of Ann Arbor and has been on this ride as my beta almost from the very beginning! Love you, Kat! ❤


I drew a heart into the condensation that had accumulated on the window overnight. Through the bold, clear lines of my doodle, I could see the fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the early hours of the morning, blanketing the city in white. It was like a clean canvas, impatiently awaiting an artist to make the first stroke.

Like our lives. Everything felt new, and yet familiar at the same time. I didn’t know this place, or the future that awaited us; but I knew him, and myself, and I felt that was enough.

Jamie began stirring in the small bed across the room, and I turned to see him reach a hand out from under the covers, searching for me. I felt my heart constrict at the amount of love that instantaneously engulfed me.

My sweet, ridiculous Scot.

The floor was cold under my feet as I padded back over to the bed and crawled in next to him. I wedged myself into the crook of his arm, trying to steal as much body heat from him as possible.

“Good morning, Sassenach,” he whispered when I finally settled in. He kissed my forehead without opening his eyes, and I could feel the smile playing on his lips as they lingered between my brows.

“Good morning, yourself. I’m cold,” I purred. “Warm me?”

A sigh of contentment escaped him as his other arm came around my waist, pulling me impossibly closer to his body, my living furnace. I felt my own body relax and melt into his, and allowed myself
to enjoy a quiet moment with him after so many months apart.

*To just be, together.*

“What are our plans for today?” I mumbled into his chest after a few minutes.

He didn’t answer right away, and I looked up to make sure he hadn’t fallen back asleep.

As if he were answering my unspoken question, his hand roamed up from my waist and back down, fingertips gracefully gliding over the bare skin of my back. When he reached the swell of my buttocks, he took a firm grip and pulled my hips tight against his.

He was most definitely awake.

His head tilted down slowly towards mine, placing a lingering kiss on my lips before moving to the spot behind my ear.

“Plans?” he whispered between light bites on my ear lobe and kisses just beneath there. “My only plan is to keep ye locked in this room for the rest of yer visit.”

I moaned in response to that suggestion, and felt his reaction to my noises, but just a bit further down.

Trying to not to let him distract me too much, I pushed him a bit more for an answer. “Knowing you, Jamie Fraser, you most certainly have plans for us.”

“Aye, ye’re right. I do.” Another kiss, and then a lick across my collar bone that sent a shiver through me. “But for right now, my only plan is to make ye whimper.” And before I could process what was happening, he dove beneath the covers.

It would never be enough.

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We eventually untangled ourselves from the sheets of Jamie’s bed around noon, realizing that if we didn’t actually put some effort into getting up, we would stay there forever.

I wanted to see Ann Arbor; it was the city that had enchanted Jamie from the moment he had arrived. I longed to see the things that were a part of his every day, and spend time in his favorite spots.

It was a selfish desire on my part. I wanted to create memories with him so he would still be able to feel my presence wherever he went when I couldn’t be there. I wanted to talk to him on the phone and know exactly what he was seeing, not just imagine the place as a vague picture with fuzzy lines. I wanted Jamie to walk down a street and think of me, how we strolled there together, how he laughed at my jokes.

Stupid, egocentric, overwhelming love. I didn’t want him to forget me.

“Where to first?” I asked as we pushed our way through the front doors of his dorm.

“This way,” he said as he took my mitten hand in his, “I have something special I want to show ye, Sassenach.”

It took us 15 minutes to reach the iron gates of the Nichols Arboretum.

“The locals simply call it The Arb, but I’ve only come here a few times,” Jamie said, letting go of my hand for a moment to pull his beanie back down over his ears. The red curls falling across his
forehead were speckled with little snowflakes. “But every time I’m here, I think of you.”

“Only when you’re here?” I asked with a sly smile.

“Always,” he hastened to remedy, “Always! But even more when I’m here. It may sound dumb, but it reminds me of our walks through the parks back in the Edinburgh. Reminds me of home.”

He dropped my hand again and moved a few, wide strides ahead.

I didn’t follow immediately, but turned and took in the bit of wilderness around me, in awe that such a place could exist within a city. It was gorgeous, and the snow covered trees and paths glittered as the sun poked its way through a break in the clouds.

As I completed my circle, a white bomb hit me square in the chest and exploded. I gasped through the cold wetness and wiped at my face.

“But there is never so much snow in Edinburgh!” he said, laughing. He actually dared to laugh.

“You’ll pay for that, Jamie Fraser.” I sneered and ran to him, ready to inflict my revenge on him in any way I could. I tried, with no success, to pull him down into the snow. Before I could realize how, he managed to wrestle me into the air and I ended up with my head against his back, while he fondled my ass, conveniently set upon his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I exclaimed, pounding my fists against his back. He carried me as if I were as light as a feather.

My response released another fit of laughter from him. “Oh I did miss you, my Sassenach,” he murmured, his hand still groping at my butt.

“Me or my arse?” I asked, actually curious.

“Both. I didna ken I could have one and not the other.” He pinched me lightly, then advised me to stop moving before we both fell.

I stopped, and he let me slide down him, slowly, never losing control. His eyes were glinting with happiness and a few unshed tears of joy when I looked at him, standing flush to his body.

When we resumed our walk a few minutes later, I noticed the wooden edges of flowerbeds left to hibernate over the winter. “I guess it will be heavenly here in the spring,” I said, trying to imagine all the colours dancing around me.

“Ah, was it a bad idea to come here?” Jamie asked self-consciously, looking at me with a frown. “It’s only bare trees and snow now, would ye like to go somewhere else, Sassenach?”

I gave him my warmest smile, squeezing his hand. “It’s wonderful, Jamie. It’s so quiet and calm. Everything white, so pure.” I pulled him to me and placed a kiss on his cheek. “I love it.”

Jamie let out a breath, content with himself. “I thought ye would. And there is a river further down!”

He walked in silence, as we had done countless times before, in a life miles away, in a time that felt like years ago.

We neared a lonely wooden bench that was situated under a tree, with thick bark and wide branches.

“I was thinking…” Jamie started, then trailed off. He glanced at the bench, then back to me. “We had our bench on Calton Hill.” He tipped his head in the direction he thought Edinburgh was, although I
had no idea which way east was either. “I thought we could have our bench here, as well. Since I’ll be here for—”

I didn’t let him finish his thought. My lips accepted all the love he offered, all the little ways he cherished what we had. I strained to keep the tears from falling, thinking of all the means by which he had already linked this place with me, even before I had set foot here. I showed him my giddy smile though, realizing how stupid I had been, thinking that he’d come to forget me.

He sat down and pulled me onto his lap, and we watched stray snowflakes fall, looking at each other every few moments, trying to take in our new way of life. When I started shivering, Jamie motioned for me to stand, and we resumed our walk.

“Cold already,” he said and shook his head disapprovingly. “I had told ye that first day,” he stopped, and gave me a small smile, “That ye’re a blue-nosed Sassenach.”

I laughed, thinking of the day I discovered how warm Jamie’s hands always were. “Mmmm, you did.”

“I had gone back home and spent the rest of the night thinking if you might have taken offense. But then, you’d given me yer number, so it couldna been that bad.”

“No, not that bad,” I agreed, feeling the warmth of his hand through my gloves. “Not bad at all.”

We followed a path along the river, and when my limbs became sufficiently cold to complain about, Jamie agreed to go to a coffee shop for a little break.

He suggested at least ten different options with great coffee and tea, but we settled for the one closest to central campus, that he frequented every morning before class. On our way there, Jamie greeted several students that passed by us, and I started wondering just how popular he had become here, and in such a small amount of time. It seemed that the tall, redheaded Scot had made quite an impression.

Jamie told me all about the swim team as we neared our destination. He went on about their training, the new coach and the facilities at the university. Everything had surpassed his expectations. He was enraptured, and I felt my heart swell for him. He had made the best choice, and I took a little pride in the fact that I had helped him do so.

“When will I meet John?” I asked when he finally stopped to take a breath from his rambling.

Jamie hesitated for a moment as he held the door open to corner coffee shop for me, but finally continued once we took our spot in line.

“He texted me this morning, Sassenach. Hector is having a party at his place tonight, and John asked if we wanted to go.” He looked at me, uncharacteristically indecisive. “I would rather have ye all to myself, but I don’t think I’ll be able to, now.”

“We could go,” I shrugged. “We’ve had all day to ourselves, and it’s not like I’m leaving tomorrow.” Jamie made a sad face, and I pulled him down to me for a kiss. “We still have plenty of time! Plus, I want to meet John.”

“Aye, he wants to meet ye, too. Even though I dinna ken whether the combination of the two of ye will turn out well for me.”

I snorted and looked at him cunningly. “Maybe I’ll make him tell me your secrets.” I wiggled my eyebrows and he laughed.
“I think ye already ken all my secrets, mo chridhe,” he whispered in my ear and pulled me closer. The older women behind us coughed loudly just as our lips met again, and we apologized, stepping up to the counter to order.

We sat at a table near the wide glass windows, looking out at the street. I felt warmth finally seeping into my body, and with the hot coffee between my hands, the tall Scot sitting across from me, I couldn’t hold my smile back.

We talked about Edinburgh, about Jenny and Ian who were trying to persuade Brian into producing cider as well, and of Rupert and Angus, who had returned to Edinburgh and started a shop fixing bikes, in a forgotten basement close to the city centre. We talked about Oxford, and about my next visit before more obligations would start on my part. It felt wonderful, talking to him again, feeling his hand holding mine, reaching out and touching him. So simple. So perfect.

After several refills we were ready to face the cold again, and left the small cafe. Jamie had a whole list of things we could do, but our late start to the day severely limited our options now.

“We could browse the art museum for a bit. It’d be warm in there,” he suggested as he tightened the scarf around my neck.

“I’d like that,” I told him and we set off.

The museum itself was small in comparison to others, but still held a number of intriguing installations that we found ourselves discussing quietly. Belatedly, we realized that we’d never perused a museum together, and agreed on visiting more of the collections in the following days. On our way out, I noticed a display advertising the museum’s African art gallery and made a mental note to make sure we made it to that one.

The sun had already set when we left the museum and both of our stomachs had begun rumbling for food. After grabbing a quick bite to eat at the student union, Jamie texted John asking for Hector’s address.

“What kind of party will this be, exactly?” I asked while we waited for John’s reply.

“What d’ye mean, Sassenach?”

“Do we need to dress up?” I raised an eyebrow, then raised my arms, indicating that my huge, puffy coat may not be proper party attire.

“Och, no.” Jamie shrugged. “I dinna think it will be anything fancy.” In an instant his arm was around my waist, pulling me to him. “Ye’re beautiful, babe,” his said in a most sincere, mellow voice. “So beautiful that I’m thinking of texting John we willna make it.”

I smiled against his lips and took them in mine.

Later that night, nestled between Jamie’s body and the arm of Hector’s sofa, I closed my eyes, listening to the soft notes of the guitar. It was dreamy.

“D’ye like it, Sassenach?” I heard Jamie’s whisper, his arm pulling me closer to him.

“Mmmm… I envy John.”

That startled him, and he moved back to look at me. “Why on earth would you envy John?”

“Well…” I chuckled. “Hector is tall, handsome, kind, clever, with his own apartment, and he plays
the guitar. Isn’t that obvious?” Jamie made a sound I couldn’t characterize, but I was sure it wasn’t amusement. “What?”

“Nothing,” he murmured, turning his eyes away.

“Hey,” I crooned and pinched his side. “Are you really jealous of Hector?”

“I’m not jealous!” he exclaimed a bit louder than he meant to be, and John scowled at us, his gaze leaving Hector for the first time since his boyfriend had started playing.

“Oh, come here, you…” I paused, grinning, but Jamie didn’t look at me. “Chippy Scot!” I finished, bringing my hand around his neck, and lowering his face to me until I could capture his lips in mine.

I didn’t pay attention to the rest of the song. When Jamie pulled back to look at me again, he had a crooked smile on his face.

“So, ye like me more?” he asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“I love you, stupid–” I didn’t get to finish my sentence, his teeth taking hold of my bottom lip.

Hector continued strumming soft tunes on his guitar, now with John sitting next to him, when Jamie’s eyes went wide with panic.

“Where is your coat?” he asked, springing from the couch.

“In a room, somewhere.” I looked at him puzzled, unable to understand what had gotten into him all of a sudden.

A minute later he was back, with our coats, scarves and gloves in his arms. We said a hasty goodnight to the rest of the group and took our leave, Jamie practically dragging me out onto the street.

“What time is it, Sassenach?”

“What? What does it-”

“Claire! The time!”

Giving up hope of getting words out of him that made any sense, I dug into the pocket of my coat for my phone. I held it up to my face and the screen lit immediately.

“It’s 11:48. Why does it matter? Will your carriage turn into a pumpkin come midnight?” He chuckled at my stupid joke, but took my free hand in his and led me down the snowy walkway.

“Aye, I’ll make sure I leave my glass slipper behind.” I looked down at his long feet, laughing at the notion of Jamie in slippers. “Come on,” he said, tugging at my hand. “It’s a ten-minute walk in the best conditions. We have to hurry.”

And with no more explanation than that, he began walking, pulling me along behind him as I nearly ran to keep up with his long strides.

Even properly secured against the wind the night air was cold against my cheeks, and I knew they’d be a deep pink by the time we got to where we were going. Jamie didn’t slow his pace, but he kept
glancing back to me to make sure I was alright, a large sly smile spreading wide across his face.

After what seemed like the longest street block in history, Jamie turned and I saw the coffee shop from that afternoon on the corner. He kept moving towards an archway ahead of us, and I knew it led into the diagonal yard he had shown me on my tour of the campus earlier in the day.

Unsure where exactly we were going, I was surprised when Jamie suddenly stopped in the middle of the archway. Not expecting such a sudden halt, I crashed into the back of him and felt my feet go out from underneath me on a rogue patch of ice.

I braced myself for impact with the pavement, but Jamie caught me before I went down. He held tight to my arms as I steadied myself and I glared up at him.

“What in God’s name is going on, Jamie Fraser? Why the sudden rush out into the cold?”

“What time is it?”

I glowered at him, but didn’t protest this time and looked to my phone once again.

“11:57.” The smile I had seen on his face during our walk reappeared, this time even bigger.

“This is the West Hall Engineering Arch.” He raised his hands and gestured to the brick archway all around us. “It was built in 1904. A long time ago, the female students lived way up in that direction,” he pointed towards one end of the arch, “And the men lived down here on central campus.”

He closed the distance between us, hands coming to a rest on my hips.

“After a date, the lasses and laddies,” I giggled at his put on heavy Scots accent, but he ignored me and continued, “Would part ways for the night right here and say their goodbyes. Legend has it, that if ye kiss someone at midnight under this arch, ye’ll marry ‘em. So, Sassenach, I’ll ask ye once more, what time is it?”

My brained stopped. My pulse quickened and I felt my heart flutter as I looked down to my phone a final time.

“Midnight,” I whispered, but his lips were on mine before I could get the entire word out.
I had missed watching Jamie swimming – the concentrated look on his face as he focused on his coach’s instructions, the tightly pressed lips as he got into position, the way everything around him disappeared the moment he pushed away from the wall. His technique seemed flawless. His arms moved as if the water was oily and he was sliding through without effort, simply being where he belonged. Ellen had been right to call him kelpie.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I barely registered that Jamie had gotten out of the pool and was now walking towards me, when he suddenly stopped in his tracks, reached for his towel and with a quick move covered himself. I didn’t know if anybody else had seen what I did, but the color rising on Jamie’s cheeks was enough to make me giggle. He came to me with wide, fast strides, a crooked smile on his face, and pulled me against his – still wet – body.

“Hey!” I protested. “You’re wet.”

“Mmm,” he made a noise from deep down his throat and looked into my eyes. “‘Tis called revenge.”
“For what?” I asked, frowning at him.

“Ye ken for what. And I saw ye laughing, Sassenach. From now on, ye’re not allowed to come to see me training.” I pressed my lips together, having a hard time to stifle the laughter that bubbled inside me. “D’ye ken everyone teased me in Edinburgh after that first time ye came to the pool? I canna have that here, too.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I agreed, with feigned solemnity. “We canna have that.”

Jamie made another sound that indicated he wasn’t satisfied with my response, and after a soft bite on my bottom lip, turned to go to the locker rooms. “Wait for me, aye?” he asked before he disappeared around the corner.

As if I had anywhere else to go.

We spent that night at home, alone. After two failed attempts to watch a film cuddling in his bed, we accepted that no matter the plot and direction, nothing could hold our attention. Jamie took the popcorn from my lap and set the bowl on the floor, focusing on the salt I hadn’t yet licked off my lips. He did it for me, and the groan that came from deep down his throat sent a shiver down my spine, enough to make me forget everything else. I ran my fingers on the soft skin of his neck and through his red locks, pulling him closer for a long, long kiss.

That night, I paid attention to all the little things I couldn’t see when I was away.

How his eyes were becoming dark, wide pupils swallowing the blue irises, when I slipped out of my clothes. How his peppery scent was engulfing me when he took me in his arms, and the relief of our naked bodies together, soon replaced by a flame burning on our fingertips, aching to explore. To make the other gasp, and moan, and groan. How his teeth were scraping against my neck as if the need to taste me would never be sated, while his hands were gliding along my body, never having felt enough of me. How his voice vibrated through my body when he murmured wicked and sweet things in my ear and against my skin, making me shake with need. And the way he was smiling, just for an instant before I came undone, as if he was the happiest man in the world.

With Jamie going to his classes every morning, I found myself relaxing in an everyday life that I wished could go on forever. I was sleeping in every day, hiding in his dorm, read a lot, and strolled around the campus and the city. Jamie’s excitement was contagious, and I soon found myself falling in love with Ann Arbor. It would be easy to live here, with him. No more late night calls, no more lonely nights. An ideal situation. Easy, if I didn’t have my own dreams to follow.

Oxford was written in my heart for so many years that even considering changing my plans felt like a betrayal. And, in any case, I was never one for easy things. Living apart was a challenge, but I was sure that going through a long distance relationship would make us stronger. It would be a proof, that no matter what, we would be together. We had love, the kind of love that goes along with will and commitment, and it was enough for us. I could see it every time I looked into his eyes when he talked about the future, and I felt that my heart would burst with joy. We would always have each other.

It was one of those late mornings – or early afternoons – that the door of Jamie’s room swung open, making me spring out of bed.

I stood still, a few seconds that felt like hours, looking at John, seeing his eyes going as wide as mine.
“Shit,” I whispered, and jumped under the covers.

“Oh God,” John mumbled, closing his eyes. He turned around to face the door, and proceeded on leaving the room while murmuring things I couldn’t make out.

I was only in Jamie’s University of Michigan blue t-shirt, and my panties.

My heart was beating so fast I thought it would stop at any moment from sheer exhaustion. And then I’d die from embarrassment.

*Oh God.*

As if it wasn’t enough that we had kicked John out of his room, now he couldn’t even enter it safely. I put on my pyjama bottoms and a bra, and walked to the door, all the while trying to find something to say. Something that wasn’t, ‘Don’t worry, we didn’t do it on your bed, although we got close once.’

“John?” I slowly opened the door, popping my head out into the corridor. John was there, red as a beetroot, trying to avoid my gaze. “I’m decent now,” I said with a smile. An awkward smile.

John breathed a sigh, his shoulders dropping as he turned towards me. “Jamie told me you would be out. He said you’d go to the museum again.” I couldn’t believe he was explaining himself for coming back to his room. “I’m sorry, Claire.”

My laughter was short but genuine. “You’re sorry? It’s your bloody room! Come in!” I titled my head towards the room and moved to sit on Jamie’s bed again. John walked inside, closing the door gently behind him.

“I just need a few more clothes and I’ll be out before you know it.” He opened his wardrobe, moving hangers left and right, searching for something. His cheeks had found their normal color again, but his abrupt moves made it clear that he still thought he was intruding.

I stayed on Jamie’s bed, looking at him, wondering how I could amend the mess I had made. “Don’t you have a class?”

“What?” he asked, distracted, as if he didn’t expect me to talk again. “Oh, I have, but later.”

“I could make you a cuppa if you don’t need to leave right now.”

John turned to see me, his eyes glinting. “I haven’t heard anyone offering me a cuppa for a while now,” he said with a grin. “I think I’ll accept your invitation, my lady, even though your abode is rather simple.” He gestured at the room. “And small.”

I chuckled and rose to add water in the kettle. “I will try to do better next time, my Lord. I’ll try to accommodate you in a summer palace, or something.”

“So why aren’t you at the museum?” John asked while piling clothes on his bed. “Apart from staying here to scare me half to death, I mean.”

“I’m not that scary,” I said with a smirk and John raised an eyebrow at me, hiding his smile. “I…” I looked around, trying to find an excuse, and failed. “I got distracted,” I finished, rather lamely.

“Hmm,” John rubbed his chin in mocking concentration. “Distracted. And without the massive Scot around.” He nodded to himself once or twice, as if reaching to a conclusion, and added, “Interesting.”
I shook my head, pouring the water into the cups. “Sherlock Holmes, now in your dorm,” I murmured and heard him chuckle.

“What’s this?” John asked, taking in his hand the actual reason that got me distracted.

I drew a deep breath, took the cups in my hands, and moved to stand next to him. “My mom,” I answered, smiling. As I smiled every time I held that picture. As I had been smiling, lying on the bed with the picture on Jamie’s pillow, when John had entered the room.

“Where is she?” he asked, studying the picture with a slight frown before his eyes met mine. His glance was kind, his light blue eyes beautiful, patient. I felt as if I could tell him anything, and he would understand.

“Here?” I pointed at the picture, turning his attention to it. “In Zambia.”

“Wow. Was she a volunteer?”

“Yes. At least, I guess so.”

I munched my real answer inside my mouth, suddenly ashamed of it.

_I don’t know. This is my mother, but I don’t know what she was doing there._

I felt my chest hollow again, and not knowing what to do, I took my cup from the table and sat on the bed. John sensed my uneasiness and didn’t pry further. I supposed Jamie had told him about my parents. Mirroring my moves, he took his cuppa and sat on his bed across from me.

“My brother’s girlfriend,” he stopped and corrected himself. “Err, fiance, had gone to Lebanon a year ago. As a volunteer.”

“She did? That’s amazing!” My eyebrows shot up, and I could hear my excitement pitching my voice high. I sat up on Jamie’s bed, crossing my feet in front of me, waiting for John to tell me more.

