Our son.

by Jack_andthestalk

Summary

Hi, this is my new fic. It will be multi chapter.

Story surrounds . Jamie and Claire having a one night stand, conceiving a son. They have been amicably co parenting for past four years but not in a relationship. Claire lives in Boston, Jamie in Scotland.

Claire for the first time in four years is returning to Lallybroch to be maid of honour at Jenny’s wedding.
Back to Lallybroch

As my plane touched down on Scottish soil, I looked out over the beautiful landscape, I snorted to myself thinking of the last time I had touched down in Scotland, four years previous. Eager to sight see with Uncle Lamb and oblivious to how my life was about to drastically change. My first time in Scotland was a promised visit, a long overdue holiday with Uncle Lambert, while I finished medical school and still had the luxury of a summer break, before going out in the real world of hospital rotas and long shifts. The visit had been in Uncle Lamb's mind for sometime, his best friend Brian Fraser owned a historical Estate called Lallybroch, in a small village, Broch Morda, high in the hills of the Scottish highlands. Since my parents had passed away three years previously, Uncle Lamb had taken me on as his own, and did his level best to be both Mum and Dad to a very broken and scared sixteen year old. Brian and Ellen had visited us plenty in Boston during those first few years, helping Lamb find his feet with a teenager and offering support wherever they could to me. We had never managed to return the visit, Lamb had plenty of times, while he worked in Scotland on digs, he always stayed at Lallybroch. He had never managed to bring me, until that summer. It was one of my best holidays, made only better by the presence of Jenny and Jamie Fraser. Brian and Ellen’s children. My first time to meet them but we became quick and fast friends. Three weeks of unadulterated fun! What was the worst the could happen? Little did I know four years ago, in an unused cottage on Fraser lands, that my son would be conceived. And here I was returning to Lallybroch again, as a guest for Jenny’s wedding. My first time in Scotland and my first time in a long time to be in my son’s fathers presence. I took a breath and stepped on to Scottish tarmac. ***********

Three months after returning from my holiday with Uncle Lamb I came to the slow realisation that my periods had stopped. Funny with all my medical training, I put it down to stress and losing weight over exam stress. It was only as I was almost approaching my second trimester that I realised, I was in fact pregnant. One long night between the sheets with Jamie Fraser being the cause of my ailment. A frantic and absolutely awkward phone-call to Jamie ensued. Followed by equally frantic and awkward phone calls between Lamb and the Frasers shortly after. Promises of standing by me and helping, flowing free on both sides. I just lay on my bathroom floor crying, wondering how the hell would I manage to sit my final exams 8 months pregnant. True to their word, the Frasers including Jamie had done everything and anything since our little was born to help me be a single mum and work as a doctor. He was flown back to Scotland every two months. Ellen usually flying to Boston to collect him, spending a few days with me and then flying them both home, where the little monkey was thoroughly spoilt for weeks at a time. Jamie flying him back, brief and nervous greetings at Airport arrivals with me, before Jamie was rushing to a departure gate to return to Scotland to manage the estate and farm. We managed to co parent as only two modern full time working adults can, our communication being completely facilitated by Ellen, Brian, Lamb and Jenny. This was the first time I would be in Jamie’s company for longer than a few hours with our son present. Deep Breath. ***********

Jenny picked me up from the Airport, Jamie had brought Willie to Inverness to pick up horses and would meet us back at Lallybroch. Willie had arrived in Lallybroch, three weeks earlier, accompanied by Jamie. I simply couldn’t wait to see my little boy. I fidgeted nervously with my hands. Imagining how the week would go, all of us together. Jenny bubbling with excitement about her upcoming nuptials, chatting animatedly on the way to Lallybroch. Her brown hair tied in a messy bun and her hands moving over the steering wheel to illustrate the story she was telling. Wedding flowers. Jenny and I, had built a strong friendship since my first visit to Lallybroch. Obviously because of the consequences of that visit we were thrown together somewhat. The
Frasers simply became family. I was the mother of Jenny’s only nephew and the Frasers only
grandchild. Jenny flew out and stayed with Willie and myself often and was always on the end
of the phone in both support of Willie and friendship for me. Quite simply Jenny and myself had a
strong bond, I was so touched and taken aback when she asked me to be her maid of honour. I may
have cried for several hours after her phonecall. I had no siblings, and for Jenny who had any
amount of friends, to pick me to be at her side on one of the most important days of her life was
simply not something I would ever forget. Her gruff speech and the rarity of emotional words from
her, the day she rang to ask, didn’t help the flow of tears. “Ye ken it’s no just because yer Willie’s
mam, ye’ have been there for me more in the past four years then anyone, yer sister Claire no
matter what else,” she sniffed at her end of the phone and added jovially “asides it’ll make Da
happy, he can try and push you and Jamie towards the priest and legitimise his grandson.”

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We had both laughed at that. Jenny had been excitedly talking about her wedding, a change in her
voice, interrupted my thoughts. “So ye have yet to meet Laoghaire then Claire?” Jamie’s new
girlfriend. “Yes, that’s right. What is she like Jen?” Jamie had phoned me a few weeks before,
gruffly stating he was seeing someone and would it be ok for Willie to meet her. I had said off
course, I trust your judge of character but the whole episode had left me feeling empty and I was
struggling to think why, probably because I didn’t want any other stepmum type person in Willies
life. I knew that was silly because Jamie wouldn’t allow someone to act as a Mum to Willie ... and
yet still. Jenny’s tone had gone a little higher in pitch when she replied. “Ach, I s’ pose she is grand
Claire.. she is queer mad about Jamie, I dinna know if that’s necessarily a good thing though... she
can come on a bit strong...”

Intrigued by Jenny’s first statement, I questioned,
“What’s she like with Willie?”

Jenny squinted her eyes as if trying to sum up her thoughts, “Weel she came on a bit strong there
too, tried to smother him with affection, to impress Jamie I presume, but then she rang one of
the days asking could she take him out, Mam had to tell her it wasna appropriate .. I think that stung a
bit .. but it settled her down some.”

This woman was going to be around my son and I prayed Jamie had chosen well. “Do ye mind?”
Jenny’s voice softening. Clearly thinking this a sensitive topic. “Not about her being around Willie,
but Jamie having a girlfriend I s’pose”, she finished. “No don’t be silly why would I mind, Jamie
and I were never a thing”, that empty feeling returning again. “Well that’s just it, I have no asked
ye before Claire but ... weel was Willie just a one night thing or was there more to it?” She glanced
over to look at my face and quickly added. “Yer welcome to tell me to mind my own business, aye?
But I always wondered about ye?” I simply replied. “No just the one night.” A sudden flashback of
me lying spread eagled and wanting, under Jamie’s strong body came back to mr. Nails clawing
down his back and Jamie’s whisper of Gaelic in my ear, made my stomach clench. I looked out the
window so Jenny wouldn’t see my expression. This trip was clearly unearthing regressed
memories. Great.

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We pulled into Lallybroch courtyard to be met by Brian Fraser. Tall and dark unlike Jamie’s
colouring But had the Fraser eyes, which my son had inherited. “Ach there she is now, Claire ye
look bonnier each time I see ye!” Brian’s outstretched arms waiting to embrace me. “Quit yer
embarrassing pur Claire, Brian stop it.” Ellen smiling at her husband, knowing he had no intention of stopping. Brian Fraser, always the charmer and made no secret he wanted his son married to the mother of their child, partly for old fashioned reasons, partly because I was the niece of his best friend and partly, I hoped because he liked me. His teasing of the issue was guaranteed and accepted. I’d probably be more upset if he stopped. What would I do if he was jesting with this Laoighaire about marrying Jamie? Get a grip Beauchamp. “Claire, Jamie and Willie willnae be long now, I’m sure yer dying to see yer wee lad, god he is a braw boy isnt he Brian Mac?” “Aye Ellen, like his Da and me..” A loud ahem from me and a smile. “Oh aye you too Claire, Jamie was only saying he gets more like ye every day.” Did he now. I was sitting at the large kitchen table in Lallybroch’s kitchen when I heard a Jeep door slamming and little footsteps thumping through the house. “Mama... Mama!”, Willie bounding into the kitchen and up into my arms. Jamie following closely behind him, standing, arms folded and resting against the doorframe. Watching Willie and I unite, a smile on his face. “I miss you Mama” Willie clutching me about the neck, “me an Da counted down all the days ye we’re com’n on Da’s pone.” “Oh well hasn’t Da a clever pone!” I exclaimed mocking my sons pronunciation of phone, ruffling Willies red mop of hair, just like Jamie’s. I took in Willie from head to toe, satisfied that all was well and not much had changed over our three weeks apart, only a few more freckles and maybe a little taller. I readjusted my gaze and looked back up at Jamie, who was watching my ministrations with Willie, a tender look on his face. “All as it should be Sassenach?” A smirk forming on his lips. “Yes, sorry I’m always afraid il miss something”, “aye me too, Dinna fash I do the exact same.” I took in Jamie’s appearance. I always forgot how big he was. In terms of genetics I couldn’t have picked a better father. Jamie was a beautiful man. Perfectly carved muscles, a strong Viking face and beautiful red curls just long enough to tumble around his face. I couldn’t look in my sons eyes without seeing Jamie’s. Willie was quite simply his double and had all the promise of Jamie’s height too. “How was yer flight?”, I stood to greet him, with a wriggly three and a half year old in my arms. He broached the distance, kissing me lightly on the cheek. “Hi Jamie, it was good I slept for most of it”. It’s great to finally get her and lovely to see everyone. I forgot how beautiful Lallybroch is”, Always good to see him. We stood for a minute taking in our son, before we could hear Ellen shouting to bring me up to my cottage. -
A scottish boy

Chapter Summary

Claire joins the Frasers for Dinner.

After chatting with the rest of the Fraser household for a while, Jamie and Willie said they would show me to the cottage where Willie and myself would be staying. I was familiar with them, there are four cottages in Lallybroch just on the hill at the entrance into the estate. Jamie now lives in one and the other three I believed were rented as holiday lets. The walk up to them was all too familiar, I could remember every step from the four years previous as Jamie and I stole away from the main house for time alone, knowing this to be my last night of holidays. I could see him ahead of me, pulling me uphill, a knowing look in his eye, licking his bottom lip in anticipation of what it would lick next.

Now the image in front of me was Jamie hanging Willie over his shoulder, tickling him as he held conversation with me. His wide muscular shoulders, bouncing Willie effortlessly between them. They were quite the sight, Willie squealing in ecstasy. I half wondered did he have the same fun with me?

“Mam thought it might suit ye better to be up beside my cottage, so Willie can sleep between the two of us?”, quickly adding “if ye like ye can stay in the main house either?”.

“No this is great, perfect in fact. Willie will be so excited to have us in the same proximity.”

I could have kicked myself for saying it, Jamie and I rarely discussed our situation and the fact that Willie never got to see us together. Willie knew enough at a young age to know our situation wasn’t necessarily the norm. He had spoken animatedly, about me coming to Scotland to visit his Da with his crèche carers, showing the significance in his young life. I didn’t want Jamie to feel anymore guilt than what I already did, Willie was very much loved and cared for. That had to be enough. Jamie was an excellent father and given that he didn’t have Willie full time, they had an almost extreme bond. Hero worship on both sides.

Just as we were mounting the hill, we spotted Jenny coming from the cottages, purposefully striding towards us, “Ach there ye are Claire, I just left ye up some spare blankets and I brought a few of Willies things up from the main house, so he has a few things to play with”.

Jenny stretched her hand out to Willie, “c’mon a bhalach, il bring you and yer mam up to yer cottage.”

“We’re fine Janet!” Jamie took me by surprise with the tone in his voice. Seemingly he took Jenny by surprise too when she responded, “what’s up with ye Jamie? I’m only going to...”, Jamie sighed.

“I ken Jenny, it’s just Willie might like if me and his mam settled him in, Aye?”
“Oh right weel ye only had to say brother, ye needna been so snippy”. “I wasna being snippy Janet.. I am merely....”

Jenny was marching on ignoring his protests."Oh Aye that is exactly how ye were brother, see ye at dinner Claire.” Jenny breezed past us, head in the air, Jamie would hear about this later, Willie had jumped out of Jamie’s arms and was following her. Jamie made to stop him.” I wanna see what granny is baking Da”.

Jamie rolling his eyes, "nay Willie ye will bide here with me and yer mam" I could see Willie dancing on each foot eager to get going, Willie had the Fraser stubborn streak and I could see this was mounting to a stand off.

"Let him go Jamie, il only be leaving my things in the cottage and I can go fetch him then". Jamie looked at me considering and eventually relented “Alright, but yer to come up with yer mama later Willie no messing, alright”.

“Right Da!” With that he was bounding behind Jenny.

Jamie opened the cottage, took my bags and brought them to one of the two bedrooms. He started pointing out toilet, kitchen etc. Before I knew what I was saying the words ‘I know Jamie, I was here before’ . Spilled out of my mouth. I regretted it immediately, especially seeing Jamie’s face turn pink and his hand started rubbing the back of his neck. A trait Willie always did when he was nervous or embarrassed.

“Aye, that’s right”

Oh god.

“Oh no ... I mean don’t be sorry..I just mean..I have been here before no need for a tour or whatever ...”

Christ what was I telling him not to be sorry for? Shagging me senseless in almost every space in this small cottage or forgetting I had ever been in it.

A smile formed on my lips, Jamie recognising my embarrassment, a smile forming on his own
“I did know Claire, I dinna want to presume ye would remember.” Christ what were we talking about now, the cottage? or the sex?

Please stop talking Jamie.

"so dinner in the main house later, aye?" I nodded and exhaled once he closed the door behind him. This was going to be a long holiday if my brain wouldn't engage with my mouth.

I was a tightly wound ball of stress by the time I made my way down to the main house, ,my hair freshly washed was falling down my back, curling madly, Willie just before I left the house 'saying yer hair is lovely and fizzy mama" didn't help my confidence. after spending too long deciding what to wear, which ended up with me wearing my usual skinny jeans and t shirt, I rushed my shower and ended up stubbing my toe on the wall getting out. It was sore, but for some reason tears started forming in my eyes and once they started I couldn't stop. I wasn’t too sure if it was completely to do with the stubbed toe. I eventually pulled myself together, when I heard Willie say “ it’s alright mama, I get you tissue, now there mama s’ok.” Willie was non stop chatter on the way down to the house, clearly thinking distraction was the cure to what ailed me.

Jenny's fiancé Ian, greeted me at the back kitchen door, hugging me tightly and commenting on my 'bonniness'. It was only after I saw Ian and his parents, I realised that dinner was going to be a more elaborate affair than just the immediate Frasers. Christ was Laoghaire going to be here?

Before I had time to form a sweat, Willie was pulling my hand ”'c'mon mama, ye can talk to uncle tian amoro", Willie was ready to socialise. I hoped he behaved during dinner.

Willie was busily dragging me by the hand into the kitchen, when he spotted Jamie. "Look Da, I bwought Mama!" Willie was bubbling over with excitement at showing me off. Jamie was smiling proudly at him, "ye did a leannan, where ever did ye find her?"

“In da cottage silly, sorwee we took a long time, mama was crying”

Jesus Willie really?

Jamie looked alarmed, "Claire, are ye ok, what's wrong?"

"Oh god no Im fine....I mean, its so silly..I. I stubbed my toe", I babbled out.
Jamie shook his head, "Claire, I ken ye well enough to know, ye dinna cry over stubbed toes, tell me mo chride?"

The term of endearment was too much and my eyes started filling with tears again. Fuck sake get a grip Beauchamp. "Christ look at ye, yer almost crying now? what's wrong?

"Jamie, please its fine, now please can I go and see Jenny, I need wine". I went to swan past him and he grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. "Claire ye would tell me, wouldn't ya? ...if there was something wrong?", I couldn't look him in the eye, there was something wrong but I couldn't put words on it myself how could I tell him? I blinked back the tears "yes" I said simply, taking in his blue eyes, turning darker with concern. He released me but I stood there for a minute, glad of his protection from the rest of the house, so that I might compose myself. Jamie seemed to know what I was about because he took my hand and said, "ready?" before leading me to the dining room with Willie and handing me a large glass of wine.

Dinner was a rambunctious affair, with Jenny's soon to be in-laws joining us, I needn't have been worried, they were just as lovely as Ian, welcoming me like family. I had regaled them with a few stories of Jenny and Ian visiting me in Boston, the stories involved Uncle Lamb taking Willie so Jen and Ian could show me a good night on the town and us all falling home inebriated. Jamie traced the table cloth with his hands, laughing when appropriate, he looked occasionally from me to Jenny or Ian but didn't comment much. When Ian's dad asked if he had any wild nights out in Boston, he simply said no his visits were fleeting. I thought I seen sadness cross his face, he deliberately turned and looked at me. A pang of guilt hit me, had I ever made him feel welcome to stay?

There was no sign of Laoghaire. I kept wondering if she came for dinner, and did the Frasers like her? Love her even? Stop it Claire.

I knew about this girlfriend for months, why was it only now being back in Lallybroch I was affected by her. Now I couldn't pretend she wasn't real?

Once I had pushed all thoughts of Jamie's new girlfriend out of my head, the dinner was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, Mrs Crook; the Fraser's housekeeper, had taken Willie out to the kitchen after dinner to help prepare and serve the desserts, he adorably reappeared carrying one plate "for Da and Mama to shware", Jamie scooted over to me to eat it and we feigned incredible enjoyment and loud praise to Willie's delight. Willie promptly sat up between us and feel asleep, eventually gifting me his feet and Jamie his head as he slept.

Being the only child there and utterly adorable anyway, the adults began
heaping compliments on him while he slept peacefully. "God he is a beautiful boy", Ian's dad exclaimed. Jamie and I looking on proudly. Not to be outdone, Brian chided in with "Aye he is the bonniest in Scotland, Gerry that is for sure". I scoffed "I see his Scottish accent has come on in leaps and bounds Brian, he told me today 'I dinna need any of that paint on my face, I look bonnie without it', I tried my best at a Scottish accent to illustrate Willie's newly deepened accent "Aye well he is right there Claire, ye dinna need anything, he is a smart Scottish boy that lad".

Jenny smiling at me knowingly retorted with "och Da, Willie is American no Scottish, sure he was born in Boston!" Brian not one to be bested when it came to his Grandson's heritage and without flinching said "weel he was conceived in Scotland and that's enough for me Janet!"

Oh god Brian Fraser!!

Vivid images of Willie's conception flooded my mind, Jamie pinning me to a dresser, hands up my skirt and me dancing to his tune, his lips on my neck and my hands in his curls pulling to me, whispers of want falling from our lips. Red was creeping up my face, I was afraid my tell-tale glass face would show I was thinking of the re-enactment, but before I could process anymore the growl that came from Jamie knocked me from my own hazy flashback.

“Da!! Enough, yer grandson and his mother are at yer table, Aye?” Jamie gave his father a formidable look and pushed himself from the table, clutching Willie to his chest. "C'mon Claire, Il see ye home", I started to stutter out "but Jamie, Im not ready..." Jamie looked at me, eyes blazing. I managed to squeak out,"mmm right, well it was lovely to meet you all, Ellen, Brian thanks for a lovely evening..", "Sassenach! C'mon!"

Ellen and Brian gave each other a knowing look, and I realised Brian instead of being remorseful after Jamie's scolding, seemed rather pleased with himself, nearly as if whatever reaction he tried to provoke in Jamie was just what he got.
Jamie walked back to the cottages, strides ahead of me, Willie clutched to his chest. His face was almost purple when we left the main house, his knuckles white when he pressed back from the dining table.

We silently put Willie to bed, stripping him of his clothes, with practiced hands rolling his Pyjamas on without jostling him awake. We moved in synch, each knowing the role the other played. Without having ever practicing it before, we knew our son.

When I came back out to the kitchen, Jamie was standing in front of the stove, Whiskey bottle on the table and two glasses poured, I took one and watched him expectantly.

Eventually he sighed running his hand up tussling his hair. "I'm sorry Claire.. ", I thought for a minute, he was about to apologise for his own behaviour until he continued,"about Da...he doesna ken when to shut his mouth...when it comes to Willie...he gets so so..", Jamie was running his hand through his hair, exasperation evident in his eyes, he was struggling to find the words to express what was going on in his head,

I could see that this wasn't the first time Jamie and Brian had come to logger heads about Willie and I wondered what was behind it? Just what was Brian hoping to achieve? He had clearly hit a sore point with Jamie but I wasn't exactly sure what the trigger was. "Jamie, you don't need to trouble over me or my sensitivities, but I would like to know what it is exactly about what your dad said to...well that has got you this worked up?"

He stared at the floor, as if completely fixated on some spec there. He eventually looked up, "ya ken how he is about ye, how he wants us” he gestured to me and him. “He never sees past that yer Willie’s mother.. and no matter what I say on the matter, he is always there probing about how Willie should have both his ma and da living with him” There was a red colour running up his neck, left behind after his hand had ran over it too many times or from embarrassment I wasn't sure. "Willie is getting older, aye? If Da keeps this kind of talk up it willna be long til Willie catches on about our past and our living arrangements.” I heard what he was saying but I knew by his face, there was more to what exactly Jamie didn’t want Willie to know. As the living arrangement was fairly obvious to Willie, I thought.

I gave him a nod to say and...

“I dinna want him talking about how Willie came to be", "What do you mean?” I was struggling to comprehend what the hell he was trying to protect Willie from.
Now red was defiantly creeping from the spot on his neck up to his, perfectly sculpted cheekbones. It made him look like he had been outside and had a healthy glow. Only blushing would suit the likes of Jamie. "I dinna want Willie to ken, he is the result of a one night stand, and I dinna want Da alluding to it either...there is a method to what Da is at, and I dinna like being manipulated."

The temper was rising from my stomach up to my face, I squared my eyes and set my glass down. "so you are ashamed of what happened between us?"

"No!!" His eyes widened like saucers, "I dinna mean that, I only meant that I ...

"Yes you did!, that is exactly what you meant, I walked across the room to round up on him "look I am sorry your father pressures you to have a relationship with me, it must be a terrible terrible trial for you" sarcasm dripping from my tone".."you needn’t have any concerns on that score I couldn’t think of a worse fate than to be in a relationship with you” I spat. “but If you think..that I am going to lie to Willie about how he came to be, to shield you from your ..your regret!!" I shouted the last word at him, my breath was ragged, I pointed my finger at him,"... you are sadly mistaken!"

He took my finger and held it, sighed deeply and said "Claire I just meant that I would like Willie to think he came from love" he said it so simply and looked so earnest, I could feel the tears threaten to spill behind my eyes. I felt my heart break a little when he said it, I wanted to hurt him to make him feel like shit, in the way he had just done to me, tearing me open with his words. I looked up at him, so he could see the tears in my eyes, "well Jamie I never need lie to my son, because for me, he did come from love, more fool me!" He opened his mouth to speak but I continued, "I know we don't have the perfect relationship and that he doesn't have a conventional family but I have always loved you Jamie, you gave me Willie and you're more than I ever expected as a father...just because he were never romantically involved doesn't mean there isn't love".

A tear slid down my face, "I am sorry by me coming here I have brought back bad memories or shame for you or whatever it is I have made you feel" I lowered my voice, "but most of all, I am sorry you think our son was not born from love!".

I turned and walked towards the bedroom. "Claire, I didn't mean to say I dinna think he came from love, I meant I wanted him to know it"

"Just go Jamie."

"Claire..please.." I closed the bedroom door and sat on the bed, tears pouring down my cheeks, when I came out sometime later he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the comments, hope to have the next chapter up at the weekend.
By the time myself and Willie were up and showered the following morning Jamie's jeep was gone from outside his cottage. Good!, I thought I would just ignore him for the rest of my time here, we could resume our contactless parenting as soon as I got back to Boston. Willie and I wandered down to the main house for breakfast, checking over plans with Jenny for her imminent big day and catching up properly with Ellen. It was soothing to be in their company, no matter what had happened with Jamie and I, the women in his family had loved me unconditionally, which for me with no real family to speak of aside from Lamb, it was very much reciprocated and appreciated!

As the morning wore on, Ellen and I moved out to her garden to do some weeding and choose the flowers for Jenny's wedding bouquet, Willie came to help 'Gwanny' but really causing more destruction than anything else, digging up flowers and turning the watering can upside down drenching himself in the process, I was just finished pruning Ellen's rosebush when I felt a shadow looming over me.

I didn't turn to see who it was, I heard Ellen say "Ach Jamie, there ye are mo Graidh will ye clip that top rose for me there, Claire and myself are too bitty to reach it". He didn't respond but suddenly I felt his big body reach above my head and clip the rose Ellen was speaking off. He was right behind me now, I could feel his breath on my back, "what have ye planned then Jamie?", Ellen enquired. "Ye have a look of purpose about ye" I heard him exhale. "I was thinking we could go for a ride Claire", he said ignoring Ellen's question. His voice sounded gruff and hoarse as if it hadn't been used much.

I dug my hands into the clay below the rose bush, wishing I could sink into it and disappear altogether. I felt completely exposed by our argument the evening before, I couldn't bring myself to turn and look at him, instead I just answered "il get Willie a dry jumper and he will be ready to go with you" I made to stand from my knees, "I dinna mean Willie, I thought just you and I would go, Mam will be fine with Willie?" He obviously had looked at Ellen for approval as she was nodding vehemently at me saying "oh aye, me and Willie are due to start making some scones, are we not Willie?"

I swallowed the lump threatening to build in my throat. Why the hell was I such an emotional mess, I didn't want Ellen's sympathy, she must know about how Jamie felt about Willie's conception. I was mentally spent from it all. "no thank you Jamie, I want to finish these plants for your mother and...", A hand gently rose from behind me and rested on my shoulder, "Please Claire." A plea.
Ellen was watching the two of us curiously now, what she had first thought was as a simple invitation to go horse riding, was now apparently something else completely. She took another look at Jamie and seemingly made up her mind. "Go Claire", she said softly, "the plants will bide", a simple tilt in her head and a pleading look in her eyes, told me she was asking not telling me to go.

I turned to look at Jamie, his blue hooded eyes, watching me intently to see what I would do. "fine", I said with resignation, "I'll need to wash my hands".

Once we got to the stables, Jamie began mounting a horse he referred to as 'Donas', I looked around wondering why he wasn't saddling a horse up for me when he stretched out his arm indicating for me to mount Donas with him. I didn't move to join him but merely looked at him sceptically, "where is my horse?", "Its easier if ye ride with me".

I hissed back,"don't be ridiculous I am perfectly capable..." he gave me a grave look, "i dinna say ye were not capable but we have a bit of ground to cover and it will make it easier as ye are not familiar with the route". He outstretched his arm again, his eyes met mine for a second, please. "Fine", I murmured and took his hand. I settled myself between his legs but did not allow my body to rest against his, leaving a polite distance between us. He just wrapped his arm around my stomach and hoisted me into his body, "Ye will nay be too comfortable if ya ride like that, rest against me, aye".

“Where are we going?” I asked sometime later, I was lulled by the heat of his body and his strong arm wrapped around me, his other arm managing the reigns easily, the muscles in his arms twisting and turning, guiding Donas.

“I have something in mind I wanna show ye” he said quietly. With that he used his strong thighs to squeeze Donas down a grassy pathway I had not been before.

We were riding for well near an hour, my little knowledge of the Fraser lands told me we were near coming to the border of those lands, or what I remember to be the border. All of a sudden Jamie turned Donas and we trotted through a small clearing of trees before mounting a hill, once at the top Jamie stopped Donas tied him to a post on a fence and said we would walk from there.

I could see it almost immediately, it was a partially built house, little more than the foundations but all internal walls were well on the way to show the outline of each room, whoever was building it
had started to clad the external wall with the most beautiful natural stone that I knew to be very similar to the stone used on the tower in Lallybroch.

Jamie turned to me and put his hand out to help me down the hill, when we arrived at the dwelling, he turned to look at me, as I carefully traced my hand over the beautiful stone fronting the house, "the stone is it from the main house?", "Aye, its from the tower, it was a wall that had crumbled and I kept the stone for this", he said pointing at the house, "Its beautiful Jamie, are you doing all the work yourself?", he looked pleased at this, "Aye, when I can..I usually spend the weekends doing it..there is nay rush as such..I hope to have the roof on before winter though and then I can start thinking about windows and such".

I nodded, "well give me the tour then!" Jamie looked so pleased with my interest, my heart nearly burst looking at him. He took great time in walking me through each room and why he had chosen its position, for the light or a view. When he was finished I turned to him and said "its lovely Jamie, I hope you have many years of happiness in it". He looked at me bewildered, "its nay for me Claire...Its for Willie!"

"for Willie?" I asked incredulously.

“Mmm aye, well I ken he lives in Boston” he looked at me earnestly “and no matter what ye think of me Sassenach, I would never interfere with that”. He kicked stones forming the foundation, “but when he gets older and feels like maybe spending a bit of time here or having a place to bring his own family, I want it to have made it for him .., somewhere he can come.”

"Jamie", I said in almost a whisper, "its such a wonderful thing to do, Willie is so lucky", I realised he was still looking at me intently, "I have no brought anyone up here aside you, Mam and Da", he smiled then and said " I brought Willie up once, and he told me he would prefer a treehouse". We both laughed at that. "C'mere he said there is one more thing I wanna show ye", he led me to the back of the house where there was the foundations of another dwelling, much smaller, perhaps a garage I thought. It had the outlines of three rooms, and one tiny room, which was either a closet or maybe a washroom. I noticed on the blocks that were lying ready to use in the centre of the dwelling, sprayed in some sort of paint was the words 'CB bedroom' and 'CB Kitchen', I supposed they were to identify where the various blocks were to be used. I looked at Jamie curiously "this is rather big for a garage?", he shook his head "its no a garage" a smirk forming on his lips, "its a granny flat" he said proudly.

Confusion written all over my face, he nodded in my direction and said "for you Sassenach", I shook my head as if to say I don't follow, he turned away to fiddle with a piece sticking out of one of the half built walls. "I ken that if Willie comes home from Boston either with a wife and kids or just for College, he will want you to come too aye, at the very least at holidays and such? so I thought it best to have yer own space so ye wouldna be on top of the other". My mouth was hanging open agape, "there will always be a place here for ye Claire", he said softly. I literally was
lost for words "Jamie I don't know what to say, I.I..".

He smiled pleased that he had left me speechless, "ye dinna need to say anything, I hadna planned on showing ye it until it was finished but after last night...weel I wanted to explain to ya", Jesus was I going to cry again? " Claire, what I said last night came out all wrong..I ken the truth of how Willie came to be" he looked into my eyes and they were so soft I could have drowned happily in them, memories of our night together written on his face, "I was worried that someone who didna ken, or didna know us!". 'Us', "would someday tell Willie that he was only the result of a one night thing, which in practice may be true", he smiled ruefully, "But we ken you and I, that there is more to it than that, Aye?"

I nodded my head in agreement. "Yes" I said weakly, he continued "So when Da talks flippantly like that, I get worried that he will say something in front of Willie and he will no ken the truth from us, so he will get the wrong idea".

He moved to an arms reach in front of me and tentatively touched the back of my hand, "I couldna ask for a better mother either Claire, I hope ya ken that?", his eyes searched mine to see if I believed him.

"Yes, thank you Jamie", My eyes were filled with tears but I was determined he would not see me cry again.

We eventually made our way back to the stables on Donas, the atmosphere was lighter between us, we were joking and happy to be in each others company. It was so long since I had seen this side of Jamie, probably the last time I was here, before we had the strains of co parenting affecting our relationship. Jamie was pointing out various landmarks on the Fraser lands, when he slowed Donas and pointed to a cave hidden up high on a hill, "do ye remember that cave Sassenach?", A knowing smile formed on my lips but I added rather noncommittally, "yes something familiar about it alright"

He stopped Donas and rested his chin on my shoulder, the act was so intimate, my heart started beating madly in my chest, I hoped he didn't notice. Even though there was no one around us for miles, he bent down and whispered into my ear "that's where ye pinned me down and kissed me for the first time, aye?" was he flirting?

I snorted "I did not pin you down", you Mr Fraser, made up an excuse that you had lost something in that cave and made me go with you to find it, when you got me there, you put your foot out tripping me up and YOU then pinned me to the ground"

I could feel his chest vibrating behind me, "Aye weel" he said lightly, "ye clearly enjoyed yerself cause I see ye have no forgotten one single detail Sassenach".
I reached back to slap his thigh.

By the time we reached the paddocks I was fully resting my body on Jamie, his arm strong around my middle holding me there. In the distance I could see the figure of a woman leaning against the paddock fence, looking out at the direction we were coming. I could tell she was smallish with long blonde hair.

"Who is that at the paddock Jamie?"

He hesitated in answering, sighing first, "Eh..that'll be Laoghaire, Sassenach".
Laoghaire waited patiently for us both to dismount the horse, Jamie first then me, Jamie lifting me down and keeping his hand on my hips a second longer than necessary. He could see I was apprehensive, I took it as a reassuring gesture, although he gave me a funny look.

Laoghaire had a wide smile plastered onto her lips, I didn’t know her well enough to know if it was sincere. “ye must be Claire, I have heard a lot about ye” from who I thought?.

She held out her hand, “its lovely to finally meet ye Claire.” I shook her hand and put on my nicest smile. “Lovely to meet you too” I didn’t reciprocate her comment on hearing much about her, because I simply hadn’t, I knew her name and that she was seeing Jamie, end off.

I noticed she was looking behind me, “Where is Willie then?” Realisation dawning on her face that it was just Jamie and I out for a ride, the excuse that would have been our shared son, nowhere to be seen. Jamie arrived at my side, answering her plainly with no attempt at an explanation, “he isna with us.”, Laoghaire lost her composure for a minute and grimace flickered across her face. “oh, I see,” she replied.

Sensing the tension mounting by the second, I brightly suggested an alternative for Willie’s absence, “ he was too busy baking with Granny”, I shot a dazzling smile at her, I realised this did little in the way of explaining why Jamie and I went alone, but I felt it was better than Jamie's gruff reply.

She looked at Jamie, “I was gonna go up to yer Mam and Da’s see if there was anything they wanted doing for the wedding?” I could tell by her it was a question and she was awaiting Jamie’s reaction. She seemed hesitant in the idea. “ I’m sure they are fine Laoghaire but yer welcome to go up and see.” Her name on his lips gave me a queer feeling.

Jealousy?

"Ok then” I started, “well it was lovely to meet you Laoghaire, I have to head to get back to Willie but I’m sure I will see you over the coming days”, another dazzling smile and I was almost on my way, away from the two of them. “Wait Claire! I will walk up the house with ye?, give me a chance to chat with ye?” Laoughaire’s enthusiastic offer gave me an uneasy feeling in my stomach, but what could I do? Jamie seemed to be busying himself washing Donas, clearly not joining us! “sure” I replied.

Fuck.

We reached the main house in record time, thanks to my long strides. We kept conversation neutral, with Laoghaire mentioning frequently how beautiful Willie was and clearly the apple of everyone’s eye. I got the vibe that she had only met Willie one other occasion, muttering
something about how Jamie likes to keep Willie all to himself. Jenny’s opinion of her being ‘keen’ seemed accurate, especially if her over enthusiastic treatment of me was anything to go by. I would imagine her real feelings towards me weren’t the bubbly conversation I was currently being treated to, in reality I was sure her feelings were more of mistrusting, especially after seeing the way she eyed me up as Jamie and I dismounted Donas, she was hiding it well, maybe so as not to rock the boat with the Frasers.

Ellen looked taken aback when I arrived at the kitchen door with Laoghaire in tow, she raised her eyes, which I think had more to do with Jamie leaving me alone with Laoghaire than Laoghaire herself.

Laoghaire was received politely by Ellen but not overly familiarly either. All of this eased my discomfort, which I internally chided myself for.

I shouldn’t care.

By the time Jamie arrived, the air of awkwardness had eased considerably. Willie was sitting on my knee and Laoghaire was happily talking to him as if he was hard of hearing. Laoghaire picked up considerably once Jamie arrived and sauntered over beside him while he washed his hands at Ellen’s sink. She was stroking up and down his forearm and I noticed the muscles in his back looked more tense with each stroke. He may have felt awkward with Willie and I there, I probably would be the same if the roles were reversed. When Laoghaire’s long Scottish drawl started with “so babe..” I felt my stomach clench and I adjusted my gaze to the inside of my coffee cup. “I was thinking that we could..” she turned her smile to me first but it came across as more of a sneer as she rolled her eyes at the same time, “obviously if Claire didna mind” she continued, ”that we might bring wee Willie to the fun fair in Broch Morda this evening?” Jamie who was now stood facing the kitchen, snapped his head around to look at Laoghaire. "Laoghaire..he started, he sounded stern. But she immediately cut across him and said to Willie "would ye like that Willie, the Funfair??” she had recommenced the talking for the hard of hearing. My blood was boiling at her complete disregard for my consent as his mother, before asking my son. I went to speak but before I could open my mouth Jamie snapped “Laoghaire dinna go asking Willie, Claire nor I have discussed it and Claire may well want to spend time with him, he has been away from her for three weeks.” Laoghaire looked down her eyelashes at him “Ach have I said the wrong thing?, I am ever so sorry Claire” not waiting to see if I accepted her apology she turned back to Jamie “I’m sure Claire would love a night off, and Willie would love it.” Willie at this stage was saying “yes me go to funfair”, so it was too late to brush it under the carpet. Laoghaire presuming anything about me was enough to make me slap her, but I restrained myself, only just. How dare she think I wanted a break from my Son. Ellen was watching this mouth agape, glaring at Jamie. “Laoghaire”, I started, “I am never in need of a break from Willie, he is never a chore and I would prefer if you didn’t make assumptions”, She wasn’t expecting my acerbic tongue, she opened her mouth to speak and I redirected my gaze at Jamie "but if Jamie would like to bring Willie, I would never interrupt his plans with his son..” I finished.

“Claire, there is nay plans that ye..”

Jamie hadn’t finished his sentence when Laoghaire cut across him. "Great, Willie will love it”. Jamie practically growled “I will ask him Laoghaire!”. 

Jamie tried to meet my gaze when he bent to speak to Willie on my knee but I was too angry and that anger was definitely headed his way, best I had time to calm before I said something I regretted.

“Willie”, Jamie started, “would ye like for Laoghaire and I to bring ye to a funfair tonight?".
Willie’s eyes lit up and he excitedly nodded his head and said “yes Da, I like funfair, you and mama bring me” “no”, I interjected, “Mama isn’t going, Laoghaire and Da will you bring you”. Jamie still trying to meet my eyes “Claire why don’t you come?”

“no I don’t think so Jamie, thank you.” I replied stiffly, he got the message.

At that Willie threw started one of the most unreasonable tantrums of his young life, one I felt like imitating myself.

“I dinna want Weary to go, I want you and Mama bring me!” repeating his mantra over and over until it was clear no amount of soothing from Jamie or I would work. Ellen went to him, picked him up and said “Willie is overtired, and its nay wonder the boy must be confused when it is no his mam and Da making arrangements for him”, she directed her stern look first at Laoghaire and then Jamie. Squeezing my shoulder gently she took Willie out to the garden to calm down.

I stood from my seat, making Jamie stand from his crouched position at my feet, where he had been talking to Willie. “I will have him ready to go with you this evening” I directed this to Jamie, making it clear that I was giving him over to him and only him, “he will calm down”. I was determined if Willie was calm enough, he could go with Jamie. He had made his bed, he could lie in it. I would not have it said I denied him his son.

“Claire..” he started, “Don’t have him back too late” I said unnecessarily, stoping him from continuing whatever he was going to say in front of Laoghaire. “you can see he is tired”. I walked straight out the door giving a curt nod to Laoghaire on my way.

I brought a more subdued Willie back to the main house later that evening to meet Jamie and Laoghaire, as I approached the back door I spotted Laoghaire leaning against Jamie’s Jeep, he stood more rigid in front of her. Just as I was approaching I could hear her say “Babe I am sorry, I dinna know I was over stepping the mark, Aye?” Before Jamie had a chance to respond, Willie was bounding forward into his arms, yelling “Da are ye ready?” Laoghaire gave me a tentative smile and climbed into the front of Jamie’s jeep. I approached Willie in Jamie’s arms and gave him a kiss goodbye, reminding him to be good. “and a kiss for Da” Willie said excitedly “ Da is a big boy he doesn’t need a kiss” I replied as lightly as I could, but Willie having the Fraser stubbornness continued “kiss him Mama, puir Da”. I was shaking my head, when Jamie stooped slowly took hold of my wrist and gave me a chaste kiss on my cheek “there”, he said “I gave Mama the kiss”, as he moved to straighten, he said “I am sorry Claire..I would never have…” having heard enough on the subject I briskly turned to him and said “from now on you make your arrangements with me, not one of your girlfriends, and I will pay you the same courtesy, ok?” I could see he was hurt by my words but I didn’t care. “Yes” he said rather hoarsely. With that I turned and walked away. I could feel yet more tears burning behind me eyes.
In Vino Veritas

Chapter Summary

a short chapter but should have the next up soon.

When Jamie returned with Willie later that evening, Jamie clutching a bunch of handpicked wildflowers from him and Willie, I half wondered did Laoghaire know he was out picking flowers but pushed her to the back of my mind. I thanked him politely but distantly for the flowers. My wall was up, after what happened earlier, I was determined to be courteous but I wasn’t engaging with him beyond that. He could tell, he was trying to get me to talk luckily as it happened, I was rushing, throwing on some make up and trying to pile my hair on top of my head. I gratefully noticed Laoghaire had not returned when they pulled up in the jeep.

Willie immediately flopped on the couch and Jamie stuck on a cartoon for him, coming back to stand behind me watching me intently as I struggled with my eyeliner.

“where are ye off to?”, “Oh Jenny and I are meeting some of her friends in Broch Morda”, I was standing at the only mirror in the cottage situated just inside the main door. I was still upset with him and my brusqueness was deliberate not just because I was already running late. I could still feel his eyes linger on me, I presumed it was to see what to do about Willie. “Your mum said she would take Willie tonight if you have plans?” I added helpfully, raising one eyebrow.

“Eh no ..I mean aye that’s fine, I willna be going out again Willie can stay with me”. I turned grabbing my clutch from the table, “ok then see you later”, he was still eyeing me, “is that it?” I asked hoping that it might move him, uneasiness was settling on me and I was starting to wonder what the hell he was staring at. “Eh aye, that’s it…” I made for the door handle, “can I drive ye in?”

“no thanks Ian is bringing us” I breezily replied. “oh right, well Janet can get a bit wild on the wine so ye mind yerself now wont ya?”

“Oh I intend to”, I replied with as much innuendo as I could muster, his eyes widened and he opened his mouth to respond but I shut the door behind me, leaving him standing in the cottage.

Janet aka Jenny seemingly was quite the wild child as Jamie had predicted and too many shots of tequila, led to me and the aforementioned pulling up in a taxi at Lallybroch at 4am that morning. My head was spinning, it was taking all my strength to control my limbs and I hadn’t decided if I would be throwing up or not. Jenny swept out of the taxi first and in a loud whisper, that I would imagine could wake most of the estate, told me she would help me to my cottage. Jenny herself was none too steady, however she told me in no uncertain terms “ ima much better drinker than youuu” pointing her finger in a threatening fashion. She was linking me up the path when I heard Jamie’s voice, hissing behind us, “Jesus Janet I asked ye to mind Claire, not get her steaming drunk!” I couldn’t turn around, when Jenny stopped to retaliate, the movement would have been too much, I tried to continue forward. “Dinna be silly Jaaaames” Jenny laughed “Iv nay broken her, I merely helped Claire to relax, ya know socialise, let her hair down, hike up her skirts, tha kinda thing.” She finished. I couldn’t see Jamie’s face but I could hear his almost snarl “What do ye
mean ye got her to hike up her skirts?”

Jenny who was back at my side was flapping her arms madly “its a fuck’n turn of phrase Jamie, ya needna worry I dinna ruin yer precious Claire” sarcasm dripping from her voice. Precious Claire?

They were both acting like I wasn’t present and I half wondered through my drink fuelled brain if I was an apparition!

Jenny clearly not fit to continue arguing turned back to her partner in crime ”Christ Claire I think ima gonna throw up in that bush ther”, I snorted but that nearly cost me my balance and I swayed unsteadily until I felt Jamie’s strong arms lift me bodily and carry me into the cottage, I managed to slur out “put me down Jamie “”, I willna put ye down or else ye will fall I am putting ye to bed Sassenach”, “Don’t call me that and put me down, the last thing I want is your help”, if my words stung he hid it well because he kept moving “Well tough cause I’m nay am putting ye down so stop wriggling.“

Jenny reappeared at the doorway, ”yer only using that as an excuse to feel her up brother”, ”Janet I can barely make out what yer saying yer speech is so slurred!”, Jamie retorted. Jenny looked outraged, ”Spe-ach. Hic. I ‘ave nn idea wha yer talk’n about”. Jamie promptly lay me on the bed and started taking off my high heels, “tsk these are completely impractical shoes Sassenach ”running his hand gently over the sole of my foot. “My shoes are none of your concern Jamie” I drowsily replied, my eyes drooping from the effort of talking.

“Do ye want to take off yer make up Claire?”, I nodded ”yes ..I can do it myself!””, “ye sound like Willie and ye canna stand up, so no ye can’t do it yourself”. I opened one eye to see him over at my dressing table picking up bottles and squinting at the lables, eventually he muttered “ Aye cleanser! sounds like clean that’ll do”

I couldn't open my eyes now, if I did the room would just spin, my mouth was watering with the urge to puke and as bad as the day was, I didn’t want to throw up on him.

Jamie took it that sleep had overcame me because, he continued to mutter to himself, I could feel him pour the creamy liquid over my face and then gently use cotton pads to remove it, after a time he snorted “silly woman do ye not ken how beautiful ye are, ye dinna need make up”, I kept my eyes shut and tried to steady my breathing, I definitely didn’t want him to know I was awake now. He continued his administrations taking time in carefully covering every inch of my face, when he was done he threw a blanket over my bottom half and stuck his hands under it, and began shimmying my skirt down my legs, he didn’t let his hands touch the skin on my thighs keeping his hands over my skirt and under the blanket to protect my dignity, when he got to my ankle we wrapped his hand around it and rubbed it gently. When he was finished he reached to switch off the light when, and then in the pitch black dark, I felt his lips on mine, just barely and then they were gone.
This chapter gives a little glance back to around the time Willie was born and the effect of the pregnancy on both Claire and Jamie. The family of three also get some quality time together.

Jenny and I had our last dress fittings early the following morning, our previous nights antics not the wisest of ideas in the harsh light of day. I was under the spray in the shower when I heard a loud knocking at the cottage door. I wrapped a towel around me and led myself blindly to open it. The dawning realisation that there was more tequila running through my veins than blood, when I tried several times to work the door knob to open said door.

My greeting was near to a growl when I eventually opened it, to find an amused looking Jamie on the other side. “Ach Sassenach how are ye feeling?” he said sarcastically.

“I am rushing Jamie, Jenny and I have an appointment…”, I was still hastily running around the cottage, trying to find something to wear, my hair was tied in a towel and I had a white towelling bathrobe wrapped around me, I tightened this further when Jamie slid into the cottage behind me, he placed a large takeaway cup of coffee on the table and two Ibuprofen. I could have hugged him. “I was in the village this morning picking up something for Ian and I thought ye could do with this”. he said sheepishly.

“thank you, its just what I needed”, I choked out between large gulps of the coffee, trying to wash the tablets down.

Jamie smiled and pressed his lips together, he appeared apprehensive “Willie is gone off with Grand-da for a few hours, but I had a suggestion for ye when he returns..if ye dinna mind?” he added.

“mmmp, what’s that then?”, I replied groggily still swallowing coffee as if my life depended on it.

“I thought we could bring Willie camping tonight!” he stated proudly.

I swallowed and squinted my eyes, the lights and his words causing a throbbing in my head.

“You and Laoghaire or weary or whatever you call her want to bring Willie camping?” I reiterated.

He smirked at my clear mocking of Laoghaire’s name, “Ach no, me and you Claire?”

“Jamie”, I started, but before I could continue he interrupted, “look Claire, I know ye are upset I dinna blame you a bit I would be the exact same and I can tell ye that I had strong words with Laoghaire so it willna ever happen again, but the one thing I did learn from it is that Willie really wants to spend time with his Ma and Da and I think…if ye dinna mind that is…I think we should try and do that more often?”

He stuttered through the last bit reeling himself in when he realised, he needed me willing to spend time with him as well as Willie.
Once he said Willie wanted it, I knew he was right and as much as I wanted to tell Jamie and his offer of camping on the heel of my ferocious hangover to go hang, I couldn’t in good conscience refuse something I knew our son desperately wanted.

“fine”. I sighed.

By the time I came back to Lallybroch with Jenny, Jamie and Willie had the jeep packed with a tent and supplies, Mrs Crook had prepared a picnic basket and Willie was beside himself with excitement. My heart almost broke at how happy he was just to have Jamie and I with him at the one time.

I gathered an overnight bag and off we headed. Jamie had a spot picked out near a stream on the Estate, far enough away to have the feel of independence for Willie but only and hour walk from Lallybroch should the whole thing go tits up, Jamie explained on the way that he hoped to do a little fishing with Willie. Whatever my feelings were towards Jamie, I was determined to keep the mood light, so that Willie didn’t pick up on any of the previous days animosity.

By the time we had the camp set up, Willie was positively bubbling with excitement to go fishing, Jamie set him up with a little rod and a net, pulled on his water waders and put him standing in the middle of the stream where it was the most shallow, he screeched and laughed in delighted, Jamie muttering to me there wasn’t a chance of a fish getting caught with him roaring in the river.

Eventually Jamie produced a fishing rod and declared to Willie ‘son Im a gonna teach yer Mama how to fish!’, I threw him a look and he smirked, “asides Sassenach a little cold water under yer feet will kill what ails ya!”.

I rolled my jeans to above my knee, Jamie waded into the water first and then reached back for me to help me down, I gave him my hand and began to climb down the rivers slippy embankment, on the last step I slipped completely and landed in his arms, he grabbed me up and secured me against him, taking me in for a second before tucking an errant curl around my ear and saying rather unnecessarily “its slippy down here Sassenach, keep a hold of my hand, aye?” We waded a little further out, with Willie standing on the embankment clapping his hands with excitement. “Get a big fish Mama.”

My fishing expedition wasn’t as successful as Jamie’s, who had caught our supper and promptly went about preparing them so we could cook them over our little camp fire. Jamie was impressive in any environment, but out in the wilderness he was positively captivating "I didn't think our camping would be so authentic", I exclaimed. “Weel Da, used to bring us and we dinna get supper unless we caught it, so it added to the incentive”, he smirked. “Its lovely that you pass that on to Willie, Jamie he is very lucky.”

I looked over at Willie who was covered in muck sitting on a camping chair with a Fraser plaid wrapped around him, “he is the image of you”, I said smiling. Jamie came to stand by me offering me some of the fish to taste, “ach he is like me but he has bits of you too, he was staring at my face intently and without what seemed like conscious thought, he took another piece of fish and put it to my lips, I swallowed but his hand lingered on my lips and his eyes fixed on mine, "yer mouth” he said rather hoarsely tracing my lips with his finger, “ye have the same mouth as Willie”, his hand left my lips and traced the way around to my ear, "and yer wee bitty ears, he has the same ones exactly". His eyes moved from mine and he was looking at my lips again, then we heard “Da is my supper ready yet..im staaarving!, Willie’s exaggerated drawl breaking our trance.

Night flew in fairly quick the August sunlight fading out, Willie was beyond exhausted and completely ecstatic about sleeping in a tent, Jamie said he would lie with him to get him to sleep,
so I sat out beside the campfire listening to music on my phone, after about an hour I realised Jamie must have nodded off too, so I headed for the tent, the short few hours sleep I got the night previous plus the hangover, were weighing heavily and I needed to lay my head. When I opened the tent Willie was pushed right up to the side of the tent and Jamie in the middle, there was no where for me to go except beside Jamie who was stretched almost the full length of the tent snoring softly. It was too warm for a sleeping bag so I just lay on top of mine. The heat was radiating from the two boys and I couldn’t help but lean over Jamie to kiss Willie goodnight. Jamie stirred and I quickly lay back down so as not to wake him.

I lay on my back for a while wondering why the hell sleep wasn’t coming. Dawning realisation coming to me that my senses were completely saturated by Jamie, the fresh smell of him mixed by his own masculine scent, just lying beside me was doing something to my insides I wasn’t entirely comfortable with. Jamie had the same effect on me the last time I was here, which resulted in Willie. This time however we had an important relationship to maintain, that had boundaries set up since Willie was born. I couldn’t just react to these feelings again as it would jeopardies the delicate working arrangements, Jamie and I had, when it came to Willie. Plus he had a girlfriend.

I turned on my side watching him, his steady breathing in and out. It reminded me of when he had come to Boston for Willie’s birth, we had not seen each other since the night he was conceived and there was a lot of awkward tension as he slept in my spare room waiting for me to go into labour. I was so frightened, of the birth and having a baby, I couldn’t sleep at night, so I found myself standing outside his bedroom door needing to be beside him, I crept into his room and lay on the bed beside him. I had instantly felt better, I didn’t move to touch him I just lay there and watched him sleep. at some point he woke, he kissed me so softly and gathered me to him. I was gone by the time he woke in the morning and neither of us spoke again about it. But after he went back to Scotland, that kiss sustained me on many a lonely night.

The heat was stifling in the tent and watching Jamie was doing nothing to aid sleep, so I quietly gathered up my blanket and crept out to sleep beside the smoored camp fire. A few moments later Jamie emerged from the tent. "Sorry Sassenach did my snoring bother ye?” he said with a slight curl on his lips. “no no not at all…its just hot that’s all”, not mentioning what was causing the heat.

He was suddenly was looming over me, “can I lie beside ye? he asked casually, we can lie on your blanket and use mine to cover us?” I was completely thrown by this request but managed to stutter out “em eh..ok”.

Where the hell was my reserved resolve now?

Once he settled beside me he whispered “sorry I dinna mean to nod off earlier, the little bugger asked about 100 questions and I think he got me to sleep before him”. I laughed at that, knowing full well the tactics Willie used to avoid bedtime.

He looked lost in thought for a while and I left him to it, I was enjoying the view of the stars and just the solid heat beside me.

Suddenly he broke the silence and said, "I was lying there beside Willie, thinking how clever and braw he is and imagining how easily he mightna have come to be, if ya ken what I mean?“.

I did. The chances of Jamie and I coming together to conceive Willie were a long shot given that I lived on the other side of the world and was it not for my holiday, we might never have met. "mmp”, I agreed, “I have thought of that before, how the chances of us meeting were slim and well I suppose the chances of us getting together on that holiday were a long shot too…”. Jamie snorted
“oh I wouldn’t say they were a long shot Sassenach”, a smile brightening his face. Confused at his statement, I replied, "what do you mean?“.

He turned on his side to face me "weel as soon as ye got out of the car beside Lamb and I clapped eyes on you, I was completely smitten, there was nay much that I was not going to try to …weel to win yer affections”.

“really?” I replied Incredulously. He smiled, “Aye that is one of the things I love about ye, he haven’t the faintest idea the affect ye have on men”, I gave a grunt of disagreement, “I don’t think I do Jamie”.

He looked at me, his eyes boring into mine, “ye were the bonniest thing I have ever seen Claire”, with barely a whisper he added "ye still are".

My heart was beating way too fast "charmer" I snorted trying to deflect? the attention away from me. “its the truth” he answered. “that’s why I felt so guilty”.

“Guilty?, Why?”. He gave me a look of disbelief "Claire if I hadn't cajoled ye into coming up with me to the cottage that night..I mean ye were in yer final year in medical school…I ken the last thing ye wanted was a bairn..“ Sitting up on my elbow a bit to face him, "firstly, it didn’t take much to 'cajole” me as you put it, and secondly for god sake Jamie I was a bloody medical student and I didn’t even think about protection! So I don’t know why you feel guilty!!“

"Ye did think of it the first time to be fair, it was all the other times ye dinna think of it”, he said smirking. I slapped him, then covering my face with my hands. “Stop you are embarrassing me!” I said through stifled laughter.

“weel in any case” he continued, “I dinna regret Willie off course, but I ken it was the worse time for ye, and ye were so mad when I came to be with ye for his birth, I dinna blame ye a bit, I deserved it".

My eyebrows creased in confusion, “I wasn’t mad at you Jamie! I was so grateful you were there honestly, I was scared shitless that’s why I was crying all the time, I didn’t think I would be good enough..and I had no one else besides Lamb in Boston…well that I could count as family”.

“But ye wouldn’t let me stay, after he was born, I mean..I left ye when he was nay but 3 days old?”, I felt tears behind my eyes at the memory of telling him I didn’t need him, “Jamie you still had your final exams at University and all this was waiting for you..” I waved my hands around to indicate the land we were camped on.

Lallybroch.

I added much more quietly “you know they couldn’t manage this without you…they depended on you to come back!”, I had messed up enough by getting pregnant I couldn’t take their son from them.

I thought for a minute and then added “ besides for that week you came for Willies birth you barely spoke to me? I Didn’t want you to stay for sympathy!!”

“Sympathy!! are ye mad?, I didna speak to ye cause I was petrified, ye didna stop crying once I landed!”

“Jamie”, I said impatiently “I was overdue with Willie, absolutely petrified of giving birth, of being a mother, of being a doctor and a working mother and most of all the person who I had entrapped in the same mess, was there staying with me thinking I was crazy!”
“Claire, he said quietly, "I dinna think you were crazy, I thought ye hated me."

“Well I didn’t”, I replied rather gruffly. Jamie just made a Scottish noise in his throat. We lay on our backs for sometime looking up at the stars, before I heard him say “we should have talked Claire.”

Regret?

I felt his hand reach for mine and he entwined our fingers, sometime later I was lulled to sleep by his warmth next to me, a million questions rolling through my mind.

I woke up the following morning with my head on Jamie’s chest and his arms around me.
Chapter Summary

Jamie and Claire are needed back at Lallybroch for wedding prep.

There was no time to feel embarrassed waking up at dawn in Jamie’s arms, Willie was standing over us “I seep in da tent all by myself Ima big boy”,

Willie clearly living his best life hadn’t noticed his parents embrace either which was a good thing or he would have all of Lallybroch informed. Jamie squeezed my shoulder before I sat up to sort Willie out.

Jamie went about making something that resembled porridge over the fire, which was absolutely delicious which he topped with honey and nuts.

Willie and I made loud noises of appreciation, Jamie turned a beautiful shade a pink at the praise, while smiling at our stuffed mouths.

We brushed our teeth and washed our faces at the stream, while making sure Willie didn’t climb into said stream clothes and all. I let the wet flannel cloth lie on my face for a minute, relishing in the icy coldness from the stream’s water. When I removed it Jamie was staring at me, I smiled at him but instead of him turning away embarrassed, he just smiled shyly at me. Our gaze was eventually broken by Jamie’s mobile ringing.

Jamie’s call was a slightly stressed Ian, letting us know that the Marquee tents being used for the wedding, were erected that morning, we needed to make our way back to help out setting up. Also in hushed tones Ian telling Jamie that Jenny was like a mad woman and to see if I could settle her down, we both snorted at that. Suddenly I hated the idea of leaving our little camp, but we proceeded back with something different between us, a closeness I couldn’t quite explain.

As soon as got back to the main house, we were quickly put to work. Multiple marquee tents had been erected in the courtyard of the estate in our absence. Each one needed to be set up with chairs and tables to accommodate both the wedding ceremony and the dinner after the ceremony. Ellen and I quickly went to work on the floral arrangements for each tent. I had hundreds of flowers laid out in front of me, using a make shift table inside one of the empty marquees, Willie tearing up leaves at my feet asking a million questions. I had spent the morning bent over the table arranging and rearranging bouquets to decorate the marquees and my back was killing me. The night spent lying on the ground with Jamie not helping matters. I was rubbing my lower back, groaning when Willie piped up, “what’s wrong Mama, are you swore?” scrunching up his little nose in sympathy. “Yes poor Mama has a sore back from sleeping on the ground last night”, I explained while rubbing between my shoulder blades awkwardly. “il do it Mama!” . Willie was standing on the table kneading his little hands into my back, “eh ok Willie very good, not not so hard..eh ok Willie that is sore now”. We heard a voice saying “C'mere Willie why don’t ye let yer Da do that?”

“Willie enjoying his nursing position, wasn’t going to relinquish his role easily, "no Da, Mama likes me doing it.” Jamie approaching us now, “weel Mama likes me doing it too”, Jamie said raising his eyebrows suggestively at me, “isn’t that right Mama?” he said.

I rolled my eyes at him “dinna be so sure of yourself Fraser” I said mocking his accent, he laughed
Willie now redundant shrugged his shoulders and bounded off to one of the other Marquees. Jamie placed his hands on my shoulders first, kneading and rubbing with his strong hands, which brought a sound from my lips, which actually made me blush. “Christ Sassenach I love yer wee sounds, yer a vera vera noisy woman” his voice sounding much deeper. “I am not!” I said indignantly, slapping behind me. “oh aye ye are”, his hands continued rubbing down the rest of my back, when he got to my lower back he moved his thumbs in hard circular motions, at the base of my spine. I leaned forward slightly rotating my neck “oh god I hate to admit it but you are good…mmm yes right there”, he snorted and his hands hesitated for a moment and then went to the hem of my t shirt, he tentatively reached under and touched my skin, my breath hitched. Jamie moved half a step to bridge the small gap between us and his hands wandered up my bare back rubbing. His head leaned forward to rest on my shoulder and a husky whisper in my ear “how is this for ye?”, I could feel the heat of him behind me and his lips touching my ear, both our breathing becoming laboured. My legs were trembling slightly, I hoped he didn’t notice. “mmp”, my only coherent response. I let my head fall back to rest on his shoulder. His hands were moving in circles out to my hips, gently squeezing, his fingers found the way round to my tummy, he bent his mouth to my neck, “Claire…” a hum.