John moved to sit more comfortably, careful not to jostle the piles of clothes he’d left on his bed. “Yes, she’s quite impressive, this one.” I wondered if that meant she was more impressive than his brother’s ex-girlfriend, but thought it wiser not to ask.

“She does sound impressive,” I commented, “If she went to Lebanon just a year ago.”

John turned his eyes to his tea, then looked at me again. “Minnie is pure force. I don’t know if I could endure half the things she has been through.”

“Minnie?” I asked incredulously.

John’s lips curled up, and he looked at me with mischief. “Her name is Miverva, actually. But she’s petite, and Hal – my brother – started calling her Minnie when they dated. Started calling her Minnie before they dated, to be precise, and if you ask for my honest opinion I think he was just trying to get her attention. They were working for competitive law firms, you see. Anyway, long story short, the whole family calls her Minnie now. She told me once,” John paused and shook his head, “That she was considering adding poison to Hal’s tea for reducing her name to a cartoon.”

I smiled and sipped my tea, waiting for John to continue. When I realized he wouldn’t, my eyes trailed back onto my mom’s picture.
“I’m pretty sure Minnie would volunteer again if she wasn’t pregnant.” John’s voice was calm but his eyes were intent on me and he smiled, in a caring, encouraging way.

“She’s expecting?” I asked, trying to focus on the easy part of the conversation. “Congratulations!”

John’s face shone with a wide smile. “Thank you, Claire. They didn’t expect it, but she’s expecting.” His smirk was a clear indication of how much he had teased his brother about that.

“Well, a pregnancy sounds like a pretty good reason for not trying to get herself killed,” I said with a smile.

“Indeed, it does.” John sipped his tea, and we kept silent for a few minutes. I studied the picture again, looking at my mom’s smile, wondering if she missed her life in Africa after meeting my dad and having a family. “She would be delighted to talk with you.” John’s voice brought me out of my trance. “If you’d like to learn more about volunteering,” he added noncommittally. “She could give you the gist of it.”

“John…” I hesitated for a moment, thinking about it, my glance falling on my mom’s picture again. I drew a deep breath and brought the lukewarm cup of tea closer to my body, as if its warmth would help me make a decision. It would be just a conversation, I wouldn’t commit to anything. I looked up at John, who was suddenly very interested in patting the creases of the folded sweaters on his bed. “I’d love that.”

–

Jamie came late that evening, his blue beanie covering the red curls, his lips frozen when they touched mine.

“I missed ye so much,” he whispered, trailing kisses down my neck, his hot breath a contrast to his cold lips that made me shiver. “I was thinking of ye all day long.”

“I was right here,” I said with a smile, taking his beanie off to run my hands through his hair.

He groaned against my neck and looked at me. “And that’s even worse, isn’t it? To ken ye’re alone in my dorm, and I not able to come to you. Ye’re so close,” he whispered, took my lips in his and snaked an arm around my waist to pull me closer.

“You’re so bloody cold,” I mumbled as I cupped his cheek, still red from the temperature outside.

“Seems ye need to warm me up this time, Sassenach,” he replied with a smile against my lips.

It took less than a minute and I could feel Jamie’s body underneath mine, hot as ever.

“I don’t think you need all these clothes, now,” I said, biting my lips as I pulled off his sweater.

Jamie groaned and pressed my body against him, sucking on my neck, while his hands traveled down my back and settled on my butt. “And ye definitely dinna need that pyjama bottoms.”

We took care of the offending clothes and melted into each other, and it wasn’t long until the room seemed too hot for both of us.

–

A while later, I was lying on Jamie’s chest, drawing patterns on his side when my stomach rumbled, making Jamie’s laughter shake my body. “I’m hungry,” I said with a pout. “Don’t laugh!”
Jamie rolled his eyes and saw the corner of his mouth curling up. “Aye, I was sure ye’d be. I brought supplies, babe.”

Only then I noticed the packages on his desk. We ate in bed, and I listened to Jamie talking about his day, sharing with me all the little things he had done while resenting he couldn’t come back to the dorm. When we emptied our cartons, I sat on his lap, wrapped my legs over his hips, and fortified myself for what was coming.

“Jamie.” I swallowed hard, trying to sound serious.

His eyes were sleepy, the day’s fatigue falling heavy on him. His hand was tracing lines on my spine as he leaned his head against the wall. “Aye?” he asked in a husky voice.

“I was thinking today,” I started, then stopped, unsure of how to proceed. I had decided to narrate the events from the beginning, but now I wasn’t sure if that was the best approach.

“Ye mean to tell me there is a brain underneath all these curls?” He caught a lock of my hair between his fingers, then pulled me in, took a deep breath and placed a tender kiss on my head. “I had suspected something o’ the sort.”

“Jamie, I…” I pushed back and took his face in my hands, willing him to look at me. This got his attention. “Do you remember the picture I told you about? My mom’s picture?”

“The one she’s in Africa?” he asked, perplexed, and sat up.

“Yes. In Zambia. I kept thinking about that.” Every trace of sleep disappeared from his face. He didn’t talk, just gave me time to put my thoughts together, even though I had spent the whole day doing just that.

Jamie had a life here. He had his program, his friends, his dream coming true. And while I was really proud of him and I looked forward to living my Oxford dream, in the meanwhile, I felt left out. For the first time in my life, I was floating without having a purpose.

“John was here today,” I started, looking at his brow furrow.

And I told him everything. About my conversation with John, my Skype call with Minnie, the way she talked about volunteering and the immense feeling of completion, how each and every volunteer makes a difference… Jamie listened to me, silent, and I saw a mask setting on his face with each passing sentence, making his feelings inscrutable. I continued, trying to pass through it and make him see, make him understand that this was something I needed to do.

“When I’ll be back in Edinburgh,” I paused and rubbed my face, frustrated. This wasn’t going well. “It’s not as it was when you left. Jenny is at Lallybroch, John in New York. I am alone and I have nothing to do.”

“You could catch up with your reading,” he offered. “You wanted to go to Oxford prepared.”

I scowled at him. “I still do. And I will, I’m not giving up on studying. But this is different. It’s something I might never get the chance to do again.”

Jamie swallowed, his hands still on my hips. “You could volunteer anywhere,” he said, his voice low, constrained. “You could do it in Scotland, or here.”

“Yes,” I agreed, taking my eyes away from him. “But my mom… She was in Zambia, Jamie, and I had no idea before. But now I do, and I feel like I will somehow understand the person she was if I
volunteer to go to there, too. I will share the same experience with her.” Jamie kept silent, then pressed his lips together and nodded.

“It’s not going to be forever,” I crooned. “Only a few months.” A strained smile curled his lips up. “We will still talk. Nothing will change.”

“Claire.” His voice was harsh. “Stop saying that. Things will change. We won’t meet for months.”

I took my hands off his chest and neck, looked at him for a long moment, and then turned my gaze on my lap. He was right, we wouldn’t meet for a few months, but I thought this was something we could deal with.

“I thought we were better than this,” I said, my voice equally hard with his.

*I thought he would understand.*

Jamie didn’t reply. I heard his heavy breaths, his fingers drumming against the headboard, my heart racing inside my chest. It was a long silence and the air got thick around us. Impossible to breathe. I bit my lip, regretting what I had said, feeling terrible for questioning how strong we were. But still, when I opened my mouth, I didn’t find anything else to say. I didn’t have anything to offer as a consolation. I had said the truth, I believed we would be alright if I volunteered. Just a few months.

“I hate ye for being so good,” he sulked. I smiled, leaned into him again, and took his lips in mine. “I love you for being so good,” I said, breaking our kiss for a moment before his teeth were on my bottom lip. I cupped his face, feeling the need to repeat my statement, to make him really know. “I love you.”

“I ken,” he smiled wistfully. “You’ll come back to me, right?”

“I love you for being so good,” I said, breaking our kiss for a moment before his teeth were on my bottom lip. I cupped his face, feeling the need to repeat my statement, to make him really know. “I love you.”

“I ken,” he smiled wistfully. “You’ll come back to me, right?”

“Always.” I placed a reverent kiss on his lips as if sealing a deal. Jamie studied my face with a small smile, ran his fingers on my cheek, and tucked an errant curl behind my ear. “Actually,” I started, trying to keep a straight face. “It’s not a choice anymore, not to come back.” Jamie’s hand stopped on its way through my curls and he looked at me puzzled. “Since we kissed under the arch at midnight…” I smirked at him, raising an eyebrow.

Jamie chuckled, shook his head and pulled me to him, kissing me again, and again, and again. The smile had reached his eyes when they locked with mine, and I felt a heavy weight lifted off my chest.
He lowered me onto the narrow, single bed and I got under the covers, scooting over to make room for him. Jamie cuddled behind me, our bodies fitting against each other as they had so many nights, sharing warmth, revelling in our closeness. We kept quiet as we breathed in the same air, listening to the beating of our hearts. Hearts we knew would always beat for each other, sharing stories and lullabies, making a world of their own.
Jamie had been right about one thing. It wasn’t the same.

Everything had changed. My timezone had changed, and two more hours crept in between us. Jamie’s obligations had doubled as he got further into the semester, and his free time became limited. My schedule in the medical program kept me occupied from eight to four-thirty, and then with afternoon clubs, I missed Jamie when he was waking up, and I couldn’t stay awake long enough at night when he’d get back to his dorm.

But the biggest change was the unmitigated disaster our communication had become. Or lack thereof.

The volunteer house had no wifi connection, and I had to walk to a nearby cafe to talk to Jamie, something that was impossible to do during the week since the only time he was able to call me at night when he’d get back to his dorm.

So I bought a Zambian SIM card and texted him. A lot. It still wasn’t enough, but it was the best I could do. I missed his voice. I missed seeing his face. The few times we attempted a video call all I had managed to see of him was a frozen image. Sometimes clear, sometimes blurred, because he had moved before the connection lagged. I had laughed the first time at the image of Jamie with his mouth open, his eyes turned skywards, as his voice came through the speaker with a relieved ‘finally’. I had thought the problem with the internet connection was random, and it would be better the next time we’d call. It didn’t.

We continued texting, trying to keep our lives intertwined. We sent pictures – pictures that were pushing the limits of my patience because most of the time it took more than one failed attempt to get them through. Our messages often turned into long monologues, as the other was busy or sleeping. And then, when we had time to check our phones, we found long monologues in return.

That was how I found myself staring at a white piece of paper, brow furrowed, determined to write something that would be more intimate than a text on his phone.
My dear Jamie,

No.

My love,

No. Damn it! How was I supposed to write a whole letter when I couldn’t even write a greeting?

My sweet Scot,

Yes, that’s better.

My sweet Scot,

It’s me, your Sassenach, writing a letter to you, as if we live in the 18th century. I miss our century, to be honest. I miss proper internet connection. This 2G thing sucks.

I paused in my writing, sure that I wouldn’t give a damn about the internet connection if Jamie were with me. With a sigh, I shook my head to scatter those thoughts away. He wasn’t here, and he wasn’t supposed to be. Biting my lip, I continued, trying to focus on the positive things that had happened during the two weeks I had been in Zambia.

Being here is like moving into another dimension. I knew it would be different, but I never would have imagined people living on the same planet as us having such different everyday lives. I thought I was prepared when I landed in Africa, having finished the online training at home, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. I omitted telling you last week, but I panicked so much the second day I was here, that I started crying that night in my bed. It’s silly, ridiculous, and it makes no sense, but I felt lost. Alone. It was the first time that I could become lost and Lamb wouldn’t be there to search for me. I had to make it on my own. We had no guidance on how to live here and it seemed so hard to build a life from scratch in a country where I couldn’t even communicate well enough to buy something to eat. I was terrified, Jamie. And I didn’t tell you, because I knew you didn’t want me to come here, and I felt guilty and ungrateful for the chance given to me. Anyway. I’m much better now. I met Louise and she has pretty much made everything easier. She arrived two weeks before I did, and helped me a lot during my acclimation here.

Livingstone is beautiful. It’s rural and wild. Louise said we might visit the Victoria Falls next week, so get ready for pictures! It will be awesome to explore a bit, there are so many things to do!

I know I haven’t said much about the people I’ve met here, but they are usually around and it’s weird for me to be writing about them while they are looking at me. Louise is from France, that much I have told you. She’s a free spirit, straightforward, unabashed for what she says or does, but she’s also sweet and funny. She’s always smiling – I don’t know how she does it. Sometimes I just want to start crying when I see the scarce medical resources available here. The equipment is limited, the clinics are under-staffed, and the patients too many. But then, that’s the reason I’ve come, right? To help. I decided to help in the children’s department, although I was really tempted to volunteer
For the home-visits, I am usually paired with Margaret. She’s from Virginia and she’s really shy. She often gets lost in daydreams, but she is also so very patient and calm. During these visits we are supervised by Chikondi, which means ‘love’ in Chewa. Isn’t that great? Chikondi is a local caregiver and he’s amazing. His English is very good and he explains every little detail for us to understand what he’s doing and why. We mostly observe and assist him with small things now, but we’ll be able to do more once we get more experience. Yesterday we sat for almost an hour after an examination, listening to the stories of an old man who has been living alone since his wife passed away last year. They had five children, but they have all moved away. We were almost ready to leave, when he looked at me for a long moment and then just started talking. I couldn’t understand a word he was saying, but Chikondi started translating immediately. The man’s words rolled out in his deep voice, taking their time, but his eyes danced as shared his memories with us. And when he finished telling the last story – how he made fun of his wife for her cooking, but they both knew she was the best cook in the village – we gathered our equipment to leave and he rose too, saying that it was time to go to see his girl, because she was waiting for him.

It was impossible not to cry as I watched his dragging steps towards the cemetery. Chikondi said that listening to our patients and giving them comfort is just as important as the medical care and health education that we provide. In that moment, I felt as though I’m here not only to help heal their bodies, but their souls too. And it struck me that we’re not so different after all. It’s magical to be human and live, and feel and remember. And to be a human who has love and time to share with others creates a beautiful, inexplicable feeling. Like you suddenly realize you’ve been breathing your whole life, but you now relish in the action, something so simple, and yet so important.

We have been seeing the same giraffe I told you about every time we go for home-based care to the village nearby. We decided to name it Mani. I’ll take a picture tomorrow, so you’ll get to know him too – I hope he’s a he.

The volunteer house is nice. We have a pool outside the house, and a BBQ, and we’ll probably organize a get-together tomorrow. Week days are way too busy, so it’s only Saturdays and Sundays that we have time for ourselves. Jeremy and I started a Reading Club and we spend almost all of our afternoons there, reading to the children. No matter their level of poverty or their illnesses, children smile a lot. I’m starting to believe that’s the common denominator that keeps us human. It’s strange, how the laughter of children brings adults together. It feels like they are the reason we can all function in the same equation. And most times I think that looking at tiny humans running around, playing, yelling, singing, is what keeps me sane and gives me purpose.

We’ll start health talks at the local schools next week. It’s mind blowing how important health education is. Even the simplest issues, like hydration, hygiene, and nutrition, have to be discussed. I’m excited to get into these classrooms, even more so because that’s where my mom volunteered.

I’m happy to be here, but I miss you, Jamie. I miss you so much. And I’m thinking of you all the time, I hope you know that. There are so many things I would like to share with you. Even the simplest things, like a flower or a sunset. Even though you wouldn’t care about them at all. At least the flower. You might have liked the sunset. We’re talking about going bungee jumping. I wish you were here so we could jump together.
Sometimes at night I dream that you hold me in your arms and I sleep better for it.

I’m now thinking that sending letters might seem really stupid to you, so don’t feel obliged to reply. We will text anyway.

I love you.

Claire

I finished the letter with a wistful smile, folded it, and wrote Jamie’s address on the envelope.

“Claire!” Louise waved from the door. “Are you coming?”

I secured the envelope between the pages of a book in my luggage, and headed outside. I would stop by the post office first thing tomorrow.

“What were you doing, Miss Bennet?” Robert raised an eyebrow, but his gaze didn’t leave the book he was reading.

“Ha, bloody, ha.” I replied, refraining from replying to his question.

At that moment, I realised that I had forgotten to mention Robert in my letter, but I didn’t know how to describe him to Jamie either. He was the oldest one here, but he didn’t talk a lot and his cocky behavior always made me wonder why he had volunteered in the first place. He was working in the adult department and organized the Math Club in the afternoon, so we didn’t really interact during the week. He was the actual reason, however, I didn’t participate in the Math Club. I didn’t want to be stressed during the afternoon activities, dealing with his sour behavior. Jeremy was much closer to the type of people I would usually be friends with.

“So, are we doing the BBQ tomorrow?” Louise asked, clapping her hands enthusiastically.

I shrugged and saw Margaret’s anxious gaze passing across all our faces, waiting for anyone else to speak first.

“I think it’ll be cool. We haven’t really spent much time together.” Jeremy was lying in a deckchair, and he rose on his elbows to look at us. “What do you think, St. Germain?”

“Why do you keep calling him by his last name?” I inquired, narrowing my eyes at Robert as I took the seat next to Louise.

“I don’t know.” Jeremy furrowed his eyebrows, as if he had just realized he had been doing that.

“I don’t mind,” Robert said. “All my friends call me St. Germain. Not that any of you would ever be anything close to my friends,” he added, and I grimaced.

“Of course your Highness,” Louise mocked him in return. “So, it’s decided. We’re doing the BBQ tomorrow.” She bit her lip, then, and looked around. “Where is Helga?”

“She had an additional first aid training session.” Margaret fidgeted with her skirt, then fixed her gaze on the swimming pool tiles.

Louise saw me observing Margaret, and she leaned closer to me. “She’s getting better. When I first came she hardly talked to any of us.” Seeing my questioning glance, she continued. “She’s not well. Her boyfriend died last year. Cancer.”
“Oh my God,” I whispered, trying not to seem upset in case Margaret chanced a look at us. She didn’t, but Robert did, and when his eyes found mine there was an expression on his face I couldn’t quite decipher. Something between loss and understanding.

Well, that was new.

I had no idea Margaret’s time here was part of a healing process for her, and that made me realize I hardly knew anything about my roommates’ lives outside of Zambia, and certainly not enough to reach any conclusions on their characters. Maybe Robert had been an arrogant arse who began to change his attitude after volunteering. Maybe he had realized there was something more important than his little insignificant world.

“I’m in for tomorrow,” he said in his deep voice, eyes back on the pages of his book. I had seen him reading it the previous day and I had already read the book, but never mentioned it to him. It wasn’t that I wanted to start a conversation with him.

Louise shot me a questioning stare. “Yes, yes, I’m in, too,” I agreed. “Margaret?” It took her a moment to come back to reality and I noticed that her eyes were moist. “Will you come to the BBQ party tomorrow?” I asked, trying not to add any pressure to my tone.

She nodded and smiled, the colour of her eyes a deep chocolate brown that made me smile back.

“Perfect!” Louise stood up, stretched, and declared, “We have to go shopping.”

“Will we invite the rest of the volunteers? The locals? I’m sure Chikondi would be glad to come.”

Robert rolled his eyes, but Jeremy agreed with me. With Louise’s and Margaret’s nods, he left the house to inform everyone about our little party.

“Tell them to bring food and drinks!” Louise shouted after him and he waved his hand, signaling that he had heard her.

Margaret rose from her chair, coming to ask Louise about the food and I joined them, looking at Robert over my shoulder. “Well, are you coming? Or do we have to do everything while you lounge here with your book?” I sneered at him.

He heaved a heavy sigh and rose, leaving his book on the table next to my chair. “Happy?”

“Whatever you say.”

“Let’s go!” Louise nodded towards the street and linked her arm with Margaret’s, leaving me and Robert behind. Robert smiled at Margaret when she turned to look at us, a real smile, and it was the first time I noticed that he had always been kind to her.

Maybe he’s not that bad.

When he looked down at me, a sly grin replaced the smile on his face. “Nice hair.”

I resisted patting my hair, even though I could feel that my curls had gone wild with the humidity, but I couldn’t resist huffing.

No, he’s definitely a prat.

Five minutes later we were in the town center, checking the food counters. I stood in front of a bowl of caterpillars, wondering if any of the rest had tried them. Chikondi had told me that ifinkubala were
delicious, fried and served with tomatoes, onions and nshima, the staple carbohydrate of Zambia. They certainly didn’t seem delicious.

“Don’t even think about it,” Robert drawled, glancing at the bowl with disdain.

I wondered if Jamie would try them. He was always so adventurous with food. Seeing that he had eaten haggis regularly, I could easily imagine him eating caterpillars. I took a picture with my phone, smiling at the woman behind the counter, intending to send it to him when we went back to the house.

“Are you done?” Robert asked in a bored voice.

“Yes, I’m done,” I replied keeping my own voice as flat as possible.

“Let’s go then. I think we stayed long enough in the vicinity of fried insects.”

“They’re larvae, actually.”

He rolled his eyes, making it obvious how mundane he found this information. “I want to buy vitumbuwa for my afternoon tea,” he stated, as if I was in his service and I should buy them for him.

I struggled for a moment, trying to remember what vitumbuwa was without asking him. He must have seen my face because he snickered, “The fried dough balls with sugar.”

“Oh, right!” I smiled. I wanted to buy some of them too. And even though I wouldn’t admit it out loud, he was right – they would be perfect with tea.

I checked my phone for any messages from Jamie, but I realized it was still too early for him. I saw his smile in my background picture, however, and smiled back, as if he could see me.

Jamie would definitely eat caterpillars. And if he’d like them, he would try to feed them to me too.

For the first time in the two weeks since I had arrived in Zambia, I found an advantage on Jamie staying back in Michigan. At least I could avoid the caterpillars without a battle now. Chuckling, I walked next to Robert, who shot me a strange glance but proceeded with his search for vitumbuwa, ignoring me further.

Not caring a bit, I smiled again. Today was Saturday. And that meant I could go to the cafe and call Jamie the moment he woke up.
Michigan Writing

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the long delay, I've been very busy this last month. Thank you for sticking with me!

Sassenach: I juuuuuumped!

My hands were trembling. It took me more than one try to write the message without mistakes. My fingers seemed to have a mind of their own, sliding on the screen, adding a stray H and two stray Os before I could command them not to. The moment the message was sent, I calculated the time in Michigan. Six-thirty. Still too early, but the first thing I wanted to do once I had land under my feet again was to share that moment with Jamie. Now, when my heart was still trying to escape from my chest – as if I could share the feeling with him through a simple text message.

Bungee jumping was amazing. Better than I thought it would be. Even now that I was standing still, I could still feel the adrenaline running through every tissue of my body. Waves were crashing against my skin, fighting for release, making me invincible.

All due to those scary, exhilarating sixty seconds when I felt I was challenging death. Trusting a rubber band to keep me alive and feeling my heart beating wildly, the blood rushing through my body, my voice leaving my mouth in shrill cries. The wind rippling through my hair.

Elation. Freedom.

I had to do it again, but next time with Jamie. I needed to see his smile splitting his face when the
crew would pull him up. To see happiness reflecting in his eyes the moment they found mine.

_Sassenach:_ We’re definitely doing this together, too.

Louise’s voice pulled me from my thoughts and I looked up from my phone. The crew was working fast to ready her, not leaving time for second thoughts. Louise, however, was looking at me with panicked eyes. “I’m not sure about this…” she murmured, a question hiding behind the words. _Should I not do it?_ She was close to backing out just before the jump.

“It’s awesome Louise!” I encouraged her, unable to erase the grin that was still on my face, lingering there from my own jump. “You’ll love it!”

A few moments later she was screaming “Merde!”, but I could hear the laughter in her voice.

Looking around, I saw Robert chuckling silently, while Jeremy was standing close to the edge, excitement clearly written on his face. Margaret, on the other hand, had shrunk into herself, standing as far as she could from the crew, as if they would suddenly grab her and throw her off the bridge without so much as a question.

“C’est magnifique!” Louise’s laughter interrupted her words, her hand secured over her heart as she stood again amongst us. “Best thing I’ve done in a long while!” she added, ecstatic.

A weird sound came from Robert’s voice that made Jeremy laugh. We were all aware that Robert was one of the things Louise had done lately, but it was nothing more than one drunken night, so none of us had mentioned it.

“No matter how good you are, mate, I don’t think you can really compare to bungee jumping.” To the challenging glance shot at him by Robert, Jeremy added, “No offense, St. Germain.”

Another sound came from Robert, but he didn’t reply to Jeremy’s comment. Jeremy turned to the crew. “Okay, my turn!” he said. “I’m so excited!”

“Can’t tell,” Robert drawled, looking bored.

“Oh come on!” I said, disbelieving. “You can’t pretend to be calm about this! It’s not called an ‘extreme sport’ for nothing.”

“Oui!” Louise agreed with me, pulling her hair up into a sleek bun, still smiling. “This feels so good!”

“I know,” he said plainly.

“You do?” I asked, surprised.

“I’ve done this before,” he deadpanned.

“And?” I couldn’t hide the smile from my voice. It was as if he had resigned to showing no emotions at all, and it was getting ridiculous.

“It’s great, okay?” he said, his face stony, but his eyes grew wide, as if he had surprised himself by admitting it.

I smiled triumphantly, but didn’t continue the conversation. Jeremy was almost ready, and he was looking at me with a wide smile, waiting to take his picture so he would post it on Instagram.

“Got it,” I winked at him and smiled, and his grin became wider, if that was even possible.
Thirty minutes later, we arrived back at the volunteer house. Robert had jumped from the bridge in the most nonchalant way, but even he couldn’t control the grin on his face when the crew pulled him back up. Margaret had decided that she didn’t want to try, even though we had repeatedly assured her that the jump was perfectly safe and felt amazing. Robert had walked with her back to her room while the rest of us had stayed behind, having an animated conversation about seeing the ground coming closer and closer, and wondering where the hell the rope was that would stop us.

Jamie hadn’t mentioned my letter in any of his texts or during our calls, and I, wanting it to be a surprise, didn’t inform him of my old-fashioned means of communication. So I could hardly believe in my eyes when Robert gave me the crisp white envelope with my name written on it in Jamie’s beautiful penmanship.

“Mr Darcy sends his regards,” he said with a slightly raised eyebrow, but I didn’t have time to spend on his mockery. That he, of all people, would be the one to read Pride and Prejudice and use references from the book to tease me. Or maybe he had watched the movie. Having Jamie’s letter in my hands, I didn’t really care either way.

I ran to my bed, lay prone propping myself up on my elbows, and tore the envelope open.

   My Sassenach,

   A letter? Really? John is now calling me Napoleon and it’s all your fault. He says Napoleon was sending steamy love letters to Josephine and he’s sure that’s what we’re doing as well. If I’m going to live through that, you have to increase the level of naughtiness in your letters, babe. We have to live up to John’s expectations (and that’s the only reason I’m asking this of you, as I’m sure you very well know).

   “Yeah, sure, Jamie Fraser. The one and only reason,” I murmured, grinning. “I wonder who you’re trying to persuade with this.” Shaking my head, I continued.

   What you also need to know, is that Hector has left two fake letters on my desk this week – one featuring hearts of all shapes, the other full of ridiculous declarations of love. And a bit of sex talk. Really bad sex talk, if I may say so. We should have never helped these two get together. They are insufferable, and I have to endure their silliness all by myself now that you’re gone, Sassenach.

   COME BACK. SAVE YOUR LAD. I’M SUFFERING HERE.

   “You’re a ridiculous human being,” I whispered, smiling, although my heart clenched a little reading his words. I knew he was joking, I knew it, but I also knew he did wish I was there. My eyes glanced back to his words.

   To be honest, I never expected to get a letter from you. It was a nice surprise, reading you, though. Maybe I’ve read the letter more than once. Maybe I read my favorite parts every night. Maybe.

   The groan left my lips before I could control it. Why does this man have to be so sweet? All of a sudden, my arms felt extremely empty.

   I never expected to tell you that I’m happy you’re there, Claire, but I am. I am happy because you are. Because I can see the way you smile in the pictures you send. Because I can even read this joy, squeezed into the tiny white spaces between the crammed words in your letter, flashing as if it were written with fluorescent colours.
I can’t really explain it, but it makes me happy and sad at the same time. It feels like an ache in my chest. I’m happy you’re doing what you love, but I want to be there, with you. I have this constant feeling that I’m missing something really important, something we were supposed to live together.

But then, if I followed you everywhere, maybe you’d get sick of me and ditch me the moment you got bored. I’m staying here to make myself unattainable, that’s what I’m doing.

Here is where you say, “I’d never get bored of you, you fool.” (I do hope you’ve said this. Or at least thought it.)

R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S. “I’ll never ever get bored of you, you fool,” I said, feeling that I owed him that much. It was the truth, after all. Jamie’s letter continued in a more serious tone.

I know we need to make some memories that are ours and ours alone, mo chridhe, but I don’t want to. I want to be there, to see wild Africa as you see it, the people, the landscapes… To see you healing others, getting ready to become one of the best doctors in the world. I want to be there, to smell you at night when you lie in my arms, to feel your skin soft and warm against my lips. To feel you getting wet, as I run my fingers across your body.

My heart thundered inside my chest. Living up to John’s expectations, my arse.

Anyway. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I miss you terribly.

“I miss you too, you oaf. Why do you have to make this so hard?” My whisper was soon lost, as Jeremy burst in, laughing at something Louise had said outside. I swallowed hard, trying to master my feelings.

Things here are pretty much as you left them, Sassenach. Classes are relatively easy and the winter term ends next Tuesday. Coach has started pushing us harder. Training is exhausting and I often have no stamina to do anything more than go to classes and to the pool. I’m getting better, though. My time underwater is so much longer now! I still need to improve my turns, and coach says my back doesn’t have quite the right arch when I jump at the start. In Edinburgh, my coach had said I had the perfect start – it appears not.

I could almost see him rolling his eyes. My poor swimmer, straining for perfection.

Other than that, we usually gather over at Hector’s for beers twice a week, as you already know. You remember Jim from when you were here? The complete arsehole? He’s starting to open up now, and he’s really not that bad. Oh, and I just hung up with Jenny. She told me she’ll send you some pictures of Lallybroch, to entice you to return home. Lallybroch is beautiful in the spring, remember the pictures I sent you last Easter? I’ll send you some pictures of me, to make you come here. Fraser measures, we call them.

Jenny said she misses you a lot, but she’s proud of you. She said I’m a lucky bastard to have you – I needed to remind her I am her family, and not you. I talked with Ian, too. He has started looking for apartments in Edinburgh, so Jenny and he will live alone come September. He wants to find a job too, so he can pay for it, but Jenny has no idea about his plans. He’ll get her on a trip to Edinburgh so they’ll decide together which one they like once he narrows down their choices to three or four apartments. I told him that he’s making the rest of us seem inadequate as boyfriends, but he merely chuckled. He is,
though.

Don’t get any ideas in that pretty head of yours. Ian is only one, taken by Jenny, and I’m the best boyfriend you can ever get. Right? Right?

You’re the best I can ever get, that’s for sure.

Your team of volunteers seems nice. Tell Louise I said hi! And keep a safe distance from the guys, okay? (I’m kidding. Or not. Okay, I am, stop staring at that piece of paper as if you’re going to put it on fire.)

I don’t know when this letter will be delivered to you. I’ll make sure you get enough of me through texts till then. I can’t wait for the weekend, so I can see and hear you again.

I love you. And I miss you. And I want you. God, I want you.

Time will pass and I’ll have your obnoxious curls getting in my face again. I can’t wait.

Your beloved Scot.

I pressed the letter against my chest, breathing long and deep. A letter from Jamie – who would ever have imagined that happening. I grabbed my phone, checking the time. He should have woken up by now.

*Sassenach: Where are you, my sleepy Scot?*

Seeing that he wasn’t online, I tucked the letter between the pages of my book and went outside to sit with the others. Louise gave me a sweet smile, and nodded towards the only empty chair, between her and Margaret.

“Happy?” she asked in a low voice once I was seated.

“Yes,” I said, but it was more of a sigh and less of a word. “I miss him.”

“I know.” She pressed her lips together, and her glance traveled to her phone. Charlie was back in France and he hadn’t taken Louise’s decision well. He blamed her for leaving their perfect life to go on an adventure without him, and they had broken up a few days before she left for Zambia. But she still loved him.

At least Jamie understood.

When the rest went back in the house, Robert and I were left alone basking in the sun.


Robert looked at me for the briefest moments, then averted his eyes. If I didn’t know he had been lying under the sun for the past thirty minutes, I would swear he had blushed. With his gaze fixed on a puffy white cloud, he shrugged.

“You would make a nice Mr. Darcy yourself, you know,” I said without really thinking about it. Or, more specifically, thinking about his money and arrogance.

His eyes found mine, and the openness I saw there surprised me. “It was my mother’s favourite book.” He ran a hand through his hair, fixing his gaze on the cloud again.
I froze at his use of past tense.

“T’m sorry, Robert.” I reached out tentatively and squeezed his hand, feeling his fingers pressing hard against the arm of his chair. “I know how it feels like.”

He looked at me again, wide eyes glazed with unshed tears. He nodded, gulped as if to swallow the words and feelings that overwhelmed him, and stood abruptly. A moment later he left the house.

My gaze was fixed on the road for a while after Robert disappeared at the turn, thinking how proud and prejudiced I had been in my assessment of him. Everyone carries their own baggage, some people hiding their limping better than others.
When I lived in Scotland I missed the sun dearly. Sunny days were treasured, and I found myself smiling without any particular reason when the sunlight snuck between the curtains of my room in the morning.

But sometimes a person can have too much sun. And too much dust stuck to their body. And there is a point when you think of rain and realise a wistful smile has appeared on your face at the thought. It’s the same moment you realise there isn’t an inch of your body not coated in grime.

I reached that exact point on a quiet afternoon in June, two weeks before I left Zambia. Some would say it had taken me long enough.

I was left alone after treating the skin wounds of a couple of five-year-old boys that had gone out ‘to explore’. Their little feet had raised tons of dust as they ran away from the clinic and the first thing that came to my mind was that I was extremely tired of washing my hair every night only to feel it dirty again by noon the following day.

Then, just before the boys disappeared out of sight, one of them turned back to look at me, white teeth stark against his dark skin as he smiled, and waved goodbye.

And suddenly, I didn’t mind the dust that much. I didn’t mind the heat, or how heavy my body felt at the end of each shift. All that mattered was their smiles when they left the clinic.
My three months in Zambia were so full of experiences, I could hardly believe it hadn’t lasted longer. I learned how to talk to people who were in pain, how to heal them or – when this was impossible – how to make them feel better. I learned to listen to them, to search their eyes, to read their discomfort or pain in the way they moved. And I learned how a single smile can make your day, how two skinny arms wrapped around your body or two warm hands holding yours can fill your heart to the brim.

Spending my childhood with Lamb, I was used to living amongst people who were different from me. He’d taught me to look at people and see them for all they were. Humans. Different, beautiful, every one a worthy individual.

“All people are the same,” Lamb used to say. “All genuine smiles make the eyes crinkle, all hearts beat in the same way inside our chests, not aware of colour or tribe.”


When I first decided to volunteer I had thought I would find a piece of my mother in Africa. I believed I would discover who she had been, what she had pursued in life. I didn’t. And I wasn’t disappointed, because I had found a piece of myself in the faces I met in Livingstone, and I cherished that. And maybe – just maybe – that piece of myself was hers. Passed down to me, together with her amber eyes, an unbreakable part of myself.

Being a volunteer had been a full time job – and a demanding one at that. But I didn’t want to leave, not yet. I had more to give, there were people here who needed me. But I knew that my time was up. In two weeks, I would feel Scottish air against my skin once more. I would feel Lamb’s arms hugging me for a few extended moments before he would push away to look into my eyes and pet my hair the way he always did. And a week later, I would be at Lallybroch. Jenny had asked – demanded, actually – to spend a week or two there. She had enough of the men, she had said when we’d texted. And true to her word to her brother, she had sent me pictures of the estate, in full bloom and beauty.

Jamie would come home after the summer term. We would spend two weeks together before his next term began and I would go to Oxford. To Oxford, where – unexpectedly – I would find a familiar face.

Robert.

He had been different since his personal confession. His arrogance and cheeky comments hadn’t abated, but there wasn’t an edge to his voice anymore. It felt as though he needed someone to know his story, even if that someone wasn’t a friend, even if it was just me. He clammed up after that and never talked about his mother again, apart from the time he’d told me it was her wish that had brought him to Zambia as a volunteer.

We started, however, talking about literature. One evening I found him reading that fantasy book I had finished a few months ago. And when the conversation turned to our future plans after Zambia, he had looked down at me with a smirk and proudly announced that he had been admitted to Oxford University. I’d almost spit my pineapple juice out and onto his face. After that, our expectations and dreams of studying at Oxford became the most common topic of our discussions. Robert would be studying economics, expected to inherit and work in his father’s wine business in Provence. That was a relief. The last thing I wanted was to have the self-centered, competitive French on my heels through medical school. From what I had learned about him in the few months we lived together, he didn’t like being bested by anyone. And neither did I.
Jamie was the first to know I had found a fellow Oxford student in the middle of Africa. He and I had been texting and sending photos all the time, and I kept changing my screen background, choosing the funniest of the pictures he sent me. My favorite picture of him though, was the one he had sent me right after I arrived in Zambia. He was wearing a wide, silly grin as he sat in the bleachers of Michigan Stadium, my Wolverine amongst the blue and yellow sea of other students. He had sent it together with a text, shouting, “MY FIRST SPRING GAME!”

Boys.

Despite the selfies Jamie sent me every day – in class, on his way there, before training holding the towel I had bought him, or tucked in with his blanket at night in bed, my favorite part of the week was when I saw him during our calls every weekend. I was always trying to take in every detail of him during our video chats – his beautiful eyes, the way his curls moved as he excitedly gesticulated, his voice.

I missed him and I knew he missed me too. Even when John was present in their dorm and Jamie wouldn’t say it, his longing was obvious in the way he looked at me.

Two weeks and I would be at Lallybroch, in Jamie’s room. It made no sense for me to fly straight to Michigan with Jamie having his final classes and preparing to sit for his spring term exams. I had looked for tickets to visit him right after the exams, but the fares were too high to even consider it.

We had agreed that it was not the ideal situation but okay nonetheless. We would survive it. At least, once I was back in Scotland, we would be able to call each other every day. As John had said, laughing, the force of the internet would be with us.

Jamie would come home at the end of August, after his summer term, and we would be at Lallybroch together, spending every single minute with each other.

“We have to make up for so much lost time,” Jamie had said to me during our last call, and the glint in his eye was as terrifying as it was exhilarating.

A text on my phone brought me out of my reverie and I realised that I was still standing under the sun, alone, looking towards the far end of the road. I found myself doing that a lot lately.

Scot: John’s cousin is a pain in the ass.

Sassenach: Hello to you, too.

Scot: Hi babe. John’s cousin is a pain in the ass. She called him, woke us up, and she demands that we pick her up from her hotel and show her around.

Sassenach: Well, she came to visit. Makes sense, no?


Sassenach: It’s 1 pm here!

Scot: You’re not helping. It’s 7 in the morning. Maybe I can send her there, then?

Sassenach: Is that the cocky cousin or the nice one? I doubt they’ll like the dust we have here, in any case.
Scot: The cocky one. Can I come there myself? Please?

Sassenach: Why aren’t you on your way, already? :P

Scot: Don’t tempt me.

Sassenach: I don’t have anything to do right now.

Scot: We didn’t send you there to relax under the sun, Sassenach. Get that gorgeous round arse to work.

Sassenach: It seems I’ve healed all of Zambia.

Scot: So humble.

Sassenach: Always. I took lessons from the best.

Scot: Fuck you.

Sassenach: What? Since when are you talking like that? I need a selfie to make sure it’s really you.

I spent a whole minute wishing his selfie to load faster, but I ended up with a sleepy Jamie on my screen, which was worth the wait.

Sassenach: So it is you. These Americans are rubbing off on you, no? AND I DON’T MEAN IT LITERALLY. Also, fucking seems a bit difficult right now, seeing as you’re half a planet away.

Scot: But I’m ready, you know, right now.

I could almost see his pout and the challenge in his eyes when I closed my own, and I felt my cheeks turn red.

Sassenach: Okay. Shut up!

Scot: DAMN WAIT TILL I SEE YOU AGAIN. JUST WAIT.

Sassenach: Oh I’m looking forward to that.

Scot: Aaaaargh

Sassenach: Eloquent. Now get dressed, go get John and Hector, and show the girl around. She came all the way from Penrith to see Ann Arbor.

Scot: I just don’t get why I have to go, too.

Sassenach: John is your friend. This is what friends do. I spent all Saturday afternoon shopping with Louise.

Scot: I hate you.

Sassenach: Me too. Send me pictures?

Scot: Always. You too. Actually, I need one right now.
I took a picture of my dirty dusted face and sent it to him, grimacing when I saw how sloppy I looked.

**Scot:** You’re so tanned, I want to lick you.

**Sassenach:** Believe me you don’t. I’m dirty.

**Scot:** DIRTY? OMG STOP TALKING. I’m hard already and I have to get dressed.

**Sassenach:** You are ridiculous. Have I ever told you that?

**Scot:** Only a million times.

**Sassenach:** Good!

**Scot:** I’m going to take a cold shower AND CERTAINLY NOT THINK OF YOU.

**Sassenach:** I wish I was there with you.

Sending that, I actually snickered. His reply came in milliseconds.

**Scot:** You are a heartless, dangerous woman.

**Sassenach:** And yet you love me. Now go shower.

**Scot:** I do love you. And I’ll prove to you how much once I get my hands on you, you tease. Ttyl!

Raising my eyes from the screen, I saw Louise looking at me.

“You know I can tell when you’re texting Jamie, from that silly smile on your face?” she asked, keeping her arms crossed in front of her chest as if judging me.

“What can I do?” I didn’t try to hide my smile. “I found myself a good one.”

Louise nodded and came to stand next to me. A moment later a heavy sigh left her lips, and I noticed the shadows in her eyes. “Margaret was crying again. I tried to talk to her, but she won’t listen. She’s leaving next week and she doesn’t want to go back.”

“Makes sense.” Louise’s mood had been bad the last few days. “The moment she’ll be back, she’ll have to deal with reality. He won’t be there, and there will be no way to escape.”

“She keeps talking in her sleep. She’s having weird dreams, you know.” Louise twisted her rings absentmindedly, not looking at me.

“I know. I woke her last night because she was murmuring and thrashing about. Jeremy was awake too, and we kept her company until she was settled again.”

“I’m sorry to see her go, especially knowing she’s still so unstable. I think her family isn’t supportive and that terrifies her even more.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Two of the volunteers I got to know had come to Zambia carrying a great emotional load and needing a chance to escape. They were trying to heal themselves through healing the others. The universality of pain, all over again.

“Charlie called me.” Louise changed the subject, this time with a smile. “He said he misses me.” She
rubbed her hands against her thighs, awkwardly, but met my eyes when I turned to look at her.

“Rather convenient, wouldn’t you say? Seeing as you’re going back home next week.”

“Not all of us are strong, Claire.” Her voice was harsh and I bit my lip, regretting being so straightforward.

“You know better, I guess.”

Louise sighed again. “I wish I did, actually. I don’t know what to do when I get back to Paris.”

I placed my hand on top of her shoulder and squeezed lightly. “You don’t need to decide right now. You can meet him, see what he has to say, how he’ll explain himself.”

Louise nodded, sleek brown locks of hair escaping her loose ponytail. “I wish we were as strong as you and Jamie are. Everything would be simpler.”

“Well, it’s not like everything comes easy and we don’t try at all. We’ve just decided that being together matters the most, and we’re not sacrificing what we have just because we’re not close. We’re both stubborn and it helps – thus far, at least.”

My phone vibrated against my leg, and I unlocked it to see a picture of Jamie and John rolling their eyes, and a girl in the background.

Sassenach: Out, already?

Scot: Yeap. She’s fourteen but she’s so bossy I think John is afraid of her.

Sassenach: And you?

Scot: I’m being a good friend, as I was advised to be. I already regret it.

Sassenach: Where are you?

Scot: Out for breakfast. She had the longest order I’ve heard in my whole life. She actually ordered something from the menu and then changed every little bit of it. It was embarrassing.

Sassenach: Leave a good tip.

Scot: We will! Hector turned red as she kept going on and gave the waitress a shy smile.

Sassenach: I wish I was there, sitting at another table just to make fun of the three of you.

Scot: Believe me, babe, if you were here I’d sit right next to you at a table in another cafe.