Suddenly the shrill sound of “Jaaamie” being called broke our spell. Laoghaire.

Jamie kept his hands on the small of my back under my t shirt, her voice was getting nearer. “Where are ye Jamie…?”.

"Jamie stop” I said my shrugging away from his hold. “Claire… I dinna ken what she is here for…” As if it mattered why she was here, she was and that was that.

Jamie kept a hold on my waist. I turned to face him, my eyes ablaze ”she is here because she is YOUR girlfriend and feels she has a right to be here, so would you please go out to her before she lands herself in here!”, I snapped.

Laoghaire’s presence irked me, my frustration was directed at Jamie. I had no rights, I knew that, who was I fooling? I knew it was jealousy, but I was damned if I would tell him! The way Jamie and I had been this past 24 hours leaving little room for anyone else but the two of us, I had completely banished the ‘girlfriend’ from my mind. Maybe to ease my own guilty conscience at how much I longed for Jamie’s touch.

"Claire will ye no listen to me…” he pleaded. “No I won’t, will you let go”, I said squirming out of his grasp. He opened his mouth to continue but I pleaded “please Jamie!” the thoughts of having to deal with Laoghaire, in this state was terrifying. He read my face and gruffly said “fine!” storming off towards the entryway. I made my way to a floral arrangement at the other end of the marquee before I heard her voice just at the entryway “ach there ye are, what are ye doing in there?”Laoghaire said looking over Jamie’s shoulder. Jamie moved to the side to block her view and ushered her away. “nothing, what are ye doing here?”, his voice sounded cold. Guilty?

“I just came to see if ye needed any…” Laoghaire’s voice trailed as Jamie steered her away from the tent and me.

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I was afraid to move from the tent for some time on the chance I would run into Laoghaire. An hour later, I had completely run out of flowers for my arrangements. Willie had come back and was
looking for food, so I tentatively made my way out of the tent and headed for the main house. I realised while sneaking down to the house, that I wasn’t ready to face Jamie either. My head was whirling from what had happened between us earlier, the memory of it making me weak at the knees and mortified in equal measure. The thoughts of what would have happened if Laoghaire hadn’t arrived was food for thought to say the least.

I didn’t know what Jamie was thinking or what or how his girlfriend fitted into what was happening between us, I resented him for Laoghaire that was becoming clearer by the minute. Had I any right to resent him?

I made it unscathed to the kitchen in the main house, Ellen was making lunch for all the volunteers. I jumped in to help thankful of the distraction. I was bent over making a pasta sauce when Jenny arrived, her temperament coming up to the wedding was a little testy, but luckily I had escaped her ire….so far.

“Jesus that girl is annoying”, Jenny grumpily declared, putting down a large box of candles.

“Who?” Ellen replied,

“Laoghaire!” Jenny spat. Ellen sighed “dinna be nasty Janet, she is trying to help”.

“It’s your fault ya ken!” Jenny said looking at me pointedly. Baffled I replied, “My fault…why the hell…?”

“Weel she only started making these unannounced visits since you arrived! trying to ‘help’” Jenny said, saying the help using her fingers curled to display inverted commas dramatically. “I reckon she thinks she is gonna find you and Jamie going at it the rose bushes or something”, Jenny snorted.

The colour in my cheeks rose to an almost crimson colour. Jenny gave me a curious look. “Hit a nerve did I?” she said smiling devilishly.

“You did not hit a nerve!” I said straightening my posture, trying to look as self-righteous as possible.

Ellen started laughing at my rather defensive reply, she smiled deviously at me

“I didna get to ask ye Claire, how did Jamie and yerself get on with yer ride the other day?”

Jenny’s eyes widened like pools, her mouth agape and we all burst out laughing.

Jamie chose that moment to walk in the door.

“What are ye laughing at?, he said looking amused.

“ach nothing son, were just chat’n is all, what do ye need?” Ellen said trying to compose herself. “I need Claire”, he replied completely serious.

Jenny and Ellen both started laughing again and I threw them a look. “What’s up”, I said as lightly as possible, moving around the kitchen counter to get away from the other two women’s hysteria.

“Can I have a word with ye?” he tilted his head towards the back door. I shot the two women a further look of warning and followed him out. I could hear them sniggering as we left.

Once outside he smiled shyly at me, “I wanted to speak to ye…I mean about earlier…Claire I…”
he moved closer to me, his voice dropped a little. “About Laoghaire…” I interrupted him at once, “Jamie listen I really… I mean there is nothing for you to explain, off course Laoghaire should be here, she is your girlfriend after all and…” His eyebrows shot up, “I ken he dinna appreciate her being around and that’s ok because…”, I didn’t want him thinking me jealous so I squared my shoulders “I have no issue with her being around!” I said indignantly.

I suddenly found myself backed up against the wall at the back door, Jamie looked at me curiously now, losing track of what he wanted to say, an amused expression forming on his face. “Do ye not care then?” he said his eyes burning into mine. He moved his arm so his hand rested on the wall behind my head. Giving the illusion I was pinned to the wall.

“What do you mean?” I bristled. There was a curl at the corner of his lips and his eyes were positively sparkling. “Ye heard me, do ye not care about Laoghaire then?” I swallowed audibly, what was he playing at? If he thought I was going to tell him I was resentful over his girlfriend, for any other reason than her annoying behaviour, he had another thing coming. I straightened my back and brought my face right up to his, “off course I care, whoever you choose will be in Willie’s life, I care that you have managed to search the whole of Scotland and found yourself one of the most annoying women!” The bastard smirked at me “so ye only care on account of Willie then?”, “Yes that’s right” I snapped. “What do you want me to say Jamie?”

He put his other hand on the wall on the other side of my head “what I want Claire, is for ye to tell me what ye want and to be honest?” He was looking at my lips intently, his eyes slowly creeping up my face to look directly into my eyes. I was fuming with him, yet I wanted to push myself off the wall and put my mouth to his, to melt into him. His breath was on my face.

Just then we heard voices coming across the courtyard, Jamie slowly leaned away from the wall but remained in front of me, his eyes fixed to mine. Then is a hushed tone he said, “what I want Claire, is for there to be honesty between us, and I need ye to tell me the truth!” I glared at him again “I am!”

He smiled again but a little more hesitant. “No yer not and ye ken it well!”

We heard Ian’s voice getting closer but Jamie didn’t move.

“Ach there she is now”, Ian’s voice bright and cheerful. “Claire, I have a friend here I’d like ye to meet, he is a fellow Bostonian too, this is Gerry Forbes, Gerry this is Claire Beauchamp, our nephew, Willie’s mam”. Ian said proudly and turned to me. “Gerry went to school with Jamie and I, but he lives in Boston as well, just home for the wedding,”

“Please to meet you Gerry”, I smiled politely but rather distractedly at him and he took my hand. Jamie stood away from in front of me to stand at my side. “I actually met you the other night” Gerry said a little shyly, “you were with Jenny in Broch Morda”, I cringed inwardly, my recollection of the night hazy at best. “Ach Claire won’t remember that, took me an age to get her to bed!” Jamie sneered. I glared at him, what the hell was he playing at?

“Our meeting was fleeting dinna worry Claire, although I dinna realise ye were Jamie’s lass when I met ye, would have given ye my sympathies”. Gerry grinned jokingly.

Jamie glowered at him. I put on my sweetest smile. “No Gerry, just Willie’s mam, not Jamie’s lass, if you’ll excuse me I have to help Ellen serve lunch. See you in there?” I said directing my invitation to Ian and Gerry. Striding purposefully towards the kitchen.

I didn’t look back.
Chapter Summary

Jamie gets irked.

I shut the kitchen door behind me and thanked heaven silently that I appeared to be alone, I leaned up against the door to try and calm my erratic breathing. I was already shaking from my encounter with Jamie and to try and make a poised exit without them all seeing me completely fall apart, left me spent. Gerry Ian and Jamie were still the other side of the door, I heard Gerry make a low whistling noise, “ye picked well from the gene pool there Jamie me lad, Willie’s Ma is hot”, Jamie almost growled back “watch yer fuck’n mouth Gerry and keep yer eyes off her”, there sounded like an apology from Gerry but I hastily made away from the door in case they found me eavesdropping.

We had almost 15 guests for lunch, all food was set out in the middle of the large table in Ellen’s kitchen and everyone helped themselves, the guests were all friends of Jenny and Ian, who had come for the set up. My plan was to grab a plate of food and hide, before Laoghaire reappeared but I didn’t move quickly enough and Gerry Forbes, clearly now thinking us kindred spirits beckoned me to sit with him. Jamie glared at Gerry but he didn’t even look at me, this unsettled me considerably the idea of me upsetting him or breaking the tenuous new bond we had made. Willie was scrambling up on my lap, scrounging whatever took his fancy from my plate, once satisfied he has taken the “ummy food” from my plate, he headed over to Jamie and repeated the procedure. Watching Jamie coax food into him just made my heart swell, it always did when I saw them together. Jamie was such a natural father, which wasn’t surprising given the example he had been set from his own. Suddenly the kitchen door open and Laoghaire appeared, she slunk in the door quietly and said something softly to Ellen, I couldn’t see Ellen’s expression but I could hear Ellen quietly bid her goodbye and to make certain Laoghaire wouldn’t join us for food.

Laoghaire made for the kitchen door but not without looking back longingly at Jamie, who kept his head bent attentively to Willie, although I watched Ian catch his eye for a minute and give him a peculiar look.

The kitchen eventually started to empty out and after making polite conversation about Boston with Gerry, which excited me about as much as watching paint dry, I stood to clear up. Gerry whipped out his phone and said, “C’mer Claire, I must get yer number for when ye are back in Boston, we can meet up?” Jamie’s head shot up from his plate and I caught his glance quickly. I hesitated for a minute deliberately, I wanted Jamie to know I had to give it for politeness sake, but I had no interest in meeting Gerry. I didn’t know why I was so concerned in what Jamie thought but given our earlier conversation, I didn’t want to play games. To make Jamie jealous for the sake of revenge just seemed beneath me. In the end, I smiled and said “sure”, punched my number into his phone and said “god knows when I will be able to though, I don’t normally see much of anybody between Willie and the hospital”, I gave a little sigh to aid my single mother woe. Ellen threw me a sympathetic look. Gerry obviously a persistent bugger quickly replied “sure maybe the next time Willie has to come see his Da, ye might have some free time then?” He kept eye contact, this wasn’t a statement, he was waiting on an answer, I eventually opened my mouth, when Jamie cut across the table “I think she answered ye the first time Forbes, dinna ask again.” it came out closer to a hiss, which between the colour in his cheeks, made him look like a kettle about to boil.
“Jamie!” Ellen said sharply, cutting the game of eyeballing between Jamie and Gerry. Jamie dropped his gaze and Gerry returned to his food. Jenny and Ian looked at Jamie, and then back to me, questioning glances, wondering what the hell was going on. I walked away and began washing up.

After most of the Ian and Jenny’s friends had returned to the marquees to continue setting up I hid out in the bathroom for a bit, running water over my face and wrists, I knew Ellen would have a question or two, when she got me alone about what had gone on over lunch. I was walking down the corridor, returning to the kitchen when I heard muffled tones coming from the pantry. My eavesdropping seemingly now knowing no bounds, caused me to loiter for a second until I heard who was in there. I heard Ellen’s soothing voice, and was about to continue when I realised she was talking to Jamie

“Jamie I dinna ken what got into ye, but ye canna behave like that, it’s not proper, it nay the way to behave in front of guests and it is nay fair to Claire”,

“well I’m no sorry, he was overstepping the mark big time, that’s no very gentlemanly is it? and he is a complete prick too!” Jamie gruffly reasoned. He sounded like Willie when I was telling him off and the irony made me smile.

“oh aye, and what makes you Claire’s protector?, Ellen a master at aggravated mediation, asked this in the same tone that she would use if she was offering someone a cup of tea. I smirked at her swagger.

“Dinna be smart Mam”.

“I am not being smart Jamie, but ye have had Laoghaire out here, while Claire is staying, and she has behaved nothing but courteous to the girl, even when Laoghaire gave her just reason to not be, do ye no think how that girl being out here made Claire feel? yet she never embarrassed ye Jamie!”

Jamie interjected “Well Laoghaire kens now… “

But Ellen was resolute “I dinna care what ye have told Laoghaire Son, the fact remains that Claire is a single lassie and she is entitled to pick and choose her suitors , or refuse them as she pleases and ye would do well to remember that. That is the road ye have chose is it not?”

There was silence and Jamie’s voice was lower, “ye ken fine well it is nay something I chose Ma….its no simple”

Ellen’s voice took on a sympathetic tone, “I ken that Jamie I do, and I dinna think it has been easy but… look yer not asking my advice, although I have a thing to say on the matter but what I will say is this” there was a pause and Ellen took a breath.,

“Jamie ye need to man up and speak to her, speak to Claire while she is still will’n to listen son.”

“ What are ye do’n down there Mama?” Willie ratting me out from the other end of the corridor shouted, which made me jump almost half way down the corridor to get away from the pantry door.

After the eavesdropping, I shamefully hid out helping Jenny for the rest of the day, terrified of finding Jamie and terrified of not finding him. But trouble has away of finding you so I was leaving one of the Marquee’s I ran straight into Ian.

“Ach there ye are now”, Ian’s cheerful voice called out.
“Oh sorry, Jenny is quite the taskmaster, she hasn’t let me out of her sight” I said jokingly, avoiding Ian’s eye.

“no one kens that better than me Claire”, Ian retorted jokingly. “Anyway that is kind of why I am looking for ye” he smiled.

“oh?” I feigned interest, thinking it another job on Jenny’s long list was about to be allocated to me.

“as ye know Jenny has been like a banshee these last few days, I had a bit of a de-stress idea for her if you dinna mind helping out? he finished.

"sounds ominous” I replied.

“aye well there is a spa hotel, type place in Inverness….Jen loves it, so I thought we could head up there this evening. its only over an hour away and Ellen said she would keep Willie. Why wasn't Jamie keeping him.? Ye could have a treatment and stay the night, be back here tomorrow the day before the big day, rested and hopefully Jenny will nay look like she has been sucking on lemons!”, Ian finished.

“Oh ok, I could ask Jamie to borrow his jeep, let Jenny relax on the drive there?” I suggested. Ian smiled. “Ach now yer not going to have all the fun, ye ken I am stressed too ye know!” A wide grin appearing on his face. “nay me and Jamie are going too, a night out with the bestman and the bridesmaid, a final fling as such” Ian said with a wink. “oh I see”, I replied carefully.

“Aye we won’t bother with the treatments though, we will have a dram or two in the bar while we wait on ye, there is a bonnie restaurant there too…” he said absentmindedly “anyway, can ye be ready in an hour Claire ? We will get ye at the cottage.” With that he turned on his heel and started walking down towards the house again, leaving me with a queer sense of apprehensive excitement in the pit of my stomach.
In which Claire and Jamie recall an episode before Willie’s conception.

The renovated Castle in Inverness was antiquated and romantic, the bedrooms were lofty with large four poster beds in each room and bay windows revealing the wild Scottish countryside all around us. My room as well as a huge four poster bed, which I absently thought was wasteful just for me, also had a fireplace that had a roaring fire lit, the August air was still warm and although there was probably little need for the fire, it provided an almost hypnotic ambiance. Champagne and miniature chocolates had been left on a little coffee table by the window. I popped the champagne open, pouring myself a large glass. I lay on the bed languishing in the luxury of the soft mattress. At this rate I wouldn’t need a massage to relax, I was already well on the way to unadulterated bliss. A large knock at the door drew me from my reverie, I pulled the hotel bathrobe around me and padded to open the door, Jamie stood against the frame, black t-shirt and blue jeans, hair wet from the shower. The sight of him pooled warmth between my legs.

Gathering myself together and trying to hide any lustful thoughts from my face, I silently stepped aside to let him in, “I want a word with you”, I said brightly. Jamie smiled, “oh aye? Sounds intriguing, what have I done now?” I shot him a look. I rang down to reception because I wanted to pay for Ian and Jenny’s room to discover you have paid for everyone, Jamie I am not having it, I am paying too. “Eh…ok then will you have a glass of champagne? You did pay for it after all…” I added trying to insert some joviality.

“Aye go on then”, he sat on the edge of my bed and I handed him a glass, standing in front of him sipping my own. Jenny would be calling for me soon for our massage, Jamie took a sip and swirled the liquid around in his mouth, he looked thoughtfully at me.

“I wanna apologise for earlier Claire, the way I behaved at lunch, I shouldn’t have acted so…so”.

“Rude?” I finished for him and smiled.

The total truth was I didn’t mind, I was inaneely grateful of his attention, which said more about my feelings for Jamie than I cared to think about. “It’s alright Jamie”, I said honestly, “does he always irk you? Gerry I mean?” I smiled again but sympathetically trying to put him at ease. He smirked “aye he has always been a prick but no he has never got my gander up until today, when I saw him drooling all over ye…”

"I didn’t notice the drooling but I didn’t try to encourage him you know?” a sad smile crept up his face “I ken ye didna Claire and yet ye would have been well with in yer rights”

He paused again and appeared to be counting the bubbles in his champagne flute. “I hate that”, he said quietly.

I raised my eyebrows at him, “hate what?”
“do ye remember when ye came the last time…the time before Willie?” he said sitting up straighter. “and we went into Broch Morda and that fella…can’t remember his name now..but he tried it on with ya…and I hit him?” a mischievous look on his face.

“yes and I told you then, there was no need …that I was able to handle it myself” I replied hotly.

“Aye but ye after we discussed it..ye accepted why I behaved like that… ye were mine then…those few weeks ye were mine to mind to protect, although we hadna said it to the other…we kent it, aye?”

“mmp” I nodded, “I suppose we did ken it!” I said smiling.

“it was easier afore Willie because, weel although ye were cross then, I knew ye were not going to take that fella up on his …advances..” he said awkwardly

My memory of the night was Jamie hitting the guy, me and him having a furious row over what right he had, as he recalled we hadn’t defined what we were to the other, except that fact that he couldn’t be alone without making out until he both were breathless and wanting. That night, part of me had wanted Jamie to claim me, and he did…we ended up down a secluded alleyway, both shouting at the other , which ended with him shouting that I was his! Those words alone caused us to fall into a blistering kiss that ended with our hands down each others pants, feeling and demanding a release form the other to rectify our earlier callous words. I think it was a couple of nights before he took me to the cottage.

The memory flashed over my face and Jamie smiled shyly perhaps remembering that alleyway too. He continued, “I hate that I canna stop it, I hate the idea of ye with anyone still… and it’s worse now with Willie!” he finished.

“Jamie” I sighed cupping his cheek, “you know no one would ever replace you with Willie, neither I or Willie would ever want that…right?”, he bowed his head and leaned into my touch, when he looked up his eyes were dark fathomless pools full of desire “it’s not that”, he said hoarsely.

I blinked twice trying to understand and then I felt his tug at my bathrobe belt to draw me nearer, I willingly landed between his knees, “its you” he said softly. I swallowed hard.

His eyes were so earnest, full of longing. I ran my hand down around the nape of his neck and tugged on his curls lightly “well my feelings towards Laoghaire are not entirely to do with Willie either” I said tenderly, I tilted his head back with my hand so he looked up into my face. A knowing smile growing on his lips “oh aye?” his hands tentatively came up and settled on my hips, “well I had my suspicions about that”.

“well I don’t know how, I have been very closed on the matter!”, I said mockingly.

“Do ye remember the rest of the night?” he said rather huskily. “mmm yes it was quite hard to forget…” I whispered.

I lowered my head and rested it against his forehead. His forehead was cool to my touch, my own felt like it was on fire which was probably due to the heat gliding around my body.

“I have thought of the night often Claire”, he said teasingly, his use of my proper name causing a pleasant tightening in my tummy. “I sometimes do that..try to remember…” he said more breathlessly. “I have nearly forgot what it’s like to kiss ye…”.

He took my champagne flute and put it with his on the bedside locker, his eyes never leaving mine.
His hand rose to cradle my neck luring my face to close the gap between us, our lips almost touching. “Let’s see if I can remind you”, I said gently bringing my lips to his, once I felt his warm mouth, I just melted into him and him to me, he parted my lips with his tongue, gently tilting his head to take in more of my mouth, our breath caressing the others, tongues stroking. His hands moving from my hips to my lower back, urging me down to his knee. I sat astride him and he let out a moan, “Jesus Claire”.

His hands ran up and down my back until they cupped my arse and he lifted me so I was flush with his body, my hips automatically grinding into him, a noise fell from his lips “ye drive me crazy Claire” his arousal evident between my legs, his mouth left my lips and ran down my neck.

A loud knock at the door. Jenny’s voice "C’mon Claire were due in the spa in 5 minutes and I need this massage badly, weel either that or a shag but the message will have to do Jenny hissed through the door”.. Jamie held me firm to him, “Christ I dinna ken why she needs to talk filth through standing outside on the corridor!” I snorted and made to move off his knee. Jamie grabbed a hold of my arse again “shh pretend yer not here,, she will go away eventually”, bending to kiss me again, “Jamie!” I giggled “stop we can’t she knows I am in here!”

“Claire, what are ye at? c’mon!” Jenny persisted.

“Christ she has always been annoying but she is out doing herself now. “Jamie muttered. I laughed and got tried to get off his knee opening the door. He kissed me quickly and thoroughly again, pulling me back into him, neither of us close enough, none of it enough. He moaned at the loss of my body when I eventually made to rise from him. He muttered “dinna open that door for a minute”, his ears a beautiful shade of pink as he made to adjust himself.

My plan was to slip out the door so Jenny wouldn’t see Jamie, but she breezed straight past me, “what were ya at? Oh look ye got champagne…” on spotting Jamie coming out from my bathroom, “Eh, I dinna realise ye were in here too brother” her eyebrows almost touching her hairline. “We were just facetimeing Willie” I said rather hurriedly. Jamie smirked clearly not feeling we needed to explain ourselves to Jenny.

“il see ye at Dinner Sassenach”, he ran his hand along my lower back discreetly, “enjoy yer wee message I ken how much ye like them.” With that he strode purposefully by Jenny, who was watching him with those suspicious Fraser eyes.
I felt boneless, a pleasant jelly like feeling that left me longing for strong hands to knead and mould my body to theirs, and that was after my massage. I wasn’t sure how much of that was just wanting Jamie. Fortunately for me Jenny and I were escorted into separate treatment rooms once we arrived down at the spa, so she couldn’t continue to give me meaningful looks or quipped comments on my ‘flushed face’. I finished my massage first and hurriedly made it back to my room to get dressed before dinner.

I arrived down to the bar, wearing a little red wrap around dress, and a small amount of make-up. I would be lying if I said I didn’t want to make an effort but also, not to overdo it so I ended up looking like an overdressed poodle. Jamie and Ian were sat at the bar, two tumblers of whiskey glistening with ice in front of them. As I approached the bar Ian’s phone started ringing, he walking slightly away from the bar to take the call. Jamie spotted me coming and rose to greet me, I thought he looked a little uneasy, I suppose it was only to be expected given what had happened in my bedroom and our forced hasty exit, not leaving any time to convey what we felt about it.

He kissed me lightly on the cheek “ye look beautiful Claire, how was yer treatment?” his slight formality was making me nervous too. “Good …my back has been… well…” remembering he knew all about my sore back I coyly added with a smile “some idiot made me go camping and my back has been giving me jip since…so yes the massage was wonderful.”

The inside joke relaxed us both and he leaned forward to check Ian was still back turned to us and entwined our hands, playfully asking “what do ye want to drink then Sassenach? They have those silly cocktails ye and Jenny like getting rat arsed on…”

I gave him a sardonic look, “Jenny and I only like to get rat arsed on sophisticated drinks, cause were ladies” I joked tilting my head and smiling at him.

I heard Jenny before I saw her and slid my hands from Jamie’s opting to take the cocktail menu and busy myself in it. Knowing the Fraser persistence I was waiting for a return of her inquiring eyes or at the very least a few teasing statements. Just on form Jenny slided up next to us “I was gonna call by yer room for ye Claire, but I wasn’t sure if yerself and Jamie had locked yerselves in again…ye know for yer facetiming or whatever” she added mockingly. Ian who had returned to the bar gave Jamie and me curious glances.

Jamie quickly ordered mine and Jenny’s cocktail and we made our way to the dining room, drinks in hand.

The dining room was a huge high ceilinged room, with one of the largest chandeliers I had ever seen hung in the center, it hung over a very historic looking wooden floor, I imagined the now room had been a ball room originally. Within the room were several eloquent high backed dining booths and low atmospheric music playing in the background. The hostess seated us and left with another drink order from Jenny, clearly going to be drinking her way through her pent up wedding frustration. Ian whispered something like “dinna overdo it now” in her ear and she shot him a look.
Jamie kept his hand to the small of my back, leading me into the booth first, then sliding in beside me. His arm resting over the high backed couch. We immersed ourselves in the menus, discussed our choices and began chatting about the wedding, Ian’s nerves over his speech and how Brian was a liability with what he could possible come out with during his speech. Jenny teased that he was likely to ask the priest to marry Jamie and I, I noticed the colour rising on Jamie’s face at this. The waiter returned with Jenny’s second cocktail, Jamie ordered from the wine list in fluent French that made my breath hitch a little, I bent my head into the menu again to hide my transparent face.

Once we ordered, we sat back, laughed and chatted. Jenny’s tipsy form feeding the light hearted mood… with all of us both laughing at her and with her. Her fast witted humor bouncing of Jamie’s brilliant story telling.

Once our starters arrived, Jamie placed a scallop on his fork and said “try it Sassenach, they’re good.” He leaned in, putting the fork to my mouth and delicately pouring its contents into my mouth, as he reached across he hooked my leg under his, our ankles entwined. The heat between my legs at his touch and the very expensive wine he had chosen was a heady mix cursing through my body.

By the time we had finished our main course, Jamie’s arm that had begun draped around the back of the couch had headed south gradually and reached my knee, his fingers were absently rubbing circles where he touched skin.

Jamie was bent whispering something in my ear, when out of the corner of my eye I saw Jenny’s index finger sway over and back in our direction and a slight slur falling from her mouth “so would ye recommend it then?” swaying her finger from me to Jamie to identify where her question was targeted.

Being parents I mean…” her eyes were squinted, I didn’t think the squint was from anger but rather trying and failing to not see double. She looked intimidating just the same, and I smiled at how she appeared to people but was a pussy cat under it all. Mine and Jamie’s touches had remained under the table, but we had somewhat evolved over the course of the evening, going from two rather tentative individuals to gradually leaning closer, entwining legs and hands, hidden from prying eyes until we were almost moulded into each other. Being honest his body next to mine felt extremely good. Jenny’s scrutinizing stare, made me a little self-conscious and I made to entangle my legs from Jamie’s but he kept both his hand and legs firmly in place, a light squeeze to my knee in reassurance. “Best thing I ever did” Jamie answered touchingly. Looking at me, and asked “wouldn’t ya agree Claire?” a meaningful smile on his lips. Ian started to say something to Jenny about wanting ten children and before I could answer Jamie’s question, they were arguing over how many children they wanted. Jamie leaned down and teasingly whispered into my ear “best sex of my life the night Willie was conceived…no wonder we ended up with a bairn… do ye think I should tell them that Sassenach?” A tremble vibrated up my body and I hid my smile in my wine glass. Jamie’s hand slid marginally higher above my knee and his finger dipped to the inside of my thigh. My breath hitched, Jamie and I both clandestinely smiling at the other looked up to see Ian and Jenny’s discussion on their future family size was now escalating into more of a row, with Jenny muttering, she would have as many bairns as she fucking felt like and in the same breath “is there nay more wine left?”

Trying to distract them and myself from current thoughts I volunteered “You will both make wonderful parents, honestly it is the most brilliant experience.” They both looked back at me, trying to feign interest but clearly distracted at their annoyance with the other.

Jenny distractedly looked at me and said “even though yer not an actual couple though, I’m sure it must be challenging at times, no?” her words cut through me, I knew she didn’t say it to hurt, it
was more a result of her loose tongue than anything. Jamie squeezed my thigh “what difference 
does that make? us seeing Willie as the best thing that happened Janet” Jamie replied testily

Jenny oblivious to Jamie’s tone waved her hand in dismissal “Aye I suppose yer right brother, 
Willie is a gift no matter what way ye and Claire are…although I would say when ye go on to have 
bairns with others it will be hard on the wee lad”.

My heart sank at the thought of Willie seeing me or Jamie being in a relationship with someone 
else and having kids with that person, effectively making something work with his potential 
siblings step father or step mother, when we couldn’t make it work with each other.

I was pulled from my thoughts by Jamie’s gruff voice saying “I dinna want bairns with anyone 
else, Willie is enough.”

Jenny snorted in agreement, “aye see Ian, one bairn is enough!”

Missing Jamie’s point completely, I thought.
My first thought on Jamie’s declaration on having more children was to get him alone and tell him how much what he had just said meant to me, my second thought was I would like to show him.

The only barrier to getting time alone with Jamie, was his sister was steadily getting drunker by the minute, and wanted the night to continue in the bar. In order to catch my breath, I made a trip to the bathroom to reapply some lip balm and cool my hands and face. I came out of the toilets, to find Jamie leaning up against the wall opposite, holding my wine glass and bag. “Ian and Jenny are gone back to the bar for a night cap, I have promised we will join them for one and then I am gonna go to bed!” he explained. “Oh, ok” I replied not sure where that left me. Before I could say any more he added “and you will be coming with me” his voice sounded determined, he pressed his lips together in a thin line. “Oh will I now, and what makes you think I would want to do that?” a wicked smile forming on my lips. He moved forward and whispered “Aye, I am afraid ye will have to…I am in desperate need of time alone with ye”, we paused for a moment as someone passed us on the corridor.

“I see” I said contemplatively. “Have you a secret to tell me then Mr Fraser?” I asked seductively. I was fast excelling at this game. Jamie smirked, “Ye have no idea Sassenach”, he breathed. He leaned forward slightly and brushed his lips against mine, and discreetly dragged his tongue along my bottom lip, his hands came behind me and ghosted over my arse. Heat pooled between my legs at his feather light touch and I couldn’t see how I was going to manage to sit through a nightcap before we could get upstairs. “Do you not think they will notice if we both leave together?” I murmured into his mouth, biting his bottom lip as I said it. “A low groan came from his mouth, “Christ Claire yer gonna kill me… no they...won’t mmp… no they willna notice… Jenny is too far gone and Ian is too preoccupied with how many bairns she will give him”.

I laughed at that “ok, let’s have a nightcap before bed then?” I walked in front of him putting a little sway into my step. “Ifrinn” I heard him mutter behind me.

By the time Jamie and I made it to the bar, Ian had ordered us four large cognacs. I added a still water to the order and Ian remarked “wise lady Claire”, glancing in Jenny’s direction. Jenny rolled her eyes and took a gulp of the cognac. Fortunately the discussion of how many children they should have was forgotten, Ian had moved onto discussing horses with Jamie that they were considering buying. Jenny had side-lined me into discussing how she should wear her eye make-up for her big day. Every now and then Jamie’s foot nudged mine and he eyed my glass. Drink up.
When eventually Jamie made to leave, I yawned and stretched slightly. “Ye must be tired too Claire”, Jamie said with no hint of insincerity in his voice. He was good. “Wrecked” I replied, my voice only a pitch higher than usual but not obvious enough to cause suspicion. “I think I will head to bed too actually.” I added.

“Ach c’mon, it’s not even 11pm yet! Ye canna be going to bed yet, it’s my wedding week an I dinna wanna go to bed” Jenny said sullenly.

“Weel maybe ye should Janet”, Jamie replied curtly,

“c’mon Sassenach, dinna heed her, she will be sorry in the morning” Jamie continued self-righteously, glaring at his sister while giving me his hand to rise.

By the time we made it out to the corridor we were both giggling, pleased that we had managed to slip from Jenny’s persistent advances. Jamie pulled my hand to face him and said “I have ordered champagne to be sent to my room, are ye interested?” a knowing smile spread across his lips, my stomach flipped. “Lead the way Mr Fraser.”

We shared the lift with an older couple, strangers to us so we kept our hands entwined and silly smiles on our lips, stifling our giggles when we caught the older gentleman patting his wife’s bum.

We kept hold of that bubbling giddiness right up until Jamie slid his key card through the lock, we took each other in for a second, once inside the room. a nervous energy ran between us. I looked away from his gaze, unable to look at him, biting my bottom lip, I eventually looked back up at Jamie through my lashes. My vulnerability showing. It had been so long since we were intimate with each other, and it was hard to think of any other outcome than us sleeping together given the way things had been steadily building since I landed in Scotland, I wanted him badly, there were so many conversations that needed to happen first, but I didn't want to hear any of them. Where would this leave us? Were we only complicating something that was already complicated enough? Willie? Boston/Scotland? Laoghaire?

All of those conversations would have to wait and I knew that was not a good choice, but it was the only choice I was willing to make.

Jamie was looking at me intently, his head tilted to the side as if considering how to approach a wild horse. Eventually he whispered “c’mere Sassenach, we have no reason to be scairt of each other.” His hand reached out for me and pulled me into his embrace.

The intensity of my feelings were like a repeat of the last time together and we knew how that had
ended. Not just Willie but the heartbreak of not being together, could I face that again?

Without room for further thought, Jamie brought his lips to mine and I dissolved into him, his mouth on mine, searching, wanting. None of it was enough. My hands found the belt hooks on his jeans and I pulled him to me, hands wandering up and over his chest, until I reached his neck and face. His hands settled for a moment on my hips and found their way around to the front of my dress to untie it, he looked up at me for consent first. With one nod, he had my dress pooled in a heap on the floor. I stood before him in my black luckily matching underwear, his eyes took me in and he ran a palm down over my breasts and stomach until he reached the waist band of my pants. Just above my waist line were little marks, which Willie’s birth had left. He felt them with his palm and then bent to trail kisses over them. My breath hitched, I held onto the hair at the nape of his neck, dragging him back up to me. I hurriedly unbuttoned his shirt and swept it over his shoulders.

Standing in just our underwear, his eyes swallowed me whole, wandering up and down my body. Jamie smiled tentatively at me. “Ye are the most beautiful woman Claire, do ye even ken that?” his voice husky. I didn’t trust myself to speak but merely moved my lips to his again, this time I ran my fingers in and under the waist band of his underwear, teasingly. Something like a low growl escaped his lips and he pulled me to stand flush with him, with one nudge on my upper thighs, I knew he meant up. I wrapped my legs around him and we made it to the bed, biting, tasting, groping.

He crawled on top of me, kissing from my thighs up and over my torso, arriving at my lips. Smiling into them before kissing me thoroughly, he rolled us until I lay on top of him where he promptly unclasped my bra and covered them with his large hands, cupping them as if weighing them. “I used to be jealous of Willie when ye were nursing him” he said smirking at me. I swotted him with my hands, “idiot” I declared. I clenched my thighs tighter and started rotating my hips. I could feel every inch of him under me. I started gently biting his chest, and kept going until I was level with his crotch. Lowering his underwear with my teeth, I took him in my mouth, his hands came down to my hair. “Sassenach if ye do that…I willna…oh god Claire…” his hands gently encouraging what his voice was telling me to stop. I kept up my ministrations, I could feel his hip movements towards my mouth getting quicker and quicker, his breath coming rapid, words and mutterings becoming less and less coherent until suddenly he pulled me up and splayed me on my back. Tearing my pants down and off me in one fluid motion. “That took a lot of will power to stop ye, but I have waited a long time to have ye in my bed and I dinna plan on not pleasing ye first” he whispered. The strength of his hands on my arse lifting me up towards his mouth. He began kissing down my inner thigh, tentatively looking up through hooded eyes at me. The look was enough to finish me there and then, I was hot, I was wet, and I was more than ready for him. I quivered and a raspy breath fell from my mouth, when I felt his tongue inside of me. Which he used proficiently until I was screaming silently into the pillows, calling his name, unable to see anything but white flashing before my eyes.

Just when I started to come around again, I heard his voice come from just under my breast “I hope ye are not as dead as ye look, cause I need ya badly”, I pulled him by the ears and thrust my hips at him so he could enter me. He came into me hard and I cried out his name. “Fuck…Claire I
Oh to have him inside me again, the feel of him already tantalising every nerve in my body.

“move” I instructed, “I need you” I grabbed hold behind his neck and pulled him down to me, then grabbing his arse and guiding him at the pace I needed over and over, every thrust caused a sound to come from my mouth that sounded foreign to me. His hips moving faster and harder over and over until I could bear no more, my climax building and building. The feel of his body strong and guided by me. His movements were becoming more frenzied, harder and deeper, my hips rising to his every thrust to take him deeper. “Claire” softly my name falling from his lips into my neck “oh god Claire.” The end came as a surprise to both of us, crept up into a release so powerful that I felt it vibrate through every inch of my body and the aftershocks of Jamie’s orgasm blissfully delaying the sensations of mine. It took a long time for our breathing to become normal again. Jamie eventually rolled on his back staring up at the ceiling a very dazed look in his eye, “god that was …” he started. “Amazing” I finished for him breathlessly. He rolled slightly to look at me slowly “aye it was” he said sounding stunned.

He rolled on his side and absently played with my nipple, making me squirm a bit with all the sensations running through me. “I was so far through with just yer mouth Sassenach I thought it would be finished before it began and my reputation would be ruined!” he said jokingly. I giggled “What reputation Fraser?” he looked thoughtfully at me, cupping my cheeks and searching my face until he landed on my eyes. “The one I have with you” he said seriously, “that is the only one that matters.”
A Drunken Sailor

Chapter Summary

NSFW

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jamie and I had eased into silence after our earlier exertion. After some time passed, I heard a gentle snore coming from my breast where Jamie’s head rested. I stroked his hair and kissed his temple and then edged gently out from under him to retrieve my underwear, throwing on Jamie’s shirt but not bothering to button it, I wandered over to the fire to throw a couple of logs on. The castle rooms chilled considerably at night. I crept over near the door where I hoped I had dropped my phone earlier, I heard Jamie’s sleep hoarse voice come from the bed “dinna go Claire… please?” God I felt terrible, he thought I was going to sneak out on him, remorseful for our earlier actions. “oh no I wasn’t leaving, I was just trying to find my phone in case your mother text” I explained. “aye ok, well come back to bed then?” As if I wouldn’t.

“Get off the duvet , so we can get under. I’m freezing!” I instructed. Jamie following my instructions pulled back the duvet and climbed in, “c'mere mo ghraidh, Il warm ye.”

I snuggled into him, stroking his side with my right hand. We lay quiet for a while, but I could feel his fingers tapping silently on my thigh. After a time he said "so we should probably talk Claire?”

"Ok, what should we start with?“ I said laughing nervously.

"I like taking ye to bed” he said jovially. I slapped him playfully, “ach no, sorry I couldn’t resist, its hard to ken where to start though.” he added more soberly, smile still on his lips. “ As he drew circles on my shoulder.

We were quiet for a while and eventually I asked "What is it ? I mean what do you think…what is it between us?”

Jamie sighed, “I dinna ken but its no normal, I can tell ye that..” he replied.

“Do you think it is because of Willie” I asked. “Do I want ye because of Willie?” he said a little incredulously. I nodded. “Eh no Claire, I love him like he hung the stars but the little monkey dinna affect me wanting you”, he tentaatively bent his head to kiss me, he approached me like we hadn’t been groping and biting with the sam lips only an hour before, a shyness creeping back in as we lay in the dark. “I want ye because of you, nay because of Willie, mam or Da…or anybody else” he finished and then bent to kiss me again. “me too” I sighed into his mouth.

The kiss deepened, his tongue pushing tantalising mine gently. Jamie’s kiss was something else, I had almost forgotten his soft mouth and full lips, he moved his tongue to taste but also to tease… his power held in promise.

I melted into his mouth, our hands began again in earnest, any words that needed to be spoken were forgotten, a building need taking over, hands wandering to feel and give pleasure. Jamie dipped his
hand inside the waistband of my panties, his hand continuing down between my legs, he muttered into my mouth “why did ye put these on again”, I laughed. “because I like to give you obstacles”, he snorted “I ken ye do Sassenach…“ Without further discussion he kept his eyes locked to mine and used his fingers until I was riding his hand into oblivion. Once I had my bearings again I pushed up on him, lay him on his back, sitting astride his thighs. He was more than ready I could feel the solid beat of him between my legs. I reached down and took him in my hand to guide him into me, his head bent back and he arched up a gasp coming from his mouth. I moved steadily at first, sinking deeper and deeper. His knees spread and lifted giving me leverage, my hips responding to him, riding him harder and harder. He came to meet me, resting his head against my breasts holding me close, he looked up into my eyes and breathlessly whispered ”Ye are mine and only mine.”, I nodded, I knew.

We chased our releases slowly this time, just enjoying being one again. We were lulled to sleep by rain pounding against the sash windows, safe and secure in each others arms.

I was vaguely aware of a soft a knocking sound at the edge of my dreams. The knocking was getting more persistent and eventually a hissed “Jamie open the fucking door will ye”, I shoved Jamie to wake him, but he only burrowed deeper into my body. “Jamie wake up. Quickly there is someone at the door. I think its Ian”, “well tell him to fuck off its the middle of the night” he replied drowsily.

“I would but we are in your room and I am not meant to be in here!! Remember!! I hissed. Ian’s voice was growing louder, Jamie rubbed his eyes sleepily and said ”Ach yer meant to be here alright ye just dinna want anyone to ken it Sassenach” he said with a smirk, patted my bottom fondly and made to get out of bed. “Jamie! Wait” I started to search under the sheets for my underwear “don’t let him in!”

“Sassenach ye just told me to answer the door” he said feigning exasperation and rolling his sleepy eyes at me. “plus its 2.30am in the morning if Ian is banging on my door its nay without reason and probably to do with drunk Janet” he added reasonably. He pulled on a t shirt and his underwear.

Before I could do another thing, he had sprung open the door. I gathered the sheet around me and gritted my teeth. Hoping whatever Ian needed could be conducted through the bedroom door.

Ian breezed straight past Jamie, clearly absorbed in his own issues and hadn’t spotted me in the bed gripping a sheet to preserve whatever dignity I had left. If I had been flushed from our earlier antics, I must be positively glowing now. I thanked god for the dim lighting in the castle.

“For fuck’s sake man, it like waking the dead trying to get ye up. Ian was raking his hands though his hair, a long night was evident on his face. ” I have to kip with ye, yer sister is gone silly with drink and has locked me out of our room cause I am a complete bastard apparently, and she dinna take kindly to me telling her she was as drunk as a sailor” he said dryly.

Jamie was rubbing the back of his neck “Eh Well…ye canna stay here I will give ye Claire’s key..” Jamie replied calmly.

“I am nay sleeping with Claire!” Ian scandalised tone made me smirk “Christ Jenny will for sure kill me then!”

Jamie sighed “Claire is nay there, ye will be fine.” Ian’s eyes widened slightly “what do ye mean Claire is nay there…where is…” Jamie’s eyes roamed the room for a minute eventually falling on me in the bed.

Ian’s eyes followed Jamie’s and his mouth fell agape on spotting me in Jamie’s bed, obviously
naked under the sheet I was gripping to for my life. “Eh..oh right well right..eh..sorry..Sorry..Claire…Jamie if ye dinna mind can ye just give me Claire’s key and Il…be out of yer way…” Ian was backing to the door, I was trying my best to keep the laughter at bay at poor Ian’s awkwardness seeing me and Jamie like this. “The key is over there”, I said to Jamie, Ian took it and backed towards the door, tripping over our discarded clothes. Jamie shut the door behind him and we both burst out laughing. “poor Ian” I said sympathetically.

“Aye well that’ll teach him to no go knocking on my door in the middle of the night Sassenach” Jamie said lightly. I crept out of bed to get a drink of water and Jamie came up behind me wrapping his arms around me. “Did I ever tell ye, ye have the roundest loveliest arse!” Jamie whispered unnecessarily into my ear. “Come back to bed Claire I’m freezing.” The following morning I sent Jamie to my room to retrieve my toiletries and clothes, trying to spare Ian any further embarrassment. On his return Jamie had lay out on the bed taking out each cosmetic from my toiletry bag, fiddling with it and asking “what do ye do with this Sassenach?”, I patiently described in detail what each one was used for, he came to a bottle of body oil used in the shower. “What is this wee bottle here Sassenach? Lemon and Lavender oil?” he asked reading the label as if it was Hebrew. Once I explained its use, he stood up with purpose and said "get into the shower Claire, I am putting this one on ye." Which resulted in my legs wrapped firmly around Jamie’s waist, while his hips thrust and thrust until I was crying out and shaking, water cascading over us and an empty bottle of oil discarded on the bathroom floor. We were very late down for breakfast.

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It didn’t take much in the way of investigative ability to know that Jenny Fraser was extremely hungover, she was sitting in the now breakfast serving dining room, clutching a coffee cup and wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. Jamie nudged me at the sight of her and smirked, I appealed to his better nature not to tease her, he gave me one look indicating he would be doing just that.

"ach Janet, ye look a bit green around your gills there…did the food no agree with ye?” sarcasm dripping from his voice. “Dinna even start James, I am near death an I ave to get married tomorrow!” she cried. I squeezed her arm, “Jenny I have some rehydration sachets and some good quality pain killers in my medical bag back at the house, I will get you sorted.” “see that’s why I love you Claire cause yer not a complete shit like my brother and future husband….speaking of which where is Ian, Jamie?”

“How should I ken” Jamie choked between mouthfuls of fruit. I nudged him under the table, glaring. “Jesus did he not stay with ye last night?” Jenny’s eyes widened. Jamie realising his error. “Oh aye, he did …I mean I saw him this morning and then we …I mean I went for a wee walk so I dinna ken where he is just now…” Jamie finished lamely.

I rolled my eyes at him. Jenny with her head bent barely nodded. “good I dinna think it would be a good idea to loose him the day before the wedding…” she finished.

I set about getting some fruit, returning with a plate for Jenny. “you really should try and eat something Jen, it will help, I promise” “mmm, I canna see it staying down but Il try Claire” she replied solemnly.

I spotted Ian heading towards us and waved. He gave Jenny a kiss on the cheek and said “How is my little drunken sailor this morning?” going straight in with a jibe, brave man I thought. She took his hand, a silent apology passing between them. Ian sat in beside Jamie, and gave him a long sniff and said “Christ man ye smell good, what is that? Lavender?” I choked into my coffee cup. Jamie ears turned pink and his head dipped into his bowl "aye” he replied sheepishly "a new shampoo
I’m trying…“

Chapter End Notes

Please comment, they really help when I am writing future chapters to know if what you think. Thank you for reading.
As soon as breakfast was over, I implored Jamie to find Ian and ask him not to mention to Jenny about the previous night. I didn’t know enough myself about what was happening and if Jenny got wind of it, well suffice to say Jamie and I would be in for a sit down interview on what was happening. Jamie returned saying Ian had surmised enough to know he wasn’t to discuss it for the moment, but had several questions on the matter himself. “Like what?” I asked, Jamie raised his eyebrows “to give ye an idea Sassenach” he said cheerfully “he wanted to ken if we do that every time I drop Willie back to you in Boston.” I couldn’t stop laughing, Jamie continued “aye, he has a point though, it twould have made the exchange much more amicable” attempting a wink.

As soon as Jamie had made the joke, we both shared a look, the memory of all those exchanges, unspoken words and awkward glances when collecting Willie, coming back to both of us. We still had all of that to deal with, how would all our co-parenting work given what had happened the previous night? The intention of speaking last night had been put aside, our physical yearnings had been denied for so long, which meant the night had been long with touching, tasting and exploring, none of it enough. Words seemed to have been forgotten. Jamie was right though there was nothing usual about what it was between us and now we had our little son to think of as well.

After medicating Jenny, we headed back for Lallybroch, Jamie and I wanted to stop into Inverness to pick up a little gift for Willie, he no doubt expected one, given that as far as he was concerned, Mama and Da were on ‘olidays’. I picked out toys and showed them to Jamie, I watched as he carefully read the back on each one and considered if Willie would play with it or if it was age appropriate. I realised this was the first time we had shopped together for Willie. It was a strangely pleasant feeling, one I wanted to repeat.

On arriving back to Lallybroch, Willie was beside himself to see us, jumping into Jamie’s arms and pulling me by the neck towards Jamie and himself to kiss me. “I miss you mama an’ Da, Grandda let me dwive the twactor” he spilled out excitedly. “Did he now?” Jamie said pointedly looking at Brian. “ach only a wee spin Son, nothing to fret over” Brian replied, waving his hand dismissively.

We sat at Ellen’s table in the kitchen drinking tea and planning what had to be done for the next day, Ellen was running around comforting Jenny and scolding Ian for letting her drink too much. I saw Brian take me in for a minute and say “Janet should have had some sense like Claire, she looks well rested”, colour crept up my face. Jamie was watching me attentively, a smug smile on his face. I could have happily slapped the cocky bastard, the previous night’s antics were dancing behind his eyes as he drank me in. Jamie’s whole demeanor was leaving me completely disconcerted and my tongue wouldn’t work to respond to Brian. Jenny responded to her father, luckily taking the heat off me, “Aye well at least I had fun, sure Jamie and Claire went to bed at the same time Willie goes!” Ellen glanced at us briefly, but said nothing. Great.

After discussing in length how Jenny should wear her hair, I stood up, to escape my embarrassment. Also to deny Jamie any further enjoyment in watching me squirm, “I had better get
ready to go and collect Lamb”, I announced brushing myself off in an attempt to keep my gaze downwards.

Uncle Lamb was flying in for the wedding. Willie or I hadn’t seen him in almost three months and I was almost as excited as Willie to collect him. Jamie stood to take his jeep keys out of his pocket and said “dinna be speeding now Sassenach”, I gave him a curt smile and made to leave. “C’mon Willie, let’s go get Lamb!”

I was buckling Willie into the car seat when he remembered some toy that he couldn’t make the journey without, I unbuckled him again and let him run into the house. I was bent over the boot trying to find my handbag, when I felt a large hand on my arse, “I just came to see ye off”, Jamie cooed into my ear as he bent over my whole body to access said ear. "Did you now?” I said trying by best to put some sternness in my voice. "Before or after you were finished laughing at me?” I quipped. “I wasna laughing at ye, I was merely enjoying yer little pink cheeks” he said playfully. I turned to come out of the jeep “will you stop grabbing my arse, I am cross with you.”

“Ach dinna be cross with me Sassenach and ye ken I can’t keep my hands from yer arse…I told ye so this morning” Jamie appealed, looking down at me through earnest eyes. He pulled me closer by my hips and said huskily “c’mere mo graidh, “Jamie stop, someone will see and Willie is…..” my words meant business but my body was putting up little contest. Before I could continue my rebuttal, his hands were circling my cheekbones and his mouth on mine. A little sound fell from my mouth at his kiss and I could feel him smiling into my mouth. My heart pounding at his touch, I couldn’t stop him even if I wanted to.

“Why are ye kissing Mama?” We jumped apart but Jamie made a show of looking in my eyes and saying ”there ye go Claire it’s all out now” I tried to contain the laughter building in my belly, Jamie’s face was hilarious. He looked like a child who was about to be scolded. His face had taken on a crimson colour and he was biting his bottom lip.

Jamie cleared his throat “No Willie yer Mama had something in her eye”, Jamie explained. Willie just stood with his head tilted and looked at his father thoughtfully. Not meaning to be funny Willie replied deadly serious to his father “had she somethin in er eye or er mouth Da?” A giggle escaped my mouth and Jamie glared at me.

“ ye were kissing her!” Willie persisted seeing me laugh. Jamie crouched down to Willie’s level, to try and gain better ground with his son, but before he had a chance to speak Brian appeared from the kitchen door, "what is wrong a bhailach? Brian asked seeing Willie in deep conversation with his father. "Da was kissing Mama” Willie divulged without any preamble.

Jamie had made his first mistake by not recognizing Willie would have a reaction very similar to his own on being told he was mistaken, when Willie knew very well he was not mistaken. Willie dug his heels in and persevered, looking at his grandfather. "Da was kissing Mama” Willie divulged without any preamble.

Brian’s eyes shot up to his hairline and he began rubbing his chin contemplatively. If Jamie had any sense he would have rolled his eyes to his father muttered something like 'kids…hey?’all of which would have gone over Willie’s head. Unfortunately Jamie didn’t have any sense! “Ach no son, I told ye yer Ma has something in her eye”. I knew straight away this would only get the Fraser stubbornness up in Willie, before I had a chance to intervene. Willie crossed his arms, narrowed his eyes and said “are ye getting marrit to my Mama?” he looked so adorable as my
protector, I couldn’t help the smile forming on my lips. “Christ” Jamie muttered “ye have been spending too much time with yer Grandda.”

I made to break up the interrogation, “C’mon Willie we are going to be late”, I appealed. “Do ye like kissing my Mama?…I dinna want to kiss girls when I get grown up.” Willie continued.

Brian was stood watching, a broad smile across his face. “Da quit yer smirking” Jamie replied grumpily. “yer only encouraging Willie”. “Ach nay son, ye are encouraging him fine on yer own” Brian quipped patting Jamie squarely on the shoulders, “next time bring Claire to the stables, less likely to get caught there!” with that he turned on his heel and strode off whistling to himself.

I buckled Willie back in and was about to hop in myself when I felt Jamie’s hand grab mine, his voice was deep and gruff when he said “I’m sorry Sassenach, I should have been more careful around Willie.” His eyes were full of remorse and I realised he wouldn’t upset his son for anything. “Jamie” I breathed, “its fine, he will have forgotten by the time we get to the airport”, don’t beat yourself up about it.

“Aye I wanted to ask ye… but I am not sure ye will think it a good idea now with Willie seeing weel what he saw…”, I nodded for him to continue. “Go on?”

“Well …I was think’n ye and Willie could sleep with me in my cottage tonight? There was red creeping up his neck and I knew it cost him to ask me after all that had just unfolded, “wont that confuse Willie though Jamie?” I asked nervously not wanting him to see it as a rebuke

A wide smile spread across his face. “weel Sassenach only if he kens which bed ye sleep in? He wriggled his eyes suggestively at me. I raised my eyebrows and said “I will see you later!”

I dropped Lamb at Lallybroch and spent some time chatting with him, Brian and Ellen. Lamb had a ‘regular’ room in the main house and would be staying there. When Lamb had asked where I was staying, Brian quickly quipped “ Ach Jamie put her and the lad right beside him, less she tried to escape” winking wildly at me. “mmm I see” Lamb mused, winking at me. God these two together could be dynamite.

I decided to take Willie back up to my cottage for a bit of chill out time. As we neared the cottages, I noticed a baby pink mini parked outside Jamie’s cottage, I guessed almost instantly it was Laoghaire’s and my heart sank. Living the way we were the past 24 hours I pushed all thoughts of her and what was happening with Jamie to the back of my mind just happy to be part of our own world. Laoghaire was standing just outside his door, Jamie in the doorway arms folded. At least he didn’t seem to be granting her admittance, or was she just leaving? I was sick, physically sick and chastised myself for it. Now I would have to take Willie out of the jeep and walk up the path to my cottage, walking straight past them. I turned off the engine of Jamie’s jeep, and made to get out to unbuckle Willie. I knew she must have seen me pull up, I didn’t look in their direction. I didn’t need to, I could hear her loud and clear, she wanted me to hear her.

“I have been patient Jamie!, nay many girlfriends would have agreed to what I did”, I stayed away, not interfered for the sake of yer boy but now I hear ye have taken that slut off to a hotel for the night? When ye said ye wanted to keep her sweet, I dinna ken it meant fucking her too!” I put my hands over Willie’s ears and made for the door of the cottage fumbling for keys. “I ken how important it is to ye to have yer son move back to Scotland but I dinna think ye would stoop so low!” She continued. Blurting out the last bit to make sure I got every detail of what she wanted to say.
Dimly out of the corner I could see Jamie grab her by the forearm and push her towards her car, he was shouting something at her but my mind was buzzing, my heart racing. I just wanted the solitude of the empty cottage. So I could lie on a cold floor and pretend I hadn’t just been made a complete and utter fool. I had been so stupid.
Trust

I quickly turned on the tv and plonked an oblivious Willie in front of it, I grabbed some snacks for him. Once he was settled I made for the bedroom, my heart was beating at an unhealthy pace, my hands sweaty and tears burning behind my eyes. I went to the bathroom and ran the taps over my wrists, trying and failing to stop tears pour down my cheeks. God what I would have given to be able to run for the airport, but I still had to get through the fucking wedding, Christ what a mess. What a fool.

I couldn’t say how long I sat on that bathroom floor weeping, for my stupidity, for my anger, for me and for Willie. It took me a while to register the pounding at the cottage door, it was Willie’s voice saying “Da is outside Mama” that brought be out of my reverie. Fuck, if I didn’t open the door, Willie certainly would.

I used my sleeve to wipe my tears away. There was no hiding from him. I took a quick glance at my reflection in the mirror, I half thought of washing my face but I knew it wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference. My eyes were thoroughly fucked.

By the time I made it out to the kitchen, Willie was opening the door. Jamie came striding in by him, ignoring Willie was a rarity for Jamie. He was on a mission, a panicked look on his face. “Claire let me explain”, he stammered out.

I motioned my head to Willie who had resumed his horizontal position on the couch. He opened my bedroom door and said “Can I talk to ye in here…please?” I looked back at Willie and sighed. “Fine but be quick, I don’t want Willie to think there is something wrong.” He nodded. My face would do that all on its own, I thought absentmindedly.

Jamie shut the bedroom door behind him. I stood at the window looking out, I didn’t want to face him.

“I ken ye heard what she said, but Claire its nay the truth”, he sighed deeply then and hesitated “not all of it anyway…” he said more gently.

“What is true?”

Silence.

“Jamie, if you want to talk you had better do that because otherwise get out.”

He cleared his throat, I decided I would make the bastard squirm and turned to face him. He walked two steps hesitantly towards me, I put the palms of my hands up and said "don’t touch me, just tell me the truth Jamie."

Tipping something invisible on the carpet with the top of his foot.

Cautiously he began, “Before ye came, I asked Laoghaire to nay come out as much, to give me time with ye…and Willie”

I swallowed, blinked back the onslaught on tears and said “I see, and why did you want to do that?”
He raked his hand through his hair, “honestly?” I nodded “I wanted ye alone, I wanted to spend time with you, and I wanted to show ye what Willie’s life is like when he is here.”

“Why did Laoghaire agree”, it came out as no more than a whisper, I was afraid of the answer afraid of how I would feel knowing he discussed me with her, plotted even.

“Surely you telling her you wanted to spend time with me, me… merely a quickie from your past, an historic conquest …a fuck that ended up being the mother of your child” vitriol was spilling out of my mouth, to punish him, but also to punish me because that is how I saw myself now. A fool who was merely someone to try and swoon, so he could have his son in Scotland.

His face was blazing red, I’d hit a nerve, he was furious. “Why are ye talking, like that, ye never have ever been any of those things to me Claire.” he growled.

“Oh c’mon Jamie, who are you kidding, you lied to me, that is how important I am to you…all of this time you planned all this…” my hands gestured from me to him “all of this just so I would let Willie move to Scotland or I would be fool enough to think you wanted me here and to bring your son with me!” I spat.

“This has never been about me, it’s only been about Willie.”

A sound came from Jamie that I could only akin to a roar, his eyes were wild. “It has always been about you Claire!, how can ye no ken that?”I heard the crash of ceramic before I registered that he had knocked the bedside table over with his fist. He took two strides towards me, glaring and grabbing me by my forearms “It has always been about you!!”

“You’re a lying bastard and you don’t want to admit it to yourself!” I yelled. Pushing him back into his chest. “You were able to plot with your girlfriend to make me believe….to…lie to me…and tell her!” you said I was yours’ ‘Ye are mine and only mine’

“…well now I know why, you don’t want me, you want me for Willie…you can live your life with her! Laoghaire? You plotted this with her did you not? She knew the truth!”

“I dinna want Laoghaire and I never have!” he roared.

“I don’t believe a words that comes from your mouth Jamie”, I hissed, angry tears sprung from my eyes.

Suddenly his face softened, “mo graidgh dinna weep”, his hand reached to touch my face. I turned my head “please don’t Jamie.”

He bowed his head and inhaled deeply, he spoke so softly when he started again, “yes I did want to speak to ye, about you and Willie coming here, just to try it for a year to see would ye come. I wanted him to have one year in school here, I wanted to see if you maybe would like it, I kent it was a big ask, but I thought it was worth the ask, to have ye both here.” His chin quivered a bit, I knew he was holding back any emotion from his face and it was starting to seep out regardless.

“I shouldna never have told Laoghaire, but as soon as I mentioned ye were coming, she was like a fucking sticking plaster, I kent she would try and spend every waking moment out here once ye came and I wanted to spend time with ye…yes maybe broach the subject of you and Willie coming here for a year to see if ye liked it but more than anything Claire I just wanted to see you and spend time with you!… And aye I was a coward I should have told her straight out…I can tell ye one thing it was no from considering her feelings that I didna.”

He leaned his back up against the wall and let his head fall back looking up at the ceiling. “when
she came to the paddocks that first day, I was so pissed off. He smiled ruefully for a minute, something flashed across his eyes and he took me in, ” I forgot in a way ya ken, of what i am like around ye, I see nothing beyond you Claire and you may no believe me but that is the truth. I wanted to tell her to fuck off there and then but ye were watching me and I kent how it would look. When she spoke to ye like that in the kitchen, I knew it was the final straw. So on the way to the funfair I pulled up at her place and told her I dinna want to see her anymore. I brought Willie to the funfair on my own. I told her the truth then, I thought it was only fair to the lass…”

He brought his head back then to look at me, to gauge my reaction.