Sassenach: Drama queen.

Scot: You haven’t met wee Geneva yet.

Sassenach: How come she visited without her parents?

Scot: They had promised her this trip if her grades were good. They were. She’s really smart, actually. It makes her more of a pain in the ass.

Sassenach: Maybe the three of you can teach her something, you know? Humility, for example.
Scot: Not a chance.

I stuck my tongue out, took a selfie and sent it.

Scot: Don’t you show me that tongue because I have dreams about it. And I hope you’re there alone.

Sassenach: I’m with Louise! She says hi!

Scot: Hello Louise! Take care of Claire for me, okay?

Sassenach: You realise I’m still the one reading the texts, right?

Scot: Just read that one aloud.

Sassenach: I’m capable of taking care of myself, thank you.

Scot: I know. My strong and stubborn lass. John looks desperate and Hector is huffing. I’m going to save them from their misery because I’m a good friend.

Sassenach: The best! Go save them, my gallant lad!

I huffed a laugh and turned my focus back to Louise. “It was quiet today.”

“Mmmm.” Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed under the sun.

“Whatever happens with Charlie, you’re going to be fine,” I said, using my most reassuring tone.

“Mmmm.”

I decided to join her and close my eyes for a bit, but an elderly woman and her daughter came into view. “Well, don’t blame me for that,” I murmured and nudged Louise, who opened her eyes, saw the patients, and shot me an accusing glance.

“Hello,” she said as she turned back to the women, and we both rose from the bench.

Who knew what waited for us once we got back to normalcy. For now, we had work to do.
There is a subtle feeling of trespassing, wrapping itself around your heart and squeezing lightly, when you step into someone’s empty bedroom. A feeling strong enough to make your breath come slow and heavy, your feet tread with caution, not to disturb the spirit of the absent owner. As if your own body marks you as an intruder and tries to make your presence subtle, even though your rebel hands leave invisible fingerprints on every surface, proof of a long-lost innocence.

I was sitting on Jamie’s bed, looking around, feeling the emotions rising in my chest.

I was in his room. His bed, his books, his posters on the walls.

And yet, I wasn’t home.

This couldn’t be home without him. It couldn’t be home without his clothes neatly hanging in the closet. The air felt empty of laughter, the sheets immaculate and wrinkleless underneath my fingers. No one would whisper dreams and stories to me when I’d lay down at night.

“Are ye going to sit there all day, lost in your ominous thoughts?” Jenny’s stern voice came from the door, and I turned to look at her without knowing the answer to her question, or how she had deduced the nature of my thoughts.
I hadn’t seen Jamie in months, and though I always missed him, I had never felt his absence drive into me like a knife through my chest. Never, until the moment I entered his room and realized I would be sleeping in his bed without his breath on my neck, without his arms around me. It didn’t feel right.

“Claire!” Jenny’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts once more. “Stop it! I’m not letting you stay here, with that morose look on your face, staring at Jamie’s stuff.” She looked at me through narrowed eyes, both hands fixed on her hips. “The best Fraser is here, anyway,” she added with a light shrug and a wink. “No?”

“How do you mean?” I teased her, and couldn’t stop my smirk as I saw both her eyebrows rise.

“I should leave you here, crying over the shirts Jamie left behind.” She wore a smug grin and tilted her head towards the stairs. “Come! I’ve made tea.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot how tea is a synonym for panacea.”

She stopped just outside the room and turned to look at me, squaring her shoulders. “What kind of Englishwoman are you?” she challenged me with mock offence.

Avoiding her sharp glance, I rose and walked to the door. One Fraser was always better than none. And even though I felt like curling up in Jamie’s room and being miserable, arguing with Jenny Fraser required more energy than I had.

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Sleeping in Jamie’s bed without him was not as horrible as I had thought. We talked every night until I fell asleep, and I carried his voice with me in my dreams. It was enough to make me wake with a smile on my face.

Days raced by, as they always did when I stayed at Lallybroch. Between texting and calling Jamie, studying to be prepared for medical school, reading classic literature with Jenny, and choosing between her endless versions of labels for Lallider – the Lallybroch cider she and Ian had made over the previous months – there was hardly any time to think about how quickly the days were passing.

I had missed Jenny. Her warm smile when she listened to my stories from Zambia, her crude tone when she decided I had talked with Jamie enough and it was time for us to go for drinks, her loud laughter when she had more than two pints, and the hugs she gave me every time she suspected I might be feeling lonely.

When I was a little girl, I always tried to imagine how my life would be if I had siblings. Someone to talk to late at night, someone to conspire with when Lamb couldn’t hear us, someone to hold my hand when I was afraid. Someone who would be there, and I wouldn’t be alone.

Jenny and I might not build fortresses or climb trees together, but I had found my sister in her. And I knew she would be there for me, no matter what happened between her brother and me.

Not that I planned to let anything ruin my relationship with Jamie. Now that we could call each other every day, his only complaint was that we were all together at Lallybroch, and he alone in Ann Arbor. Alone as a figure of speech, because he was never really by himself, what with John, Hector, and the other members of the swim team going out or gathering at their dorm. He still proclaimed that we shouldn’t have fun without him though, and kept sending pouty faces every time I sent him selfies from our nights out in Inverness. At the end of the night, however, when I saw his eyes smiling at me through the screen, we would count down the days together until his return to
Scotland.

As Jamie’s arrival approached, I started researching destinations in Scotland, wanting to spend a few days alone with him. I had been almost sure he’d be as excited as I was when I proposed the idea of a road trip to the north, without plans or itinerary, when I got Jamie’s text rejecting my idea.

Scot: You haven’t had enough of Scotland already, Sassenach?

Sassenach: I’ve never been to the North Coast! I saw pictures and there are so many places to visit! Jenny told me you traveled there with your parents, when you were children. Do you remember anything?

Scot: It was green.

Sassenach:

Scot: Okay, yes, I remember. Wide beaches, the ocean, rivers running down emerald hills, Highland coos. That’s all.

Sassenach: Well, that sounds GREAT! It’s enough for me!

Scot: Not for me. It will be tiring. And I doubt we’ll find rooms to stay.

Sassenach: FFS

“Well, that’s a twisted face, if I’ve ever seen one,” Jenny remarked as she came to sit on the bench next to me, a sheen of sweat appearing on her forehead from the shining sun.

I huffed. “It’s your brother, you know. The beginning of all evil in my life.”

Jenny laughed, blue eyes crinkling with mirth. “What did he do, now?”

“I suggested we travel for a few days, go to the North Coast. But he doesn’t want to.”

“Oh.” Jenny averted her eyes, looking far at the hills hiding the horizon. “He must have missed Lallybroch. Not that he’ll ever admit it.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought, too,” I agreed, then took in her rosy cheeks and short breaths. “And where have you been?”

“Wi’ Ian,” she replied, simply, and I wiggled my eyebrows suggestively.

“We were examining the trees at the orchard, if you need to know,” she exclaimed indignantly.

“Oh, I’m sure you did.”

Jenny pursed her lips ready to reply when my phone buzzed with a picture of Jamie sending kisses, probably feeling guilty for turning down my suggestion of a week of summer holidays alone.

“So how are things between you?” Jenny bumped into my shoulder with hers, wisely changing the subject as she turned her eyes away from my phone. “With the distance and everything?” A playful smile was on her lips, but her eyes were serious, inquisitive.

“It’s… Okay.” I took a moment before I continued, my fingers trailing on the bluebells of my necklace. I had replied to the same question hundreds of times, but I couldn’t give a superficial
answer to Jenny. “It’s not okay, actually,” I chuckled nervously, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden. I rubbed my hands together, interlinked the fingers to keep them from moving, then crossed my legs before I untangled them again. “But we make do,” I asserted, nodding to myself.

Jenny studied me, then made a strange noise in her throat. “I haven’t seen ye fight. Do ye? Did you get distant?” she asked, now straddling the bench to look straight at me.

“No, no. Nothing of the sort. It’s just… I miss him, you know? I want to share things with him and he’s not here. So I end up texting him and sending pictures with the most trivial things. He does the same.”

Jenny nodded, frowning. “It’s working, though.” She smirked, her gaze falling on my phone again. “Ye may seem ridiculous, and trust me ye do, but ye have kept your lives together even though you’re not in the same place.”

“I guess so.” I gave her a timid smile. “I know that sending him a picture of my meal is stupid, but then he sends me his and I feel connected to him, somehow. It’s not like eating lunch together as we did at school, but it’s something.”

Jenny nodded, and we kept silent for a long while.

“You know,” she started, running her fingers through her sleek black hair and fixing them up into a ponytail. “After Christmas, when Jamie and I came back at Lallybroch with Ian, I went through this phase when I all I could think was, ‘That’s it. That is all I’ll ever have.’ I was with Ian, whom I knew my whole life, and we would go to uni together and I would always be with him. And it scared me, realizing that.”

I turned to look at her, this girl that never stopped surprising me. I had been in Edinburgh back then, and I would never have imagined Jenny having second thoughts about Ian.

“I mean…” she continued, rushing to explain when she saw my confusion. “I grew up in a small place and Ian had always been there. I don’t remember myself without Ian around. We were kids when we got together, that summer when he kissed me, and it had felt like the most natural thing in the world. Then, I saw you and Jamie getting separated by an ocean I wondered what my life would be if I wasn’t with Ian. If I would be the same person, if I would be different. If I would study abroad, not having Ian to keep me in Edinburgh.”

“Did you want to?” I asked. “Did you want to leave Scotland?”

Jenny sighed, and a soft smile curled her lips up. “No, not really. It didn’t take me long to realize I am the person I want to be when I am with Ian. He smooths my edges. He makes me laugh. He understands me even when I don’t understand myself. I grew up with him and I know now that I want to grow old with him. To live with him by my side. To share the journey.”

I nodded, smiling as I took in the beauty of her conviction. “Sometimes I wonder whether things would be easier if I hadn’t met Jamie when I did.” I confessed as the sun dove lower, kissing the top of the hills. “If I met him after university, after we’d done all we needed to do. Maybe everything would flow then, and we would be together without the distance between us.”

“But if so, you might have never met him.”

“I know,” I agreed, seeing how pointless that route of thought was. “And that’s why I don’t regret having to live through this. Because I have him, right? I still have him, even though he’s miles away.” Tears welled up in my eyes and rolled down my cheeks, and I felt Jenny’s arms around me,
pulling me closer to her. I hadn’t told a soul about these thoughts. Not even Jamie. I cried harder.

“Ye have him and he has you. You went to bloody Zambia and the two of you stayed together. You’re strong, Claire.” She ran her hands against my back, her words as soothing as her caress.

“I know. It’s not rational, this fear that I’ll lose him. We talk every day, we share everything.”

“You love each other, silly! That’s enough.”

“We do,” I admitted, brushing tears away.

“I won’t let him hurt you. And I won’t let you hurt him, okay?” Jenny kissed my cheek as if to emphasize the love in her words. “I promise. I’m the wise one, after all.”

“Right,” I laughed, and hugged her tight.

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Three weeks at Lallybroch were more than I had initially planned, but they still weren’t enough. A sunny Sunday morning, however, I kissed Jenny, hugged Ian and Brian, and took the train back to Edinburgh. Lamb would start his sabbatical a few weeks after I left for Oxford, and we wanted to spend time together before Jamie returned from the States.

It felt like our days in Egypt, when the two of us had stayed home drinking tea and Lamb filled my imagination with stories of broken artefacts that made his eyes glint with excitement, revealing ancient civilizations and Gods who lost their power when people found new ones to grant their wishes. Those quiet afternoons when he’d tried to show me the internal need humans have to be remembered, the necessity to leave something behind, stronger than flesh and bones. But now I was the one telling the stories, and they were not tales of the past. I was sharing stories of the present, of people who were living and breathing the same moment we did, but Lamb would only meet through my eyes. I talked about their lives, their families, our differences and similarities, of the way they changed who I was and made me a better person. Of the way I might have affected them, too. Lamb was the best audience I could ever ask for, his proud smile and kind eyes filling my heart with joy.

When Lamb wasn’t at home, I found myself strolling around in the city. Edinburgh was different in summer, its streets full of cheerful tourists wandering, standing to listen the bagpipers on the streets or heading towards the castle and the palace. Some days I let my feet take me wherever they would, only to find that I subconsciously visited the places I walked to with Jamie. More than once I ended up at Calton Hill, watching the city with my hair dancing on the breeze, and I could almost feel Jamie’s long fingers tucking the errant curls behind my ear, his hand lingering on my neck as he leaned in for a kiss. And some days, when the sun hit my face long enough, I could almost feel his smile – warm, full and gentle. As if pieces of our soul were interwoven with this place, making it ours no matter how far apart our bodies were. As if my brain refused to take in the surrounding without conjuring memories of him.

I was sitting on our bench at Calton Hill when Jamie sent a picture of his sleepy face, right after he’d woken. The text came seconds later.


Sassenach: Less than 24 hours!

The following morning, 22 hours after I’d left Calton Hill, I was waiting with my luggage at arrivals, ready to go back to Lallybroch. It required a humongous amount of strength to stop cracking my
knuckles and keep my legs from bouncing.

His flight had arrived ten minutes ago. People came rushing by me, tourists looking for the information desk, Scots searching for their families and friends.

I thought I would count the days, the months, I had been away from him while waiting. I didn’t – couldn’t. My mind was blank, as though primed to create new memories.

And then, as I thought my heart would give way from overworking, I spotted him. Tall, red curls falling against his forehead, blue eyes looking around – searching for me.

My gaze met his and I started walking towards him before I realized it. It was different than our first reunion. I had felt consumed by his presence, then. We had kissed with all the desperation and elation of our passion. Now I wanted to hold him, to get lost in him, to feel his heart beating as I lay my head against his chest.

I didn’t know how long we were hugging for after I crashed against him. How long we were kissing, after his lips found mine. How long we kept still in each others arms, reluctant to let go as if someone would pull us apart. Finally, I took a step back and smiled at the grin lighting his face.

“Come on,” I said, taking his hand in mine and reaching for my luggage with the other. “We have a train to catch.” It was exactly what he’d said to me, when I arrived in Detroit.

His grin grew wider. “I don’t think so, Sassenach.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning, as I turned back to look at him.

“Well,” he blushed. I hadn’t seen Jamie blush in a long while. He ran a hand through his curls and smiled again. “The first time I texted you –”

“Can’t we talk about this on the train? We’re going to be late!” I interrupted him, and he sighed theatrically.

“No. Now listen, will you?”

I looked at him through narrowed eyes but didn’t speak again.

“As I was saying, the first time I texted you, you told me that your favorite food is mushroom risotto, and then ye promised ye would escape with me. First destination…” He squeezed my hand in his, looking at me expectantly.

“Paris,” I whispered, recalling our conversation almost two years ago, and watched him pull out two plane tickets from his backpack.

“Paris,” he confirmed, waving the tickets in the limited space between us. “A week, just the two of us.”

I gasped. If I had any air left in my lungs I was sure it would leave my body in a scream. Instead, I stood there, stupefied, looking at him.

“We’re going to Paris?” I asked, at last, stupidly.

“We are, babe. We’re leaving in two hours.”

Before he could say one more word, I took his face in my hands and kissed him. It wasn’t an easy kiss, given that my mouth would not comply since I couldn’t stop grinning.
I always loved traveling. Every time Lamb announced we were moving to another country, he made it seem like an adventure. And all I could see was another world waiting for us to explore—new tastes, new smells, new people. And always an archaeological site with new findings to visit. That was living with Lamb. My trip to Zambia was the same. An adventure, yes, but always with an underlying purpose behind it. I had never traveled for the sake of it, for fun. Never, until Jamie took me to Paris.

Jenny knew. Of course she did. And she hadn’t said a word, looking at me with disappointment instead, when I told her Jamie wanted to stay at home once he returned. Lamb had known as well, and he funded the trip together with Brian. A gift, they had said, because we both deserved it.

Jamie began teasing me about my plans for a road trip through Scotland the moment he freed his lips from mine. “Maybe you’d rather cancel Paris, Sassenach?” he asked with a mischievous grin. “Go to this road trip to the North Coast instead?”

“It was a great idea, you know.” I narrowed my eyes, daring him to utter one more word. “But Paris is…”
“Paris,” he finished for me, and pulled me into his arms again.

I claimed the seat by the window when we boarded, ignored how the armrest between us squeezed into me just below my waist and leaned into him. Jamie rested his head on top of mine and we watched Edinburgh get smaller and smaller, until puffy cotton clouds danced around us. He slept soon after, his excitement finally superseded by fatigue and jet-lag.

I found it impossible to settle down. Paris. We were going to Paris and my boyfriend was the best conniving liar I could ever ask for. I snuggled closer to him and let his warmth pulse through my body. Just having him beside me, feeling my unruly curls dance with each of his breaths, was enough. He tightened his arms around me in his sleep, and as we soared away from Scotland, I knew I was home.

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The first thing we learned about Paris was what a maze the Métro de Paris was. Lines – blue, yellow, red, purple – crisscrossed the map on the wall opposite the ticket office, challenging us to find which of the 16 lines would take us to the station closest to our hotel.

Jamie was murmuring names of metro stops, showing off his nearly perfect French accent, while I scanned the region around our hotel on my phone, throwing names at him while he tried to find them on the map. We were getting nowhere, when a man came up to us, free maps in his hands, speaking English with a beautiful French accent. He introduced himself and asked if we needed any help. I could have kissed him.

“Yes!” My immediate reply came together with Jamie’s decline of the offer. “What?” I looked at him over my shoulder. “We’ve been staring at this map for five minutes!”

“I need one more minute…” he murmured, his eyes still scanning the innumerable stops on the map. I tried hard not to roll my eyes – and failed.

One more minute my arse.

I showed Adrian the location of our hotel on Google Maps and five minutes later we jumped on train, panting from running down the stairs, Jamie still not talking at me. There were no empty seats, so we squeezed behind two huge blonde men with backpacks, while trying to move our luggage out of the way.

“Jamie,” I tilted my head towards him after we pulled away from the second stop, hoping that his indignation had subsided. I kept my eyes on him, waiting for a reply, wanting him to look at me. It didn’t work. He kept looking out the window, as if whole landscapes were unfurled in front of him. I would not allow him any time for egotistical male pride while we were in Paris of all places, and seeing that he left me no other options, I pinched his side.

“Sassenach,” he hissed, but he finally looked at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, although I knew very well what he was brooding about.

“Nothing.”

“Jamie…” My tone wasn’t sweet this time. His name had become a warning. If his behavior lasted five more minutes, I would be the one not talking to him.

“I would have found it, ye ken. Wasna that difficult.”
“I know you would have!” He pursed his lips but didn’t respond. “It was hot in there, and crowded, and I just wanted to get done with it and go to the hotel! And Adrian offered.”

“Of course he did.”

“It’s his job, you know. You saw the vest he was wearing, didn’t you?”

“Mmhmm.”

“ Asking people for help isn’t bad.”

“Mnhmmm.” But the frown had left his brow, and his lips twitched at the side, as they always did when he refused to admit he was wrong.

“You’re insufferable,” I said at last, and leaned over my suitcase to kiss his cheek.

He smiled at me, his slanted eyes somewhat remorseful. “Come here?” he asked, kicking the luggage from between us so I could walk right to him.

–

The lady at the reception was polite, her eyes bored behind her rimless glasses. She certainly didn’t share our twin smiles or our excitement about being in Paris. She gave us two card keys, gestured at the tiny elevator while instructing us not to go up together because we had our luggage, and wished us a nice stay. Jamie went first and waited for me right outside the elevator door. We walked down the long corridor together and found our room at the end of it. It was simple, white with a royal blue carpet and paintings on the walls. I didn’t have time to comment on it or inspect it better, because the moment the door closed behind us, Jamie was all over me. One hand in my curls, tilting my head up to have better access to my mouth, the other roaming over my body, grabbing and teasing.

At last, I smiled against his mouth. “I need a shower,” I said, feeling the sweat coating my body. I made to sniff at him, ready to claim that he needed one too, but his perfume hit me, together with his musky scent accentuated from our travel and all thought left my mind, apart from one. I hadn’t smelled him for so long, it felt painful and comforting at the same time.

Jamie didn’t reply. He nibbled my neck and kept kissing me, slowly walking us to the bathroom while clothes were shed on the floor.

We remained under the water torrent a considerably longer time than a person needs to shower. Not that either of us expected anything different the moment we crammed into the small space together, laughing.

The water wasn’t as hot as I liked, but it was a compromise we both made after the first time we showered together. The temperature of the water though, was a trifling detail. What mattered was that Jamie’s hands slid over my body, his teeth locked onto the sensitive skin of my neck, his groans reverberating in the small room.

And my moans, if I wanted to be fair.

It was a dance, the way our bodies responded to each other. Jammed between the glass doors of the small shower with almost no space to move, my back on the wall, my legs locked on his waist, Jamie’s body was the only reason I stayed upright while his mouth made me melt. And when I felt him inside me, panting in my ear how much he missed me and that he loved me, a sensation took over me, freeing and tethering; I was connected to him with a solid, unaltering thread, but I was still myself, and that was the most powerful feeling I had ever felt. I was his, but I was mine as well.
Because Jamie knew all that I was and loved me for it. No matter how much time had passed since we felt each other last. He casted no molds to make me fit in, to make me change into something else. And for that reason I had trusted myself to him, knowing he’d keep me safe and cherish me like a gift. Even if I wasn’t perfect. We had chosen each other and that made us strong. It made us different.

We lay in bed for a long time after our shower, feeling each other, comparing the skin underneath our fingers with the one held by our memories. Refining the details we had forgotten.

The curve where his deltoid met his biceps was smoother than I remembered. His chest felt wider, his hip bones more prominent. I didn’t know if my memory had betrayed me or he had changed these past few months. The changes were small, almost imperceptible.

*But the trail of auburn hair beneath his navel is the same,* I thought with a smile.

When I glanced up to look at Jamie, he was studying my hair.

“*I don’t think I’ll ever get bored looking at the colours of yer hair, Sassenach. They are light and dark, soft and strong. Like you.*”

I laughed and shook my head, the curls slipping out of his fingers. “They are just brown, you know.”

He huffed. “*Ye say the same for yer eyes.*”

“*Because they are brown, too,*” I laughed, raising both eyebrows.

“No they’re not. They’re like whisky.”

“*Amber?*” I frowned, doubting him.

“Yes. Amber and whisky and gold,” he added, and before I had time to reply that I was not a wolf, he moved on top of me. A wicked grin was all I could see before he made his intentions clear and dove for my mouth.

It was two hours later, when I felt guilty enough to drag Jamie out of bed. “Come on, we didn’t come here to stay in a hotel room! We have to see Paris!”

“I have to see you,” he said in response with a lopsided smile, bringing a hand around my waist, his fingers trailing patterns on my ribs.

I tried to ignore how my heart thrummed in my chest.

*How can he still do that?*

“I’m here! You saw me,” I retorted and laughed. “And I will be right next to you, Jamie Fraser, even when we leave this room. Now get your arse off the bed and get dressed!”

When we finally left the room it was almost night. But it didn’t matter. The Parisian lights were everything I had imagined and more.

–

Our week in Paris held some of the most beautiful moments of my life. I had Jamie by my side, and the City of Lights to explore.

The first morning, during breakfast, after realizing that Jamie’s plans ended with our arrival and
accommodations in Paris, I made up and wrote out our itinerary. Based on the map I got from the hotel reception and the “must-visit” posts I found online, I split the city in quarters and organized our trip based on which places we’d visit each day. Jamie kept silent while I babbled about our schedule, and ate his sandwich looking at the Parisians passing by our cafe. His eyes became wide when I finished my search and showed him the list of places we absolutely had to visit. Then he looked at my foolish grin, chuckled, licked the mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth and gave me a kiss that tasted of butter and cheese.

We walked along the Seine every day. We crossed the river through Pont des Arts to visit the Eiffel Tower and the Luxembourg Gardens, which felt strangely familiar after having read Les Misérables, and we waited for an eternity in the line to enter Notre Dame. We stopped to listen to local street bands, their music painting the city with colour, and kept the rhythm in our hearts for hours later.

No matter what the itinerary was for the day, the list always included eating fruit tarts, quiches, and baguettes with the most decadently delicious cheeses. It felt like paradise.

“Coach is going to kill me if I go back ten pounds heavier,” Jamie murmured, his mouth still full with the pain au chocolat he bought from the boulangerie we’d stopped at for a break.

“At least I’m eating healthy.” My blueberry tart had, at least, some fruit in it.

“Keep telling yerself that, babe. Ye’re lucky I like your arse plump.”

“My arse isn’t plump!”

“Oh, aye, ‘tis. I studied it verra well last night, aye? I should know.”

I pursed my lips, shooting at him my most intimidating glance.

“I’m in trouble now?” he asked a moment later, licking chocolate from his fingers.

“You certainly are, Jamie Fraser,” I answered, grabbed the chocolate pastry from his hand and bolted across the park from where we were sitting. I had eaten his pastry before he caught up with me, but didn’t manage to defend my tart before he took a huge bite in retribution.

After that, it was easy to convince him to join a free walking tour, following Marie as she showed us known and hidden gems in the city, and we listened to the stories behind statues and buildings, stories of the people who left their names woven into the history of this city.

Paris was magical. But I knew that feeling of complete happiness wasn’t only because of the city. It was because Jamie was so close to me again. I could reach out and touch his smile, I could rise on my tiptoes and taste it. He was here. We were together. For all the beats our hearts had missed these past months, they were still beating to the same rhythm. Six months apart and nothing had changed.

As we walked through Les Marais, staring at the art displayed in the various galleries, Jamie turned to look at me and the happiness in his eyes rendered me speechless. All my fears and insecurities melted, fading away. The light in his eyes, that loving gaze, was a promise of future days and belonging.

I had felt the future looming over us when we were apart. I had feared it, even. Feared the unknown that it brought with it. But looking at Jamie, feeling his strong arm around my shoulders as he pulled me into him, I knew.

Yes, I would go to Oxford and we’d be apart again. But I would wait for him. I would wait as long as I needed to, until the time would come and I’d wake up next to him every morning, nuzzle his
neck and then try to convince him to get out of bed and make some coffee. I wanted to tell him that, tell him that we’d make it, that I believed in us. But I kept myself in check, as if saying the words aloud would break some kind of spell. I felt guilty and foolish for thinking that way, as I felt guilty for doubting that we would make it, but I still didn’t voice it, not wanting to dare fate to play with us. Not that I believed in fate. I believed in our love and trust. But saying those things out loud would start a conversation about doubts and uncertainty, even though I would only claim the opposite. So I didn’t talk.

I didn’t talk about Oxford, or Michigan, about swimming, school, or the distance between us. I wanted to live each day with him now that he was close, savouring the sun’s warmth on our faces, the Paris around us and the feeling of holding each other’s hand, safe and solid on our side. So I rose on my tiptoes instead, brought his face down to mine, and kissed all my conviction into him. It was enough.

–

It was our last day and we were sitting on a bench by the Seine, looking out at the sun glittering on the water’s surface like stars that couldn’t withstand the summer’s heat and went in for a dive, when Jamie gave a long sigh. “I think I know what I want to do with my life,” he said, eyes fixed on the water. “Mmm?” I opened my mouth to tease him about being the best swimmer in the world, but clamped it shut again. Last year had been hard on Jamie, between his own dreams and his father’s, between swimming and the family business at Lallybroch. Michigan was ideal because it combined both prospects for Jamie’s future without forcing him to choose. Not yet.

It was a while before he spoke again. “Do you think that Ian and Jenny will be happy at Lallybroch?” he asked, his hand fidgeting with my fingers on his thigh. “If they kept the business, I mean.” The business that his father wanted for him. I took a moment before I replied. “Yes, I think so. They are so excited about Lallider. Considering that Ian will go to business school, he will be able to run it. And Jenny…” Jenny would go to College of Arts, but that had nothing to do with Jamie’s question. It was my turn to sigh. “Lallybroch is a part of her as much as Ian is, I think. I hadn’t realized that, before staying with them after I came back from Zambia. Jenny belongs there. And even if they keep the business, she will always be able to paint.” I didn’t ask him what he was thinking, or why he would ask such questions.

Jamie didn’t look at me, his fingers now tracing circles on my open palm. “And my Da? How was he, with Lallider, with Jenny and Ian’s work?”

“Happy,” I said, and smiled. “And proud.” Jamie’s face brightened up at that. “Maybe I can still convince him to change his plans, then. Jenny and Ian couldn’t stop talking about Lallider and their part in the whisky making every time they called.”

“Jamie?” I didn’t continue, willing him to look at me. When he did, his mouth was tight, but his eyes held hope. “What do you want to do with your life?”

A wistful smile. “I want…” He huffed a chuckle. “It might sound stupid.”

“Go on.”
“I can’t be a professional swimmer forever, ye ken. And our family business is great, and I want the best for it but it doesn’t… speak to my heart.”

“I know,” I said in a low voice, wanting to encourage him.

“So, I was thinking of teaching swimming to children with disabilities. Maybe having my own pool, at some point. I would like to help people and give them an escape, make them feel how wonderful it is to be in the water. There is no place for aquatic therapy in the Highlands, I think. Not close to Lallybroch, at least.”

My heart swelled and I smiled as I interlaced his fingers with mine. “I think that is wonderful, Jamie.”

“You do? It doesna seem like a silly dream to ye?”

I shook my head. “Silly dreams are all we have to guide us in this life. Dreams that seem impossible. But they’re not, Jamie. And I promise you that we will be together when you give your first swimming lesson. I will be there, just to remind you of what you have accomplished.”

He kissed me. It wasn’t passionate, or consuming. It was slow, reverent.

“I love you,” he said, his sapphire eyes glassy with unshed tears.

“I love you, too.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon making plans, trying to estimate how many years Jamie would give swimming classes in the same pool he’d trained as a kid while working at Lallybroch before he had enough money set aside to get a loan and start his own business. How I could apply for a position in a hospital in Inverness, or start my own private medical practice close to Lallybroch. We talked until the sun set and the lights of the city danced on the water like fireflies, keeping the smiles on our faces as we built the machination that would make our silly dreams come true.
I was excited and afraid.

I was intrigued and intimidated.

I was enchanted.

I was at Oxford.

That city had been to me what castles and voluptuous dresses were for other little girls. A fairytale. A dream.

It had all started when I was eight years old. Lamb had taken me with him to visit one of his dearest friends – one who by chance had just discovered a new archaeological site and was convinced that a whole city lay underneath tons of dust. This kind of information always worked like a fluorescent light for the kind of craved-for-knowledge-moth my uncle happened to be, and it took him only a few days to find airline tickets for us to fly from Lebanon to Oxford.

While my uncle and Andrew – or Professor Horcrof, as he was known at the university – spent endless days talking over manuscripts and pictures, I had been a PhD student’s burden to entertain. Extremely unprofessional on Andrew’s behalf, but I was too young to realize it back then and Emma insisted that taking care of me was no trouble at all. She was as sweet and kind as she was impressive – almost as tall as Lamb, with golden hair and beautiful blue-rimmed glasses. Not really beautiful, but imposing, and it was obvious that everyone respected her. For me, the genuine niece of uncle Lamb, that meant much more than alluring eyes and an aristocratic nose.

Emma had been the reason I prayed for nearsightedness for years after we left Oxford. And the reason I found Oxford’s grey the most beautiful colour, and started building my own fairytale in the city of dreaming spires. She was the one who had taken me to the Bodleian Library and made me take the Bodleian oath. Sometimes, in the years that followed, when I closed my eyes, I could still feel my chest puff up with pride and self-importance as I spoke the words, ‘I hereby undertake not to
That day I had also sworn to her that when I grew up, I would study at Oxford as well. Emma had replied that she was sure I would.

And now, here I was. I wondered what Emma would think.

My college was not at the centre of the city and I felt my heart beat faster and faster inside my chest as I walked towards my destination. It was a struggle to bring my shallow breathing back to normal and not break into a run when I first glimpsed Lady Margaret Hall. A college with more than one hundred and forty years of history, and the first to educate women at Oxford.

I searched for the word in my head as my feet led me to the entrance. Honoured, I thought, and stepped inside.

Three days in Oxford and I was sure that Jamie’s phone would soon reach its maximum storage capacity after receiving so many pictures – the buildings, my college, my room, the gardens… I didn’t even take the time to sort out the best pictures, but sent him everything, unable to contain the happiness I was feeling.

“You have to take me to each and every one of these places when I visit, Sassenach,” he’d written. I promised him I would.

The accommodations at Lady Margaret Hall were better than most colleges in Oxford, and Mary Hawkins, my roommate, was a sweet, if not a bit shy, girl from Bath. She had a quiet beauty, and luckily for both of us, she was a fellow medical student. I liked her from the first moment we introduced ourselves and she seemed to like me too, though she talked at a frequency that was barely audible, and it was a struggle to carry on a conversation without asking her to repeat herself over and over again. I soon realized that the low voice was a way to hide her stutter, and hoped that it would get better once she felt comfortable. Sometimes I wondered how it would be, if Louise was at Oxford with us and not in France. Or Jenny. Louise would tease Mary to no end. Jenny would, most likely, take Mary under her wing and protect her throughout our years at university.

I wasn’t surprised Mary kept mostly to herself. She mentioned once or twice that she had grown up with a strict father who made it explicit to her that Oxford University wasn’t a choice, but an obligation. He had gone to Oxford University. His father had studied there. Mary’s mother had graduated from Lady Margaret’s Hall. It was unacceptable for Mary to break the family tradition. I felt sorry, but happy she had made it and was away from them now. Sometimes distance was all it took for a child to become an adult.

Freshers’ week had been full of tours and social events for the new students. A whole week for everyone to become familiar with the university and have fun – everyone except us, the medics. Our welcome included writing three essays for the first week of the term, and we spent a good amount of the week doing research in the library. There were four of us in Lady Margaret’s Hall and having to work while everyone else had the time of their lives formed a bond between us in a matter of days. The solidarity of the maltreated medics, we called it.

At least we had our parents, to help. The college family system assigned each one of us a student who was a year older, to guide us, give us advice and notes. Maisri, my college mam, had big brown eyes, thick black hair, and a deep voice that made everything she said sound serious. Even if it was something like, “Dr. Raymond won’t need the essay if you present yourself like this on Monday. One look at your hair and he’ll be scared for good. By no means, do continue running your hands
through your curls.”

When we took a break from studying, I made sure to drag Mary with me to one party or another, determined to bring her out of her shell. When she wasn’t in the library, I usually found her in the piano room. It was the only place I saw her relax. She played the piano beautifully, and more than once, I grabbed a book and lounged there, feeling the notes dance in the room around us. I had tried to convince her to join me and Maisri in the yoga classes that were taking place in the gardens during the summer months, but Mary resolutely denied.

The Michaelmas term started right after Freshers’ week. And with the courses, real life commenced.

I had read that the University demanded eight hours per day be spent on focussed, concentrated academic work. Theoretically, that was fine. Practically, the workload of medical school was much heavier. We were in lectures and practicals from 9 am to 3 pm, and then we had three tutorials per week which required either an essay, a worksheet, or a presentation prepared beforehand.

It was amazing, studying medicine. But with the courses, meeting new people, and trying to socialize in an effort to be a part of the university community, I always felt exhausted. The pictures I sent to Jamie were limited to selfies showing me and my books while I was studying in the library, or shots of the collections of pints gathered on the table in front of me at local pubs.

Some nights I fell asleep so early that I missed my nightly call with Jamie. And other times I was out for drinks and ended up having a short video call outside a pub or a club, just to see him for a few minutes and hear his voice.

In any case, we still managed to talk at least once every day. And we texted when we couldn’t. And sent pictures.

It was the beginning, I reminded myself. It was expected that I would need some time to adjust. Jamie understood. He, too, had an intense schedule. His term was more demanding now that he had been admitted to the Ross School of Business, swimming meets had begun, and he pushed himself to his limits, which meant that he often overslept and missed our morning call.

I almost screamed when I read his text after his first race as a Wolverine. Almost, because at that time I was in a lecture. Mary and a few other students shot me bewildered glances, trying to guess what Dr. Hildstand had said that I found so fascinating, but I just shook my head and swallowed my smile, trying not to attract more attention. I texted Jamie a minute later, with a row of emojis. Then, I told him that I was proud of him and I loved him. He sent me a wet kiss picture in response.

I was just as happy and proud after his second race, but Jamie wasn’t. He had finished second, and apparently for Jamie that was equivalent to finishing last. That evening, I was in the study room with Mary, Malva, and Davie when Maisri rushed in, still laughing from something that she had said to someone in the corridor, and invited us to ‘Dissection Drinks’ with medics from other colleges. Mary groaned at the prospect of going out again, but Malva and Davie quickly accepted the invitation. I had almost agreed on going too, when I remembered that Jamie would be getting home early and we would have time for a rather extensive call. Judging by the sulky texts I got throughout the day, I was sure that he’d need to talk.

“I can’t come, but maybe next time,” I said, ignoring Maisri’s frown. I would give my Friday night to my boyfriend. Looking at the big black clock on the wall, I realized I only had half an hour before our call.

Mary called it an early night and after a quick visit to our room, I headed to the showers, wanting to be ready when Jamie called.
An hour later, I was lying on my bed, still waiting. And then, an hour after that. I’d texted Jamie and he just replied that he wasn’t home yet.

When Jamie finally called me, I was more than irritated and Mary was sound asleep in her bed. Grabbing my phone, I resorted to one of the empty study rooms to have a conversation where more than whispering could be used.

“You’re late, Jamie Fraser.” I had planned for very playful greeting while I was in the shower, but after two hours of waiting and seeing him fresh as a daisy, my tone turned dourer than I’d thought it would be.

“Ah, I ken. Sorry, Sassenach, we were out wi’ the team and I couldn’t leave earlier.”

I forced myself to relax and smile, and I was almost successful. It wasn’t his fault, I repeated to myself again and again, until I believed it. Keeping my frustration from being front and center, I focused on Jamie. Spending half of our time arguing about the fact that he was late would do neither of us any good.

“Congratulations for today,” I said, to change the mood and make it clear that the second place was to be praised.

He shook his head. “Second,” he said, glumly.

“You can’t always finish first, I hope you know that,” I admonished him. “Everyone has bad days, although I’m not sure that coming second counts as a bad day.”

“At the first race it was different. Today I was so stressed, I dinna think I’ve ever been that stressed before.”

“But why? You’ve participated in far bigger competitions before.”

“Aye, but in Scotland I knew my opponents. I had raced against them time and time again as we grew up and knew their mistakes and strong points. Here I have no idea what to expect.”

“But in the first race –”

“I don’t think I’d realized the sheer size of competitions here,” he interrupted me. “The Big Ten, the NCAA championships…”

“Jamie, look at me.” I wished he could be next to me, so I could squeeze his cheeks between my hands and make him see how much he had already achieved. “You’ll do great. You’ll give your best self, you will keep working, and you will improve. You’re one of the best swimmers already! First and second place, come on!”

That made him laugh. “Thank ye, mo ghraidh. I wish you were here. It was always different when I was looking at you in the bleachers after seeing my times.”

“Well, if that makes you happy, I almost screamed both times I read your texts. During lectures, I have to mention.”

He laughed and his blue eyes shone for the first time that evening. “It does, Sassenach. It makes me happy. You make me happy. So, how was your day?”

“Good! I had my first tutorial with Dr. Raymond. He is absolutely amazing, Jamie. He’s tiny, really, no taller than Mrs. FitzGerald but he’s a force of nature. Ha. Funny, because the tutorial was on
alternative medicine and herbs. It was the best tutorial I’d had so far.”

“So, uni is as ye expected it to be?”

“Heavier workload, if you can imagine that, but yes. I love it.” I smiled, realizing the truth behind my words. Medical school was everything I had wished for, and even more.

“Good. I’m glad ye do, babe. Did you look for tickets yet?”

I hesitated. “No, not yet.”

Jamie sighed. “Dinna leave it for the last moment, Sassenach. You’re going to pay a fortune at the end.” He opened a bottle of water and drank until it was half empty. “Dhia, I’m always so thirsty after coming back from Hector’s.”

“Alcohol causes dehydration, you know.”

“Aye, aye doctor.” He flashed a toothy grin and took another big gulp.

I waited until his eyes met mine again, seeking the right words to express what I needed to say. “Jamie, I was thinking…” Jamie left the water next to him and slightly tilted his head sideways, waiting. “I was thinking that maybe coming in two weeks isn’t a good idea, after all.”

“Oh?”

I knew he wouldn’t like that. “I know we planned on meeting in early November, but the term ends at the beginning of December, and I thought I might wait until then so I can stay longer when I come to Michigan. And maybe we could fly to Edinburgh together for Christmas.” I swallowed, uneasy, even though I knew that my proposal made perfect sense. There was no reason to spend so much money just to see him for a few days. “If I come before the term ends, I will stay only for a few days and I have lectures I don’t want to miss…” I added when he kept silent.

“I thought you’d be here for my race in New Jersey, that’s all,” he finally said with no trace of feeling in his voice. His face had changed into a neutral mask.

“But it’s a better plan if I come before Christmas, no?”

“I guess so.”

I fidgeted with the hem of my top, avoiding his eyes. I knew he wanted me to be in New Jersey as we had planned, but that was before I came to Oxford. I didn’t really know what I would find here. When I finally looked at Jamie, I saw a strained smile on his mouth and disappointment dancing in his stare. “I wanted to be there, too, Jamie,” I tried to explain. He nodded. “I wanted to,” I insisted, forcefully. “But we must make compromises. It’s just four weeks, and then we’ll spend a whole month together.”

“Yeah. Okay. You’re right.”

I smiled and blew him a kiss. He kissed me – the screen – back.

“So, what place did John get today?” I asked to change the subject.

“Fourth. He was so pissed.” Jamie chuckled and I could see some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

We talked about swimming and his classes, and then about my practicals and my newfound love for
yoga. “Until I find a decent dance club,” I clarified.

We smiled, laughed, and teased each other, but I could still feel a lingering uneasiness between us.

“Jamie?” I whispered when he said he was tired and would go to bed. “You know I wanted to be there, don’t you?”

This time his smile was genuine. “Aye, Sassenach. I ken. Ye just took me by surprise, is all. Dinna worry, aye?”

“And you know I love you, right?” I asked again.

His smile turned into a grin. “Aye, ye wee yogi.” He ignored my snort. “I love ye too, Claire.” This time his voice was guttural. I let out a heavy sigh and heard him mirroring it, as if we needed to hear the words even though we could always feel them resonating through our bodies.

“Now go to bed,” he finally said. “I'll dream of you.”

“Me too,” I said, and we ended the call.

*Me too.*
Juggling and Swimming

Jugglers.

People skilled enough to throw three, four, five balls into the air, and with swift and precise maneuvers of their hands, keep them flying over their head. Easily. While smiling.

I remember watching them as a child, open-mouthed, mesmerized. I always kept my eyes on the fast-moving balls, as if studying their hands would steal the magic away. As a consequence, I never tried juggling myself. I was sure that I would drop the little balls – or lemons, I had seen a guy juggling at the side of the road using the yellowest lemons once – even before throwing them up in the first place.

Maybe if I had tried to juggle before, my life at university would be easier. Because it felt like juggling. I often found myself lying on my bed after midnight with my eyes closed, not because I sought sleep, but because I was trying to imagine how I would manage to keep all the tasks I had undertaken – my very own lemons – successfully flying around me and not send them crashing to the ground.

*If I finish this essay on Tuesday night, and then start with the presentation for Dr. Raymond after Wednesday’s practical…*

*No.*
If I first work on the presentation, on Monday…

Shit. We have the ‘Dissection Drinks’ on Monday night. I can’t miss it again.

No matter how I tried to schedule my tasks, my lemons were one too many.

Jenny had called me twice that week, and both times I had texted back, explaining that I was in the middle of a lecture and I would call her later. Texts had never been Jenny’s preferred means of communication. Which was more than odd, since she had to be the only Gen Z-er who hated texts. With practicals after my lecture and heading to the library to prepare for the tutorials after that, later had become tomorrow, and tomorrow became the day after.

Don’t forget to call Jenny, I would think to myself at the most irrelevant and inconvenient times. Tomorrow morning. I will call her tomorrow. Before she comes down to Oxford herself and I have to justify the radio silence to Jenny face-to-face.