Walking towards me so that there was only an inch between us, ”I have made a fucking mess of this but I swear to you Claire, what happened here with you, its real, its no part of a game I am playing, I canna do anything else when ye are around but want you”. He said gently.

"Maybe that is the truth Jamie, but right now I can only see that you conspired with your girlfriend to move Willie back here, but you couldn’t find it in your heart to speak to me about it?” I closed my eyes for a minute and wiped away the tears, this would be the last time he would see me cry. He and her could both go fuck themselves. “You have been my partner with Willie since the day he was born, I trust no one completely but you when it comes to him, I would never ever discuss anything about his life, his future, my worries for him but with you!…yet you felt able to discuss his living arrangements with a stranger to me and to Willie.”

“Claire I dinna discuss it with her, I promise ye…I wanted her to give me time…I shouldha just been straight with the lass, but I was afraid she would create blue murder while ye were here…so I said we needed time to talk about Willie and maybe see if we could talk about trying to live here… I never said more than that…I swear!”

His hands were outstretched as if to block me should I run for the door.

Eventually I said "I am tired Jamie, I don’t think there is anything more to say, when he get back to Boston, we can discuss Willie maybe having more time here, I have obviously no notion of wanting to live here, my life is in Boston.”

“Claire I can see ye are shutting me out… please dinna…”

“I am” I said with finality, “I am going to preserve whatever dignity I have left and try and get through the next couple of days, for Jenny’s sake, I hope we can use our maturity and respect for each other to continue to co parent Willie as we did before.”

“It was my fault too”, I said smiling sadly at him, “I made the mistake of thinking this was more.”
I was grateful for three things the night before the wedding; firstly, that I had the good mind before Jamie left, to ask him to keep Willie that night, I had a hairdresser’s appointment with Jenny the next morning being my main excuse. Number two was that Jenny wanted to go to bed early due to her lingering hangover, which consequently meant I didn’t have to sit up drinking champagne and trying not to let her see I had been an emotional wreck moments before. Number three was the sleeping tablets I had brought with me for flying, I swallowed one and downed two glasses of wine from the fridge. I barely remembered my head touching the pillow.

I woke the following morning and gave myself a stern talking to, I felt fresh, rested and my fighting spirit had returned. I owed Jenny Fraser soon to be Murray a lot and today was her day, it was not about me or Jamie. I intended to put my best foot forward and appreciate her special day, also make equally sure everything was as it should be for her.

We returned to Lallybroch from a giggly morning sipping champagne in the hairdressers. The morning was ladies only, with the male party getting ready in Jamie’s cottage. I hadn’t spotted him that morning, and I was thankful of that in order to keep my newly positive attitude ongoing.

A beautician was coming to the main house to do our make-up. We laughed and reminisced about Jenny’s early days with Ian, Ellen telling funny stories about Jamie and Jenny as children. We went up to Jenny’s room to get dressed, Dressing Jenny first, she looked stunning, one of the most beautiful brides I had ever seen. Ellen placed a pearl necklace around her neck and said “yer something old love”, Jenny smiled back and said “aye and I ken ye told me I have to give them back”, Ellen nodded, “that is right they are Jamie’s to give to his wife, when he weds.” she looked at me softly and said “and I dinna think Claire would appreciate ye taking them on her.”

“I don’t think so Ellen” I said smiling and shaking my head, face downcast. Hoping to god that the tears threatening to fall didn’t show in my eyes. “Dinna laugh at me” Ellen said playfully. “Jamie Fraser has nay had eyes for anyone since ye came with Lamb four years ago, isna that right Janet?”

Jenny rolled her eyes at her mother “will ya stop mam ye are embarrassing Claire, ye will not be happy until he produces that ring again!” Jenny said breezily, admiring herself in the full length mirror as she spoke.

“What ring?” I stuttered out. Jenny’s eyes went wide for a minute and she threw an imploring look at Ellen. Whatever she had said, it was a mistake.

Ellen looked at me and took my two hands in hers, “its nay Jenny’s story to tell aye…she shouldna said anything."

My eyes filled with tears, Ellen sighed and took a moment to think, she pressed her lips together and cautiously said “he brought a ring to Boston before, please dinna ask any more Claire cause I really canna say.” Ellen blurted and then threw a stern look at the bride.
Silence consumed the room. I kept looking at my ring finger. Did Ellen mean Jamie had come to Boston to propose? When?

“Well then” Jenny cleared her throat and said “I think it is time we went downstairs to see what Da thinks of us.” I tried to rid my dazzled brain of all thoughts of rings and made my way down stairs holding Jenny’s train.

Jenny had come to Boston to shop for her wedding and bridesmaid dress, we had a boozy lunch and then hit the bridal boutiques. Jenny had let me feel in control of what I choose, although I knew she had an exact design in mind and until we hit on it we would play the “ach that is lovely Claire but I dinna think it suits ye” game. Eventually for her own dress, she settled on a 40’s style vintage gown with beautiful lace detail. Jenny had steered me towards, a two piece dress, the skirt was tulle and floaty, it was icy blue in color. Jenny said it matched the Fraser eyes, I remember standing in the shop and thinking of Jamie’s eyes, not Willies or Jenny’s but Jamie’s, absently remembering they were much bluer and warmer than the skirt.

The top was white silk, a round neck and sleeveless. Jenny seen my hesitance at wearing something so girlie, sold it by saying “Ach Claire, it has pockets for yer wee bits”. Practicality out winning for me, secretly I wanted to look good. Even over a year ago when I picked that dress, I bought it thinking of what Jamie would think of me when he saw me in it. Now walking back up to my cottage to retrieve my camera and phone, hair piled on top of my head and a warm breeze hitting my face, I felt positively swishy and girl like, a very uncommon feeling for me.

Approaching my cottage I spotted Ian, Jamie and Willie outside having their photos taken by the photographer. Jamie had his hand draped around Ian’s shoulder and was holding Willie in his arms, he looked decadent, breath takingly handsome and my heart released a pang for him and only for him. I tried to brush it off and proceeded on to see them, “Oh my, you boys scrub up well!” I announced cheerfully. Jamie was going to get my friendliest version of me for the day, it was his sister’s wedding and whatever was going on between us, I knew I cared enough about him to make sure he enjoyed it too.

They hadn’t spotted me until I spoke, so when they turned to look Ian’s broad smile and whistling gesture made me blush. Jamie’s mouth hung open a little, eyes wider than normal, a little pride ran from the pit of my tummy to my face at the affect I had on him. He didn’t speak. I went to fix the flower in Willie’s lapel, he wrapped his little arms around my neck and said “yer the prettiest girl here mama”, I tut tutted him and said “you haven’t seen your aunty Jenny yet.” When I looked up Jamie was staring at me, he quickly glanced away.

The photographer on seeing me, checked a list from his pocket and said “the bride has asked that we get one shot of her brother, his son and Claire?” eyebrows creased in question to see if I was Claire. “yep that is me” I said helpfully. “Great can I get one of you over by the tree.” Jamie, Willie and I made for the tree, Willie taking a hand each and swinging between us, shouting eagerly “look at me mama” and “higher Da”. The photographer probably seeing this family scene unfold before him presumed wrongly Jamie was my husband, and I his wife. “ok if you two can bend down on your hunkers as if chatting to your little lad there”, we both willingly obliged, “now Jamie if you can put your arm around your wife’s shoulders, yes just like that…” Jamie didn’t correct him just followed his instructions. “Aye that’s it and if ye two can look at each other, and wee Willie here can look up at ye”, the photographer continued. “Jamie I don’t think…”, I tried to point out these poses were going to appear if we were man and wife if we didn’t correct him. “sssh Claire, let the man do his work” was all I got in response from Jamie, he has to look directly at me for the pose, he took it to another level by boring into my eyes. The second time the photographer
referred to me as Jamie’s wife, I opened my mouth to speak, Jamie just squeezed my shoulder tighter. Suddenly the ring and him bringing it to Boston was foremost in my mind and I couldn’t bring myself to say it either. The photographer positioned us into a pose and snapped several times, finally saying, “they are great thank you, ye are a good looking family.”

By the time we were finished with the photographer, Ian was standing near the tree waiting. I presumed they had to get more shots taken and made to head for the cottage. Ian called me back “Claire can I have a quick word?” Jamie shot him a look and Ian offered “just something I have for Jenny…” Jamie's face relaxed slightly and I made to walk up to my cottage with Ian.

I waited looking at Ian expectantly once we reached the cottage, “are you ok Ian? You look nervous?” he was looking over my shoulder for a minute and he looked back at me absentmindedly “Mmm…oh aye ya just a wee bit nervous…how is Jenny” he started, “Oh she is so excited, she looks amazing, wait until you see her”, I replied.

His face lit up at hearing about Jenny, and then grew serious again, “I eh..I..actually wanted to talk to ye about Jamie, Claire.” My face instantly went red, “what…I mean..what do you want to say about Jamie?” I stuttered out.

“weel”, he started, “I heard Laoghaire came by his place yesterday and said somethings to ye that were unpleasant” he said the last word as if he had dirt in his mouth. “She didn’t actually say anything to me, but she made sure I heard” I explained, my gaze stuck to the ground, humiliation creeping up on me again at the memory. “Aye weel, Jamie isna good at …the truth of it Claire is that when it comes to ye, Jamie loses all sensible reason…so I wanted to speak to ye on his behalf as such…although I ken fine well he may no appreciate it.” He pursed his lips and bowed his head, for reassurance he could continue.

I swallowed and nodded, “Ian this is your wedding day, you don’t need to worry yourself about me or Jamie, honestly we are both grown-ups”, I said smiling. I really didn’t want this, Ian did not have to take up his time with Jamie or me, especially today.

“No Claire” he said surely, “I do.”

“I set Jamie up with Laoghaire a couple of months back, she is a cousin of mine…aye?” he blurted out. Seeing I wasn’t interrupting, he kept going.

“Claire…I ken you may no feel like believing Jamie at the moment but I hope ye have some faith in what I tell ye”, a shy smile appearing on his lips.

“The thing is …well…Jamie has never moved on really from ye since ye came that first time and Willie or no, I think he always hoped that there might be some future for ye…he hadna well…he hadna passed too much heed to any woman since Willie was born and to be honest Claire, I dinna think it was healthy…then when Jenny and I went to Boston to visit ye, I kent ye were dating, nothing serious Jenny tells me but I felt…well I should tell him…Aye?”

I nodded again, wondering how Jamie had felt about my sporadic unsuccessful dates, yet he wouldn’t have known that they were just that unsuccessful.

Ian wavered before speaking again “so I pushed him a bit to take Laoghaire out…waste of bloody time” he rolled his eyes “even if she didn’t require the patience of jobe…his heart is set on you Claire and when ye came back, even a blind man could see how he is about ye”.
Ian reached forward and squeezed my shoulder “I ken he had a notion ye might let Willie come here for a year to school and that…but Claire ye would be wrong in thinking that is just about having Willie here!” he raised his eyebrows and said, “for god sake Claire, the man has started building ye a house!” Ian’s exasperation clear in his voice. “It’s for Willie”, I said meekly. Ian let a long sigh out and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, whatever he wanted to say, he was clearly deciding whether he should tell me or not. Eventually he said “I saw those plans, afore he started building did ye ken that?” his mouth curled to one side. “no, Jamie said only his parents had seen it”, “aye that is true, he dinna bring me up yet, but before he started building, he got me to take a look at the plans see what I thought”, “oh ok”, I replied not really knowing where Ian was going with this. “written over yer little apartment was no ‘Claire’s apartment or granny flat, do ye ken what he called it?’” I shook my head. “Claire’s surgery.” I swallowed hard, I could feel a lump climbing up my throat.

“Anyway”, he continued trying to steer away from me breaking down altogether, “Laoghaire may well turn up today…not as Jamie’s guest”, he added quickly, “she had been invited as she is family”, another eye roll. “I just dinna want ye thinking that she is here because of Jamie” a sheepish expression on his face. “I would say how he is feeling right now, he would gladly fire her into the mill and watch her float downstream!” Ian paused an intake of breath “it’s too late to uninvite her, as she will only cause a stramish…and Jenny will no be pleased.” We laughed at that “but I am sorry she is here and I am more sorry, I interfered at all, I shouldna have told Jamie ye were dating in Boston…its only I got the impression ye maybe were no pining after him…like he was after you…and well after Inverness…” colour creeping into Ian’s cheeks, “I can see that is no the case, ye have something special Claire, dinna throw it away”, Ian let out a sigh of relief at telling his part in all of this “god this marrit thing has gone to me head, I sound like bloody Oprah”, he finished laughing.
Speech

Chapter Summary

Jamie has to make a best man speech and Willie has an agenda...

Once back at the main house, there were plenty of tears, thankfully none of them mine…well bar the misting over of my eyes while watching Brian take in his daughter as she twirled around in her dress. The main culprit for the tears was Willie, who in spectacular style announced it was ‘no manly’ to be walking up the aisle with the girls” (Jenny and I), and wanted to stand at the top of the aisle with his ‘Da and unca Ian’. So I headed in search of Jamie with Willie in tow, before Aunt Jenny lost any remaining patience for him and sacked him as page boy altogether.

Jamie was standing just outside the marquee, greeting guests as they arrived, Willie went bounding for him shouting “ima gonna mind ye Da, I am no staying with the girls”, Jamie laughed at the sight of him. My whole resolve to keep a friendly distance until my departure was already up in the air at Ian’s words, had my resolve not been weakened alone at that, it would have crumbled at just the sight of Jamie smiling and greeting guests. His natural warm personality, along with the physical sight of him was enough to make my breath come short and my knees weak. I desperately wanted to speak to him about what was happening with us and what had been spoken of the night before, but it wasn’t the time or the place. I held back slightly once I reached him, but smiled, meeting his eye. I enlightened Jamie about Willie’s ‘it’s no manly’ strop and we both laughed at our little son and his stubborn streak. Without conscious thought my hand went up to straighten his lapel. “thank ye”, he said softly. He put his hand over mine on his suit coat, just over his heart. “ye look like a fairytale in that dress”, he said smiling. “Are you my prince charming then?”, I said grinning back at him. He looked a bit taken aback but his face lit up nonetheless. “Do ye think I would be fit for the job?” he whispered back. Before a chance to speak came again, we reluctantly had to break away at the arrival of more guests. Happy ever after?

The next time I saw Jamie I was walking up the aisle towards him. He was crouched down beside our son, patiently pointing me out to a tired looking Willie, he was whispering into Willie’s ear no doubt explaining what was happening next. I couldn’t take my eyes off them as I walked up the aisle. Mine I thought.

By the time I reached the top of the aisle, Willie was now clearly tired enough that all aspirations to be ‘manly’ were water under the bridge, reaching out his two arms for me to take him. Jamie pulled me close as we exchanged Willie and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

Brian and Jenny were next. I could see Jamie squeezing Ian’s shoulder as Jenny approached and whisper something in his ear. I loved seeing Jamie like this, he was such a calm reassuring presence to his family and friends, it was second nature to him. A born leader.

The wedding ceremony was beautiful, Willie managed to sleep on my lap through the majority of it. When it was time for the vows Ellen took him from me, so I could fix Jenny’s train or take her flowers when needed. I looked over at Jamie who was looking straight back at me, a soft look in his eyes. I gave him a quick smile and bent to examine my bouquet. Once they were announced Husband and Wife a large roar went up in the marquee and Ian pulled Jenny into a long kiss.

Pims and prosecco were being served on the grass outside the marquee, it was there I caught my
first glimpse of Laoghaire, she was standing talking to two other blonde women, one I took to be her sister possibly. She didn’t seem to see me and in order to avoid her, I slipped inside the empty marquee where the wedding dinner would be served. I spotted Jamie straight away standing amongst the tables.

Jenny and Ian had opted to not have a top table instead having several long banquet tables, so they were not seated separately to their guests. Jamie was stood in the quietly reading from a sheet, I slid up behind him and put my hand on his back, he startled but relaxed when he saw it was me, “are you ok?” I asked smiling at him. “Aye I just dinna want to make a mess of this speech, Jenny will never let me hear the end of it if I do.” he replied, pursing his lips into a thin line. “Jamie I couldn’t think of anyone better to speak on my behalf, you’ll do brilliantly.” He edged closer to me, looking down at me with his blue eyes warm and intent. “Aye well Sassenach, as long as ye have faith in me I am pleased with myself.” I ran my hand over the expanse of his back in a soothing motion, “I do have faith in you Jamie,” looking straight back into his gaze. “Claire…” he started, but before he could continue, guests started spilling into the tent. I quickly busied myself, "well I had better go see where I am sitting, Jenny has put me next to her on the seating plan, in case she ‘needed’ anything”, I said rolling my eyes at Jenny’s bossy streak. “Aye but I told her to seat ye next to me, so she can get her new husband should she ‘need’ anything. He responded quickly, adding more brusquely "it will be easier for us to manage Willie anyway.”

“Oh, ok” I said simply. The connection between us had shifted again, a tentative ease creeping back in from our heated words the night before.

As soon as they started to serve the champagne for the speeches, I could feel rather than hear Jamie’s foot tapping quickly next to mine, his hand on his thigh tapping an identical rhythm. I lowered my hand to his under the table and put my palm over his hand, he looked down at our joined hands, as I started rubbing slow circles into the back of his hand. Reassurance. “It will be ok, you’ll do fine!” He turned our hidden hands and entwined our fingers looking at me gratefully at first and then a mischievous smile appearing across his lips, he bowed his head almost onto my shoulder and began rubbing his nose up and down my neck, tickling me in the process. “wot are you doing?” I asked giggling. “I am smelling ye”, his matter of fact response did nothing to explain why he was smelling me, “Jamie people are starting to look….” I said halfheartedly protesting at his closeness, Aye well let them look, ye always smell so good Sassenach, it relaxes me”, his response accompanied by a long inhale at my hair, “you are mental!” I said laughing but undeniably pleased.

When Jamie got up to speak, I downed my champagne to quell my nerves for him. I needn’t have worried, he spoke beautifully starting with his long and full friendship with Ian and regaling his audience with hilarious stories of the trouble they had gotten into when they were young. I could see tears in some of the guests eyes laughing at Jamie’s tall tales, they were completely enchanted, a born story teller/ He spoke about his own parent’s example of love and a long and lasting marriage, the example they had set for him and Jenny in finding a true partner for life. When he moved onto Jenny and Ian’s relationship, he used a sweet but hilarious story at how he came to realise Ian was in love with his sister. “Janet and I were having a woeful argument down at the stables, there was some name calling” Jamie explained good-humoredly. “I dinna remember the exact details…” he teased “but suffice to say it was all Jenny’s fault!” an eruption of laughter at this, Jenny rolled her eyes laughing. “Anyway” he continued “next thing I remember was getting a thump into my jaw knocking me clean over, I thought first that Jenny had hit me, but nay, this is the twist in the story” he continued adding dramatic ineundo to his voice “ye will all be shocked to discover that it was my best friend, Ian standing over me rubbing his fist!” Jamie looked at Ian then “he told me if he ever heard me calling Jenny names he would beat me with my Da’s belt!”, “Jenny ran over to him fussing about his fist and kicked me while I was still down!” Jamie turned to them both then and said “I kent then they were not to be trifled with, as they would always have
each other’s backs, nothing has changed since that day.” He got a large applause, when he started
to speak again, he had a more earnest tone, the earlier teasing was put aside for sincerity, “I would
like to say a few words about my sister, as much as I gripe and complain about her” Jamie added
winking at Jenny, a lull of silence and Jamie continued smiling softly at Jenny, “I truly could not
want for a better sister, friend or co-conspirator” Jamie turned to look down at me and Willie, “she
has been a huge support to Claire and I since Willie was born, and has no issue at telling us if she
dinna think we are doing the whole parenting thing properly, or spoiling Willie herself, when she
dinna think we are doing enough of that either!” Jamie quipped “and there are many things I love
about Jenny but one of them is her close bond with Claire, they are like two peas in a pod,
especially when it comes to complaining about me!” he added winking jovially, earning him
another chorus of laughs. “It’s a really lovely thing to see” he paused and looked down at me “to
see two of the most important women in my life having such a connection.” He raised his glass
then and said “so to my sister Jenny Murray, who will always tell us how it is, and to the loyalist
man I ken, Ian Murray, may yer lives be filled with laughter, love and happiness!” once he sat
down again, I gripped his hand and squeezed it tight.

After dinner I lost Jamie into the sea of guests. The banquet tables were being pushed back along
the edges of the marquee to allow for the band and dance floor. I heard rather than saw Laoghaire,
she was bent down talking to a disinterested looking Willie. I quickly made my way over to her. I
had no notion of causing a scene at Jenny’s wedding but there was no way I wanted her anywhere
near Willie. I navigated myself through the crowds to get to them but just before I reached Willie,
Jamie suddenly loomed in front of me, he picked Willie up into his arms and handed him back to
me without looking, Willie was oblivious to any tension quickly wriggled out of my arms and
bolted towards the wedding cake. I could see Laoghaire reaching for Jamie’s forearm and a hissed
tone coming from her into his ear “ya ken fine well where ye will come running to keep yer bed
warm, when she is gone back to Boston and dinna forget it James Fraser.” Jamie swung around,
face like thunder grabbing me by the hand and pulling me with him. “Stay away from my son and
Claire”, He spat back. We were engulfed into the crowd of guests as he steered us away. He didn’t
loosen his grip and I had no choice but to follow him. When he got to a clearing in the crowd he
turned and pulled me towards him “Claire I am so sorry, ye shouldna have to listen to that…”
before he could finish his sentence I put my finger over his lips and said “shhh, I don’t care”, he
looked at me incredulously, clearly confused by my calm approach to Laoghaire after my anger the
night previous. Without conscious thought I raised a bit on my tippy toes to reach his lips, and he
bent to meet mine. We had just time for a chaste kiss when we heard a little voice say “Da are ye
kissing Mama again!”, exasperation evident in Willie’s tone. I could feel Jamie’s broad smile
against my mouth. “No son, yer Mama has something in her eye…”
Dancing in the dark.

Chapter Summary

Willie arranges a dance.

The end has some NSFW content.

High heels kicked off and feet raised and resting on a chair, I sat back with Ellen watching the hilarious performance before me. Brian Fraser, was currently throwing a very patient woman around the dance floor, his dark hair shaped into a quiff, in an attempt at an Elvis impersonation which he was accompanying with an ‘uh huh’ for good measure. His hips were rotating in a way I wasn’t entirely comfortable with but couldn’t look away either, It was a thoroughly enjoyable sight, which Ellen and I were making the most of.

Tears in my eyes from laughing, I didn’t notice the large body looming over me, I felt a finger run up the sole of my foot and looked up to see Jamie holding Willie in his arms, a relaxed smile across his wide mouth. “yer son and I would like to take ye out for a dance?” His hand outstretched to pull me up. Once on my feet Jamie leaned into my ear and said “well actually Willie doesna think I have much in the way of moves but he said he will show me!”

Who could resist an uber confident Willie.

I took Jamie’s hand and he led me to the dance floor still holding Willie, Willie sat upright in Jamie’s arms, with a serious expression, a captain leading his ship and Jamie being the ship, “now Da go nice and slow so Mama doesna get dizzy.”

An acoustic version of dancing in the dark was being played by the wedding band. The guitar drumming a hypnotic beat introducing the song. The girl singing had a clear, beautiful voice, the crowd around us instantly calmed from the earlier more upbeat tune, the floor cleared slightly with some opting to sit out the slower song. We had ample room to move. A low guitar thrumming.

You can’t start a fire, you can’t start a fire without a spark, this gun’s for hire

Even if we’re just dancing in the dark.

Jamie with his free arm grabbed me by the waist and pulled me close swaying our bodies slightly, “Good” Willie encouraged, a steady beat guiding the three of us. Willie’s head lowered to Jamie’s shoulder, happy to be lulled along by the music.

Jamie ran his hand down my lower back and pulled me flush with him, our heads like magnets pulled together until our foreheads rested against each other. Eyes intent, a question behind them. Is this ok?

I need a love reaction
Come on now, baby, gimme just one look.

I could feel some eyes on us, I didn’t care but I knew we were raising questions, I was Willie’s mother, not Jamie’s partner, but it was clear from looking at us that we were closer than just a co-parenting arrangements. “Don’t you think people will think we are rather friendly?” I whispered to Jamie. A broad smile followed “Do ye really think I care what anyone thinks Sassenach?”

Suddenly Willie’s little voice broke in, “Spin her now Da”, we both started laughing but Jamie true to form span me out slowly.

You can’t start a fire worrying about your little world falling apart.

One hand twirling me away from them, then before I knew what was happening he did a slick pull on my arm and pulled me back flush against his face, I was breathless and totally disorientated, Jamie’s lips breezing over mine, a devilish smile on them.

A whisper into my mouth “the little dictator said I canna kiss ye” another word from Willie and I was swung back out twirling away again, then suddenly back again almost landing on Jamie’s mouth this time, “Da!” Willie’s voice full of hilarity and an attempt at a warning, enjoying his control over us “Dinna kiss her I told ye!” I couldn’t stop the smile bursting across my face, the two of them were completely endearing.

Even if we’re just dancing in the dark

Jamie intent on teasing his son, swung me again, this time bringing me back to the previous position flush with his face, he was now biting his bottom lip, “Willie it is no easy not kissing yer mama”, Jamie’s head slightly bent his eyes dancing with mischief, “maybe just a small kiss, aye? Jamie appealed. ”No Da, ya see she only likes me kiss’n her, isn’t that right Mama?” Willie reasoned, his voice had taken on a tone of sympathy.

“Pur Da”. I said smiling. “yer a temptress Claire”, Jamie scolded.

We lulled ourselves back to a steady sway again, Willie’s head drooping with every movement until I could see his eyes dropping.

Even if we’re just dancing in the dark

Even if we’re just dancing in the dark

Hey, baby…

Jamie ran his nose down over mine, breathing me in. His hips guiding the three of us. Eventually as a new song began to play I reluctantly whispered into his ear, “My little protector has fallen asleep, we should let Mrs. Crook know he is ready for bed”.

As we walked away from the dance floor Laoghaire stood to the side arms folded glaring, Jamie kept a firm hold on my waist and we walked on by her.

We readied Willie for bed in the main house where Mrs. Crook had offered to babysit him.
Once we got back outside the kitchen door, Jamie pulled my by the hand to a narrow entry way at the side of the main house. He pushed me back up against the wall, his body pressed up against mine, his hand rose to run down from my cheek to my neck, resting just above my breast.

His forehead rested against mine, “yer no so angry with me as ye were last night”, his eyes watching mine keenly, trying to find an answer behind them.

“I’m not” I agreed. His hands moved further down and rested lightly on my hips, “why not then?” I smiled running my hands down the length of his chest feeling him solid and warm, against me. “Because I don’t want to be anymore” I replied simply, He sighed deeply and closed his eyes “will ye be able to trust me again?” he asked, his eyes still closed. “I hope so” I said slightly more breathlessly. His gentle hands were guiding my hips against him, encouraging a similar rhythm from our dance, this time guiding me against him for friction.

“Can I kiss ye Claire?” I managed to murmur out an “mmp”, before his lips covered mine, gently at first, but when I whimpered it only heartened his efforts and he deepened the kiss, his tongue running along my mouth in silent question. “God I have wanted to do that all day he said eventually, it came out a breathless rush of words. I could see my own chest rise and fall quickly. Suddenly his hand roamed down my thigh and he started to hike up my tulle skirt, “Jamie”, I protested, “you can’t… jesus there are over two hundred people a few minutes away!”. He didn’t stop but was clearly struggling to find anything under the tulle fabric, “my heart has been sore for ye, I need to feel ye Claire.” Oh god, resistance was futile.

His head was bent now looking down at the skirt trying to navigate his way under it, his face was screwed up in concentration, I couldn’t help the laugh building up inside me, once it escaped, he looked at me a slight smirk on his face “it’s no funny Claire”, he grabbed me back into a hard kiss, ignoring the skirt for the time being, although I could feel his desperation.

I reached my hand down below the hem of my skirt and slowly ran it up my leg, once he realised what I was about he looked down, my hand now just above my knee and my skirt gathered above it, I took his hand and placed it where mine was, just inside my thigh, his breath hitched and I continued to guide his hand up my leg, deliberately slow, bringing my ankle around one of his calves to spread my legs further. I placed his hand over my crotch, a wetness evident beneath my panties, “that’s for you Jamie” I said in barely a whisper.

“Jesus Claire”, a growl “ye literally drive me to madness…god ye feel so good”. I bit my bottom lip, smiling at my effect on him “Shh, someone will hear us” I said giggling. His hand slipped under the lacy material and he ran a finger tentatively inside of me, feeling heat, my body was throbbing for him now. I took my hand away from his and reached for his trousers button, undoing it and slipping my hand down and taking his full length.

“Ye are gonna be the end of me Claire”, “mmp well I hope there will be an end alright” I muttered into his ear, which I received a low groan in response. My other arm thrown around his neck pulling him closer. His hand had picked up a rhythm and my hips were dancing to it, my strokes on him were becoming more determined. Suddenly he took my hand away and splayed my thighs so they were up around his waist. “If ye keep that up im gonna come on yer little swishy dress, and I ken ye won’t be pleased”, With one ruthless move he thrust up and into me. His trousers fell just below his arse and I grabbed him to me, cupping him.

My head fell back against the stone wall of the main house and I gasped out “oh god Jamie”, his head fell on my chest just above my breasts and he started to drive himself into me, his knees bent. A loud groan came from my mouth and he laughed “now Sassenach, ye ken there are people everywhere…”, he placed his mouth on mine, gently biting my bottom lip. His grunts with each
thrust falling into my open mouth, “God I have never known want like it”, he stammered out between thrusts, his hips dropping lower every time so that he drove up higher and higher. My body was arched bending to accommodate him, trying to take in every bit of him, “oh god Jamie, don’t stop…fuck”, a muttering in Gaelic rang out in my ear in reply to this, his movements started coming faster, harder, more desperate. “Claire I canna…jesus Claire”, with one final thrust he stilled for a moment, and an inhale of breath before he let go of the tight grip on my thighs, rubbing them over with his palms, I could feel the evidence of his orgasm, a warm gush filling me. His head dropped again on my chest, his breathing ragged “I love ye Claire.” My ears were buzzing from my own finish and I wondered if I had heard him correctly. But his head eventually rose from my chest and he cupped my face, my body still pinned against the wall and my legs wrapped around his waist. “Do ye ken that?” he asked softly, absorbed eyes watching me and waiting.
Declarations

Chapter Summary

Some nsfw in here.

“I’m not sure if I did”, I replied honestly. “well ya should” Jamie said firmly, “I have told ye once before?”

“you did not!”, I said crossly.

“Aye, I did”, a sure smile creeping up his face. "The day Willie was born.”

"Jamie” I said rolling my eyes, “that’s different!” he drew his eyes together, contemplatively.

"I dinna see how it’s different Claire” his face had taken on an amused look. I could feel myself blushing.

“The birth of your child is a very emotional thing!” I said patiently “I am not surprised you said something like that in the heat of the moment”, a flicker of annoyance passed over his face. “I dinna say it in the heat of the moment Claire!"

I looked down at our still entangled feet, his hands found my hips again and pulled me to him, “and ye said it too”, a smug smile on his face. “Does that mean ye dinna mean it, or was it just the heat of the moment?” he was trying to say it with bravado, but I could see there was fear in his eyes.

I could feel the burning in my cheeks as I recalled the declaration. Willie stuck to my naked breast, my brow covered in sweat, Jamie kissing me fiercely, thanking me for Willie, then tenderly cupping my cheeks and whispering "I love ye Claire”, I didn’t hesitate, without flinching I replied “I love you too”, tears building in my eyes. Jamie’s return to Scotland had caused a hurt that meant we never uttered those words again until now.

I was sure of it then, but we were so new, we never realised how tentative the first declaration of love was. I didn’t want Jamie to leave, but he had little choice, Lallybroch was his and he couldn’t abandon Brian and Ellen to run it alone, they simply couldn’t manage without him. He had his final exams to sit, it was mainly unsaid but he couldn’t stay, I knew it, he knew it. Jamie never mentioned Scotland or moving me and Willie there, he knew it would have meant me sacrificing my career, everything I knew was in Boston, except for Jamie.

It was hard for him to leave, that was evident in him the days before he left, the night before his flight home, he had slept on the floor in Willie’s nursery watching his chest rise and fall, just before dawn he crept into my bed and held me tightly.

Rationally I knew it wasn’t his fault he was leaving but nevertheless the sense of abandonment when he took that flight was overwhelming, I think my first wall went up that day. When he returned to see Willie the next time, I had removed my heart from the equation.

Finally I whispered “I meant it then Jamie, but we are staring down the same rabbit hole now are we not?” his fingers ghosted over my lips and his forehead dropped to mine, "I still have to leave tomorrow.” His eyes closed and he replaced his fingers with his mouth.
“I still can’t help it though Claire”, eyes locked on mine.

We walked back up towards the marquees hands entwined. Some guests were walking towards us, as we approached the entryway, I made to loosen our hands, “We have nothing to hide Claire”, Jamie said looking at me quizzically.

“Jamie…it’s just we barely know what we are about ourselves, without your family asking you hundreds of questions.”

He smiled and pulled me to him, “Let them ask Claire, I willna tell them anything unless ye want me to…aye?”, “aye” I agreed smiling.

We were separated fairly quickly on entry to the marquee, Ian grabbed Jamie and muttered something about whiskey tasting with the boys, an urgency in Ian’s voice suggesting they were about to undertake their life’s work. I was promptly swept out on the dance floor with Brian Elvis Fraser and Jenny. I looked back over my shoulder for one last glance at Jamie, he was mouthing, ‘il find you later’, a little wriggle of his eyebrows and he was gone.

Hours later, the band had finished, a sing song was picking up at a table filled with Jenny and Ian’s friends, I stood, hip propped against the bar with a drink in hand humming along with Jenny. I felt a pair of large hands grab my arse, and a chin rest solidly on my shoulder, “ye smell lovely Sassenach, are ye ready for bed?”, a large inhalation of breath and a bite at my earlobe.

Jamie was well on it, this would only mean all offers of discretion between us would go out the window. Jenny’s eyes went out on stalks and her mouth dropped open slightly, "Jamie Fraser! what’s gotten into ye, yer pissed…stop yer groping on Claire!", Jamie completely ignoring Jenny’s instructions was now secretly sneaking a finger under the hem of my top, circling my bellybutton sending shivers down my spine. I felt for appearances sake I should try and get out of his grasp, I wriggled slightly to get away, this only encouraged him and he kept a tighter hold on my waist. “ima gonna need ye to put me to bed Dr Claire, my head dinna feel so good!” “Jamie”, I hissed trying and failing to kick him in the shin. A friend of Jenny’s had stopped to say goodnight, it gave me a minute to swing around and talk to his face. “Fine we will go to bed but you have to stop that, this isn’t how I want your sister to find out about us”, his eyes were glazed over now “mmm us, I like the sound of that Sassenach”, I rolled my eyes “c’mon before Jenny spots us sneaking out”, I grabbed his hand and pulled him behind me.

We were heading down the hill towards the main house, where we had both been allocated rooms. The cottages were housing wedding guests for the night. By the look of things we would be only requiring one of the two bedrooms Ellen had made up for us. The short walk down the hill seemed too long for us to be apart and Jamie pulled me into the shadows of a tree for a thorough kiss, Jamie’s head was bent and he was whispering words of endearment in Gaelic into my ear, while I giggled helplessly under his grasp. I spotted Gerry Forbes over Jamie’s shoulder, before I had time to alert Jamie, Gerry had spotted us and was approaching fast, a slight sway to his step, “ach so I can see yer issue Fraser, ye wanted her for yerself!” Jamie turned to Gerry given him a disdainful look, “and yer point being Gerry?

Gerry didn’t seem to know where to go with his line of interrogation now that Jamie wasn’t arguing with him. His mouth agape, he eventually looked at me and said "Claire, when ye want
someone who will do better by ye than just introducing ye as their baby mama, give me a call.”

I swallowed, I could feel the rage building in Jamie with just his touch on my back, he took two strides and was looming over Gerry “I dinna introduce ye to Claire at all, the last thing I would do is introduce her to the likes of ye”, Jamie looked him up and down as if he was a bad stain. “What Claire is to me, is no any of yer concern, are we clear?”

Gerry was intimidated, that was evident from his body language alone, Jamie had a head over him in height, never mind build. Gerry however had enough alcohol coursing through his blood to give him a bravery that wasn’t warranted. He walked backward a step, a sneer evident on his face. “OH sorry Fraser it’s just I thought ye were fucking the blonde”, Jamie had him grabbed by the collar and pinned him to a tree in less than a second.

“Jamie” I pleaded, “Don’t please…he isn’t worth it.” Jamie was breathing heavily through his nose and there was a fiery red burning up his cheeks. Gerry to his credit looked suitably terrified.

“Jamie…I was only mess’n aye?, dinna take it so serious”.

Brian appeared out of the marquee. He glanced in our direction and headed towards us. He put his hand on Jamie’s shoulder, “c’mon son dinna let this idiot get to ya, he is drunk.” I could see the rage slowly dissipate from Jamie’s body as he became aware of his surroundings.

Jamie took a breath and let go of Gerry, “Dinna speak of Claire again, do ye hear?”, a nod from Gerry and he was gone.

Brian looked at the two of us, a wry smile on his face, a shrug of his shoulders and a wave of his hand in dismissal, an explanation not needed. "and where were ye two heading then? his face taking on a mischievous look. "We are just heading down to the main house …to em check on Willie” I replied weakly. “Mmm well is that so, well ye young ones go and enjoy yer night.”

We had only taken a few steps when Brain called my name, "Claire…. we love hav’n ye here, ye bring a light to the place…aye Sorcha…just like yer name in Gaelic.”

I smiled and he winked at both of us, “off with ye then” with that he headed back into the tent his Elvis quiff still standing tall.

Jamie was like a tightly wound cat ready to pounce by the time we got to my bedroom.

I knew Gerry had upset him, between the whiskey and the emotion of the past few days he looked ready to punch the wall. I took off my dress and threw on a little vest top and shorts, I made my way over to him. He was sitting in an arm chair in front of the old fire place in the bedroom, glass of whiskey in hand. His face was full of tension, I knelt at his feet “Jamie, don’t let him get to you…he is just what you said, a prick trying to stir you up…he knows he can get to you through me.”

“mmm”, he muttered his gaze was looking over my head as he toyed with the rim of his glass, I took it from him and took a sip, then placed it on the floor beside me. I ran my hands around and over his calves then, untied his shoes and removed his socks. “Sassenach ye dinna need to do that, I don’t like to see ye on yer knees serving me”, I looked up at him through my eye lashes and battered them flirtatiously. “do you not then?”, I was rewarded by a smile and a long sigh. “I continued to run my hands up and over his knees, running them across the expanse of his thighs until my hands were massaging the inside of his thighs, when I reached his crotch, I ran my hand over the beginning of his arousal and I heard his breath hitch. ”, Jesus Claire, c’mere”, his tongue was loose with whiskey and I enjoyed the way I could see his body wasn’t holding anything back from me. “mmm in a minute”, I hummed back.
I unbuttoned his trousers and he lifted his hips so I could pull them and his underwear off him. Naked now from the waist down, his white shirt flowing over his throbbing length. I slowly opened the buttons on his shirt but didn’t remove it just pushed it back off his chest. Jamie was looking down at me hooded eyes dark with desire, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

I tugged a cushion out from behind his back and put it under my knees, to give me height, I slowly kissed each knee and started a trail up his thigh, sucking and biting as I went. His hand was in my hair and his breathing was labored. A hiss from his lips, “what are ye doin…oh christ”, I used my tongue to run around the tip of him, and he let out a breathy groan. I licked him up and down before I took him in my mouth, his head fell back against the back of the chair another hiss “fuck”, I got a rhythm fairly quickly and his hand remained on my crown gently bouncing with my head up and down, as I worked him over. His hips started rising of their own inclination and he seemed to have forgotten all his English. As his movements became quicker under my mouth, “fuck… Sassenach”, I moved my hands up and over his mouth to suck him. But he yanked my hands and pulled me up to standing, he moved out to sit on the edge of the armchair, making quick work of removing my shorts and pulled me down to sit astride him, he was supporting all my weight with his legs, I snuck a hand between us and took him inside me, he let out a shuddering breath.

He angled his hands underneath my arse and I rose up and down in steady movements, foreheads pressed together sharing each others breaths, my limbs quivering, I could feel my belly tightening, this wouldn’t take long, an urgency building in Jamie’s limbs, encouraging me up and down at a faster pace, then both our movements starting to become manic, clutching to each other.

Finally with my arms clenched tight around his neck and our bodies slick with sweat, we found an end.

We crawled into bed, satisfied bodies wrapped around each other, limbs like jelly. Just as I was falling to sleep I heard Jamie whisper “I dinna want ye to go mo graidgh, stay with me.”

I turned to face him not knowing where to start, it’s not that I wanted to leave him, it was the complete opposite, but yet here we were again with one of us having to make the sacrifice of leaving our home. It never occurred to him to come to Boston, it simply wasn’t an option. A part of me resented the fact that if anyone would have to compromise it had to be me. I had raised Willie in Boston on my own, made a life for us there, and built a successful career.

I knew it cost him to ask, but at the very least I expected him to acknowledge all he was asking.

I could feel annoyance building inside of me, memories of him leaving me and Willie alone in Boston becoming vivid once more in my mind. “Jamie, Boston is my home, I have a career there, a home, friends”, His hand was stroking my side “and what Claire, all Scotland has is me?”, “Don’t be ridiculous you know what I mean …I just mean do you understand what you are asking when you are say stay? You make it sound simple, when you know how difficult it would be for you, if I turned around and whispered come with me?”

“Claire ya ken that is impossible, god do ye not think there are times when I wished I could just get on a plane and go to ye? I would risk everything here, all my family have worked for, I canna do it to them.”

“I know” I said quietly, “it’s just do you think my life in Boston is so different, that all I worked for is so easily disposable Jamie!”

“No but do ye expect me not to ask Claire? I want ye to ken I want you here, I am sorry if ye think I am being selfish.”
He turned on his side his back to me, “this is our last night together Jamie, do you want to spend it fighting?” “It’s only a form of torture” he replied quietly, “knowing ye are going and holding ye all night, maybe it is easier if we are like this, it willna be as hard”. His tone was cold, distant. Protecting himself from what he saw as my rejection. Stubborn man.

I lay on my back for a while, my temper rising steadily. Eventually I got out of bed and went to sleep in Willie’s, room, hot tears spilling from my eyes.

Everything changed the following morning, all words forgotten but the piercing scream of Jenny calling my name and the sight of Brian Fraser slumped and bleeding on the kitchen floor.
Heartbeat

Everything stilled once I saw Brian on the floor. Still dressed in his pajama’s, blood pouring from his head, a blue tinge around his lips, no pulse.

I started CPR instantly, my training took over, the sole focus on getting his heart to beat again and keep it beating for him until we got to hospital. I barely remember the ambulance pulling up, me working on Brian as they stretchered him out of the house. Just as I climbed onto the ambulance with him, I saw Jamie briefly, distressed blue eyes running from me to his father.

Brian had to be resuscitated on the way to the hospital when I lost his pulse again. Pulled in on the side of the road, defibrillator in hand, I begged him to stay with me. He did, just.

By the time we reached the hospital I couldn’t bear the look on Ellen, Jenny and Jamie’s face as they watched us rush Brian past them on a stretcher. I couldn’t even stop to reassure them, I didn’t have words of reassurance for them and I couldn’t afford the time to stop. Once he was handed over to by the ambulance crew to the medical team, I stood back a little letting them do their job. The ambulance crew had briefed them on my profession and that I had performed CPR on the patient. They allowed me to observe as they hooked him up to monitors, oxygen and ran bloods. I kept looking at the blood coming from the back of his head, I didn’t know what had come first? His heart stopping or the gash to the head causing it to stop. I hoped for the heart attack, if that was the cause of him falling then maybe the hit to the head wasn’t as serious. If it was a brain injury that caused his heart to stop then there might be no coming back.

I opted to stay observing as much as I could, trying not to overthink their decisions and let them work, I was too closely involved, I knew that and yet I couldn’t leave him solely in their hands in case they missed something. The doctor leading the team, started asking about other medications, previous heart conditions, blood type. I had to find Ellen, I could hazard a guess at medication, Brian had stayed with me often enough in Boston, and I didn’t think he was taking anything but Ellen needed to answer for him. By the time I reached the family room where the Frasers had been left to wait, they’re tearful faces and stressed eyes were enough to make me want to fall on my knees and comfort them, I had to remain in doctor mode, I was simply useless to them otherwise. Getting the information as quickly as possible. I sat holding Ellen’s hand asking her the litany of medical questions about her husband that I needed to know, I returned with the information as soon as I had it, asking for the medical team to let Ellen see her husband once he was stabilized.

When I went to bring Ellen to see Brian some time later, she literally looked like a different person, her cheekbones seemed hallowed, her eyes dark, her beautiful red hair stood out from her face in whisps, probably from tugging her hands through it. Jamie sat with his arm wrapped around her and I wanted to take him into my arms, to protect him from the pain. He looked up at me, looking for reassurance, I had none to give but I tried to convey a look to say, there is hope for now. “What is happening Claire?” Jamie asked, I could see him swallow hard waiting for my reply. I explained as much as I could. Words we didn’t have time for at Lallybroch, “His heart had stopped, they won’t know why yet, whether it was the cause of the fall or if the fall caused something to happen in his head resulting in his heart stopping”. I explained what they were doing to stabilise him, they would need scans, bloods etc. None of this could be done until they were happy his heart was in any danger of stopping again. They nodded, probably afraid to ask too much more.

I wrapped my arm around Ellen and brought her to his bed, Jamie and Jenny stood on the other side. I explained each machine, his intubation tube, the litany of wires and foreign noises that made him look more like a machine than a living human. Brian’s doctor arrived, his explanation brief
The ECG and bloods are pointing to a heart attack, but he suffered a serious blow to his head when he fell, we will need to get images of his brain to see what is happening there”, Ellen nodding helplessly, tears now starting to fight through her worn out eyes. “Dr Beauchamp kept his heart beating, he simply wouldn’t be here otherwise, he is in the best hands here at the hospital, and we will be hoping to get him comfortable enough that we can run a CT later today.” He left us with his words, I knew he was thinking serious brain injury and the logistics of managing that if his heart wasn’t fit for surgery.

Jamie and Jenny left Ellen and I so they could ring home, and tell them what was happening. Jamie would organise someone to mind Willie so Lamb could come into the hospital. When Ellen and I returned to the family room, my mind was more at peace from speaking with her, I had offered what I could to her which was little enough. Jocasta, Ellen’s older sister and Lamb had arrived, when Jocasta bustled in looking for second opinions and ringing consultants “Friends of the family Ellen, ye will need to hear what they have to say to ye”. Ellen silenced her quickly “Claire will see to it.” Finality clear in her voice. Jocasta who I had only ever met once before looked to me and then to Ellen, “Aye but Claire lives in Boston, we need someone here looking at these images, telling us what they think, dealing with the doctors, I canna see how that can be done from Boston?”

Ellen gave me an intentional look, then a quick glance to meet Jamie’s eyes. “Claire has offered to take some time from work and liaise with Brian’s medical team, she will also request to see all CT results, so we will have her opinion and that is the only one I care for right now!”, Her tone was clipped, tired and beyond reproach.

Jamie’s head shot up at this, he opened his mouth to speak but closed it just as quick. “What about yer flight Claire? Have ye even rang the hospital in Boston? Jenny interrogated. “It’s all sorted, don’t worry about that now.” I met Jamie’s eyes, a pensive look on his tired face. I longed to rest my head on his chest and wrap my arms around him, but we hadn’t touched all day and the idea of approaching him in front of a room full of people seemed too daunting.

Lamb on hearing all this second hand, simply nodded and said “I will sort out your flights Claire.”

“Now” I said looking at Ellen, “part of this agreement was that you eat and sleep, you need to be strong for him? Mmm?” I gave Jamie and Jenny a look which the nodded their agreement, Jamie ushering his mother under his arm “c’mon mam, let’s get ye some food”.

Results showed a bleed on the brain, I wasn’t surprised. It would take time until we knew the extent of it, swelling would need to go down. I sat holding Brian’s hand waiting on the Cardiac consultant to see him. I felt a presence behind me, turning around I saw Jamie at the foot of Brian’s bed watching him intently. “Ye ken when I was small”, he spoke quietly, almost hoarsely, “I thought there was no one like him, aye?, and when Willie was born that is what I wanted to be, I wanted to be man like Da was for me…for Willie”,

“You are I said, Willie thinks you’re superman”, I said with meaning. He looked at me shyly “I dinna ken, maybe…” he said thoughtfully. “But when I saw Da on that kitchen floor this morning, he looked like a bairn so fragile, I dinna ken what to do, I have never felt so helpless.”

I just nodded, letting him speak. “Then ye came busting in the door, and ye just took over…ye kept him alive Claire…and I have never been more grateful”, I stood to go to him, I could see his eyes were filled with tears, but he put his hand up to stop me. “I wanted to thank ye for what yer do’n … for staying…I never expected ye to do that, I can’t tell ye what it means to Mam…well to all of us”, his hand ran through his hair and I stood stock tall afraid I would spook him if I went too
close. “Him and Mam...they are so close, I dinna ken how they do it but they are great friends, ya
ken they are mad about each other, me and Jenny were always tell’n them off when they would be
groping at each other.” A half smirk on his face at this, I smiled at him “They are an exceptional
couple” I agreed,

He seemed lost in thought for a moment, “I dinna ken how Mam will cope if anything happens him
Claire”. I cleared my throat, “Jamie she won’t have to, he will be ok!” I said it with such certainty I
almost believed it myself. “I will do everything in my power to bring him back from this”, I
promised.

A warm smile lightened his face “Aye, I ken ya will Sassenach, its nay wonder he loves ye so
much, always wanted a doctor in the family” an attempt at a wink. I reached out my hand to take
his but he moved back a step. “anyway I better go before Jenny starts fighting with another nurse…
or something” a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. With that he was gone and I don’t think I have
never longed for his touch more.
By silent mutual consent I slept at Jamie’s cottage since Brian’s hospitalisation. Jamie sat up with Brian during the night and came home early in the morning to let me replace him in time for doctors rounds and to bring Ellen. It was the best time for me to get an update and observe Brian for myself. Brian was been kept in an induced coma. He would require surgery on his heart, but that couldn’t be contemplated until the swelling in his brain came down. The unsaid thing was until he woke up or they started bringing him out of the coma we had no idea of the seriousness of the brain injury. My presence made no difference to any of this, but Ellen had told me just having me there gave her a sense of peace…and there I stayed.

I had barely seen Jamie in almost a week we were like ships passing in the night. Apart from the obvious anxiety, I worried for Jamie, when he came home from the hospital in the early morning, he went straight out working with the horses or dealing with the estate. He might only sleep for an hour in the afternoon before heading back into the hospital for early evening once I returned home. None of it was sustainable, all off it was taking its toll on him.

Since we spoke at Brian’s bedside, our conversations were strained and distant. No matter how I tried to approach Jamie, I was met with the same steal wall, his eyes were hooded when he looked at me, nothing showing on his face. I was worried for him, angry at him and missed him terribly. After 8 nights of Jamie sitting up without a break, Ellen insisted that he take a night off and let Ian go with Jenny.

I waited patiently at the window waiting for him to come up from the stables that evening hoping patiently that we might get some time to talk. He didn’t come. I kept looking at the clock willing him to walk through the door.

I had chosen to sleep on the couch taking a blanket from his bed. I had been sleeping in Jamie’s bed mainly because we didn’t need to share it, he hadn’t been here at night. I obviously wanted him to get a good night sleep so I kept to the couch knowing he would choose to avoid the bed if I was in it. Willie had his own room and a single bed, he was not a good bed partner and I wanted to be in the sitting room so I could hear Jamie come home, or I hoped he would come home.

It was near midnight when I heard his key in the lock, my heart leapt. I decided to feign sleep to see what he would do, I heard him softly open the bedroom door, then retreat out when he saw I wasn’t in his bed. Before I could work out which way his footsteps were coming I felt his hand under my thigh and around my back lifting me up into his arms. He was carrying me towards the bedroom, I was afraid to move, I didn’t want to disturb his actions so I could try and interpret what the hell was going on in his head. Once he placed me gently on the bed, he turned to leave. “Jamie” I croaked out, “Where are you going?”

He didn’t turn just stood still, “I will sleep on the couch, ye need yer sleep lass.” He moved again towards the door.

“Stop!” My voice was firm but my mind was scared shitless he wouldn’t. “Why are you being like
this?"

Silence.

"Please talk to me?" I could feel a lump forming in my throat, I really couldn’t bare this treatment from him much longer, I came to realise that no matter what, I had been accustomed to Jamie’s gentle attentiveness since I met him, no matter our circumstances this was the first time I really thought he didn’t want to be around me. My heart was slowly breaking from it.

My plea filled the air around us, eventually a sound came from where he stood in the room barely audible “I just can’t Claire, I am no able for it right now.” “It?” I asked incredulously, “is that what you call speaking to me, being near me, it?”

“ya ken what I mean”, his tone was defeated and tired and I half thought I should leave him be, maybe he was right, he didn’t need our drama right now. But selfishly I couldn’t, we had weeks of this ahead of us possibly, I needed him to speak to me. “I don’t ken at all!” I snapped, “Please tell me Jamie, talk to me, come here” I implored, patting the bed beside me.

When next I heard his voice again, it trembled slightly “Claire, I am so tired…I…I…”, he trailed off. I thought that was as much as he was going to say, blame it all on tiredness and walk away, just as I was about to say “fine go!” he suddenly started to speak again, he sighed deeply and continued a new, “Claire, it’s just with Da and everything, I am no in the best place and I canna bare …I mean I am so appreciative of what ye are do’n, I hope ye ken that, it’s only that one way or the other ye will be leaving soon again and I dinna think my heart can take much more right now…so I think distance is the kindest thing we can do for each other, aye?”

My heart almost broke listening to him, “Jamie, please come here now I want to talk to you.”, “Claire…”, “I am asking Jamie, please” I said with certainty.

He turned quietly in the dark of the room and sat on the bed beside me, the mattress shifting with his weight. I found his hand. “Will you not let me comfort you?” I whispered.

“Claire…please dinna do this…do ye not think I want nothing more…but it will only make things harder”, I cupped his cheek and turned his face to look at me, he rested the weight of his cheek against my palm hesitantly and closed his eyes. “I dinna ken if I am alive or not” he whispered. “I feel like I am a ghost waiting to hear what will become of Da, waiting for you to go again once we know…there is nothing but darkness stretched out in front of me…I feel so guilty about him” a pause, “Da I mean”, his hand found mine and he started rubbing circles into the back of it.

“– the night before his heart attack, I was fucked right off with him …I blamed him Claire because I couldn’a go to ye in Boston…so many times I had said I wanted to try to be nearer Willie…he kent full well that meant you too…but he kept saying that he needed me here…for me to ask ye to live here, that this was all going to be Willie’s one day, he needed to be reared here…he can be so bloody stubborn”

“I am so sorry Jamie, I made you feel that pressure, I stammered out “I… I made you feel that way with my foolish words…It’s my fault not yours.”

“Claire…I have had these conversations with him, long before me and you spoke of it, I have a mind of my own ye know”, his lip turned up slightly into a half smile. “Anyway it doesna matter now…and I am being maudlin… we would be better off getting some sleep, aye?” He made to stand.

“Will you comfort me Jamie?” it came out as a rushed breath, I was so afraid to ask it of him.
“Claire…please” he was pleading with me not to ask. If he refused me now I probably would never find the courage again to ask it of him again.

My hand reached up for him, he stood over me watching me pensively before eventually taking my waiting hand. I pulled him down and drew back the blanket, he slid slowly in beside me.

We were both fully clothed. “just lie with me here, you don’t have to touch me if you don’t want”, he snorted and said in a gruff voice “no touch ye, and when have I been capable of that before”, the first sign of a proper smile lighting his beautiful face. “well you managed well enough all week not to touch me never mind look at me”, “Claire” he said sternly, “if ye think that I find this easy for us to be so close and nay touch or talk, ye dinna ken me at all”, he rolled on his back for a minute, silence throbbing in the dark room. I was jolted out of my own thoughts when he spoke again “to tell ye the truth I dinna want to sleep in this bed all week, when I came home from the hospital …it smelt like you and I thought I’d go mad from wanting ye, I just kent maybe this would be better aye?”

He turned around again and we just lay there staring helplessly into each others eyes. My hand raised up of its own inclination and caressed his cheek, “its all consuming isnt it? me and you”, I said smiling. “aye”, he replied simply.

I slowly moved my lips to his, and he watched me carefully his eyes roaming down to my mouth. When my lips eventually made contact with his, I didn't realise the hunger that had been burning up inside of me, a sound came from my mouth that I didn't recognise. I was met with Jamie’s equally starved mouth. We fused together our tongues crashing, we were sucking the breath from each other’s lungs. He moved suddenly, pushing me onto the mattress and rolling on top of me, “God I want ye so much…I have nay will power for ye”, Jamie growled out, his sentence unfinished as he sealed his lips over my mouth again, “silly man”, I replied in haste while pushing my hips against him in question. His hands were scrambling at my body, without any care, my t-shirt bunched in his hands, as if he was trying to rip it from me, I started to help him, pushing my yoga pants down and grabbing the hem of my t-shirt pulling it off and over my head for him. His hands urgently now trying to open his own jeans while I pulled his t-shirt over his head. We were groping madly trying to rid ourselves of everything, I pulled him down to me wrapping my legs around his waist, our mouths tasting and biting. “Jamie…oh god…”

It wasn’t gentle or what you would imagine love making for comfort to be. It was fierce, an urgency in both of us to be as physically close to the other as possible. once we were discarded of layers, no time was wasted on foreplay, Jamie pushed down his jeans and underwear, left them still bundled at his ankles and thrust into me without any preamble, a low groan coming from him at our joining, his movements were almost frantic and my hips were no better, our lips fused together with each thrust or else his head dove quickly between my lips or my nipples. “fuck…Claire…” Jamie’s groan brought out something in me almost animalistic, I scraped my nails down his back and he arched up, my belly felt full of him, biting down on his shoulder, to stifle my cry, I could feel his release building, when he rubbed his cheek against mine he was wet with sweat. His chest was heaving and I thought vaguely this mightn't be the best idea, given that Jamie had barely eaten or slept in over a week.

His release, after mine seemed to suck the last breath from him. He rolled onto his back and his chest was almost spasming trying to control his breathing, eventually it slowed and grew more regular. I pulled the duvet up and over us and turned to him, “I thought I would die if you didn’t touch me again” I whispered into the dark. A throaty laugh came from beside me in the bed “aye well I thought just there that I would die from touching ye, it was like me heart was gonna burst”, I giggled at that remembering his rapid breathing and sweat soaked brow.
“It killed me Claire not to, I promise ye that, but I canna say we are making things easier by doing this.” He turned his head a sad smile of resignation on his face.

A pang ran through me at his words.

“You need to sleep” I said with authority. Like an obedient puppy he turned to face me and was asleep in seconds.
“Fuck…Goddamit…ouch”, I hissed out after stubbing my toe on the bedside locker.

Fumbling around the bedroom trying to find my clothes, I knew I was going to be late for Ellen, stupid alarm clock hadn’t gone off and Willie had decided to sleep in, so nothing had triggered me out of my deep sedated sleep, a big warm body wrapped around me only discouraged my waking further.

“What are ye doing Sassenach, I have never heard such language from a supposedly respectable woman!” Jamie scolded from the bed.

"My stupid alarm clock didn’t go off and I have to shower quickly before your mother comes to pick me up”, I replied hastily while rummaging through the bed looking for my phone under the covers. I found Jamie’s naked thigh and got marginally distracted by the feel of his hard muscle, out of instinct I ran my hand up the expanse of it and forgot about my search for the phone.

“not that I am complaining Sassenach but I canna see how this is helping ye get dressed?” he quirked an eyebrow in question.

“mmm…yes…sorry…off course” I trailed off, a blush creeping up my face, before removing my hand completely, I gently ran my fingers over his balls. Jamie groaned loudly and pouted, once I took my hand away, “weel yer late already do ye want to get back in here for a minute?”

“A minute huh? Not exactly selling yourself there Fraser”, I retorted while continuing my search for the phone. Jamie rolled on to his tummy and grumpily muttered something about me being ‘a vera cruel woman’.

I threw a pillow at his head and said “I am going to have a quick shower will you tell your mother that I will only be a few minutes if she comes for me?”

I received a grunt in response.

I managed to shower and dress within minutes, which left me entering the kitchen resembling somewhat like a drowned poodle but I was ready at least. Ellen and Willie were sitting at Jamie’s kitchen table, Jamie was stood over the stove obviously preparing something for Willie’s breakfast.

“Sassenach, here I put yer coffee in this so ye can take it in the car”, Jamie said handing me a thermos mug full of steaming coffee. “Oh I love you thank you” I said flippantly on sight of the coffee, Jesus did I really just say that? and in front of his mother. I tucked the hair behind my ear to hide my burning cheeks, Jamie just smirked but an undoubtedly pleased look flashed across his face, he went about plating Willie’s breakfast granting me a reprieve from my embarrassment.