With Joe things were different. He demanded pictures from my college, my dorm, and my textbooks, so we could compare our respective medical schools and start bickering about whose university was better. It was utterly ridiculous and we both knew it – since mine was the Oxford University and there was no real competition, to begin with. Not that Joe would ever agree with that notion. We usually texted when I was in the library and ended up writing in caps, our conversation nothing more than ludicrous arguments. I had choked more than once in my desperate attempt to swallow my laughter, but it was more difficult to pretend that I wasn’t aware of the irritated glances shot at me from my fellow students who were trying to study in silence. To Gail’s utter despair, Joe kept arguing with me even when they were together, and on top of that, he tried to pull her into the debate. When Gail grabbed his phone and started talking New York bagels and pancakes, I knew the conversation was over.

Apart from feeling totally overwhelmed by the workload, life at Oxford was good. More than good. Mary and I got along fine, and when we weren’t deep in the library researching for the essays we had to prepare for Dr. Hildegard’s or Dr. Raymond’s tutorials, we had late nights together with Malva and Davie, drinking beers and discussing professors and medics from other colleges. Davie had proposed we call ourselves the very humble ‘Lifesavers’, while I was inclined more towards Malva’s ‘Where’s the Finish’. We settled for ‘Four Angry Pencils’ and we were very proud of our little team.

Texting with Jamie was a constant. He was becoming more and more stressed as his meet in New Jersey approached, and I pulled out all my feel good moves to calm him down. Silly, sweet gifs in the middle of the day, ridiculous voice messages, goofy selfies… We stopped calling in the morning because he was literally running to the pool the moment he woke, and we kept our conversations short at night because he was usually exhausted and needed sleep. No matter how much I smiled or played the fool, he was getting more distant as the days passed by.

“Ye don’t understand, Claire,” he would say, again and again, even though I insisted that I did understand. “It’s very important to do well in this meet.”

I would spend the rest of the call reassuring him that I knew how much the meet meant to him and that he would do great, until at last, he would mumble that I was right and he shouldn’t be so nervous, but that he couldn’t help it. By the time we would say goodnight, he would become my sweat Scot again, sure of himself and his abilities. Until the next morning.

The Wolverines departed for New Jersey on a rainy Tuesday – or at least it was drizzling in Oxford. When he was with his teammates, Jamie fell back into being much closer to his old self. He was sending pictures of himself and John making silly faces or smiling like loons, and when he called, his
voice sounded aloof, unconcerned. I wasn’t sure whether he strived to maintain a cool facade in front of the others or if he really relaxed around them. I could see that the strain back on his face, however, a frown establishing itself between his eyebrows, the moment he was alone.

“No matter what happens tomorrow, know that we are very proud of you and that won’t change,” I told him the night before the competition and saw him heaving a deep sigh, his chest deflating.

“What if I fail, Claire? What if I’m not as good as they thought I would be? I can’t continue here without the scholarship and I don’t want to go back to Scotland like that.”

I looked him in the eye and put on my most serious face. “Jamie,” I intoned, trying to keep my voice harsh on purpose. “Stop doing that. It’s not fair! You’re doing a disservice to yourself, can’t you see that?”

“What if –”

“There are no what-ifs. I’ll have none of that,” I announced as if I was his mother and he was asking for another scoop of ice-cream. “You will go out there, and you will swim. Remember what I had written on your birthday cake last year?”

I could still see the dark blue buttercream letters if I closed my eyes. Not my most beautiful work, but it had served its purpose.

“Just keep swimming,” Jamie replied, and I could swear I saw a smile crack on his lips.

“Just keep swimming, Jamie. I’ve seen you swim, I’ve been there. You swim because you love to. And you’re good at it because when you’re in the pool, you feel free. Don’t be afraid, you stupid Scot! Live it! Go out there and enjoy yourself!”

He rubbed his face with his palms, then ran a hand through his hair. “Ye’re right, I guess.”

“I am. I always am,” I amended. “You should know it by now.”

Jamie snorted, but didn’t disagree. He was smiling now. A wide, toothy smile. “I will think of you the entire time,” I said, softly. “You won’t be alone, I promise.”

Jamie nodded but didn’t speak.

“I won’t be in the bleachers but I will be thinking of you,” I said again and felt the guilt painfully squeezing my heart. Jamie needed me and I had chosen to stay in Oxford. Not that it had been the wrong decision. It just hadn’t been the right one, either.

“I ken, babe. ‘Tis irrational, this worry.” The camera lost focus as Jamie moved to lie in bed. When his beautiful blue eyes were back on mine, I gave him my biggest smile.

“It is. Don’t let it eat at you. But first, you need to get some rest, and I need to go to bed because we have Hildegarde’s tutorial tomorrow and it’s a pain in the arse.”

We ended the call and I returned to my room, my heavy steps the only sound in the corridors. Speaking with Jamie before he went to bed had made me Oxford’s resident nocturnal animal. I fell asleep the moment my head sank oin to the pillow and dreamed of swimming pools, wet auburn curls, and finishing times.

Jamie was more cheerful the following day, but I could tell he still wasn’t completely himself. I went on with my pep talk as I had prepared it, trying to boost his confidence in a break between two
practicals, and promised again that I would be thinking of him. Before hanging up I risked sending him a ridiculously loud kiss while wishing no one was around to hear it. I returned to the class keeping my head low, in case anyone would identify me as the silly girl kissing a screen.

I hadn’t wished Jamie good luck, because I planned on calling him again right before his race. It was our little tradition since we had been in Scotland. He would say “I will imagine that I’m swimming towards you, Sassenach,” and I would reply, “Come find me, then, ridiculous Scot.”

It was cheesier than I could usually handle, but Jamie insisted that he loved the way I blushed every time before I said my part. And that was the reason he demanded we hold onto our own version of ‘good luck’.

I spent a good part of the practical checking the time, counting down the hours to Jamie’s race. It was two hours later when Mary stood in front of me, asking if I was ready for Hildegard’s tutorial. I was ready to nod when I checked my bag and realized I had forgotten the USB drive with our presentations back in the dorm. And like that, we found ourselves running in the rain, boots splashing through puddles and breaths hitching in our throats, frantic to get the flash drive and be back before the tutorial started.

We made it. We entered the class with our cheeks red, our hair matted on our faces and coats soaked in water, but we made it on time. Dr. Hildegard crooked an eyebrow but gestured towards two empty seats without any verbal comment, and I felt immensely grateful towards the taciturn professor.

The tutorial was amazing. Dr. Hildegard was so serious and collected, that she kept making jokes we only got when it was too late. She managed to stop Mary’s stuttering while she was a few slides in her presentation by subtly praising her work, and after mentioning a few points I should have addressed differently in mine, she concluded that it was one of the best presentations she had seen from a fresher. I beamed and nodded repeatedly my thanks before I found my voice to properly thank her.

When we left the tutorial, I realized that I had missed the time window for Jamie’s ‘good luck call’.

I had six unanswered calls and two texts on my phone.

Scot: We left the room and we’re heading to the pool.

Scot: Oh god, there are so many people here. I think the backstroke race is in fifteen minutes or so.

Scot: Sassenach?

Scot: A few minutes left, babe.

Scot: Where are you?

Scot: Claire? Where are you?

Scot: I’m going.

I wanted the earth to open beneath my feet and swallow me up. I had promised I would think of him during his race and instead I had been thinking of… physiology.

Not listening to what Mary was saying about our next tutorial, I called Jamie. It was an hour since I had received his last text and the race must be over now. He didn’t answer.
I called again. And again.

Feeling the tears rolling down my cheeks, I texted him.

_Sassenach_: How did it go?

It wasn’t enough.

_Sassenach_: I’m sorry I didn’t call.

_Sassenach_: I’m so, so, so sorry Jamie.

_Sassenach_: I was in Hildegard’s tutorial, and got carried away.

I waited for a minute after that, then called him again. Nothing. The initial plan was to leave the class at some point to call Jamie, but with presenting my work and then listening to the others… I had forgotten.

_Sassenach_: Jamie, please pick up your phone.

It wasn’t that terrible, was it? I didn’t say good luck before a race. A single race. I had talked to him that morning and every day before that. He knew that I would think of him…

I paused on this thought. I had said that I would think of him, but I didn’t. I wasn’t thinking of him at the time of the race. I had promised.

Pulling my hood over my head I walked back to the dorm, my eyes fixed on my phone.

_Sassenach_: I’m sorry.

Jamie needed me and I had disappointed him. And even though calling him for one last time didn’t seem that important to me, it obviously was important for him. I had messed up. Royally.

I entered my room and changed out of my clothes, but didn’t dare take a shower. He might reply at any moment. Maybe he hadn’t seen his phone yet. Maybe he was with the rest of the team, celebrating his victory. It wasn’t the end of the world.

As if there was a chance Jamie wouldn’t reply to my texts, no matter where he was.

It was irrational. He was irrational. I repeated that thought to myself, trying to smother the burning feeling that kept eating at my heart.

Jamie needed me and I hadn’t been there.

I wore an old t-shirt I had stolen from him when I visited Michigan and buried myself under the blankets. I unlocked my phone and kept looking at my screensaver. He was hugging me tight and we were both smiling at the camera.

It was just a call, it couldn’t be that bad. I had always been there. People make mistakes.

I looked at Jamie’s eyes in the picture, so slanted from his smile that I could barely see the blue in them. I called him again.

One more time.

And again.
Two hours had passed. I saw the lemons I had flying over my head, falling, crashing down.

I set my jaw, tried not to cry, and sent yet another text.

*Sassenach*: Call me. Please?
How long can one night be?

It felt like I was lying in my bed for ages. I wanted to get up, run, do something, but the darkness was heavy outside my window, and my heart felt heavier.

My heart, the one that kept beating, no matter how many times my breath hitched in my throat.

My heart, carrying its own heavy load, waiting.

Holding off was slowly killing me, but I had resolved not to call him again.

Hours had passed while my phone remained silent. A sinking sensation wrapped around me, dragging me down, deeper and deeper.

What had happened, exactly?

I had spent the first few hours rationalizing.

What if something happened to him? No. John would call me. Jamie is fine.

Maybe he forgot his phone at the pool and they are all out celebrating now. But he would send something from John’s phone, right?

Not if he’s still mad at me for not calling him before the race.

Maybe he needs time, and he will call when he’s ready. He’s stressed, and he’s exaggerating. It will be okay.
If only he called sooner.

I had messed up, yes, but it wasn’t like I had been out for drinks, having fun, and ignoring him. And it wasn’t like we hadn’t talked all day. I would explain myself. I would tell him the truth and ask him to forgive me. Simple as that.

Not that I hadn’t done that in my texts already. But texts were not the same.

I closed my eyes and imagined his disappointment when the time had come and I didn’t call, when I didn’t reply to his messages. I could see in my mind’s eye how upset he must have been, his deep breaths as he tried to focus on the impending race. I hoped he’d thought of all the times I wished him good luck in the past, of how much I loved him and believed in him. Or at least to forget everything about me and give his best to the race.

It didn’t matter, really. Nothing was as important as winning the race.

I knew he would do well. He was the best swimmer I had ever seen.

*It will be alright. He’ll call back and it will be alright.*

I tried to stick with this line of thought and get some sleep. Make this endless night go by faster.

But sleep wouldn’t come.

Where was he? The chances he’d lost his phone were…scarce. He’d seen my texts and was still so angry that he couldn’t even reply?

A single message was all I needed. ‘I’m fine, won the race, we’ll talk tomorrow.’ How hard was that?

It was the first time Jamie had done this. The first time he blatantly ignored me. The first time he didn’t want to talk to me.

Or rather, the second. The first one had been when he got the scholarship, but that had been different.

This wasn’t at all like him.

*Maybe he’s preparing a surprise for me?*

The week following the New Jersey race would be a slack one. Maybe he’d come to visit me, to celebrate with me.

I let hope nestle in my chest, its arrival gifting me with a few full breaths. Maybe he was flying to England right now. A smile curled the corners of my mouth, up and up, until I was biting my bottom lip in a smile full of expectation.

A moment later, reality crashed on me. Exactly when I was the most vulnerable. It always does that, waiting in the corner until we give way to the dreams, and then rushes to overtake us. With a single move, reality names the dream an illusion and takes it away, with a low, malicious snicker.

My smile vanished in a matter of seconds. Jamie wasn’t coming, and I was a fool to even think he would. He was in New Jersey, celebrating with his friends.

The waiting was killing me. I held in my tears, refusing to cry when I didn’t even know why. When I didn’t know what was happening.
He had left me hanging. He had left me in the dark, alone, with no power over anything.


When the first tears stained my pillow, sleep took pity on me.

I didn’t dream.

—

Mary’s voice woke me and I felt her hand gently nudging my side.

“Claire? Are you coming to the lecture? We need to go in fifteen minutes.”

*The lecture? Did the world have the audacity to go on when my life was crumbling?*

For the first time in my life, I didn’t care about the lecture. I didn’t care about anything at all, after checking my phone to find that nothing had changed since the previous night.

That was a living hell, I was sure of it.

I pushed all thoughts and emotions deep down and got out of bed. It would do me no good to stay in the dorm all day, and I had practicals that I couldn’t miss anyway.

I brushed my teeth mechanically for a good five minutes and washed my face with freezing water until the bones in my hands ached from the cold.

Numb – I needed to be numb. Retreat to that place deep inside me where I was safe. A peal of cruel laughter left my lips.

This place, and all the bloody safe places inside me had been opened for him.

There was no safehouse, no hidden crypt. I had given everything and I had nowhere to go now.

I started crying again and immediately rinsed the tears away.

*Get yourself together. Don’t think.*

I left the bathroom and got dressed. Mary looked at me with a frown, but didn’t ask any questions. I loved her for it. No prying. She would patiently wait until I was ready to talk. Which meant never, in this case.

We walked to campus and headed towards the auditorium. I vaguely registered that it was an interesting lecture, one of those that would fill my head with questions and ideas on any other day. Not today.

Today, I took notes like an automaton. I breathed like an automaton. When the lecture finished, I talked to others like an automaton.

It was like living in virtual reality. I was at Oxford, going on with my day, responding to the stimuli around me as if they were real, but I had this feeling that everything was only a projection on a wall, and real-life would look like the earth had been destroyed by meteors. Or a collision with another planet.

Or maybe that was just *my* world.
I went on with my day as if nothing had changed, as if I could breathe as easily as the next student in the practical.

I nodded mechanically and I even smiled once or twice when everyone was laughing, because I felt like I had to.

I checked my phone every minute. It felt like a punch in the gut. When I thought I couldn’t take it anymore, I turned it off, only to panic and turn it on five minutes later.

Not that I had missed anything.

I thought of texting Jamie again, but what else was there left to say? How many times can one apologize before those three words sound cheap?

I wrote ‘I love you’ at least ten times, only to erase the message a moment later. Didn’t he know that I loved him? What difference would a text make?

After our practical, I followed Mary to the library. I sat down with a heavy textbook and ended up reading the same line twenty times.

It was then that my phone vibrated against the wooden desk.

My heart jumped to my throat, and my knees trembled as I tried to stand up.

It was him, and he was smiling in the picture on my screen and I just wanted to fall back on my chair and start crying.

I didn’t. I swallowed hard, instead, and ran outside. Fat raindrops hit my face, but I hardly noticed them. I wore my earphones, and slid a finger across the screen.

“Hi,” I said, walking away from the entrance and leaning against the exterior wall, trying to shelter myself from the rain as well as I could. The light post was only four feet away, but my face was covered in shadows.

“Hi, Claire.” Jamie tried for a smile, but ended up taking a deep breath instead.

My heart was beating so fast I thought it would break through my chest. A ridiculous thought from an aspiring doctor, and yet there it was.

“How did it go?” I asked. “The race,” I clarified, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Second. I finished second.”

*Second. Shit. Is this the reason he didn’t call?*

His face was a mask, his voice colourless. I didn’t know what to say. *I’m sorry?* It sounded stupid. *Don’t worry?*

I nodded twice, before I mumbled, “Congratulations.” He didn’t seem to hear it. I cleared my throat and tried again, louder this time. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” he said, dismissively.

And then, silence. A long, heavy silence that stretched and stretched until I couldn’t take it anymore. It was stealing my breath.
“Did you celebrate last night?”

Jamie looked sideways, then back at me. “Aye, we went for drinks wi’ the team.”

“Nice.” I tried to smile. “Did you have fun?”

He closed his eyes and set his jaw. I saw his throat bobbing as he swallowed and waited for his answer, but his mouth opened only to close again.

“Are you alone?” I blurted. It was obvious that we couldn’t keep this conversation going for long, and I didn’t want to start talking about what really mattered if other people were in his room.

“Aye. John is out.”

I tried to smile, and let out a sigh before starting explaining myself. “Jamie, I am so, so, so sorry I didn’t manage to call you yesterday. I know you needed me to call and you’re angry at me, and you’re right... But I was in the middle of a tutorial and time went by, and –” I stopped abruptly and squeezed my eyes tight. “I am sorry.”

Jamie nodded but didn’t say a word. I couldn’t recognize the look in his eyes.

“Talk to me, please. Talk to me, Jamie, we will figure it out,” I pleaded in a quivering voice.

“Claire –”

“Yes?” I bit my lip hard, trying to keep the tears inside.

“I didna call ye yesterday and all day today, because I needed time to think.”

The wall behind me was rough underneath my fingertips as I pushed harder against it, wishing for the pain to ground me. To prepare me, somehow, for what was coming. I knew it. I knew him. I could see right through him. The way he talked, how he looked at me... I recognized that look now – the pain and regret, the determination. Tears blurred my vision before he could go on.

“This isna working, Claire,” Jamie said, and I felt a thousand daggers sinking into my heart. I felt them hovering around me all day, biding their time. A whimper left my mouth before I could stop it, and I pushed my lips together in reflex. I looked at Jamie, at the bloody screen, and tried to keep my raging emotions under control.

“What –” I started in a broken voice, and I summoned all my courage to go on. I wouldn’t stop this conversation before it had even started because I was crying. I pushed my fingernails into the wall, willing it to support me. “What do you mean?” When Jamie only shook his head, I continued. “Since when is it not working?” I huffed a laugh, challenging him. “I forgot to text you once, and that’s it? I’m not good enough for you?”

That rilled him up. “Did I ever say ye’re not good enough for me, Claire?” he demanded. “Dinna put words in my mouth!” He then murmured something under his breath, lowering his eyes.

“So what is this? You don’t call, don’t text, don’t even tell me that you need time to think and I’m here waiting for you to deign to inform me that things aren’t working out because the idea stuck in your head?”

“It’s not in my head! It’s in my life! This – what we have... It’s not what it once was, and –”

“And you want to end it?” I couldn’t believe I was uttering those words. This had to be a nightmare.
“Aye.” It could have been a whisper of the wind. It could have been a raindrop falling into the river. It could have been the rustling of leaves. But it was his voice, and the sound choked me. A small word I had heard him say thousands of times. The same word, ending it all.

I bit my lip until I tasted blood. I scraped my palm against the wall, and saw the hand holding my phone shaking.

“Why?”

*Why are you giving up on us? Why aren’t you patient? Why are you tearing my heart out?*

I couldn’t ask that. I wouldn’t. So I just whispered again, “Why?”

“I love ye, Claire,” he said, and I noticed for the first time that he was crying, too.

Hearing his words broke all the walls I’d tried to build to keep my despair aside. “This makes no fucking sense,” I sobbed.

“I ken, I ken,” he repeated. “I love ye, mo nighean donn, mo ghraidh, my Sassenach. I love ye so much and I wish you were here or I was there, but you’re not and I’m not and I canna go on like this.” He said it all with breath, and then this face paled, as if a chunk of life was torn out of his chest.

“No, no, no.” I shook my head violently, wet curls flying and sticking on my face. “We will make it work, we said we would, remember?”

He needed to remember. He just needed to know that we would be together no matter what, and then he would change his mind.

“I canna. I miss you, and this is not what I thought it would be. Seeing you once every three months? What kind of relationship is that?”

“Our relationship!” I all but screamed. “It’s our relationship and we’ll work on it. This is just the beginning and I am overwhelmed a bit by the workload here, but I will get the hang of it. I know I should have called before the race —”

“Claire!” he interrupted me. “This is not about the race. I mean, it is, but it’s not only that. Ye’re not here when I need to cuddle in bed with you after a hard day. Ye’re not here when I want to go out and dance and feel your body against mine. Ye’re not here when good things happen, when bad things happen, when nothing happens… Ye’re not here.”

“Of course I’m not there! I’m right here, doing my best to be a part of your life! And you knew that, Jamie Fraser! You knew I wouldn’t be there!”

“Your best…” he trailed off before finishing the thought. I was ready for another attack, when he said, “I hadna thought it would be so difficult.”

I repeated his words, mocking him.

“Yes Claire! I thought ye’d be with me until your term started, but no! God forbid! Ye had to volunteer and go to Zambia! And then —”

“You said you were okay with me going to Zambia!” I interrupted him, indignant. I felt my cheeks flaming in anger now.
“I said I didna like it! But ye didna step back! Ye said that ye really wanted to go and really, what choice did I have in the matter?”

I snorted, refusing to talk to him. I couldn’t believe that he was holding my trip to Zambia against me. What else was there that he had never talked about?

“Well, I’m not in Zambia right now.”

“Aye, and what good does it do to us? Ye have internet access and we still hardly talk. D’ye think that thirty minutes per day is enough to keep a relationship going? Because it isn’t!”

I took a long breath through my mouth, blinking at him. I couldn’t believe my ears. “We limit the time of the video calls because of your training,” I spat.

“And your practicals, your tutorials…” He shook his head and his red curls fell into his eyes. It had become one of my habits to run my fingers over his forehead and push them aside, but I knew that even if he was in front of me right now that would be the last thing I would do. Smack him on the forehead, maybe. “Ye didn’t come for my race, as we had agreed. Do ye ken how long it is since we had sex?” Jamie asked, bringing me back to our conversation.

I felt my eyebrows curving in an impossible arch. “What? So this – this is about sex?”

“No. Not only sex, but sex is important, too.”

“Our schedule is fucked up!” I declared.

“I ken!” he shot back. “This doesna change the facts though, does it?”

It didn’t. “We can do better,” I said, more calmly now. My breaths were short and fast, and I stopped for a moment, trying to collect myself. “I miss you, too.” Jamie didn’t reply. “I thought I was there for you, I thought what we had was enough.”

I slid down the wall, sitting on the wet pavement. I was soaked by this point and I didn’t care.

“I thought it would be enough. I wanted it to be.” Jamie’s voice was soft, as if he murmured something in my ear as we lay together in bed. “But I want to live, Claire, not to be constantly suspended between two continents. I want to live here, now. And I wanted to share now with you, even though I couldn’t share here. But I can’t even have that.”

Because I hadn’t sent a bloody good-luck-text. “I don’t know what else I can do. I can’t promise that I won’t mess up again, but I can promise that I will try not to. And I’ll be there in a few weeks. We will spend a whole month together.”

“Sassenach,” Jamie rasped, pained. “Stop. Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what? Love you?” I asked, with an incredulous laugh. “I don’t remember how life was before I loved you.”

Jamie rubbed a hand on his face. His eyes were red and puffed when he looked at me. “It pains me, Claire. It pains me to wake up and know you’re not in my arms, it pains me to count the days until I see ye again. I canna do it anymore.”

I had no breath to speak. Tears kept rolling down my face, and Jamie’s ragged breaths sounded closer through my earphones than the rain pattering on the pavement I sat on. I felt him closer than all the world around me and I wanted to reach out and grasp that feeling, afraid I would never have it
“So that’s it?” I croaked, and licked my lips, tasting the salt.

It couldn’t be it. We couldn’t end like this.

“I am sorry. I love you. I will always love you. But maybe this is for the best. For both of us, ye ken.” A sigh, and he continued. “I will focus on my life here, and you on yer studies…”

The words sounded unreal in my mind. I couldn’t reply. I couldn’t agree or oppose the notion, not that it mattered.

Love isn’t a cage. It’s not working that way. Love is like the wind, aiding us in staying airborne, lifting us higher.

“Goodbye, Jamie."

My finger trembled as I ended the call. I felt the sky drop closer, crushing me. A flash of lightning tore up the darkness in the distance and I closed my eyes, wishing Jamie would be there to hold me in his arms.

But there would be no more Jamie. No one would hold me to keep me safe. No one would brush away the hair from my face. No one would kiss away the tears.

I held my breath in an attempt to verify that my heart was still beating.

It did. My treacherous heart went on with hollow, empty beats against my ribs.

My head hit the wall, and I stayed there, sobbing under the rain until Mary found me.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry!
You broke my heart.

What a lie. People keep saying that, but the repetition doesn’t make it any more true.

My heart was fine. Not one broken blood vessel. No rupture of the muscle. It kept beating, like the earth kept spinning around itself without asking my permission.

I wished Jamie had really broken my heart. I wished the pain could be diagnosed and treated.

Ms. Beauchamp, you have a broken heart. With this medication and two weeks in bed, you should be fine.

But then again, I didn’t want to be fine. I wanted to mourn. Being fine meant I hadn’t lost anything of importance.

My memories became my refuge. The happy ones, the sweet ones, the silly ones. I was greedy for more moments with him. I longed for happiness.
Jamie sitting next to me and calling me Sassenach in Mrs. FitzGibbon’s class.

Jamie holding me in his arms for the very first time, murmuring in Gaelic to calm me down when I was spooked at the escape room.

Jamie giving me bluebells – the real ones, my bracelet, the necklace that still hung between my clavicles. The necklace I knew I couldn’t part with.

Jamie teasing about me giving him blue balls.

Our first kiss, sweet and fiery and wonderful.

The surprise party he planned for my birthday, the cake with the tiny surgeons and operating room made out of sugarpaste. A special order for me, because he knew how important medical school had been to me.

Jamie stubbornly joining me on almost all the rides at the amusement park because he was unwilling to leave my side.

The first time he touched me on that bench, ignoring the world around us. Hogmanay at Lallybroch, when we trusted the pillows to keep our ventures private. The first time we made love, after his silly dancing…

All the glances, the hugs, the smiles. The teasing, the laughter. The way his gaze burned a moment before his lips found mine.

How complete my world had been back then. And how I had trusted him to keep it that way. Trusted both of us.

But we had failed.

We had failed the girl and boy sitting on that Scottish hill, having breakfast, making love, promising that they belonged together – forever.

It required all my strength to keep up appearances. Outside, I continued with my everyday life. Inside, I crumbled. When I wasn’t alone, I found myself collecting my pieces, lifting my chin. I put one foot in front of the other and walked to lectures. I talked to people, I even smiled from time to time. Fake, superficial smiles, with light nods of my head and a silent wish that I would disappear.

Everything reminded me of him. The couple walking down the street in front of me; my favourite coffee place that he would never visit; the Oak Walk and the Thorn Walk in the university parks; a song that we had never listened to together but seemed to be written just for us. All the places I had wanted to show to him and never had a chance to. All the little nooks where I had imagined us together.

I closed my hands in tight fists and kept the tears inside, willing myself not to break before I was back in my dorm.

During the first week, Mary insisted on accompanying me everywhere. When I ceased going to the library with her though, I made it quite clear that I needed time by myself. The precious time when I would lie in bed and drown in my despair, entertaining myself with my broken dreams.

One would think that two weeks of crying would be enough. More than enough. As it turned out, it wasn’t. The moments I was left alone, the dam would break before I could take another breath.
At first, I kept asking myself ‘Why?’

I replayed everything in my mind. Our time apart, the ache born with the distance, his disappointment when I told him about Zambia and how he pushed himself to his limits to support me while I was there, the hurried night calls when I was out for drinks at Oxford, the texts that remained unanswered for hours when we had classes, Jamie becoming more and more stressed with keeping his scholarship.

It had all been there, and I, the fool, thought it would be okay. That we could work through it.

I had been so happy, so excited that we followed our individual dreams and were working on accomplishing our goals, that I thought all our effort should be focused on that. The long-distance part of our relationship would be just another chapter in our story, a chapter named ‘Hard Times’ or ‘Too Many Video Calls’, followed by many, many more chapters. I had never believed everything would be perfect and I quickly realized that Michigan wasn’t going to be easy on Jamie. I knew that he needed me, that he wanted to talk more often, that he hated the distance.

I didn’t know, however, that he believed we were drifting apart. I was sure we would stand together, blaming fate and luck and timing, but never each other. I thought we were strong, because we would never give up. He was a part of me, and I was a part of him.

I had kept that forever in my heart, taking it for granted. And I saw it disappear in a single video call like a balloon meeting a needle.

I knew why, I did. But I still couldn’t understand how.

How, how, how could he break us? How were we supposed to go on without each other? How could he believe that being apart was better than just being away from each other?

We had both made mistakes, but nothing so egregious that it would tear us apart. How could we learn from our wrong-doings if he didn’t give us a chance? If he quit us – us – that easily?

Thinking of why brought guilt and remorse into my heart. Thinking of how brought anger.

He had given up. How. Dare. He.

Bouts of sorrow, anger, anguish, and despair threatened to smother me. And then, the tears ran free, a silent statement of everything I was feeling and couldn’t put into words. Salty, as if to prove that life was still tasteful and that I was meant to go on.

I didn’t want to go on. I wanted what I had with him. I wanted Jamie to be someone else – himself, but stronger. I wanted him to shout out for help, to talk to me, to demand more time, to sacrifice more for us. To be content with less. I wanted him to understand. I wanted him to want me, no matter how little I had to offer. I wanted him to cherish the beautiful moments we had together and feel they were enough.

I knew they weren’t – I knew it deep in my soul. I had known it every morning I woke up and he wasn’t lying next to me. I had known it when I longed to touch him and couldn’t. But I had set my jaw and soldiered on. Because I wanted no one else but him.

Maybe he’s right, a tiny voice sang at the back of my head, insisting that we were torturing ourselves with a transatlantic relationship. We were young, too young. We had so much to do.

But he can’t, he can’t be right.
He had promised that I would always be in his heart and his mind. As he would be in mine. Living without him didn’t feel right.

Sometimes I wished Lamb and I had never gone to Scotland in the first place. And then I hated myself for it, because Scotland had given me some of my favourite memories.

Every night I resolved to move forward. Every morning I realized I couldn’t leave Jamie behind.

At the beginning of the third week, I went back to my dorm to find Jenny there. I hadn’t talked to her after the breakup. I couldn’t. I had texted that I was okay, and ignored her calls after that, just like I ignored Joe’s messages.

I had expected when I saw Jenny again that she would keep her distance and stand rigid, with her hands perched on her waist and her eyes narrowed on me. I had expected to listen to her cursing me and her brother for messing up. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Jenny sprang out of my bed where she’d sat waiting, and a moment later she was on me, holding me in a tight hug and almost crushing me.

“Mo chridhe, mo chridhe,” she repeated, and I felt my world breaking into a million pieces at the sound of the familiar words.

Who would call me mo chridhe, now? Mo ghraidh? Mo nighean donn? My breath hitched in my throat as I remembered Jamie’s rough voice during our last call, desperately saying all the endearments together as if he would never say the words aloud again. As if they were mine, and mine only.

I burst into tears and held onto Jenny, feeling her small hands patting my hair and my back as she tried to soothe me.

It took a long time before either of us could talk. Jenny had cried too, and we brushed away the tears looking at each other for a long moment before laughter, loud and ringing, broke the silence and grief.

It was the first time I had heard myself laugh in the last two weeks.

“Look at us…” Jenny murmured, a smile lingering on her lips. “What a mess!” She gestured at her face, her dark blue eyes still shining with unshed tears.

I took a few deep breaths and found my hands held in Jenny’s smaller ones.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, and my trembling voice betrayed the nonchalant tone I attempted.

“I gave ye two weeks,” she explained and shrugged. “And ye have to thank or blame Ian for that, because he’s the one who kept me in Edinburgh for so long.”

“Jamie told you?” I asked, tearing my eyes from hers. I was suddenly terrified of what Jenny knew, of what Jamie had said. I fixed my eyes on the duvet and braced myself for the worst.

“Aye, the dolt. He did. Not at first, mind you, but he finally confessed when I insisted he looked like shit.” She paused, shook her head and continued. “He must be adopted, I’m telling ye Claire, because I’ve never heard of a Fraser or a MacKenzie being that stupid.”

I smiled, but I was sure Jenny had noticed it didn’t reach my eyes. “He said he couldn’t go on. With
the distance. That we weren’t as we used to be.”

“Of course ye weren’t as ye used to be! Back in Scotland, we thought it a miracle if anyone found one of you without the other. Ye were always together! It was expected, that yer relationship would change wi’ the distance. I even remember Jamie saying that!”

“He did. We knew that things would change, but we couldn’t really know. Maybe Jamie said that in an attempt to convince himself that it would be alright.” I sighed. “I don’t know, Jenny.” I removed my hands from her grip and rubbed my eyes that overflowed with tears once more. “We didn’t talk a lot lately, he was right about that. I hadn’t realized… I thought…” I sniffed back tears and took a shaky breath. “But he didn’t give us another chance, Jenny. He just gave up. We were still at the beginning. Later on, we may…” I trailed off, not sure of what to say. Would the distance become easier after a while? I had hoped it would, but I couldn’t be sure. After all, our obligations would increase during the following terms.

“He’s broken, too, if that helps. Crying and all.” Jenny waited until I looked up at her again. “I’m not trying to excuse my brother, Claire. I want ye to know that I’m here for ye, as yer friend. He’s a fool for letting ye go, and he will regret it, sooner or later. He is overwhelmed right now –”

“I know. He’s really stressed.”

“Aye, he is. He told me it was painful to think of ye all the time and know it will be months until he sees ye again. He said he felt ye drifting away, and he couldn’t visit.” Jenny let the silence fall heavy around us, carefully choosing her words. “He feels that he’s split between two continents.”

“I know.” My voice was so small I hardly recognized it. Jenny hadn’t said anything I didn’t already know. Jamie had been honest with me. I knew his reasoning. I just didn’t understand it. For the first time, I didn’t understand him.

“I dinna ken why he did it,” Jenny’s voice echoed my thoughts. “I dinna ken why he thinks breaking up will help, but he does. He thinks that it will be painful now, but in the long run, this will be for the best. Ye have a lot of years ahead of you, Claire.”

A long, heavy sigh left me deflated.

“Do you believe that? Will the pain get easier?”

“Time is the best healer, don’t they say so?” Jenny asked with a small smile. Seeing me shrug, she took my hands in hers again. “I wish I knew the answer, Claire. I wish I knew the best advice to give ye. But I don’t. If Ian did the same, I would personally fly over to the US to assassinate him. But everything has always come easy for Ian and me. We’ve never been apart for long.”

“You’re lucky,” I murmured. “I wished that for us, too. I still do, sometimes. But then I think…” I bit my lip, smiling wistfully. “Jamie and I went through a challenge and instead of coming out of it stronger, we let it break us. Maybe we weren’t meant to be, we weren’t good enough together.” I couldn’t look at Jenny anymore. I fixed my eyes on the window, on the darkness outside that mirrored the one inside my heart.

“No,” Jenny shook her head emphatically. “Claire, ye ken I’m no’ a romantic. Being in a long-distance relationship is hard, and having a whole ocean between ye isna easy to overcome. Couples are meant to be together, close to each other. No matter how much ye love him or he loves ye, living in different continents isna normal. It isn’t just a challenge or something ye should go through. But ye had faith enough to try it, because ye both had dreams and it was worth taking the risk. Yer love was
worth it.” Jenny squeezed my hands, and I saw regret in her eyes. “Timing is important, Claire. It’s half the deal. Ian would have never kissed me if I was seeing another lad at that time. Ye and Jamie…” Jenny’s shoulders dropped in resignation. “I thought ye were forever, I was sure of it. And then my idiot brother goes and does this…”

“Maybe he’s right. Maybe everything gets better with time. Maybe we should appreciate the beautiful thing we had and go on.” I spoke the words in a passive voice, believing none of them. Said them out loud, mostly to hear them myself.

“Maybe,” Jenny agreed. “And maybe not. Maybe ye’ll find each other again.” My heart skipped a bit, but I knew Jenny wouldn’t say more. I would never know whether that was her thoughts or her brother’s. “But in any case,” she continued, “Ye have to stop crying your heart out, Claire. Find yourself again. Give the amazing person ye are a chance. And maybe, with time, the pain will become just a dull reminder. Dinna lock yerself in this room thinking of my brother.”

“Everything reminds me of him.” I didn’t plan to say it, but there it was, out in the open. The reason I couldn’t function properly. The reason I avoided everybody. The reason I wasn’t myself. I didn’t know how to be myself without him.

“I swear…” Jenny grunted. “I swear I will kill him.”

“Well that wouldn’t be good sisterly behavior, would it?” I asked, the corners of my mouth curling up in a smile. The tears that rolled down my cheeks reached my smiling lips in a bittersweet symphony.

_this life_, I thought, not sure how The Verve got into my head.

“I told ye, some time ago, that ye’ll be my sister whether ye’re my brother’s girlfriend or no. Right now, I want to be a good sister to ye.” Jenny hugged me again, her arms solid and sure around my frame. “I love ye, Claire. I wanted to be sure ye ken it.”

“I do,” I said, sniffling back more tears. “I love you too, Jenny Fraser. The best of the Frasers.”

“What about my da?” she asked, echoing our conversation from months ago, and for the second time that evening, we burst into laughter.

Jenny took the last train to Edinburgh that night. Two days later, I ventured out to the library again, thinking that medical textbooks couldn’t possibly have anything to remind me of Jamie. When I returned to my dorm, I found Mary, Malva and Davie waiting for me in front of my door.

“Dissection Drinks,” Malva announced, taking the books from my arms. “I’ll just leave them inside and we leave.”

“What?” I looked at her as she disappeared, and then raised both eyebrows at Mary and Davie. “I don’t remember agreeing to this.”

“Because you didn’t,” Davie said, smiling.

I turned to Mary, who was looking at me through wide, guilty eyes. “Jenny told me not to let you soak in your misery,” she tried to explain. “She made me promise.”

Jenny. Of course. Just a short visit wasn’t enough, she had to put my life in order even in her absence.

“Right. I need to make a call.”
Davie laughed. “No matter how many calls you make, Claire, you’re coming with us tonight. We’ve missed you, red-rimmed eyes and all.”

I rolled my eyes at the sight of him batting his eyelashes at me.

“Ready to go!” Malva reported from the hallway, and we left.

Three hours and a few glasses of wine later, I felt lightheaded and realized that smiling had gotten easier. A few older students were discussing types of surgical sutures and techniques, and I focused on memorizing the information for further research, when I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I moved to the side, thinking that I was in someone’s way, but the tapping continued.

“Why, Miss Bennet, you won’t deign to talk to us now?” The words hid a smirk I knew all too well, and danced in a light French accent. I turned around and smiled, even before I saw him. Robert, just as I remembered him, minus the dust and heat.

“How did you know it was me?” I asked, frowning.

He glanced at my hair, unruly curls flying around my head, wild with humidity. I resisted the urge to pat them down, as I always did in his presence. It was as if we were back in Zambia.

“I think that’s pretty obvious,” he replied with a cocky grin. “Exquisite hair.”

I laughed and pushed him lightly on the shoulder. “Still a prat, I see.”

“Always. I wouldn’t want to disappoint.”

Sure that by now I had missed the important arguments in the conversation about sutures, I decided to catch up with Robert instead.

I hadn’t expected it, but it was nice to see him. A familiar face from my life before Oxford. A part of my past that hadn’t changed.

And for a night, while talking to Robert, I could pretend that I was still happy.
This story was born as a result of my procrastination. I wrote the first chapter instead of working on the paper for my PhD, an evening I was alone in the lab. I couldn’t resist, because I could see Jamie right there in front of me, teasing Claire in the class. Now, a year and a half later, I have finished writing my paper and my PhD thesis, got my PhD and I prepare for the next stage of my life. I guess what I want to say is… It has been a journey.

I posted the first chapter as a one-shot and your feedback made me go on. Back then I knew the beginning and the end of this story and thought it would be about 20 chapters long. Well, these two kids had other plans. They had so much to do in between, to live together, that the story kept becoming longer and longer. And I loved it. I loved writing them. I really, really did.

When I was a few chapters in, I posted on Tumblr something about English not being my native language (as if that wasn’t obvious – I had just started writing in English). The amazing @theministerskat saw that post and sent me a dm offering to beta Thermo. She was the first person I talked to on Tumblr and has stayed with me since then, correcting approximately 124,472,539 wrong prepositions in the process. Kat, I hope you haven’t regretted that dm. I can’t thank you enough. Love you.

So, here we are. The last chapter! Thank you all for the love you have shown to this story. Thank you for your kudos and comments. Thank you for being a part of this journey! You’re amazing.

Oxmas.

A little Christmas bubble in Oxford before the end of the term, created for the students to celebrate the holiday together. Even if it had to be a month early.

Music, colourful Christmas markets, trees going up on the streets – even at the centre of the old
Bodleian court. I could never have imagined the Bodleian court looking more beautiful, but apparently, everything looks better with a Christmas tree.

My legs were hurting from the midnight ice-skating Malva, Mary, and Maisri had dragged me to. The three M’s of my Catastrophe, as I called them. But it was fun. A lot of fun. So much fun that I had forgotten myself for a while and laughed with all my heart.

Then I’d remembered that I would never tell him how great midnight ice-skating with friends was. Him. Sometimes it was difficult even to think of his name, let alone say it.

But life was going on and I was still at Oxford, with friends and our magical Christmas campus. Thinking about how terrible the holiday would be back at home, I decided that I owed it to myself to have a little bit of fun here.

I didn’t want to think about the end of the term. I was supposed to go to the US and then to Lallybroch with Jamie. Lamb wouldn’t be in Edinburgh, because when I announced my initial plans he’d decided that he wouldn’t fly back. He was at a critical point in his research, he’d said.

Back then, it was fine. Lamb was happy and he’d eased my guilt for leaving him alone in a single phone call.

It was the reason I still hadn’t told Lamb about Jamie. I didn’t want him to come back because his little niece couldn’t handle a break-up. And now, once the term was over, I would spend a month in Edinburgh alone, most probably studying for the next term. The ideal Christmas break. Just awesome.

“You’re still in your pyjamas?” Malva’s eyebrows shot up the moment she entered my dorm room.

“Yes?” I asked confused, as I watched her walking towards me, shaking her head.

“Today is the event at Bodleian’s Old Schools Quad, remember? The one with the projections of maps on the buildings? You said you wanted to go!”

I had said that, but then I forgot about it. It would be amazing, seeing the maps from the Bodleian Library collection projected onto the library’s historic buildings. I shot Malva an apologetic glance and got out of bed. “Give me ten minutes?” I implored, and headed towards my closet.

“We’ll wait for you outside,” she said, before I heard the door click shut.

I wore my favourite pair of jeans and a soft, warm sweater. Boots. A woollen scarf and a beanie, that meant I didn’t have to put any effort into taming my unruly curls. In less than ten minutes, I joined Malva and Mary who were giggling at something next to the front door.

“What?” I asked, walking towards the entrance.

“Well, our little shy daisy here has something to tell you, Claire.”

My eyes shot from Malva’s teasing smile to Mary’s blushing cheeks. “Oh my God! What?”

“It’s nothing!” Mary exclaimed, much louder than normal. Startling herself with her raised voice, her next words came out in a whisper. “It’s nothing, nothing. I’ve only met him once.”

“Him? Who?” I inquired with a grin on my face.

“Alex,” Malva replied instead of Mary, batting her eyelashes and faking a swoon.
“Who is Alex, Mary?”

“This guy,” Mary murmured. “I dropped my scarf last night and he picked it up and gave it back to me. He was so kind, and he smiled…”

“And?” I pushed her, but Mary had hardly heard me, lost in her reverie.

“We were walking in the same direction,” she continued, her voice dreamy. “And we talked, and I don’t know how, but I didn’t stutter at all. He had the most beautiful eyes, and he’s a fresher too.”

“Which college?” Malva asked, chewing her lip. “We should pay him a visit!”

“Nnn-o, no, no.” Mary faltered. “And I don’t know that, anyway. An older guy materialized next to us all of a sudden and told him they had to go. Alex looked at me and said –”

“Till next time,” Malva spoke, imitating a man’s low voice.

“Yes, but not like that, you know,” Mary corrected, smiling and blushing even more. “But he doesn’t have my number and I– I don’t know how…”

“Come on.” I linked her elbow with mine. “He might be there tonight.”