I looked to Ellen sitting at the table, she was completely unaware of my big mouth, head in her hands and looking like death. “Ellen”, I said softly “have you slept at all?”, “ach, I have surely dinna be minding me Claire” waving her hand in dismissal. It was clear she was lying, she was fading away in front of us. Ellen was a beautiful woman, always had a ruddy glow about her. In the week since Brian took ill she was a shadow of herself. “When is grandda back from his ‘olidays?”, Willie asked cheerfully. Ellen had insisted we not tell Willie where Brian was but I was beginning to wonder if a holiday was the best excuse we could have thought up.
I messed his hair and said “Soon sweetheart”, hoping Willie would leave it at that, too sleepy for the full interrogation, he duly bent his head back to his breakfast and comic book.

“I just want him to wake up now”, Ellen said quietly, she tried a smile but her bottom lip quivered and a lone tear ran down her face. “Oh Ellen, he will” I said with a certainty I didn’t own.

“Once we get more images today, they should start to reduce sedation and bring him around slowly.” I explained cautiously. “Aye its just what will come back Claire? mmm will he even ken us?” Ellen sobbed.

Jamie put his arm around her, “He will mam, I dinna ken any situation where Da wouldn’t ken you, c’mon now we have to think positively” Jamie spoke soothingly, he had an almost instant effect on Ellen. He continued to talk in soothing tones, rubbing her back until her tears had withdrawn and she sat with a small smile on her face sniffing into a tissue.

Willie now finished his breakfast looked up, giving a quizzical look at the sight of his grandmother. Just as Jamie had done only moments before Willie went to her put one little arm around Ellen’s back and patted her hand with the other "ach granny dinna be sad, Im cross grandda dinna bring me on olidays either but its no manly to cry about it.” I could tell Willie was furious when we all burst out laughing at him.

I wouldn’t see Jamie for two long days, Brian had sold horses to an equestrian centre in England called Hellwater, Jamie had to transport them, they were worth a huge amount of money to Lallybroch and he couldn’t risk the deal going sour by waiting any longer to deliver them.

He waited until I returned from the hospital, so I could take over with Willie. Once I showered the hospital smell away, Willie and I went down to the stables to see him off. Jamie and I were politely reserved again in front of Willie but I longed for him to take me into his arms and kiss me goodbye properly. As Jamie was loading up the truck, Willie stood watching asking what seemed like one hundred and one questions, mostly about the horses that were being put on the truck “Where are the going Da?” he asked eventually. “They are going to England to an equestrian center, and they will help people learn to ride horses”, Jamie explained patiently. “Mama is from England Da, do ye ken that?” Willie said in the same Scottish lilt that his father had just used to explain about the horses. "Aye I do, ye ken I knew yer Mama before you knew her son?” Jamie said smiling at Willie. "Did ye Da?” Willie asked incredulously. I couldn’t help but stifle a giggle at his innocence. “Aye I did, she came here on her holidays with yer Uncle Lamb”, Jamie explained while rubbing down one of the horses. “Was she yer girlfriend Da?” Jamie coughed a bit. "Aye I suppose she was”, his tone a pitch higher than normal. "Did ye want to marry her Da?” Willie asked teasingly, laughing at his own question. “Willie” I said warningly, “Aye I did”, Jamie said unabashedly turning to look at his son.

Willie stopped his laughing straight away, looking wide eyed at his father’s declaration, now he was staring at him speculatively, I could see the next question forming in his mind, why didn’t you?

“Now hop into Da’s truck and see if you can see over the steering wheel but don’t touch anything else, ok?” I hoped this would prove a distraction for Willie to cease his line of questioning and give me a minute on my own to say goodbye to Jamie.

Jamie closed the door on the horse trailer and came to stand in front of me, “will you try and get Mam to eat something Sassenach, and dinna leave her too long on her own if ya can help it, and dinna let Jenny near the medical staff”, concluding his list of requests, he smiled and said “yer
probably regretting the day ya fell in with this family…” a shy smile on his face."The best thing that ever happened me, meeting you lot", I said winking at him.

“Yer to sleep and eat too Sassenach, make sure you take a break from sitting with Da, do ye hear me?” He instructed.

“Off course” I promised.

The week since Jenny’s wedding had seen August end and September crawl in, there was a slightly cooler feel to the air. But I could feel the heat radiating from Jamie, he was like a furnace. “How are you always so warm, you’re only wearing a t-shirt?” I asked smiling up at him.

“Och ye make me burn up Claire” he replied with an attempt at a wink. Flirting was he?

"Are you going to say goodbye to me then?” I asked in my most sultry tone.

"Did we not do that last night?” Jamie asked huskily, our lips inching closer almost touching. "I didn’t know that was a goodbye shag?” I retorted playfully.

My hand was snaking up the inside of his t-shirt for a cheeky feel of his skin. He shivered slightly at my touch but made no move to stop me. His arm ran around my lower back and pulled me to him, so I was flush with his body. “I don’t think we ken how to say goodbye, that’s why were in this situation Sassenach, Jamie’s lips quirked into a half smile.”What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well that’s what happened the night we conceived Willie, we were trying to say goodbye.” “Oh” I said laughing, “I see…well I thoroughly enjoyed that goodbye”, “Did ye then? Jamie whispered running both hands down my back, cupping my arse and allowing his lips to gently ghost over mine inhaling deeply. "Oh trust me, I enjoyed it”, he pressed his lips to mine then and we both melted into each other, I fell up against the side of the trailer and he pushed himself on top of me. Gently running his tongue over my bottom lip, gaining entry to my mouth, his tongue caressing with mine. He gave one last squeeze of my arse and broke away, leaving me completely breathless.

“How long more can ye stay Claire…I mean with the hospital?” Jamie asked quietly, his arms still tight around me. “Well I had originally said a month when I asked for the leave and they have approved that, so I have another couple of weeks”. I explained a little guardedly. One hundred things had been roaming through my head about returning to the hospital and I didn’t want Jamie to know about any of them just yet.

“Mam has become terrible dependent on ye Claire and I wouldna want ye to feel trapped like that ye can’t leave us to get on with it, I mean not everyone would have their own personal doctor to mediate for them?” he said coyly.

“I don’t feel trapped and you know I want to be here right?” I asked tilting my head to make him look into my eyes, so he could see the truth in my words.

“Aye, I am grateful for it Claire no matter what has happened with us, that ye are willing to do this.” He took on a reflective look came across his face, when he mentioned what was happening between us. Uncertainty was clouding out our words.

“Jamie” I said suddenly “I should have known that you would have at least tried to come to Boston, I’m sorry I doubted you but I am sorrier that it caused hurt between you and Brian…you are needed here”

Jamie opened his mouth to interrupt but I raised my hand to stop him and continued.

“…it’s just there were times I felt a bit isolated after Willie was born and it took a lot for me to
build a life for us…you had so much support here…I probably resented you a bit…and I shouldn’t have judged you like that…I used to love when your parents came to collect Willie and stay with us….they encompass the meaning of family….there were times that I wished it was you that came”, I bended my head to look at the ground, slightly ashamed of my next sentence. “I grew an image of you then… sheltered by your parents…I was probably a bit jealous of all they did for you and I am sorry.” I finished quietly looking at him for a reaction.

He smiled and bent his forehead to mine. “Claire ye mightn’t have been too far wrong, I shoulde thought about your life in Boston before expecting ye to upsticks and suit me, I’m sorry too.”

“Anyways” I stated more cheerfully, “I will be eagerly awaiting your return, if Willie thinks anyone else is gone on ‘olidays he may revolt on me”, I whispered kissing his lips one last time before getting Willie
A date.

I was like a giddy teenager waiting on Jamie to come home two nights later, we had a small positive step with Brian that day, after a reduction in sedation he had opened his eyes, he hadn’t spoken but he looked around making eye contact with Ellen before he fell back under. I had explained to Ellen that as the swelling decreases that both blood flow and brain chemistry improve, his brain function would improve but it would be gradual, nevertheless this was a progressive step. I had spoken to Jamie briefly over the phone to explain, but I could sense his apprehension too, I knew no matter what I had advised, Brian’s family had half expected him to wake up speaking immediately.

The day Jamie was due home, I cleaned the cottage, bought groceries and planned on putting together a nice dinner for him. I was stood over a cook book trying to decipher European measurements versus what I was used to in Boston when I heard knocking at Jamie’s front door. Laoghaire was standing on the doorstep, a broad smile on her face which instantly fell away on sight of me. She was holding some sort of tray or dish. I had forgotten I should be well back in the US by now, I was the last thing she was expecting.

“Can I help you?” I asked in my most prim voice. She swung a lock of her hair behind her shoulder. “I…em well I was looking for ye … is Jamie here?” She was trying to look over my shoulder. “I heard about his Da and I made some food” she illustrated the tray in her hand by lifting it slightly. “Oh well he won’t be back until later, I can leave it for him if you like?”. I offered helpfully. “I thought ye were only here for a week?” She asked while handing me the tray begrudgingly. “My departure has been delayed” I replied in a clipped tone and a tight smile.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”, she hesitated for a moment deciding whether to speak or not and finally settled on “Tell Jamie I am thinking of him and his family.”, “I will of course”, I had closed the door in her face before she had time to walk away.

Willie coerced me into making a cake for Jamie ‘Da loves cake’ he told me solemnly, not mentioning that Willie adored cake. Willie was sat on the counter top pouring pre measured cups of ingredients into a big mixing bowl, I heard the cottage door open and close, I couldn’t look around as Willie was gone free reign with his pouring and I was struggling to control the cake batter.

I didn’t hear any sound of movement and I eventually turned around to see who had come in, Jamie was leaning against the closed door, arms folded and scrutinising the scene in front of him, an amused smile across his face. “What are you smiling at?” I said narrowing my eyes.

“Nothing Sassenach”.

“Well why are you loitering there at the door with that look on your face then?”, my cheeks were blushing but I couldn’t exactly say why, probably just the way he was looking at me so intently.

Willie spotted him and jumped into my arms for a lift to the floor, running up into Jamie’s arms. “Da, we missed ye! Mama is making a cake for you and I can have a wee bit” Willie blurted out excitedly. “Oh is she now” Jamie asked curiously looking over Willie’s shoulder to have a look at my baking attempt, “aye” Willie continued “and she made ye dinner, I had mine already though cause I was hungry…and unca Ian brought me out to check on the moo cows and I cut my knee but
mama put a plaster on it” “Well, ye have been busy a bhalach” Jamie said kissing Willie on his cheek and jostling his hair. Willie having emptied his mind of all he wanted to tell Jamie, sat back down at the kitchen table where I had put out some colouring for him. Jamie approached me slowly, like a bird stalking his prey, “I dinna ken ye could cook Sassenach”, his eyes were sparkling, as he glanced around the kitchen taking in the scene before him. “Off course I can cook!” my eyes narrowed and I folded my arms in defence. “How do you think I feed your son, he doesn’t get his insatiable appetite from me!”

“Does he not…” smug smirk now in place and he bent over to view a large stone based pan that held part of the dinner I had cooked. “this doesna look half bad, maybe I underestimated yer talents Sassenach.”

“Maybe you did!” I retorted attempting to sulk.

“Now here you go” I said pouring him a glass of wine. “You can have this and a shower while I throw the bloody cake in the oven,” He took the glass and nodded, he had the sexiest smile spread across his face. “mmm I could get used to this” he said inching closer to me. Glass of wine in one hand and the other resting on my hip bone. I glanced over his shoulder to see Willie bent over the colouring book.

“I think that was one of the nicest sights I have ever come home to Claire…” his voice was husky.

“You are making fun of me” I said tilting my head to smile at him.

“I certainly am not.”

“ye all domesticated in my kitchen, its done things to me Claire…”

“Stop it you are teasing now”

“I canna wait to eat your food…mo ghradh his voice was full of innuendo, he came close enough so that I could feel his breath on my neck. Without realising it I was slowly edging towards the kitchen counter, his body looming over me, he was looking attentively at my mouth.

“Jamie” I said cautiously -----------------------“I was thinking about something while you were away…” He looked down at me suddenly intrigued. “Aye, go on” a dip in his head to continue.

“Well”, I started smiling suddenly feeling silly at the idea I was about to present. “As you are aware we share a child, .... we have talked about crossing the Atlantic to be closer to each other, we have been to bed numerous times now…”

“Not always in bed” he corrected.

I nodded “Ok, we have been intimate on several occasions….”

“I’d say more than intimate Sassenach” he corrected further.

“Ok fine whatever…more than intimate.”

He nodded approval smiling at me.

“But yet we have never been on a date, nor have we ever cooked for the other or sat down and just got to know the little intricacies about each other…we have had none of that first kind of stuff… you know normal dating behaviour” I finished lamely.
His mouth quirked slightly. “Ye want me to date ye?” he asked teasingly.

I raised my eyes at him “you are asking that as if it’s a chore Jamie!”

His hands instantly went up and a look of alarm filled his eyes. “No no god no, I dinna have a problem with it Claire! A deep breath “it’s just that we seem a bit far in to start dating…ye are the mother of my child ya ken?” he took one of my hands and a warm smile lit his face.

“yes I know but we need a foundation…other than Willie, Jamie to know if this” I gestured my hands from me to him “if this will work…we have no problem jumping into bed with each other… and there are clearly deep feelings involved…but shouldn’t we start at the beginning to be sure?”

His hand raised cupping my cheek, his fingers circling along my jawline “ok then Claire Beauchamp what do ye have in mind?”

“Well” I said sighing slightly at his touch, secretly wondering if it would be ok to put out on the first date.

“we can start tonight, I have cooked dinner, there is wine …and after we put Willie to bed, you may begin dating me!” I said smiling.

“I vera much look forward to that Claire” he said attempting to wink.

It was rare for Willie that he had both of us to put him to bed, so he made the most of it. Jamie and I were lay down either side of him, while I stroked his head, Jamie read him his third and final story.

I had never heard Jamie read to Willie before, he had his arm wrapped around Willie, his strong arms holding Willie towards his chest. The sight alone enough to make my heart burst, but when he read to him, I wanted to take Jamie’s face in my hands and kiss the breath out of him.

He was just so endearing, full attention given to his son, he used different accents for each of the characters, and he bent tenderly to answer Willie on his millionth question about the book.

I watched Jamie and thought it was probably normal in some way to love the father of your child, after all he had given me one of the most special gifts, but I realised watching him that part of why I had fallen so deeply in love with him was because of how he was with our son, I couldn’t have picked a better father for Willie.

By the time we got back out to the kitchen, Jamie poured us two glasses of wine and I served out our dinner.I had cooked a well-rehearsed prawn thai curry that always went down well when I had friends over in Boston, I had made my own spring rolls and I tried to hide my smile when Jamie took his first bite and said “Christ Sassenach ye actually can cook.”

We chatted a little nervously at first, I think Jamie thought there was a first date script he should be sticking to and was on the verge of asking me what I did for a living. I reached my hand across to him, using the tips of my fingers to run lightly over the back of his hand, I could feel his body relax
at my touch, a reminder that we shared something, he wasn’t talking to a stranger.

“Do you do this often?”, I asked looking into his eyes.

“is that meant to be a version of do I come here often Sassenach, cause ya ken fine well I live here”, smirk in place on his lips and his tongue running along just under his top lip.

“No, I mean do you date as in the whole nine yards, dinner…movie or whatever? You didn’t look very comfortable when we started off…you’re only beginning to relax now” I pointed out

“mmm…I don’t suppose I do” he replied honestly. “Well I do…just not often” a little pinkness running up his cheeks.

“I dinna think that is why I was nervous though” he was looking into his wine glass playing with the rim of it, I couldn’t see his eyes.

“No? Why then?”

“Its more to do with the date…I think”

“The location you mean?” I asked smiling mischievously at him.

“Ya ken fine, I dinna mean the location…I mean the person”

“He make you nervous Jamie?” I ran my toes lightly up his leg.

“Aye ya do!”

I leaned across the table, before standing slowly, my breast grazing his arm “I better clear these if you want cake.

I heard him mutter.

“Is it any wonder?”

We chatted over our cake, it was easy and flirty and if we really were on a first date, I would be crying out for a second.

Eventually Jamie rose and said do ye want to finish yer wine on the couch, to which I replied “smooth Fraser.”

Once we got comfortable on the couch, with my leg slung slightly across his knee, and his hand resting gently on my upper thigh.

“so then Sassenach what about you?” his eyes intent on mine.

“What about me?” I creased my eyebrows in confusion.

“You asked me if I did this often ye know …date” he explained, “So I am asking you, if ye date often?” He rolled his shoulders a little and scooted further down the couch, as if preparing for a bedtime story.
“Oh” I said my eyes growing a little wider, heat warming my face. “Well I suppose I do date yes, I don’t know if I’d say often ... more like sporadically, I haven’t really introduced any guy to Willie in that way if that’s what you mean ... I would have checked with you first.”

“I ken that Claire... that’s no why I’m ask’n.”

“Why then?”

“I just wondered if there was maybe someone ye were still seeing in Boston...maybe that was another reason for ye to stay there.”

I opened my mouth to speak but Jamie just raised his hand to continue. “I dinna mean ye are playing me false or that... I’m sure ye dinna plan on coming to Scotland and jumping into bed with me ... it’s just I knew ye we’re seeing that doctor fella and I just wondered if ye still were?” His hand had entwined in mine and he was staring intently at our caressing fingers.

I was trying to think what bloody doctor he was on about. “Doctor?” I asked confused ... I amn’t seeing any doctor...”

Squinting my eyes in concentration I continued.

“I dated a doctor called Michael... maybe a year ago or more but I can’t think of any other ...”

“Aye that’s the fella” Jamie said gruffly, “are ye still seeing him?”

“No” i shook my head vehemently. “I’m not seeing anyone ...” he lifted his head to look at me and my heart almost broke when I saw the relief in his face. He honestly thought there was someone else, someone that was bringing me back to Boston, “good.” He said a boyish smile on his face.

“Actually..” I whispered, I ran my hands up his arms to loop around his neck. “I have just started dating this guy” biting my bottom lip. “Oh aye” a sexy smile back on his face. “Mmm... we have a bit of history together ...we met about 4 years ago but it didn’t work out then.”

“Tsk that’s a pity, what happened then?” His eyes were open and earnest but I could tell his cheeks hurt from holding in the smile.

I moved closer, my lips grazing over his. “Well ... we had this one night... and let’s just say he left me with a permanent reminder of him”

“That’s nice” Jamie said smirking.

“Lovely” I agreed.

“What about this night ye shared then? Was it memorable?” His hand slid down my thigh and cupped my arse.

“Very” I nodded biting my lip.

“Did he bed ye?” Jamie continued his line of questioning.

“Yes, lots of times” I answered solemnly.

“Jesus in one night ye say? He must be some man ... I wouldna let him get away again.”
I made a squeaking sound as his hand ran down beneath my jeans and cupped the flesh of my arse now.

“Was he good in bed... this man?” Jamie’s tongue ran along my lower lip.

“Reasonable” I giggled out.

“Well ye must have liked it ye went back for more ... several times ye said!” His hands had moved up now and were unbuttoning the front of my jeans.

“I was trying to teach him” I breathed into his mouth but couldn’t stop the laugh building inside of me.

Jamie just burst out laughing “Why ye wee hellion il show ye about teaching”

With that he put his mouth firmly to mine, and threw himself on top of me as we grabbed and tore clothes from each other.

Just when he had me down to my underwear. I stopped his hand from pulling at the elastic on my panties, my breathing erratic and hips still moving in tandem with Jamie’s “stop Janie, I really shouldn’t put out on the first date.”

He looked at me as if I was gone mad and then we both burst out laughing, resulting in us falling off the couch and continuing our exploration on the floor.

After a time we had to bite into each other’s shoulders to stifle our groans of pleasure. Afraid we would wake our son.

I fell into a contended stupor, lying on Jamie’s naked sweaty body. Suddenly I realising why I was so puzzled about Jamie asking about Michael.

“Jamie how did you know about Michael, Willie didn’t know about him and I never told Jenny he was a doctor?”

Jamie was stroking my back looking up at the ceiling.

“I met him” he said quietly,

“you met him?” I repeated confused.

“Aye I went to Boston to see ye, and when I went to the hospital to ask for ye, this Michael guy said he was yer boyfriend and ye we’re with a patient, that I should call back later.”

My mind was whirling “when did you come? Were you bringing Willie back?”

“No I wasna bringing Willie back... I came to see ye... I came to ask ye... if ye would maybe give you and me a chance, it doesna matter now.. it was ages ago Claire...I met that fella and I turned and went back to the airport.”

The ring.

“Jamie!” I said tears burning my eyes, “ you should have told me... he wasn’t important...I would have...”
“Dinna trouble yerself about it Sassenach” He replied kissing me softly. “The main thing is yer in my arms now.”
The following morning I was vaguely aware of what sounded like Jenny’s hushed voice talking in my dreams. I vaguely wished she would stop talking so I could go back to sleep but the noise was growing louder and now Ian’s hoarse voice was cutting across Jenny’s.

"I really think ye should stop just letting yerself in Jenny, should we no knock instead of using the yer key"

"dina be silly Ian, Jamie will be so pleased and asides I dina want to wake up Willie by knocking"

A gradual realisation came over me that the voices were real and not just a figment from my dreams.

"Jamie!" I hissed, "I think Jenny and Ian are in the house, get up!"

Jamie’s hand was cupping my naked breast and he just squeezed it and scooted closer to me. "Jamie, Wake up!"

"Sassenach, the door is locked Jenny is no in the house" he replied drowsily.

“she is!! I hissed “I heard her say something about your spare key”, none of my urgency was having any effect on him, he just drew me tighter to him and pressed the length of himself against my bottom in question.

"Jamie are you listening to me?…” I was caught under his arm, just as I attempted to rise from the bed, I heard a precursory knock and Jenny whispering "Jamie are ye awake I have good news…” I grabbed the sheet from the bed, wrapped it around me and made to hide at the side of Jamie’s wardrobe which was hidden from the view of the door, if Jenny came any further than the doorway I was screwed. Jamie rolled his eyes and muttered “yer ridiculous why are ye afraid of her?” “I am not” I muttered, tripping over the sheet.

Before we had a chance to debate it further, the door swung open and Jenny’s excited voice boomed through the room, I was struggling to control my breathing and regretted not just hiding under the duvet. “Jamie! Da is speaking, the hospital called Mam early this morning to say he was asking for her, so she is gone in, he wants to see us ….so get up!”

“that is great news Janet”, Jamie croaked from the bed

“Is Claire in with Willie?” her voice lowered now remembering that Willie might be asleep.

“Aye, will ye start some coffee and I will be out in a minute?” Jamie was butt naked under that duvet so I hoped Jenny took the hint.

She hesitated at the door for a minute, then I heard her say “aye, ok.”

Once the door was closed, Jamie sat up, resting on his elbows and smiled at me. His hair tousled and eyes sleepy.

"Sassenach I can see yer wee red cheeks from here, dina fash about Jenny, she will find out sooner or later…god I would love to rip that sheet of ye.”

“Shh!!.” I made a noise of scorn with my tongue "I told you they were outside, you are impossible
to wake…oh god, do you think she knows?"
"Claire…we have nothing to hide and she shouldna be going around letting herself into people’s houses, aye?" he padded across the room, patted my bottom fondly and bent to retrieve some sweatpants from his dresser.

Jenny was abnormally subdued by the time Jamie and I had dressed and made it out to the kitchen, Willie was still sound asleep but I started getting his breakfast ready merely so I didn’t have to look her in the eye. My heart was racing a mile a minute, waiting for her to say “Were you in bed with my brother?”

Jamie was right I was scared of telling her and part of that was because I had been hiding it from her for weeks, making the whole thing far more illicit than I intended and now with Brian so ill, to disclose it would almost seem insensitive. I wasn’t sure if I was paranoid due to guilt or if Jenny was suspicious of something.

Jenny briefly outlined Brian’s progress and we planned our visits that day so we would hopefully get to see his medical team. I could feel Jenny’s eyes glancing from me to Jamie. The blush rising in my cheeks already. Jenny cleared her throat, her decision made. "Are ye well Claire? She asked eventually “Ye look tired? I ken none of us our sleeping much but ye have to try aye?”

I nodded, my cheeks were flaming and the self-satisfied smirk on Jamie’s face made me want to slap him. Ian was glancing from me to Jamie, a knowing look on his face.

“Why are ye looking at them like that Ian? Is there something I dinna know?”

Before Ian was forced to explain himself Willie’s little sleepy head emerged in the doorway, "there you are! Did you sleep well? I have your breakfast ready." I chirped a pitch to my voice that I barely recognised. Ian and Jenny spoke with Willie briefly before leaving. She gave me a nod of her head and quipped "I will see ye at the hospital Claire." I had not heard the end of it.

We dropped Willie to Mrs. Crook and quickly made our way into the hospital. Brian’s face lit up on sight of Jamie, who covered his father’s hand instantly, a playful expression on his face "ye ken ya ruined Jenny’s after party Da, ye have no consideration.”

When Brian responded his voice was hoarse from misuse "Aye I can never do anything that suits the rest of ye that is for sure” he smiled. "I hear the lovely Claire has been here dealing with all these doctors"

"Aye she has, she is no a woman to be trifled with" Jamie quipped.

"Will ye thank her for me Jamie?" Brian asked.

"Ye can thank her yourself, she is right behind me." I moved forward slowly smiling down on my sole patient for the past few weeks.

"Hi” I said simply, Brian’s eyes full of tenderness looked up at me, "Claire” he croaked…”thank ye"
"Off course, you know I wouldn’t give up the chance to boss everyone around."
He simply nodded and smiled, holding my hand pulling me closer down to sit on the bed across from Jamie.

"You know they need to operate on your heart?" I asked carefully.

Brian nodded again. "Well before we engage with what surgery is best and when they should do it, I have asked a friend of mine to come and look at you. He is a senior cardiac consultant in London.

"Ye are bringing in the big guns" Brian said smiling. “Yes we will have you back home with Ellen driving her mad in no time.”

He looked pensive for a minute and glanced back to Jamie.

"Ellen looked so pale and thin today son...I feel terrible for putting her through all this. Have ye been staying with her down at the house Claire?" Brian's hopeful eyes now looking at me enquiringly.

I could feel my cheeks burning, "no I am staying up at the cottage with Jamie...it was just easier with Willie" I added quickly "but we are keeping a close eye on her and I would think now she has seen you talking and awake it will ease her mind somewhat." I rubbed the back of his hand soothingly.

Brian eyed me curiously and then his eyes returned to look at Jamie, his tone was a little perkier when he spoke again.

"Weel i canna tell ye how greatful that ye were able to stay Claire...tell me can ye stay with us another while?" an earnest look in his eyes.

"I probably will go back next week once we find out what is happening with the surgery."

Brian nodded and then as if suddenly remembering an excuse to keep me in Scotland. "Aye but dinna forget I will need ye here for the surgery itself… ye will stay to see me safe?" he raised his hand and patted his chest where his heart was. A satisfied smile on face.

We joined Ellen for dinner in the main house, making sure we kept our word and encouraging her to eat and keep her strength up. Although since Brian was communicating again I could see a lightness in her, Brian still had a road ahead of him but cognitively he was looking good.

After dinner Ellen asked to hold on to Willie for the night for company. Willie who hadn't seen much of his grandparents in weeks jumped at the opportunity. Ellen offered the invitation to me also "Claire yer welcome to stay down here too or ye might prefer a night where he isn't kicking ye in the bed".

I felt terrible deceiving Ellen too, especially as she was presuming that I shared a bed with Willie. Jamie wriggled his eyebrows, while Ellen wasn't looking and said "Should I tell her I dinna kick ye when we're in bed?" I couldn't stop the blush creeping up my shirt and over my neck. Sooner or later the Frasers would need to know. What we would be telling them was another issue.

Jamie and I walked Willie up to the house to retrieve his pajamas and toothbrush, I stood at the kitchen table packing a few things in a bag for him when I spotted Jamie lift the lid on the dish Laoghaire had brought the night before, "what’s this Sassenach?"
My 'date' with Jamie and Jenny's early morning visit meant I completely forgot about Laoghaire's food offering. But before I had time to answer Willie interjected, "Weary bought it yesterday, mam said not to eat it, it wouldna be nice".

"Willie, I said waringly "what I actually said was we didn't know what it was, I didn't say it wasn't nice!" Willie looked at me as if to say and the difference is?

Jamie looked suitably embarrassed, "Sorry Sassenach, I dinna ken why she came here." he was rubbing the back of his neck, color rising up his cheeks.

"Is she no yer friend anymore Da?" Willie's interrupted, his innocent voice floating through the room.

I sat back a little in my chair and folded my arms. Jamie's face was gone an almost purple color.

I really should have interjected helped Jamie but it was too tempting to watch him squirm.

"No son...not really...she isna." Jamie said weakly.

"Johnny in my playschool says ye can only have one special friend that’s a girl, ye can have lots of ordinary friends that are girls but only one special one...which one was weary?"

"Just ordinary" Jamie muttered. I wriggled my eyebrows at him, earning me a glare.

Willie's head was bent over my tablet, playing an alphabet game. "Do ye have a special friend mama?" he asked absently

“No I don't”.

"Well if ya like ye can be Da's cause he does no have one either."

I lifted Willie’s chin to look at me “Willie, you know your Da is very special to me already?”

"Aye but he dinna live with us"

I could see Jamie's face clouding over instantly, sadness etched all over it.

"Willie", Jamie went around and knelt to Willie's level "ya ken there is nothing I would love more than to live with ye, but yer home is in Boston and right now I have to stay here to help Grandad aye?"

Willie simply nodded and turned back to the tablet, the matter appeared to be over.

"I want a brother." Willie's definite voice breaking the silence again.

Jamie darted a look at me.

"Well we will see" I replied cautiously, Willie merely rolled his eyes and said "well its only fair mama if Da canna live with us I want a brother." Sound logic.

I could see Willie’s mind ticking over, contemplating how to action his plan.

"You could marry someone in Boston and then they will give us a brother" Willie blurted. A broad smile clearly delighted with his idea.

Jamie's eyes almost hit the ceiling at this. "Willie ya ken its no just that simple for yer Ma to marry."
Is it not?

"My dentist likes her, Willie offered helpfully “he said she is very pretty....didn't he mama? ye could marry him."

"No", Jamie replied a little too sternly, "That is not how it works son, yer mama will not marry the first man that says she is pretty".
Willie snorted, "he isna the first da! there are loads" his head was bobbing enthusiastically happy to be informing his father for a change, "my teacher said there is no a flower as pretty as her and the man in the grocery store asked could he buy her telephone cause she had lovely eyes"

Jamie face was a hilarious mixture of incredulity and confusion at why a man was trying to buy my phone for my lovely eyes, "my number" I whispered sheepishly, a way of explanation. Jamie shot me a dirty look.

Willie still trying to barter me off was not deterred "One of those will do mama, they’ll bring us a brother..."

"Willie!" Jamie’s raised voice interrupting bringing Willie back to reality. "Yer mama has to love or like the man at least, she canna be marrying them cause they think she is pretty, that is no how marriage works!"

"I really think you shouldn't be engaging” I whispered to Jamie warningly "you are arguing with an almost 4 year old on what makes a good marriage…hmm?."

Jamie gave me a stern look "I dinna like the sound of Willie's dentist Sassenach, he does no seem to be paying much attention to his teeth when he is looking in yer eyes!"

Willie looked at him solemnly "no Da its no my dentist that really likes Mama's eyes it’s the man in the grocery store I told ye...the dentist likes all of her"

"Get yer bag I am bringing ye down to Granny".

I tried not to snort at Willie’s indignant face.

_____________________________

Jamie was preoccupied when he returned, I watching him move around the cottage, open a bottle of wine, stroke the fire, all the while pensive and quiet, fingers tapping against his thigh.
“What are you thinking?” I asked eventually, I leaning up against the kitchen counter to observe him.
“I am thinking the little bugger hasn’t an ounce of loyalty that is what I am thinking!” Jamie replied hotly.
“Jamie he is only a baby...he doesn’t think beyond his own wants and needs...he wants a brother he doesn’t really understand…”
“Oh aye does he not?” Jamie interrupted. “Once I explained I canna go to Boston, he produces a bloody list of possible suiters for ye!”
I smirked, “you know you are being ridiculous don’t you?”
A sigh, “Aye” he nodded sheepishly. “It’s just I dinna think he would be so content for ye to marry another man.”
“I am not marrying any man!”
He nodded and slunk down on the couch arms crossed “Stop your sulking you silly man”
“It’s no just that” He said quietly.
“What then? Tell me?”
He didn’t answer, just shook his head “never mind.”
“I will tell you what” I went over to him and stood between his spread legs. For every word or truth that you tell me, I will remove one layer of clothing? hmm, how about that?”
His lip curled up to one side. “Oh aye go on then…” his humour improving.
“You first” I instructed.

A deep sigh and more fidgeting, eventually he looked at me thoughtfully.
Why do ye not want Janet to ken about us? Why are ye keeping us a secret at all?”
I slowly unbuttoned my blouse, his eyes were on me and although he wanted a response, his tongue darted out and ran along his lower lip.
“Well, there are a few reasons really why I haven’t… your dad being a big reason…but I suppose the main reason is what do I tell her hmm?”
My shirt was fully opened now but I didn't remove it, I just ran my hand up and over my bare stomach eventually arriving at my breast and began rotating my index finger around my covered nipple.

Jamie’s eyes travelled with my hand biting on his lower lip when he saw me land on my breast.
“Should I tell her that I arrived in Scotland and immediately started shagging her brother?” I suggested. “I wouldn’t be sure that she would be all that much impressed Jamie.”
“Well is that what we are do’n?” he said sitting forward so he could run his hands up my thighs. “Shagging?”

“you have to admit we have squeezed in a good bit of it? Hmm”
I shrugged my shoulders so the blouse fell down and off my back.
“Well that is my next question then…so get ready to remove something else Sassenach”
I ran my hand down and rested it over the button of my jeans, waiting.
“I dinna think titles were ever important to me before but even that prick Forbes pointed it out, and I dinna like it a bit”
“What?” I asked? Opening the button of my jeans. His hands darted up to help me. “Ah no no” I slapped them away playfully. He sighed deeply “Ye are a minx Claire”
“Continue” I directed.
“Its just like I dinna want to be introducing ye as Willie’s mam, it makes us look like yer no mine and…..”
I ran the zip down my jeans and pushed the fabric away slightly revealing my lacy underwear. Jamie made a low moan deep in his throat and his hands reached up to feel the lacy underwear underneath. My breath came short and I could feel heat pool between my legs.
“I ken we canna live in the same country right now and it could be months before I can see ye again…but would ye be willing to ya know…” His cheeks were growing redder.

“Can we continue this when ye go back?” he blurted out eventually. “What shagging?” I teased.
“Ya ken fine well I dinna mean just shagging Claire…I want…what I would like to be able to say is that… I would like to say ye are mine that as ye said we have a definition of what we are to the other.” He added shyly.
My heart almost burst looking at him “Are you asking me to be your girlfriend?” I dropped my jeans to the floor. His breath hitched and his eyes ran up and down the length of my body. “Aye that could be one word for it?” His hand ran around and began massaging my bottom. “I mean do ye think ye mind waiting until we can see each other again…the distance I suppose?” I lowered myself down, sitting astride him, resting my forehead against his. “I can wait for you” I answered sincerely. “And I promise not to marry Willie’s dentist…hmm”
“Aye that would be a help” his thumb ran across my lower lip, eyes intent on mine.
“What about you?” I asked “Will you be happy to see each other when we can? I mean do you want to see other people or…..” I sat back a little suddenly worried about his answer.
He shook his head incredulously “no I dinna want to see other people” his voice dipped becoming huskier “I love ye Claire and I will love ye whether ye are here or in Scotland”.
“I love you too” I whispered into his mouth.
The pox.

Two nights before Brian's surgery Willie came down with chicken pox. He had been cranky during the day and while Jamie was bathing him that evening he noticed spots covering his back and arms. I was in the hospital meeting with Brian's surgeon. I had left my phone on silence and by the time I got a chance to glance at it, I noticed 6 missed calls from Jamie. I nearly had heart failure myself wondering what the hell could be wrong that he needed to phone me 6 times.

After it rang once on my end, Jamie answered breathlessly "Claire, where have ya been? I have been ringing and ringing, Willie has a rash...I rang the GP and I am gonna bring him in...."

"What do you mean a rash?" I asked.
"He is covered in spots and I think he has a fever" Jamie answered impatiently. "Will ye just come home and look yerself." I could tell by his testy response that Jamie was panicking.
I headed straight for the cottage, stopping once at a local pharmacy to pick up calamine lotion and children’s paracetamol.

I arrived at the cottage to find a completely wound up Jamie clutching a clammy and bemused Willie to his chest pacing up and down the kitchen floor.

"Christ there ye are, I thought Christmas would be here first!"
I merely rolled my eyes and disentangled Willie from his breast, I lay him on the couch to examine him and take his temperature, which confirmed what I had believed when Jamie described his symptoms, Willie had chicken pox. I dosed him with the paracetamol and covered his little body with the soothing lotion.

We propped him up on the couch with cushions and his duvet, to watch a movie. It was late but he would likely need a distraction to stop the itching. Once his temperature reduced, Jamie remembered to breath and I could see the tension leave his body. I snuggled in to his side on the couch and whispered "you know he will be fine, it’s good for him to get them out of the way at his age, he will recover quicker."

A sigh "aye I ken, I am sorry I just hate when he is ill", he smiled wryly "The first summer I had him, he got an ear infection and I wouldna let anyone near him, no even mam..."

I remembered, Jenny had rang me in hushed tones saying Jamie was being a nightmare and would I speak to him. "I rang you remember?" I asked. "hmm, Aye, as soon as I heard your voice I felt better" he snorted and fidgeted with his hands. "ya ken I only truly trust you when it comes to him."
I nodded because I was the same with Jamie, "as broken as our relationship was I never worried about Willie once he was with Jamie, his instinct was always spot on when it came to him and we always deferred to the other on his welfare, an unspoken language we shared when it came to Willie. “You’re the best daddy Jamie, never doubt it”. He put his arm around my shoulder and held me tighter.

Jamie was gone at the crack of dawn the next morning and by the time evening was drawing in, I came to the gradual realisation that I too had chicken pox, hive like spots appearing across my cheeks, forehead, back and arms. I doused myself in calamine lotion, scaring myself by looking in
the mirror. I hopped into bed beside Willie looking like Frankenstein’s bride and hoping Jamie wouldn’t come looking for me.

I must have dozed off because I woke a time later to hear Jamie's hushed tones whispering through the door.

"Sassenach, i canna open the door what’s going on is Willie ok?"

"hmm..oh ya..he is fine", I replied groggily "I am going to sleep with him tonight".

"Well open the door I wanna see him" Jamie persisted his voice rising above a whisper.
"No!" I was awake now, not a chance Jamie was seeing me like this. "You can't come in, he is contagious...so no you can't" I finished lamely.

"I ken he is contagious, he was contagious last night and ye know I had them before so what are ye at?" Jamie's voice was exasperated.

"He is asleep you will disturb him!"

a pause while Jamie considered his options. "ok then” he said pausing “you come out here, I willna disturb him"

"No!" I pleaded, "I can't I...I am not coming out"

"Sassenach what the hell has gotten into ye? Will you come out here now?"

"Jamie please go away." It came out as a sigh.

"I willna go away and I will break down this bloody door if ye dinna appear out here now!"

"I have the chicken pox" I sobbed through the door "And I am not having you ...you see me like this...so go away!"

Silence.
"Claire, dinna be daft come out...please?" his voice was softer now, although I could still hear traces of amusement in it.

"No, I look like a cross between a Dalmatian and that guy from Sesame Street"

Another pause.

"Which guy?"

"Bert"

A snort
"or maybe Ernie, I’m not sure and I am not coming out in any case"

"Claire, I canna believe ye wouldn't let me see ye...yer being silly"

"I am not silly, I am a massacre" I sniffed.

"Come out mo ghraidh...please, I willna sleep until I see yer face or what’s left of it" I could hear him stifling the laughter. Bastard.

I knew it was futile, I slid off the end of the bed trying not to jar willie and opened the door a crack, peeking out at him.
"Come here." he ordered and pulled me though the door shutting it softly behind me. "Ach ye poor thing, he was looking me over carefully, taking in each blemish on my skin, "are ya scratchy?"

"Yes very" I admitted sheepishly

"Right, well then lets run ye a bath and put more of the lotion on ye"

"Jamie I am fine...you don't need to..."

His hand was up halting any more protestations. "I don't need to but I can and I will...aye?" I nodded like a child and let him guide me by the hand towards the bathroom.

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Jamie ran an enormous bath, pointed at it and said "in."

Once I was settled he handed me a large tumbler full of whiskey and said "medicinal." I lay soaking, enjoying the warmth of both bath and whiskey, silently contemplating how happy and content I was here, it wasn’t just Lallybroch, it was just being with Jamie. I looked forward to him coming home each evening, just his being near him lifted my heart, never mind his ever attentive presence in bed.

I had thought long and hard in the past few weeks on Jamie asking me to stay and although he had never asked since the night of Jenny's wedding I hoped that if one day I could make it work, the offer would still stand.

The practical issue for me was work. My options for work as a surgeon would be limited, the hospital near Lallybroch was small and surgeon posts did not arise every day, I had specialised in pediatric surgery back in Boston, I could practice general surgery again but it probably wouldn't make it any easier to redeploy myself in Scotland.

Then there was the usual stuff, our home, friends, Willie's playschool, Lamb etc. None of it was impossible and it could be done, I was scared of it but mostly I was afraid to give up everything to find out Jamie and I wouldn't work or something would go wrong. Never mind the pressure Jamie might feel in reality having us here, when so much would have been sacrificed for it to happen.

All that said the more time I spent here the harder I was going to find, leaving Jamie. Which I would have to do at some point regardless, it could take a year or more for me to find a suitable job.

Breaking me from my thoughts Jamie returned, towel wrapped around his toned torso and a bottle of calamine lotion in hand. "Scoot up Sassenach, I’m getting in"

"Jamie I am covered in hives! You can't be serious"

"Aye well besides from the fact that yer the bonniest wee thing when ye have the pox or no, I am get'n in and rubbing some of this into yer spots, aye?" He dropped the towel leaving me no doubt he was coming in whether I moved or not.

Once he was wrapped around my back, I lay into him resting the back of my head on his chest and luxuriated in the feel of him against my sore body. "I was just thinking how much I love this, being here with you" I said stroking his thigh under the water.

I could feel him smile against my cheek as he rested his chin on my shoulder.
"its funny, if ye had told me this would happen a month ago I would have said ye were mad, when Jenny told me ye would be staying for a while over the wedding I didna ken how it would be between us but I didna think we would end up like this" he spoke softly into my ear.

"no?" I asked.

"god no, I knew I wanted ye badly but I never thought I would want ye badly enough to share a bath with ye while ye look like chucky's kid"

I slapped him under the water, splashing both of us.

"Och I am only joking…"

We grew quiet again, contemplating the change we had seen in just a month.

Eventually Jamie cleared his throat and said, “I was serious Claire when I can't believe ye are here like this”, he ran a hand up my stomach and cupped my breast to illustrate. He sighed contently and continued "I was fairly sure ye hated me enough to politely ignore me most of the week",

"you are hard to ignore" I replied taking his hand up to my mouth and kissing the back of it.

"That first evening ye arrived, I… well ye were there with yer hair all curly around yer face, god I wanted to do nothing more than kiss the breath out of ye…but I dinna think ye...or Willie would appreciate it much…”

"oh I don't know...I probably would have appreciated it, can't speak for our son though! I added smiling.

"Then” he sighed theatrically and ran his hand down my thigh “when I brought ye up to the house foundations and had ye ride with me...Jesus Claire ...yer round arse stuck between my thighs...I was as hard as a rock the whole way over the heather..."

"hmm you hid it well" I said laughing

"Maybe, it was no comfortable though" he replied contemplatively

Jamie’s hands ran up the expanse of my tummy and were now busily cupping and massaging my breasts, which were weightless in the water.

"Then that night in Inverness...when I came to apologies for my behavior with Forbes...God when I pulled ye down on my lap in yer wee bathrobe" His index finger was idly rotating around my nipple, I could feel the length of him pressed against my back and I was throbbing at the memory of that kiss alone. "It took all my strength to get through dinner in the hope that ye would come to bed with me after"

"Sure of yourself I would say, there was little doubt I was going to your bed and you knew it" He hummed into my ear in mirth.

"Aye well I dinna think I have ever wanted anything so bad in my life Sassenach"

Silence overcame us as we no doubt replayed that night in our minds, both of us remembering the bone deep need of being with each other, sharing our bodies again.

Eventually I turned to him "Jamie, do you remember the night of Jenny’s wedding and you said you wished I could stay?"

“How could I not?” he replied sheepishly “I dinna exactly think it through…what I was asking of
“No maybe not” I agreed “was it more a post coital impulse? … I mean have you really thought about it? For all you know you would grow really sick of me? This is the longest time we have spent together?”

“Claire” it came out as a breath and he tilted my chin so I could look up at him. “I would never grow sick of ye, we just fit? Hmm you and I?” I have known it since the first day I ever set eyes on ye, you belong with me… … we’re meant to be together, so no I will never grow tired of ye!

We grew silent again until I felt Jamie’s chest vibrate behind me “asides I leave ye in bed hungrier than when I first came to ye, I want ye all the time Sassenach, that willna change I can promise that.”

I swallowed before I drew courage to make my next declaration. “Jamie…I think maybe…that I will try and move…I mean it could take some time, months maybe a year until I get work…but I think I would like to try living here.” I eventually stammered out.

There was a sudden splash behind me, Jamie lifted me as if I weighed nothing at all and had me fully facing him, sitting on his lap now.

“Do ye mean it?” Jamie choked out.

I nodded.

He pulled me into a long kiss, the kind that would leave my lips and mouth bruised for a long time after. “I hope ye are not raving from the pox” he said laughing and crushing his lips to mine again.
Missed Chances.

I tried to anticipate how difficult it would be returning to Boston. I knew from previous experience that Willie would be miserable for the first few days, while he adjusted to daily life without Jamie.

I hadn’t however predicted the depth of my own longing for him, dreaming of his touch and trying to conjure it to life in my bed.

Nor had I envisaged how easily our new relationship could be tested through distance and disappointment. When I left Scotland, I was completely certain of the depth of feeling I had for Jamie and vice versa. What I hadn't planned upon was disillusionment due to a missed meeting and how that could rip through promises made, leaving the seeds of doubt in its wake.

As soon as I returned to Boston, I began researching surgical positions in Scotland. With no vacancies available unless hundreds of miles away from Lallybroch, I had to try and bide my time, and wait for something suitable to come up. In the meantime I busied myself with getting my apartment ready for renting when we left, and sorting out my medical license for practicing in Scotland.

Jamie and I had a plan to endure our time apart, we would not go any longer than six or seven weeks without seeing each other, Willie’s trips to Scotland would no longer be completely facilitated by his parents or Jenny. We now would do every second one, allowing ourselves at least 3 days with the other before returning to either Boston or Scotland. In theory it sounded fool proof but our whole relationship almost came apart at the seams after what should have been our first visit together.

The first trip, coincided with my birthday. The plan was Jamie would fly in that weekend and spend three days with us. On one of the nights I had made plans for just Jamie and I, I dreamed up a night that would consist of dinner, overpriced cocktails and naughty hotel sex. The plan alone kept me going when I was at my lowest ebb and missing him.

I woke frequently over our time apart, breathless, hot and wet from wanting, in the full knowledge that nothing would sate it but Jamie. Phone calls and facetime not having a patch on the real deal.

On the morning Jamie was due to catch his flight, his face popped up on my screen. It was a picture I had taken off him in bed before I left Scotland, hair ruffled and sleepy. It was one of my favorites, because he had just ordered me back to bed and his eyes were full of promise.

I answered, "Hi Mr. Fraser, have you checked in yet?" I knew straight away something was wrong, he sighed deeply before saying "Claire I am so sorry I canna come."

An emergency with a buyer, two foals had died by an unexplained illness, he had to stay make sure it wasn’t contagious and wouldn’t spread through the stud of horses. the vet had to be dealt with, on and on went the litany of reasons why he wouldn’t be getting on the flight due to leave in two hours…I zoned off after the first sentence, vaguely heard him ask could he send Jenny instead, pleading that he didn’t want me spending my birthday alone. "I have friends here Jamie" I replied coldly, "you do what you have to do, I will speak to you later." I could hear him protesting, begging me not to hang up, I could hear the desperation in his voice but I just wasn’t in the right frame of mind to comfort him. His excuse was perfectly reasonable but I was blind to rationale
thought, it was on one hand a reminder of when Willie was born and on the other a desperate realisation of how difficult this long distance thing would be.

I wasn’t silly, I knew he was every bit as disappointed as me and sorry for it all, but disappointment is a funny thing, it can be a breeding ground for bitterness and disillusionment.

Jamie had begged me on the phone before he even told me he couldn’t come, not to shut down on him once I knew. I had promised flippantly just to hear what the hell was wrong, the instant he told me I did the very opposite of my promise and started building up those walls.

The thing was, before I left I had no doubt that Jamie loved me and that love was enough to warrant me to leave my job and home, to up sticks and be with him completely. Even in the few days prior to leaving, I caught him watching me with a longing that made my breath hitch, we were both exhausted from lack of sleep as we spent most of the last few nights, sharing our bodies so that we covered every inch with each other’s touch.

The morning before I had left his cottage, while Willie was saying his goodbyes down at the main house, Jamie had propped me up on his kitchen counter, without a word, he hiked up my skirt, pushed my knickers down around my ankles and entered me with a ferocity that left me crying out after his first thrust, "I must Claire" he had whispered. His eyes gazing into mine, mouths open to the other, lips barely touching. He made sure I knew he would miss me, the bruises on my hips and neck would remain when I could no longer feel his gentle touch.

But while absence can make the heart grow fonder, it can also grow doubt, when there isn’t the physical and emotional presence of the other to reassure you of that love. We never had the opportunity to speak to Jamie’s family about our new relationship, Brian surgery had rightly overshadowed anything else in the days prior to us leaving and when we weren’t at the hospital we were too preoccupied with each other to stop long enough to speak to of it.

However Jenny had come to the departures gate as a surprise to see me off, she hadn’t expected to find Jamie and I at the locked in a firm embrace, his hands cupping my cheeks. He didn’t flinch once he knew Jenny was beside us, kissing me fervently "I love ye Claire, I will see you in a few weeks, aye?" I nodded all words dormant in my mouth. I blinked back tears, stroked his cheek before turning and hugging an astonished Jenny. I kept my eyes on him until I was gone through the gate with Willie, our eyes didn’t leave each other until we were out of sight.

The simple thing of Jenny knowing, kept our love real. Accompanied by her phoning almost immediately once I reached Boston, spluttering out "Jesus Claire I kent ye might have been messing around again, I dinna realise ye were in love!" which had caused me to smile until my face almost split.

All of that was good, it definitely made the longing easier, but once that crack of disappointment was allowed to creep in, I began to lose my faith in Jamie and in us. I knew it wasn’t fair, he was barely able to choke out that he couldn’t come, I heard the tremble in his voice when he tried to explain why, off course I forgot all that vulnerability in him the minute I ended the call and focused only on how I felt he had let me down. Refusing all offers to celebrate my birthday, instead I shut Willie and myself up in the apartment binge watching movies and eating take out.

Jamie rang over the next few days, I answered but spoke little, he whistled on about what was happening, no improvement, I knew it was extremely stressful for him and I made sympathetic noises but I shared nothing and I left Willie on the phone longer than I would normally. I was panicked, had I been delusional? Promising to move to Scotland, when he couldn’t make one visit,
how were we to continue like this. Mentally I was already back tracking on everything I had promised.

I went back to work on the Monday and instead of returning Jamie’s missed calls that evening I sent him a quick text saying that I was caught up in surgery all day and I would call him later.

I know now in my own weakened mind that I would have continued like that shutting myself off for him was it not the sight that greeted me the following morning outside the hospital entrance.

I walked out the main doors, and my eyes were instantly drawn to a large figure, leaning up against a wall across the street, one foot on the wall, one foot on the pavement, arms folded in front of him. He was watching me attentively before I was even aware of his presence, a small smile growing upon his face. A newly grown beard, instantly told me he had been going through his own mental anguish, tired eyes showing the apprehension behind them. How would I recieve him?

I was across the road before I knew what was happening, stopping just an inch in front of him "Hi", I said beaming. "Hi" he said softly. Without a thought for another thing I was up and in his arms, mouth pressed to his and tasting his tongue. His newly grown beard tickling my cheeks and nose.

"God I missed ye" he whispered. He ran his nose against my own, and breathed in deeply.

"I'm sorry Jamie, I know I have been difficult...I just..."

"I was afraid I'd loose ye, I had to come, I canna stay long though" he pressed his forehead to mine.

We just breathed the other in for a minute, he suddenly pulled my face up to look into his eyes.

"Ye need to ken you come first always Claire" his adam apple bobbed and his face creased in concern, his eyes watching mine intently, did I understand?

"Im sorry", I squeeked out, blinking back tears "I know I have been...."

"a tad distant?" Jamie said smiling.

"hmm...just worried, doubting whether this was going to work.."

"it will work Claire, it has to...I will see to it"

I entwined his hand in mine and said "C'mon lets go, we have five hours before we have to pick up Willie.

______________________________________________________________________

Watching Jamie walk around my apartment was strange, Willie had been a baby the last time he had stayed. I could see him taking it in, noticing the changes since he had last been.

It was the home I made for Willie and I and it was full of us, Willie's coloring stuck to the fridge, pictures of Willie with Lamb, Jamie's parents, me Jenny and Willie. He picked each one up, then looked at the wall where I had mounted and hung the wedding photos of Jamie, Willie and I. "Jenny sent them to me" I said pointing at the photos.

"We look so happy, ye couldna tell ye were as mad as hell with me there" a cheeky smirk lighting up his face.

"I am a good actress" I retorted. We stood apart now, six weeks of absence causing a sudden
shyness between us. "Would you like to go to bed?" I said it meaning, he must be wrecked
transatlantic flight and all that, but he wriggled his eyebrows suggestively at me.

"I didn't mean that!" I said rolling my eyes, "I meant you must be wrecked!"

"Oh aye, I am" he breathed out, biting his bottom lip and looking me up and down, drinking me in.
"But I didna come all this way for two days and not shag ye senseless the first chance I got Sassenach."

I swallowed, heat was pooling in my tummy and without conscious thought, I licked my lips in
anticipation of his touching mine, there and everywhere. He moved suddenly, hands on my hips
drawing me closer. "Come here" he breathed. He had me up in his arms before I knew where I was,
"Do ye still sleep in the same room?" I nodded and he pushed the door open with his shoulder and
shut it with his foot, stood me down, just at the bottom of the bed and said "I wanna take yer
clothes off, dinna move an inch"

He made quick work of my blouse, when he slipped my bra off, he stood back for a minute
cupping them appreciatively "Do ye ken" he stated in a matter of fact way “that ye have the most
beautiful breasts I have ever seen?" I laughed "You're mental"

"Why are ye laughing, it’s true" a lopsided grin on his face, he bent his head and put his mouth on
my nipple. I groaned loudly, "I have thought about yer body many many times"
Jamie continued pausing after each word for emphasis.

With his mouth still sucking and licking my nipple he began opening my jeans and pushing them
down until they dropped around my ankles. "Well" I said reaching for the waist band of his jeans "I
would be lying if I said I didn't miss your body too hmm", pulling his Zipper down and taking his
hard length in my hand. He sighed contentedly and shut his eyes as I stroked him.

Jamie made his way up from my breasts to my neck, sucking and biting.

"Get on the bed Sassenach"

I duly obeyed, Jamie had a predator likeness on his face as he crawled on top of me.

Laughing, I choked out "you have a wild look in your eye Mr. Fraser."

"I have a wild feeling in my balls since I spotted ye an hour ago" he quipped holding said member
between his thumb and index finger.

Without any qualms and knowing I required no further foreplay, he snuck a hand in under my arse,
tilted me up and thrust home. Both of us letting out contended sighs. Stilling over me he dipped his
forehead to my shoulder, his beard tickling my naked breasts. I squeaked out "this beard feels
different, I feel like I have gone to bed with a stranger"

“Sassenach I intend to make sure…there will nay be anyone else in yer bed but me…ever!” it came
out as a grunt.

My hips started to move against his, slowly, teasingly at first, my body was burning under his
trying to hold back, my tummy clenching as his hands roamed up and down my body, I couldn’t
decipher whose moans were whose. His movements quickened and he pulled my arms up over my
head and pinning me down with one of his, his other hand gripped the headboard and he reared up.
Jamie made it is sole purpose to reach parts of me, only he knew, I clawed his back and his name
came from my mouth like a chant over and over. He breathed “God Sassenach…ye undo me”
when his own release came. My thighs were a quivering mess wrapped around his waist and our erratic breathing coming more like gasps trying to regulate again.

"I seriously fucking missed you" I sighed, as he rolled off me, pulling me to him and bringing us to lie on our sides facing each other. "me too" he whispered as he tilted his forehead to mine.

We lay there lazily stroking the other for some time and spilling out the secrets of our hearts, rectifying all the isolation of the past week.

Jamie and I spent the next two days in domestic bliss, picking up Willie later the first day was a highlight, Willie’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when he spotted Jamie. He grabbed Jamie by the hand and retreating back into the classroom to meet his playschool teacher, introducing him to Jamie as “this is the boyo who says mama is as pretty as a flower Da!” Mr. Christie’s cheeks reddening at Willie’s no nonsense approach to telling it as it is.

Willie clearly enjoying his role as mediator “I can tell ye Mr Christie, Da didna like that one bit did ye Da?” Jamie went suitably red while shaking Mr. Christie’s hand.

We went to Willie’s favorite restaurant and I watched joyfully as Willie proudly showed Jamie off to anyone he was on a first name basis with. It was a heavenly few days but all the time tinged with sadness as I knew it would be short lived. Jamie had taken a massive chance and come mid crisis when the infection was still not contained within the stud. I felt guilty knowing he had acted purely because he was afraid of losing me. I learned one valuable lesson, silently I vowed not to put either of us through this again.

No matter what Jamie had said about ensuring this distance thing would work, I It was clear as long as I remained in Boston that we could be pulled apart easily by missed visits, unfulfilled promises and doubt. I had lived in a state of sorrow since returning to Boston, missing Jamie, missing Willie with Jamie and missing Jamie’s family and the sense of contentment I had found in Scotland.

It was time to make braver choices than I had before, Jamie had proven to me I came first, now I had to show him he held the same place for me. I was not going to continue to risk, one of the most important things in my life, over missed flight connections, farm crisis and lengthy surgeries.

I had enough savings to survive for a while and while being a surgeon was another of the most important things in my life, Jamie and Willie came first. I hoped that a job would present itself eventually but I wasn’t going to wait it out in Boston any longer, I didn’t tell Jamie, I waved him off at the airport and returned to the hospital to hand in my notice.

Four weeks later Jamie picked Willie and me up from the airport, anticipating Willie and I would be staying for a week. Jamie scooped us up in his arms at the arrivals gate, kissing Willie and then me. Willie merely rolled his eyes, his tolerance level for his parents kissing improving each time. My intention was to tell Jamie about our drastic move straight away but I thought the better of it and decided to wait until we had Willie in bed that night. I really should have known my son better, he was not a secret keeper.

We were sitting around Ellen’s kitchen table when Willie decided to drop me in it, Jenny was excitedly catching up on all Willie’s news as he colored in beside her.
“how are all yer wee friends at playschool?” Jenny asked.

“Ach they’re grand aunt Jenny, there sad about me coming here though and Mr Christie said the school will be awful quiet without me.”

Ellen rubbed his head and said “Well I am sure they will but ye will be back next week to set them right again.”

I opened my mouth to change the subject but nothing came out, my mind shut down.

Willie however had a captive audience all grinning proudly at him, Willie was oblivious head bent over his coloring when he absently spoke again. “Ach no gwanny sure I won’t see them next week, but Mama said I will make new friends”

Brian looked up from his paper perplexed “Is he moving schools Claire?”

“Yes” I managed to squeak out and Jamie looked at me curiously, clearly something I hadn’t discussed with him. He remained silent. I stared at my hands trying to think of how to approach this.

“Where is he moving to?” Ellen asked me ignoring Willie.

“Well we have to look but…I…”

Before I could finish my sentence Willie looked up and said “the wee school Da went to when he was little”

Jamie’s head snapped up. My face was crimson. I opened my mouth to speak but before I could continue Brian interjected, “Ach now Willie dinna be daft ye go to school in Boston”

Willie rolled his eyes and said “aye grandda but I canna go there now can I?”

Brian squinted his eyes taking in his grandson, they were all watching Willie curiously now, probably wondering how he had got so confused.

“Why can’t ye?” Jamie asked, eyes intent on his son, bending down to Willie’s level.

Willie clearly exasperated now looked at Jamie and with his voice slightly raised said “Cause ye gave Mama that endangerment ring and were gonna live with you now”

Jamie’s eyes darted to me. I was biting my bottom lip looking down at the shiny sparking ring that Jamie had slipped on my finger a month previous, while we lay under my duvet that first morning.

Jamie was breathing deeply on his back before he turned suddenly and took my hand in his, bringing it to his lips first and kissing it then sitting up slightly he stroked hair from my face and said “I have thought of how to do this, probably for up to four years now, or at least since almost the first time I clapped eyes on ye.

He swallowed audibly, I could see him choke back the emotion building in his throat before he said “Claire, I have loved ye from the first moment I saw you, I intend on loving ye til I take my last breath and I would vera much like if I could bind ye into a contract so that ye have to let me?” a slight curl to his lips, and his eyes like dark pools, searching out mine, waiting for an answer. I couldn’t stop the giggle building up nor the tears roll down my face, when I all but screamed “Yes!”
I made Jamie wait to tell his family until I was in Scotland again, I knew then that I would move, I just decided to wait to tell Jamie. Nobody had spotted the ring until Willie’s confused description prompted them all to look at my hand where my ring sparkled under the light. I gave them all a sheepish smile before the screams started echoing the room and they were running towards us.

Jamie just sat there beaming at me. Mouthing “thank you” silently.

Ellen was sniffling into a tissue when Brian patted Jamie on the back, winked at me and said “Ach sure it only took him four years to build up the courage and finally ask ye!”

Jamie pulled me down and onto his knee kissing me soundly to his families cheers and Willie’s voice in the background saying “Ach da will ye stop that!”
Hi all this is technically Arc II but I would like to keep it under one body of work so will be updating here if that's ok.

This is set directly after we left J/C in the kitchen in Lallybroch. Jamie has just learned that Claire has moved to Scotland for him and the family have just learned that Jamie proposed to Claire the last time he was in Boston. There is some NSFW in this chapter.

Our Son ARC II
Three in a bed.

My first night at Lallybroch didn’t exactly go as I imagined, or maybe more along the lines of I didn’t get to have a conversation with Jamie as I had planned. The Fraser’s excitement was all consuming and champagne seemed to spring from the taps it was that plentiful.

Jamie pulled me aside quickly, eyes watching me inquiringly, “Are ye sure Sassenach?” before I had a chance to answer he exhaled loudly beaming at me “I canna believe ye did all this by yerself without telling me!”, Jamie pulled me to him then and as I tried to mumble words into his chest, Jenny pulled us apart “Now stop it ye two…ye have a lifetime for that…come and tell us all about how he proposed Claire?” I blushed at that, vaguely thinking we should have composed a more pc engagement story, the post coital reality of Jamie proposing while the air cooled our sweat soaked bodies was perfect and true to us but lacked the content that you could share with your soon to be in-laws. “um” I managed to stutter out and looked to Jamie for help who mirrored my own red cheeks, his mouth slightly agape, eyes frantically darting over and back trying to think of an answer. “it was at dinner, wasnit Da?” Willie interjected helpfully.

It wasn’t at dinner at all but that was when we told Willie so without realizing it Willie obligingly filled in details that were much more suitable than the actual version.

“Did ye get down on one knee Jamie?” Jenny asked beaming.

“hmm no…I actually didn’t” Jamie turned to me then shamefaced, “sorry Sassenach”, he crinkling his eyebrows apologetically. “It’s hard to kneel down when you are naked and on top of me” I muttered under my breath to him. “What?” Jenny asked face creased in confusion “Oh nothing” I was just saying to Jamie that “I wouldn’t have wanted a scene…” I trailed off lamely. “Ian got down on one knee for me” Jenny replied indignantly, “Aye” Ian quipped “but ye had my ear in a vice grip and I was afraid to disobey ye”, Jenny slapped him playfully. “Stop it Ian Murray!”

Now instead of unleashing all my fears and anxieties on Jamie about my drastic move, he was too concerned he had messed up the proposal which was the least of my worries. “Sassenach” he hissed in my ear, “I never thought about doing it proper or traditionally…I feel terrible” I pressed my index finger to his lips, “I wouldn’t have accepted your proposal any other way”, his ears went pink but he gave me relieved smile. “Have ye thought of a date then Claire?” Ellen asked smiling proudly at Jamie. The only thing that the word date meant to me was an actual date where I went out for dinner, “Um”, Jamie managed to intervene “no we havna had time…and to be honest I dinna ken Clair would be able to move so soon…” he looked absolutely stressed now at the notion of me being there, and the idea to move seemed naive and foolish all of a sudden. Beads of sweat were bursting out along my neck.

Jamie must have seen the panic in my eyes, because he let his thumb rub soothing circles into my lower back . Willie’s head popped up from his colouring, “how long will it take before my brother comes?” I choked on my champagne and Brian stood suddenly from his arm chair, face beaming.
“There is no baby in yer Ma’s belly yet” Jamie replied patiently I raised my eyebrows at him whispering “yet?” under my breath. Jamie had the good grace to blush and return to his champagne flute. Brian sat down again a little ungracefully. “I am sure it won’t be long before ye get a wee brother or sister a bhalaich” Brian offered comfortably. My eyebrows almost hit the ceiling and I nudged Jamie who seemed to be in another world before he eventually stuttered out “Da we just got engaged….will ye give us a chance!”

That wasn’t the reasoning I had been looking for but it would have to do. “Jamie” I whispered soothingly into his ear, “I thought you said you didn’t want anymore ‘bairns’” curling my fingers into inverted commas at bairns to quote his declaration over dinner in Inverness. Jamie looked at me thoughtfully before turning fully to face me, a wide smile splayed across his face “I think Claire” he said pointedly while lifting my hand to kiss the back of it “ye will find what I actually said was I dinna want bairns with anyone else”, he entwined our hands now and leaned forward drawing me in for a kiss, “just before our lips touched” he whispered, “I only want bairns with you” a little squeak came from the back of my throat before he engulfed my lips.

It wasn’t that I was opposed to his plan; it was simply that the topic was being discussed amongst his family before Jamie and I could talk about it. Something I might have to delicately manage I thought as Jamie broke away from my lips, rubbing his thumb along my bottom lip “I still canna believe ye are here” he said again grinning, the sweat returned to my brow, “for good” disbelief evident from his tone. God did he think I was mad to leave my job? “We need to talk later Jamie” he nodded agreeably “aye I canna wait to get ye alone”, I got the distinct feeling he didn’t mean to talk.

Much later that evening when we eventually were allowed to leave to go up to Jamie’s cottage, time alone proved to be a problematic commodity. Willie was only getting his head around what it actually meant for me and Jamie to be a couple as opposed to just his parents. It also became clear that Willie hadn’t suspected that Jamie and I were together on our last visit as soon as we reached the cottage. Once inside the door, Willie looked around thoughtfully “is this our new home now Mama?” Jamie gave him a puzzled look, “son this was always yer home when ye were here in Scotland, ye always stayed with me here, aye?” Willie nodded slowly and burrowed his eyebrows just like his father, “aye Da but Mama dinna stay with us then.” Jamie shook his head smiling at him, “aye but she stayed with us the last time Willie” he patted his head and made to help me lift one of many cases from the hall.

Willie stood stock still watching us, “But her bedroom was in the cottage next door?” Willie persisted. I blushed a furious shade of red realizing that Willie presumed in his innocence that I went next door each night and not in the same bed as his father. Jamie shot me a bewildered look and crouched down next to Willie, deciding not to rewrite history Jamie nodded solemnly “Aye that is right Willie, but this time if its ok with you…mama can sleep in my bed.” Willie just furrowed his brow again “but where will you sleep Da?” I saw Jamie bite the inside of his mouth, and he inhaled deeply taking Willie’s little hand in his “Well I will sleep with yer Mama” Jamie said softly. There was silence for a minute before Willie’s face came alight, “ye will?” Willie asked earnestly. Jamie nodded pleased with himself. “Aye I will!” Willie’s grin grew wider before he punched the air. “Im gonna sleep with ye too Da!” his little voice brimming with excitement, Jamie’s face had the opposite effect, his mouth practically fell to the floor and this time I tried to stop the grin escaping across my mouth.

Checkmate, I thought.

“Now Willie” Jamie said more seriously “ye have yer own room, and Da painted the stars on the ceiling for ye, remember? Da’s room is nay fun at all.” I made a loud ahem sound over Jamie’s head, when he looked back up I winked at him and muttered, “oh I wouldn’t say it was nay fun Da” Jamie rolled his eyes sternly at me and brought his attention back to Willie who was carefully mulling over his father’s logic.

Willie’s face cleared again a decision made, “no Da, I prefer yer bed anyway and now Mama will
be there” Jamie opened his mouth to speak again but I put my hand on his shoulder, tilting my head to the side “a word?” I whispered. “Willie you get your jammies out and I will help you in a minute, ok?”

Willie headed towards his bedroom and I turned to Jamie, “look he has a fair bit of change the past few weeks let him sleep with us tonight and then tomorrow we can talk to him properly, hmm?” I ran my hands around Jamie’s waist, giving him an imploring look. “Sassenach…it has been a time since you and I have been together, ALONE! I need to… ye ken do things when our son isna lying between us” Jamie looked down on me eyes widened beseechingly.
I bit my lip to stop laughing but a smirk was forming at the corner of my mouth “its nay funny Claire…I am desperate” he rubbed his hips against me suggestively, “please Sassenach persuade him to sleep in his own bed!”

Before we could continue our conversation, Willie returned behind us and I pushed Jamie away slightly, “I’m all ready Da” he said blinking his big blue eyes rapidly. One look at him and I knew Jamie wouldn’t be able to refuse. Willie had gone to the effort of trying unsuccessfully to put on his pajamas by himself resulting in his top being inside out and his bottoms back to front, his bedraggled state and the teddy clutched firmly to his chest undid Jamie completely. He gave a sigh of resignation and said “aye son lets go to bed.”

Willie outwitted us and talked nonstop once the three of us were in bed, Jamie and I must have fallen asleep before him because I woke sometime in the middle of the night with Willie’s foot in my face and his head on Jamie’s chest. I was lulled back quickly under, with the sense of wellbeing that all of us were under the one roof.

Sometime before dawn I felt a soft caress on my forearm and a murmur in my ear, “Sassenach wake up”, I opened my eyes to see Jamie standing over me in his boxer shorts, “what are you doing?”

He curled his index finger in a come hither way, putting his other index finger over his lips “shh” Without many options and not wanting to wake Willie I followed him obediently. I had only made it to the corridor when his big hand grabbed me and dragged me into the bathroom where Jamie promptly locked the door behind me. My eyebrows creased in confusion, “what the hell?” before I had a chance to even finish my question Jamie was lifting me bodily onto the bathroom vanity muttering “it’s the only door that locks”, I didn’t need to guess why he wanted a lockable door when he started hiking up my nightdress and running his tongue teasingly down my neck, “I….have….been…dreaming…of having…you….for…weeks”, each word punctuated with a kiss along my jawline. It wasn’t going to take a lot for me to go along with his plan; I was already warm and tingling from his hand working its way up my thigh. The sleep blurring my mind was dissipating with his every touch.

By the time his hand slid into my underwear, I was fully awake and on the verge of melting into his skin, little beads of sweat tingling my back from his urging. Jamie slipped a finger inside of me the throaty “fuck” that came from his mouth made me wrap my ankles firmly around his arse pulling him into me, his mouth met mine, wet hot and hungry. He broke away for a moment “Claire I canna wait”, I pulled him by the neck back to me “me either”, running my hand down into his boxers I took him into my hand, softly saying “take me then”, he made a growling sound and removed my legs from around his waist to pull my underwear down. Jamie rested his forehead against mine, took himself in hand and guided himself into me.

My head fell back against the cold tiles and I lost any sense of where I was or was or for that matter what noises I was making. One of Jamie’s’ hand came up and covered my mouth, “shh or ye will wake Willie” he muttered between thrusts. His fingers were possessively digging into the skin on my lower back dragging me closer, deeper.” I slid a hand down and cupped his arse, making our hips meet at a rhythm to match my need, more, harder. Jamie’s hand left my back and slid up under my nightdress, rucking the fabric above my breasts, before he bent greedily and took my nipple into his mouth, the effect had be reeling and I clung on tighter, biting Jamie’s shoulder to stifle my moans. His thrusts were becoming erratic now and so were his words, the intense blow of his hips making him grunt loudly. “Jamie” I said in a whisper, “shh”. He pulled back for a minute and
looked at me, desperation evident all over his face. A flicker of decision and suddenly I was up in
his arms then flat on the bathroom floor, Jamie drove into me over and over again until I was
quivering around him, making him groan with completion against my neck.
We lay there on the bathroom tiles unable to speak while the aftershocks that kept us joined
dissipated, I heard Jamie mutter something into my ear, “What did you say?”
“I said” laughter vibrated against my chest, “that we better get the little bugger out of our bed
because my back canna take this every morning”
“hmm I said contemplatively “every morning?”
Out of Place

After my boorish awakening, Jamie offered me a cooked breakfast, he was plating up when a sleepy-headed Willie appeared from the bedroom, arms at full length above his head yawning wildly. "How is my best boy?" I asked lifting him up on my knee, "I had a great sleep Mama" he replied conversationally "Did you like Da's bed?" he stuffed sausage from my plate into his mouth and nodded his head exuberantly "uh hum...It's the best bed ever!" Jamie turned from the stove and gave me an intimidating glare.

I didn't need to be prompted further, "you know Willie, Da and I are going to bring you to the village today to look at your new school?" Willie turned to look up at my face eagerly "ye are?" his face alight and so like Jamie, my breath caught. "Yup, we're going to meet your new classmates and your new teacher". Keeping my tone light I continued, "and the usual school stuff" I said shrugging my shoulders casually. Willie squinted his eyes, "What usual stuff?" he asked suspiciously.

"oh you know me, and Da will have to answer questions about you....on paper, you remember we called them forms in Boston?" I explained while buttering him a slice of toast, he accepted readily. "oh aye, what will ye write?". "well... they will ask Mama and Da some questions about you so they can decide if you are ready to go to school."

Willie looked back up at me again indignantly, "I am ready Mama",

"Oh Da and I know that, but you know the school needs to check that you are doing big boy things first." Willie looked furious now at this questioning of his manhood. "What do ye mean big boy things?"

"Ah, simple things" I replied heedlessly, popping some bacon into my mouth. "Like knowing your letters and numbers, brushing your teeth, sleeping in your own bed" A pause, "it should be fine."

I could feel Willie squirm a little on my lap, he chanced a glance at Jamie who was watching us mouth open slightly, admiration evident on his face. I felt a little rush of pride before I returned my gaze to my breakfast.

Willie chewed carefully and eventually sighed "I suppose I should sleep in my own bed tonight then..." voice full of regret.

Taking his queue, Jamie nodded and tussled Willie's hair "aye son, I am afraid so...although yer mama and me will miss ye" I shot Jamie a filthy look and mouthed "liar" behind Willie's back.

Willie squared his shoulders, chewing contemplatively "aye Da...it doesn't seem fair that you and Mama get to have a sleepover every night." I kissed the top of his head to stifle the laugh.

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Jamie's old preschool was the only option for local children within a twenty-mile radius, Ellen had told me that although we wouldn't have much in the line of options, the one we did have was excellent and it brought all her children on significantly before starting big school.
A large elderly woman with a round rosy face greeted us at the door, embracing Jamie warmly before standing back and pinching his stubbly cheeks.

"Jamie Fraser, weel now, it's good to see ye come through these doors again, ye grew into a fine strapping lad."
Jamie nodded, a broad grin lighting his face, "Thank ye, Mrs Fitz, I was so happy to hear ye are still here."

Mrs Fitz nodded energetically "Oh aye, canna get rid of a bad thing," she said cheerily, bending down somewhat she gave Willie a once over "well there is no denying this is yer bairn Jamie, he is the spitting image of ye!", "What is yer name wee lad?"

Willie eyed her sceptically "I'm Willie," he said clearly, "Who are you?", "ach I am Mrs Fitzsimmons, but you can call me Mrs Fitz, like yer Da and everyone else, did before ye."

Jamie bent down next to Willie "Mrs Fitz runs the school Willie", Willie gave Mrs Fitz a discerning look up and down and said, "do ye teach here?" Mrs Fitz nodded and said "aye there are three teachers and I am one of them", Willie stuck a finger in his mouth, "my last teacher was a man", Mrs Fitz gave Willie a little smirk and said "ach well I am afraid it's all lassies here Willie, but we will do our best by ye"

Mrs Fitz stood back now and took in my presence for the first time, her head tilted to the side, "is this yer mam?" the question came haltingly, almost sceptical.

Willie nodded enthusiastically and said, "aye this is my Mama, and my old teacher liked her a lot, he thought she was bonnie..."

Jamie's eyes widened, and he smiled apologetically at Mrs Fitz, I outstretched my hand "hi I'm Claire." Mrs Fitz forehead crinkled in puzzlement before taking my hand lightly, "yer no Scottish?" she asked incredulously.

I shook my head biting my bottom lip nervously. "No I'm British" I scolded myself internally for the regretful tone my voice held.

"I see," her eyes ran over me now appraisingly, critical. "And will ye be staying in Scotland then Clur?" My name sounded foreign on her tongue, and I found myself having to swallow uneasily before I was able to answer. "mmm yes". Jamie reading the situation, put his arm around my back pulling me into his side, "Claire" he over-pronounced the vowels in my name to correct Mrs Fitz version, "and I just got engaged".

Mrs Fitz's mouth fell agape, and she blew air through her cheeks "Is that so?" I noted the lack of congratulations.

Jamie's eyebrows almost hit the ceiling, his head tilted to the side as he returned Mrs Fitz scrutinising glare.

"it took a long time for me to pluck up the courage, but she has made me very happy."

Mrs Fitz picked up on his prompt, returning Jamie's smile without it reaching her eyes. "I hadna heard it in the village ya ken?" it was posed as a question.

Jamie cleared his throat, "Aye well it happened a wee while ago, but we only told the family yesterday."

Mrs Fitz ran clammy hands down over her apron, her face full of concern "I would say there will
be many a lassie disappointed to hear it Jamie, but I am glad ye have found happiness."

A beat while she glanced at me, -- "truly". I looked down at Willie who luckily had missed the awkward tension in the air and was looking through a glass panel contemplatively, watching children playing inside.

I suddenly wanted to wrap him up and never come back, but Mrs Fitz was moving quickly now, apparently moving on from her disappointment. "So Willie" her tone purposeful but friendly, smiling warmly "normally new boys and girls stay for a few hours see what they think of the place, would ye like that?" I cleared my throat, about to pull Jamie quietly away for a word, I couldn't catch his eye.

Willie looked back at Jamie and me, his face uncertain, I knew he was thinking about balking, but Jamie hunched down to him, smiling encouragingly "I canna wait to hear what ye think of Da's school Willie, do ye think ye would like to stay?"

Willie chanced another glance through the glass panel; I could see him eyeing two boys playing with trucks in a sandpit. "Aye Da, I will stay."

My mood was sour as we made our way back to Jamie's jeep, "that woman was downright rude" I said fixing my glare on Jamie, "aye" he sighed and looked down at his feet "I should have forewarned ye", I narrowed my eyes, "forewarned me of what?"

"She is Laoghaire's grandmother," he said it with deliberate slowness while looking at me with one sheepish eye.

"For fuck's sake Jamie! You didn't think to tell me this before? It came out as a throaty growl, "she treated me like a scarlet woman in there, in front of our son!" The pang of loneliness at leaving Willie now replaced with silent anger seeping into my veins.

Jamie pulled me close by the waist and leaned me against the Jeep, eyes intent, "I'm sorry Claire...truly I dinna think she would be like that" his shoulder collapsed as he leaned to rest his forehead against mine.

"Jamie I really don't know how I feel about Willie going there?" I looked over my shoulder at the school behind us imagining Mrs Fitz taking the disdain for his mother out on my beautiful boy. Jamie curled his finger around my chin and pulled me back to him, "Sassenach, ya ken when we go back, and Willie did no like it, I will have him out of there quicker than ye can say boo", a playful grin lighting his eyes.

Jamie's smile usually could ease the tension from my body, but the gnawing anxiety was still there. It was more to do with how I would be accepted than Mrs Fitz herself.

"Jamie," I said quietly, playing with the open seams of his jacket, "I had a great relationship with Willie's teachers in Boston, and I can count so many of the parents there as close friends. I can't help but feel the same relationships won't be extended here if Mrs Fitz's reaction to me is anything to go by."

Jamie was drumming his fingers against my hip, his hand rose and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. "Claire I am truly sorry for that, I should have told ye about her relationship to
Laoghaire, ye went in there with yer guard down, and I willna let it happen again, if she continues to treat ye like that, I will have a word ok?"

Now it was my turn to grin, "gonna beat up a pensioner?" I said running my hand inside his jacket to feel the hard lines of his chest. Suddenly being close to him wasn't enough.

"Asides" he entwined our hands on top of his chest, "we dinna have much choice when it comes to preschool unless ye wanna drive for 20 miles each morning and afternoon?"

"Well I am not ruling it out", I bristled "but for now we will let Willie decide if he likes it", Jamie squeezed my hand and smiled.

Once back in Jamie's jeep, he moved with intent, navigating through the gears quickly, and swinging the wheel with his palm while looking over his shoulder. I raised one eyebrow, "where are we going?"

"Weel..." his spare hand found the flesh of my thigh, "now that Willie is locked up for a few hours...you and I need to do some Ma and Da stuff." Jamie glanced over at me, eyes sparkling, a lazy smile on his wide mouth. The term Ma and Da, made my belly flip ridiculously. For a second I thought he meant to take me back to bed until his grin broadened "we need to go to the house and look at walls". He threw me a filthy look when I snorted into my sleeve saying "I never knew walls would get you so excited."

The last time Jamie had brought me to the building site, we had travelled there on horseback. I hazily remembered him telling me that where we were going could only be reached by riding over Fraser Lands. This time Jamie drove his Range Rover along a fairly bumpy underdeveloped road. We tussled up and down as he skilfully avoided large potholes and deep inclines. I could already make out the destination in the distance, and we had only been on the road for less than a quarter of an hour. "Jamie," I asked puzzlement evident on my face, "the last time you brought me here, you said we had to come on horseback, it also took us an hour's ride each way!"

Jamie brought the jeep to a stop in front of the foundations, smirked at me and climbed out. He came round my side to open my door and helped me down from the jeep, hands solid on my hips.

"Claire," he looked at me as if I was half mad, quirking an eyebrow.

"Of course I brought ye on horseback, for one thing" he grabbed my hand pulling me towards the building site. "Ye were absolutely furious wi me". We approached the main entrance, and Jamie tugged my hand to face him. "For another, I couldna think of any other way I could get my arms around ye for two hours without ye hitting me", I smiled tilting my head appraisingly at him, "and Lastly" he said grinning madly "I would go to any length so I could fit that gorgeous round arse against me!"

"James Fraser!"
My mouth fell open, as I failed to hold back a laugh, I pushed him away slightly, and "you mean to tell me that you orchestrated that whole ride, so you could feel my arse".

He gave me a gratifying bob of his head and bit the inside of his mouth, halting a smirk. "aye." He looked undeniably sexy. I raised my hand not sure what its target was, and Jamie s drew me back towards his chest, "hey" I said wriggling fiercely, Jamie suddenly swung me around and lifted me bodily into his arms. "What are you doing?" I
managed to squeak out. He was moving towards the house in long even strides, "I am carrying ye over the threshold" he said plainly. My heart skipped a beat, and I had to blink back tears quickly before Jamie could see my face.

Down on solid ground, Jamie kissed me softly "I love ye a nighean", there was something focused in his mind, and it was more than just showing me the house, he moved from the hall to the first room on the right, "this I thought would be a wee living room?" he asked head tilted towards me enquiringly. The walls were built to just above my head, and I noticed that Jamie had been working on it since I was here last. He retook my hand and faced me towards the opening in the wall, I presumed to be a window. "This will be a large bay window", a beat and then he said, "if that is ok with ye Sassenach?" When I turned to look at him, his eyes were creased with worry, and I realised that through my own awe, I had completely forgotten to open my mouth.

"When you brought me up here the last time," I said quietly, "you had a girlfriend. I knew it was for Willie and I was so proud that you would build something so beautiful for our son.", Jamie moved towards me, "but I had to be mindful that this was somewhere you might live with your partner or wife, with Willie" I ran my hand gently across his lips, cheeks and brow and whispered chokingly, "never in a million years did I think that would be me!"

Jamie shook his head from side to side incredulously, "Sassenach", he said softly, "this will sound daft and silly, but I dinna think I have any choice only to tell ye," I stared at him blankly not sure what he meant. His head dipped, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips, a beautiful red glow crept quickly up his cheeks. Jamie made a sharp exhale, closing his eyes briefly before he spoke again. "I think ye ken, that I fell in love with ye very quickly after we first met". I opened my mouth to answer but Jamie's thumb found my bottom lip, and he whispered "just listen", my eyes were filled with tears now, I sucked in a breath finding it hard not to let the words of love I wanted to say, spill from my mouth.

Jamie's chin trembled, taking him in I realised that he seemed more nervous than he did the afternoon he proposed. "There was a day, we went riding…after ye first came?" I nodded, but Jamie clarified, "the rain came, and we took shelter in the cave?" I nodded again, but this time a revealing tear spilt out of my eyelid. "Things were hazy for a while up there," he said smirking "but I do ken its the first place I kissed ye?" another nod from me. "I wanted ye on first sight Claire, but that day up in the cave, when I fell on top of ye…I looked into yer eyes…" Jamie's head bent suddenly, and he snorted. "now this is the bit that will sound daft Sassenach" he shook his head in disbelief in whatever he was about to say. "but that day in the cave, just afore I kissed ye…I looked down into those eyes." His head bent against my forehead, and he bore into my eyes, his voice came in a whisper next "when yer eyes met mine, the first thing that came to my mind, was that I wanted to make a home, build one and live in it with you, I could never explain it…like I could see our future in front of me, and I couldn't wait to start."

My mouth opened and Jamie silenced me again with his thumb, pressing down gently on my bottom lip. "A few nights later, I did make a home with ye, I made Willie's home, but I have wanted to build ye a proper one ever since."

I stood on tiptoe, brushing my lips over his, I grabbed a handful of his jacket and pulled him into me, he locked his mouth to mine, opening slightly so that he might breathe me in. "I love you" I whispered between kisses. Jamie's fingers tangled in my hair, pouring himself into me. Our bodies flush, everything else around us seemed to fade away except the burning sense of anticipation brewing behind our kiss. Jamie pushed me up against a wall, my hips rotating against him, "I want
you” I managed to rasp out as Jamie's head moved from my lips and began a path down my jaw and neck. His hands slid up, and under my coat, so that he could gently explore my breasts before running a flat palm over my tummy, he started fumbling with the zipper on my jeans. His breath was ragged and movements swift, he just had my jeans open and the fabric pushed aside when I heard a car door slamming in the distance. "Jamie," I said breathlessly, pushing him back. His eyes were unfocused, but after a second he seemed to realise what I meant.

I had just finished zipping up my jeans when Brian rounded the gap in the walls indicating the entrance. "Ach there ye are now," he chirped. Jamie seemed to have busied himself with some tools abandoned on the ground and was arranging them on a workbench. I was conscious of our red cheeks and flushed lips, never mind the buzzing sound inside of my head, at almost been caught. If Brian noticed our flustered state, he was kind enough to not mention it. Instead, he walked from room to room with us, discussing plans with Jamie and asking my opinion.

It was only as we were making to leave that he pulled Jamie back and said: "Oh aye son, will ye call to yer mother this evening, she is getting into a right stramish over this engagement party, and she wants to check a few things with ye".

My ears picked up, "engagement party?" I questioned, "oh really there is no need for a party…I would honestly prefer…" before I could finish Brian put his hand on my shoulder gently."Tell ye the truth lass, ye would be doing me a great favour if ye let Ellen go ahead with it". He turned to Jamie giving a grim smile, "we have clients coming up from Helwater estate next week, and it would prove an ample distraction while they're here…we have a significant wee deal hanging in the balance." I opened my mouth to say something, but I noticed the strain on Jamie's face, so thought better to leave it. "Brian took my silence as acceptance and said "thank ye Claire Jamie's uncle Dougal is travelling up with them to help with negotiations, but he can be a bit overbearing, aye? And it would help to have a social setting where he will have to behave himself." Brian slapped Jamie on the back, "ye ken what I mean son?" Jamie's mouth was pressed in a grim line, eyes dark. "aye I do" he said bleakly.
The Deal

Chapter Summary

Thank you for the fab comments, some of you read this over this Christmas break and were kind enough to leave a comment after every chapter. I was blown away. Please let me know what you think, it really feed my writing!

The morning the Hellwater clients were due to arrive at Lallybroch, a weird like energy seemed to descend upon the Frasers. Ellen who was always an accomplished host, relaxed and competent at accommodating visitors in her home, appeared to be absolutely frazzled. Brian resembled someone waiting on a promised attack, and Jamie wavered between zealous and sullen.

I took Willie into playschool and ran a few errands in the village. When I arrived back to Jamie’s cottage, Jenny was in the neighbouring one cleaning. Recognising my opportunity, I made two mugs of coffee and went to see her.

Jenny’s mood wasn’t too affected by the imminent arrival; instead, she was humming happily wiping down surfaces. “The Dunsany sisters will be staying in this cottage” she explained, and Lord Dunsany and Dougal will stay in the main house.”

“Jenny?” I said cautiously not sure exactly what I wanted to know. “What is it about these clients? Everyone seems so ….” For lack of a better word I hazarded “highly strung?”, Jenny looked up from what she was doing and smiled knowingly “Ach each of them for different reasons Claire”, when my brows furrowed she threw down her cloth and accepted the mug of coffee from me, “What I mean is there are different reasons for Mam, Da and Jamie to be tense.” Jenny paused over the word tense and exhaled, “Mam doesna like Dougal, her brother” she clarified.

“Hmm Ok.” I gave her a nod in understanding “that makes some sense…”, Jenny bowed her head “aye he isna someone ye could trust too easily, and he has shafted Mam in the past”, she gulped her coffee, placing a hand on her hip thoughtfully, “These Dunsany’s that he is bringing here…they're Big business ya ken? Own one of the largest Equestrian centres in Britain, Lord Dunsany is a personal friend of Dougal’s.” Jenny pressed her lips into a thin line and continued. “They've been buying horses from us for a while now ….but what they are here about this weekend…well, it would mean we would be the sole supplier of their stock, they're adding onto their premises in Hellwater, and building a state of the art equestrian centre, it will be used to train the best of the best”. She paused raising her eyes in exclamation. My own widened, and Jenny continued. “It would make Lallybroch into a company, probably quadruple our workers, not to mention equipment and buildings that would be needed once the deal is established…it would secure the future of our business if ya like.”

“So a lot is riding on this trip?” I stated unnecessarily.”, “Aye,” she replied simply, Jenny smiled at me, her eyes like her brother were sparkling now, and I could see pride in them, she hesitated before she spoke again, 'Jamie... well I'm no the type to lavish him with praise, but he has a talent for it, Aye?”.

Her face lit up, “he knows just the right horses to cross breed to get the best animal, and he is renowned for his handling and training.” A bolt of pride ran through me at Jenny’s words. “I dinna ken how he does it to be fair” She picked up her cloth and recommenced wiping a window ledge vigorously. “He can spot a good breeding horse a mile away, but it's not just that, Jamie will
consider what the animal will be used for and will match it with the best breed for its use. He will decide where that animal will be best trained and the equipment or method that should be used to get the best from the horse.”

Jenny leaned up against the window for a moment and stared at her cloth thoughtfully before continuing, "Jamie has always been that way with the horses, he handles them, and whispers to them, they're almost hypnotised by him" she crooked an eye at me teasingly, "Ha maybe you do ken Claire". A red flush ran up my face, I could suddenly feel the ghost of Jamie's hand running up and over my hip that morning, his mouth tight to my ear as he whispered encouraging words to bring me into oblivion. I dropped my gaze guiltily. Jenny just roared laughing, "Well then," she said pointedly.

“He has bred and trained horses that have gone onto compete at the Olympics dressage or racing, she explained grinning at me,” it’s the main reason a lot of our buyers use us.” Jenny clarified soberly, “Jamie’s reputation.”

Her face blushed slightly, and she gave me a sheepish look, “Ya can see why Da couldna lose him to Boston?”

“So it would seem” I breathed, “and that is what has Da's dander up”, she said quirking her mouth slightly, “what do you mean?” I asked puzzled. “Well, Dougal is hanging out of the Dunsany’s like he got us the deal when really Jamie did on account of what he sold them initially.”

“Oh” I played with the top of my coffee mug, “Is that what has Jamie annoyed then?” Jenny shook her head laughing, “Ach no, he is edgy cause the Dunsany’s drive him mad, but he has to hold his tongue, or he will jeopardise the whole deal.”

“Well then,” I said as I rolled up my sleeves, I better help you clean up!

It was late in the afternoon before Jamie got home; his face held the harsh tone of earlier but softened on seeing me. “ye look bonny Sassenach, with yer hair atop yer head like that.” Strong arms came around me from behind, and Jamie nestled his chin into my shoulder. “thanks”, I said while continuing to rummage in the press in front of me. “It’s my domestic hairdo,” I replied smirking and turned into his arms, “What do ye mean?”

“Oh, I helped Jenny clean out the cottage next door for our ‘visitors’, whispering visitors as sinisterly as I could to make him smile. Jamie rolled his eyes, “I dinna want ye doing that Sassenach”, “um well Jenny was, am I not part of this family too...that I can’t be put to work on the family business?”

Jamie’s face lit up, and he pressed on my lower back, so my hips bowed into him, “Yer part of my family aye,” he said smiling warmly “, and I am to be yer husband no?”

“So I hear anyway, “I said grinning foolishly at him.

“Aye well, Jamie bent to nibble against my ear, "in that case, it's my job to spoil ye and not have ye
grafting like that.” His warm lips slipped onto mine, and I breathed him in. Jamie chuckled into my mouth “Asides Sassenach, yer a surgeon, not a housekeeper”,

My eyes narrowed as a bold smirk formed on his lips, “it’s been like a bomb hit this house since ye arrived, I dinna ken why it’s next-door yer cleaning.” I pinched him full into his stomach, and he let out a large puff of breath. Pulling me to him again, pinching my sides until I was bent over wheezing, he suddenly lifted me and threw me over his shoulder, grasping my arse almost painfully. “Where are you bringing me?” I squeaked out, between screeches into his back, Jamie continued slapping my bottom and scolding me in Gaelic. “I am”, he continued while trying to manage my squirming “going to make love to my betrothed”, throwing open his bedroom door and shutting it with his foot again, he landed me unceremoniously on his bed, so I bounced slightly. I managed to look down, Jamie was crawling over me with a predatory look in his eye. “I have one hour to make ye scream afore our son comes home.”

His hand ran over himself as he tugged on his zipper, "god Claire” he huffed, "I never stop wanting ye” a bolt ran between my legs, as he roughly grabbed at the button of my jeans. I bit my bottom lip; smiling up at him "don't make me scream too loud" he bent to kiss me, and I continued talking into his mouth "remember we have the Dunsany's next door...” my words were breathy and lacked real concern. Jamie pulled away from my lips crooked one wicked eye at me, “Oh let them hear”.

First impressions, Geneva Dunsany, was far more uptight than her younger much more likeable sister, Isobel. She was currently sitting across from me cutting her food into minuscule bites, pushing it around her plate and making a face of distaste as she attempted to swallow it.

Her gaze flickered around the table until eventually, it rested on me “Claire, isn’t it? I spotted you leaving our cottage with Jenny this afternoon but didn't get a chance to say hullo or to thank you, the cottage is beautiful” she gave me a smile that didn't reach her eyes and waited for my reaction carefully. “No problem at all, Geneva isn't it?” She nodded, darting her tongue out to wet her lips before taking a small sip of wine. I, in turn, drank deeply.

When I looked up again, Geneva was peering at me over the top of her wine glass inquisitively. “How long have you worked for the Frasers?” her cheeks raised for a second as she shot me another weak smile.

“Well no, I don’t actually work for them…trying to add humour I finished lamely with "well I suppose you could call it work....”

Geneva’s brow furrowed slightly, Jamie half turned his attention from Lord Dunsany "Well,” she said biting her lip and gazing at Jamie in a way that made me feel completely uncomfortable “I would imagine the Frasers are tremendously supportive in the workplace if James is any measure”. I came to the sudden realisation that the Lady Geneva was indeed very sweet on 'James'. Looking to my right demurely, I batted my eyelashes at Jamie, who smirked at my subtle attempt to flirt “Oh tremendously” another long sip of wine.

One of Jamie’s eyes crooked at an angle, bewildered. “Tremendous at what?” he probed “Well James” Geneva purred padding her mouth genteelly with a cloth napkin, “I was just saying to Claire that I imagine your family would be wonderful to work for.”

Jamie took a long sip from his own glass, sucking in his top lip as he placed his glass down. “We
aren't too bad...I suppose?”, a flash of teeth, “why do ye ask?”
Geneva turned to me a bemused expression across her face. “I was just saying to Claire she did a
wonderful job on preparing our little cottage, she will be a great asset”. We seemed to have grabbed
the rest of the dinner party's attention, as I pined slightly conscious of several sets of eyes on me.
“An asset?” Jamie cut across, his lips pursed and hands clasped together, resting on the table as if
in prayer, engaged.

Geneva glanced around the room quickly, her cheeks flushing “well at working for Lallybroch
estates?” she clarified.
Jamie just snorted, head downwards and shaking from side to side, “She doesna work at
Lallybroch.” He said grinning, he took my hand delicately in his, rubbing over the diamond on my
ring finger, eyes soft now as they sought me out “Claire is the future Mrs Fraser.”

It was only a second, but I watched Geneva’s face crumble before she fixed a bright smile across
her lips. Hand shakily grabbing for her wine glass, it was the sympathy in Isobel's eyes watching
Geneva that made me wonder how deep her feelings ran. “Congratulations” her voice wavered
slightly.

“We are having a small little celebration tomorrow night for Claire and Jamie, and hoped ye would
be able to attend?” Ellen said smiling warmly before her sweeping glance fell on her brother and it
cooled considerably. Dougal Mc Kenzie was in some ways the complete opposite to Ellen, he
lacked her warmth, graciousness and kindness but I couldn’t argue that he didn’t share her
astuteness. Since he had arrived alongside the Dunsany’s he appeared to be presenting the Frasers
as a sacrificial offering on a plate, there was something in it for him to facilitate this visit and I
wondered if he was loyal to anyone, only himself?

Dougal pushed his chair back from the table abruptly, almost bouncing his discarded dessert spoon
across his plate. “Ellen dear sister, would ye be so kind as to bring some cognacs into the drawing
room?” the gentleman has some business to discuss.”

Ellen looked at Dougal bemusedly, almost a hint of sympathy in her tone when she said “Dougal, I
dinna ken what century ye think it is, but my husband is well fit to serve ye cognac, and if ye think
for a minute the business ye consider only involve the men occupying the house tonight, ye are
very much mistaken.”

Dougal's 6ft, 6 height did nothing to intimidate his sister and when he opened his mouth to argue
Ellen raised her hand, “I will join my husband if the matter is to do with our business” the ‘our’
said an octave higher than the rest. Ellen smiled warmly over at Brian “as always”; Brian ran his
hand over the back of his wife’s “as always” he repeated softly.

Dougal let out a huff of breath and swigged down a large gulp of whiskey, his cheeks were
naturally ruddy, it was hard to tell if the deeper flush was to do with his temper or the vast amount
of whiskey he had put away.

“Of course sister,” he said smiling sweetly. Lord Dunsany’s deep aerostatic voice cut through the
family tension. “Ellen, Brian, I will gladly discuss the matter with you of course, but its imperative
that James should attend, he is the carrot in this deal.” He clapped Jamie on the back, and all eyes
flicked to him, he didn't look at all surprised at Lord Dunsany's words but attempted a wink in my
direction and said: “Aye, I will be there.”

I squeezed Jamie’s hand “good luck, I will go ahead up to the cottage with Willie”. As I rose to
leave Geneva stood, “you know I think you are right Ellen, I would like to talk business too, after
all” she looked to her sister, “decisions taken today will affect us further down the line”, she gave
me a curt nod, and excused herself from the table.
I lay awake for some time hoping Jamie would return and tell me how it went, but I eventually was lulled to sleep.

He woke me with a gentle shake sometime before dawn, my eyes were blurry from sleep, I rubbed them quickly and ran my hand through my hair, now able to take Jamie in, he looked positively wild, his hair standing in rufts ontop his head, clothes dishevelled and his eyes bloodshot. My heart started to beat painfully against my chest.

“Sassenach,” he said in a solemn whisper, “we need to talk.”
That horrible feeling of bubbling nausea swirled relentlessly around in my tummy. Jamie's defeated face fixed on me, waiting for a reaction. Any words that were likely to come from my mouth would be so full of venom, that I dared not open it. Not to protect Jamie, it was to stop me sharing anything of my reaction.

"I wouldna leave you for anything Claire" Jamie's eyes beseeched mine, “I had no choice”.

I couldn’t look, wouldn’t let myself meet his eye.

I had inhaled his every word since he woke me an hour before. A lot of it was things I had already known from what Jenny had explained. Right up until the end, when he came to that bit I knew it was bad before he started.

Jamie seldom cried, maybe when Willie was born? I thought absently, apart from that I couldn't think of another time. Now standing on our cold cement door step, as the sun mounted the sky, he pinched his eyes to stem tears from streaming down his face, his cheeks stained with the ones that had already escaped.

I couldn't muster one ounce of sympathy for him, it scared me, complete detachment. My brain was protecting my heart allowing me just numbness for a moment or two.

It gave me the chance to look at him, really look at him as if he was another person's partner. What advice would I give my friend if she had moved herself and her son from their home thousands of miles to set up a life with someone she loved deeply, the father of her child, only to arrive and have him tell you that he actually was moving hundreds of miles away to run another business?

I would tell her to pick up whatever dignity she had left and run, run, run.

Thoughts of Willie fled through my addled brain. How would I tell him? When would we leave?

“How long?” I asked quietly.

He didn’t speak and I felt the rage boiling in me again, this time now through gritted teeth, “how fucking long Jamie?”

He sniffed and cleared his throat, "two years as long as it takes to finish it.”

“And how long until you go?”
"Claire” he whispered imploringly.
"I need to prepare Willie,” I said briskly, ignoring his plea.
“Two months.”
A nod and I was on my feet, brushing myself down."Ok”
“What are ye going?”
“I am not sure,” I said distractedly looking out at the vast amount of hills and fields I could wander through.

Jamie rose to grab me back. “Alone Jamie, leave me alone.”

four hours later and bleak clouds hovering over me, I found myself at the stables, watching Brian brush down a great big stallion.

He swung around when he heard me approach.
"Just me” I said meekly, wrapping my arms around my waist, suddenly feeling the cold.

Brian's startled expression softened instantly and he looked at me with utter sympathy. Tears filled my eyes abruptly. "Thank god, are ye alright?”

A nod, while I stunk my teeth into my bottom lip.

“He has been out looking for ye twice lass, his temper is frayed enough, I thought he might kill someone if ye dinna return to him soon.

I snorted, but the downturn in my lips made it appear more of a sneer, "when I do go, I won't be leaving on foot”, my tone was biting, and I regretted at once using it on Brian but the regret quickly waned when I pictured them all knowing, they knew before me and did nothing. Fuck them all.

Brian's face creased in pity, I couldn't bare it. I turned to leave again not sure of where I would go.
"Claire I ken ye are hurting …”

My voice was brisk now "Brian if its all the same to you...I don't want to..."

His hand was firm yet gentle on my shoulder as he turned me, "ye have every right' he said softly.
Jamie feared it most of all that it would hurt ye, lassie, ye were his only care, I can promise ye that."

A dense lump climbed up my throat, painfully reminding me that if I spoke it would unleash a sob instead of words. I placed the flat palm of my hand to my forehead but it was too late, tears were coming again. It was as if my eyes were so practiced at it they couldn't stop. I tried breathing in and out deeply, in the hope of bringing back some calmness. Suddenly I could feel Brian's arms folding me into him, holding me to his chest. "Ach Claire...dinna weep a leannan."

That was all it took before big rasping sobs escaped my chest and vibrated against Brian's.

He held me for some time before he gently guided me over to a hay bale and beckoned me to sit, handing me a tissue.

"Claire I dinna ken how much the lad told ye, and I dinna want to make things worse, but I hate to see the two of ye hurting...and I ken Jamie is too”

He looked down at his hands shamefully, "he might even feel worse because it's his fault", sighing deeply, trying to summon up words that could make things a whole lot worse or in the vien hope it
might ease some of the pain. "having my own hands soiled in this sorry affair brings me nothing but shame too." he said quietly.

I put my hand over Brian's hand, "It's not your fault" I whispered.

He shook his head avidly, "I should have checked the contract with him, he was under such pressure...I shouldha kent."

I couldn't follow the jumble of words falling from his mouth.

I turned to him now, my brows creased "From the beginning" I said firmly.

A long intake of breath, Brian rubbed his hands nervously up and down his thighs, after tapping his fingers lightly against his thigh for a moment or two, he began to speak slow halting words, "Jamie was trying to secure a deal” hands upturned now in demonstration…he dinna say it but I kent he wanted it for our pensions", another nod and he swallowed "mine and Ellens".

"Since my accident, the lad has been very firm in that he wanted me to retire properly, have a life outside of here, ya ken?"

I bobbed my head receptively, suddenly needing someone to fill in the gaps that I wouldn’t allow myself to ask Jamie. A red mist had blocked any further need for information.

"When the Dunsany's offered him the contract to buy exclusively from Lallybroch...well we thought it too good to be true", "I shouldha fucking known that spineless bastard Dougal could only bring harm on us" he hissed, throwing a piece of straw he had been playing with forcibly to the ground, standing abruptly he began pacing over and back in front of me, temper subdued enough so he could continue. "Jamie saw it as a way to secure Lallybroch's future and allow Ellen and me a healthy pension to retire on.

They offered us a large amount of money to secure the right to exclusively buy any stock that was bred and raised here at Lallybroch. If there was stock, they had a need of, and we dinna have it here, the contract included provisions for Jamie to buy on their behalf, train the animal and sell it on to the Dunsany's."

Another slight tilt of my head acknowledging my understanding.

Brian ran his hands along the edge of a stable door, pausing over grooves with his long fingers considering. "They drew up the contracts a few months ago, but Jamie held off on signing…it was something he was thinking on. Then the stud got that virus, the poor lad was day and night with them, trying to keep the infection at bay. He missed yer birthday on the head of it."

"I remember," I said hoarsely.

“He returned from his last trip to Boston, and he had decided he would sign”.

Brian looked imploringly at me now.

"We were still reeling from nearly losing all our livestock if it hadna been for Jamie’s quick thinking..." he trailed off, and smiled meekily at me “for the first time we realised just how vulnerable we were…” He tilted his head shyly ", and I know now that Jamie had asked ye to marry him on that trip…so the lad had his plans too."

My heart fluttered in my chest, and fresh tears slid down my cheeks. So much hope and now it was snuffed out. Thinking of the stress, Jamie must have been under yet he flew to me in Boston
proposing during it all. My thoughts must have been apparent on my face because Brian's face softened "it puts things in perspective lass, Jamie was fair desperate to see ye."

I wiped a stray tear from my face. "That is when Jamie signed the contract," he said sorrowfully, "When he came back from Boston" Brian pressed his bottom lip into his mouth and shook his head dejectedly.

"There was no reason to think the worst of them...it all seemed above board".
"This trip was just to iron out the specifics, work out what stock they would need over the coming months, talk to them about what Mares were in foal, breeds, that kind of thing," Brian ruffled the thick black hair on top of his head, and it struck me how not only alike Jamie was to him but Willie too, absently thinking the Frasers had strong genes. "Then last night they turned around and said they wanted Jamie to oversee this big expansion at Hellwater!"

My mind suddenly was in the drawing room watching this nightmare unfold, and I idiotically could see Geneva Dunsany, leering gleefully in a corner because she knew all along they had this trick up their sleeve.

Brian's foot started tapping agitatedly, "Jamie refused outright…said there was no way, and then they drew their sword." He finished bleakly.
My heart started hammering fast in my chest, I hadn't let Jamie explain earlier, he had looked at me, eyes empty and said "they have the power to shut us down if I dinna go Claire", I hadn't cared then what justifications he thought he had.

To up and leave after I had given everything up to come to be with him. He had never been able to leave before when I needed him.

I didn't want to hear it from Jamie, but now in the cold light of day and Brian's sad face before me, I had to learn the full truth whether I wanted to or not.

"There were small clauses built into the contract Jamie signed; what he thought were insignificant details, they are using them against us Claire."
I opened my mouth to ask, had he not sought legal advice? could we fight these contracts? The resignation of Brian's face somehow told me there was little hope for any of that.

Brian sat down beside me again, putting his big hand over mine, “He has a huge talent, clever man when it comes to farming, horses, even business..but Jamie has a kind heart…he never wouldha thought that people would be capable of being so underhand.”

"What are the clauses?" my voice sounded cold, I didn't mean it. I was trying to protect myself from something, and I wasn't even sure what.
“The Dunsany’s have exclusive rights to buy our stock, and they may take up to 180 days to decide if they want them and are entitled to the first refusal." They made it clear that if Jamie decided not to go to Hellwater, they would apply that right on every horse they look at. Even though last night they told us it would be their intention not to buy any. It means we wouldna be legally allowed to pursue another sale…for some time."

Brian's head bent slowly, and he appeared for the first time as if he might breakdown himself. "the second clause is we canna sell within 200 miles of Hellwater Claire. They effectively can make it so we willna be able to sell our stock to anyone that could offer us a competitive price and by the
time ye take in the delay they can impose on such a sale…well ye may as well close us down now.”
Brian’s head dropped and he clasped his hands together “I ken ye are angry with him and it willna help him for me to say this to ye but Ellen and I dinna want him to give into them…”
He sat up straight now, pride in his voice when he spoke again “Jamie isna an ordinary man, he was born to lead, and he saw hundreds of years of work by our kin about to be robbed by those bastards, and I knew we could argue all night, it wouldna mattered, he will sacrifice himself to help us.”
I said nothing, the stillness in the stables, grew thick.

Brian’s choked voice broke the silence, "It kills me, my son has to do this Claire…I would do anything so he mightn't have to but he willna leave us without a home or business, and we canna persuade him otherwise."

I wiped the dust from my thighs and stood up.

"I am so sorry a Leannan" he said quietly.

I squeezed Brian's shoulder as he stood, pulling me to him and embracing me without another word. "We will be yer home still?" his face searching mine. I realised that they had just got used to the idea of Willie living here.
"I don’t know…Jamie doesn't even know how often he is likely to be able to get home…and I would never go to him there…not now especially." I replied flatly.

It was only then I heard rustling behind me that I realised Jamie stood watching me with hollow eyes, taking in the sight of my red and tear-streaked face and his father's arms around my shoulders comforting me, something I hadn't allowed him to do.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

A little nsfw below. Please keep the comments coming, they fuel the fire.

Brian patted my hand, a tight smile swept across his face. “There ye are Jamie lad, I was just about to tell ye that I found Claire!” his tone overly light, nervous almost. Jamie nodded, arms folded defensively keeping his eyes locked on me. “Aye,” he said plainly.

Brian sensing the tension, made one final attempt at smoothing the waters, “Son I have told Claire that this is not our wish for ye, I ken that might not help yer explanations but…I”

Before Brian could finish his sentence, Jamie’s face grew grim. “This is bullshit” he snarled, “I am damned if I do and damned if I don’t”, pointing one finger at his father “you absolving yourself of my decisions isna going to make things any better, so dinna bother trying that judicious bullshit with me!” he spat.

Brian visibly flinched at his words, but he walked towards Jamie calmly, eyes full of sympathy. “I am sorry son. I ken this is very difficult on ye.”

Before we could speak another word, Willie came bounding energetically into the stables, and we all made a conscious effort to take a step back.

“Ma” Willie shouted excitedly “Me and Da have been looking for ye all morning!”, he jumped up into my arms “Where have ye been?” his brows creased together questioningly. “Oh well” I replied, infusing a brightness in my tone that I didn’t feel, “I have been out walking and helping Grandda.”

Willie nodded acceptingly. “How many friends can I invite to the wedding?” he blurted out, his mind running onto his next plan. “The what?” I asked my addled brain failing to follow Willie’s quick turnaround.

“yer and Da’s wedding,” Willie explained rolling his eyes. “I wanna invite my new friends from School.”

Jamie stepped forward, taking Willie from my arms. “As many as ye like son”, ignoring my half opened mouth he smiled reassuringly at Willie.

Brian cleared his throat and started shuffling towards the stable door. “Come with me a bhalach” Brian beckoned; Willie duly leapt from Jamie’s arms to follow his grandfather.

“Don’t do that” I hissed as soon as Willie was out of earshot.

“Claire,” Jamie said ignoring my temper. “Will ya let me explain” his hands outstretched pleadingly.

“your father has explained it all” I said and stormed off.

If my dress had sleeves, they would be wrung within my fingers nervously. “Fuck”, I muttered to
myself "I am too soft that's my problem".

The three swift brandies I had downed before arriving had numbed my yapping stomach but done nothing to quench the anxiety roaring around my body.
I had no one to blame for my attendance at this farce but myself, given that my first thought this morning was to board a plane to Boston. My resolve had weakened under Jenny's pleading words.

"Ya ken mam willna ask it of ye, but she has invited everybody and their mother to this party, if ye dinna show with Jamie, she will would be shamed", seeing my expression she held her hand up haltingly, "I ken right now yer not too concerned of shaming Jamie, but I know ye willna shame mam."

My answer was quick and wounding "I will do it for Ellen." I said sharply, stamping out the flash of hope that flickered across Jamie’s face.

Jamie's soft knock on the bedroom door came sometime later, "Are ye ready Sassenach?" his anger from earlier had dissipated somewhat, and instead his eyes held a sadness, the sight was like an invisible hand churning my gut. Part of me longed to pull him to me, missing the solid feel of him but I was still too sore to bridge the gap.

To occupy my mind and avoid Jamie, I had spent more than the average amount of time readying myself for a party. If I dressed as if going to battle, it might conjure up bravery I didn't own, and to hide the utter devastation that I felt inside. I would be damned if the Dunsany's would know what they cost me.

Jamie's face when I opened the door, fortified me with just enough courage to face them. "Ye are stunning," he said simply.

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"I dinna want the Dunsany's in my home either" Ellen whispered as we entered through the kitchen door, "but they will be gone tomorrow, and for now we will hold our heads high, aye?"
I heard her message and greeted each guest as warmly as I could.

Yielding to Jamie's warm hand on the small of my back, just as much an act of compromise as need.

The Fraser's neighbours and friends eyed me with a mixture of curiosity and something like compassion. I was a stranger, the Sassenach pet name Jamie called me was somewhat different on their tongues.

To most of them, Jamie's engagement came entirely out of the blue, and they weren't even aware that we were dating, which technically we weren't.

The flow of congratulations, followed with "sure it will be lovely for Willie" spoke volumes. Our engagement perceived as a necessity, an arrangement almost. Just a girl Jamie had got pregnant, and now he was doing the decent thing by marrying her.
Everything coloured by the move to Hellwater, I couldn't see our story anymore. Focusing only on the bare facts of mine and Jamie's history, I saw myself from their eyes. A mistake.

Panic and humiliation were fighting each other for dominance in my mind.

My status as an obligation was driven home when I heard an elderly neighbour of the Fraser's bend to Jamie's ear. His ruddy cheeks wobbling in merriment "Ye got caught son" he said nudging Jamie playfully in the ribs, "happens to the best of us...our Ann was six months gone when I married her, ye did well to escape the ould ball and chain for four years."

Jamie's head snapped instantly to me first and then he lent to the man again, muttering something between gritted teeth and stormed away leaving me alone with strangers.

Hours seemed to pass since I lost Jamie's presence by my side. I listened to stories I had no part in or knowledge of. I was ignoring the stares and curious looks and raging silently with him for leaving me.

I pressed my lips together to try and still the scream that threatened to fall from my mouth.

"Claire?" Jenny's concerned face was peering at me.

I moved across the room, away from her searching for an exit I bumped straight into Jamie. Geneva Dunsany trailing behind him, "where are ye going?"

He was leaning over me, not helping the circulation of air I so desperately needed. “It doesn't matter, I can’t do this”, I swallowed hard and took a deep breath, I glanced over his shoulder at Geneva and Jamie followed my stare, he turned back to me quickly to say something but before he had uttered a word a cold hand reached for my forearm.

Geneva Dunsany's concerned eyes watching me "Claire are you ok? You've gone a terrible shade."

"Fine," I said smiling tightly.

Her blue eyes gazed at me sympathetically this coinciding with Jamie's equally concerned expression made me want to slap something, was he with her when he left me alone? "Look I am sure none of this is easy," she said mildly, "newly engaged and about to be separated."

Jamie moved a step closer to me as if anticipating my propensity to turn violent. "I just want you to know that we will take excellent care of him" she smiled sweetly. "I dinna need your family's care Geneva, I am there under coercion. let us be clear, aye?."

Suddenly it was too much, Geneva's wounded face, Jamie's defensive words. They were all involved in this mess, and I no longer wanted to be.

Bolting for the nearest door, I breathed apologies while squeezing myself between guests as I left.

It was an hour later when Jamie snuck into the stables behind me. "I thought ye went home," he said quietly, tentatively edging closer to me as if approaching a spooked horse.
"Home?" I snorted sarcastically "and where would that be?"

Jamie took a moment to consider "I would like to say yer home is with me, but I dinna think ye see it that way anymore?"

I was at a loss for how to answer him. "Do you have any idea how it felt in that room? I have never felt so alone... so... " searching for a word to sum up how I felt, "so far from home" I finished, hoping that he couldn't hear the break in my voice.

When his hand snuck around to pull me close, I shrank from his touch.

"I am so sorry Claire" he held on firmly, ignoring the attempt to sever myself from him.

"Sorry?" I asked disbelievingly "sorry doesn't come close, Jamie."

His face fell, and his hand rose to cup my cheek. His eyes brimmed with tears, and I could see the exhaustion weighing down his shoulders.

I fixed my eyes on a vacant point on the floor, biting my bottom lip, it hurt to look at him.

"Do ye think it is easy for me Claire? It's like ripping my heart out and living without it" his voice falling to a whisper at the final word. Swallowing hard and blinking rapidly, he moved towards me.

“Do ye not think I am fucking broken at the thoughts of leaving ye?" he persisted.
My mouth curled up in a sneer, "and here you are still only thinking of how this affects you, Jesus Jamie" I snapped.

His hands reached out and held me firm by my forearms. There was no sound but a ragged drawing of breath. He stood staring at me, eyes searching up and down my face.

"What would you have me do? Let them leave my parents without a home, a business? Throw away everything they have worked for?"

"What I would have had you do is not put all that at jeopardy without getting fucking advice first" I spat.
Something flickered in his eyes before he roared "fuck" and kicked an upturned bucket halfway across the stable. Running his hand through his hair he turned from me, his head thrown back.

I wasn't done.

"No matter how I look at it, I can't get past that we are not your priority, we weren't your priority when Willie was born, and we aren't your priority now," I said flatly.

“Claire” Jamie breathed, “That couldn'a be further from the truth” he shook his head incredulously.

"This is pointless" I retorted rolling my eyes, "you can't even see what your actions mean Jamie?"
His bewildered glare told me he didn't have a clue.

"Look," I said feigning reason. "Our circumstances have changed. It's like you proposed a lifetime ago. I am not naive enough to think that Willie and I may have seen like an obligation."

Jamie's eyes widened, and he put his hands up haltingly, moving in small steps to stand in front of me.

"Obligation?" he asked incredulously. I didn't answer, the whispers and swirls of gossip still circulating in my mind from the party.

"Claire" he breathed, one side of his mouth turning up in a smile. "When I asked ye to marry me, I meant every word, it doesna matter what happens around us Sassenach, what it is between us doesna change."

His imploring eyes and soft intake of breath made me want to fall into his arms, but Jamie's reluctance to admit the enormous problem our future faced grated on me.

"Oh ok, so when do you think we should get married then? Where do you think we should live? When he opened his mouth and failed to say something. My lips curled up into a sly smile. "The truth is, the day you agreed to move to Hellwater, you ended any future you and I could have."

Jamie's mouth dropped open, but something close to recognition passed over his face.

I raised my hand halting the start of his protests, and my voice trembled slightly when I said "it's not just because we will be separated, your actions speak volumes, Jamie. I gave up everything to come to you, and yet again, Willie and I are down the pegging order."

His eyes flashed angrily, and he loomed over me "Do – ye – not – think – I – regret –it" he said through gritted teeth.

"I don't fucking know; maybe it is what you want? Running the show at Hellwater, everyone thinking you're some sort of fucking demigod come horse whisperer, maybe you get your kicks out of that, hmm?"

Jamie's eyes went as wide as stalks, his hands bunching into fists at his sides before he sent one pounding against the wooden frame behind me. I was reasonably sure I had never witnessed Jamie so furious. I revelled in it, matching his glare with gusto.

“Are ye crazy?” he asked incredulously. Part of my brain was begging me to stop this before Jamie’s head blew clean of his shoulders, the other half wanted me to provoke him until he said something he couldn’t take back and I would have justification for my loathing.

Jamie grabbed the top of the gate of the horse stall directly behind me, my eyes followed his hand,
and I could see the whites of his knuckles as he gripped it. He was boxing me in, leaning over me to demonstrate his power, it irked me considerably.

I cleared my throat and gave him a smile that didn't quite meet my eyes. My voice was like honey now.

"Look you'll be fine I am sure...those Dunsany sisters will be certain to make you feel welcome, I think one of them might even want to fuck you too...so your bed will be warm", the cold gaze that I gave him under my lashes was the perfect accompaniment to the utter filth I was suddenly capable of spouting.

Jamie grabbed me roughly "What the hell has gotten into ye?" he growled. "Oh come on" I persisted. "You're pretending it’s a death sentence...when I am sure the Lady Geneva will make it an altogether more enjoyable affair", my disused British accent now slanted, mocking.

A rumble came from Jamie’s chest that I knew was going to exit his mouth as a roar.