I was sure Mary hadn’t seen a single projection all night, her eyes scanning the crowd for him, for Alex. It was sweet and honest, and it made my heart hurt. So I focused my attention on the lights dancing on the hundred year old walls. The old and the new, in perfect conjunction. With my eyes on the Old School Quad buildings, I didn’t notice another him until he was standing right next to me.

“That interested in maps, are you?” Robert’s French accent stood out from the British ones around us. I hadn’t seen him since that night at the bar, three days before. We had agreed to go out for drinks again, the way people always do when they say goodbye because they feel like they have to. He had my number and I had his from when we were back in Zambia, but, as expected, neither of us had called.

“It’s enchanting, isn’t it?” I asked in a light voice as I moved my eyes over another projection.

He made a low, affirmative sound, but when I turned my head towards him, he was already looking at me again. “So, how do you find your first Oxmas?”

Robert shrugged. “It’s weird, isn’t it? The term hasn’t finished and I still have to work on an essay for the 26th, but everyone is so cheery. And you know, the trees, the lights…”

“They create a totally different atmosphere,” I finished his thought. “It will be weird when it’s over, going back to the pre-Christmas mood.”

“Definitely,” he agreed. “But I like it.”

“Well, celebrating Christmas twice can’t be bad.”

His eyes changed for a moment, and his mouth became a hard line. Before I had the chance to say something, he smiled.

“Christmas is not my favourite time of the year,” he explained softly.

I was ready to ask how that could be, but I stopped myself in time. His mother. Maybe Christmas brought back memories of family traditions, and his mother was an inextricable part of this time for
him. As Ellen had been for Jamie. I wondered whether not having so many memories from my parents was beneficial from time to time. But then, I would give my soul for a few more moments with them.

I took a step towards Robert and squeezed his arm in solidarity. Neither of us spoke, but we didn’t need to.

At some point, Malva disappeared and a bit later I felt someone pinching my arm.

“Ouch!” I turned to look at Mary. “What?” She was blushing again, and when I looked next to her, I saw a skinny guy with brown hair and the sweetest smile who was blushing too.

“I didn’t find him, but he found me,” Mary whispered to me, her eyes shining with happiness. “Do you mind if we leave?”

I bit my lip to stop the smile from growing wider on my face. “No, of course not. Good luck!” I watched them until they disappeared into the crowd.

I spent the rest of the night standing next to Robert, admiring the projections, enjoying the comfortable silence between us, and letting the colours of light sneak into my heart.

“So, what’s the plan now?” he asked once the event was over. He looked around, searching for something. Or someone. “It seems that my friends ditched me,” he observed a moment later.

I snorted. “Yeah, mine too. Not big fans of maps, it seems.”

“Booze sounds better,” he commented.

“Does it?” I wondered.

“Oui. Join me for a pint?” Robert winked at me, then looked nonchalantly at the people leaving the library.

“You know that once I take the beanie off, a jungle of curls will be waiting underneath it?” I half-joked, half-prepared him for what he would see.

Robert laughed, then looked at my beanie as if I was hiding a little monster underneath it.

“You’re right,” he grimaced after a long moment of examination. “We better just walk around.”

His grimace became sincere when he felt my blow to his arm. “You’re an arse,” I added, for good measure.

“I think I’ve heard that one before,” he laughed, rubbing his arm. “That hurt,” he grumbled. “You’re paying for the drinks.”

“Fine! But no hair jokes for the rest of the night!”

“Deal!” he said, tugging on a curl, stretching it out and watching it spring back.

We went to a crowded pub, sat at the only available table in a corner, but Robert didn’t let me pay for the drinks. We talked about life in Oxford, the medical school and his courses on economics, and I tried hard to keep Jamie out of my mind, not to break down just because Robert had some common classes with him. Robert talked about his father’s business in France, and listened to my stories from my travels with Lamb. When we left, he announced that he would walk me back to my dorm, because it was late and he was a gentleman. Ignoring my snort at his description of himself, we
started walking towards the dorms of Lady Margaret’s Hall.

It was much quieter now that the events were over, but students were still walking around, laughing, flirting, and giggling. The night was beautiful, and a few stars hung in the clear sky. I took a deep breath and tried to empty my head from all thoughts of my heartbreak. I had fun tonight, and I was allowed to. I was entitled to it.

When we arrived at my dorm, I turned to say goodnight only to find Robert’s face a few inches away from mine. My heart stopped when I felt his hot breath and smelled the peppermint in it, from drops he’d bought from a stall at the Christmas market. I held my breath in turn, knowing that it smelled exactly the same. I had eaten half his peppermint drops on our way back to my dorm.

I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. Before I had time to think, Robert tilted his head closer to me, and the next moment he brushed his lips against mine. It was gentle. A start. An invitation for more.

And I freaked out.

I took a hurried step back, raising a hand to my lips and looking at him through wide eyes.

Robert frowned at me, then took a step back, too. “You’re single, aren’t you?” he implored, perplexed.

“How?” I asked, not wanting to affirm his notion.

“How did I know?”

I nodded.

“You haven’t mentioned him once tonight or the other night at the bar, you’re not constantly on your phone texting him and you didn’t send him a picture from the event. Even though you loved it. It wasn’t so hard to figure out,” he concluded and shrugged, his gaze falling on my lips again.

“I guess I’m quite easy to read,” I murmured and heard him chuckle.

“I like that.”

I nodded again, not knowing what to say. The truth. I had to tell him the truth. I was never good at lies, anyway.

“Robert,” I started and his green eyes locked with mine. He was one of those people who didn’t even have to try to look good. Robert was the definition of a handsome man. But that didn’t matter at all. I took a deep breath and continued. “You’re not wrong. Jamie and I, we…” I swallowed, cursing myself for stumbling. “We broke up. But I’m not ready, and I don’t want to move on before I am. It wouldn’t be fair, to either of us.”

Robert nodded and raised his chin, in defeat or acceptance I wasn’t sure, but kept his eyes low on the ground. “I understand.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, wanting him to look at me again. “I’m still in love with him.”

At that comment, Robert looked at me and gave me a wistful smile. He took a step towards me again and placed a warm, gentle hand on my cheek. His thumb caressed my cheekbone as he murmured something in French, so low that I wasn’t able to catch it. “You’re a good one, Claire,” he said, at last.
“I don’t know about that,” I disagreed.

“I do,” he insisted, then took a step back and turned to leave. I stayed rooted in place. He had only taken two steps away before he turned back again, grinned at me, and said, “See you around, Miss Bennet.”

As I walked up to my room, I wondered whether he was a good one. If I had made a huge mistake by stopping him, by not kissing him back. He was beautiful, smart and witty, even if he was a little bit more cocky and authoritative than I would like.

And yet, kissing him now didn’t feel right.

Robert had a wonderful French accent, and all I wanted to hear was Jamie’s heavy Scottish one.

I fell onto my bed, hating Jamie for ruining my Oxmas, my chances for a future, my life. Hating myself for loving him so much.

Mary came back from her date after midnight. Alex had kissed her and her exhilaration permeated the thick layer of unhappiness that surrounded me. I was happy for her. I was glad she had found someone who was so like her, who could understand her, and care for her. Who didn’t mind if she was shy or stuttered, and saw the lovely person she was.

By the time Mary fell asleep, I couldn’t find it in me to be upset anymore. But I couldn’t force myself to be happy either. I slipped into my semi-depressed state with ease, and when I realized sleep wasn’t a choice anymore, I put on my thickest winter coat and headed out to the gardens.

I don’t know how long I sat by the river, crying, while trying to stop my stupid heart from suffocating me. At last, I lay down on the cold grass, closed my eyes and wondered what kind of an idiot I would be if I ended up with pneumonia. Maybe that would be enough of a shock to delete Jamie from my mind.

Maybe.

I woke up with the dawn overtaking the night sky and a hand holding mine. My heart began beating faster and faster, and I closed my eyes again, trying to figure out what to do. This wasn’t a woman’s hand. It wasn’t Mary’s, or Malva’s. It was a big, warm, male hand that seemed strangely familiar. But who was I to be sure about the familiarity of hands? I resolved to leap to my feet, take a look at the person lying beside me, and if I didn’t know him, run back to my dorm as fast as I could.

But then he spoke. And his voice was a balm that soothed reality away.

“If I lay here, if I just lay here, will you lie with me and just forget the world?”

My heart stopped and I felt my eyes grow abnormally wide as I opened them again. I tried to breathe, but I couldn’t. I tried to react, to turn and look at him, but I was afraid that he was just a dream and the moment I turned he would dissolve into thin air. He had spoken to me in my dreams before. He had never been there when I had woken up.

“But you’ve never touched me,” I croaked with effort.

“What?” His whisper was barely audible. Tentative.

“You’ve never touched me in my dreams before.”

A chuckle. “Yeah, bummer.” His voice quivered and a shiver ran down my spine. “I couldn’t touch
you in my dreams either, Sassenach, and I decided to do something about it.”

My whole body tensed.

_The gall of him._

I sat up so quickly the world tilted on its axis for a few seconds. When I found my bearings again, I slowly turned to look at him.

God, he was beautiful. Those red curls, the bright blue eyes, the wide mouth. I suddenly realized why I couldn’t kiss Robert. His soft brown locks, his shining green eyes, his full lips – they were all wrong. Perfect, but wrong.

A small smile curled Jamie’s lips and I realized he was drinking me in too.

And then it hit me. The hurt, the desperation, the anger.

“What are you doing here.” It wasn’t a question. It was an interrogation. I set my jaw, resolute to be rigid, determined not to cry.

“I had to see you,” he said in a low voice and moved to take my hand. I snatched it away from him.

“Why? Are you trying to establish a new tradition? Do we have to see each other once a month now that we’re not together?”

“Twenty-six days,” he countered.

“What?” I asked incredulously.

“It’s been twenty-six days since that night.”

_That_ night. I knew exactly how many days it had been. A part of me had died over the course of each one of those days. I kept my hard gaze on Jamie for a long moment, then stood up. “Well, you saw me. Now, goodbye, Jamie.”

“Claire!” he yelled, alarmed, as he sprang up and rushed to me. “Wait.” He towered over me and grabbed my arm, afraid I would leave if he didn’t have a proper hold on me. I didn’t know if he was wrong about that. I wanted to get away, far away from him. Even looking at him hurt. “Please, Sassenach.”

“What do you want?” Ice infused my tone.

“I need to talk to you.”

I didn’t want to listen to him, and yet, I wished for him to tell me everything. I wanted to know his heart, his thoughts. I needed answers, so many answers, but just looking at him and knowing he had decided he didn’t want to be mine was stealing my breath. He was here, but he wasn’t my Jamie anymore.

I took a step to leave and heard him gasp, as if I had shot him. I froze in place, balling my hands into fists.

I was fighting with myself, struggling to find what I wanted, and how much more pain I could handle. I closed my eyes, trying to set my feelings in order before they could choke me.

I felt like I was four again, standing in the aisle with the chocolate bars at the grocery store and trying
to choose one. It was one of the few memories I had with my dad, shopping together. I will never forget how I had stared and stared at the chocolates, licking my lips as if I were imagining their taste on my tongue, trying to decide which one I should put in our cart. And then, surprising myself, I had suddenly started crying. Soon my silent tears turned into wailing, bringing my dad’s attention back to me.

“What’s wrong, Claire?” he had asked, eyebrows scrunched in a frown.

But I couldn’t answer his question. I hadn’t known what was wrong. I only knew that I wanted to do what he had asked and choose only one chocolate, but I also wanted to buy all of them. And I felt tired, too tired to decide. I only wanted my mum, because mum would know which chocolate was the best. So I kept crying, and crying, until my breath came in gasps, and my dad’s face was blurry in front of me.

He had held my shoulders and pulled me into a hug, then, his big hand drawing circles on my back to soothe me.

“In here,” he had said afterwards, tapping lightly on my chest, “Snuggle our feelings. And they are so many, sweetheart, that sometimes they don’t talk to each other and try to get out of our chest all at once. And we start crying, because we are confused and we don’t know how to feel. I want you to take a deep breath, stop crying, and tell me what’s wrong.”

And with my father squatting in front of me, his hands tucking errand curls behind my ears, I had told him that I didn’t know what I wanted.

I felt the same now, only that I was not four anymore, and I couldn’t throw a fit. Jamie was here, standing in front of me, looking me through pleading eyes, and he was all the chocolates. And yet, I couldn’t have him. I couldn’t trust him, not anymore, but I didn’t want to leave either. I couldn’t.

So I inhaled. Exhaled. In and out, again and again, following my dad’s advice. My coat was soaked from lying on the grass for so many hours, and my hands felt like ice cubes. And I decided to listen to him.

“Let’s go find a bench. My arse is freezing.”

I started walking and heard him falling in step behind me, undoing the zipper of his insulated jacket. “Here,” he offered, catching up with me in two wide strides.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I dismissed him, keeping my chin high.

“Please, Sassenach.”

“Don’t call me that!” I hissed, breathing hard. He had decided that I was not his Sassenach before he made that video call. I was plain Claire to him now, and he had better deal with it.

“Please, Claire,” he repeated, rectifying his slip.

I took his jacket begrudgingly and wore it. It was dry and warm, and it smelled like him. Dammit.

Two minutes later we were sitting on a bench, watching the sky changing from a deep blue to a lighter one. It was beautiful. This would be one of my favourite moments with him if his surprise had happened a month ago. Now, however, I could feel the bitter taste of these twenty-six days in my throat every time I swallowed.
“I’ll hear you.”

“Can I hold yer hands, please?”

“No.” My voice was colder than my hands as I shoved them into his jacket pockets.

Jamie took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. It was such a simple gesture and so him, that I felt my heart clench inside my chest. “I miss ye, Claire,” he whispered. “Every moment, every day.”

I resolved not to talk until he was done, and to keep any tears at bay. I would not cry. I would not.

“I miss ye when I wake up and I don’t find yer text on my phone. I miss ye when the guys do something funny and I can’t text you to laugh with you about it. I miss ye when I finish training and I can’t call ye to see how ye’re doing. I miss ye when I go back to the dorm and canna talk to ye about my day. I wake up every day, knowing that no matter what happens I willna be happy, Claire… I canna think of myself without ye.”

Fuck my resolution. I had to speak.

“So you didn’t seem to have any problem with that, twenty-six days ago,” I deadpanned.

“I was a fool.” Jamie’s voice trembled. “I thought… I thought breaking up would be hard, but we’d get over it and then everything would be easier for both of us. I could see ye struggling here, and I couldna even hug you when ye needed me, when ye were tired from long hours in the library. Ye couldna come to my races or be there to calm me down when I was stressed. Another guy in the team broke up with his girlfriend who lived in another State and he got over it, eventually. And we arena in different States, Craig. We live on different continents,” he explained as if that detail had eluded me. “I felt torn all the time, between ye and my life in the US. I ken that I was the one who changed our plans, I was the one who went to Michigan—”

“I never said anything about our plans. I never complained, and I supported your decision from the very first moment. I was the one who told you to go. That is not why we broke up. We broke up because you stopped believing in us. Because you wanted somebody who would be closer to you.”

“No!” he protested, his gaze bore into mine with insistence and flame. “No, not somebody. Not anybody. I wanted ye to be close to me, and I thought that if we were in a long-distance relationship for years the pain of not seeing each other would become too much, until we couldna take it anymore. Or what we had would become less. I thought that we would gradually fall apart, and I didna want that. I thought that we didna have any other option, Sassenach. Every time that ye missed one of my calls, or I missed yers, I became more sure of it. Then I thought…” he trailed off.

“What? What else did you think, Jamie?” I prompted, impatient. He was a mess but I didn’t feel merciful in that moment to go soft on him. Not after everything I had been through.

“I thought if we were destined to be together, maybe we would find each other again once ended up in the same country. But now I know, Claire. I dinna want to find ye again after how ever many years, and realize that ye don’t want to be mine anymore. That there is a big part of yer life that I know nothing about. I dinna want to miss yer first day in the OR, or yer graduation. I dinna want to miss yer smiles after yer tutorials, even if I can only see them through a screen. I dinna ken what I was thinking when I believed I could do it without you, but I can’t. I can’t and I don’t want to be without you.”

I huffed, partly because I didn’t want to let his words have an impact on me. “Twenty-six days. Took
you long enough.”

“I tried, at first. I tried to go on, to tuck you into a corner of my heart and keep living. But I couldn’t, Sassenach, because all of my heart was yers. I could have come to find you after those first few days. And maybe I should have, but I didna, because I wanted to be sure. But no matter how hard I tried, living without ye didna become easier. It became harder. I kent how I was with ye, and now I ken how it is to live without ye. It sucks, Claire. I’m miserable without ye. All I could think of this past month—”

“Twenty-six days,” I interrupted him.

He smiled, shaking his head. “I love ye. A Dhia, I love ye so much it hurts. Twenty-six days. All I could think of was ye, Sassenach. How I wanted to share everything with ye. How I needed to ken where ye are, what ye’re doing, and how ye feel. I missed ye with every breath I took. And now I ken that I canna go on without ye.”

I’d resolved not to cry, but treacherous tears were rolling down my cheeks without asking for my permission.

“And how do I know that you won’t change your mind again? How can I trust you again, Jamie?”

My question found its target in his heart, and I saw his sharp intake of breath from the impact. “You broke my heart,” I whispered, as an explanation. “You broke me.”

He looked down for a moment, but quickly locked his eyes on mine again. “I fucked up. I know I did. Forgive, mo nighean donn. Forgive me, please.” He paused for a moment, and extended his hand between us, palm facing up. He didn’t remove it when I didn’t move to take it, and he continued. “All I’m asking for is another chance. One chance, Sassenach. If ye’re not ready, if ye need time, I can wait. I will wait for as long as it takes.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t think time would change how I felt. I loved him, I knew I did. But he had given up on us, yielding to his fears. He didn’t believe we would make it through all the years of our separation. He had chosen a life without me and broke me in the process.

Well, and he regretted it. It was clear that he did. I could see it as much in the pain in his eyes as I could hear it in his voice when he spoke.

I watched Jamie’s chest rising and falling with every breath he took while he waited for me to say something. His hair was a mess from all the times he had run his hand through it. I wanted to fix it, and then run my fingers over his cheekbones, over the curve of his lips. And yet, I was frozen in my place. Not even to take his hand that lay on the bench between us.

“How can we ever be the same again?” I asked, unsure. I started caving in, and I didn’t know how to feel about it.

“I dinna want us to be the same. D’ye remember the first time I talked to ye?” he asked with a timid smile. “In Mrs. Fitz’s class, ye were keeping notes on the first law of thermodynamics.”

I didn’t know where he was going with that, but I stayed silent and let him go on.

“The conservation of energy. Nothing is lost, Sassenach; only changed. And I don’t care if we change, as long as we change together. This… Me without ye… It was an interruption in the first law of thermodynamics. Because I was lost. And that’s against the laws of physics.”

I laughed. This was ridiculous. Jamie blushed, and then laughed with me.
“I ken what I want now, Claire. I want ye. I want us. And I will fight for us, if ye let me, because what we had – what we have – it’s true. It’s truer than anything I will ever get. It’s more than I could ever ask for.”

I kept my eyes on the river, the grass, the sky. I felt my heart beating faster in response to his words, as if each time he spoke he glued another of its broken parts back in place.

“All I’m asking for, is a chance,” Jamie implored. “A chance to prove myself to ye, mo ghraidh.”

“A chance,” I murmured, trying to sort the tangle of emotions in my chest.

He came closer, now brave enough to take my hands out of my pockets and wrap them in his. “I know ye and ye know me. Ye’re the only person in the world that really knows me. Ye’re my heart and my soul Claire, and I canna leave without them, can I?” Without taking his eyes from me, he leaned into me and kissed me gently on the lips.

And damn him, it felt right. But I didn’t kiss him back. I had more to say.

“You didn’t talk to me.” I kept my voice calm. “You had all these thoughts in your head, and you left me here in the dark, thinking that everything was alright on your end. And when you made up your mind, you just called me to announce the verdict of a trial I didn’t participate in.”

Jamie opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again. I guess there was nothing he could say that wouldn’t be a lie. He had decided for both of us.

“This…” I started again. “This is not how things work, how relationships work. If you have second thoughts, I need to know. If you need something I’m not giving you, I need to know. If you believe that we’re fucking falling apart,” I finally barked, unable to keep the anger from my voice, “I. Need. To. Know.”

Jamie nodded, but I was far from finished. “What we’re trying to do is bloody hard. We need to talk, and talking includes the unpleasant discussions too. I’m not going to try again without knowing that you’ll do that.”

“I give ye my word, Claire. We will make this work. I will do anything I can to make sure it does.”

“Will you talk to me? Always?” There was no ice or blaze in my voice now. Just a question. A sincere question that demanded an honest answer.

“Always,” Jamie vowed and leaned into me. “I will not give up on us, ever again,” he whispered on my lips, and I drank the words in.

I had trusted him with my heart before and he broke it. But he was right when he said that I knew him. And I knew he’d torn his own heart apart in the process too. I could still see the pain in the way his sweater hung a little too wide on him, in the black bags underneath his blue eyes. I looked into his eyes, those eyes I knew better than my own, and saw the truth in them.

“One chance, Jamie Fraser. You won’t get another.”

“I willna need another. Ye’re mine and I’m yers, and I will never let you go again.”

“Promise?” I asked, as if that would seal the deal. As if his promise would secure my happiness.

“Promise,” Jamie nodded emphatically, his eyes overflowing with tears that split when he closed them and kissed me again.
And this time, I kissed him back. It was long, and soft, and encompassing. It was an offering of his soul, and I took it, keeping it safe inside my chest. A treasure and a hostage.

“Plus,” Jamie said once we stopped to catch our breath. “I offer you a chance to torture me forever for making the worst mistake of my life.”

I laughed, cupped his cheeks and kissed him again.

I closed my eyes. Life was nothing but chances and choices. Decisions. Paths waiting for us to take them. A huge aisle with chocolate bars.

I looked towards the path in front of me and I saw Jamie and me together – arguing, fighting, kissing, laughing. I saw a man who wasn’t flawless, but was mine. I saw a future that wasn’t perfect, but was real.

I saw happy moments and sad ones. I saw difficulties and dreams coming true. I saw us facing life with our hands clasped tightly together.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw a risk, but a risk worth taking.

“Challenge accepted, Jamie Fraser.”

And just like that, the next chapter of our lives began.

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