“Ye think I want to fuck somebody else, is that it Claire, ye think I want to leave you and Willie so I can fuck Geneva Dunsany?”

I turned my face away, staring at nothing on the wall. "Answer me!!" Jamie roared.

Turning completely, back to his face I breathing deeply trying to calm myself.

Jamie's warm breath came fast against my ear. A spiteful tone to his words.

“Well more fool me because you are the only woman I want to fuck even when yer out of your mind!”

He pulled me back against him, his fingers pressing into my hips until my bottom met his cock. Hard, aching.

"Can ye feel that" he hissed against my neck.

"Even - now," he said haltingly. "I want ye when ye canna even look at me."

He was rousing something in me that I wasn't sure what to do with.

Heat spread through every inch of me at his touch.

Another breath.

"I only want you" he whispered.

I craved him, anger be damned, intense pleasure clawed up my spine and I rotated my hips against him. Teasing.

"Can ye no look at me then?" teeth snaking into my neck, his chin heavy on my shoulder.

"No," I said hoarsely "I can't".
"Do ye want me?"

"Jamie" I pleaded. "This won't help" My body sending a different message as I slipped my hand back and ran it over his arousal, which earned me an eager groan and a breathy "fuck".

Slow and steady Jamie's hand crept up the hem of my dress, sure fingers gliding up my thigh until he reached between my legs and felt the wetness there. "Ye do want me," he said while biting and licking the soft skin below my ear.

Jamie's hand journeyed down my arm and he entwined our fingers where my hand rested above the gate. One knee shoving my legs apart he continued to move his fingers inside of me, teasing the wetness there. I could barely breathe around the need.

Moaning loudly I thrust my bottom against him, and Jamie drew in a sharp breath.

I wasn't aware of one other coherent thought, but the sound of the metal clang of his belt buckle hitting the floor as he dropped his pants, and his fist driving himself inside of me. Losing all heed for where we were or who might see.

Over and over we punished each other every time Jamie thrust into me, I pushed back.

Frantic breaths and screams were barely audible over the pelting wind and rain outside. Furious coiling, in my belly, when Jamie slid his hand down to our joining I bowed over at the waist, his soft cries of "Jesus Sassenach" as he stilled and came inside, was just low enough that I wouldn't hear his voice break.

He slumped over me and grasped me to him. We stood like that not moving and buried deep until Jamie's voice came back against my ear, he pressed a wet cheek against my neck.

"Are ye going to leave me, Claire?"
Acceptance

Reverently Jamie put us back together. His hands lingering on my hips and stomach a moment longer than necessary. Picking up his coat from the floor, he wrapped me in, arms reaching around my back he held me to him for a time, burrowing his head into my hair. He pulled back slowly to meet my eye. Reticence had replaced the madness which caused our frantic joining. Reaching down between us he grasped my hands and brought them up to rest above his heart, an anxious moment where we both went to speak, and I nodded my head to indicate he should go first.

“I’m sorry Claire” he started haltingly “I have never taken ye like that before” he bowed his head, focusing on the ground, “– in anger” he finished quietly.

“Hey” I tilted his head up to look at me, “I was angry too, remember?” Jamie’s concerned eyes searched mine, and I squeezed his hands once before letting go.

“Jamie –”, my voice was deceptively low and calm.

“There are some things I need to say to you” I continued slowly.

Jamie nodded grimly and backed up against a workbench letting it take the weight of his legs, his head poised ready to listen. A beautiful auburn curl dangled on his forehead, freed by our earlier excursions. I took in his dishevelled thoroughly fucked state, and my stomach tightened, and a weird sense of pride ran through me, as I remembered his groans in my ear, that I pulled from his mouth. Pull yourself together Beauchamp!

“Do you remember when I came for Jenny’s wedding, the first night I arrived?” his eyes narrowed in concentration and he nodded. “You got annoyed with your father and told me that you didn’t want people to know that Willie was the result of a one night stand?”

“Aye”, his brows furrowed curiously.

“You wanted Willie to grow up to think he came from love?” I continued.

The Adam’s apple below Jamie’s strong chin moved up and down with effort, and he cleared his throat before omitting a raspy “only because I knew he did” Jamie replied earnestly.

“Yes but I can understand now why it hurt you for people to think he didn’t.”

A sudden surge of loneliness ran through me remembering that night. I had gone to bed thinking Jamie was ashamed of what had happened between us.

“Up there – at that party I have never felt more like the weight of a dalliance that went too far, the outcome burdening you with a child.” The words came with difficulty and had an instantaneous effect on Jamie, who rose, unfolding and outstretching his arms to me. “Claire –“. My hand waved him away. “Let me finish,” I said firmly.

“And not only did I feel that way, but I was also left alone by you to work my way through it.”

“I can explain” he held his hands up in surrender, ”I dinna mean to leave ye or to be gone for so long, there was something I had to see about.” He blurted the sentence in one breath.
I crooked one eye at him, “Have you any idea how hard it was for me to go tonight – knowing that this whole engagement is not even a certainty given what you told me this morning?”

A mocking smile curled my lips. Something like recognition passed over Jamie’s face, taking a moment I glared at him, challenging him to disagree.

“Christ Claire I can see now…I shouldha thought”, I could hear him trying to keep the air of desperation out of his voice, but he was moving nervously, trying to meet my eye. “Its to do with the Dunsany’s I dinna want to tell ye in case…”

“Stop,” I said firmly, pointing a finger straight at him, “I have heard enough about the fucking Dunsany’s, you just listen now.” My tone brokered no argument and Jamie rucked a hand through his hair and exhaled dejectedly.

“It has been so hard since I arrived, giving up my life, career, friends – I never really had a home until I had Willie, always moving about with Uncle Lamb, but when Willie came along, I built it with him in Boston.” A pause “on my own” I said each word clearly and pointedly.

“Claire –“Jamie interrupted again, which caused me to hiss “will you just fucking listen first, then you can talk.”

Another breath to still myself, “but it was ok because no matter how hard it was, I came for you and that was enough”. Jamie rucked a hand over his jaw. I could see the quiver that ran through his body in anticipation of what I was leading to, how I felt he had failed me.

“A man joked about you getting ‘caught’” at that party I curled my fingers into air quotes at the word “– you walked away and left me, by your actions alone you confirmed what people already think.” I spat angrily.

He closed his eyes, breathing heavily. “An obligation,” I said clearly, but once the word had left my lips, the lump in my throat melted into hot angry tears and I wiped them away furiously.

Jamie’s eyes snapped open, “Jesus Claire-ye are no an - “seeing the tears streaming down my cheeks he reached for me, his own face broken, “god Claire” he said in one even exhale of breath “ye are the furthest thing from an obligation.”

I put one hand up to stop him, “just listen”, I said sighing “I listened to every single word you spoke last night.”

The rain was pelting against the flat room of the stables, and I vaguely wondered if people would notice us gone but decided I didn’t care.

“You came to Boston and proposed, and I got wrapped up in the dream, moving here, expecting you to fit your life around me, and not considering what our lives would look like here in Scotland.”

I threw my hands up to heaven and laughed “God saying it out loud, I should have known.” My tone was bitter now and I consciously altered it when I spoke again. I tilted my head confidently, my mind decided in what I had to say.

“Jamie, you signed a contract as a single man even though I wore your ring on my finger?” He put his head in his hands, capturing the need to blurt something his reasons by biting down on his lip.

My heart hurt at the sight of him, he was expecting me to chastise him on not getting legal advice
but it wasn’t even that, he still would have made the decision independently of me.

“It’s completely unfair what they are doing, that goes without saying, and I am angry on your behalf that they are taking advantage of your honesty.” He looked slightly taken aback at my reasonability.

“Willie wouldha had more sense”, he hissed under his breath. Something tore beneath my rib cage hearing him slate himself, while I was already doing a good enough job.

“I know at the core of it, your reasons were to protect your home and your parents, you made a rash decision, and you’re paying for it now. Jamie stepped forward suddenly, eyes pleading.

“I did it for us too, Claire”, it was for our future”.

“For our future?” I shook my head incredulously “without discussing it with the person whose future is entwined with yours?” He faltered now, stopping in his tracks before he reached for me.

“Jamie -”, I sighed resignedly, placing the palm of my hand to my forehead, exhaustion and wretchedness seeping through my bones. I needed to make him see this was not about the contract, it was us, supposed partners.

“I am terrified of what ye are about to say to me, Claire?” His voice was husky with emotion, I fidgeted nervously with my fingers, and pledged myself to continue.

“Neither of us expected what happened when I came the last time, it was sudden and passionate and I wouldn’t change a minute of it.”

Claire…” he whispered while closing his eyes, he knew where I was headed.

“When I asked ye to marry me, I meant every word.” His words were choked, halting.

Reaching his arms out in front of me, he beckoned me to him. I went, loving Jamie was not going to change but living my life with him was. My heart beat painfully beneath my ribcage.

I struggled for a minute to form words, and Jamie took the opportunity.

“Claire I will not let this go without a fight, I will not give up what we have, I don’t know how yet, but I will find a way, I am asking a lot, but I am begging ye not to give up on me just yet.”

His eyes beseeched mine, the last thing I wanted was to give him up, he was mine, but I wouldn’t spend my life waiting for him to sort out this deal, nor could I pretend that none of this would have happened if we were truly ready to marry.

“I didn’t act like a wife or partner, when I moved Willie and I over here without even telling you,” I said honestly. “We could spend the rest of our lives trying to change each other.”

“We will learn – Claire..please -I may be able to get out of the contract.” His voice was full of desperate hope.

“Jamie no matter how angry I am, you know I wouldn’t want you or your parents to lose their business, I couldn’t have that on my conscience.”

His long eyelashes swept down his cheeks as he took a moment to think.

“I am afraid to promise ye things I might not be able to fix, but I would lie or do far worse to keep
ye. I have thought a lot today about just giving it all up, as selfish as that may sound” His voice broke on the last word, and I found myself making a shushing noise to soothe him. “I would do that Claire if it meant I dinna lose you or Willie” he swallowed hard. “I dinna ken what kind of a man that makes me, that I would risk my parents future either, but I would.”

“I wouldn’t be able to cope knowing I had done that to Ellen and Brian, nor would you if it came to it.” I ran a hand over his face, “you are a good man, its why I love you.” my voice breaking with each word.

Jamie’s head shook over and back in disagreement but I kept talking, for his sake, I had to make him see that there were too many things stacked against us, not only Hellwater.

“I walked and walked this morning trying to work out what was hurting me most, and in the end, I knew”, I failed to control my shaky breath, and I bit my bottom lip to stop it trembling.

“You aren’t ready to be a husband Jamie, tonight alone showed me that…there is too much of a bridge between us.”

His eyes were frantic now searching, “Claire I am…I”

I stood firm now, a determined face, stop drawing it out, Claire.

“Jamie, please tell me if the roles reversed here, you wouldn’t be in the slightest bit doubtful at my commitment to you?” steel in my tone, shoulders straight I glowered up at him.

Something resonated behind his eyes, suddenly he took me firmly by both arms, and he returned my look of determination. “Claire I can see how all this might look”, he waved his arms around him vaguely, releasing me for a moment before grasping me again.

“There is nothing I want more than to be your husband Jamie; I want a partner Jamie; I want a team, a family”, look at your parents! Brian would never have signed that contract without Ellen beside him.”

Jamie looked at me now shamefully, “Claire I am so sorry, I can see how I have failed ye, but ye must believe me you and Willie are my world.”

I lowered my head and shook it slightly, Jamie slipped a finger under my chin gently, forcing me to look up at him. His eyes softened, and his voice was filled with such honesty that I wouldn’t have been capable of looking away when he spoke.

“Do ye remember” he began softly “when ye came for the wedding, and we slept outdoors with Willie. I nodded, not able to answer him coherently.

“Ye put yer small hand in mine” he smiled wistfully, and ran his hand down my arm, placing our two palms face to face, a small hand mirroring a larger one.

“I thought my heart would burst with happiness that night because I kent then ye dinna hate me.”
“Jamie –I” my voice cracked.

He put a finger to my lips, “and when ye let me kiss you, in Inverness?” I couldn’t help my lips curl up at the memory, but a tear escaped down my cheek remembering the burst of complete happiness I had felt that night.

“It took all my strength to get my shaking legs down to the bar, Ian thought I’d taken drugs or something, I couldn’t stop smiling.”

Jamie’s lips turned up into a wide grin, and his own eyes glistened with tears. He brushed a lone curl behind my ear, “and then mo ghraidh” Jamie’s head tilted to the side slowly, drinking me in. “Ye let me take ye to bed, and I am fairly certain my heart stopped there with you.” He whispered “because I have never gone to bed with a woman and been made to feel the things you made me feel that night”, a blush ran from my neck colouring my cheeks. “I love you so much Claire, and I want to be your husband, I have wanted you to be my wife for a vera long time, even at a time when I couldn’t say ye were mine.” Jamie’s fingers trailed a path from my eyes down along my cheeks to cup my chin and turn my face to him. “ye are right, I dinna act like a husband, but don’t ever believe that it was because I dinna want ye” he said finally.

I bowed my head, and he caught the tears that fell from my cheeks with the side of his fingers.

“Jamie, I love you, but I have to go back to Boston, my home isn’t here without you.”

“yer home is with me and mine is with you, I can’t lose ye Claire” Tilting his head to the side so he could look up at me.

“Jamie, stop,” I said quietly, “you don’t know what the future holds with all this, and we need to think of Willie too, he will be broken when you go to Hellwater, at least back in Boston he has his old school, friends, things he is used to.

He nodded slowly, “I don’t want them near our son,” he said haltingly, an embarrassed flush ran up his cheeks, and he licked his lips nervously. “But I thought that maybe ye could stay here until I could manage to see what can be done about this?”

A sudden flash of anger strengthened my resolve, I drew away from him. “So you expect me to wait here patiently while you try and dig yourself out of this whole?” I asked incredulously.

“No…well…I mean…it may not take much” he stammered out.

“Jesus Jamie you are unbelievable, I have left my job, my home and now you want me to live here while you move to Hellwater, in the vague hope that you might” I staggered my voice exaggeratedly “you just might get out of it?”

“I ken that might seem unreasonable, but if you are here, it gives me hope…I canna lose ye.

I breathed heavily through my nose, “I will stay with Willie, to give you time with him before you go but I am going back to Boston.” I said with finality.

“Ye are saying you dinna want to marry me then?” he asked hotly, his eyes narrowed.

“Jamie,” I said through gritted teeth. My patience was waning considerably “Of course I want to marry you! I fucking love you!

I breathed in and out controlling my temper “ But can you tell me what kind of a future we would have? You in Hellwater, me here – not even
sure of how often you will be able to come home?” Maybe if we had years together, we might be strong enough, we haven't been able to live under the same roof for longer than a month, and you’re leaving again!!

He bowed his head shamefully I thought he wasn’t going to reply until I heard a hair-splitting roar come from him and an overlying bucket went flying through the ground as he growled the word “FUCK.”

He knew.
I knew I had to tell Willie but sitting across from him now, with my heart in my stomach I wondered how I had managed to spectacularly fuck up the one thing that should have come naturally to me, being a Da.

His big blue eyes took me in for a minute, and I could see the springs in his mind turning over digesting the news, he rested his elbows on the table and with one eyebrow cocked he asked what was foremost in his world.

“What about me riding the bigger horse?” My brows creased in confusion. He sighed impatiently, and shuffled off the kitchen seat standing behind it. He was ready to baulk.

“Ye said” an accusing little finger pointed at my chest, "that you would teach me to ride Donas now that I was living with ye”, his pink lips forming into a pout. As I faltered to answer him quickly enough, Willie sighed moving his blue gaze up to the ceiling for a few silent moments. He looked far older than his years. Just for a second, I could see my father in him, patience waning.

I couldn’t look away as my mind raced to wait for the shoe to drop and Willie to realise there was more to be lost than a bigger horse. Claire’s eyes ran from me to our son, as she tried to decipher the silent language running between us.

“Da has a couple of weeks before he needs to go”, she added helpfully “perhaps he can help you ride Donas before he goes.”

Willie’s expression changed, and he looked at Claire as if she was mad.

He was my mirror image; from the furious set of his jaw to the painfully looking red glare beginning to climb up his cheeks. “Ye said mama was YOUR special person “, he continued, gander rising with each word, horse forgotten. “Ye said ye would get married” his little hands folded into fists and he held them down by his sides, I knew without looking that the skin on his palms would have the indentation of his nails, the same way mine did when I was a child.
“Willie”, I bent to him, tried to look him in the eye, his nostrils flared with the effort of his breathing, and I felt a weird sense of pride when I realised he was just as hurt for Claire, that and he very much wanted to thump me.

“You and your mama are the most important things to me, I intend on making this right, but I may have to go for a while...” I rested my thumb and forefinger on his cheek, and he turned to the side, evading my pleading gaze. My hand hovered for a minute before I laid it down on my knee. “I love ye Willie; I wouldna leave ye for anything I hope you believe me.”

He stared at a spot on the wall, bottom lip trembling, utterly betrayed. Turning suddenly his eyes narrowed into slits, “ye said I might get a brother, me and Mama couldha stayed in Boston with my friends, and I shouldha just got a brother there!”, Stamping his foot off the ground. Willie was just four. He wanted a brother, someone who loved his mother (properly) and to ride a big horse. I had failed miserably at all of them.

“Willie, I want to give ye a brother, ten of them”, I said pleadingly, all too aware of Claire’s cautious eye. She warned me to be as honest as I could, not to give him false hope. To me this was the truth, I did want more bairns with her, but I didn't think Claire saw a future like that for us anymore. The ache in my chest at the thoughts of her having someone else as the father of her future children. At my son's feet begging him to trust me.

Willie shook his head in disbelief, a lock of auburn hair bouncing across his forehead with the effort. He swiped the back of his arm across his head, pushing the hair out of his face. Everyone said Willie favoured me. I regularly saw my reflection in his face. But sometimes he did something that was so entirely Claire it stole my breath.

A living person that reminded me, Claire and I had been real. I always sought her in him, wanting to see her mark on the person we made.

“YE LIED” his voice still held a tone of an infant, that soft centre, when risen, came out as a scream. I tried to pull him to me, but he resisted, shrugging himself away and standing beside Claire who bent now to his level.

“You know Willie,” she said softly, her eyes etched with concern. “Da and I didn’t mean for this to happen, but it isn’t just his fault its mine too, he didn’t have a lot of time to prepare for us coming.”

“I know your Da loves you more than anything in this world, and he would never ever do something to hurt
you, but you know how good your Da is at his job and these people have put a lot of pressure on him and Grandda to make Da help them.”

I swallowed hard, hated myself for letting her explain my mess but panic clawed at my throat, and I couldn’t find words to help him.

How could I explain to him why I saw fit to leave him and his mother or that my efforts to fix it had fallen flat, nothing but negative responses from solicitors? We would be out of business no matter which way we looked. A drawn-out court case, prohibiting us from selling until its conclusion or breach the contract now and let the Dunsany’s reclaim our assets through compensation.

Willie let out a whimpering sob and leaned into Claire’s breast as she rubbed his back soothingly.

“What about my friends at school?” he looked at Claire beseechingly, “they’ll all think I’m lying about the wedding.” Her brows furrowed for a minute before realisation cleared her expression. “Oh don’t worry, I can explain” she started to offer.

I stood and wrapped my arms around him, bowing my head into his chest. “Will ya forgive me? Da will fix all this; I just need time.”

I felt Claire’s small hand caress my head too and a bolt of relief ran through me, just knowing she was there. Weeks of distance seeping away once I felt her touch.

Willie pulled apart from both of us, he straightened his shoulders and looked me in the eye, the tone changed, lighter, make pretend almost. He took several deep breaths, attempting to still himself.

“It’s alright Da” he puffed out his chest and looked up at Claire hopefully, “me and Mama will be fine, we were before, weren’t we mama?” I felt something inside me break. Claire looked at me in, her eyes like two half-moons full of compassion. She knew what he meant, and she knew how I would take it. It wasn’t the first time I let them down; they survived before.

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I made a hesitant step into Willie’s room before bed asking could I read him a story, he shook his head “I want mama”. I sat on the bed next to him and said “Is it ok if I get her in a minute?” he fidgeted with the duvet and nodded without looking at me. “Willie, I know you are angry, and ye
I heard a snifflie, but he didn’t say no so I continued settling on the bed beside him. “Well I flew over to her in Boston a few days before you were born”, I felt his head move against my shoulder, I continued, “she came to meet me at the airport, and I was coming down the escalator, ya ken the moving steps?”, another nod, “she was reading something and wasn’t looking out for me, and I got to watch her the whole way down.”

I smiled down at him, “ya ken that lovely curly hair she has,” his lips curled up slightly, his body relaxing into the sheets, “anyway, I kept looking at her thinking god she is the prettiest thing I had ever seen, but I was really nervous.” Willie looked up at me, big blue eyes full of curiosity, “why were ye nervous Da?”

“Ach well, you were a bit of a surprise for your mama and me, and I dinna ken if she might be…” I squirmed a little in my seat, “I thought she might be worried about being a mama…it’s a big job is all.” I trailed off.

Willie seemed to accept this and leaned into my shoulder so I could wrap my arm around him. “Anyway when I got down to her, she gave me this big hug, and I was just so happy to see her, but her coat slipped a little, and suddenly I could see Mama’s big round tummy, I looked down and squeezed his shoulder, “with you inside!”

His face lit up then, “was I humongous Da?” he asked excitedly.

“Aye ye were, ya ken yer mama is a tiny wee thing, well I was afraid ye would break her.”

Willie nodded solemnly, “I am glad I dinna Da.”

“Aye son, me too, she wouldha blamed me”, I winked at him.

“So …” I began again, “I saw Mama’s tummy, and my heart almost stopped, do ya ken why?”

Willie shook his head avidly. “Because I was so proud Willie.”
Willie scrunched up his nose, “Proud?”

“Oh aye, as a peacock” I tucked the blanket up around him, and he snuggled down, "because the most amazing woman in the whole world was having my baby, and I wanted everyone to ken she was mine.” His brows creased a little, “ya ken the way ye want everyone to know Donas is yours?” he stared at me blankly for a minute, a sprig of excitement ran across his face at the mention of his horse.

“Aye, Donas is the best horse in the world,” Willie replied dreamily.

“That is right, and yer Mama is the best woman in the world, so I wanted...", I trailed off considering how to phrase, the blind need I had for Claire. "Well I suppose, I wanted her to be my wife and not just yer Mama, I wanted her for myself." I winked at him, "but we can share."

“Aye well yer right, ye wouldna want anyone stealing her like I wouldna want people stealing Donas.” Willie agreed gravely. A look of concern on his face, that I was reasonably sure was more to do with Donas.

I kissed the top of his head and said: “Aye, that is it, son, cause I one day ye will meet a girl and ye will ken ya want to marry her and have bairns.”

Willie made a retching sound and giggled. “it’s true ya will, but remember” I said warningly, “there is only one girl that is right for ye, she will be very special.”

Willie’s eyes squinted in concentration, “how will I ken who she is Da?”

“Ach, I said ruffling his hair, ye will ken the minute ye see her, just like I did with yer Mama.”

Willie gave me a sceptical grimace, “Just wait until she hands ye yer bairn, it’s the happiest day of your life!” he rolled his eyes “I doubt it Da.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that escaped me at the disgust on his face.

“But anyway what I wanted to tell ye is that I ken I might have to go away for a little while, but I
will come back to yer Mama and you because ye are mine and I love nothing more in this world than the two of ye.”

His voice was hushed, he rubbed his fingers along the edge of my knee nervously, “Mama said it could be a long time and we might have to go back to Boston.”

I took his forearms and turning him to me gently, “Willie can ye keep a secret?”

“Aye Da”

“I will be back to you and your mother, sooner than maybe Mama believes I can be because I was silly and I have given her reason to doubt me”

My mind raced for a minute trying to word what I wanted to say to Willie.

“I have to be clever when I get there and work some things out so I can come home.”

Willie nodded his eyes intent on me, “Will ye have to jump big hurdles Da?”

“Aye, something like that son.”

“Be careful; Mama gets cross if we get hurt amember?”

I stroked his cheek and kissed him, “when I get back I will not be parted from you and your mama again, ok?”

He gazed at me for a time and swallowed hard, I could see he was worried, but his face eventually relaxed peacefully. “I believe ya Da”.

He looked up at me; his eyes were earnest and determined. “I will make sure no one steals Mama or Donas while ye are gone.”
Switching off the light, I kissed his forehead, “Good night, Mo mhac brèagha.”
Chapter 34

Our days were focused on keeping things normal for Willie’s sake. But the inevitability of Jamie’s departure hung over us like a dead weight. I wasn’t capable of sharing my feelings, too much resentment and hurt bottled up but most of all heartbreak at the thoughts of losing him. To protect him and me, I couldn’t let it show. Jamie’s parents already had tried multiple attempts to thwart him leaving, ranging from selling everything lock stock and barrel to throwing all their savings into a hotshot barrister that would lead us into endless legal fees and no happy ending guaranteed.

I couldn’t live with them not having their home, their retirement. The Fraser’s were good people, who had supported Willie and me since I came into their lives. I wanted their happiness safe just as much as Jamie. It was this common bond that allowed me to forgive Jamie or at least to understand why he had to follow through, I knew he loved us, and he loved his parents. It shouldn’t be a matter of choosing, I could rebuild in Boston, they could not.

So here we were hours before Jamie’s departure, I needed to say goodbye to him, just wanting solitude, him and me. Regret over turning from him the past few weeks, as I minded the hurt in his eyes every time I avoided his gaze, his touch or his words. It wasn’t that I didn’t want them; it just was more painful to be close to him knowing it was fleeting.

I had some time in Scotland after Jamie left, watching Willie worry and pine over Jamie’s move; I had promised him we could stay until the end of his term. It would soften the blow of missing his Da, having all his family around him. Jamie came home early, packed a few things only enough for a long weekend, I had raised my eyebrows but said nothing. Jamie was firmly gripping denial, he couldn’t see himself there long-term. Convinced that he would manage to pull off something that he may get the Dunsany’s to release him without repercussions.

In a way, I needed him to go so I could get on with losing him. Grieve for what could have been so I could start to move on, anything would be better than trying to coexist, acting like strangers when it couldn’t have been further from the truth. But tonight would just be about goodbye.

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“I cooked” my hand gestured vaguely to the stove, “I don’t know if you feel like something or if you have maybe other things to do...” babbled words and sweaty palms, it would take me a few moments to settle, to strive for normalcy.
Jamie stood arms hanging loosely at his sides, the taken aback expression my invitation had elicited, only lasted a moment before it was replaced with eagerness.

“I would love to eat with ye Sassenach.” Holding my gaze, he continued, “just normal aye?”

“just normal”. I promised.

He crossed the kitchen then purposefully, taking a bottle of wine from the fridge and uncorking it. Pouring two glasses and placing them on the kitchen table, “Do ye need any help?”

“Nope, just plating up…it’s Simple really…nothing fancy.” I was talking too fast, my hands brushing nervously down my thighs. Normal I repeated to myself trying to quiet my mind.

I sensed Jamie’s warm breath on my back, hesitating for a moment before he gently enveloped my shoulder with his hand, kneading it once and allowing it to rest. I stood stock still, conscious that it been a while since we touched like this.

“Anything ye cook is braw Sassenach.” He said softly. I thought he would move away, just an assuring gesture, but his body stilled behind me, and I felt his hand hovering over my shoulder for a minute before he made a decision lowered his arm, wrapping it around my stomach, wordlessly.

“Thank ye.” He whispered quietly. I placed my hand on his and squeezed it once before I turned to him. I rested my hands on the counter, hips tilting towards him but not close enough to touch.

“Have you everything packed?” I quirked an eye upwards, knowing full well he had packed maybe three things, “I am hoping I won’t need much”,

“Jamie,” I said in a frustrated breath, “I really think you need to accept that you could be there for some time…”

He shook his head firmly, “If I canna get something on them, I have a contingency…” His voice went quiet and I could see he wanted to tell me. I knew he was going to attempt to convince me for the millionth time that he would dig himself out of this mess, we had one night, and I didn’t want it filled with unfeasible promises.
“Look”, I said firmly, “if we are going to do this ‘normal’ thing, then let’s not talk about England or tomorrow. I gestured towards the table, “I am going to feed you, it’s just you and me now, no promises, no planning, just us.” He stepped toward me and tried to smile. Jamie’s smile had always been remarkable, the kind that makes you weak and happy all at once, a game changer. This smile, however, was not like that. It was tighter, strained. He did not want to concede this could be our last night together as some form of a couple, but he would accept it because it was all we had.

Dinner was simple in every way, we stuck to every day, Willie, his school, Lamb, Jenny, Jamie’s parents. We didn’t mention Brian’s grey pallor, Ellen’s face constantly etched in worry or the enlisted solicitors that had come through Lallybroch like a revolving door. It was pleasant, complete make-believe but we smiled, drank and ate, while occasionally meeting each other’s eye with a glint of something only between us.

When we had finished, Jamie pushed himself back in his chair, eyeing me carefully.

“Is it something ye wanted?” I raised one eyebrow, and he tilted his head towards Willie’s bedroom, “bairns”, he explained. Jamie’s body was relaxed as he swung casually on the back legs of his chair, this wasn’t meant to start an argument, it was worded with curiosity light, flirtatious, first date kind of stuff.

When I faltered to answer immediately, he didn’t rush me just allowed his eyes to linger on my face while toying with his bottom lip.

Eventually, I sighed, smiling at him over the rim of my glass. “bit late for this conversation, isn’t it?”

Jamie placed his glass down and straightened his chair.

“I meant before if Willie hadn’t happened, was it something ye planned on?”
“Oh, I see.”

“Well I was young—er, hadn’t really had a mother myself—it wasn’t something that was foremost in my mind – but no I didn’t see it in my future until Willie happened.”

Jamie nodded and ran his finger around the rim of his glass, “I reckoned as much.”

My eyebrows shot up, “You did?”

“Aye well, its just ye were so driven at yer career when I first met ye, being a doctor was so important and ye were fierce independent…I remember thinking it would take a lot to settle ye.”

“Settle me?” I crooked one skeptical eyebrow at him, but my real struggle was stopping the smirk threatening to shadow my face as I fought the idea that Jamie had considered trying to settle me.

“Ye werena like other lassies Claire…I could tell ye dinna need the picket fence and a house full of bairns…or even a man, yer a free spirit…I suppose” his eyes skimmed over me for a minute and he drew in a long breath, something unsaid ran between and he exhaled shifting on his seat to rest his ankle over his knee. Jamie’s eyes grew dark, and my heart sped up at the effect I was apparently having on him.

“Well” while I attempted to change the subject, Jamie just continued to stare brazenly at me, tilting his wine glass to and fro. My stomach was coiling in on itself, and I felt like crawling across the table to run my tongue over his lips.

“ya, ken ye never once rang me when ye got back to Boston?”

“What?” I asked narrowing my eyes at him. He smiled confidently at me and leaned across the table. “Ye went back to Boston, and ye dinna pick up yer phone and ring me once” his index finger pointed to the ceiling illustrating the number of times I didn’t call. “I only heard from ye, after ye found out ye were pregnant.”
My chin dipped into the neck of my sweater as my mind raced trying to remember.

“Jamie – I don’t think” irritation started to creep into my tone. What was he playing at dragging this up now?

“It’s the truth” he replied plainly. He tilted his wine glass pointedly at me. “Ye know –“ he scraped a hand down his face, “if it wasna for Willie, I am not sure I wouldha heard from you again Claire.” His tone was light, still teasing but there was something in his eyes I couldn’t quite place, uncertainty perhaps.

“That’s not true”, I shook my head and took a sip for my glass, trying to hide my features.

“Oh aye it is, I said all sorts to ye that night in the cottage, I didn’t hold back, ye said ye would call as soon as ye got home. Ye never did.”

I needed to tell him how much I wanted to, but the reality of returning to Boston was like a bucket of cold water, suddenly the thing that seemed very real while in Scotland now made me feel abashed, we had known each other for such a short time yet Jamie was right we didn’t hold back the night in the cottage and then I had worried he would see me as less, too brazen, too easy. So I chickened out and didn’t ring him. Now facing his inquisitive smirk, I found I couldn’t say any of that.

Instead I settled for “I meant to call”, weakly whispering it into my sweater collar.

Jamie rolled his eyes laughing, “‘ye meant to call, did ye?’—his voice went up a pitch—“what happened, ye forgot?”

I gave him a withering look, “I didn’t forget”, he took a long pull on his wine glass and settled it down on the table.

Lacking any real excuse I could share with him I threw the questions back on him, “Why are you going over all this now?” I pointed my wine glass towards him accusingly. “Nostalgia can be dangerous Fraser”.

Jamie’s tongue darted out and he wet his lips nervously, he lifted his glass and lowered it without drinking. He leaned across the table abruptly, face determined. “Something ye said in the barn the night of the engagement party”, my hand trembled as I reached for my wine glass, I tried to feign nonchalance “What was that?” my tone was casual, but my heart was drumming a loud beat in my ear. I sunk my lips into the wine glass to hide the colour rising up my cheeks while I waited for him to answer.

“Ye said, ye felt like an obligation.”

Oh god, a devious lump started forming in my throat, and I begged myself not to surrender to it.

Jamie took my silence for what it was, acceptance, so he continued.

“It struck a chord with me ye see, registered, I suppose.” He shrugged his shoulders casually. “I always felt like ye were obliged to maintain a relationship with me, and had Willie not happened ye might not have contacted me again.”

“Why would you think that Jamie? It’s so far from the truth.”

“Claire,” he said exasperatedly, “ye ken as much as I do what happened the night Willie was conceived?”

I sat back slightly in my seat not sure where he was taking this, “I cajoled ye up there.”

“I went willingly” I corrected.

“Fine,” he said sighing, “but ye ken, as well as I, do that all the times I bedded ye that night, only once did I control myself long enough to think of precaution.”

I rolled my eyes “Jamie it wasn’t ‘bedding’, half the time we didn’t even make it to the bed!”

Jamie gave me an impatient glare, “fine” he replied haughtily “sex, all the times we had sex, only once did I use protection. My head rolled back “this is why you are in this mess Jamie” I waved my hands vaguely around the cottage,” you take on too much responsibility – my tone dipped coyly –“
I never asked you to use precautions the many other times we had sex …I thought it would be ok.” Now I was positively scarlet at my own naivety, an almost qualified doctor, what the fuck had I been thinking? A little voice in my head whispered quietly, you wanted him pretty bad too.

“Aye but Claire I canna tell ye how out of character that was of me.” My eyebrows shot up to my hairline, “are you suggesting that it was characteristic of me…” I started to argue, he waved his hand dismissively. “It’s no that, what I mean to say is, even then I wonder if I was trying to anchor myself to ye.” My head lurched back in surprise. “Jamie, are you saying you consciously tried to get me pregnant?”

He rucked his hand through his hair agitatedly “no, not consciously anyway” Jamie stood suddenly, opening his mouth and closing it again dumbstruck. His head fell back, and he looked at a spot on the ceiling.

“Jamie Fraser will you tell me what the hell you are on about!” I said firmly.

He lowered his head and met my eye, “Claire I dinna wish to compare ye to other women because there is no comparison, but it would be lying if I said that when it comes to preventing bairns, I am if anything overcautious.” He crooked one auburn eyebrow, “with others –his cheeks blazed red – it would put the fear of God in me to tie myself to someone by having a bairn with them.”

He sat down again and began toying with his wine glass, his voice dropped low and husky, his eyes stayed fixed on the glass, “yet that night with you, I dinna care if I was bound to you forever, I think I didn’t stop to use protection because it dinna frighten me what a future with you might hold.”

He shook his head shamefully, “I never stopped to think of what you might want.” His head shot up, and he looked me straight in the eye, “So Claire if anyone is the obligation here, its no you – he exhaled loudly – it’s me.”

“I was always too guilty or shamed to tell ye, he said softly, but I would feel more so if ye were under the impression ye were of any obligation to me Claire.”

He half snorted under his breath, “Christ even when ye rang to tell me ye were pregnant, half of me was giddy at the thoughts of you carrying my child, the other half was scared shitless ye would hate me for it.”
Promises

"Someday do you think we will ever get this right?"—my voice trembled slightly—"us, this?" I waved my hands between the two of us.

Jamie smiled shyly. "I was afraid ye might want to slap me since it appears like I just admitted to knocking ye up purposefully".

Shaking my head, I gave him a lopsided smile, "no I heard what you said, I understand what you meant, I mean I—" I fidgeted nervously with my wine glass, choking on words that were hard to admit to myself let alone him.

Jamie reached across the table and took one of my hands in his, he used the other to tuck a wayward curl behind my ear, "tell me?"

"I naively thought we would be safe because of my cycle", I half slammed my palm against my lap, desperate for some sort of movement to hide my anxiousness. I could feel heat fill my cheeks and I inwardly rolled my eyes at how stupid that sounded now. Dr Beauchamp indeed.

"But like you, I wouldn’t have made that assumption quite so quickly with someone else. I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I had never had unprotected sex, I wouldn’t even entertain it before you.” My lips turned upwards, “I suppose I wanted you and I didn’t let anything stand in the way of that.” the last omission came out as a whisper.

Jamie’s face lit up, “is that so, aye?” a smirk grew across his wide mouth, and I narrowed my eyes at him. He looked jubilant.

“When I rang you that day to tell you I was pregnant”—a whistling breath escaped my lungs —“God I was petrified.”

Lowering my head, I searched for words to describe how it felt, to tell him that our lives were about to change forever.

Beyond the panic, and fear there was this tingling of peace that I was doing it, Jamie. I knew he would look after us. But it mattered so much what he thought, how he felt. As daft as it sounded, I wanted him to be happy.

“When you answered your tone was so gruff, I was afraid to speak.” My admission was greeted by Jamie’s raised eyebrow.

“I was pissed it had taken ye three months to call Sassenach, it was nothing to do with what ye were about to tell me” he shifted in his chair, squaring his shoulders, a riled expression on his face “I was sore over ye, aye?”

“I know, …I just mean that well…I wanted to call before that.” my mouth went dry, and I took a hasty sip of my wine, while Jamie quirked a curious eyebrow at me.

“I gave so much of myself to you that night in the cottage, I was worried that you might think less of me.” I squirmed in my seat, brushing invisible crumbs from my jeans.
When I looked up, Jamie was staring at me mouth agape. “Less of ye?” his voice pitchy, the question came out as an incredulous squeak.

“Well - I had only known you a few weeks, and I worried I had given too much of myself too soon.” I tried to pull my hand away, but Jamie tightened his hold, almost pulling me across the table.

“Less of ye?” he repeated in disbelief, “I was ruined after that night, I couldn’t have thought more of ye.”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed, and he watched me intently. “Ye were my every waking thought, remembering those weeks with ye, then worrying what I had done for ye to disappear.”

He paused, chewing his lip. “It’s just…” he took his hand away to ruck it through his hair, I instantly felt the loss of his touch. “I was afraid I misinterpreted signs – his tone dropped – “when I didn’t hear from ye, I well I thought ye had regretted it.”

My answer was instantaneous “I didn’t.” memories of the unregrettable night swirlled around in my mind, and I tried to hide the heat that was filling my cheeks and sending jolts between my thighs.

“I am glad of it Sassenach”- Jamie lowered his gaze letting it fall on our joined hands.

I pushed the chair out from the table and stood, taking the small steps to bring me just in front of his knees.

“You might think that by me running back to Boston at the first sign of trouble – my hand dropped to take his – ‘ that it means I don’t love you or that I am running from you, but that’s not it.”

I grappled for a moment to find the right words. “I am going back because I don’t want to be here without you, everything here is you. It would be too hard, and that might mean I am selfish but If you’re gone I need to do what is best for me, I need to raise our son, and I can’t do that if I am stuck here miserably pining for his father.”

Jamie’s hands reached for my hips and drew me between his knees.

He let out a long shaky sigh, “Claire, I –“

“Just hear me out.”

I ran my hand down his cheek, and his eyes shut for a moment instinctively.

“I don’t want to punish you”, – taking my hand away from his face, I ran it over the engagement ring on my left hand – “I can’t tell you how it felt when you slipped this ring on my finger.”

Jamie’s head snapped down to my hand “Claire please dinna –“

Shaking my head, I fought for the words to describe my elation that day in Boston. “I felt like for the first time I actually belonged – my voice sounded strangled, and I cleared my throat – “I belonged to you.”

“I have never wanted anything more in my life,” he said softly.

“yes and right there in that bed, a whole image flashed before my eyes, a home with you, a life with you and Willie, a happy ever after…I suppose.”

He stood suddenly, meeting my eye. “Claire I want so badly to give ye that”
I put my hand up to halt him, “Jamie”, I exhaled before reaching up to skim my lips over his - “you don’t know what is ahead of you, whatever you have in mind – it will take time- before you are free.”

I slipped the ring from my finger, and his eyes dropped to my hand.

“Claire no, please dinna do this.”

“Listen”, - my voice was soft, pleading – “I can’t wear it, I would feel foolish.”

I gave him a half smile, “I am going to be in Boston, and you will be in England, dealing with god knows what.”

I took his two hands in mine, “we are not in any position to get married, and I don’t want a ring for the sake of it.” I placed the ring on the kitchen table, the metal clang filling the air.

Jamie backed away enough to look into my eyes, “It isna for the sake of it dammit”, rucking a hand through his already messed up hair.

“I gave ye that ring because I want ye to be my wife, - the gruff tone softened slightly -, “I love ye Claire, yer all I ever wanted as a partner.” His eyes stayed fixed on mine, imploring.

When I stood resolute, he continued.

“I dinna blame ye for underestimating me or thinking I am overly optimistic to believe I can outsmart those conniving bastards, but ye have not taken into consideration how badly I want to be back here with you and Willie.”

I bowed my head regretfully. “I do know that Jamie, it’s because I am afraid of what they are capable of-“

“If I get out of it?” his chin tilted defiantly, “What then – for you and me?”

“If,” I said pointedly, “England does not go ahead as planned, then maybe.” I softened my tone, “Maybe there could be a future for us, but what I am trying to say is, neither of us knows what is ahead I can’t postpone living until you work out what you need to do Jamie.”

He stood stock still for some time gazing at a spot on the wall. Then suddenly he took a decisive step towards me, eyes bright. “Claire I am going to ask ye do something for me, he straightened his shoulders resolutely, “I canna blame ye for not seeing our future just now, or because I do, it is my job to show ye that future and that involves me sorting Hellwater.” He tilted his head towards the diamond lying abandoned on the table, “I intend to earn the right to have ye wear that ring again.”

He watched me take this in for a moment, brow furrowed, “So what I want to ask of ye, for now, he pressed his lips into a thin line, “I need to ask ye to trust me.” His hands rose defensively before continuing, “I ken that is a lot to ask right now but ye are right I dinna ken what is ahead of me when I leave here tomorrow. No matter what happens I need ye to know that anything I do, will only be about getting out of there.”

I crooked one eye at him, “Jamie you wouldn’t do anything illegal would you?”

He paused for a minute considering, “I dinna plan on it, and I ken I am no good to anyone in a prison cell.”
I let out a puff of air in relief.

He turned me now, taking my elbow and pulling me towards him slightly. “I won’t be able to speak to you freely once I am there Claire, so I need ye to remember who I am.”

His voice was brittle with desperation. I tentatively reached up and touched his cheek letting him lean into my palm.

“I will, I promise.”

His shoulders slackened with relief, and he pulled me against his chest, burrowing his head in my curls. We stayed locked like that for some time until Jamie shifted and seemed to want to ask me something but thought better of it, instead glancing at the floor, “what is it?”

He lifted his head and

“Well, I was about to say it out loud and realised how pathetic it sounds.”

My heart beat double time from the look in his eyes, and I could almost anticipate what he needed.

“Say it.”

He raked a hand along his jaw and licked his lips nervously.

“I need you,” he said quietly.

I opened my mouth to argue that this might not be the wisest move. Jamie noticed my hesitancy. “After Da’s accident you asked me to comfort you?” do ye recall?”

I nodded and swallowed the lump sliding up my throat. “I think that perhaps it was ye comforting me even then,” he smiled sheepishly “, but ye still asked it of me, aye?”

Another feeble nod.

“So Claire, I am asking it of you tonight, I want ye to come to bed with me, I need to take that with me when I go, to remember what it feels like to love ye.” He said simply.

I whispered his name like a plea, not sure of what I was pleading for. Inching my lips closer to him “Ok”. I needed him just as much.

Jamie’s eyes scanned my face for a second to be sure of my answer before he pulled me up to his mouth, kissing the air out of my lungs so that I had to stand on tiptoe to accommodate him.

“It has been weeks since I kissed ye” he smirked against my lips.

“You won me over after our first kiss”, his face lit up in pleasure. “Did I then? Well, let me show ye again to remind you.” Our lips met again in a flurry, and everything else went away. We only broke away to fill our lungs with air and Jamie used the opportunity to move us.

Things happened in a flurry after that, weeks of abstinence fueling our desire. Our limbs and hands intertwined, groping wildly until I found myself standing in front of Jamie’s bed about to pull up the hem of my sweater.

“I will undress ye,” he said firmly.

Slowly he raised my hands above my head, pushing the soft fabric over my shoulders and letting it
drop to the floor. Jamie allowed his eyes run over my body, before pulling at the lacy material holding my breasts. Pulling it down, he cupped them appreciatively, “God I love them”, he rasped before replacing his hands with his mouth.

After some time, his hands trailed reaching my zipper. Slow trailing fingers found their way into my underwear. Jamie shut his eyes and made a lengthy exhale from his lips as if steadying himself.

“That soft path of skin that leads down there to just between yer legs.” His fingers trailed along it, making me want to grab guiding them where I needed him most. “I tell myself that path is just for me, only for my hands.”

“It is” I half panted.

“Aye, and the whimpers ye make when I touch ye there.” Those sounds are mine. The squeaks when I take ye”.

“I do not squeak.”

“Aye ye do” he replied firmly “, and I fucking love it.”

He pushed my jeans over my hips and let them fall to the floor. “Do ye want to know what I thought the first time I saw ye naked?” he asked trailing kisses along my collar bone.

“tell me?”

Jamie leaned back for a moment, smiling softly at me. “that ye were the most beautiful woman, so beautiful that I kent I would be ruined for anyone else.”

I blushed wildly “you are quite the charmer Fraser.”

“It’s the truth”, he whispered as he brushed a thumb over my bottom lip, “Ye had that wee blue dress on, I still remember it, even the pattern.” His hand rose now stroking my cheek. I remember unbuttoning it slowly like a kid at Christmas, I’d imagined what you would look like naked for three weeks I wanted to savour it, aye?”

I nodded smiling and pulled his shirt up over his head.

“The wee dress, only a slip of a thing”, he said playfully, “it’s a wonder ye dinna catch hyperthermia Claire” he had attempted a stern tone, but his voice was so husky with desire it sounded like he was straining.

“it fell to the floor, and I thought to myself, Christ Jamie yer imagination is shite.”

I couldn’t contain the laughter and smiled at him as he continued determinedly, “because”,- his tongue darted out and slid over my hard nipple. I arched into him, while my laughter died out on his neck, “What?” he asked smirking up at me. “Tis true” – he was beginning to pant out each word, - “Right then and there, with that wee dress about yer ankles, I knew I was ruined.” He rose and kissed me languidly, and while hovering over my lips, he whispered, ”Nothing could have prepared me for you, Claire.”

I blinked back tears at the quiet awe and love in his eyes. Trying to lighten the tone I stroked the length of him and whispered.

“I was fairly turned on by you as well, wasn’t that what got us into all the trouble?” quirking one playful eyebrow at him. Jamie let out a groan of contentment “Christ Claire.”
“Even now when I watch ye in the morning slip out beneath the bedsheets, without a stitch on” - he let out a breathless chuckle – “I canna put my two feet under me for some time until I try and calm myself for the want of ye.”

His hand slid between my thighs and in a swirl of motion he lowered me back on to the bed while guiding two fingers inside of me. Oh my god did I want him. I watched him bit his bottom lip, one hand braced over me, as I writhed beneath him.

“Were no sleeping tonight Sassenach” he whispered against my ear breathlessly.

I snorted but was too far gone to form coherent words. Instead, I stated the obvious. “I want you, Jamie.”

I felt him move then, pushing me up on the bed until he was angled between my thighs he ducked his head greedily sucking and biting down the length of my body before settling his face between my legs. He grinned up at me from his vantage point “Now Claire” he said with authority “no muffling yer wee sounds tonight because of Willie, I need to hear ye.”

“What if he wakes” I gasped as his tongue slid teasingly along my inner thigh. “We willna wake, just relax mo graidgh.”

I dropped my head back, and Jamie pushed his warm flat tongue into my heat, I made a mortifying mewling sound and Jamie’s head returned from between my thighs, “Aye Sassenach, just like that.”

Anything after that was an incoherent panting of his name, mingled with more and faster. My hands holding his head auburn curls between my legs until the building pleasure became too much, each stroke of his tongue taking me higher. I whimpered “fuck Jamie” which caused him to make a groaning sound between my legs, the vibrations were enough to finish me completely, which I did keening over him.

Jamie returned to my side, smiling tenderly at me.

Cupping my face in his hands he whispered softly, “I only really want for two things in this world and they are to be your husband and Willie’s father. I willna let anything stand in my way of that. “I love you” I confessed into the hollow of his neck.

“I am so glad of it.” His hands slid over my hips to graze against his own, urging me on top of him.

“I dinna ken how I am going to leave ye in the morning, but It will be with the taste of you on my tongue and the feel of your soft body against my hands and the sound of you coming in my ears, because ye are mine and nothing will change that”
My mouth curled up in a self-conscious smile, suddenly shy to say my goodbyes with Jamie’s family looking on. I wondered if they noticed our bruised lips and bitten necks. I tugged a curl around my finger and glanced over at Ellen and Brian pointing out flowers to Willie, allowing us a tiny window to say our goodbyes. Jenny stood under Ian’s arm sniffing into a hanky.

Jamie had embraced them all told them he ‘wasna dying’, but I could see his throat bob up and down furiously, as he strained to show a brave face. He had come to the end of the line where I was standing arms hung awkwardly at my sides, not knowing what to do with them. Jamie had pulled me by the waist and bent to kiss me; I kept my hand curled into balls at his chest not wanting to let go.

When his mouth met mine, we forgot where we were and deepened the kiss, trying to say with our mouths what we were incapable of with our voices. When Jamie’s tongue gently slid over mine, I heard gravel munching underfoot as Ian and Jenny shuffled away awkwardly. For a moment I didn’t care, wanting to live in him and have no one take him from me. Eventually, I sighed and said, “your parents will think I’m a disgrace.”

Jamie gave me the most boyish smile “Claire they see the way I look at you when you’re not looking; they wouldn’t expect anything less of a goodbye from me, aye?.”

A sudden lump invaded my throat, and I pulled him to me again, breaking away when I heard Willie’s voice getting nearer. Jamie through him up on his shoulder “remember what I told ye my lad?” as he mounted several kisses over our sons head and cheeks. “I amember da, mind Donas and mama” I rolled my eyes “did he tell you in that order?” I snickered rubbing my hand through his hair. “I canna remember mama” Willie answered solemnly.

I looked back at Jamie and saw him hastily rub his sleeve over his eyes, a lone tear had escaped his efforts and rolled down his cheek. Willie rubbed a little hand through Jamie’s hair, “dinna cry Da, nobody will take mama or Donas, while yer gone, I pwomise.”

Now tears were falling unbidden from my own eyes, and I wiped them away quickly, placing Willie on the ground for a minute. “You got to go,” I said firmly, “traffic will be heavy” we both knew I meant we would end as trembling wrecks if we didn’t make a move soon. “aye,” Jamie said hoarsely eyes stuck to the ground.

I gave him a few minutes to breathe, his head rising eventually to meet my eye,

“Claire Beauchamp” – his tone clear and confident –“I love ye” he bent nearer my ear – “I will love ye forever” – when he leaned back to look down in my eyes he mouthed “trust me mo chridhe”

Brian’s hand on his shoulder and Willie shouting “I love ye Da” were the only fragments I
remembered before a trail of dust blew along the road as his jeep drove away.

In the few weeks since Jamie had been gone, the lack of his presence was felt everywhere, I felt guilty adding to the sombre mood by showing how much I missed him; instead I tried to throw myself into helping out around the farm and making sure Willie enjoyed his last few weeks in Scotland. Jamie phoned every night, wanting to hear every small detail of our day. He was reluctant to say much about what was happening in Hellwater, and I didn’t press him.

Mostly I was glad of Ellen Brian and Jenny’s presence, the moment Jamie kissed both Willie and me goodbye and left Lallybroch they stepped up. Never allowing us too much time in the cottage and insisting we ate with them every evening. I was pitifully glad of it. Every inch of the cottage was a reminder of Jamie and escaping it helped.

Our tranquil routine at Lallybroch was rudely broken by the return of Dougal Mc Kenzie. He turned up unannounced and uninvited. Ellen’s reluctance to even admit him went over his head as he claimed to have come from visiting Hellwater and Jamie and wanted to let us know how he was doing. His attempt at sincerity didn’t win over his sister but his promise of been gone by morning not to return again if she wished, did the trick.

Dougal had, for the most part, ignored me on his last visit to Lallybroch. Throwing me one assessing glance and commenting on my boniness to Jamie. Other than that I was a non-event for him.

But since the Dunsany’s had approached Jamie to work at Hellwater, it had become apparent to Dougal that I was more unwanted baggage that rooted Jamie to Lallybroch and had been the main reason he had dug his heels in about working at Hellwater. Dougal hadn’t counted on Willie and me living in Scotland, in Dougal’s, Jamie might have been more agreeable to Hellwater, and they would not have had to threaten him with the demise of Lallybroch. But Jamie had been furious, and the Dunsany’s and Dougal had unleashed their outrageous tactics. His relationship with his sister and brother in law was irreparably broken.

Dougal Mc Kenzie sat staring at me intently from across the dinner table, cutting through a story Jenny had been telling, he tilted his head in my direction and asked how I had been since Jamie’s departure.

While he waited for a response he busied himself examining a morsel of food on his fork when my response was a nonverbal glare, he tried again.

“Jamie seemed well fashed about leaving ye,” – I continued to stare back at him – “although” he added in a contemplative sigh “when I visited him last week, he seems to be settling nicely in at Hellwater.”

Don’t take the bait.

“We have been busy here”, I replied evenly, keeping my gaze directed into the bottom of my wine glass, rolling the red liquid around in my hand.

Dougal’s hand slapped against the table jubilantly. “I kent as much, I told Jamie so” he downed the remnants of his wine in one swallow and leaned across the table, his voice brightening
“Ya ken Claire, while James may have reservations about the Dunsany’s, this is a good opportunity for him, he is overseeing the construction of one of the biggest equestrian centres in England, probably in Europe.” he smiled, flashing teeth and landing his elbows firmly back on the table. “His name will carry with it.” He gave me a conspiratorial wink.

“With all due respect Dougal,” I said smiling sweetly, “Jamie doesn’t want his name associated with the Dunsany’s on account of how they recruit people, I doubt having his name attached to their equestrian centre will appeal to him much.”

His eyes widened, and he leaned back in his chair slightly, “yer feisty wee thing or ye no?”

“If you mean, I don’t tolerate bullshit, then yes that is correct.”

Ian choked into his wine glass stifling a laugh and Jenny patted my hand proudly. “That ye don’t Claire” she agreed.

Dougal’s widened eyes eventually fell back to his dinner plate, but he was not to be deterred. I had struck a sore point, and he would not relent in whatever message he seemed determined to deliver.

His glance fell on Ellen and Brian as if trying to reason with them over my propensity to bite.

“Aye, I am sure it wasna suitable to have Jamie move away so soon after ye moved here” his sweet smile made my stomach heave.

“Claire and Jamie had no wish to live separately, Dougal, so let’s not pretend it was a choice, aye?” Brian replied gruffly, while Ellen just glared disbelievingly at her brother. The tension building over the dinner table was tangible, and I longed to rise from my seat and throw the entire uneaten contents of my dinner plate onto Dougal’s lap and leave the room.

Dougal smiled sympathetically at Brian, “I said to Jamie that they’re two independent people, dinna need to be living in each other pockets, do they now?” his gaze returned to meet my eye, and I pressed my hand into the side of my chair to stop the fury building up in my stomach. Suddenly grateful that Willie was upstairs asleep in Brian and Ellen’s bed.

I was no longer content to listen to this tripe and didn’t want Jamie’s parents feeling the need to defend me.

“You seem to have a knack at colouring the truth Dougal” I popped a piece of meat into my mouth and allowed my lips to curl up mischievously as I chewed.

“I ken the best of marriages start out with some separation Claire, why myself and my wife, Clara-“before he could continue, I sat forward placing fork down on my plate and resting my chin on my entwined hands calmly. “With all due respect Dougal-“ my tone light, mocking, “I’d rather not use your marriage as a blueprint”, the way his mouth dropped open and the stunned expression on his face, made me grow bold and I flashed him a dazzling smile.

“From what I understand your wife lives in Spain most of the year?” a long pause as I took my time to refill my wine glass, Dougal observed me, mistakenly confident that I wouldn’t go there.

“She has a very attentive live-in personal assistant doesn’t she?” – I strained my eyes in concentration and tapped my forefinger against my bottom lip contemplatively – “Manwell? Is that considerably.
Jenny snorted, and I threw my smug smile in her direction.

Dougal was purple, a long finger pointed threateningly at me, “How dare ye –“

I was unperturbed, “There must be a reason you are not needed in your wife’s house?” I asked lightly while popping a grape into my mouth from the cheeseboard in front of me. “after all I am sure”, even someone like you, must have a purpose?

Dougal started to rise threateningly to his feet, “Do you visit much, I mean to give Manwell vacation time?”

“How dare ye listen to ye little bitch-“

“Ye will no speak to Claire like that at my table” Ellen’s voice interjected firmly.

I flopped back in my chair happily, taking a long pull from my wine glass.

“Yer lucky I allowed ye over the threshold brother, dinna pretend you had no part to play in separating her and Jamie, so ye needn’t come here now telling her it’s for the best.”

Ellen stood and reached for the bottle of wine before pouring herself a large glass and sitting back down. She gave out an incredulous sigh, “in fact I dinna ken why yer here at all” she laughed incredulously and shook her head, “ye got Jamie to do yer bidding, what else do ye want?”

“I only came to tell ye the lad is doing braw, he is really getting stuck in.” Dougal huffed defensively.

I couldn’t help the drop in my heart, imagining Jamie giving any of his real attention to this project, but I mentally berated myself for already forgetting my promise.

Brian narrowed his eyes, taking in his brother in law, “he is a gifted lad, there isna much he canna work at.”

Dougal’s face lit up “Oh aye Lord Dunsany is delighted with him, he has the architects and engineers jumping in hoops at his whim, Miss Geneva thinks he will shave a million off the original estimate for the project, with some shrewd changes.”

Now my heart was beating outside of my chest; naively as it sounded, I didn’t realise Geneva Dunsany had any role in the designing or building of the equestrian centre.

The question was bubbling out of my mouth before I could stop it. “What role does Geneva have with the project?” I aimed for nonchalance, but I wasn’t sure I delivered as Dougal crooked one bushy grey eyebrow at me, his turn for revenge evident with the self-satisfied smirk spread across his face.

“She is the financial controller” he replied evenly. Straining to keep the gleeful tone from his voice he continued “Jamie has to keep her sweet to draw down the necessary funds for the project and to align his budget.”

Brian leaned across the table about to say something, but I was determined not to show defeat. “Gosh I am surprised, I didn’t think she had a head for figures never mind the ability to control a
“multi-million-pound budget”.

Dougal’s expression was impassive, but his eyes were practically dancing in mirth when he composed himself enough to answer me.

“Jamie seems to think he can save her money and that speaks Geneva’s language, quite the bonnie team the two of them last I saw” the corners of his mouth quirked upward, a hint of victory in his smile.

I knew that I could keep up this game and had many responses that would wipe the smile of Dougal’s face, but I had this niggling feeling that Dougal had information that would hurt me deeply if I continued and I didn’t think I could withstand it. I dropped my gaze to my plate, not to avoid Dougal so much but to the sympathetic stares from the rest of the Frasers.

Much later that evening Jenny and Ian had managed to unwind me with too much wine, curled up in armchairs around a fire in the study. We chatted and teased and avoided all talk of what Dougal had said at dinner. I knew they were trying not to give it credence and I was trying not to let my insecurity show. I mostly was succeeding, and the wine was certainly a good anaesthetic, but now and again Dougal’s depiction of Jamie working closely with Geneva gave me angry hot flushes which I was, for the most part, disguising well.

As midnight came and went and our chat quietened, Jenny who had been watching me intently narrowed her eyes.

“Claire” she slurred slightly, “I presume ye are not heeding anything that man says?”

I gave a noncommittal smile, “I’m fine Jenny honestly, I – “

She looked to Ian for support “Tell her Ian”.

“Jenny – laughter lacing my tone to hide my embarrassment – “ will you stop, I am a big girl, and Jamie is – “

“Dinna start pretending that yer fine with what he said either? She waved her hand around sloppily. “I’m not daft Claire.”

Ian crooked one eye at me, “Claire, ya ken Jamie hates each and every one of them, there is a fox in him, if he is playing nice it is cunningly so.”

I took another long pull on my wine glass and eyed them both sceptically and sighed.

“I feel bad for even mistrusting him, it’s just Dougal gets under my skin with his smugness –” my tone growing angrier the very mention of him, “he came here to wind me up.”

“Aye,” Jenny said knowingly and “ye are falling for it.”

“Hmm, I think you’re right, and I am being silly, let’s forget it ok?” I made to stand, but my legs wobbled briefly before I fell back down with a thud.

“We will have one more dram Claire, and then Ian and I will walk ye back to the cottage, Mam has Willie so ye can have a nice lie in tomorrow.”
My head bobbed agreeably, and I allowed the alcohols foggy haze to cloud my decision making, “Christ I miss Jamie to talk sense to ye now.” Ian chuckled.

Jenny was rooting in my purse beside her place at the fire.

“I’m gonna call Jamie and tell him what Dougal is at, he told me to keep him informed” she pulled my phone from my bag with a tug and flopped back on the armchair, eyes squinting, dangerously near to closing to examine the screen on my phone.

Both mine and Ian’s mouths fell open “Jenny its almost 2 o clock in the morning, you are not ringing Jamie!” I said firmly. My head was light from wine and the idea of Jenny telling Jamie I was jealous of Geneva Dunsany.

“Aye Jen, C’mon” Ian tried to reach to take the phone from her, but she snapped her hand back. Holding the phone above her head. “he is my brother, Ian and he told me to watch over Claire.” Ian sighed “Jen he told us all to watch over Claire, if she isna sick or deid, I don’t think ye should ring him in the middle of the night though.”

Jenny let out an impatient puff of breath “tsk” she scolded. “Jamie willna think she is deid!”

I managed to stand on wobbly feet and grab the phone from Jenny’s hand while she was distracted. “Agh, I said triumphantly, “got it”. My smile quickly faded when I noticed Jenny had already hit the call button to dial Jamie, I was desperately trying to hit cancel when I heard a high feminine giggle coming from the receiver. Jenny and Ian’s faces watched on in dismay as I put the earpiece to my ear and stupidly said “Jamie?”

Silence on the other end and a familiar British accent answered clearly “sorry James can’t come to the phone just now” – another stifled giggle “he is busy”, and the phone went dead.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

I usually thank @balfieughlywed at this point because she is my reading gal and puts me straight when I am gone off course. But this week I almost broke her! So I really want to thank her for all her tireless, ‘but why? and straight out this isn’t right talk she gave me. She always hits the nail on the head and made me do a bit of soul searching (dramatic much?) The epic @notevenjokingfic took my jibberish plot planning and really cleaned it up and set me straight again, I am actually giddy with the what we decided on and for the first time in ages can’t wait to write! I also want to thank @ladyvioletshummingbird and @laythornmuse who support this little fic so much and regularly squeal or shout at me in DM about their writing or often just random bants which really helps when I can’t write a sentence. A little NSFW below the cut.

Crawling up the length of my body, she nipped and sucked each expanse of skin, ignoring the part that needed her mouth most, teasing.

Dark curls were falling around her shoulders, almost reaching her naked breasts. Cheeks rosy red from desire and the heat of our bodies.

My hand sought a nipple, but she moved quickly to evade my grasp. Her head fell back in a naughty giggle. I attempted to reach for her hips, encouraging her nearer.

“uh uh,” she waggled a delicate finger at me. “Patience Jamie”

“Sassenach” – I surprised myself with the begging groan that came from my mouth – “I canna wait I need to be inside ye.” My hands were flailing around me as I attempted to pull her mouth to mine.

“all in good time” she whispered against my lips, not quite touching as her hand crept down and cupped my balls.

I was rocking brazenly beneath her, willing her hips to lock with mine as they should be, two magnets moulded to fit each other.

“you’ve been a bold boy Mr Fraser, and I intend on punishing you for it”, she squeezed lightly making my cock twitch on demand.

“Aye,” I replied, bobbing my head eagerly “I have”, her tongue slid down the length of me, drawing a hiss from my mouth as my hand cupped the back of her head. “Claire” I pleaded again, earning me a stern look as she bent to my groin. She gently ran her teeth along my shaft, hips bucking off the bed now, decency be damned I was aching for her.

“That’s it” she crooned. “Do as I say.”

Her hand ghosted over my stomach and chest, clutching for mine, once she grasped it she pulled it down to her mouth using the flat of her tongue to glide over my palm. “Touch yourself for me, Jamie”. My balls felt they were near to bubbling and my head fell back against the pillow. “I canna Claire – I.”
Her voice sure and smooth rose up against my ear, “you can Jamie, it’s just us.” she guided my hand down to my cock, “show me how you like it?”

Her hair swept around her face, she bit deeply into her bottom lip, eyes locked on mine, “then you can do whatever you want to me” she offered.

“Oh fuck” I reached down taking myself in hand, shutting my eyes tight. “that’s it” she praised, taking my free hand and placing two fingers into her mouth, she sucked deeply. The sensation of her fingers in her mouth made my stomach coil, I frantically pumped myself while using my free hand to rub and tease her breasts. She purred encouraging words in my ear and ran her tongue over me.

Claire ran her hand in under my ass, cupping a cheek and urging me to lift, my hips raised and met my hand at her inclination, she set the rhythm.

I pleaded to her in Gaelic, praised her, thanked her, told her I loved her. She was the only woman that made me lose English, the irony was not lost on me.

Her mouth continued to suck my fingers in and out, her hips moving in tandem with mine. I knew I was going to come and soon, vaguely thought ye need to stop man or ye willna be no use to her. But I couldn’t, I tried to turn on my side, my body coiling in on itself to reach an end. Claire’s palm firm on my chest pushing me into the bed. “shhhh” she whispered

“fuck, ye are amazing, do ye ken that?”

Then her tone changed, “your alarm is going off Jamie”. I lifted my head from the pillow to clutch her to me, but she was gone.

6.00am flashing on the clock beside my bed. Fuck.

My head fell back down as I tried to remember the dream, needed to stay in it for a moment or two longer until my heart rate returned to normal, wanted to pretend she was here beside me flushed with pleasure.

I imagined Claire’s reaction if I told her she haunted my dreams since I arrived here, suddenly the idea of telling her anything hit me like a punch to the stomach, oh god I missed her.

Our calls had been reserved, without saying it, Claire seemed to know I had to be careful of what I said. She didn’t push, but there were things that I wanted to say, they threatened to come bubbling out of me if I didn’t keep myself in check. Knowing each word was noted and logged.

I glanced at my phone to see if she had tried to return any of my calls from the day before. She hadn’t which was odd, she and Willie always rang before bed.

Rising slowly, I showered and prepared for the day. Meeting Geneva at the site before 8am. I had little control over what I did since I arrived. Everything I asked, everything that was asked of me was planned, rehearsed. Rising Geneva out of her bed at stupid o clock, to stand in the pissing rain, was a small triumph in terms of what I could control.

I was bone weary, not so much from the late nights poking and prodding budgets and trying to find a trail, it was the falsity I had to portray when I was around her. Interested.

I glanced at the clock again quickly and tried Claire one more time, she would be waking soon to get Willie ready for school.
It went straight to voicemail. A sliver of anxiety gripped my wame I tried to dismiss it as foolishness, she was probably just asleep, maybe her battery was dead. There was nothing amiss.

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An hour later, I stood on a cold construction site with Geneva Dunsany, who, apart from a hard construction hat had dressed completely inappropriately for the weather.

As I went through each building explaining what was happening, telling her we were running over, a hopeful look, can she draw down more, how soon can she get it, where could she pull it from. Then let them watch.

I had to work at this, make her trust me. Dinners, sharing of pasts, attentive, make-believe. Never anything I couldn’t come back from, never putting me beyond Claire.

Ignoring her hand on my arm as she asked another nonsensical question about the depth of the Equine Swimming Pool, I forged ahead telling her a larger more expensive design would improve the horse’s muscle tone faster, easier trained, quicker sold.

As usual, she bought it, another checkbox ticked.

More dinners, more lies, another set of ears listening and learning. Digging my way out piece by piece.

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“Ian man, what is going on at home? I have been trying to get Claire on the phone this past two days.” I tried to hide the growing anxiety, Ian would think me daft, but I couldn’t stop it. I had to contact him. Had to know where Claire was.

In hindsight, I should have known instantly, Ian’s voice stuttered slightly, tone hesitant. “Jamie, how are ye, how’s Hellsville?”

I immediately dropped the façade I had planned upon, “what’s wrong with Claire’s phone Ian?”

Another pause.

“Em, I dinna think there is ought wrong with it, man…”

“Is she avoiding me?”

“I’d say that could be more accurate alright.”

Something registered about Ian’s vagueness, almost as bad as my own answers these past few weeks.

“Is Janet listening to ye?”

“Aye.”

“Can ye tell me what I have done to Claire?”

I heard muttering in the background.

“What did Jenny say?”
Another pause.

“She said yer a prick.”

My stomach turned.

“What the hell is wrong Ian, will ye no spit it out and tell Jenny to keep her nib out.”

Ian sighed deeply. “Geneva Dunsany answered yer phone.”

“She what?” I asked incredulously.

“She answered yer phone to Claire?”

My mind was whirling, palms wet. “Why the fuck would she – “

“In the wee hours of the morning” Ian whispered into the phone, I wasn’t sure to protect himself or me.

“When?” – I tried to think quickly, when had she access to my phone, god what was Claire thinking surely she would know I wouldn’t – fuck. I saw her then as clear as day, her face close enough I could touch it. Lips trembling slightly, her back set proudly. A tell she had when she was hardening herself not to cry. “Why Jamie?”

I rucked a hand through my hair, kicking something across the room, “Can you get Claire to talk to me?”

Ian either didn’t hear me or was choosing to ignore me. “She was doing braw Jamie, ye should ha seen her and the lad around the farm helping out, I actually think she mightha stayed…” he trailed off.

“Where is she?”

Suddenly there was shuffling, and Jenny’s voice came on the phone “a bràthair?

“Janet will ye tell Claire –“

“She sat at the table” – Jenny’s tone was nearer a growl “she was fierce, she dinna let Dougal cloud her mind when he insinuated that something was going on with ye and that Dunsany bitch.”

“Claire?” I asked stupidly


“She held her head high and she dinna waiver, but then I said let’s ring Jamie, tell Jamie what the fuck wit of an uncle has been up to, thought we would all have a good laugh at it, I never thought that she would be answering yer fucking phone at 2 o clock in the morning Jamie!” Jenny’s tone was shrill, I knew it she was beyond mad, she was upset.

“Jenny, it’s not what ye think, I dinna ken what Geneva was playing at but – I.”

“Oh she kens exactly what she is playing at” Jenny said through gritted teeth, “She was cute enough to ring Dougal the next morning, told him that she answered yer phone to Claire, said ye were sorry Claire had to find out like that, had Dougal call to Claire in the cottage and do yer bidding .”

My mouth fell open, throat tightening painfully, that conniving bitch, how could I have been so stupid?

“He told Claire” I choked out, “that we were sorry? Jesus”

I said exhaling loudly. Flopping to the bed as my legs gave way.

A voice in the back of my mind kept saying, don’t forget their listening. I didn’t care, I had to know.

“Jenny”, I couldn’t hide the shake in my voice,

“Aye.” Her tone was softer now, her breathing starting to calm.

I swallowed painfully. “Where are Claire and Willie?”

My cheeks were wet, and my heart was thumping so hard I thought it would break through my ribs.

“they’re gone,” she said sorrowfully. “Jamie” – her tone was pleading - “Claire missed ye so much, but she put on such a brave face, the poor lass couldna stay here a day longer thinking ye had betrayed her.”

I pinched my eyes with my thumb and forefinger willing the tears to stop, I sniffed noisily. Jenny’s soft voice was murmuring comfort into the phone, but I couldn’t make out what she was saying.

“Can ye explain it to her Jamie, maybe she will listen to ye…”

“that’s the worst of it Janet” I choked into the phone, “I canna explain it, just now.”

The softening sympathetic tone lacing Jenny’s voice suddenly reverted to the shriller tone of earlier. “What do ye mean ye canna explain it? For god’s sake, Jamie do ye want to lose them?”

“Are ye mad Janet, of course, I dinna want that – I just need to think a minute will ye let me think.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line, breathing heavily through my nose as I racked my brain trying to come up with a way to tell Claire, to make her understand what was going on here.

Bile was rising up my throat as I imagined her reaction, what she thought of me, how she must hate me. Fear gripping my insides that I wouldn’t be able to change her mind.

Geneva had planned this, as I was busily conspiring against her and her family, she naively believed that if she removed Claire from the picture, there was something to be gained between her and me, that was my fault.

I had brought this on us, I had followed directions, played along to get the answers, didn’t rebuke unwarranted touches or flirtatious smiles. I had led Geneva to believe there was hope. I had left Claire, and I open to this, it didn’t matter that it was a lie, how would I ever explain this without telling her why?

How could I make her believe it was only her for me? That it was laughable, I would ever want Geneva Dunsany in any way.

I couldn’t go to her yet without sabotaging everything. If I left Geneva would never face the consequences of her action, all of this would have been for nothing.
There had been nothing but silence on the phone for a long time, Jenny just waited as if knowing I had to try and work out what I could say.

I… I need to ask something of you, Jenny?“ I said, sometime later, my voice sounded different to my own ear, smaller, less almost.

“Yes,” she said without faltering.

“When ye can get through to Claire, will ye tell her two things from me.”

I heard Jenny swallow, and she hoarsely mumbled: “Aye Jamie, go on.”

“Tell her I love her, and tell her not to forget that I am her obligation, so she needs to try to keep her promise.”

Jenny remained silent, probably wondering what the hell I was going on about, but eventually, I heard static and her sure voice saying “Aye, I will a bràthair.”

If nothing else, the fear in my tone had achieved one thing. My sister believed me, without reason or explanation, she knew.

I hung up the phone, one thing clear in my mind. I had to get word to Claire. I couldn’t lose her.
Chapter Summary

@notevenjokingfic took a small idea I had and used her wonderful mind to help me build on it for this chapter. Both she and @balfieheughlywed give me their time, advise and support and I really value it all as I know they've hectic lives outside of fanfic land. As usual @laythornmuse and @ladyviolethummingbird have been hugely helpful and supportive, and the DM's over our combined fics could fill a novel lol. I really hope you like it. X

7 weeks later. Boston.

With my phone tucked under my chin and Jenny Fraser’s persistent questioning in my ear, I fumbled in the bottom of my bag in search of the house keys.

“Jenny, honestly I’m fine. We’re back in a routine now, Willie is happy to see his old school friends. – I – am fine.”

“Ye have repeated fine twice, so ye must be then.” She quipped sarcastically, before her tone softened – “ye are not and I ken it well, mam and Da want to go out to see ye and Willie in a few weeks would that be ok?”

“Of course, I would love to see them, and Willie would be delighted.”

“aye,” Jenny agreed quietly. I could almost hear her mind working over the phone.

“Wot?” I blurted out more testily than Jenny deserved and kicked myself.

“Ach, it’s nothing Claire, it’s just I ken ye dinna want to talk about him, but I only wondered if ye had heard anything from Jamie? His calls are becoming less and less frequent here, Mam and Da are worrit and I – don’t want to upset ye, but there is something off about what is going on there.”

I wasn’t capable of answering without sounding bitter, but I heard the weary, worried tone in Jenny’s voice and wouldn’t hurt her for anything.

“He rings Willie every second day.” I said sighing, since the first phone call after I returned to Boston, I just hand the phone to Willie, so I haven’t really spoken to him myself – I can’t just yet.” I finished honestly.

“aye – off course Claire.”

The vice-tight grip on my heart as I even discussed Jamie was the reason I wasn’t capable of holding a conversation with him. My days and nights spent missing him, followed by the wave of gripping pain overcoming me every time I imagined him with Geneva Dunsany, her high pitched giggle haunting my dreams as I saw her, at work, at play and in his bed.
Willie tugged impatiently on my coat, “Will ye open the door mama, I’m burst’n.” I looked down at him as he danced from foot to foot while holding his crotch.

Pushing the door open, I dropped my bag and swapped Jenny to my opposite ear.

“Look I’m sure, he is just busy there Jen, it’s all new – ” I trailed off lamely. Geneva is new; I thought to myself and felt the lump run from my stomach up to my throat.

“Claire – “Jenny began hesitantly “I dinna think Jamie is busy for the reasons you do; I have spoken to him – I told ye what he said.”

I blinked back tears, “Yes you did – but I really can’t think about it anymore – I need to be strong for Willie and working myself into a weeping heap thinking of the what if’s will not help me function.” I admitted in resigned sigh.

There was silence on the other end of the phone for a few moments, and Jenny’s tone was almost unrecognisable when she spoke again.

“As mad as I am with him for putting you in this position, to even give people the chance to question him. I don’t believe it. – Claire, I heard him. There is no way that man loves anyone but ye.”

The bitterness in my retort surprised me as much as Jenny, “He doesn’t need to love her Jenny.”

I could hear static and the sound of Jenny picking something up and placing it down again. I didn’t need to see her to know she was pacing, a tell when Jenny was thinking, similar to Jamie’s fingers running a rhythm on his thigh. Fraser quirks.

“Claire – ya ken ye need to speak to him, yer not being honest with him either. “

“But yet- its – too ” I cut off mid-sentence when my eye fell on an envelope amongst the post that was strewn across the welcome mat.

Mr William Fraser, followed by our address and in Jamie’s very distinguishable scrawl.

“Claire, are ye there?”

“Oh yes sorry- yes –yes I am.” An urgency to get Jenny off the phone made me blurt out “I promise I will talk to him soon.”

“Jen I have to go Willie needs – “

“Aye, aye, go on then I will speak to ye tomorrow.”

I heard a click at her end and grabbed the envelope from the floor ignoring the rest.
Willie ripped open the package with gusto, tongue hanging from his mouth in concentration. Toppling the contents on to the table, he clutched something resembling a brightly illustrated, bound journal.

He cast it up into the air and excitedly declared “Da send me a book.”

“So it would seem” I replied throwing my dubious gaze over it.

The front cover was a sweeping landscape of fields and meadows, a little mole family standing front and centre arms and hands entwined with each other. I only needed to glance once to know that it was Jamie’s work. He had inherited Ellen’s artistic streak, and often drew funny cartoon characters to entertain Willie, this work had the same detailed sketching but with bright wisps of colour illuminating it.

It wasn’t unusual for Jamie to buy or send books to Willie; bedtime story was their thing whenever they were together. Jamie excelled at it, he read animatedly to Willie, giving each character a funny accent, making background sounds and explaining any detail Willie failed to grasp. In the short time he had lived together in Lallybroch I found myself being lulled into Willie’s room at night to hear Jamie read to him.

The bound storybook I held in my hand now, was a first; Jamie had made an actual book just for Willie.

The title at the top of it read, The Mole family and at the bottom, it said written and illustrated by James Fraser.

“Look Mama” Willie was jumping up and down excitedly, “those moles are us, see.” His little finger jamming each animal. “The big mole looks like Da, he is really tall and has red curly hair, and he is wearing a kilt!” Willie’s eyes were wide as saucers as his gaze drifted to the littlest of the moles, who was wearing Willie’s favourite jeans, sweater combo, this mole had the same straight floppy red hair as Willie that made it so easy to pick him from a crowd.

“That one is me –” he continued voice getting pitcher with each similarity he could find “oh and look” – he almost screeched – “that pretty mole is you, mama.”

I had never seen a pretty mole before and had to admit the mole Willie was now jabbing eagerly, was quite eye-catching, and there was little doubt this mole was female.

She stood out from the rest of her family, wearing a pretty floral dress resembling something I owned and wore regularly, a matching flower stuck in long curly hair. However, what made her different to the others wasn’t just her lack of red hair or feminine wardrobe, it was the detail Jamie went to in adding golden flecks to her eyes making them look like they were glowing. She had long fluttering eyelashes sweeping wide across her upper lid and a wide smile lighting her face. Her femininity was further emphasised by the usual lack of roundness moles typically possessed, this mole had an accentuated curvy figure with a controversial voluptuous cleavage for a children’s book.

Jamie had further personalised this mole to resemble me by adding a shiny stethoscope, which hung loosely around her neck.

I bristled at the happy little family bounding up from the page, suddenly angry at whatever Jamie was trying to pull off. Paint a picture of a happy mole family running through a pretty garden, make it resemble the woman you fucked over and all should be forgiven?
Willie peeked inside the front cover which had an inscription a printed version of Jamie’s scrawl, he hastily thrust the book into my hand, “what does it say mama?” rubbing his little hands together, smile wide and brimming with delight.

I inhaled deeply as I glanced at the typescript and cursed Jamie with everything I possessed.

“Well” I began evenly, “the name is called the Mole Family” I traced my finger lightly over the title. Imagining Jamie bent over a desk plotting his story out.

Willie nodded his head, “aye and what does that say at the bottom?”

I puffed out an incredulous breath and damned Jamie Fraser to hell and back.

“It says: Mama please read this to Willie, all my love Da.”

My childish heart felt like picking up my phone and texting him to read his own bloody story.

However, I wouldn’t deprive Willie of anything and certainly not something that had lit up his whole face the way this book had.

Letting out a shaky breath I told Willie to brush his teeth and to hop into bed, “I will be there in a minute.”

Holding Willie under the crook of my arm I opening the first page of Jamie’s book, feeling ridiculously nervous for someone about to undertake what most parents routinely went through every evening. I couldn’t shake the feeling that this book was more than just a bedtime story.

Once upon a time, way up in the Scottish highlands lived a mole family. Da Mole, Mama Mole and Baby Mole. They loved their home, and their little farm and being together –

Jamie had illustrated each page, showing the moles living and working happily on their farm, to build the story he had included the moles with different types of dialogue, riding horses, playing with the baby mole, all lending to the storybook happy family image most children’s books captured.

I turned a page to find the mole family standing outside a house that looked eerily familiar to what the finished product of our house at Lallybroch should have looked like; Willie didn’t seem to notice my hesitancy at turning the next page, as if I was waiting for something to explode from the book.

Willie pointed at the smallest mole riding a large black horse, tilting his head up to look at me, “look mama I’m riding Donas” he declared proudly.

“So you are.” The next page showed the mole talking to a new family of animals. “What are those?” Willie asked, his brows creased in confusion. “Wait until I get to that bit” my curiosity had me skimming ahead quickly, suddenly desperate to know where this story was going.

One day a weasel family came to visit. They asked Da mole to go and work for them at their home, far away from Scotland. Da Mole didn’t want to work for the Weasel family, so he said no thank you, he would hate to leave Mama mole and baby mole. However, the Weasels were a mean
My heart beat fast in my chest as I read on to Willie, revealing the Weasel family threatened and fought with the moles until Da mole went with them.

Willie’s brow creased and his chin dimpled while he listened to each twist and turn.

I couldn’t deny I was more familiar with the beginning of the story but once I turned the page to see Da mole working at the weasel farm and a new character introduced on the page next to him. I almost forgot I was reading a four-year-old story and found my eyes jumping ahead as I eyed a puffin dressed in a police uniform that Jamie had drawn in great detail.

The puffin had floppy blonde hair, with boggle eyes, he was dressed head to toe in police uniform.

Da mole was working one day on the Weasel farm when Puffin the policeman came to see him –

My lips trembled, and my sweaty palms fumbled with the pages as I read over the piece about the policeman to Willie and again in my head. The policeman said the weasels had a lot of money that didn’t belong to them, and if Da mole could pretend to be their friend, the weasels might show Da mole where they hid their money.

I almost forgot to read the bit to Willie where the puffin would watch and listen to everything Da mole did so he could catch the weasels I was so intent on working out what this meant for Jamie in Hellwater.

“ye skipped a bit mama” Willie pushed his hand to where the puffin was observing Da mole from a distance.

As the story played out, I found myself ignoring Willie’s requests to put different accents on the animals as Jamie did. Instead carefully piecing together the plot Jamie was laying out, and the message he sent when the policeman told the mole of the risks to his family should they find out what he was doing.

Jamie had worked towards Willie seeing how much the mole missed his family, a little thought cloud bubble over the mole’s head, imagining what it would be like to be home again in bed with his family all of them curled up contently in one bed.

Willie’s head bent solemnly, “that’s like pur Da.”

I turned the next page to images and text of Da mole befriending the weasels so that they led him to the money. Willie complained I was reading too fast.

The quality of the bedtime story taking a backseat as I grappled to understand what this all meant.

As I reached the last few pages, Da mole was stood in a room filled with money, showing it to a little army of puffins. Willie laughed at the funny caricature faces Jamie had given each one.

I licked my lips nervously as the story concluded with Da mole back and happy with his family. The weasels locked up. Willie sighed contentedly, “that was sooo good mama, will ye read it one more time?”

I could barely stop myself from tearing out of the room to scan the book alone. Turning off the light I promised Willie I would read it one more time in the morning before school.
A few minutes later I was bent over the book in the kitchen, going through each detail. Panic rising in my belly as I examined each picture again, this time noticing small details that my addled brain had missed, the puffin pointing at a phone and telling the mole not to use it, ‘if the weasels should find out.” Written in the dialogue box about the puffins head.

I let my fingers feel each drawing, feather-light touching the words images of Jamie plotting, planning and taking the time to sketch something to match each twist and turn so that he could tell me a story.

This wasn’t the action of someone who was cheating with another woman; this was someone who was caught and still found a way – to make me see.

My fingers suddenly felt something like brail along the last page.

I traced each letter with my finger before hastily jotting it on a notepad beside me.

Gaelic words, I knew few but recognised the first two instantly. Jamie used the first one when he slipped his ring on my finger. My bhean, my wife. The second he regularly used when talking about Willie. Mo Mhac, my son.

I grabbed my phone from the table and typed in the last two, tears flowing down my cheeks when the translation popped up on the screen.

Mo bhean
Mo mhac
Mo h-uile rud.
Na diochuimhnich

My Wife, My Son, My everything, don’t forget.
Jamie’s monosyllabic voice recording answered. “Hi, this is Jamie, leave a message after the beep.”

Plummeting my heart into my shoes. Again.

Where are you?

Willie wriggled impatiently within my grasp bringing my attention back to him.

“dinna hold my hand mama! We’re past the gate.” He rolled his eyes dramatically, cheeks burning the same crimson Jamie’s did when he was embarrassed.

With one final tug, he broke free and ran up the school path. "What about my kiss?” I shouted after him, prodding myself in the cheek and pouting my lips slightly. Willie rolled his eyes for a second time but dutifully ran back and kissed me quickly.

“See ye later mama” he bellowed as he pushed the school door open and let it bang noisily behind him. I tutted in my mind as I saw him drag his bag haphazardly behind him down the glass corridor.

Glancing back down at my phone I willed it to ring. It had been three days since the book arrived and after foolishly waiting until the next day to contact Jamie for fear I would draw attention to him. I tried his number with all attempts to reach him falling flat. My chest felt bruised from the hard thrum of my heart against it, persistent and unusually fast. It was so unlike him.

Since our return to Boston, Jamie had phoned religiously. I had only taken his call on the first occasion and passed the phone to Willie for all the others.

I walked quickly back to the house, I still had a few hours before my shift at the hospital.

My mind raced with possibilities of why he had turned his phone off, what had caused him to stop ringing Willie? No matter what had happened since our return to Scotland Jamie had rung consistently. A guilty feeling tugged at my insides. Maybe if I had taken his calls, instead of fobbing the phone on to Willie, I might have some idea where he was, what was happening. I should have trusted him. The other part of my brain tried to comfort me, you couldn’t have known,
he didn’t tell you.

I hadn’t planned on ignoring him as I had; the first call once we returned had thrown me. I expected something totally different from him, needed it. Instead, he had turned everything on its head and left me reeling.

The idea of Jamie with Geneva was hurtful; beyond hurtful given what she had conspired to do to our family but even after Dougal confirmed it. Something inside of me kept a glimmer of hope, or maybe something more akin to trust that Jamie wouldn’t do that. He was honorable, not just with me, with his family, his friends. Apart from getting with me at Jenny’s wedding, he had never appeared to be a man that would cheat and to cheat so blatantly.

Even then he had ended things with Laoghaire before we slept together. It was no excuse, but there was a pull between us, a pull so strong I would have done the same in his shoes had our roles been reversed, no man would keep me from Jamie, and a voice inside my head was telling me that no woman would keep me from him.

So when he phoned on our first evening back in Boston, I had imagined for him to have a reason, an excuse. I hadn’t predicted the vagueness on the other end of the phone. There was no doubt about his nerves, his voice was clearly shaking, but he lacked any words to tell me what the hell was happening there, never mind what was happening with Geneva Dunsany.

The tremor in his voice should have told me he wanted to say more than he did, but I was so angry, so much had happened in forty-eight hours. I didn’t hear what I should have.

“Ye went back early”, he had said cautiously.

It hadn’t been what I was expecting. My mouth incapable of speech had hung agape as I stood in my kitchen, clenching the hem of my sweater with such vigour I thought it might rip.

He took my silence for what it was and began to speak again.

“Jenny told me.”

I presumed he meant Jenny had told him I had gone back to Boston early.

He cleared his throat and hesitantly, all most painfully said “Claire –”

I had waited, holding out for something, words of comfort anything that would ease the ache in my chest at what I had been led to believe about him and Geneva.

Jenny had told him, he knew what I believed or was led to, he knew the pain and humiliation I had felt since she had answered his phone and laughed seductively, before telling me that Jamie couldn’t come to the phone.

If she could have conjured up an image and hurled it down the line to me that night it would have been her curled around his hips, holding his phone in the air while she threw her head back and laughed at my stupidity.

I had gone to bed that night in a mixture of alcohol, rage and broken-hearted tears. In the morning I had stilled my mind and my heart and told myself that Geneva Dunsany was capable of these types of games and so much more, promising myself that Jamie would have an explanation.

Jenny had arrived with coffee and pancakes from Ellen, and reassured me as only she could that Geneva was a desperate slapper and “Jamie wouldna risk the clap to lie with her.”
I snorted into my coffee, my heart slowly unwinding to its normal rhythm when she took my hand and said: “honestly Claire, Jamie is too in love with ye to want another woman, its nay true and he will tell ye.”

Later on, showered and ready for the day I was wrestling with Willie to dress him when Dougal Mc Kenzie had knocked on my door. “A word lass?” was all he had said before barging past me. Shooting me his most sympathetic smile and telling me clearly and without preamble that Geneva had phoned him to tell him of my late night call.

“How truly sorry she was that ye should find out in such a way. She and Jamie would never want to hurt ye.”

Shoulders straight and head held high. I had merely asked him to leave before emptying the contents of my stomach down the toilet.

Twenty-four hours later and back in the safety of my galley kitchen in Boston, Jamie’s name flashing on my screen with the same urgency that would draw me to answer it without hesitation, without a conscious thought but the need to hear him tell me it wasn’t true. I wanted to curl into the shelter of his shoulder and have him tell me there was no one but me, that Geneva Dunsany had robbed his phone and Dougal Mc Kenzie had not spoken an honest word in all his life. It hadn’t gone down like that.

“Claire I – “

Please make it better.

“Remember what I asked ye?”

Was he serious? That just on a whim, on a promise I had made before I heard directly he was sleeping with someone else. He wanted me to honour my promises?

When he had asked that, I thought he meant trust him not to get arrested, trust him to come back, trust him to love me. God, I didn’t think he was asking me to fucking trust him to insanity.

“Can – you – explain? I had hissed out between gritted teeth.

A pause that went on too long, because if he could explain this nightmare, he shouldn’t need time.

I heard him take a large intake of breath, and something like a sniff, maybe a sob. I didn’t move didn’t flinch. Waited with bated breath to hear what he had to say.

His words were choked with emotion; I didn’t need to see his face to know it was buried into his palm.

“I – love – you.” He had all but whispered, slow and precise, for a minute I had taken it as a balm before I realised that wasn’t what I asked.

I had asked him to explain, and he couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

Loving me wasn’t the issue, had he fucked her? Could he tell me what the hell was happening?

“I need more than that Jamie.” My tone did not broker argument; he knew he had one chance before I was gone from this conversation.
“Right now - I canna say anything other than that Claire.” Each word punctuated angrily, and his breath was brimming with frustration.

I had said nothing other than “I will put Willie on; I have nothing more to say.”

That had been seven weeks ago, I refused each and every one of his calls, handing the phone to our son. Willie blurring out the highlights of his day, ranging from “and then Johnny said let’s put a straw in the milk – “ to "I dinna like Julie sitting beside me Da, she smells like flowers it makes me sneeze.” I had no idea what Jamie advised on his end, and I tried to walk into another room. This way it would be easier. Each evening Willie returned the phone with the same message. “Da says he loves ye.”

Up until the book arriving I would grind my teeth or clench my fingernails into my palm to stop myself retorting "tell your father I said to fuck right off.” I never would but the fear of it blurring out of my hot-tempered mouth was a risk I had to prepare for.

Now I would give anything to have him ring, wanting to know he was ok, that I believed him, that I loved him too.

After dropping Willie to school and safely ensconced inside my living room I was desperate for any information I could find on Hellwater, anything that might fill in the gaps of what Jamie was doing. Sitting bow legged on my living room floor, laptop cradled precariously between my legs, I typed in Hellwater and almost held my breath as I waited on the page to populate with search results.

Nothing glaringly criminal jumped out at me, Hellwater’s official webpage, media articles discussing the estate and its history, and various Olympic games news reports that mentioned Hellwater for training and breeding of horses. I knew from Jenny that some of these high bred horses had originated from Jamie and was the main reason why William Dunsany had been so taken with Jamie.

Below all these articles was one solely focused on Lord William Dunsany himself, again nothing stood out as new information, he had inherited his title, the Dunsany family had held Hellwater estate for generations, and in the past ten years, they had won numerous awards for being the most accomplished equestrian centre in Europe.

Under personal history it listed William Dunsany as married with three children. I knew of only two daughters. Gordon. One son? I hadn’t heard of him. I opened a second tab and typed in the name. The first link that popped up on my screen was an article detailing the death of Gordon Dunsany almost six years ago. The only son of Lord and Lady Ellesmere, died tragically while abroad in Panama. Very little else apart from listing his previous employment as financial controller of Hellwater estates. So Geneva had taken over from her brother?

Typing Geneva’s name into the browser was much less satisfying, and certainly no mention of her untimely demise. Instead, it showed a few images of her pictured at some D list royal events, a few polo matches and more recently at a charity gala in aid of injured jockeys.

I noted the date was the same night Dougal Mc Kenzie had come for dinner and subsequently the night I went on to hear her high pitched giggle on Jamie’s phone. I searched up all images of the charity gala, but Jamie was either not photographed or didn’t attend. He certainly had no word of
attending a fundraiser, but he had said so little about what he was doing in Hellwater, him not mentioning it wasn’t significant.

The second article in a financial publication mentioned Geneva taking on the position of financial controller at Hellwater; it was dated one year after her brother died. Listing her educational background which all seemed to be science-based. If the article was accurate, she had very little accounting or financial training.

A weird sense of sadness passed over me at the tragedy which had befallen the Dunsany’s, leading to Geneva having to leave everything she had pursued to fill her dead brother’s shoes. My mind stretched to wonder how a family who had been through such heartache could be so underhanded in their dealings with Jamie, knowing it separated him from his family.

I was just about to close the article down when I noticed a third link detailing the recent upsurge in Hellwater business ranking. It also consisted of a paragraph with information on the new state of the art, equestrian centre that would commence construction this year with a budget of over 10 million sterling at its disposal.

A sprig of jealousy tightened over my heart as it occurred to me that I had wholly underestimated Geneva Dunsany in terms of her ability within her job and also in her want of Jamie.

My phone vibrated on the floor beside me, and I almost keeled over in my haste to answer it. My heart sank when I saw Jenny’s name flash up on my screen.

“Hi, Jen,” I said feigning brightness. I knew how worried the Frasers had been about Jamie, I couldn’t even attempt or want to tell them what I had discovered in the past three days. Brian would be back in ICU and Jamie would never forgive himself.

“Claire – “

She sounded like she had been running. “Are you alright Jenny, what’s wrong?”

“Oh my god” – she said more urgently than I had ever heard her speak – “have ye seen any UK news?”

I scrunched my nose up in confusion before she all but shouted.

“Turn on yer UK news!” I hastily scrambled across the floor to my TV, fingers slipping as I tried to think of a channel that had good coverage of British news reports, settling on BBC news and waiting for the screen to adjust.

My eyes blinked, once and then again as I made sure it was Hellwater grounds I was staring at. Two uniformed officers standing guard outside the main gates, one talking casually into their radio transceiver.

A red banner at the bottom of the screen read. Lord William Dunsany and his daughter Geneva Dunsany have been arrested in an early dawn raid at their Hellwater estate, this morning.

A bead of sweat ran down my neck as I waited for the news banner to update.

Lord Dunsany and his daughter have been charged under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act and were under investigation by HM Revenue and Customs Police and Criminal Evidence team.

Suddenly the picture above the banner changed, and Geneva Dunsany appeared on the screen handcuffed and been led from her home by several plain closed policemen. Her father following
closely behind her.

Her head bowed to hide her face as she was guided through a maze of photographers and television crews.

A report stood in front of the Hellwater estate, holding a finger to her ear in anticipation of a question from the news-desk. Her British accent was bright and chirpy as she detailed the little information that could be released at this time.

The arrest is said to be in connection with one of the largest tax fraud cases the HMRC has investigated in recent years. Both intrusive surveillance and property surveillance had been practiced under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, and it is believed the Dunsany’s have been under investigation by the HMRC for some time. The Dunsany family have declined to comment at this stage.

My legs gave way, and I fell back awkwardly against the couch. I could still hear Jenny’s voice asking if I was there from the phone on the floor.
Wild Horses.

Chapter Summary

So… The next chapter is here and there is some revealing of what has been going on at Hellwater. I worried about this chapter as these details have been in my head for months now and I wanted to make sure they were been explained properly - or that the dialogue included what it should. Thank you to my go-to gal @balfieheughlywed for reading this for me, encouraging and asking the necessary questions. I have badgered the expert eye of @notevenjokingfic for the past few chapters and I am so grateful to have her input, the plot nearly swallowed me up and she straightens me out when I get silly! @ladyvioletthummingbird is such support with this fic, thank you as always. You're appreciation and patience with this story has been incredible, thanks for reading.

On my return journey from Willie’s school with grocery bags clutched in hand I approached my front door step distractedly until I noticed the large body sitting on my doorstep.

Jamie's tall frame sat crouched on the cement step outside my apartment, his forearms hung loosely over his knees, his head bowed down into his body, either asleep or staring at something on the ground. I could still make out the auburn golden curls at the nape of his neck, and I absently wondered when he had gotten it cut?

I had anticipated that he would come, as soon as the reporter spoke the words detailing the Dunsany's arrest a few days ago, I knew Jamie would come as quickly as could be arranged. If not for me than for Willie. Now faced with the reality of the man, I had loved and hated and dreamt of since I had left Scotland. I was suddenly paralysed. Fear gripping my insides, and my heart beating painfully against my chest.

I steadied my breath for a moment before I dared to move forward. My palms were suddenly wet, and the grocery bags slipped forward losing their traction within my grasp, they made a ruffling sound causing Jamie's head to jolt up.

His eyes widened as he scrambled to his legs quickly. I put one foot forward to move, but Jamie was already walking down the path towards me in long even strides, I froze waiting for him. Clearing my throat in preparation to speak, I hadn't time to utter a word as he crushed me to him, and I felt a ripping sensation in my heart at the half-choked sob that framed my name in his mouth.

"Claire –

Jamie's hands ran down the length of my back before dipping his head into the curve of my neck as if preparing to cocoon there.

I was so dumbfounded I hadn't even put down my grocery bags, my arms hung awkwardly at my sides, Jamie just held onto me as a child would to their favourite rag doll. My head dropped slowly, and I nestled against his cheek, feeling his jaw tremble against me. I lost the bags then and wrapped my arms around him as tightly as I could. I don't know how long we stayed like that as if holding each other up. Jamie's voice made a
rustling sound low somewhere near my neck. It was definitely Gaelic, and it came in long relieved sighs.

I pulled away, my lips curled up looking at him curiously,

"What are you mumbling?"

"Just saying thanks", he said eyes twinkling.

"To who?"

"To all the different gods I prayed to on the way here", he tilted his head against my forehead – "tis only right now I can put my arms around ye." He attempted a wink which drew my eyes back to his eyes. They were watery and tired and they were trying to read something on my face.

"Are you ok?" I asked stupidly, "I mean you weren't hurt or anything – "

He blinked rapidly and sniffed before his lips curled upwards.

"Nay Sassenach, not physically anyway –."

I gave him a nod in understanding and rested against his forehead for a moment, taking in his scent and warmth. Just to enjoy him, no matter what would come later.

Jamie raised a hand to push one of the errand curls behind my ear, his fingers grazed over my cheek, and his eyes darted to my lips. I couldn't go there yet.

"I didn't expect you to be here "I dipped my head to avoid him seeing my cheeks flush – " so soon I mean" I was babbling, aware of his eyes on me.

His finger found my chin bringing my gaze back up to him.

"Wild horses couldna stopped me."

"I tried phoning you" I stumbled over the words too preoccupied with the way his gaze held mine.

"They took it, - evidence ." He answered while rubbing his nose along mine.

They?

There was so much I needed to know. So many blanks he had to fill in. The relief that he was alive and well, and unharmed had quenched the burning anxiety flowing around my body, only to realise now that his physical well-being was looked after, I still had other issues to worry about.

My mind had reconciled itself with the fact that I would have an explanation about Hellwater, maybe not one I wanted. However, the restrained phone conversation I had with Jamie about Geneva Dunsany was not going to be the final version, some part of me had always known that. Fear crept back into the spaces that had been soothed a few moments before at the mere sight of him.

No matter Jamie's motive if he had done something with Geneva Dunsany to gain information, there would be no more him and me, or us. It would be a final unrepairable rip, made all the more painful because while he may not have done it in want, lust or even love, he would have done it knowing there could be no him and I after the fact. Any deal he had struck involving something like that, would have offered up our relationship on a platter.

I moved out of his embrace and looked up at him through my eyelashes. "You had better come in."
"I hadn't been aware that I had started to empty the contents of my shopping bags into cupboards until I felt Jamie's large hand slide over mine while I reached to place a jar in the cupboard above me. 
"Leave them, Claire?"
It was laughable but I suddenly I didn't want to know.

Lowering myself cautiously into the chair opposite him, his hands clasped together as if in prayer, blue eyes watching me intently.
He knew I was off, and he knew I was scared.

"Did ye get the book?"

I nodded and couldn't help a small smile curve my lips. "Yes, it was quite the hit." 
Shaking my head, "I still can't quite believe all that must have happened"- I paused briefly licking my lips - "to you." I finished pointedly.

Jamie's brows rose, furrowing as he shook his head "not just me Claire, it happened to you too, and Willie – our family."

A flash of red coloured his cheeks, our family was said more as a question than a statement. Were we still one?

"Start from the beginning, I need to know how it all – "for want of a better word I settled on the obvious "– began."

Jamie nodded and reached a hand out to one of mine, examining it for a moment. His finger was rubbing lightly over the space where his ring used to rest, and I felt a deep pressing pain stretching my chest as I wondered if I would ever see it there again.

"At our engagement party –" he blurted out suddenly, and I could feel my self-bristling, had he known what he was doing all this time?

"I was in foul humour – " he continued.

His hand left mine to wave up in the air, his forehead creased as he frowned, remembering " ye were so heartbroken at what I had done, I was pissed at myself for being so stupid – what ye must have thought of me."

He gave me a sorrowful look and continued.

"I saw them all congratulating ye, and how ye shrank away – he let out a strangled sigh "I dinna blame ye, I wouldna want to marry me either."

My brows creased in confusion and not stopping to try and reassure him I stopped him in his tracks.

"What has our engagement party and my apparent loathing to marry you got to do with William Dunsany and his daughter?" he wouldn't hear her name from my tongue "- getting arrested." My voice was like ice, and I didn't realise the annoyance that was burning up inside of me until I began to speak.
Jamie's eyes flashed in understanding, and he raised a hand halting me.

"Sorry – I just meant that I went outside to calm down before I insulted every guest mam and Da had invited, and that is when I got the first inclination that there was more than just dodgy contracts at play in Hellwater."

"Ok so tell me."

"Geneva followed me outside –" my face must have expressed something because Jamie waved his hand and said, "I mean- she claimed it was to say sorry how things had gone down over the contracts– she leaned into my ear and told me I should look at the positives."

He breathed heavily through his nose. Rucking a hand through his hair as I could see him replaying what had happened over in his head.

"I told her to go fuck herself if I recall correctly –" he sucked in his bottom lip and laughed snidely. "she isna used to people telling her no."

I engulfed a strangled breath and released it slowly, willing myself to remain calm.

" – while she was walking away she threw some comment at me about "It being a pity because I would have a lot of money at my disposal for this project - I could make a name for myself." he curled his finger into air quotes ‘ with this once in a lifetime project’ he corrected.

Jamie shook his head disbelievingly – "at the time I was in such a temper, I dinna really focus on what she said – it was only later when I got to Hellwater – I suppose I was more desperate then to find their flaws – or something that would get me out of there."

I sat back in my chair, and Jamie grasped for my hand again. "It was only when I started thinking of how she had worded it that I realised she had said it so underhandedly, almost looking over her shoulder” – he gave me a cynical look "I kent then whatever she meant about money at my disposal – she would be controlling it and in the hopes she could control me if I was intrested."

I rose and grabbed a glass from the cupboard filling it from the tap and downing it in one, not even thinking to offer him any.

"I was sae focused on legal routes to wrangle my way out of their grasp, I failed to see that if they got me to Hellwater under coercion, they had to have their hands dirty elsewhere."

I flashed him a smile, and he shifted nervously. "Smarter than you look, Fraser." Jamie sat forward with purpose now," I researched everything I could find out about them, and the bit of information I found was something I knew all along but dinna register."

I smiled shyly at him, seeing the look of achievement fill his eyes. A tender look flashed across his face, and he forgot lost his place in the story for a moment.

He slowly allowed his finger to crawl over the back of my hand; he reached my wrist which he turned upright and brought it to his mouth.

"it is so good to be sitting here looking at ye, being able just to reach out and feel ye Claire – it probably sounds daft but yer like a dream.” I couldn't stop my face lighting up, and we stayed in that moment beaming back at each other. Eventually, a little voice inside my head told me I needed to know the rest.

"What didn't register? " I asked after a time.
"Gordon Dunsany was found dead in Panama."

I crooked an enquiring eyebrow at him. "Panama" – Jamie said patiently while drumming a finger against my kitchen table " a tax heaven – " a sly smile lightening his eyes – "probably one of the most well-known things about it."

"Oh"

"Aye, well that and at the time Gordon was found dead, he was the financial controller for Hellwater estates."

"Oh," I said again.

"I had an old friend from Uni that I kent was working in some capacity at HRMC. John Grey, have I mentioned him to ye?"

I shook my head, and Jamie stood, walking to the kitchen sink and refilling my empty glass and downing it.

"I contacted him and pitched the idea, told him what I knew. He immediately offered to meet me, but away from Hellwater."

He sat back down heavily on the seat opposite me. "That is when I kent, I was on to a winner."

My phone buzzed insistently in my pocket, I glanced at it quickly and hit the silence button Jamie's eyes followed my movements.

"Do ye need to –"

I tilted my head indicating for him to continue.

"As soon as I told him about Geneva mentioning money at my disposal for the equestrian centre, John was all over it. They had tried an investigation a few years before but lacked evidence linking the Dunsany's to any foreign accounts."

He shrugged his shoulders "what they really needed was to get Geneva to move money from these accounts – and that is where I came in."

My ears were buzzing, and my stomach churned over, the water seemed to be more than my system could handle, and the more I heard Geneva's name from Jamie's lips, the more I wanted to gag.

My gaze flicked away from his, and I looked down at my hands. Wanting to badly ask him, what his role had been with Geneva, pride sticking in my throat as he narrowed his eyes, a concerned expression etched on his face.

"Claire –"

"Just tell it as it happened" I managed to stammer out.

Jamie nodded slowly, I could see his adam's apple bobbing up and down, and he shifted in his chair before he started to speak again.

"It was clear that Geneva was vera keen to impress me –" he paused and deliberately met my eye I thought for a moment he wanted to drop the story of the case and just speak about him and me, what all this meant, but I glanced away.

He took the hint and continued.
"John and his team wanted me to push her with the project, make her believe that costs had gone over what had been predicted, demand changes that would require more funds, place urgency on having money drawn down."

He paused and slid his hands across the table, they were less than an inch from my clenched hands, but I didn't move to touch him.

"We went down that route – "

I was done listening to the legal plotting of this investigation.

"I would imagine you had to be on good enough terms with her then?", feeling the flush of red fill my cheeks.

Jamie's nodded, and he pressed his lips into a thin line, his face impassive.

"Aye at first", he agreed " I had to keep her talk'n and such, the night ye called – "

I straightened my back and leaned over the table, willing myself to hide any hint of emotion from my face.

"Jamie, did you sleep with her or – ?"

His eyes went wide as stalks and he shook his head vehemently.

"NO!"

"Claire – "

I put my hand up to stop him, "Look there was pressure on you, you may not have wanted to but – "

"Claire- " he banged his fist of the table. "I did no sleep with her. Ye must believe me."

I didn't answer, but I locked my gaze with his, I could see tears welling up behind his eyes, from frustration or hurt at my accusation I couldn't tell.

He looked down at his hands scrutinising his palms. He said nothing for several minutes, and I thought he was done explaining himself.

"That night ye rang – was the game changer."

"Why?"

"I – well up until that I think I carried some guilt about her, I kept thinking she is a young lass probably knows no better, her father had ran his business this way, then moulded her brother and when he died he molded Geneva – that is what I thought anyway." His shoulders slackened defensively and he let out a long sigh. I could see exhaustion creep into his body and I wondered when he had last slept.

"I suppose I was so desperate to get out of there I dinna care who I hurt – but as the days wore on and I realised if I managed to pull this off" – he looked up and met my eye – " Geneva would go away for a long time, and it would be because of me." His eyes looked at mine pleading, hoping I understood.

"What happened the night she answered your phone?"
"She had been at a fundraiser –" he pinched his eyes between thumb and forefinger – "she came by the studio I was staying at blind drunk."

My fingernails were digging into the palms of my hands, and I willed him to hurry up or better again stop talking. Either one would do.

"The surveillance guys had seen her coming, rang ahead to tell me to wire up."

He snorted incredulously. "I had barely opened the door when I knew I had made a major mistake, she was really drunk, messy drunk – almost threw herself into my arms straight away, calling me James and tell'n me she loved me."

Jamie's head shook from side to side. "I told her she was drunk – to sort herself out."

"Then she started taking her clothes off – I flipped, told her to get out – then the tears started."

He swallowed "I was ashamed – I had pretended to befriend her to get information that would finish her family – she had taken it to heart thinking I had feelings for her – I told her it was ok and that I would bring her home – it was while I went to get a robe or something to wrap around her– she must have taken the phone."

Jamie narrowed his eyes "Claire look at me?" I raised my head and met his eye. "I brought her home, straight away – its all on tape – I have nothing to hide."

I managed a nod.

"I dinna realise until the next day – she couldna unlock it – only answer calls." He finished unnecessarily
"Why was that a game changer?"

My voice trembled slightly and I inwardly rolled my eyes, wanting to appear as strong as possible so Jamie wouldn't hold back.

"Well –" he raised his eyes, recalling what had unfolded. "Up until then I was sorry for her – after I rang Jenny and I kent what she had done, what she got Dougal to do –what she had done to you. " His eyes lit up , his lip jutting out slightly as he laughed, his voice was venomous and proud "She could have lost me what I love most in this worId Claire- so I dinna hold back,."

He paused and I could see his mind working, trying to find away to express what had motivated him on.

"I was so fucking angry – I rang john Grey and told him I wanted off the case they could get someone else to flush her out, I was so caught up with wanting to get to you – to explain – it was only then I realised how trapped I was – John told me straight if I left – she would get away with it all – and those tapes would never see the light of day –"

Jamie laughed bitterly "those tapes were the only things that could clear my name Claire – if I came to you with some farfetched excuse telling ye I was a mole for a huge tax evasion case – ye wouldha thought I was gone mad."

"I wouldn't." I interjected.

"Aye ye would have, ye believed Geneva and ye believed Dougal – I dinna blame ye, god knows I have tested ye enough in our short time together, I have a lot to prove – if I finished what I went there to do – I had some hope of restoring yer faith."
I reached out and touched the tops of his fingers, pressing gently. My show of Faith.

He took a long shaky breath " Geneva Dunsany doesna care about anyone but herself – she didna care if she ruined my family and suddenly I dinna care much if I ruined hers I went to the site the next day and I demanded more money from her for the project, told her I wanted it as soon as possible, that she was unprofessional and incompetent."

His chin tilted up defiantly, his tone clearer and not without a hint of pride he continued, "I told her she had costed everything wrong and she was in jeopardy of shutting the whole thing down – from then on I took risks in how I handled her, I dinna care how I came across – I just went for it – it was much easy to bring her down when I hated her."

"So what happened?"

"Well, it turns out Geneva Dunsany likes men mean" – he snorted – "ye could say she gets off on it cause the more of a bastard I was to her – the more she jumped".

A wide triumphant smile spread across his face. " A week later – she had exhausted all available funds in their British accounts – so she made contact with a financial institution to get the rest of what I said she needed and all the HRMC had to do was wait and watch."

"Jesus"

"Aye, within another week she had moved a couple of million out of a Panama account and then they had her."

I exhaled in an almost whistle.

"So what happens now?"

"There will be a trial – in a few months – the charges are significant – the Dunsany's have a long history in Panama – big money."

I stood walking around to where he sat, leaning against the table my arms folded.

"You came straight here?"

"as soon as I had given my statement, I went straight to Gatwick – have been on standby until I got the flight last night."

I ran a hand down his face, and he leaned into it, eyes closed.

"I had to see ye – god ye have no idea how much I missed ye Claire – and Willie - ye were on my mind day and night."

I felt him tremble slightly, one tear slid down caught by the side of my finger,

"I feel like I have been without ye for much longer than a few months – "

I leaned towards him to cup his other cheek, something happened. He looked up and met my eye, seeing the tears stain my own cheeks, and the next moment he had grabbed me, pulling me into his lap and kissing me with all he had. Teeth sinking, tongues touching lightly, questioningly until we both started to fight for dominance, out of the need to push the pain of the past months away. Without conscious thought, I found myself straddling him, grinding my body against his, and he
squirmed trying to meet my hips, my hands lost in his too short hair cut and the other balling a fist in the front of his t-shirt. I felt one hand tangled in my curls while the other travelled from my thighs up to my arse, settling on my waist to pull me closer still.

We pulled away allowing our mouth to hover over the other, our breaths were short and fast.

"I am not leaving you and Willie again Claire – I am here to stay."

He pressed his head into the crook of my neck, breathing deeply.

“What about Lallybroch - what about Brian and –“
“You and Willie come first – everything else can be arranged – I mean if its what ye want too?”

I tugged his hair slightly bringing his gaze back to mine.

“I have to do some talking too –“ I bent and touched his lips lightly “but I am so glad you are here.”
“Alright,” I said after a reasonable amount of time on Jamie’s lap, “let me get you something to eat, we will need to pick up Willie soon and once he has gone to bed later we can talk a bit more.”

I quickly scooped up the glass, and set a hurried pace as I gathered fruit and vegetables from the fridge to prepare a salad.

I needed to insert some space between Jamie and me until we had a chance to talk later. The way not only Jamie’s hands were roaming in the past few minutes made me acutely aware that I would end up hoisted on the kitchen table with my legs spread and my yoga bottoms around my ankles if I didn’t put a halt to our contact. At least until I had spoken properly to him. There was a need between us both, to repair our broken link. I could feel it building in Jamie, I understood it.

So many people had come between us in the past few months, we just simply needed to know only each other, shut out the rest of the world. I just couldn’t allow myself to go there yet.

I could feel Jamie’s gaze on my back as I chopped strawberries and put them into a bowl, the scrape of the chair signalling that he was on the move, soft footsteps closing in on the short space between him and me.

“Ya ken” he whispered softly into my ear, “I am not so interested in food just now Sassenach.”

Warm hands settled on my hips, palms spread so that his fingers could seek flesh under the hem of my t-shirt. My body buzzed from the contact, and I couldn’t help but tilt my head slightly to allow him better access to my neck. A repeated message from my mind. Not yet, sobering my body’s eager movements.

I turned my head around to look into his eyes, trying to release a warning stare, but I was met with Jamie’s eyes sparkling with happiness and love, I found myself sighing and sinking deeper into his touch.

His voice was gravelly when he murmured against my neck “have ye any idea how badly I want ye?” his honest unbidden declaration made me want to unzip him there and then, push him to the floor and take him inside me.

There could be no satisfying our obvious want of each other until we could talk and I wanted more than the thirty minutes we had left until school pick up, to do that.

I extradited myself from his embrace.

“Food,” I repeated sternly
Jamie pressed his lips in a playful smirk and waggled a finger at me “ah ah, I dinna want to eat food.” The emphasis on what he did want to eat, lying vacant in the room.

He pulled me by the hips so my back was against his chest again, his chin comfortably resting on my shoulder.

“Jamie” I whined, but it came out as more of an exasperated giggle “will you stop.” I wriggled a little to escape his grasp but that only heightened things, unperturbed his hand roamed down and cupped one cheek of my arse, kneading it appreciatively. His other hand dipped further into the waist of my yoga pants, and I let out a yelp, stopping him in his tracks.

“Jamie c’mon!”

The urgency in my tone meant it came across more irritable than I intended and he stopped still in his tracks. Turning me in his arms to face him, - “what’s wrong Claire?”

In the end, I chickened out, I lowered my gaze seeking for some truth ‘- I’m sorry – it’s just – so much has happened, I suppose I am just getting used to you being here again.” Deceit coated my mouth, and I stumbled over the words, making them sound brasher, less like me.

Our eyes met, his creased with concern but he seemed to accept what I was saying, he nodded slowly, his adam's apple bobbing against the long line of his neck as he swallowed.

“I’m sorry I dinna mean to -” he left the rest unsaid and pushed away from me resuming his seat at the kitchen table, - his face was full of hurt at my rebuttal, and I cursed myself for not being completely honest.

Instead, I closed my eyes for only a moment and went to him, tilting his chin up to me I kissed him, allowing my tongue to chase the plumpness of his bottom lip teasingly, “it’s not that I don’t want you” – I said smiling and a little breathless sometime later, “I just want us to have time.”

I could feel the heat of his skin pressed to my forehead and could make out a wide smile replacing the hard-pressed line of his lips. “Aye, I should like to take my time too.”

Later when we picked Willie up from School, I wasn’t sure which broke my heart more. Whether, it was the sight of Willie’s mouth agape, elation flooding his face at seeing Jamie, the solid roar of ‘Da – followed by a sob “I missed ye so much” as he sprinted down the school path into Jamie’s waiting arms”. Or if it was the way Jamie scooped him up, clenching Willie tight to his chest before kissing his eyes, nose and lips, making loud smacking noises that usually would have earned a reprimand from his son ‘tis mbarrasing Da’

Not this time though, any abashed feelings were wholly absorbed by their relief at being reunited. Jamie’s eyes flooded with tears and he burrowed his head into Willie’s neck, just as he had done with me that morning, the hustle and bustle of the school gates washing over them as they stayed locked in their embrace.

They only broke apart when Willie became overwhelmed with the need to tell his father, all things that had been racing through his mind since their last conversation, things he only trusted Jamie to ask,
Have ye been to Scotland?” Is Donas ok?

“Did Grandda mow the meadow at the back?

“Has Grannie bought me the new wellies – with the long back so I can wade into the water when we go fish’n again?

“How many planes did ye take to get here?”

“Did ye bring me something?”

“Why did ye cut yer hair Da?”

Willie didn’t pause in between to allow Jamie to answer, just let one question run until the next. I prized him from Jamie’s grasp, landing him square between the two of us and offering him a hand each. “Let's get you home, and some food in your belly and then Da can go through your questionnaire ok?”

Willie nodded happily, swinging his legs up in the air after Jamie and I counted to the three each time.

As soon as we got home, the door shut behind us, I felt myself relax, the bound up tension in my shoulders eased as I watched Jamie and Willie drop coats on hangers and kick shoes to one side, the simple domesticity of my little family moving about the apartment lightened my heart and made me feel ridiculously warm inside. Their incessant chatter and horse play filled the air with a kind of joy that could be found in happy homes, and for the first time since Hellwater, I felt like we could have one together.

I found myself watching them from the kitchen door with my hip propped against the frame, Jamie caught my eye taking the two strides across to me, he gently massaged my shoulder blade, kissing me tenderly. “Why dinna ye take a bath or – a rest, I’ll fix Willie something to eat.” He lowered his head and looked up at me through his lashes coyly, “I think I have caused enough upheaval for one day, hmm?”

I exhaled a breath in a soft sigh of contentment, “A shower sounds a bit like heaven – I cupped his cheek and leaned in just so our lips could touch, “when we get Willie to bed later we can talk, ok?” Jamie nodded solemnly, but the creased lines of worry rippled across his forehead again as he watched me go.

I turned on the shower faucet allowing the hot water to make a cloud of steam in the bathroom before applying a five-minute face mask and a coat of paint to my toenails. I considered how little interest I had taken in any of these things in the past few months, now confronted with Jamie back in my life I suddenly was pulling at the dark circles under my eyes, willing them to disappear.

I took my time washing, moisturising and generally preening my body into something that could be presented to Jamie if things went in the right direction later. The luxury of an uninterrupted shower was not lost on me, a sudden pang of relief filled my heart knowing I wasn’t alone in watching Willie.

There was so much to talk about between now and then. I wrapped a robe around myself and padded back out into the kitchen, where I could see the shape of Jamie’s broad shoulders stirring something over the stove. Willie was sitting behind him, fork upright in his little hand like a hunter primed and ready to attack his prey. He was chattering excitedly about whatever it was Jamie was making.
“I'm starving Da – tis my favourite – I have no had it in aaaaaages.”

I rolled my eyes behind them, wondering what dish Jamie could be cooking up, with his limited culinary abilities that had Willie drooling in anticipation. Haughtily thinking that I was a far better cook than Jamie and produced every dish on Willie’s wish list without argument.

It was a minute before the peg dropped, but far too late in terms of saving my senses as the smell of eggs billowed around my nose and throat, saliva pooling in the back of my mouth, stomach lurching to rid itself on its contents.

There was nothing for it, I moved at lightning speed shoving a bewildered Jamie out of the way before repeatedly gagging into the waste bin, which was the nearest thing I could see.

My ears were buzzing, as I willed my stomach to stop, just wanting the horrible sensation to cease but the smell of the omelette Jamie was making had covered the kitchen.

I managed to splutter ‘open the bloody windows’. I was incapable of standing upright in case of triggering nausea again. Instead, I sank to my knees, head bowed breathing in and out deeply. I felt Jamie’s hand on my back, “mo ghràidh, are ye ok?”

I was powerless to answer him, knowing that any movement would up end my stomach.

“ach Da – she will be fine again in a minute,” Willie replied when it became apparent I couldn’t speak.

I held up one finger, which didn’t seem to impinge on Jamie’s patience.

“Claire –“ he repeated, “Are ye ok – can I get ye something?”

“Tis only the eggs Da”, Willie continued to interject - “the bairn doesna like them.”

At that moment, I was sure my heart stopped, I vaguely considered feigning to faint just so I could be absent for what undoubtedly was about to unfold.

“What bairn –“

I flopped backwardly on the floor, pulling my legs to my chest and resting my back against the wall. Wondering if I could risk opening my mouth to speak. The saliva swirled against my tongue again, and I put the back of my hand to my mouth just in case.

I could make out the lines on my sons face, his forehead almost meeting his eyes at Jamie’s question.

“Mama’s bairn-“ Willie’s voice sounded unsure now, he wasn’t used to leading his father with this type of information, then suddenly his shoulders relaxed, and he slumped forward, elbows on the table holding his head and his legs swinging happily beneath the kitchen chair.

“Ach ye willna ken then –“ Willie sudden understanding of the situation seemed to lighten his unease considerably.

“Jamie – I was trying to wait until tonight.” I managed to blurt out.

The stunned expression on Jamie’s face was only an indication of what was going on in his body as he stumbled forward against the kitchen table and slid down onto the floor beside me. His gaze locked with mine, and then it wandered down my body to rest over my tummy, a small bump lay
hidden beneath my jumper, he couldn’t see yet but he would soon.

“Claire – “he gasped out, his mouth hung open and his large fist covered it before he raked his hand down over his face.

“Ye see Da – we dinna need ye for my wee brother after all –

“Ye what?” Jamie asked, his face looked drunk, screwed up in disbelief.

“We don’t know it’s a – “ I tried to interject, but the words fell flat on my tongue.

“As soon as Mama and me got back to Boston, we got the bairn –“ Willie continued happily, his little legs taking a longer swing with each groundbreaking piece of news. He was thoroughly enjoying this.

“Only me and Mama ken, it’s our secret, isna mama-“

I managed a weak nod in Willie’s direction and watched Jamie’s bottom lip tremble.

“But mama won’t mind ye knowing about the bairn”, - he got up from his seat and came to sit by me on the floor, laying one small little hand over my tummy.

“the bairn is only small yet Da – but it makes mama terrible sick – so we try and not to cook eggs cause he dinna like them."

Willie’s voice was full of sympathy, as he crawled on all fours to where Jamie sat opposite me, the same little hand rubbed a tear away from Jamie’s cheek, “dinna weep Da – the eggs willna harm the bairn – only make mama puke.”
By the time Jamie descended the stairs from putting Willie to bed and reading him what seemed like the time equivalent of ten bedtime stories, one look at his face told me he was near desperation for answers.

I had merely nodded my head in Willie’s direction earlier, asking him to wait until we were alone before discussing it. Now faced with the inevitable, my stomach churned over as I tried to gauge what Jamie’s reaction would be.

I stood at the window in the living room, my back to Jamie as I heard the door shut softly behind me. I rubbed my forearms up and down vigorously, goosebumps rising in the wake of the movement — the apprehension of what words would come next made my skin seem like ice.

There had been little in the way of conversation, but Jamie had watched me intently all evening, during dinner, while folding laundry, jumping to his feet at every opportunity to take something from me or take over a task. He was like a wound up bow ready for release.

Hearing his footsteps approach hesitantly, I turned to face him. He was hovering behind me his hand reaching out and dropping again just as quickly. Eventually, he let out a long ragged breath.

Allowing his hand to linger in the air over my stomach, “Can I – touch ye?”

I was slightly taken aback by his reverence; my mouth hung open awkwardly before I found the words to answer him.

“Of course – you don’t need to ask Jamie.”

His lips formed a crooked smile. “I ken – I just dinna feel like I have the right –“

Quirking one eyebrow at him in question, I took his hovering hand to rest on my rounded tummy. “– eh you put it in there?”

He beamed proudly for a moment before the creases of worry scattered across his forehead again. Blue narrowed eyes searched my face questioningly, after a moment he gave way to an instinct, his shoulders dropped in relief as he felt the little home I had created for our baby allowing the palm of his hand to slide across my belly and back again gently.

“How far along?”

“About 14 weeks.”

He snorted in disbelief, “I canna believe it – all evening I canna take my eyes off ye – .” A bright
smile fleeted across his face briefly, struck by a thought he bowed his head suddenly looking down at the growing life between us.

“- I feel I failed ye again.”

I smoothed out his tensed jaw with my thumb and forefinger, the pain and worry of the past few months etched on my face, things had happened because of a single isolated decision Jamie had made, but he had chosen a path to see it through. A path that I didn’t join him on. I didn’t want him to feel he failed me, but pent up tears of frustration began to fall down my cheeks nonetheless.

I shook my head trying to explain, but instead of words a low choked sob came out, and Jamie clutched me to his chest.

“Oh God, I am so sorry Claire – Why did ye no tell me sooner – I woulde come to ye – I – .”

“What Jamie – what could you have done sooner?” I challenged.

He shook his head from side to side, “Claire ye ken I would – “

“And I woulde be to blame for the end of Lallybroch or the Dunsany’s getting away with all they had done? That is a big weight to put on this baby Jamie, and on me.”

Silence filled the gap between our bodies, Jamie didn’t release me. I think he knew that if we stopped touching at that moment, it would take us longer to mould back to one another again.

“And when I came this morning – ye dinna want to tell me then?” there was a probing tone to his voice, but is still held softness, willing me to be honest with him.

“Jamie – when I found out –”I shook my head unable to form words, tears splatted down my cheeks and I rubbed them away quickly. “I just couldn’t.

He took a sharp intake of breath and nodded his head, deciding not to press any further.

“When I found out I was pregnant on Willie – I had no claim to you – no expectation of you wanting a relationship with me.”

I sighed, and his hands fell from my back to rest loosely on my hips, still not breaking contact.

“Aye - Claire for the second time – ye have found out ye were carrying our bairn – Alone.”

The last word hung in the air between us.

“Yes, but this time I really felt alone, it’s easier when you don’t have expectations, I had none on Willie – for a time I felt so stupid, I couldn’t believe I was pregnant again with your child, only this time there was more than miles between us Jamie.

I dropped my head, staring at something intently on the ground.
“The only thing I could do,—”

silence, a breath and the steady sound of a fast pulse in my ear before I found the will to conclude —

“—You did what you had to do – I know that now – but Jamie I did what I had to do too, and that was plan a future without you in it.”

Completely out of character and a definite first for Jamie Fraser, he didn’t rush in with questions to my loaded statement. Instead, he let go of my hips and walked the two steps back to my couch, slumping down on it as if the breath and been stolen from his body. He was unnervingly silent.

After a moment that felt like hours, he tilted his head back up to look at me. “And now?” he said simply “is it too late now?”

I didn’t know how to respond, I would be lying if I pretended I cursed the ground he walked on when I first found out, but there were things I didn’t know then, things that had kept us apart

Did I want him? There was no question in my mind that I did. But it was clear from his crumbled expression that he wasn’t so confident.

Before I could answer him, he began speaking haltingly again. “Ya ken, – I showed up here, and that was one of my biggest fears – the whole time I was apart from ye – that it would be too late.”

“I dared not even ask if ye still wanted me, wanted us when I met ye on the doorstep this morning because I was afraid of the answer.” He huffed an incredulous breath.

“Christ” he trailed of face suddenly alight. “Claire, do ye ken how proud and happy I am that ye are carrying my bairn, again. That I am lucky enough for ye to do this and carry on when I was no even here to care for ye – or protect ye –”

I put up a hand to stop him. “You didn’t know.” My voice was shaky; I was struggling to keep my composure in the face of his regret.

“tis not the point –“ he replied firmly. He gestured towards my stomach with one hand and rucked his other hand through his hair at the same time.

“how long have ye known?”

I took a long, steadying breath before meeting his eye.

“The morning after Geneva answered your phone.” I kept one eye half closed in trepidation knowing how he would take that piece of information.”

“Christ”, his voice was a low growl; he pressed the back of his fist up to his mouth.

“Hellwater was enough on its own merit to break us, to make ye lose faith in me –fucking up in business was enough – I can’t even imagine what ye must have thought that night or after it.”
He exhaled loudly and scrubbed a hand over his face, “I went there to try and save Lallybroch to redeem myself in some way not just for Da, but so that you could look at me as someone who wasn’t a complete disaster – “

Colour flooded his cheeks as his chin dipped into his chest, “I wanted to make ye believe in me again -.”

My breath caught, and I fought the urge to rush to him and wrap my arms around his neck and tell him that I did.

“- the and as selfish as it sounds I dinna want my legacy to Willie to be the Fraser that burned the whole place to the ground with his stupid mistake – it would stay with me and him for a long time.”

“Jamie, I – “

His hand waved in the air, determination on his face when he locked his eyes with mine, he cleared his throat in an effort to hide the tremble when he spoke, it was no use his voice still shook, heavy with vulnerability.

“But all those things seem insignificant now if I don’t have you Claire – if you don’t want me anymore? What is the point in preserving my reputation, if not for you. You’re the only one that truly matters.”

I stared at him dumbly for a minute before I realised, somewhere in what he just said, was a question, not a statement. I wiped the tear from my cheeks with the back of my hands and went to sit on the coffee table in front of him.

“I didn’t plan on you being a part of this – because I couldn’t.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line, “I tried to see past the distance in your voice when you called me, then Geneva – “ I said sighing. I put my hand down and touched my stomach, “but when I found out about the baby – I had to stop wondering if you were going to come back, or if you had fucked her, or if you still loved me.” I had to stop all that noise in my head and focus on this.

Jamie reached out a hand and rested it over mine on my tummy.

“But then the book came – and I knew whatever had kept you from me was bigger than I had imagined - I was so worried for you.”

I ran a hand down over his cheek “just because I couldn’t let myself plan a future with you in it, doesn’t mean I didn’t want to – it was self-preservation.”

Jamie’s eyes held something in them when he looked up at me, fear of what I would say next.

“But you’re here now - and I do want you, I don’t want you to miss anything else.”

His whole face lit up – he blinked back tears, and he pulled me to him.

“Are ye sure?”

“Yes, I am sure.” I managed to squeak out before Jamie pulled me onto his lap. Kissing the breath from my lungs.

He broke our kiss suddenly looking down at my stomach, brow creased in confusion.
“How did ye - I mean yer IUD?”

I quirked one eyebrow at him, slightly impressed he had remembered.

The information had been given to him in a rushed string of words during a heady encounter the week of Jenny’s wedding, we hadn’t dwelt on the topic, I had confirmed it was there, he had heaved a sigh of relief and continued what we both had on our minds.

“Well yes” – I agreed “it was a shock – I barely wanted to do the test, was sure all the symptoms were stress.”

I didn’t mean it accusingly – yet there could be no denying the past few months and the first of our child’s existence had been hell.

“God Claire –” Jamie’s threw his head back, staring at something on the ceiling. “I canna begin to tell ye how sorry I am.”

I felt the need to continue, ignoring his apology.

“After Dougal told me that you and Geneva were a ‘thing’” I was barely able to close the cottage door behind me before I was throwing up.”

Jamie rucked a hand over his jaw, muttering Gaelic under his breath, most of the Gaelic I knew was from when Jamie took me to bed, they were words of endearment or praise and usually came in a string of incoherent sentences as we neared climax.

These Gaelic words were angry, spiteful and the red seeping up Jamie’s neck in temper did little to disguise their meaning.

He gently manoeuvred me off his knee, temper fuelling his need to move, he stood looming over me, “he could have harmed the bairn with his lies.” He said through gritted teeth, “I will not let this lie Claire – I am no done with Dougal Mc Kenzie.”

I didn’t argue; instead I watched Jamie pace over and back in front of me, his head snapped around in my direction, eyes squinting.

“But – with the IUD – and the bairn what does that mean?”

I patted the space beside me and beckoned him to sit.

He sat down quickly, taking my hand within his own, eyes creased with worry. “I mean will the bairn be – ok?”

I managed a nod, and quickly swallowed the lump in my throat remembering the fear the first few weeks of my pregnancy had brought. The overwhelming need to get back to Boston, to doctors I knew and trusted.

“I had to have it taken out – a procedure – it can increase the risk of miscarriage.” Jamie’s mouth opened and snapped closed again, he pinched his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

I squeezed his hand reassuringly. “I am over the most dangerous stage now.”

“and this procedure – who went with ye or–,”
“I went on my own Jamie – I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else-“

“Asides me?” He said accusingly “ye would have let me come and yet I was playing silly beggars at Hellwater when you were trying to see to the safety of our child Claire-“

His anger was directed at himself. I knew that, and although I had reassured him that I wanted him, us a family. I knew there would be more of this to come. Jamie was not done in punishing himself over what had transpired since he left me.

“the baby will be ok Jamie.”
He nodded his head again and allowed his eyes to resume their watch over my stomach.

“Christ Claire the chances of ye getting pregnant” it came out as an incredulous snort. “

“I think it was less than a one percent chance – “ I replied dubiously “Seemingly all you have to do is look at me and I get knocked up.”

Jamie chuckled nervously. “Aye – well it will save us blaming the other for not remembering contraception – at least this was out of our hands.”

“hmm, I s’pose.”

“fourteen weeks- “ he said to himself wistfully, he pressed his bottom lip between his tumb and forefinger, mumbling months and dates under his breath.

“If you are trying to work out the when – “I interjected wryly , “I can probably tell you because they had to work it out when they removed the IUD.”

Jamie’s eyes went as wide as stalks, he resembled Willie when on Christmas morning, slack eyed and full of curiosity, “Tell me?”

“The night of our engagement party.” I left the rest unsaid. Watching Jamie puzzle it out before his eyes grew wide again.

“The stables?” he asked in disbelief.

I made a sound of agreement in my throat and ran my palm across the rounding of my stomach.

“Yes – our baby was conceived in a fit of rage.” I bit my lip, trying to still the nervous giggle that was threatened to unwind me into a hysterical state. I was growing giddy with all the weights lifting from my shoulders from just telling him what the past few months had held.

“Jesus Claire.” He whispered, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly “I dinna ken what to say to that.”

My knowing smile grew wider as I saw him slump back against the couch, huffing an incredulous breath as he went.

I let him be, allowing him to observe how our lives were about to change. I was gazing out the window from the comfort of my seat when I felt a tug on my arm.

Jamie raised one ruddy eyebrow at me questioningly, “Come here?” the apprehensive look in his eye made my stomach lurch a little. He thought I would refuse him.
I scooted down the couch, and he lifted me onto his lap, my thighs straddling him. His hands roamed up and down my back, relearning the contours of my body.

“I feel like I am walking on air – and I dinna ken if that is alright because I don’t know if ye are happy or – if ye feel like killing me – but I canna stop myself from smiling like a loon.” His face was beaming, eyes cautiously meeting mine. Hope foremost in them. Was I happy too?

“It was a shock,” I said firmly. “Not something we had really talked about or something I had planned on.”

“ – and now?” Jamie nodded his head urging me to continue.

“It was hard at first – that day in Scotland – it did feel like dejavu with Willie, I was alone, I had no idea what was going on with you and you were so distant when you were in Hellwater – I began to think that maybe you mightn’t(6,6),(990,988)
“I meant what I said in Inverness – I never craved them with anyone else but you.” I traced the pout on Willie’s lips, and seen the auburn wisps of hair on his head – he was only a few hours old, and I was already imagining what our next bairn would look like – would they favour you more – yer curly head mo nigheann donn, or yer wee bitty ears?”

Jamie suddenly broke into laughter, colour creeping up his face. He shook his head from side to side his hand coming up to cover his eyes.

“What?” I asked bemused.

Taking his hand away from his face and entwining it with my own, he huffed a chuckle.

When I gave him a warning glare, he bit his lip to quell the smirk on his lips.

“I think when Willie was nay even two – I came up with this plan – no not even a plan more like a fantasy – ”

He bit his bottom lip in hesitation again, and I took his chin in my hand. Tilting it up as I did sometimes before cleaning Willie’s face.

“Tell me – “I said with a warning stare.

“I thought about guilt’n ye into Willie needing a sibling – I mean the lad could barely speak so how he could tell us he needed one I dinna ken – but at the time I wasna thinking too sensibly – I thought I would offer to have another bairn with ye – make ye feel it was only right on account of Willie.”

His head fell back, and his whole body shook as laughter filled his lungs.

I couldn’t help joining him.

“Oh my god, James Fraser – you would fool me into thinking our son needed a sibling so you could get laid!”

His head shot up, his eyes were taken on a dangerously dark look, and the laughter faded on our breaths.

“Getting laid wasna the issue Claire - being with you again was.”

I swallowed hard and felt a ripple of pure desire run from the tips of my toes all the way up my spine. Pooling warmth filled my belly, and I bent to bring my lips to Jamie’s.

I couldn’t help the giggle that fell from my mouth into his as I thought over his plan to impregnate me again.

Jamie sighed impatiently “I kent ye will never let me live this down.”

I ran my tongue over his bottom lip and shifted my hips closer to his, earning me a long drawn out groan.

“I am slightly impressed that you were going to instigate sex with me but sell it as you doing me a favour –“

“Oh aye –“ Jamie said winking owlishly at me “aye, I am a marketing dream me.”

I slapped his chest and wriggled my hips again.
Jamie’s hands crept down and cupped my arse.

“Christ ye have no idea what ye do to me – “ he sealed his mouth over mine again, when his tongue sought entrance to my mouth I let out a little whimper.

Jamie broke away suddenly, and I instantly felt the loss of his warm mouth.

His tone had changed from the lighthearted banter of before, “Sassenach – earlier.” He asked hesitantly. “Ye dinna want me to touch ye – before we picked up Willie” he elaborated.

I nodded once urging him on.

“Was it because of the bairn? I mean did ye think I would guess.”

“Yes, my breasts are massive, I am already showing – if you had have seen me naked you would have guessed instantly and I wanted time to tell you – for us to talk.”

Jamie let out a long relieved breath. I creased my brows in confusion.

“Why?”

His expression changed completely, he bowed his head looking at our joined hands between us. When he met my gaze again his face was the image of Willie when you laughed at him when he wasn’t meant to be funny. A mixture of embarrassment and confusion.

I bit my lip to stop myself smirking.

“I thought ye had maybe gone off me.” He mumbled under his breath, not meeting my eye.

“Gone off you?”

“Aye – I thought when ye dinna want to – well it’s been months and I have put ye through the wringer for most of them – I wasna sure if well – this, us. I dinna know if you wanted me.”

His cheeks were flaming, he looked so endearing, I couldn’t help myself leaning into his mouth and kissing the breath from his lungs, hands roaming up and down each other’s bodies, our hips lifting and grinding into each other.

When we broke apart, our breathing was laboured, lips red and swollen.

“I will never go off you James Fraser.”

I let my hand roam down and cup the length of him beneath his jeans.

“Asides- I said in my most sultry voice “This pregnancy has done all sorts to my libido – if anything you’re going to have trouble keeping up with me.”

I don’t think I will ever forget the awe look expression on Jamie’s face, followed by one of steely determination.

“Get to bed.” The growl from his lips filled my belly with sparks, and I was up and off his lap before he had a chance to blink.
Jamie and I made the small mistake of separating briefly after climbing the stairs to my bedroom, him to check on Willie and me to brush my teeth and change for bed.

While Jamie was gone the longing which had started in the living room didn’t completely fade out but was masked slightly by the fear running through my veins. It had been months since we had been together and in that time my body had changed. I was confident enough to know it wasn’t necessarily negative changes, my breasts were larger, my tummy somewhat more rounded but everything else had remained as it was. It was more than I was different, altered to what Jamie had known and now faced with him seeing all of me, I felt like a virgin bride on her wedding night wondering would my new husband like me.

Once the pregnancy hormones had taken hold, many nights I had woken clammy from a dream, a dull throbbing between my thighs, wet heat making me desperate.

My body arching seeking his touch to be met with humid air and the threat of frustrated tears. The very idea, that after all these weeks apart I would finally get to sate that need made me feel wild, giddy with possibility and utterly terrified that I wouldn’t be as he imagined.

Throwing my toothbrush back in the holder, I squared my shoulders and walked into the bedroom. Jamie was crouched over his case rummaging. He looked somewhat flummoxed himself, hearing me approach he stood to full height, clutching some toiletries in hand.

“I just need ta –“ he gestured towards the bathroom.

“Um yes, of course, do you want me to unpack some of your things – I can make room in the closet –“ I started reaching into my wardrobe immediately, sliding hangers to one side, in an attempt to busy jittery hands. Jamie’s breathe on my cheek, so close that I could feel the heat of his lips.

“Aye, I will need a wee bit of space, but I can bide til tomorrow Claire.” His tone was husky, and it brokered no argument.

The answer was double loaded, turning me to him, he held my gaze pointedly, a slight indentation
on his cheek while he bit into the other one. “I will be unpacking because I will be staying, aye?”

I think I nodded.

“But everything else aside me becoming complicit with yer body – is off the agenda until tomorrow, alright?” He teased my bottom lip out from under my teeth.

“I willna be long.”

I swallowed hard and gave a more solid nod in agreement.

With Jamie gone, I was left to decide what to wear to bed. Realistically he was going to be taking it off within minutes, but I still needed to present myself in something. I had bought a little silk camisole and matching shorts for my birthday weekend, the weekend he hadn’t made it out. It had been thrown in the back of my drawers and forgotten about. I slipped the silky fabric over my head and pulled on the too short shorts. Twirling two and fro in the mirror, I pulled the top down over where it gaped slightly at my midriff, it immediately bounced back. I huffed impatiently and tugged the bun out of my hair letting it fall around my shoulders.

Jamie cleared his throat behind me, I swung around to face him, cheeks burning crimson wondering how long he had been watching

“I – didn’t know what to – “the words hung unsaid in the air as I watched Jamie’s eyes run up and down the length of my body. His mouth opened just enough to allow his tongue to exit and sweep across his bottom lip.

He was wrapped in a towel that hung low around his waist, little droplets of water were visible down his torso and pooling above the band of the cloth. I wanted to run my tongue over each one as if parched. His hair was wild about his face from where he had obviously rubbed a towel through it to dry. My stomach tightened pleasantly.

Jamie took one step forward, a smile lingering on his lips.

“Claire – I –christ ye are lovely – ye make me tongue-tied. “ I enjoyed the way he spluttered out each word, the way his body tensed and that he failed to hide the unabashed hunger in his eyes. It was like a balm to my tittering confidence; he seemed lost on everything but me.
I took two cautious steps towards him.

Finishing my thought from earlier, I shrugged my shoulders noncommittally, “Wasn’t sure what to wear.”

“Aye well – “he paused and swallowed again, “that does the trick to be sure.”

As if without conscious thought his hand rose slowly and tested the looseness of the thin strap on my shoulder, it fell over my forearm easily hanging enough to let the top slip further down my breast, resting just above my nipple.

“Ach well now look at that – it’s begin to be taken off.”

My heart was pounding against my chest, it felt like it was battering my rib cage. Jamie gave me a coy smile and moved to the other one, “Where did ye get this little number?” he asked in a hoarse whisper, eyes locked on the straps of my tops as if they held a code.

“I got it for my birthday – last time you were meant to come out.”

He made a low Scottish noise in the back of his throat. “ye bought this for me?”

He met my eye for only a second, seeking clarification.

His fingers flicked two and fro, planning a path, before they reached lower and teasingly slid over one breast, eventually resting on a nipple and circling it.

“Well, I bought it for me – with the idea you might like it. “ I didn’t hide the hitch in my breath at his touch.

“I do – vera much –”, he let out a long sigh of contentment, “ – tis a shame I must take it off.”

I shrugged my shoulders, “you could leave it on.”

“Not a chance –“a pause as he met my eyes again, “I havna seen ye naked aside from my dreams in months.”

I placed one hand on his chest and let it slide down over his stomach, hooking one finger into the
waistband of his towel.

“Well, there have been some changes since you saw me last.” My tone was jesting, attempting to flirt but my hands instinctively snapped together, twisting the skin around the tips of my fingers. Jamie’s eyes jumped to the movement and his hands' covered mine stilling them.

He shook his head in disbelief, looking down at me “I want to see every change the bairn is making – to yer body Claire.” His use of my name and the husky tone he rolled it off his tongue made me almost coil into him.

He untangled my fingers and placed my hand back on his chest, just over the fast beating of his own heart. Using his other hand to rest on my lower back to pull me flush with his body. I hesitated for only a moment as I watched his eyes fall to my lips and he closed the distance.

Jamie had kissed me before; everything about this kiss was different. It held the same motions, tongue slipping past mine, teeth grazing over lips, biting softly before engulfing a greedy mouth. It wasn’t those things that made it different; it was the ferocity in which he did it. The breathless groan that sounded like a sob, the effort of trying to breathe and fill my mouth competed with each other leaving delicious little gasps between us. He showed me it all in one kiss; I had no doubt when we broke away how much he missed me or still wanted me.

Jamie’s eyes were like dark pools, as his fingers hooked into the little straps of my camisole pulling them down along the length of my arms until the bodice followed it leaving me completely bare from the waist up.

He took one step back, the slight awe widening of his eyes when they fell on my bare breasts made me giggle nervously, Jamie didn’t so much as flinch, standing stock still, he sank his teeth into his bottom lip.

“Christ –”, his head snapped up to my face, and his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

“God ye are so beautiful – sometimes I think ye will actually make my heart stop.”

He hooked one finger into the waistband of the silky shorts, and ushered them over my hips, they fell around my ankles, and I stepped out of them. I let the task take all of my concentration to avoid meeting Jamie’s eye, the quick intake of his breath the only sound in the room.

I don’t know what I was expecting to see reflected on his face, but I was taken aback by the look of tenderness as he stepped towards me, hand outstretched to touch the small bump beginning to
develop above my hips.

“\textquote{I wasna able – “ he stopped and started again, “when ye were carrying Willie I never saw ye or – ”}

Placing my hand over his, “you can see me now.”

“I used to try and imagine ye –”, he said a small smirk lifting his lips, he rolled an R when he quipped “regularly”.

One tug on the knot in his towel pooled it to the ground, revealing the length of him, throbbing against his stomach. My fingernails trailed down over his thighs teasingly, I cupped the heaviness between them and Jamie’s head lolled from side to side, I squeezed once before moving up and taking him gently in my hand, feeling the hard pulsing of him straining within my palm, “I missed you”, I said simply, “I missed this, us.

Jamie’s body was wound tight; he was almost standing rigid as I pumped him up and down once, then twice. His brow creased in a form of agony.

“What’s wrong?”

He bit his lip, “I need to get ye into bed Claire –“ his tone was desperate, pleading, “it has been a while I dinna ken how long I can have ye stand there looking like that and not finish myself off before we have begun.”

A breathy snicker escaped my lips, and Jamie glared at me.

“tis no funny.”

Laying one hand onto his chest, I pushed him back towards the bed, “lie down.” The pleasant feeling that had taken root in my belly at the sight of him had grown branches and was sluicing its way around my body, making me crazy with it.

Obediently, he lowered himself down, as I crawled up and over him straddling his thighs with my own. Dark pools for eyes watched me from the bed, his back arching slightly as I rose above him; he reached down and stroked the length of himself, watching me. Bottom lip caught between his
teeth.

“Sassenach –“

Jamie stretched out across the length of my bed, making the queen size bed look tiny in comparison, I had almost forgotten how large he was, muscled skin carved like marble. His hips flexed looking for friction, knees flung wide.

“Just lie back – and relax.” I owned the husky tone in my voice, I was about to deliver on it.

Replacing his hand with mine, I guided Jamie inside of me.

The feel of him, stretching pulsating against all those nerves longing for his touch was almost too much.

“Oh, ugh, I groaned out each nonsensical sound in relief, with one hand on his chest I rocked forward once, testing our connection. Jamie’s head flopped back against the pillows, and he drove his hips up into me. I rocked again, and his chest rose steadily from the bed, while his head sank deeper into the pillow.

The spark that lit up my body was ignited from the deep, delicious moan at the back of his throat.

Like a train, I began a steady chug of my hips enjoying the feel of him quivering against me, the grip on my thighs and the sounds we made together. We rocked against each other slowly at first, just enjoying the feeling of being joined, allowing it build, bigger and bigger until it wasn’t a conscious decision to speed up, it was dictated purely by need.

Jamie’s hand found its way back to rest on my stomach, and he sat forward. Lips swirled over a nipple, then the other. Anchoring himself to me with a firm hold on my breast, leveraging his body to meet me with the other.

His lips parted, and his breath became shallow as I slipped a hand down just where he entered me. Jamie bucked hard at the contact, and I moaned brazenly above him.

“oh god –“ he spat out, his voice thick with arousal. “my cock dinna forget the way of ye – I think ye are imprinted on his mind.”
His hands pulled my lower back against his hips, starting a deeper rolling movement.

“Your cock has a mind? – ”, I bit down on my lip to stop myself laughing at him, I was soon much more distracted at the way his hips were lifting to me meet mine, hitting me just where I needed again and again. I couldn’t slow down. It felt so good after a draught, hormones and Jamie coursing through my body made me louder, bolder.

It didn’t go unnoticed as Jamie tried to pace my hips,

“Claire – Christ – we need to slow –” he groaned out each word with another flex of his hips in contradiction to his words.

I didn’t stop to let him choke out the rest, just ground myself deeper. Each movement an answer to the hunger building inside of me,

Jamie fell back a bit resting on the back of his hands. I began moving higher up the length of him and slamming back down. Jamie’s eyes were shut tight, sweat dripping down his brow, along his neckline and over the concaves of his chest. We were slick against each other, aiding my body to glide against his.

One of his hands were trying to reach me, flailing in front of him, with his head thrown back, he wasn’t aware of where to aim.

I moaned each time as I rose above him, a breathy groan filling my lungs as I came back down.

I was loud, unabashed. Greedy.

I heard the sounds of the bed creak and splinter between us, vaguely wondered how far the sounds travelled but couldn’t stop long enough to care.

“Oh fuck – “Jamie’s hips rose erratically to meet mine, fingers digging into my hips painfully

“His arms found me, as he grasped me around my shoulders pulling me down, his mouth falling open against my neck, I could feel his breath and the edges of his teeth. He didn’t bite or kiss, only
able to focus on his breathing.

I kept my pace – my thighs shaking with the effort, all other sensations faded away except the need between my legs, and how Jamie could ease it.

I stroked and pleaded and eventually surrendered to the tightening growing deep in my belly, unwinding and growing bigger with each feel of him.

With Jamie’s hand firmly on my bottom, I came around him. Bowling over and landing against his neck as his own hips thrust erratically, once and twice until he stillled gasping and twitching along with his own release.

I fell to my side, flopping ungracefully against the mattress,

The room was filled with laboured breaths; I took pride that for a fit man Jamie seemed like he had just run a marathon.

Silence followed as our lungs found a rhythm, Jamie's head lifted from the pillow, and he chanced a glance over at me before flopping down.

“Christ woman – ye almost killed me.” His awestruck gaze stuck to the ceiling, I could make out the slight crease in his brow as he thought.

“Ye were so – so“ he said eventually in a huff of breath. He stuttered along with each pant of breath before deciding on “I could barely keep up with ye.”

His hand was draped across his chest, and I took it kissing his palm.

“It’s the pregnancy,” I whispered against his hand.

Jamie turned on his side, cupping the cheeks of my arse and pulling me into his body.

“Were ye like that before?” he asked, his brows knitted together quizzically.

“Uh hum.” I answered nodding my head. “Yup, its hormones – I think.”
Jamie’s brows grew more furrowed until suddenly his eyes widened and his hands stopped the pattern they were tracing on my bottom.

“but the last time – ye were pregnant.”

“Me and you – we dinna – I mean did you ?”

I rolled my eyes exasperatedly “No Jamie I didn’t sleep with anyone else while I was pregnant with your child.”

He let out an exhale of breath, and pressed his lips together giving me an ashamed smile.

“Sorry – I dinna mean – sorry.” He trailed off.

“God Sassenach” he hummed contentedly, squirming into a more comfortable position “I wish ye wouldha told me ye were gagging for it on Willie, I wouldha been on the first plane out to ye.”

I slapped his shoulder and snuggled closer into his embrace. “Fool.”

Silence enveloped the room again, and we left each other to our thoughts before I felt Jamie’s voice vibrate from just above my head. His chin resting snugly.

“I dreamed of ye so often in Hellwater – of us like this – I dinna ken – “ he stopped and pulled back to meet my gaze, licking his lips once before continuing “my dreams dinna ken how good it feels to have ye –“ he swept a lock of my hair back around my neck, and pressed his forehead against mine, a tender smile lighting his face. “nothing compares to taking ye to bed ”, his hand snaked between us until it rested on my belly. “but to have this life between us, when I love ye –“ he blinked rapidly “its incredible Claire to think we made this together – “ he paused for a moment before whispering, “again.”
Early morning light crept in through the blinds, my arms immediately reached for Claire, seeking her warmth only to be met with cool sheets. I sat up quickly, my head was fuzzy from a deep restorative sleep.

I had watched Claire for a long time before sleep pulled me into the abyss, safe in the knowledge I was under the same roof as her and Willie again. I had lain awake in Hellwater often, with physical pain in my chest from missing them.

Now waking to know she was only feet away, that I would have breakfast with them, hear the soft sounds she made in the morning as she showered and dressed, watch Willie wolf down his cereal while he asked ten questions between each mouthful. Simple things, but things that made me breathe properly for the first time in months. Simple things I had only really known recently, we had only lived as a family for such a short time, but it was like I instantly knew I didn't want any other life knowing what it was like to have them.

I could smell the floral scent of Claire's soap, while the sounds of a steady stream of water billowed through the corridor as she showered. I gave myself a moment to shed the sleep from my brain before starting to make a mental checklist of all the things Claire and I had to make decisions on, they were spread out before me like a ladder, a million choices with the sum of those becoming part of our lives. First on the agenda was speaking to my parents, I couldn't avoid that any longer.

I glanced at my case on the floor and went to retrieve the small box that had weighed me down since I left Hellwater, wondering if Claire would find a place for it again. The scent from her shower and my avid imagination when it came to Claire had me threading softly across the small corridor to seek her out, my cock twitching in anticipation of her touch.

Standing just at the doorway to watch her, captivated by the careful process she took in soaping each bit of her skin, thigh hiked up under her hands, as she ran a line of soapy foam up and down her lower leg, before dropping it and giving the other leg the same attention. The way the bones in her back curved and moulded as she half bent to retrieve another bottle from the shower shelf, the contrast of her brown hair as it slid damp over her shoulder, shielding the side of her breast. I pictured our life again the one we had left behind in Scotland and the one she was letting me build here with her. Suddenly the notion of where that life happened didn't matter, as long as I had her, and Willie.

My mouth made an involuntary sound (probably from need), and Claire startled for a minute, throwing her gaze over her shoulder, she gave me a long, appraising look.

"Were you spying on me, Mr Fraser?"
A smirk lifting her cheekbone slightly. It buoyed me on seeing the light brightening her eyes.
I felt like a schoolboy who had just been caught peeping through a hole in the girls changing room, and I wondered how she made me feel like a gawky sixteen-year-old and a grown man with just one look.

"You're up early" she continued casually, quirking a delicate eyebrow in my direction before returning to her task. In two steps, I was in under the shower spray with her, instinctively reaching for her and pulling her bottom against my thighs, relishing in the feel of her.

"I got cold." I lied, swooping a lock of hair away from her shoulder so I could put my mouth there.

"You don't feel cold."

"Mmm – burning for you, I expect."

"Smooth Fraser –" I took a good handful of her arse with my free hand and kneaded it briefly – "– make yourself comfortable" she jibed elbowing me against my stomach.

Her head fell to the side to allow my mouth to explore the length of her neck, my tongue darting out to taste her. I could feel the hair of my legs tickling her soft skin as I pressed myself closer.

My hand dropped from her arse and entwined its way around her waist, before reaching up and taking her hand in mine.

I slid the ring down her finger. "Will ye wear it?" I didn't want to say again, there was no break in my promise to her. I never considered not marrying Claire as long as she would have me.

She paused for a moment, watching the diamond sparkle under the trickle of water before nodding. "Yes, I'll wear it." her voice was sure, my chin instinctively dipping to the hollow of her shoulder in relief.

"I love ye." It was a breathy declaration against her neck, and more for myself to say it aloud after all this time than anything else.

I had first said those words to Claire while she lay with Willie on her breast just after he was born. I meant it then, but I didn't dare to utter the same words again until four years later while taking her in a frenzy up against a brick wall at Lallybroch.

I had meant them just as much the second time, probably more because I had carried them inside of me for so long. Secretly loving her.

"I love you too" she lay the back of her head against my chest. "Always" she finished quietly.

We stood under the spray for a few minutes looking at the ring, considering what it meant before Claire broke the silence.

"Did you sleep, ok?" she asked while running a hand down my outer thigh pulling me nearer.

"Never better – ye snored like a fiend, but I held yer nose til ye stopped." Her delicate hand slapped my thigh "Liar."

I pressed my hard length against her backside in question. Hands gliding lazily over her breasts, and hip, making her move against me.

"I don't think I will ever tire of this," I confessed an inch from her ear, breaking the jesting banter between us.
Her breath hitched just enough to encourage me on. "Is Willie up?" she murmured against the humid shower spray, her voice sounding muffled.

"No – he –", I was struggling to form coherent answers. "Just – us." I stomped out with each roll of my hips against hers. Claire's skin was glowing pink, from the heat of the shower and redder in parts where my mouth had sucked or teased it. I wanted to cover her completely, so every part of her knew my touch.

She arched further into me with the slight pressure of my hand. When I pressed my fingers into her, she made a sound, a needy little whimper that made me desperate. I acknowledged how much I missed her in mumbling groans that fell to the side of her cheek, simple, obvious words that I found had repeated in my head over and over, every time I looked at her since I landed twenty-four hours before.

She moved towards the shower wall, bracing herself with her hands outstretched. Her small feet standing on tippy toe as I bent slightly to accommodate her. Pulling her hips up, I entered her with a groan. Felt her heat and the warmth fill my belly in pleasure. I tried to stop the loud grunts that seemed to be mainly of my making, conscious of sound while Willie slept. Claire's higher pitched sounds that came with each slap of our skin was making my balls tighten and my stomach quake. I grasped her shoulder, pressing even further against her, repeating more incoherent rubbish into her ear. Begging and pleading, wanting to turn her so I could have her mouth but couldn't bear to break our connection. I was trying to hold on, her final begging scream undid me, and I came with my teeth firmly embedded into her shoulder. It minded me of horses. I felt the heat rise up my cheeks at the thought and settled my mind to blame Claire and the effect she had on me. I steadied myself for a moment, to not crush her against the wall, but just enough to gently trap her against me. Wanting to keep our pleasure safe between us.

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After a few fleeting touches and stifled giggles, we stumbled out to the corridor wrapped in towels. We were met by Willie and one raised ruddy eyebrow. "Why were ye both wash'n at the same time?" his eyes dark with suspicion.

I didn't trust myself to answer him without smirking triumphantly, Claire stepped in front of him, ruffling his hair. "Da was brushin his teeth, I was having a shower." she said soothingly, "Are you getting ready for school? Will I help?" a veil of questions thrown at him, to distract.

Willie's eyes narrowed, and a look of alarm flooded his face. "But mama – ye dinna wear clothes in the shower, yer nudey! – he threw a scandalized glance in my direction "Ye canna let Da see ye like that."

Claire smile vibrated on her lips slightly, "Oh, don't worry Willie, I made him shut his eyes."

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The list of mundane jobs I had mentally ticked off in bed that morning was put into action as soon as Claire and Willie had gone to work and school respectively. Phone purchased, and in hand, I made my way back to Claire's apartment and sat for a minute looking at the screen while deciding what to say.

When I eventually plucked up the courage to type in the international code and press dial. An
uneasy feeling flooded my veins as I tried to draw conclusions of how this conversation would go.

When my father's voice answered "hellu Brian here" hesitantly, I realized that he didn't recognize the new number.

I exhaled nervously before saying "Da, it's me." There was a worrying pause before he spat out "Thank Christ yer mother has been worried silly."

"I'm sorry – I phoned Janet but I – "

"No, no it's ok," he said quickly, "Jenny told us it is only that yer Ma wanted to hear yer voice and we dinna want to worry Claire by phoning looking for ye, just in case ye had no arrived there yet."

"Aye – "

"Look, son – "we both attempted to talk over the other.

"Go ahead – you first," I said nervously.

"Christ ye pulled off some act in Hellwater… I still canna believe – we have had investigators here asking about the contracts ye signed and what the Dunsany's threatened."

"Aye, I have a better case to sue them now since their reputations are no longer on their side."

I stopped and took a breath. There was no beating about the bush, asides from Hellwater, I needed to talk about the real reason for my call – I couldn't settle until that was out of the way."

"Da – I havna come to Boston just to visit Claire and Willie – I will be staying." My tone brokered no doubt that my mind was made up, although I tried to soften the message by adding. "I will help ye employ someone, maybe even two people to take over for me."
"I was afraid of that," he said softly, although I couldn't decipher the tone of his reply. Before I had a chance to ask him or explain myself further, he started speaking again.

"Look, son –"

"No, Da – let me speak, Aye?"

He cleared his throat in wordless agreement.

"I understand ye are disappointed, but I have thought of little else while I was away, I will not leave ye without adequate help, and I intend on pursuing the Dunsany's for loss of earnings that should stifle any dip in profits, but I canna continue as I am –"

I let out a long ragged breath.

"truth be told Da – I dinna want to."

"Ye have been through a lot Son – his voice lowered to a whisper – "and I think ye should think carefully before making any rash decisions."

"Rash?" I repeated incredulously, "I have been trying to make this decision since I laid eyes on Claire" – my eyes narrowed as if he could see me glaring at him "– as you well know!"

"Aye – I ken that but –"there was a shuffling of feet and the sound of doors closing before he began to speak again. It occurred to me that he didn't want my mother to hear him.

"This is Willie's heritage." He hissed out a few minutes later when he was out of earshot, "He needs to be reared here – it's in his blood."

"Da!" the boom of my voice was doing little to hide my growing temper, "Ye ken he is Claire's blood too?"

Without pausing for his answer, I continued "Do ye no think she has ideas about his heritage?"
"But ye can see it when he is here Jamie, the lad visibly lights up – "

"No – "I broke in, "look – I am no discussing this Da – I am merely letting ye know."

"I ken that Jamie lad I just dinna want ye to throw away something ye have a massive talent for – "

"Claire is a surgeon for Christ sake! I dinna think that comes without talent, Da."

"Which she can practice here too." He quipped back without a beat.

I let out a long ragged breath I didn't want to lose my temper with him. He had always been stubborn, but this topic had broken our relationship more than once, and he was definitely going to be at the losing end this time.

"To tell ye the truth I dinna care Da, I dinna care what I do for a living as long as I can be with Claire and Willie."

When he didn't respond, I felt an overwhelming need to explain; further, my frustration was making me speak louder, faster and impatiently.

"Look – I could manage with Willie – not having him all the time was hard – but I managed because I knew when he wasn't with me, he was with Claire, and that was enough, once Claire had him with her in a weird way it made me happy – ye may not understand that because me and Jenny have always been with ye –"

"She is a wonderful mother". He replied softly.

"I dinna want to get overly sentimental Da – but knowing now that Claire wants a life with me – I canna settle for anything else – I would be miserable if she wasna with me."

The silence that followed was at least some evidence that he was considering my words. Eventually, he made a guffaw sound "Aye well it would take a fool no to see that I suppose – I hope ye know I always wanted this to be her home too, aye?"
"I ken that." My tone was less reproachful, and I closed my eyes imagining if she hadn't opened her arms to me yesterday when I landed, it would have taken more strength than I had to return to Scotland knowing I had lost her.

"I have wanted to marry Claire probably since the day I met her – and since we met we have never got the timing right, or we couldna work things out – I wrongly expected her to fit into my life, shape her choices around mine – and when she did just that – I did not give her or Willie the life I wanted to."

"And ye can there?" the sound of his frustration had dissipated.

"I intend to, aye." I rucked a hand through my hair while I considered whether to tell him anymore. "I couldna ask her to move again, and it doesna matter much to me where I am, as long as she is by my side – and Willie too of course."

There was a ruffling sound at the other end. "Ellen, I dinna say a word to the lad." I couldn't stop a smirk creeping across my face at his blatant lying.

More rustling before his mouth seemed to find the earpiece. "I am sorry I dinna mean to pressure ye – I had to give it one more go afore I let ye go," he confessed ruefully.

"I willna hold it against ye – and I will keep an eye on things from here too – I will get Ian to set ye up on facetime."

He huffed a breath but didn't reply.

"Yer health is important to me Da – I willna leave ye without decent horsemen for trading and to keep up with everything else."

"Yer mother warned me to make this as easy on ye as possible", he said suddenly. "I only wanted ye to ken this is yer home, and I will always want ye here, son."

"It couldn't be clearer, Da."
I thought he had passed the phone to my mother there was such a long stint of silence when unexpectedly his voice boomed into the earpiece again.

"Jamie?"

"Aye?"

"I am proud of ye always – it doesna matter about here – the way ye love yer wee family makes me proud – his tone turned gruff halfway through the sentence –"Alright that is enough of this kind of talk – it's making me morose."

I chuckled at his briskness. "Aye alright, yer get’n fierce sentimental in yer ould age."

"Look yer ma is jumping up and down trying to talk to ye so – "

"och Da – one more thing afore ye go –"

"Aye?"

"I hope to make ye a grandfather again –"a lump formed in my throat without warning when I heard him sniff loudly into the earpiece, my mother's concerned tone in the background asking him what was wrong.

"My – "halting words seemed to stick in my throat as I tried and failed to finish my sentence.

"Mo bhean a bhith le leanabh tha."

There was a much louder sob on his end this time before I heard him roar. "Ellen – Jamie and Claire are having a wee bairn – another bairn."
Oh Scotland

Chapter Summary

So sorry it had been almost 6 weeks since I updated but I am back and hope you enjoy the next chapter.

When he pushed away from my body less than half an hour ago, albeit grumbling "that is the second time this morning, Sassenach – I am no as young as I used to be."

His voice was full of innuendo and fun. He smiled broadly and a little proudly as he pulled back on his underwear while dropping a quick kiss to my stomach.

It was easy to see Jamie was happy in Boston. It was the pep in his step, the glint in his eye, our constant need to touch (which inevitably led to a lot of sex) or even the current horrendous off-tune singing coming from the shower. When Jamie emerged towel ruffling through his wet hair and a billow of steam trailing after him he reached for me as I passed him, kissing my shoulder and leaving a hand on my hip, "what plans for today?" his tone was muffled as he nuzzled against my ear.

I did not doubt that Jamie would and could make a life here, with us a happy one. That wasn't the issue, though. It was about belonging.

"Well you have that interview in the afternoon with that recruitment consultant, but I thought the three of us could go for dinner tonight?"

Jamie flashed me a warm smile that lifted his whole face. "aye, first family dinner in Boston." He replied simply.

"hmm", I hummed non committedly. Wondering to myself if I told him how I wished that we were all back in Scotland planning our future there, would he think I was gone mad?

Later that morning while Jamie leaned against my kitchen counter, chewing on a slice of toast, face screwed in concentration over an application form, he asked me to list what I thought his strengths were.I wriggled my eyebrows at him and leaned against his hip. "Well, where do I start– mmm" I feigned deliberation placing my forefinger against my bottom lip."
Jamie grinned back at me, his ears pinking at the tips.

"Oh, aye" he urged mischievously, bringing his slice of toast to my mouth as I took a bite directly from his hand, his fingers brushing over my lips as I chewed.

We heard a long weary sigh behind us, "Are ye feeding Mama?" Willie asked while shuffling into the room. I could almost hear the unsaid 'are ye for real?'

We broke apart guilty, Willie merely raised his hand before we had a chance to respond "nay mind – but I will be feeding myself, just in case ye get any ideas." Willie looked down his long auburn eyelashes at us.

Jamie coughed to hide a laugh, and I quickly sourced Willie's breakfast to calm the impatience brewing across his forehead.

"I thought me you and Da could go for dinner tonight" , I added cheerfully while pouring juice into a glass for him.Willie stuffed a spoon into his mouth, "Oh, can we go to the place that has the funny shaped pasta?"

"Sure."

"or maybe the pizza place?" he added quickly as an afterthought.

"Well I don't mind where but I thought it would be nice if we could all go together, make it a regular thing" – I gave him a reassuring smile – "You know as a family?"

Willie watched me quizzically and turned his attention to his father.

"Are ye staying a while then Da?"
Jamie looked to me first for reassurance, got it and went to sit in the chair beside Willie. "Aye – I am staying with ye and yer Mama."

Willie snorted "Ye always said ye hated Bost– " A flicker of panic cross Jamie’s face and he cut
Willie off, "It doesna matter a pin to me where we live as long as I am with you and yer mama."

I thought Jamie nudged Willie with his foot, which had zero effect on his son, Willie only shot him a dubious look and glanced back at me "And what about a Da for the bairn – bending to shovel another spoon to his mouth – "Will Da do that too?" he questioned with a mouthful of cereal muffling his words.

Jamie choked into his coffee cup.

"I am the bairn's Da!, Willie" he replied in a scandalised breath.

Willie chewed his food thoughtfully oblivious to the steady glare from his father.

"But I told ye Da, ye were no here." he corrected while swinging his legs contentedly as the cereal soothed his irritable mood "– when the bairn got into Mama's tummy."

"Willie!" – Jamie took a second to strive for a more gentle tone – "It makes no difference that I wasna here when Mama found out – that is not when the bairn got into her tummy – it was only then she realised." He took a long drink from his mug, I could only see from nose up, but going on the set of creases around Jamie’s forehead Willie’s words were affecting him.

"Oh, aye," Willie said, his eyes intrigued.

"When did the bairn get into Mama's tummy then? "Willie glanced at my stomach and then back to Jamie, "– were ye there, Da?" Willie was enthralled now, which given the topic wasn't a great thing. Nonchalance might have been better.

Jamie's face went crimson, and I watched the lump in his throat work up and down, I turned away before he caught me looking at him, afraid to make eye contact in case I burst out laughing and going by the fierce expression on Jamie's face I knew he wouldn't be pleased.

"In a way – I was, aye." He replied into the bottom of his coffee cup.

Willie's eyes squinted together in confusion, "Why did ye no tell Mama so?" another spoon loaded into his open mouth "did ye see it go in Da?"
Jamie stood abruptly from the table and glared at me. "Did ye see me go in Da when I was a bairn?" I don't think I had ever seen Jamie so red.

Willie was on a roll, "Grandda always says I was made in Scotland. That is why I am more Scottish than American." He trailed off for a minute considering "Were ye there in Scotland when I went into Mama's tummy."

"Claire!" Jamie all but growled at me, "ye are the doctor – ye could at least try and help me." He hissed through gritted teeth.

Willie snapped his finger a couple of times, blinking rapidly, trying to draw some information from his brain.

"wait wait Da – I ken now – Johnny told me in Scotland."

Willie jumped up and down excitedly.

"It's when two grown-ups kiss for too long – they get a bairn then!"

Slamming his fist down on the table triumphantly "So did ye kiss mama too long in Scotland, and then I got in her tummy?"

Jamie's mouth opened and closed in quick succession as if he was catching flies. I vaguely wondered if Jamie realised that he hadn't even kissed me the night this baby was conceived. My cheeks blushing as I remembered his hands pushing up my skirt and bending me over the stall. A little shiver of pleasure ran down my spine, and I realised Jamie was smirking at me knowingly.

Does the bairn get in from your mouth to Mama's?" Willie interrupted our thoughts, bringing us both down to earth with a bang. As an afterthought he snorted "oh god that's gross Da."

I coughed loudly to stifle the bellow of laughter awaiting to erupt from my belly. After a few fleeting moments of panic, Jamie seemed to settle on something in his mind before replying.

"Aye well there is kissing involved – maybe Johnny has a point."
"well –"Willie gave Jamie a grave look, "Mama has the bairn now so ye dinna need to keep kissing her, aye?"

Jamie pressed his lips into a thin, wry smile.

"It's important I practice all the same, son." He crooked his eyebrow at Willie and received nothing but a sigh and a long withering look.

Willie lay in bed, a small sliver of light creeping in from the hallway. He hated the dark; he had managed to get his Da to read four bedtime stories and still he didn't feel sleepy at all.

He knew why his Mama had told him before if things were worrying him, it would be harder to sleep and he should always tell her if he was scared or worried.

The pain in Willie's tummy only got worse when he thought of telling his Mama or Da what was troubling him. They were really happy, laughing and giggling all the way through dinner tonight. It minded him of that cartoon when the two skunks fell in love and they made him feel like he would puke because they were so lovey dovey, Willie had changed the channel then. He couldn't switch the channel on his parents though. He did like to see them happy. Just. Not. All. The.Time.

And if his Da could be less daft, that would be good too.

That wasn't what was troubling him, though, it was Scotland. At dinner, Da talked about how excited he was about his new job. Willie couldn't understand how he could be; there would be no horses. Maybe he should tell them he got a pain in his tummy when he thought about Scotland, they might understand. They might even say he could go back, not for a visit, but to live there like before. His eyebrows slotted together as he plotted what the next best move was.

After a considerable amount of time tossing and turning, Willie decided he would have to persuade his Mama, once she agreed to go then his Da definitely would. His Da got silly around his Mama. Willie blushed at just how silly his Da had gotten, even today his Da had been holding his Mama's hand at the school gates. For god's sake Willie was four and he wouldn't let her hold his hand. Billy Friar had teased him as they walked down the path to his parents, making puking noises all the while. It twasn't manly at all. His pur Da dinna seem to notice though.
He had stormed off ahead of his parents, listening to their giggling behind him, which only made him crosser. Yup, his Da was really daft around his Mama, so he would use that to his advantage. Like when yer training horses, his Grandda had told him once you get the mare to do something the stallion will follow to impress the girl horse. If he wanted to move back to Scotland, he needed to get his Mama to agree and Da would do whatever she wanted.

Willie's mind wandered off to how much his Da had changed, he had never seen him like this before. Connor Dalton at school said girls made boys go stupid and his Da was surely foolish around his Mama, he treated her like a bairn, washing with her, feeding her, always rubbing her shoulders or back as if she had wind.

Willie's mind wandered off to how much his Da had changed, he had never seen him like this before. Connor Dalton at school said girls made boys go stupid and his Da was surely foolish around his Mama, he treated her like a bairn, washing with her, feeding her, always rubbing her shoulders or back as if she had wind.

Willie turned on his side, sighing deeply. He didn't mind all of the silliness. It made Mama really happy having Da here, but he didn't think that was because they were in Boston. She had been sad to leave Scotland; she cried all the way home on the plane even though she tried hiding it.

Willie let out a loud huff of breath, the weight of his plan weighing down on his small shoulders.

It would be much better for the bairn to be near the horses and granny and Grandda all the time, that way they could start teaching him to ride as soon as he comes out of his Mama's tummy. Willie made a mental note to mention that to his parents. His Grandda always said it was important to start riding young. His Grandda also said that Scotland was in Willie's blood, which made perfect sense as he was happier there. He made another note to tell his parents about his blood.

A few minutes later, Willie found himself kicking the blankets off and tiptoeing over to his door to see if he could hear any noise from his Mama's room. He heard her giggle, which was good because that meant they were still awake. He suddenly couldn't wait anymore to tell them about how he was feeling; Willie knew he would sleep better once he listed all the reasons why they needed to go back to Scotland.

The rule was if he wanted anything at night, he was meant to call from his room, in case he fell or got lost on his way to his Mama's room in the dark. But things were changing; Willie would need to be getting up at night to feed the bairn. Cora Mulvey told him that bairns ate and cried all night long and she has a baby sister, so she knows. Willie bravely turned the handle and lightly padded down the corridor running through his winning argument in his head.

Willie had once heard Aunty Jenny say that his Da got ridiculous around his Mama, Willie didn't know what ridiculous meant, only that whenever he, or Bryce were being daft at School, Mr Petersberg always said that they were ridiculous. Which made sense to Willie because if his Da
was anything around his Mama, it was silly. Really really silly and it made Willie go red to think how silly his Da was when it came to his Mama, he called her Sassynuck in a weird voice, Willie wondered did he know how stupid he looked when he smiled at her but doubted he did.

His Mama had got good at farming when they were last in Scotland, right up until granny's brother and his friends had come to visit she was feeding and minding the horses every day with him. He knew she was happy there; he just needed to remind her and then list all the reasons why it was better for the bairn to be born in Scotland.

He pushed open his parent's bedroom door and was a bit relieved to see it was only his Mama in bed, that would give him time to win her over. Mama, he called out, launching himself onto her bed. He landed on something fairly solid and moveable and heard his Da yelp, "Why are ye hiding under the covers Da?" he asked as his Da appeared from under the duvet.

Willie worried for a minute if his Da has asthma like Julie Cooperson because he was wheezing and breathing hard like she does just before she needs that thing that puffs air into her mouth.

"Are you ok, Willie?" his Mama asked her eyes all crinkled up like they do when she is worried.

She put her hand over his forehead to check if he was hot, but he waved it away, it was better not to put off the inevitable.

"I want to talk to ye," he said, his voice loud and determined. "I canna sleep until I do." His Da opened his mouth to say something but was still having trouble with his asthma, so he shut it fairly quickly again.

His Mama hauled him up on her knee and in that nice soothing voice that always makes him feel better said "off course Willie, you can tell us anything."

His Da took a big drink of water from his bed stand and eventually managed to calm himself.

With both their eyes on him, bright and interested Willie felt strangely optimistic and went straight for the punchline.

"I wanna move back to Scotland." He said excitedly.

Both his parent's mouths fell open, and Willie raised his hand so they would let him finish.
"I miss it so bad – he didn't mean to whine, but his voice betrayed him – "I miss Donas and the other horses, I miss Grandda and Granny and Aunt Jenny, I miss the fields and the tractors." He took a large gulp of air "I miss granny's chickens – even the rooster that wakes everyone up."

His Da looked at him sympathetically, and he could see his Mama wipe a tear away from her eye and then felt terrible because he didn't think he would make his mama cry.

"Its ok mama – I will be ok here if ye dinna want to go…"

She choked out something like "oh no, its not that." But then his Da was rubbing her back saying "Claire its not your fault."

"It is..I should have stayed."

Willie decided now was a good time to mention all the good things about the bairn living in Scotland."

He wrapped his arms around his Mama's neck and pulled her face down so he could see into her eyes; she usually stopped crying when he did this. "Mama its not just for me – his little voice sounded defensive, but Willie wouldn't realise that just yet. "I am only thinking of the bairn too – making eye contact with his Da, a pleading nod to back him up, surely his Da wanted to go home too – "If the bairn got into yer tummy in Scotland, just like I did."

Willie wasn't aware that he was tilting his head curiously at his father working out why his Da went a particular shade of pink when he mentioned the bairn going into his Mama's tummy.

He shook his head trying to focus on his litany of reasons to move to Scotland "It's only Scotland will be in the bairns blood like it is in mine – and it's better for him if he is around all the Scottish air" Willie added smiling broadly, remembering how important MMama thought the fresh air was.

He hadn't planned on having to persuade his Da though, so when his Da cleared his throat and said somewhat quietly that it wasn't as simple as just moving to Scotland. Willie's heart sank a little. It dropped even more when he said "Boston is our home now Willie, we can visit Scotland on holidays but me and yer mama have work here and – "just as his Da was about to list out the pointless reasons why they had to stay in Boston, his mama sniffed loudly and said "no, no you're right Willie, cupping his face in her hands she said "I miss Scotland too."

Willie couldn't stop the smile spread across his face in a way that made it ache in his cheeks.
"Really Mama?"

"Really – and while me and your Da need to talk about it, I think you’re right – our home is in Scotland."

His Da was smiling at her, but his brows were creased with worry –"Claire –" he whispered, and Willie thought his Da's voice sounded really croaky, like his sometimes did when he was trying not to cry at school.

Luckily for Willie, his ma pulled her Da to her too, holding his face.

Cause he would have been mortified for his Da if he cried like a bairn.

"Jamie, honestly I have meant to talk to you both about it – "

When his Da said "yer work Claire ?– "his ma had shaken her head and said, "oh I have an idea about that."

Willie was already ten steps ahead, planning if they moved quickly, he would be home just in time to help his Grandda save the hay.

His favourite time of the year, asides from Christmas of course.

He vaguely thought that bairn owed him big time for sorting this out before he was born.

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